

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:**

***VETERANS OF THE AIR WAR OVER EUROPE IN WORLD WAR II***

**INTERVIEW OF A PILOT WHO FLEW 75 COMBAT HOURS CONDUCTING CLOSE AIR SUPPORT IN THE P-47 "THUNDERBOLT" IN A FIGHTER-BOMBER ROLE, AND ALSO SERVED AS A FORWARD AIR CONTROLLER DURING THE LAST MONTH OF THE WAR – CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF SIUE COURSE HIST 447 "APPROACHES TO ORAL HISTORY"**

**NARRATOR: JOHN B. (BURKE) PERCY**

**INTERVIEWER: DONALD D. (DAVID) GASPER**

**DATE & PLACE: INTERVIEWED 6 OCT 2001 AT MR. PERCY'S RESIDENCE IN BLOOMINGTON, IL**

**DONALD D. GASPER: [Begin transcript – Tape 1, Side A]** OK, so let's begin. My name is Donald D. Gasper. I'll be the interviewer and the interviewee is John Percy. John, your middle initial, please.

**JOHN B. (BURKE) PERCY: [continue]** It's B as in Baker.

**GASPER:** B as in Baker, OK.

**PERCY:** John B. Percy.

**GASPER:** John B. Percy and today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, a Saturday, 2001, and we're at Mr. Percy's residence in Bloomington, Illinois – and this is tape one, side A. And the project of this or the purpose of this oral history project is to interview veterans of the air war over Europe during World War II and this interview, this oral history interview is being conducted under the auspices of a graduate level course at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. The course is specifically, Approaches to Oral History, History 447. So at this point would like to ask Mr. Percy to say and spell his full name just to make sure we get that straight.

**PERCY:** OK, it's John and the middle initial is B. as in Baker, last name is Percy and that's P-E-R-C-Y.

**GASPER:** Your middle name, I'm sorry, is

**PERCY:** Middle name is Burke, B-U-R-K-E. Burke.

**GASPER:** Very good. OK. So let's go ahead and stop the tape at this point and just do a sound check and make sure we're in good shape.

**PERCY:** If you want to I could have said John Burke Percy, if you want to do it that way instead of the [unintelligible].

**GASPER:** That will work out fine. [Break for sound check] All right, well, we conducted our sound check and both parties are sounding pretty well loud and clear. So let's begin with our questions for Mr. Percy and his role in the air war during World War II over Europe. So, Sir John, if you would, let's begin with, if you could mention your place of birth and date, and then tell me something about your childhood growing up here in the local area. Of course, I understand having conducted a summer internship at the Prairie Aviation Museum and we've spoken in the past, particularly about your role in helping to keep the museum's DC-3 flying that I know you were practically born on a runway and your military service,

twenty years as a corporate pilot for State Farm Insurance here in Bloomington and in fact even today at the age of, I'm sorry what is it

**PERCY:** 77.

**GASPER:** 77, you still fly your own private aircraft, so quite a life time of aviation experience. But, of course I'll try and be quiet and let you tell us about again your, if you would, your place of birth, date of birth, your childhood growing up here in the local area, if you would.

**PERCY:** Sure. Well, I was born in Bloomington, in fact, I was born at the farmhouse and I was born in 19, February 15, 1942 [Interviewee inadvertently reversed numbers in year of birth of 1924, as he has just stated he is 77 years old] and of course lived on the farm, growing up, going to high school, and our farm happens to be about 1500 yards from the airport. Now the airport was built in 1934. I didn't start going down to the airport until I was I guess, 1939, I was about fourteen or fifteen years of age and I'd sneak off and go down there and gas airplanes, wash airplanes, maybe so I could get a ride with a guy on Sunday. And by, when I turned eighteen, year I graduated from high school in 1942, parents says "Yes, if you want to fly, go ahead." And I went to the manager and he knew that I'd been getting some lessons on the side, but I said I want to learn how to fly but I don't have any money. And he said, "We have three runways, grass runways, if you'll mow the runways, I'll give you flying time." So that's what I did that summer. I mowed all the runways at the airport and I was able to solo, with eight hours in a T-craft. And then

**GASPER:** Could you explain for someone who may not be familiar with a T, well, a training craft, what they might

**PERCY:** Oh, it was a Taylorcraft, just a two seater, had I think it was 50 horsepower in it, and it was just called a Taylorcraft and we called them a T-craft. Just two place and anyway after I soloed, I just at the time the Air Force or the Aviation cadet, the Army Air Corp requirements were that you had to have two years of college. I think of November of that year, they waived the two years of college and they set up the Aviation Cadet Program. And they had a station at Peoria [Illinois]. You could go over there and take the "stanine" test – the physicals and all that. So I went over on a bus and did that and by five o'clock that night, why you raised your right hand and says I do. So that's when I joined the Aviation Cadet Program. I think it was the 14<sup>th</sup> of December of 1942. And they said go home and we'll give you a call. And I was called up on active duty on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February. So I was

**GASPER:** Of '43.

**PERCY:** Of '43, so I had just turned nineteen. Went into the Aviation Cadet Program and from there of course we went out to basic training in Wichita Falls, Texas and from basic training, we went to pre-flight which was at Maxwell AFB [Alabama] and that's where you learned, like you were a cadet going through

**GASPER:** I'm sorry, the basic training took how long roughly?

**PERCY:** Oh, basic training, probably six weeks or so I suppose.

**GASPER:** And then you went on to pre-flight,

**PERCY:** What they call pre-flight

**GASPER:** Which was roughly how long?

**PERCY:** Oh, about the same, I guess. There it was all physical fitness, road running, you learned to have your square meals like you do at West Point, you got all your military training.

**GASPER:** Square meals for someone may not be familiar with that, that's where what you pick up your utensil and make a ninety degree angle



**PERCY:** Ninety-degree turn, right, and use one hand at a time. Of course, I got the problem because I'm left-handed. [laughter] But anyways, it was, that's where you know, that was mainly a physical fitness training set up.

**GASPER:** OK, basic training in a nutshell, learning

**PERCY:** Basic training was also road runs, carrying a pack, how to shoot a rifle and then too they put you on a bivouac, and they'd have the gas attacks with you know with tear gas and march, march, and march, you know. You learn the rules.

**GASPER:** And when you say pre-flight training, of course there was more of the physical conditioning and to what extent was there the aviation angle brought in to that training?

**PERCY:** Not much at the time.

**GASPER:** So pre-flight, but not much to do with flight whatsoever.

**PERCY:** No, not so much, no, they just called it pre-flight, and then you were supposed to go to classification, but they had such a backlog of people that they set up what they called a College Training Detachments, CTD's, and all the different units around went to the different colleges. I ended up at Murphysboro, Tennessee at the state teacher's college. We had to be there for thirty days. Due to the backlog, we ended up six months and you went back just like you were going back to college. Geometry and all the different history, and all the different courses. Now there, besides drilling and physical fitness, we did get ten hours of dual [flight instruction] in an Aeronca aircraft. That's a two-place aircraft trainer.

**GASPER:** Ten hours of dual instruction.

**PERCY:** Of dual, no solo. And then that was to determine, more or less when you went to classification, whether the instructor said you'd be a good pilot or bad pilot or didn't think you'd make the grade on your flying ability. Now, we'd heard through the grapevine that if you had previous flying time they'd send you to glider school. So I said no, I said I don't want to be a glider pilot, I want to be a fighter pilot.

**GASPER:** When you say previous flight time, just to back up a second, how many hours would you say you had of flight time, whether solo or with an instructor prior to your entry into the Aviation Cadet Program?

**PERCY:** Twelve hours.

**GASPER:** Twelve hours flying here at the

**PERCY:** At Bloomington airport.

**GASPER:** At Bloomington and as I understand it, it is now known as the Central Illinois Regional Airport and back in the 30's

**PERCY:** '34 was when the airport was built.

**GASPER:** And what was it known as at that point?

**PERCY:** Just the Bloomington-Normal Airport.

**GASPER:** OK. All right. And I'm just curious, going back to your childhood, of course, what, you saw aircraft, well, after '34 flying around your home quite a bit, and as you said you started mowing the grass to get some flight time.

**PERCY:** Well, for instance, back in '40 and '41, this instructor's name was Archie Baldrige, he ended up my instructor. They would go out to the county fairs during the summer, like out at Minier and at the different fairs and they'd call up and they'd mow a pasture, say an alfalfa field, and it happened that our phone line was on the same party line – about seven at the time. He called around and talked to my mom. I said what's John doing and can he go with me and can he go with me. So what he would do was he would take out the dual controls and take a five gallon gas can, I'd straddle it in the airplane and we'd fly out to the county fair. And it was a dollar ride. I sell the tickets and prop the airplane.

**GASPER:** When you say prop the airplane

**PERCY:** Well, start the engines, yes, start the engine for him because we'd shut down every time so he didn't want people walking into the propellers. And anyway then during the evening just before dark why we always seemed to burn up gas we put the five gallon into the gas tank and we'd put that in the baggage compartment, and he'd put the dual controls in and take off, says "OK now, take me home." So I cheated a little bit, got a little extra flying time, really before I started taking my first dual lesson. But that's how I got interested in it and like I say I gassed airplanes so I could get a ride on Sunday with one of the guys. One of the lawyers was Louie Probasco – he had a beautiful two-place airplane.

**GASPER:** What type, I'm sorry.

**PERCY:** Oh, can't think of the name right now, it was built down in St. Louis. They used it in racing aircraft back in '32 and '33. Not a air coup, but a, no it wasn't an Airmaster – Airmaster was built by Cessna. I can't think of the name right now.

**GASPER:** Well, and then with your growing interest in aviation, and other than that, well, you grew up in the farming role was of course the day to day until you, and then aviation became more and more your passion and that. And you come from a family that lived here for

**PERCY:** Yes, the farm right now [laugh] is where the section of the regional airport is where the new terminal is being built. That farmland, my grandfather's, it belonged to our family, it was in the family since 1872 and we happened to be one of the first families in Mclean County that received the centennial or the hundred year plaque. That was my mom's heyday. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Yes, your family, quite a fixture in the local area for sometime. So, well again, getting back to your, the evolution of your training and you were discussing the college training detachment and then your ten hours of dual instruction at that point. So let's see, you mentioned basic training of around six weeks, pre-flight training of around six weeks, the College Training Detachment which, because of the backlog, ended up being about a six month stint, and then after that?

**PERCY:** Then we went to, since it was Murphysboro, Tennessee, we went to Nashville, Tennessee for classification and there

**GASPER:** When you say classification that's to get a specific

**PERCY:** OK, you took all the "stanine" tests and

**GASPER:** I'm sorry, what tests?

**PERCY:** What they call "stanine" tests, you know, physiological tests and physicals and all that, and from the tests that you took they determined whether you were going to be a pilot, a bombardier, or a navigator. That's why they called it classification. That's where you got your assignments is, to which group you were going to in the Aviation Cadet Program. I lucked out – I was assigned as a pilot.

**GASPER:** Well, I'm sure your background up to that point might have helped.



**PERCY:** I don't know if it did or not. Try to get square pegs in round holes you know, and all that kind of stuff.

**GASPER:** OK, and then the Aviation Cadet Program which I believe you said you started in December of '42.

**PERCY:** That's when I joined.

**GASPER:** Or joined the program.

**PERCY:** That's when my dates starts as far as my retirement goes. [laugh]

**GASPER:** So then once you were determined to go to be a pilot, then you started that training

**PERCY:** Yes, when I went to primary and that was at Jackson, Tennessee and there, our group had the PT-19, which was built by Fairchild, open cockpit, in fact, it had a hundred and seventy-five horsepower Ranger engine and it was inverted six cylinder job – a real nice airplane. And I think we got forty hours, maybe, I suppose sixty, maybe sixties, between sixty and seventy hours in primary. And then after primary, went to basic training. That was the BT-13 – we called it the vibrating, Vultee "Vibrator". Anyway, that was at Newport, Arkansas and there's where they taught you instrument training which was the biggest thing on it. You got over twenty-five hours of instrument training. They taught you formation flying. We used to make formation take-off and formation landings. Generally, on grass fields, you know, auxiliary fields. And, plus night, nighttime, night flying and of course, they too had radios for your navigation purposes on that. Then after that you went to advanced training and I went to Moultrie, Georgia, which is at Spence Field, and from basic you either went to twin-engine school or you went to single-engine. Spence Field was single engine, AT-6s.

**GASPER:** Just to try and get an idea of the passage of time, your primary flight training took you roughly, how long?

**PERCY:** I suppose we were there three months. Originally, if you started on flight training, it took you just about a year to go through the training of the time you started and the time you graduated, but due to the six month backlog and all that, see it took, I was just, I didn't graduate until June of 1944. Started out in what they called the class of '44A, but did the CDT training six months later. That's why I started, or actually we started flying I think in December of '43 and then we graduated in June of '44. So it's seven months, seven month course. You're about six weeks in each, in each phase roughly. Trying to think back.

**GASPER:** OK, so the primary took about six weeks, the basic took about six weeks, and then the advanced

**PERCY:** Same thing.

**GASPER:** Took about six weeks. So the passage of time from December of '43 'til when you won your wings in June of '44.

**PERCY:** June of '44, yes.

**GASPER:** Alright.

**PERCY:** And of course, T-6 training, of course, since that time we were flying single engine and hoping that you'd get to be a fighter pilot, even though when you got your wings when graduated you didn't know for sure what type of aircraft you were going into. Couple friends of mine, they ended up in B-24s, B-17s, so you really never knew until the day after you got your wings, and the following week is when you got your assignments.

**GASPER:** Just curious, before you go get to your assignment, how, what kind of wash out rate did you notice in the primary, basic, advanced, if there tended to be more washouts at certain points or whatever.

**PERCY:** Basic training, I guess, I suppose maybe 20 or 30 percent, maybe, and then in advanced since, see they have so many people in advanced too, we, 300 of us went in and 200 graduated, so that is about a third, third washout. Now of that 200 that graduated, there was 95 that were made as flight officers and the other 105 were second lieutenants. The reason the flight officer rank was designed, there were too many second lieutenant commissioned officers in the manning document, according to the, you know, the Pentagon. So they had to devise a new rank because, so they came out with what they called a flight officer rank. Now it had, a look, two little, it was a ball, looked like a racetrack and it had two little blue things that we called the purple pickle. [laugh] But you had the same privilege as any of the pilots, it's just that you ended up as a noncommissioned officer because of the manning document. The only thing that did, if you went overseas as a commissioned officer, you got ten percent of your base pay being in combat; a non-commissioned officer gets twenty percent. So I go overseas with the same buddy I graduated with, he's a second lieutenant and I'm a flight, I get twenty percent of my base pay. [laughter]

**GASPER:** A little silver lining for going into harm's way.

**PERCY:** Right. But that was how that rank developed and everything.

**GASPER:** So then you got assigned you say within a week or so and you found out

**PERCY:** Well, actually, we graduated on a Saturday. Monday morning we were on a bus and I went to Tifton, Georgia to fly the P-40, the P-40 Warhawk, the ones they used in General Chennault's China.

**GASPER:** Made by Curtiss.

**PERCY:** Yes, Curtiss, yes. We always had either Allison and Rolls-Royce engines, they had the different ones.

**GASPER:** And I'm sorry, you were flying at Tifton, did you say?

**PERCY:** Tifton, Georgia. Yes. T-I-F-T-O-N. Just up the road a piece from [unintelligible].

**GASPER:** And so that was considered an assignment as a fighter pilot assigned to a unit, a training unit.

**PERCY:** Right, no, just training unit. You only got ten hours in the airplane. [clock chime]

**GASPER:** Oh yes, it's just turned eleven A.M. I should say we started this interview, oh, roughly 10:40 A.M., somewhere in that neck of the woods. But anyways, to carry on, so you started training in a fighter type aircraft, a P-40, and that

**PERCY:** Of course, you have to realize there's no instructors, even when you say you had an instructor. What you did, we went through ground school for a week, to learn all the systems in the aircraft, and then they let you get into the aircraft and go through all the switches, and they gave you a blindfold cockpit check. The instructor would make sure you knew where all the switches were and they'd let you start the engine, and taxi the airplane out and he was standing on the wing. At the end of the runway you made your run-up mag [magneto] check and all that, checked system, everything was on the go, why he patted you on the shoulder and said "Have a good flight! and steps off the airplane. So you're in this aircraft by yourself. And to me that aircraft, I still remember it, to me that aircraft was, I still remember it, I had the biggest thrill flying that aircraft I think as I did when I soloed the T-craft the first time. I mean, that was a tiger by the tail, because it had narrow [landing] gear and it had over a thousand horsepower, and it was really something. And then after you went up for about an hour and come back and shot three or four landings, then the next day they'd send an instructor with you, or I mean in another aircraft, to teach you to fly 'em in a formation, and did a little dog-fighting and stuff like that. But we got a lot of dog-fighting in and all the



maneuvers in advanced, you know, at Spence Field, when you're going through advanced training. You got all that.

**GASPER:** So you spent your training phase in the P-40 for roughly how long?

**PERCY:** Oh, we were only there what about two or three weeks, I guess, total. We only got ten hours of flying time.

**GASPER:** OK, and then you went off to?

**PERCY:** Then I was assigned to Richmond, Virginia to go into fly the P-47, the "Thunderbolt".

**GASPER:** Which became the actual aircraft you flew in combat.

**PERCY:** Combat, yes. Nicknamed "the Jug". [laugh] [Nickname supposedly short for "juggernaut" due to the aircraft's size and firepower as noted in some aviation history books]

**GASPER:** Yes, very large radial engine aircraft for its time with a large fuselage, large, eight fifty calibers, very

**PERCY:** See, it was the heaviest single engine fighter ever built. It weighed between eighteen to twenty thousand pounds. You're talking nine and ten tons on one engine, and it had a good engine, a Pratt & Whitney R-2800 with just a little over 2000 horsepower – super airplane – good survivability airplane. It got me there and got me back. [laughter]

**GASPER:** Amen. So, and then your actual training time in the P-47, how long did you, were you stateside doing that prior to shipping out?

**PERCY:** Oh, let's see. Well, we started flying, I guess it was in August and '44, and then, I can't remember how many hours we got in, seventy or eighty hours in the airplane, then we went to gunnery and I went to gunnery at Norfolk, Virginia, and there's where we did they taught us to dive-bomb and strafing – shooting at the sleeve. We had B-26, the old "Marauder" B-26 towed the target for you. But we, we only got to use the two fifty calibers, we never shot all eight fifty calibers going through gunnery school. You only used the two guns. And out on the island off of Maryland, there is where they had stationary targets, you know, to strafe, and they had buildings that looked like outhouses out there to try and drop your bombs on. We used 25-pound bombs and were learning how to do that, and we did shoot gunnery. See, the 47 was built for high altitude aircraft. We used to shoot gunnery as high as around fifteen thousand feet towing targets, and then we did what they called camera gunnery at thirty-two thousand feet with just another "Jug" flying it, and we'd make passes at him with the camera and would get your pictures on that. And finished that training and that ended up in January and then, well, I think I got finally a three week, two to three week leave to come home and then we shipped to Camp Limer [sp?], New Jersey and got on a boat in New York, and then went overseas and I got overseas in February or the first of March.

**GASPER:** March of '45.

**PERCY:** Yes, '45. I went over by ship, we were on board ship for thirteen days I think by boat.

**GASPER:** And at that point the U-boat threat had pretty well receded.

**PERCY:** Well, somewhat, yes. Our particular boat, we were in a convoy of fifteen ships and it turned out that the aircraft carrier in front of us during the night lost the steering, and the ship was just directly in front of us, we hit the bow of his ship, and he lost about twenty people and put a hole in it. They ended up limping to the Azores and then when we went in our ship went into Le Harve at night, crossing the English channel. And they allowed all the Army troops off the aircraft, or I mean boat, and then that night, then we went back across the English channel to England and we landed at Southampton, England.

**GASPER:** And your first base then?

**PERCY:** Somewhere in Britain, I don't remember the name of it. We were there for two weeks as a matter of getting assignments, getting, making sure all your shots were up to date and checking your physical condition again before you got your assignment to your outfit.

**GASPER:** And so then you proceeded

**PERCY:** Well, then I went to the outfit, yes, I was assigned to the 324<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, of course there's three squadrons in a group, there was fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth. I ended up in the 315<sup>th</sup> Squadron.

**GASPER:** And you primarily were based out of ?

**PERCY:** Oh, we were based Luneville, France. And don't ask me how to spell Luneville. [laughter] It's outside of Nancy, France about thirty miles, in southern sector. My outfit originally started out in Tunisia, Sicily, Naples, Rome, came up through southern sector and after Luneville, when the war, well, after the war ended, we ended up in Stuttgart, Germany.

**GASPER:** But as far as your combat flight time was all out of

**PERCY:** Combat time was all out of Luneville, out of France, yes, and all my missions were all over Germany.

**GASPER:** All of them you took off from Luneville? Did you, you didn't have any other combat flights from other airfields?

**PERCY:** No. See another thing since we were fighter-bombers, we did dive-bombing, strafing. We were supporting the Tenth and Twelfth Armored Tank Divisions. So to help support those, they took pilots from each squadron, one pilot and they, we were sent up to the frontlines as a forward air controller. So I spent the last thirty days as a forward air controller with the Tenth Armored Tank Division.

**GASPER:** That was how many days?

**PERCY:** The last month of World War II – from April to in May.

**GASPER:** So, right, with May 8<sup>th</sup>, the surrender.

**PERCY:** Yes, we were, we happened to end up at Garmisch-parken, in Garmisch with the Tenth Armored Tank Division.

**GASPER:** So you got to see how the Army operated “up close and personal” shall we say and then your combat flight time ran from roughly March of '45 'til

**PERCY:** From March of '45 'til the middle of April, yes. Actually, I guess I got about 250 hours in a P-47, and the flight log shows I flew 75 hours of combat time. For instance, I had a little history here of our group.

**GASPER:** Oh, you jotted down some notes.

**PERCY:** Yes. OK, on the notes I got down for, we were, our 315<sup>th</sup> squadron was called “the Crusaders”. Anyway, the particular group now, which is all three squadrons, the history, they were activated in November of '41 and they were deactivated in November of '45, this particular group. So by them starting out in Sicily, they actually, the group started out in P-40s and I think when they went on the island of Corsica, they turned to the P-47, the Thunderbolt. They switched over to “the Jug.” And then flew the P-47s the rest of the war.



**GASPER:** One thing I'm wondering about with your notes, while those, you know describe unit history, are there notations there that apply to your personal experiences; in other words, a historian might be able to refer to some other sources?

**PERCY:** Oh yes, they can pick all that up. For instance here, 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1945, 324<sup>th</sup> we flew 234 sorties in one day setting a record for one day's flying over combat. I flew nine hours that day and it was mainly dive-bombing, strafing. We'd go up eighteen, twenty thousand feet and then pull out about two thousand feet when you dropped your bombs.

**GASPER:** Well, you know, that's one of the questions, if you, I imagine it's hard to say how, you know, how typical things went because I imagine in those circumstances it was demanding to say the least. But you mention you had 75 hours of combat time, how, well, how many sorties or missions would that

**PERCY:** Well, some of them were only a half hour, some were an hour, some were two and half hours. You know, the farther we got into Germany, well, then you run, I think the longest mission was about two and half hours. That's from time of takeoff to you came back and

**GASPER:** Alright. But in other words, we don't have your flight log.

**PERCY:** No, I don't have it, just wasn't, the Form 5, that's what it says. [laughter]

**GASPER:** That as far as tabulating. Now I guess if somebody was trying to access an archive to see what records are, exist on you, your serial numbers, your military serial number, if that might help to obtain records on you.

**PERCY:** OK, like I said, Cadet's serial number was sixteen, eighteen, sixty, thirty [16186030] – I can remember it that way. Now when I graduated as a flight officer it was an AO number 939477. And then I carried that even though I got commissioned later on in civilian life, it still remained 939477 without the AO in the front of it you know. And then, let's see, retired in '69, what '66, '65 they started using your social security numbers and that's when I picked up the social security number.

**GASPER:** You said you retired in '69 from the Air Force.

**PERCY:** From the Air Force, yes, December of '69.

**GASPER:** Alright, now getting back to your combat time, could you describe the typical day, so to speak, understanding there were many variations.

**PERCY:** Well, we generally got up I suppose around five or five-thirty, and it happened that in Luneville we were living in an old calvary barn that was the French used in World War I – two story barn – supposedly no heat in it, but you know guys get innovative. We'd get a five gallon gas can, put a tube in it and had an old pot belly stove, put dirt in it and we had heat in the unit from that five gallon gas can. But you had to be sure to put that stand pipe in there; if not, you'd blow the whole damn barracks up. [laugh] But anyways, from there then we'd go to a briefing, and they'd brief you on the type of mission you were going to have – whether it was going to be strafing or if it was going to be dive-bombing and strafing, giving you your targets. We always had a primary and a secondary target.

**GASPER:** And so the briefings would be usually at roughly

**PERCY:** Roughly an hour, half hour.

**GASPER:** And starting at six or seven in the morning?

**PERCY:** Oh, I'd say probably seven, yes, something like that.

**GASPER:** Seven in the morning. They'd run about an hour?

**PERCY:** Be up airborne about eight o'clock. Now our group took off in twelve-ship, went off, four ships per squadron. Our squadron had four ships, the Fourteenth had four ships and, you know, so there was twelve aircraft that went off.

**GASPER:** In other words, for that particular mission, even though your squadron had more aircraft assigned.

**PERCY:** Oh yes, we had more aircraft assigned.

**GASPER:** How many aircraft assigned to the squadron when you say four went up for the actual mission.

**PERCY:** Well, we had twelve airborne, I suppose there was probably about thirty-six aircraft in a group.

**GASPER:** Well, twelve per squadron usually.

**PERCY:** I think so, yes, twelve per squadron. I would say yes. Because you see we had a total of about twenty-four, twenty-eight pilots in our group, you know, and oh, it was more than that. Our particular squadron, I think we had, I don't know, sixteen, eighteen pilots. The thing of it is, of the eighteen pilots, I think sixteen of us had motorcycles. We had more injuries than combat in motorcycles than we did in combat really. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Actually, that was going to be one of my questions about the, let's say, non-operational losses, or other losses, non-combat.

**PERCY:** Yes, but look, you know, when you're twenty-one, you know, you're gung-ho, and we had a mission, you know, we were fighting for our country at that time and everybody was, you know, gung-ho, and like I say, I bought a British Murlange [sp?] motorcycle, a BMW. I happened to take over a quart of Canadian Club with me and I bought it; I gave a quart of Canadian Club to the sergeant and that's how I bought my motorcycle. [laughter]

**GASPER:** Well, then so far as that combat day, so to speak, you say you had your briefing run an hour or so 'til seven, you'd find out your mission, strafe, dive-bombing, primary, secondary targets and then get airborne around eight.

**PERCY:** Around eight, yes. Say two and a half hours, so you'd get back maybe by lunch-time, you know, on that. Well, what we did, if you flew two missions in one day, and one mission the next day, then you got the next day off. Now the day that I flew the nine hours; 'bout everybody got the next day off on that particular time – that was how they worked it.

**GASPER:** Well, did you find most days were two missions or one?

**PERCY:** Towards the end there we were flying two missions a day pretty much. Like I say, when the second mission was after lunch, you'd get home just before dark. In fact, we got home one evening just about dusk and a German bomber, a 210 bomber followed us home. And we had no more gotten out of the aircraft, and debriefed and he strafed, well, he came over and dropped bombs. But the guy, he didn't hit our airport at all. He damaged the French house, right across the road from us, put holes in the Frenchman's house, killed a little sixteen-year-old girl. The only casualty we had was a crew chief, was on a, refueling a P-47, he jumped off the wing and broke his ankle when he went into the revetment ditch. That's the only casualty we had. But now the type of bombs they dropped were what we called "butterfly bombs" or anti-personnel bombs. When they hit, they don't necessarily go off, but when the bomb group, when you move them, then is when they go off. And they're anti-personnel's, which we used the same type – we called them "butterfly bombs" that we dropped from our aircraft.

**GASPER:** And so this incident where this 210



**PERCY:** Just that one incident towards the end of it.

**GASPER:** That was mid-March, late March

**PERCY:** That was right in April, it was just a last ditch effort, I guess, but it didn't damage. See, we had our airfields surrounded with forty millimeter and all that kind of stuff, and just caught everybody by surprise. And I think we got a few shots at him, but we never did get him but he missed the whole airfield.

**GASPER:** And when, so when you would come back, you would go through debriefing and how long did on average take?

**PERCY:** Depends on whether you were the four pilots debriefing at the same time on a mission or they debriefed you one at a time; might take an hour, half hour, an hour, depending on what you get done that day.

**GASPER:** And after the debrief, you were

**PERCY:** You were free then on your own or if you had another mission then you generally had lunch time, debrief and go back on another flight. But when we were flying, when I was flying at that time, like I said, we took off in a twelve-ship formation. We flew out in twelve-ship in echelon until we got the altitude, then we split up to fly with your own squadron of four ships. Our biggest threat then at that time was the Me-262, the German jet. They would fly through our formation when we were around twelve, fourteen thousand feet. They'd drop a few shells at us and they knew that we were either at eighteen or twenty thousand feet, and they'd sit up at twenty-five thousand feet and harass us. They'd also sent another guy down about ten thousand feet – that was the sucker bait; you didn't go after him, you just left him alone. Now when they ran out of fuel, then they went back to their home base. It turns out, 1984, I ran into a German pilot, well, I was flying a Lear at the time for State Farm; we were doing our maintenance at Annapolis [Maryland]. There was a German 35 there at the time. He had a fuel leak and I got introduced to him. His name was Carl Burl [sp?]; never forget him, and he had flown Fw-190s and Me-262s. So we were talking about it and he's the one that said "Yes, they had fifty minutes of fuel and they changed the engine every nine hours." The reason being is they didn't, the metallurgy at that time for your heat in your jet engine was at infancy, and "He said we had all our, the lines shut up from Spain, they couldn't get the silver for the bearings, so that's why." And I said "Well, we dive-bombed and we strafed around the Munich area and that" and he says "Well, that's where I was flying out of, the Munich area." See, they used the autobahn as a runway. So they had five mile runway. When they'd run out of fuel they'd go land at the autobahn and then they'd tow them back to their revetments and that's how they operated.

**GASPER:** Are you, you said you bombed and strafed in the Munich area. Would you say, what other, well, I guess let me take that back. And you mentioned big, the big threats, and the Messerschmitt 262 and, of course, at this point the Luftwaffe had encountered a lot of losses.

**PERCY:** They practically were non-existent at the time. We got jumped, the only time I got, you might say is, the Fw-190 – well, we goofed. We normally, when we did a dive-bomb run, we would send four aircraft down at a time and the other eight would stay up in like a Lufbery, or like a racetrack protecting each other's hindend more or less so to speak. And we decided that, well, the Germans, there wasn't anymore Germans around, so we'd send eight down in a dive-bomb run at one time and leave four up. Well, when about seven or eight were already starting a dive-bomb run, we got jumped by nine Fw-190s, so it was a matter of everybody drop bombs, drop your bombs, your belly tanks and form back into a Lufbery into a circle. Now a Fw-190, if we could get him above 15,000 feet, we could out-turn him. But below 15,000 feet, he's going to beat you and the only thing "the Jug" could do is out-run him. You could out-dive him and out-run him. But we stayed in a Lufbery and then they'd start making passes at us. It turned out that I fired maybe two or three times at the guy coming at you; you'd do what they called a vertical reverse type a thing, like a half snap roll and then back in your circle, to climb for altitude. We got three of theirs and we lost three of ours. And I guess they run out of fuel, we run out of fuel and that broke it off and you went back home. But we did lose I think, out of the three pilots, only one bailed out and the other two were lost – just one of those days.

**GASPER:** The guy who bailed out, did he get captured?

**PERCY:** He probably ended up a prisoner of war, but he was probably a prisoner of war for about a month maybe. [laugh] Back home again, you know, since it was right at the end of war.

**GASPER:** Not sure if he

**PERCY:** No, I'm not really sure, no.

**GASPER:** What happened. Now as far as threats, of course, what, I imagine flak?

**PERCY:** Well, eighty-eight, Germans were very accurate with eighty-eight [millimeter guns]. We called it "cotton candy", I don't know. What they did when you had an overcast, we would below an overcast, when they'd send up an eighty-eight they'd have it colored, green, red, yellow. What they were doing they were finding out what your altitude was. Of course, when you'd see "cotton candy" at ten o'clock low, we'd change our altitude and headings, whereas the bomber guys, they couldn't do that. We had one incident, when one of our guys, he was close enough to an eighty-eight, it blew his canopy off at eighteen thousand feet. By the time we got home and trying to get him to drop his bombs, he'd like to have froze to death. [laughter] You know, he kept saying "You guys, let's get the helmets, get down." [laugh] And he tried to dive-bomb with these bombs on.. When you started down, he had to break it off because it was sucking him out of the cockpit. So we had radar over there, our radar name was "Baby"; and we went to a target, a primary and secondary target was overcast and we couldn't do a dive-bomb run, we could not land back home with the bombs. We had to get rid of the bombs. So what they did, you flew in a real tight formation, about like the Thunderbirds [post-WWII USAF flight demonstration team], as close as you could get, and then radar would run you over a target, over a town, or a munitions yard or whatever it was and tell you when to drop your bombs. We called it an "egg basket". So he says, "Where'd you hit?", and I said "I don't know, probably a German's outhouse." I don't know. [laugh] Had no idea, you know, it was just a blind deal.

**GASPER:** You called that radar?

**PERCY:** Well, "Baby" was our, that was our code name, that was our main radar station.

**GASPER:** It was the station, but the type of radar?

**PERCY:** I – don't ask me. At the time they said radar, at that time most of us didn't even know we had the radar, you know what I mean, and they vectored you around. For instance, well, on another mission, we escorted B-26s – the only one I escorted is B-26s. We, over Munich, we were at twenty-five thousand feet, bombers were at twenty, one of the bombers got hit by an eighty-eight. I had an oil line come off; I was losing a lot of oil pressure and of course, at twenty-five thousand feet over Munich you can see Lake Constantine. Well, that's when I said "Hey, I can make

**[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A]**

**[BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B]**

**GASPER:** OK, Sir John, we of course ran out of tape there a second ago, but you said you had lost an oil line and were wondering about going to Switzerland. Now, and you ended up making it.

**PERCY:** Yes, right, we ended up escorting the B-26 back to the base. He ended up bellying in at our base. And in fact when the flight leader said "John, take them home", I said "Well, you know, I'm just a wingman, where's home?". He says, "Well, call 'Baby', take up a heading of 270 degrees, when you hit the Rhine River, call 'Baby', he'll take you home." And that's how radar, you know, radar vectored, told you what base that you wanted to go to.



**GASPER:** Now let me make sure I understand – when you escorted this B-26, how often did you ever get tasked to escort bombers?

**PERCY:** That's the only time.

**GASPER:** This was a lone B-26?

**PERCY:** No, no.

**GASPER:** You were picking up the full formation?

**PERCY:** Oh yes, there was

**GASPER:** I wasn't sure if it was a B-26 that got hit, and that you just happened to come across in trying to help them get home safely.

**PERCY:** No, they had a whole group up, I don't know, twelve, fifteen aircraft over a regular bomb run. And when this one guy hit and then two of us were complaining about having aircraft problems, they said, "Hey, latch onto this guy and take him home if he can make it." So that's why we, you know, just showing if the Germans come up you got two fighters and one bomber, figured we could support him.

**GASPER:** So you were primarily in a fighter-bomber role of course, but there was this one time where you escorted a B-26 mission.

**PERCY:** It was the old "Marauder" B-26.

**GASPER:** Sure. Do you remember roughly when that was? Well, I guess, March or April.

**PERCY:** Well, it was in April sometime, yes, had to be.

**GASPER:** Probably, April of '45. That window there. OK. Now we talked about the fighter threat, primarily the 262, that caused you concern, and you got jumped that one time when you had a change of tactics where you sent, where you had more aircraft go down; and other than that, I gather, you didn't have too many concerns about the 109s or that they weren't so, you know, they just weren't very prevalent at that time.

**PERCY:** No, they weren't prevalent. Like I say, the main thing was the 262 that'd give us problems. See at the time, right at the end of the war there, we strafed or dive-bombed the munitions yards, trains, you know, locomotives. At that time, anything that moved for us was more or less a target of opportunity. And since we were supporting the Tenth and Twelfth Armored Tank Divisions, they would call us in and say "Hey, we need such and such strafed" or "We'd like to have an area bombed." Now we carried three different type of bombs: we carried a five hundred pound contact demo when it [phone rings]. Don't worry about it; that's my phone, I'll catch it later.

**GASPER:** OK, yes, I'd better go ahead and stop the tape while we take care of the phone. [Break in tape] OK, we just had a little phone call there, and John was talking about the targets that he hit and then the types of bombs you

**PERCY:** OK, we had I think two five hundred, we carried two five hundred pound bombs and a hundred and fifty gallon belly tank for our range for fuel. On the bombs, we carried fragmentation bombs, like thirty-two in a cluster. And we carried incendiaries. So when we go in say to hit a factory area or a munitions dump, we'd drop two five hundred pound bombs, the group or whoever in the flight had the five hundred pound demos [demolition bombs], he would drop his first, then we'd drop fragmentation bombs to break it up, and then we'd drop incendiaries bombs. And we were supposed to bring our belly tank back, but it always seemed that the guy that had the incendiaries always lost his belly tank. We don't know why, but anyway it helped the fire along. Because we were getting short of belly tanks, so they were wanting us

to bring them home then. But that's how we operated. Now, for instance, we had a deal around Nuremburg, which was where our prisoner of war camp was. Now we, they had a train that had moved in behind the camp and they said it was full of ammunition; this was what we had on our briefing, and we were to strafe it. And they told us to go in a certain way, that there was a church that we had to stay like to the left side of when we strafed, so none of our stray bullets would get into the prisoner of war camp at Nuremburg. So we strafed the train, we got it burning and it was doing great when we left. This was '45; in 1953, when I got recalled back on active duty, at one of the bases we got shooting the breeze one night, and I mentioned about Nuremburg and then a B-17 pilot, he says "Well, I was at Nuremburg." He said "That train that you guys shot up and burned up didn't have munitions; that was our blankets, our care packages, and Red Cross packages." Now this was in February, he said, "So tonight John, you sleep under a sheet". He said "We'd like to froze to the death because you're the guy that burned up all our supplies." But that was just intelligence thing and you know, I'm sure, a lot of that happened.

**GASPER:** Well, to what extent did you encounter when you were strafing trains or any other targets, your concern about, hey, this thing's going to go off like a powder keg and

**PERCY:** A train, a steam-engine locomotive, if he was running down the track and had steam up, yes, he's going to blow. But if he's sitting along the siding, normally you could see your eight fifty calibers going right into him, your straffer, but he would never blow – he didn't have enough steam up. He had to be running down the track. So if you caught him in a marshalling yard itself or on a track by itself, nine times out of ten it wouldn't blow, but you knew that you'd done damage to it. Maybe they wouldn't be able to run down the tracks the next day you know.

**GASPER:** And what, I imagine because they were getting attacked so much that most of the times you caught them stationary and not so often in transit.

**PERCY:** True. Right. Well, for instance, like I say, when it didn't blow the one day we were trying to close up a railroad track on a cut. And once in a while when we went down and we had either a manual or electric release on your, to release your bombs, that particular day I went down and pulled up at two thousand feet and I used the electric release and only one five hundred pound bomb left the airplane, so I still had five hundred pounds under the wing. Then when you pull up going back up to eighteen thousand feet, you do real nice barrel rolls with that one five hundred pound bomb on the other wing. But as I pulled up and oh maybe it was around three or four thousand feet in the air, the guy behind me called and said "John, you're on fire." It turned out that I guess the ground fire got my belly tank and so I just jettisoned the belly tank. Luckily, when it hit the belly tank, it didn't hit that other five hundred pound bomb. So another airplane did the same thing. So we made a second run on the same target. We normally did not make two runs on the same target, but I had to get rid of the bomb so we went down and luckily I didn't get any more ground, we were shot at, but didn't get any more ground fire on the airplane. We got rid of the other bomb. Kind of interesting. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Well, as I recall from my Air Force days, even though I wasn't a pilot and now I'm a civilian, I remember the phrase often heard, "One pass, haul ass" – so don't linger.

**PERCY:** That's right, in fact, we made three passes that day. My flight leader wanted to go down and strafe the engine. He ended up, he got fixation and actually flew through the top of the tree. We thought he was going to go into the side of the hill. We kept telling him to pull up, pull up. He put a big hole in the leading edge of the wing of the P-47 and I pulled up along side of him, he had oil all over the windshield and was fish-tailing. And I told the squadron leader, I said "Hey, he's got a problem, the flight leader" and I said "He's [unintelligible] and he can't talk on the radio", and I said "I know he flew through those pine trees because I was right behind him and I was stacked up above him." And he says, "Well, we're going on our secondary target, you go ahead and take him on home." Like I say "Home, where's home?" "Call 'Baby'" and took the guy back home. But I guess as far as my combat, that was about the closest I guess I got hit and get the belly tank on fire and got rid of it.

**GASPER:** So that near miss was probably your closest call?



**PERCY:** I would say, as far as I know. You know, when you go down in a dive-bomb run when you're sitting and looking at the other guys going down and you see all this flak coming up at you, it looks like a tornado almost, you can, God, I got to go down there next, you know. But when you start the dive-bombing you don't think anything about it. You're concentrating on your target. You didn't think about it.

**GASPER:** To what extent did you come back and count holes in your aircraft?

**PERCY:** Luckily, I never got another hole. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Well, I imagine some guys had some "Swiss cheese".

**PERCY:** Oh yes, well, when we strafed the airdrome at Stuttgart, Germany, we lost one aircraft. Later on, after World War II, in June of '45, we found the aircraft. It had 63 holes in it. Now he survived. He bellied the aircraft in about a mile off of the end of the runway, and of course he was just a prisoner of war for I think three weeks. That was like during the end of World War II.

**GASPER:** Now did you and your fellow pilots have concerns that at that point in the war that if you went down if you thought you might be just shot on sight by the locals, or in the prison camp that they wouldn't treat you in accordance with the Geneva Convention – that they were losing the war and they didn't really care to treat you

**PERCY:** OK, yes, our biggest threat was the civilians. We were known as the "Jaboo" pilots, that was J-A-B-O-O. Now they had brainwashed the women and the children that all, we were Chicago gangsters and all we did was dive-bomb, strafe women and children. Because sure, we hit marshalling yards, and we hit cities and stuff like that, and I'm sure there was civilians. And knowing that they were really brainwashed because later on back in '52 when I was a flight instructor, we had a block party and our house was used more or less as bathroom, I guess; and this lady came through and saw pictures of my P-47's on the wall and she said to my wife "Was your husband a Jaboo pilot?" She [Percy's wife] said "Yes." She said "Had I known him I would have hated his guts"; says "We were briefed that they were Chicago gangsters." Now we had, after World War II, in June, we had a guy lose an engine, and he bellied into a wheat field in Germany and the guys flew over and he waved at them, and they got the coordinates and sent a Jeep after him, and it was probably six or eight hours before they got to him. But when they got there, the German women in that area had taken him to a barn and they had used a pitchfork on him – they had mutilated him. Like the week before we had taken the forty-fives [pistols] off; we didn't wear them any more. After that happened, we put the forty-fives back on, but they still had out [pause] you had to realize these people were fighting the war; you were there enemy and even though the war had ended, they probably had their husbands or something killed so they're going to retaliate and they did this for awhile, you know, after the war, a month or two after, and you can understand that.

**GASPER:** A month or two after the

**PERCY:** After the war was over with, sure, I'm sure that in isolated areas.

**GASPER:** You were still having incidents.

**PERCY:** Yes, mainly between communication lines and stuff like that, they were still cutting lines out and everything.

**GASPER:** That fella that caught in the barn with the pitchforks, I mean, they didn't get to him in time?

**PERCY:** No, by the time they sent a jeep to go pick him up, got the coordinates and everything, got to the farmhouse, no.

**GASPER:** They had already killed him, they had

**PERCY:** They had already killed him, that's true. So our forty-fives went back on [laugh] and they were civilians, you know, they weren't the German army itself.

**GASPER:** So, but when we talk about threats, we've talked about the fighters, we've talked about the flak, we've talked about the civilians here, we've talked about to what extent a target might actually blow up on you and get you that way. Were there any other combat concerns that you had, combat-related concerns, or you mentioned how even the presence of motorcycles was and in fact causing different losses or injuries and such. Did you have many non-combat losses due to collisions in the weather, or things of that nature?

**PERCY:** No, we've climbed, I mean, our group didn't, we've climbed out through out a bunch of bad weather and you ended up, and you look over and see a guy about three feet from you. But you didn't know he was there until you broke out of the clouds. Like one day they said "O h well, clouds are only at eight, ten thousand feet, you'll break out on top of the deck." Well, we started to climb out in an echelon, we ended up breaking out at nineteen thousand feet on top. And now I mentioned that the 47 was a high altitude fighter; now going through the training at Richmond, we had to make a one high altitude flight, I think the service ceiling on a "Jug" is forty-three thousand feet. I flew at night at forty-one thousand feet on a night flight out of Richmond on a cross country. We had to go to a high altitude and we says "This is pretty nice, well, let's take it up and see how high it'll go". So we went up to forty-one thousand feet. And you're not pressurized or anything; you're just breathing on oxygen, you never thought anything about it, you know.

**GASPER:** Way up there.

**PERCY:** Oh yes, quite a ways up there, yes.

**GASPER:** So the threats, so you didn't really any encounter the non-operational losses due to weather or other circumstances; and when you were flying out of France, well, what, the locals having endured Nazi occupation, how did the French treat you?

**PERCY:** I don't know, we never got downtown very much.

**GASPER:** Pretty much on base.

**PERCY:** Pretty much on the base, you know, the town was real close by there, you were always busy doing other things and we didn't get a chance to go out and see the countryside. It ended up as far as, that was about my experience as far as flying "the Jug", but then like I say, I went the last thirty days at the frontlines, as a forward air controller. That was very interesting.

**GASPER:** Now tell me about that, to what extent did you find yourself under the gun there?

**PERCY:** OK, well, I ended up with a jeep, had a driver, and a radio operator and myself and then we had a trailer that would pull all the radio gear and stuff with. This captain we had as a tank commander, I don't know, he and I got along real good. I happened to have a P-47 painted on the back of my jacket and of course they called me "flyboy" at the time. But anyway, we generally rode about behind number three tank. He tried his best to get me checked out in a tank, but I said no-no. Anyway, what he would do when we, we'd run into a resistance, he'd come back and tell me he wanted fighters for either strafing or dive-bombing, and it was my job to call into "Baby" and "Foxtrot" the different controllers. I set up my antennae and stuff and give them the coordinates, and find out from the radar people if there was any aircraft in that area, you know, within five or ten minutes away; and then when they would call me a flight and say you got a flight due within ten minutes, and I'd contact the flight leader and talk to him and find out what kind of bombs they had on it, and tell him what the tank captain told me what he wanted: troops strafed; or don't blow up that bridge, we need that bridge to cross the bridge, so strafe around it; or drop the bombs on it – and that was my job of controlling it.

**GASPER:** Now how, where were you in relation to the tank column leader?



**PERCY:** One hundred yards back maybe or so.

**GASPER:** One hundred yards back.

**PERCY:** Oh, you're right with him now. Because the day that he almost taught me to checking out the tank, number two tank ran over a mine and blew the track off of it and ran it up, a seventy-five mil [millimeter] up the tree. And I said "No way captain, I'm staying in my damn jeep." [laugh] And for instance, they were taking over a town, and it was kind of hilly, and being a "green horn" up there, I was standing up in the jeep and told the radio operator, I says "Look" I said "They got twenty, forty-millimeter that they're firing the other direction", and about that time I ended up, I woke up in the ditch. He had thrown me out of the jeep and he said "Flyboy, look above your head"; and about ten feet above our head the bullets were going in the side of the building he said the tracers I said were coming *at* us. Of course, I'd never been on it, I didn't know the difference. But if the guys liked you up there and in that Tenth Armored Tank Division, fine; but if they didn't just stay out of their way. But I good group, had a good rapport with the guys and they saved my butt a couple of times, just because I didn't know any different.

**GASPER:** Well, you mention the one just now with the bullets whizzing overhead, what was the other time? Or other times?

**PERCY:** Well, they, it was I think more about the second day up there; of course they're telling you about hitting the landmines and all that stuff. Well, as we went by I said "Hey, look they got about six or eight 155 howitzers they're aimed – let's turn in the road" and they said "Oh ya". So when we passed in front of them, I think they let all those suckers go with the jeep, and I swear that jeep jumped ten feet in the air. I left the jeep, figured we had been hit by a landmine. But it is strictly a routine thing that they did when you went up to the frontlines to get you checked out [chuckle] get you combat ready. No, that and the night that we took the town, half of the town belonged to the Germans.

**GASPER:** What town, do you remember the town involved?

**PERCY:** Sound like it was Chang goo as I recall, but, it almost sounded like a Chinese town, but the name of it was

**GASPER:** And this was in?

**PERCY:** In Germany, in Austria area. So, but I, that night, though we, the guys got into town, they'd find a wine cellar, and they'd have food in this restaurant type of thing and they told me, they said "Flyboy, you're sleeping in a German doctor's house tonight, down a block or two." Well, the boys that got into this German schnapps, potato schnapps – I don't know if you ever drank any of that – but they, if you'd swallow it, then you could probably be like a blow torch and put a fire out probably fifty feet away. But we'd had a few drinks and I walked out, and the guard hollered "Halt, give me the password!"; and I said "I don't know the password"; and I started to turn around and when I did, I heard him click the safety off of that M-16 [M-16 used in Vietnam; more likely WWII-era M-1 Garand applies] and you sober up real quick, and I said "Look I'm the flyboy." I said "Call the sergeant of the guard." So that what, he called sergeant of the guard and he said "Oh ya, that's the flyboy, he's OK." He says "Where are you going?" I said "Well, I got an address, I'm going down to spend the night in this house." And he said "OK, I'll take you." I said "Look sarg, go in and get somebody the password, no one has told us what the password is tonight; somebody's liable get shot. And that was pretty close incident, but the home I stayed in was a beautiful home that this doctor had. One of these great big feather beds and everything, but you didn't get that very often.

**GASPER:** Now you mentioned you spent basically the last month of the war, roughly mid-April 'til of course the end of May when the surrender was, as a forward air controller. What was the typical duration for a pilot to be assigned in that role? A month at a time?

**PERCY:** Thirty days. A month at a time. Yes. Actually what we did, there was, since three of us were going, one was supposed to fly the L-5 observation, the other two were going to the Tenth and Twelfth Armored Tank Divisions. And the one guy who was to fly the L-5, he says “You know, I don’t want to fly that thing for thirty days. It’s not conducive to longevity. That’s worse than crop-dusting.” Anyway, so what we did, we flipped a coin, we figured well they don’t know who’s coming up there, they just know they got a bunch of pilots. So we flipped a coin, so the first ten days I flew the L-5 for observation, with the observer in it, and going to work for troops for the Tenth and Twelfth. After my ten days were up, then I ended up actually the last twenty days with the Tenth Armored Tank Division. And we were on our way, our group was on our way to Innsbruck through the pass. We ended up in Garmisch the day the war ended.

**GASPER:** Now did you say, three pilots got assigned for thirty day tours?

**PERCY:** Only raffle I ever won, you know, they’re supposed to take your name out of a hat. [laugh]

**GASPER:** So one being the, flying the L-5 or for some period thereof, one being assigned to the Tenth and another being assigned to the Twelfth.

**PERCY:** Twelfth, since we were supporting them.

**GASPER:** Now did you say that they all three came from the same squadron at a time or from the group?

**PERCY:** No, same group. One pilot, each squadron.

**GASPER:** OK. Now you mentioned, you know, the concern about mines. To what extent did the column you work with hit mines?

**PERCY:** Well, we had a couple, that one time that one tank; and then right after that and then what they did, they brought in like a tank that had like a big roller in the front of it, like for rolling grass, they put that in front and then he’d run down the road you were going down to set off any mines that were in place.

**GASPER:** So they were pretty good about making sure they

**PERCY:** Oh yes, it was mine free, yes, apparently they got careless on that one time.

**GASPER:** To what extent, did you get, encounter snipers?

**PERCY:** Well, being about behind the third tank, why, we were fairly, you know, far enough behind that. Now we did have an Me-, let’s see, it was an Fw-190 strafe us one day. He made, he was making one pass across the column when we heard him coming in. The tank commander says “Flyboy, call and get some help.” So instead of going through normal procedures, I made a blank call into the air to see if there was any aircraft, and I gave the coordinates that we had. I got a call back from a P-51 pilot, recce [reconnaissance] pilot, and he said “I’m a recce pilot. I’m probably ten miles, ten minutes away from the coordinates you gave me.” And I said “We got an Fw-190 strafing us”, I said, “He’s made one run and coming around for another one”; I says “You got any ammo?” and he said, “Ya” – a lot of the guys flying the recce didn’t carry ammo with them; they carried cameras you know. So anyway, I gave him the position of it and as the Fw-190 was like on a base leg getting ready to turn, the 51 says “Hey, I got him, hold your fires.” So the tank commander, and they’d pass it on down that nobody to fire from the tank group. And as he come across, he didn’t hit anything and the 51 was right behind him, and he was about 200 foot off the deck, why the 51 was able to get him and he rolled inverted and went into the ground. So the guy in the 51 come back and did his victory roll and “Hey, thanks buddy” and I said “You’re welcome.” Of course, later on down the road, I got chewed out by the major who was at the home base because I didn’t go through proper procedures.

**GASPER:** But heck, you got that F-190 off the column.



**PERCY:** Well, I got the 51 an aircraft, that's all I was concerned about at the time, being a pilot, you know. He got him an aircraft [laugh] and no one else got hurt on the ground.

**GASPER:** The column that you were with.

**PERCY:** But, like I say, with the major, he chewed me out, but he didn't get a [unintelligible – laughter].

**GASPER:** Yes, and the bottom line is you served the mission well.

**PERCY:** Yes, luckily. Now as the war ended, this sergeant I had and radio operator, these guys were great scroungers and stuff. We were not supposed to go out of the city of Garmisch at the end of the war. Two days later, they said "Hey flyboy, we're going to go out of town and we're looking around" because there had been a bunch of German troops that they had picked up and put into an internment camp at Garmisch.

**GASPER:** You're saying this is two days after the war ended?

**PERCY:** After the war ended, about the tenth of May. Where they had stripped them down and everything, so these guys were out, it was in a wooded area, the guys were looking for knives and Lugers [type of German pistol] and this type of thing. Anyway, as we're out in this area, three Germans come walking across the pasture, with like a handkerchief on the end of stick. So we grabbed our guns, and they come up and oh, we got three prisoners of war. It turned out one of them had his arm in a sling, in a cast. And as I turned around with my jacket, he says "Oh, a Jaboo pilot." and I said "Yes." Well, my sergeant, Crutcher [sp?] was his name, was my driver, he could speak very fluent German. And this guy, this German pilot says "Jaboo pilot?" and I says "Yes." And so they talked to him back and forth, and I said "What did he say" and he said "Well, a 47 shot him down, and when he bailed out he broke his arm – he was a pilot." And I said "I didn't shoot anybody down, so it wasn't me." [laughter] Anyway, the other personnel was a navigator, he had a big navigator watch, that the radio operator took, and the other one was a ground personnel in maintenance. So we put them on the jeep and took and turned them into the camp. Now we checked for knives and stuff, and they didn't have any. As the pilot was getting off the jeep, going in, he turned around and he said "Here" and he handed me this. This is his pilot's wings.

**GASPER:** Oh my, I'm picking up a momento here with a

**PERCY:** A momento, it's metal German pilot's wings from this Fw-190 pilot that we picked up outside of Garmisch after World War II.

**GASPER:** With a laurel wreath with a very large, with what appears to be an eagle with spread wings and the eagle is resting on a swastika that's at the bottom of the laurel wreath. I think what I'll try and do is take a photo of this to include with the interview, just for someone's reference if they want to see what I'm trying to describe here. Very good.

**PERCY:** And I had kicked myself ever since, why I haven't ever tried to look that guy up and find out what happened. He might have been president of Mercedes or something, you know, since I was stationed England twenty years later.

**GASPER:** So even though, as you mentioned "I didn't shoot you down", he really offered this to you.

**PERCY:** It came out of the lining of his coat and he says "Here flyboy Jaboo" and handed it to me before he went into encampment. I thought that was kind of neat.

**GASPER:** We'll definitely try to get a picture of that.

**PERCY:** And I carried it all the time and I thought, why I didn't go back into the records and try to find this guy. I should have, I guess. But you know at twenty-one, you don't think of those things until later on. [laughter]

**GASPER:** Well, I don't know, certainly with your great involvement with the Prairie Aviation Museum here in Bloomington, Illinois, maybe there's an artifact for the museum at some point in time.

**PERCY:** I suppose, maybe.

**GASPER:** With you being a board of director there and helping to keep the DC-3 airborne. Now, with the conclusion of the war, well, we talked about the various threats you faced and did you find yourself or others around you carrying good luck charms on missions or things like that?

**PERCY:** I guess some of them did. I don't know that I carried any. I think my good luck charm was when I was in Richmond, is I went on a blind date, paid five dollars to go on a blind date with this gal and it ended up we got married, and we were married for 52 years. So it was, I don't know if it was the most expensive five dollars I ever spent or if it was the best five dollar investment [laughter]. This buddy up in Chicago, we went through pilot school together, we switched dates and just one of those deals.

**GASPER:** Well, maybe your good luck charm

**PERCY:** Was being engaged to that gal. She was very, she said "Look," – I wanted to fly 51's really, and she said "No, you stay in 'the Jug', you'll come home."

**GASPER:** And as you already said, it got you there and back many a time.

**PERCY:** Yes, it got me there and got me back, yes, and it was a good survivability aircraft. I mean, the aircraft took a lot a lot of punishment. You can't believe the stories of the guys who had holes in the wings, you know, knock a cylinder off and you just continue to run. Now one other incident, I guess I had, we had, not only did the Pratt & Whitney engine, but we had different propellers: we had Curtiss Electric, we had Hamilton Standard. But the Curtiss Electric had a tendency, the brushes would go out, when it did, the propeller went into flat pitch, like I turned up three thousand RPMs. Well, at three thousand RPMs, the airplane will not fly. I had to back off on manifold pressure to keep the RPMs around twenty-seven hundred to keep around hundred seventy mile an hour to get the airplane home. Of course, the crew chief was mad at me when I got back, he said "How much RPM do you got on it?" and I said "Three thousand"; and he says, "Well, I got to change the engine – you ruined it"; and I said "Well, yes, but at least I got home." I said "When you put that other engine on there, I want a Hamilton Standard propeller, I don't want no Curtiss Electric." Curtiss Electric didn't have a very good reputation, they had a lot of problems. But that's just one of those things that happened.

**GASPER:** So did you typically fly then with the Hamilton Standard?

**PERCY:** Yes, after that I, the other aircraft I flew. See, being a wingman and low man on the totem pole, I didn't. When I came back from the frontline, this is where our, our group was stationed at Stuttgart, Germany, and like we said, why didn't our wing commander tell us we were going to Stuttgart. We wouldn't have strafed it, because we burned up all our hangars, we didn't have any hangars for our aircraft. We lived in tar paper shacks and all that and this was in June and July, see, of '45 after the war was over with. But anyway,

**GASPER:** Well, let's see, we're covering a lot of ground here and that's great, I'm just trying to make sure what topics and how we're doing here, we're doing very well. Do you think there's anything, that whether you've seen it in movies or in books, that there's anything that hasn't really been well expressed or maybe not expressed at all about things that you noticed flying combat?

**PERCY:** Well, I tell you the History Channel is one of the greatest ones, you know, they run all the different types of aircraft on it. And of course now I've got a bunch of videos on the different aircraft too, the "Jugs" and 51s, 38s, you know, and they run a pretty true thing of it. When you're, you know, flying in that area and its coming at you then you look back on it, why yes, they're pretty accurate on that. But you



don't think of it you know. Like I say, we were twenty-one years of age at the time, and at that age, hell, you're infallible. [laugh] You know, you kick the tire, light the fire, and go. [laughter]

**GASPER:** Now of course, the History Channel, dealing with documentaries and that sort of thing, trying to be true to always to the fact, are there any movies, films, that you think are more realistic? Of course, Hollywood always takes some license in what they present, but is there any movies to you that stand out? I remember Robert Stack, I believe was in a movie with a Thunderbolt squadron. ["Fighter Squadron" made just after WWII]

**PERCY:** Yes, I think he was, yes. That was, I think wasn't it documented from a pilot that graduated in '44A class that went to "the Jugs". And he depicted and everything and they did approximately the same thing I'm telling you what I've done and in doing it, being a fighter-bomber pilot, more or less than an Eighth Air Force escort pilot. He was the one that come up through Africa and Italy and all that kind of stuff, you know.

**GASPER:** To what extent did you witness or perceive a concern that, you know the phrase, some people get "flak happy" and they, and there comes a time where they just can't step up on a given day, that they need a break?

**PERCY:** Oh, we had a few pilots, I'm sure, you might say got into the bottle a little bit, and you might say had combat fatigue, I guess they called it, you know where you got to a point maybe.

**GASPER:** Did you run into cases where some people were put in the sick ward for a time to just let them, or some other type of R & R, to give them a little break?

**PERCY:** No, no I didn't. I guess because see I, right near the end of it, and then being switched and went into the Tenth and Twelfth Armored Tank Divisions, then come back. And so, we were, we'd ask our wing commander, I did when I got back, could I go to the Pacific to finish my tour? At that time, for our group, you were supposed to fly, I think 95 missions to finish your tour against the bombers 35. Of course, these guys had a lot more hours in the air. And you know, in thirty minutes you had a mission and you were back home and stuff like that, maybe it was two hours. So there was a lot of difference in the number at the time and he said "No, go back to the States for thirty days and then go to the Pacific." So that's what I was doing, I left in July, Paris in July, come back on a DC-3 Gooney Bird, landed, ended up, landed up Bradley Field, Connecticut. Stationed at Randolph Air Force Base [Texas], I was, ended up at Sherman Air Force Base in Texas, and then I got discharged in May of '46. First time back.

**GASPER:** And then, like you said, you got called back in the service.

**PERCY:** And I stayed in the reserves and I got recalled in January 1953, back to active duty.

**GASPER:** Of course, that was now at the tail end of the Korea War.

**PERCY:** Yes, the tail end of the Korea War, and during that part of it, I ended up going to Japan. I was in Japan three years and I was flying the Gooney Bird, mainly the C-119 Flying Boxcar, hauling all different types of cargo, munitions, and while in Japan, of course, we flew into Korea, into Taipei, Taiwan, and the Chinese were acting up over there, we flew engines and stuff for F-86s for Taipei and Taiwan.

**GASPER:** So the remainder of your Air Force career, you were largely in what capacity for the Air Force?

**PERCY:** Just another pilot, although I'd had run an alert area in England, with eight F-100's sitting on fifteen minute alert type of thing; base operations; administrative officer; and when I retired out of Mather [AFB California] another major and I, we ran what they call the mission briefing section, this is navigator training, we briefed about three hundred and fifty people a day, twenty-six missions on the different flights that they flew out training navigators. We did, I did that for two years until I retired, plus still flying seventy or eighty hours a month.

**GASPER:** Now you mentioned, you know, the C-119, in your remainder of the career, of course, during the war, you flying the P-47, then you transitioned to the cargo aircraft – did you tend to fly cargo aircraft for the remainder of your career?

**PERCY:** No, I flew the T-29 which is the Convair 340 and 440 for navigating training. I ended up with three years at Harlingen [Texas], three years at Mather, so I flew the Convair for over six years. I've got about four thousand hours in that airplane. And I was in flight test section for about a year on that too. We were having engine problems.

**GASPER:** Just curious, if you have a tally of the number of hours of flight time you had in the Air Force and then I know you have quite another number of hours in your time at State Farm as a corporate pilot.

**PERCY:** I had eight thousand hours when I retired out of the Air Force.

**GASPER:** Eight thousand in the Air Force and?

**PERCY:** And I got about six-thousand eight-hundred now so

**GASPER:** Sixty-eight since

**PERCY:** Well fifty, yes sixty-eight, let's see

**GASPER:** Since you retired?

**PERCY:** Yes, let me check to make sure. Yes, I got about fourteen-thousand eight-hundred hours total.

**GASPER:** Definitely a high timer as they say and

**PERCY:** Hey, as an airline pilot, no, you know, being a fighter pilot, single engine, see, that includes between World War II and I got recalled in Korea, I flew for Steak 'n Shake Restaurant company as a corporate pilot. We had a Beechcraft Bonanza and a Cessna 195, flew for Gus [unintelligible] that just started the Steak 'n Shake here in Bloomington-Normal. And then there was no promotion in that, my father got ill, so I was going to go back to farming. So I went back to farming, when I was farming, also was during the time we had corn [unintelligible] so I ended up for Art Carnahan [sp?], the manager. I crop dusted for him in an Aeronca aircraft. I crop-dusted in the year of 1949 and 1950 [laughter] and this is not conducive to longevity. And I was farming in 1950, one hundred and sixty acres and my dad's one hundred acres. And then in January of '51, I got orders to report to active duty. I took my physical, had sold all my farm machinery and two months later they said "No, we're not going to call you." So I happened, my wife, being from North Carolina, I went down to Rocky Mountain, North Carolina. I got down there, looking for a job, and in Kinston, North Carolina, they were starting a civilian contract school, teaching pilots to fly in the AT-6. So I went down there and signed up and got hired for that job. Went through the flight, civilian flight instructor school at Selma, Alabama and I was instructing cadets in the T-6 from '51 then, in the fall of '51 until January '53 when I got called on active duty. So see I've been flying all the time, but I had instructed students in the T-6, when I got recalled in '53.

**GASPER:** And what aircraft did you primarily fly for State Farm?

**PERCY:** Well, State Farm we had a, started out with a 508 Commander, piston job. Then we got a 681 B turbo prop Aerocommander. We bought it in '72 and I was still flying that airplane when I retired eighteen years later.

**GASPER:** You retired from State Farm in

**PERCY:** December of '89

**GASPER:** With twenty years of service?



**PERCY:** Yes, I got out in December of '69 from the Air Force and came with State Farm, the last eleven years at State Farm we picked up the Lear Jet 35 model. So I got eleven years flying a Lear jet, you know. About two thousand hours in that airplane.

**GASPER:** And since your retirement from State Farm, you've continued to fly your private aircraft.

**PERCY:** Yes, 172s, Commanche, I owned a Commanche 250 at one time, and now I've got a Cessna 182. But it's a '99 model. [laughter] Ended up buying a new one.

**GASPER:** A Cessna 182, here at 77, still yanking and banking up there, in the wild blue yonder – very good.

**PERCY:** Yes, to go back and look at, well, I've been flying 59 years now, and so far, knock on wood, I've never missed a year of flying. I just been, I've had good health, been lucky and just wasn't my time yet I guess. [laugh]

**GASPER:** How many IFEs or In-Flight Emergencies would you say you've encountered, where you thought, I'm not so sure this is going to be recoverable, so to speak?

**PERCY:** Well, the Gooney Bird, I flew it for seven years straight, C-47, that was four years up and down the East coast. We were also flying navigators at the time and then in England, three years, so seven years straight. But when we were in England, see, we flew into Norway, Germany, Spain, you know all over the Far East. So anyway, and like I say, Convair six years, so I had flew a lot of hours in the same aircraft. So as far as the Gooney Bird I think I lost four engines, had to shut them down, make single engine landings. The closest one on the C-47 or Gooney Bird was out of Wright-Patterson [AFB, Ohio]. Full load of people, full load of fuel, over gross, 85 degrees, and at 50 feet as I pulled the gear up, the right engine caught on fire. So I had the crew chief check it because I had civilians in the back and they said, yes, it's on fire. So we shut it down, and I was able to go up and get two hundred feet and bring it around and make a ninety-two seventy and land back downwind with that aircraft. That's as close as I come to losing an aircraft. I don't think I ever got over one hundred miles per hour on that aircraft at the time. But it flew OK on one and I made it back.

**GASPER:** The famed reputation of the Gooney Bird.

**PERCY:** Oh yes, good. And like the co-pilot, had this new co-pilot and I wanted to turn into the dead engine, don't turn into it – I says, fine, it will fly on one engine, as long you got the airplane trimmed up it will fly.

**GASPER:** And now of course, you play an integral role at the Prairie Aviation Museum, here in Bloomington, to help keep their DC-3 flying.

**PERCY:** Yes, they got me in charge of the maintenance. Like I told the guys, you know, I don't cure the oil leaks, I just slow them down [laugh] you know. But last year I feel we were lucky – we made ten airshows, made all ten airshows; and this year, we've made nine airshows; and supposed to be today going to an airshow; and if we make that one, I'll have made all of them this year. We've made a few minor adjustments, change a few parts, carburetors, and a few things like that but I still got it flying.

**GASPER:** Now you've been a board of director at the museum and involved in keeping that running since roughly when?

**PERCY:** Well, Norm and I and two other people, four of us really are the original, the four original board of directors that started the museum back in '83.

**GASPER:** Yes, Norm Wingler is the

**PERCY:** Is the president now, yes, still president. I got assigned as vice-president, but that was by proxy, I think in '83.

**GASPER:** So you've been quite a, one of the founding fathers of the museum, and what, with the museum, what is your view on the museum's contribution to the public?

**PERCY:** Well, like I say, the idea that it started with, we went, we just wanted to preserve aviation for young people to keep them advised, you know, of what happened during World War II, and Korea and try to keep aviation alive in the community. I think we've done that quite a bit with our different community efforts, you know, being in the different parades and too starting the aviation program at Parkside High School. And the young troops that come in and they, the kids are really good, they call themselves the Soaring Cobras, and they've got a logo and we give them airplane rides for their graduation. Last year, our aircraft happened to be down at the time for their particular graduation. I flew twenty-one students in the aviation program in my own aircraft. Most of them, it was their first time in an airplane and also real active with the EAA, which is the Experimental Aircraft Association, flying the Flight Eagles, called the Flight Eagle Flights. [Interviewer is an EAA member and believes "Young Eagles" applies.] Oh, I don't know, I flown maybe 50 or 60 students in that particular role in the last two years. And I enjoy flying these young kids, see them twelve or thirteen, it's amazing to look at their face for their first time up. I get as much enjoyment as they do. I really do.

**GASPER:** Well, amen. Amen. Looks like this tape is starting to wind down and I of course would like to just get a few more of your views, if I may, some overarching views, on just a few points. And I think maybe at this point, I'll stop the tape so I can pop in another one and just

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2 SIDE A]

**GASPER:** OK, so now we're back, and Sir John you were saying you wanted to mention one other incident that you had a close call that you'd like to mention.

**PERCY:** Yes, you were talking about, you know, you spent this many years flying, you're bound to have emergencies, different things apply. Just when I was stationed at Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento [California]. It was about six months, I guess, before I was ready to retire. We were on a flight over the Pacific Ocean, about three hundred and fifty miles out, at eighteen thousand feet at night and we, all of a sudden we noticed there was smoke coming up from the floorboard of the aircraft. So the thing was to do to try, you know, hit circuit breakers to see what was going on. And we found a screwdriver, took up the floor, and when we did, we had flames coming out of the floorboard. So immediately, we went to one hundred percent oxygen, depressurized the aircraft, and we used one fire extinguisher, the flames went out, and then the flames came back. In the meantime, I'm trying to figure out how to get the flames out, turned out that on the right engine of this aircraft, it runs your pressurization system, your air conditioning and also runs your rectifier that run your radar stations. We had one master radar station and two or three repeaters. And with the fire where it is, we had all these fuel lines, this is a wet wing airplane, we got fuel lines, cross lines all down in the belly and this is where this flame was so it was either, this thing was either going to blow up, or we're going to have to ditch the airplane that night, or we're going to have to bail out. I told the instructor, I says, "Look, we're on our last fire extinguisher" I said, "this thing is, there is electricity still feeding these rectifiers, they're fused together. So the only thing to do, is to shut down our right engine." And he "What do you mean?" I said "It'll fly on one engine, there's no problem." So we shut down the engine. And when we shut down the engine, then with the fire extinguishers, the flame and the fire went out. So we assessed the damage and we're OK, flying on one engine. So we just called in the Oakland Center and told them declared an emergency, we're on one engine, at a, I wanted nine thousand feet. I liked to be radar vectored to go back to Mather Air Force Base. So they did. We drifted down and held nine thousand feet. And everybody talks how beautiful the Golden Gate Bridge is. I tell you what, at 2:30 in the morning, that was the most beautiful sight I ever had [laugh] was to see that bridge come up and we're still on one engine. So we made it back and we just went on and landed at Mather. There was no problems. And later on, there was two hundred pilots assigned at Mather, and through that incident, the



navigator wrote it up, and I had to write up my report, what we did, they ended up giving different awards during the quarter or the month. It ended up that I guess by bringing the aircraft back and everything, I ended up Pilot of the Year, which I'm kind of proud of, out of two hundred pilots.

**GASPER:** In 19

**PERCY:** In 1989, it was about six months before I retired. So I figured well, maybe the handwriting is on the wall. [laughter]

**GASPER:** Might be a good time to, yes, move on.

**PERCY:** It [pause] we lucked out and we were able to diagnose it, get the engine shut down. And the main thing is, I didn't want to bail those people out over the Pacific Ocean at night and have them scattered around, and I really didn't want to ditch it at night. But I would have ditched it if I had to; I would rather try to ditch that airplane rather than bail out, especially over the ocean at night. And I'm sure, the Convair, the way its built and everything, wouldn't be too bad of an aircraft to ditch.

**GASPER:** I was just going to ask your opinion because I remember reading accounts that pilots considered, say the B-17, an easier aircraft because it had the low wing compared to, say the B-24, trying to ditch that.

**PERCY:** Oh sure, well, that's the way I felt about the Convair. And like I tell you, the time I had about four thousand hours in it, flown it for six years, I was very confident in the airplane. The main thing was to get that fire out so that sucker wouldn't blow up. That was what I was concerned about.

**GASPER:** Now I know someone could probably look up the specifics of the Convair, but we're talking the type engines and number of aircraft or passengers?

**PERCY:** OK, it had two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines on it. They put out, what, two thousand four hundred horsepower on it. The Convair 340 and 440 that the airlines used back in '52, '53, and '55, and when the airlines got through with the Convair, the piston, they went to the turbo props. But this, now what they have done, on the Convair, they have converted some of them, the freighters, and they've put turbo-prop Allison engines on them and they use them for freighters. One Allison engine has more horsepower than both of our engines on the Pratt & Whitneys. They use them for freighters around the country and they call them 540s now, I think, because it's a turbo-prop.

**GASPER:** And I'm sorry, maybe you said it, maybe I didn't catch it, the number of air, people that were on board that plane then?

**PERCY:** Oh, well, let's see, we carried fifteen navigators aboard and crew, seventeen people aboard.

**GASPER:** When you got that pilot of the year.

**PERCY:** Yes, when we had that problem at night.

**GASPER:** You were a "full house" so to speak.

**PERCY:** Yes, we had a full load, full load on board, full of navigators. See what they did, they had four of them run radar, then you had some that were shooting star shots at night. The other stations had set up for LORAN, so we had LORAN aboard. And they had the guys that could shoot the stars – even though we lost the radar and all that and had to shut it down, but there's other means of navigation so there was no problem.

**GASPER:** Now I can see where that would definitely be a significant emotional event or memorable event.

**PERCY:** It is memorable. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Just curious, much has been said lately, again, this is October 6<sup>th</sup> of 2001, and last month on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, the US suffered atrocious terrorist attacks. I would like to hear your views of what the impact was of hearing the news about Pearl Harbor, and how you would compare and contrast that with the news of what you've heard today or in recent days of in the wake of those attacks; how you compare the effect on you personally and what you perceive, how it affects our country in general? Those two major incidents.

**PERCY:** Well, of course, Pearl Harbor, I was a senior in high school at the time, you know, pretty young. And sure, you know you had a foreign country that attacked your country, and you know, hey, we got to do something about it. And since I was interested in flying I asked the parents and said, hey, I wanted to join the service to be a pilot. I wanted to be a part of it, because actually a year, you know, we were fighting for our country and as far as this terrorist thing, actually what happened on the eleventh, I had a flight set up for 9:30 that morning, to fly my own aircraft. I was going up to fly a farmer that farms my sister's farm, and we were going to go up and take pictures because they had had a lot of wind damage before he did the combining. I had had a doctor's appointment at eight o'clock, went out and got my aircraft, pulled out of the hangar, was running up the engines, and checked my equipment, and about ten after nine, I thought, well, I have everything ready, so I'll listen to the ATIS which is your terminal information at Bloomington airport. And the tower comes out and gives all the weather and then at the end of it, he says, "All aircraft will remain on the ground – are grounded indefinitely." So I called the tower, and we're doing construction at the airport here on our runways due to the new terminal and well I thought they got a delay by an half hour or something. So I called the tower back, and I said, "How long do you have us listed as grounded?" This gal come back and said "We're grounded indefinitely" and I said "OK." So when I get out of my airplane, another friend of mine come down and he said "John, did you hear it?" And I said "Hear what?" So, I didn't even know anything had happened until, almost 'til nine thirty. And the guy said "Hey, one of the towers, you know the terrorists, these guys flew an aircraft into the buildings in New York." And I said "Oh my God!" Well, you know, it's these terrorist acts, you know they can happen anywhere or anytime, you know, it's just like a commando. You don't know when they're going to happen, and it looks like these guys had it planned pretty well. And I will say one thing, I think these guys aboard the aircraft in Pennsylvania, they tried to save it but, you know, I guess they got overpowered and; but too and I think everybody now, the American people, after the Korean thing, and Vietnam, things have kind of calmed down. But now I think its brought the American people back "hey, our country's got to survive and everybody is pitching in" to "hey, what can I do to help the country?" You know, we got to get rid of these guys and as far as I'm concerned the government, President Bush, I think he's doing a super job right now [unintelligible] spending with your CIA and FBI and all the information they're being able to pick up. It's amazing though that these guys were, you know, trained at flying in the United States. But hey, you know our borders were open, so these people come across. Like to me, it's different than Japan. The Japanese of course, they had the Kamikaze pilots. When I was stationed in Japan, at Johnson Air Base, that's where they built the Kamikaze, the aircraft itself, and I was in the same hangar that they built them but that was under a different prospective. They had a target to shoot at, whereas we don't have a target to shoot at right now, you know what I mean, as a specific thing. We know the country and where they are, and the people, and right now I think they're doing all they can. And then some people like want to do it now but we need to see and wait and if we're going to do it, do it right and to completely take care of this terrorist outbreak. I mean that's my feeling on it.

**GASPER:** Just curious, when you heard the news about Pearl Harbor, what were the circumstances surrounding that?

**PERCY:** Like I say, I don't know, being, you know, eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

**GASPER:** Well, were you, did your family hear it over the radio or

**PERCY:** I suppose, I'm sure my dad, folks heard it on the radio, yes – where I was at the time, I don't really recall.



**GASPER:** You don't remember how it was conveyed to you?

**PERCY:** It was probably, I'm sure, by radio. It had to be, you know. [laugh]

**GASPER:** Or somebody came up to you in person, just like when you were talking about at the airport, somebody

**PERCY:** Yes, came up and told me and informed me of, no, I imagine through the radio at night with the parents, you know that it happened. I'm sure it shocked them too at the time.

**GASPER:** By any chance

**PERCY:** Like I say now, it happened to be five of us guys right here in the area here, all farm boys graduated from high school together. Out of the five, three of us went into service; the other two stayed home on the farm. Now had we had a bigger farm; I could have stayed probably home at the farm to help. But I had my idea, I was down there pushing airplane throttles, and I wanted to fly a damn airplane. So you know, that's why I wanted to join the service. My parents says fine, that's what you want to do, go do it. They were very supportive of it, really.

**GASPER:** Did you have siblings, or other relatives, go off to service? I'm not sure, I don't remember did you have brothers or sisters?

**PERCY:** No, I had one sister. Just my sister and I in our particular family; yes, we're the only ones.

**GASPER:** Now, of course, in recent years, Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, has saluted the effort of those who, you know, after and enduring the Depression, banded together in the war effort and not only overcame tyranny on a massive scale with Japan and Germany, but then came back and helped build the United States into the superpower it became with very high standard of living, you know, of course representative government continued and people prospered. And what, have you had [pause] of course now, Tom Brokaw has, I believe it's now three books in his series related to "the Greatest Generation". Have you had a chance to read any of them or see anything or read anything on them?

**PERCY:** No, I haven't read any of his books. Just listen to him as a commentator, you know, over the airways and stuff like that.

**GASPER:** Well, what message would you say future generations should take from your generation?

**PERCY:** [pause] Boy, that's a tough one. [laugh] I really don't know.

**GASPER:** It's kind of a sweeping question.

**PERCY:** Well, yes. I got two grandsons now that are twenty-two years of age. They may end up in the service in this fight, I don't know, and I'm sure if it came to that, they would, knowing both of them. In fact, one of them, his wife presented us with a baby on Father's Day, so I'm a great-grandpa now; I told them I wasn't old enough to be a great-grandpa. [laughter] He's twenty-two and he works as a mechanic on automobiles and everything in Indianapolis. The other one, he's a senior at Emory in Atlanta, Georgia. [phone rings again]

**GASPER:** Well, the phone is ringing in the background. But, well, I guess we'll just press on here, it won't ring too much longer.

**PERCY:** No, it'll quit. They'll give up.

**GASPER:** Well, I guess I'll try and avoid putting words in your mouth, but to the extent that you said much like today, people are pitching in, again, I guess, pitching in again just as you were indicating of how everyone banded together in World War II.

**PERCY:** Well, hey, I think we realized that what we were fighting for, was for our freedom and too these guys are trying to destroy our freedom now, and the people of our country, you know, have had freedom so long that they're not going to let this happen. We're going to continue to try to live in our lifestyle and have our freedom, just like you know, was against Hitler and all his regime. We didn't want that, and the same thing either with Korea and Vietnam. Now one thing I mentioned, like I said, I flew cargo in Japan and all that, one thing we were on a special mission. Went to Clark AFB [Philippines], we took the airplane there for three days, and we went to the morning for the briefing, we walk in, they give us a brand new flight suit, they give us a forty-five, and we say "What's going on?" They gave us a briefing, we were to fly across Laos and Cambodia – this was in '59 just before the beginning of the Vietnam thing – going to land at Bangkok. We said "That's 1,400 miles, seven hours. We've only got seven hours of fuel." They said "That's OK, you can manage your fuel in your aircraft, but this is a route that you have to fly." We go out to the aircraft, the aircraft I flew over there had Air Force markings on it. That morning we went out to the aircraft, they were stripped down, there was no markings on that aircraft. And they briefed us, in the event you get shot down, Uncle Sam does not know you're with us. It was like one of those CIA type of deal things, so I made four trips on that. Yes, the Laos, Cambodian, they fired a few shots at us, but luckily we didn't get hit. So, and like I'd made Lieutenant Colonel at Mather in July of '69. In September, I was to be assigned overseas because I'd been there for three years. So where was it then – back to Vietnam or in that area, and I said "Honey, I think I can retire with 27 years, 20 years active and I think the hand writing on the wall: I think I'm going to get out." [laughter] So that's what I did. I lucked out with a super job with State Farm, flying their aircraft for twenty years, which I had no idea, had no idea that I would have ever fly for them that long. I figured I'd fly four or five years and forget it and hang it up. But it was such a super job and super people to fly for, that it was too hard to give up. And they were concerned about my age when I did give up, because see with the airlines you have to retire at 60, and I was 66 still flying a Lear Jet. But my health was good and they said they had no problems with that at all. I said I was looking for at that time for a twenty year, another twenty year retirement. [laughter] I lucked out.

**GASPER:** Well, so what, as long as you pass your FAA physical

**PERCY:** Physical and then too, see, we have a biannual flight check that we have to take – and since I fly mine IFR and everything, I take an instrument flight check every year.

**GASPER:** Well, do you

**PERCY:** So, I'm still working at it.

**GASPER:** So, what, as long as you consider yourself still "mission ready", you're going to keep going up?

**PERCY:** I think so, yes. I'd like to, as long as the health holds out, why, and not endangering myself or somebody else. I said, when the day comes I think I know it all, I'm going to quit because everytime I fly, I learn something new. And that's the way I feel about it. And when it comes to I think I know it all, I'm going to quit. That's when you get in trouble.

**GASPER:** Now let's see, you first took to the skies in an airplane, not solo, but the first, your first airplane ride?

**PERCY:** About 1940.

**GASPER:** Was '40. Now here we are in 2001.

**PERCY:** It's about 61 years, I guess but 59 of it you might say that I've had my hands on the controls.

**GASPER:** And you say everytime you go up, it's a learning experience.



**PERCY:** It sure is, especially now with all your new navigation equipment and all the, your new, starting out from one radio now to having two GPS's in the aircraft, and I've got a flight director system in it and all that good stuff, a storm scope [laugh]. I'm not looking for bad weather, but just to keep me out of it.

**GASPER:** Now with your learning experiences in the air and in many other respects, your many experiences in so many aspects, I guess in conclusion I would ask you, you know, we've covered a multitude of topics here; just wondering, is there any other topic or any other point you'd like to mention that we haven't addressed or discussed that you would like to have recorded for future reference.

**PERCY:** Well, the only thing since being on the board of directors with the museum here, and trying to get DC-3 flying, as you know, we're trying to get into what they call the Challenger Learning Center. I think that's a super program, of these eighth and ninth grade students that's going to give them onhands information, science, celestial navigation, and a lot of the courses that they have, it's something. To me, this, the Challenger Learning Center, is the future generation of these young kids, will keep maybe aviation or space program alive. It's a, I know you know somewhat about it, that we're starting and we've, I hope that we can continue and get this one operational here in Bloomington. I think it would be a great aspect to the community, really for the students, and like State Farm, that we get support from them, or say Caterpillar, or Decatur, the different ones, they say, you know what kind of product are you going to produce for us – what can we expect? Well, they're going to get students and young people that have onhands experience as to the science, part of your space program, and then with all the computer problems that they have, in the computer thing. They're going to be well-educated on the computers, and so they're going to get a better employee to work for them, I think, in that aspect because they're not sitting in a classroom reading a book; they're getting hands-on problems like, as you know, put them in a Space Shuttle – hey, you're water systems bad, OK, why is it bad, you have to correct it because you have to survive – so these students have to figure out how to do that. Also, they have an oxygen problem: how are you going to correct that in space? You have to have that to survive. So these are the problems that they present to the student in this Challenger Learning Center course. And I think it's a super thing for the, tool for the community. For instance, the, Carl [pause] can't think of his last name that runs the planetarium at ISU [Carl Wenning], he's very supportive. Like he says, yes, I can teach these kids about celestial stars and, you know, give them on-hands you might say information, rather than sitting home reading their book. And that's what I like. I hope that we can do that for the museum. It's a Challenger Learning Center of the Prairie Aviation Museum, to help support the community.

**GASPER:** And carry on

**PERCY:** In fact, well, the hardest working community. I don't know if you know it or not, but one of the Thunderbirds – that wasn't at our field this year, but last year [at the museum airshow] – down at Springfield, when he was here, flying an A-10, he struck up a pen-pal with a student – she'd been in the hospital, checked out. And then when he was in Springfield, he heard that about it, and he wanted to come up and give a lecture at the school, but he didn't have any transportation. So a friend of mine said "John, would you go pick him up?" and I said "Yes." So I went down to Springfield and picked up the Thunderbird pilot – Ken Edwards is his name. I put him in my aircraft and he had never flown a piston airplane. Of course, when they go through flight school now, it's all jets. So I tried to teach him how to fly a piston airplane. [laugh] Here he is, a Thunderbird pilot, so that was kind of neat. Anyway, I flew him up here, and flew him back. And while I was at the airshow in Springfield, one of the girls said "Ken said that he's busy but he wouldn't say hello, and he really appreciated flying with you but he had one problem." and I said "What's that?" He said I wouldn't let him do any acrobatics [laugh], and I said "Not in my airplane!" [laughter] But other than that, the guy really enjoyed it and I enjoyed flying the guy, you know, flying him back and forth – I thought it was kind of neat.

**GASPER:** Well, that's

**PERCY:** You know, so I've had quite a few other different experiences of

**GASPER:** You bet and

**PERCY:** Different people and to be able to pick up the Thunderbird pilot and say, hey, fly my airplane and he's never flown a piston, I thought was kind of neat.

**GASPER:** Well, as you mentioned that experience and of course, with your role in helping to provide an aviation or aerospace learning experience for the community here in the future. [phone rings another time] Oh, and there goes the phone again, I guess you're a popular

**PERCY:** Oh well, we won't worry about the phone. [laugh] I'm running you behind in your schedule anyways.

**GASPER:** Well, I guess my last, my last question, I thought of just one more, maybe retrospective question here is, of course with the objectives of this interview to be, to help write a research paper on the air war in Europe, how would you overall assess your contribution in World War II?

**PERCY:** Oh, I didn't contribute too much, I just had a job to do and tried to do it. That's all, you know, I wanted to be a fighter pilot and I was able to maybe stop a few trains and slow down a few troops, I guess, to help the war; help it along especially with the Tenth Armored Tank Division, you know, these are the guys that are on the ground that really – one thing when you're at the front lines, it's different when you're that close. The biggest thing I think, for being a rookie going up there, is going through a town, which they had just dive-bombed and strafed, is maybe, of the, say the livestock has been killed and everything, the stench and the stuff that goes with it, plus people – that hit me pretty hard; I mean, it's hard to come by. Of course, I was born and raised on a farm and we killed hogs and stuff like that, but that's completely different than going into an area which is – I'm sure that these guys out at the Trade Center there and you know good and well that that's terrible down in there, and I can feel for them since I had more or less an experience of running into that type of environment. That would be tough.

**GASPER:** Well, you were certainly part of a successful effort then and hopefully there can be successful efforts here in the current

**PERCY:** Yes, I hope so too. I'm sure we will. I know we will.

**GASPER:** So I must thank you whole-heartedly for sharing your recollections, memories, experiences, your views, today. Just one other double-check here, would you say that that should do it, you don't have any other

**PERCY:** I talked enough, that'll do it. [laughter] That ought to do it.

**GASPER:** Me too. Alrighty sir. Well, I thank you Sir John Percy for your time.

**PERCY:** One thing I would say, well, I was very fortunate, I had a nice family; I had two children, and I got three grandkids, and now a great-granddaughter, so I feel very fortunate to have that family ties. No, I appreciate talking to you, Don, and best of luck to you on your report and what you're trying to do and maybe help keep things alive too for the younger people.

**GASPER:** John B. Percy, USAF retired, retired at?

**PERCY:** Lieutenant Colonel.

**GASPER:** Lieutenant Colonel. Well, we hope others will find this as interesting as much as I have, and with that we'll conclude here and hopefully others will

**PERCY:** Hope I didn't bore somebody too much. [laughter]

**GASPER:** [laughter] Very good. OK. Well, that'll do it and let's shut things down.