

Interviewer: DONALD D. GASPER

INTERVIEW AND TAPE SUMMARY

Name: JOHN B. PERCY

Date and Place of Birth: 15 FEB 1924, BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS

Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Interview Date, Time, and Place:

6 OCT 2001, START TIME 10:40 A.M. (117:30 MIN.)
AT INTERVIEWEE'S RESIDENCE - SEE ADDRESS ABOVE

Interview Summary (attach additional sheets, as needed):

THIS INTERVIEW FOCUSES ON JOHN PERCY'S EXPERIENCES AS A P-47 FIGHTER-BOMBER PILOT IN THE AIR WAR OVER EUROPE DURING WORLD WAR II. THE INTERVIEW ALSO INCLUDES MENTION OF OTHER PHASES OF HIS LIFE THROUGH THE YEARS: BORN AND RAISED ON A FARM NEXT TO THE BLOOMINGTON IL AIRPORT; IN HIS YOUTH, WORKING/HELPING AT THE AIRPORT TO RECEIVE PLANE RIDES AND LESSONS; AND AFTER MILITARY FIGHT TRAINING, HIS EXPERIENCES FLYING 75 COMBAT HOURS CONDUCTING GROUND ATTACKS AGAINST GERMAN TARGETS (ASSIGNED TO THE NINTH AIR FORCE, 324TH FG, 315TH SQ). HE DISCUSSES GERMAN DEFENSES (FIGHTERS AND FLAK), HOSTILE GERMAN CIVILIANS, AND HIS MONTH SUPPORTING GROUND FORCES AS A FORWARD AIR CONTROLLER UNTIL THE WAR ENDED. UPON RETIREMENT FROM THE AIR FORCE IN 1969, HE FLEW AS A CORPORATE PILOT FOR STATE FARM INSURANCE UNTIL RETIRING AGAIN IN 1989. HIS RETIREMENT YEARS CENTER ON SUPPORTING THE PRAIRIE AVIATION MUSEUM (IN BLOOMINGTON) VOLUNTEERING TO KEEP THE MUSEUM'S DC-3 FLYING AND SERVE ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS, AND HE STILL FLIES HIS OWN PRIVATE AIRCRAFT (61 YEARS IN THE AIR TO DATE). HE ALSO COMMENTS ON 7 DEC 1941 VIS-A-VIS 11 SEP 21 AND BEING IN "THE GREATEST GENERATION".

Note any special circumstances involving the interview:

- DISTRACTIONS AND BACKGROUND NOISE DURING THE INTERVIEW: HIS PHONE RANG A FEW TIMES (STOPPED TAPE ONCE) AND HIS CLOCK WOULD CHIME/SOUND OCCASSIONALLY
- SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTATION PROVIDED BY MR. PERCY ATTACHED:
 - PHOTO OF PERCY STANDING BY HIS P-47 AT LUNEVILLE FRANCE IN MARCH 1945
 - PORTRAIT PHOTO OF PERCY IN DRESS UNIFORM - NOVEMBER 1969
- ALSO ATTACHED IS INTERVIEWER'S PHOTO OF INTERVIEWEE TAKEN ON 6 OCT 2001, AND OF LUFTWAFFE WINGS GIVEN TO PERCY AS HE RECOUNTS ON TAPE (BOTH PHOTOS TAKEN IMMEDIATELY AFTER INTERVIEW).
- AS MENTIONED ON TAPE, INTERVIEWEE HAD ALREADY MET AND TALKED WITH INTERVIEWER A FEW TIMES DURING THE LATTER'S SUMMER 2001 INTERNSHIP AT THE PRAIRIE AVIATION MUSEUM.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

OF

JOHN B. (BURKE) PERCY

“SIXTY-ONE YEARS IN THE AIR AND STILL FLYING”

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: *VETERANS OF THE AIR WAR OVER EUROPE IN
WORLD WAR II***

**CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF SIUE COURSE HIST 447 “APPROACHES
TO ORAL HISTORY”, FALL SEMESTER 2001, INSTRUCTOR: DR. ANNE VALK**

As a fighter-bomber pilot and forward air controller who saw considerable combat in the closing months of World War II in Europe, John B. Percy gained ample experience in surviving the rigors of war. In addition to his notable military service, this man of humble roots went on to achieve considerable success as a corporate pilot for a nationwide insurance business. Now at the age of 77, Mr. Percy enjoys an active retirement which reflects his lifelong passion for aviation. For nearly twenty years, he has served as a volunteer maintenance specialist to keep a vintage DC-3 airliner flying (for the Prairie Aviation Museum located near his current residence in Bloomington, Illinois). He hopes to continue his support for the museum as long as he can for the benefit of current and future generations. As an active retiree in largely good health, Mr. Percy also still flies his own private aircraft. Health permitting, this lifelong pilot intends to continue to fly “in the wild blue yonder” as he has done for more than sixty years.

John Percy was almost born on a runway. Born on February 15th, 1924 and raised on a farm located within a mile of the Bloomington airport in central Illinois, John Percy’s youth soon involved a keen interest in aviation. While helping on the farm and attending local schools, by age fourteen, he also helped local pilots gas and wash their aircraft to receive an occasional airplane ride on Sundays. Young John also helped a pilot who gave rides at county fairs, which resulted in yet more rides for John (and even opportunities to briefly work the controls). After graduation from the local high school in 1942, that summer John began to mow the three grass runways at the airport in exchange for flight lessons. He soon flew solo. With his parents’ approval, John’s passion for aviation led him to join the U.S. Army Air Corp’s Aviation Cadet Program in December 1942 to pursue his goal to become a fighter pilot.

His early military service entailed traveling to various bases for a variety of training ranging from six weeks to six months in duration: Basic training at Wichita Falls, Texas; pre-flight training at Maxwell Airfield, Alabama; coursework and limited dual flight instruction at a College Training Detachment at Murphysboro, Tennessee; aeronautical classification at Nashville, Tennessee (examinations to determine if a cadet would enter pilot, bombardier, or navigator training); primary flight training at Jackson, Tennessee; basic flight training at Newport Arkansas; and advanced flight training at Moultrie, Georgia. In completing this series of training phases, Flight Officer John Percy (serial # AO 939477) earned his wings to go on for further training to become a fighter pilot.

More specialized flight training followed as John learned to fly high-performance fighter aircraft: First, a brief exposure to the aging Curtiss P-40 at Tifton, Georgia for aerial maneuvers, including “dog-fighting”; then on to Richmond, Virginia for introduction to the aircraft he would fly in during combat, i.e., the massive P-47 Republic “Thunderbolt” – the heaviest single-engine fighter built during World War II, armed with eight .50 caliber machine guns along with two 500-lb bombs or several air-to-ground rockets. Nicknamed “the Jug” (short for “juggernaut”), this famed fighter gained a reputation for being able to inflict much damage to any target, yet could withstand tremendous battle damage to allow the pilot to return to base.

Arriving in Europe by March 1945 as Allied armies (aided by air support) steadily overran German positions late in the war, John Percy saw for himself on multiple occasions that the “Jug” earned its reputation for ruggedness. As a fighter-bomber pilot who flew 75 combat hours of low altitude ground attack missions against targets across Germany (in the 9th Air Force with the 324th Fighter Group, 315th Squadron, based at Luneville, France), Percy helped curb German troop and rail movements, and other targets of opportunity in support of U.S. Army units. While P-47s often could take a beating, Percy witnessed occasional losses among his fellow airmen to German flak and fighters. In addition, he also had the atypical experience to witness the war “up close and personal” on the frontlines as a forward air controller. In this role, he traveled in a jeep with a U.S. Army tank column to call in air support when needed as the ground forces advanced. Encounters with mines, *Wehrmacht* ground fire, *Luftwaffe* air attack, and other dangers made being a forward air controller a perilous job (even at this late point in the war).

With the end of the war, John returned home to Bloomington and flew briefly for the Steak ‘n Shake restaurant chain. Then for a time, he resumed farming to help his ailing father. In 1953, he was recalled to active duty amid Cold War tensions highlighted by the Korean War (which ended that year thanks to a tenuous armistice). John opted to continue on active duty as a pilot (flying transports and navigation training aircraft) and served in a variety of locations until his retirement from the Air Force in 1969. Again returning home to Bloomington, he became a corporate pilot for State Farm Insurance until he retired from that position in 1989.

John Percy enjoys an active retirement which reflects his lifelong passion for aviation. A founding father of the Prairie Aviation Museum in 1983, he remains a member of the board of directors, and is a champion of the museum’s current expansion project. In recent years, he has also volunteered to lead maintenance efforts to keep the museum’s vintage DC-3 airliner flying at airshows across the Midwest. Thanks to his largely good health at the age of 77, Mr. Percy still flies today – he flies his own private aircraft (a Cessna 182) and remains qualified to fly on instruments. With some 59 years as a pilot, he has amassed a remarkable total of nearly 15,000 hours in the air (a notable tally for not having been a commercial airline pilot). Overall, he has been in the air every year since his first airplane ride 61 years ago. This veteran airman also gives free airplane rides on occasion to members of the air museum’s youth group to encourage aspiring aviators to take to the skies someday. As a lifelong pilot, John Percy intends to continue to take wing as he has done for six decades as long as his health permits. As a brave combat veteran, and as an active, longstanding volunteer in his community, John Percy’s past and present efforts have no doubt afforded significant benefits to his country and his community, and will continue to yield lasting benefits for years to come.