

**Si I. Spiegel
Veteran**

**Wayne Clark
Michael Russert
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on October 16, 2010
West Point, New York**

Q: For the record, would you please state your full name, and state of birth?

SS: My first name is Si. That's spelled S-I, Spiegel.

Q: When and where were you born?

SS: I was born in Manhattan in New York City on May 28, 1924.

Q: Did you attend school there?

SS: I grew up in Brooklyn and Manhattan. I graduated from high school in May actually. They let us out a month early in 1942.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

SS: Yeah, I remember it was a Sunday. I was on a drive in the country with my parents. I think I was 16 at the time.

Q: When you went into the service, were you drafted or did you enlist?

SS: I enlisted

Q: Why did you pick the Army?

SS: Before I went into the service I had gotten out of high school, and in high school I took a couple of years of machine shop courses during the final two years knowing that Pearl Harbor had already happened. My brother, five years older than I, was drafted earlier and had been in the Army for quite a while. He was one of the first drafted. And that I wouldn't be going to college, so I changed from academic courses to taking these machine shop courses.

When I got out of high school I got a job in a company in New Jersey that was doing work for the Navy. I'm Jewish, and at one point I thought I don't belong in this machine shop. They kept telling me they could get me deferments, don't leave. But, I belonged in the Army, and I just walked in and signed up.

Q: How did you end up in the Air Corp? Did you request that?

SS: No. I had no idea. The fact that I had worked in a machine shop

coincided with the time when they were trying to build up the Army Air Corp. It wasn't the Air Force then. (unclear@2:07) I joined the Army and they put me in the Army Air Corp and sent me to aircraft mechanic school.

Q: Where did they send you initially for your basic?

SS: I was from New York City and they sent me to Camp Dix to be assigned. Then Atlantic City for basic training, staying in a hotel. Clark Gable was there at the time I was there. He was gonna just be one of the guys, he had a regular uniform and a crew cut. His ears were sticking out. He looked like the unhappiest guy in the world. [Both laugh] That didn't last very long, he decided to go to Special Services.

From there they sent me to the Casey Jones School of Aeronautics for aircraft mechanics. Then to LaGuardia Field, then to Roosevelt Field. When I got out of Roosevelt Field I thought I'm gonna be fixing planes behind the lines. I could have stayed in a machine shop and made more money and been doing work behind the lines. How do you get to fly the planes? Then someone told me to cross the street, when you get out of the gate get on a bus on Hempstead Avenue. Go down two miles and that's Mitchel Field. You go there and tell them you want to sign up for that and see if they take you. And that's what I did.

Q: Where did they send you to be a pilot, did you train there?

SS: No. I had been in the Army now for some time and I never left the New York area. The minute I signed up, I was whisked down to Nashville, Tennessee and then assigned to Santa Ana, California for pre-flight training. Hemet, California for primary training and I learned to solo a plane.

Q: What did you solo in?

SS: A Ryan PT 19A. A wooden plane that had canvas on it. If you stepped in the wrong part of the wing, you put your foot through it.

Q: How long did it take you to solo?

SS: It took me longer than most. I think they gave me twelve hours. Normally they wanted you to solo in eight to ten hours. If you didn't, you generally washed out. I was a real eager beaver. I did everything I could. I walked wingtips, I wiped down planes. I just stayed with it long enough that at one point I relaxed and was able to fly the plane.

Q: And once you completed primary training?

SS: I went to basic training at LaMore, California and then advanced training at Douglas, Arizona

Q: What did you fly at Douglas?

SS: AT 9s with an instructor who was afraid of the plane. He wouldn't let me fly it. [Laughs]. He wouldn't let any student fly it, not just me. He flew it, you sat

next to him, then he got out and said you take it. It was a plane that had been put into mothballs because it was so dangerous. But they needed it and they took it out. If you survived it, you could be a pilot. [Laughs]

Q: When you completed that phase of your training, did you received your wings or did you have to go on further?

SS: I received my wings there, but I went on to B17 training in (unclear @5:28) New Mexico.

Q: What did you think of the B17?

SS: Big [Both laugh]. I didn't understand why they would have you training in a B17 in (unclear @5:35) New Mexico where the winds would catch that tail. You put both feet on one rudder pedal just to hold the plane going straight. If the wind was any heavier you were going to run off the runway. It never ran off the runway for me, but it was all I could to hold it. But I learned how to fly the plane. I didn't realize what a great plane it was until I went overseas.

Q: At that point when you completed that phase of your training, did you meet up with a crew that you would be flying with?

SS: Yeah, they sent me to Lincoln, Nebraska where we were matched up. I was a pilot, I had a co-pilot, a bombardier, a navigator, radio operator (unclear @6:21), two waist gunners.

Q: Did you have some additional training before you were sent overseas?

SS: We trained with the crew then sent to Kearney, Nebraska to pick up a plane and fly overseas. At Kearney the plane they gave us had been sabotaged. Somewhere, I don't know, probably the factory. We had quite a time with that plane. The first indication was I went to taxi the plane. They had the crew take the plane on a test run before you even depart. As we tried to taxi out, the left wing kept going up and down. The left one went up, the right one went down and so on. We found out there was a huge bulge on the tire. We taxied back, we can't take off with that. And I go to the crew chief on the ground crew and tell him I need another tire. It turned out that this crew chief had been on the crew that flew MacArthur out of (unclear @7:32). He had hash marks all up and down his arm. He was a Master Sergeant, I was a Lieutenant and he was my superior by about twelve ranks. And when I told him I needed a tire, he said "we ain't got no f-ing tires use the one you got. "[Laughs] I'm shakin' in my pants in front of this guy and telling him my pilot's manual says I'm not to fly a plane that's not safe and this plane is not safe to take off and I'm not taking off. My teeth were chattering. He looked at me with a glare and said "alright, I'll get you a tire but if there's nothing wrong with your tire there I better not see your behind around here". I never heard from him again, I got we new tire. Shortly after that we took off, it was midnight when we took off at two minute intervals. Halfway down the runway you hit a little bump as your plane is beginning to get lift, and I get a call from the tower to turn our running lights on. I said they are

on. He said well, I thought so...they all went out at one point. He said circle north of the field and we'll bring you in after everybody goes out. And we come down and land and we were in Kearney for another week while they were looking where this short came from. Eventually they had to cut a panel out of the plane and they found an area where the wires had been stripped so that as soon as they touched the aluminum on the side of the plane which happened while we were going down the runway..... They repaired it and we took off as soon as they fixed it for Genier Field in New Hampshire which is now the Manchester Airport. As we're circling to land at Genier Field, my waist gunner tells us hey, there's a whole bunch of fire engines down there, and ambulance and what not. Somebody must be in trouble. We didn't know it was us. [Laughs]

We land the plane and they come over and want to know what's going on. We didn't know anything. They said they saw flames coming out of our plane. They examined the plane, couldn't find anything wrong with it. So we flew on to Goose Bay, Labrador. In Labrador my waist gunner was looking out the other window in the plane and he sees flames coming out of the number two engine. We were in the process of landing so there wasn't anything we could do but land the plane. And there also waiting for us were an ambulance and a couple of fire engines. We shut the plane down and there was no fire.

We were in Labrador for I don't know how long, part of it was when they were looking to repair the plane. What they found was that someone had put a pin hole in the diaphragm of the fuel pump. The fuel pump is directly over the turbo charger. The turbo charger gets red hot so the leaking fuel drops down onto the turbo charger and the flames were coming out of the back. Fortunately, it didn't back up into the fuel tank and we didn't blow up. They replaced the fuel pump. We were stuck in Labrador for a long time with bad weather. All these things delayed our getting over to England which probably made our tour of duty easier because the earlier you got there, the more dangerous it was.

Q: When did you end up going to England?

SS: We got there in August, but my first mission was in September.

Q: That was September 1944?

SS: Yeah

Q: What was that first mission like?

SS: Well, the first mission was a milk run. I flew with as a co-pilot with an experienced crew. It was the easiest mission of all the missions that we flew. It was short, the sky was beautiful, the ground was great. No flack, no enemy aircraft.

Q: What was your worst mission?

SS: Our thirty-third mission was over Berlin, we had trouble with one engine

going out. Eventually, it went out completely. We were able to keep up with three engines. But then a second engine was hit with flack and we had two engines out. In that one we ended up landing in Poland.

Q: It says you belly-landed the plane?

SS: Yeah

Q: Obviously you didn't have your landing gear?

SS: Well, we had the landing gear, we didn't have the airport. [Both laugh] First of all, in February, 1945 the Germans were killing as many American pilots/flyers as they could. The civilians were doing it, you know.

My bombardier was taken away from my crew because we didn't have a bomb site. Because we didn't have a bomb site, we didn't need a bombardier-he was replaced with a (unclear @14:41). He flew in a mission where he was over the target and the plane was hit. The first thing he knew was he was falling through the air with his parachute unhooked on one side because it was in the way of the (unclear @15:26) had to hook it up, his hands were bleeding, but he landed at the gates of a prisoner of war camp. He was Jewish, Danny Shapiro (spelling?). They brought him into the prison camp. He broke both his ankles. He was operated on by an Italian doctor that was working for the Germans. He did a good job on his legs, he never had any after effects when I saw him later.

Q: Now you landed behind the German lines?

SS: Yeah, the Germans had left the day before in this area the day before we landed. The Russians hadn't come in yet.

Q: You belly-landed the plane and returned to the base in April, 1945. How long were you in Poland?

SS: We were in there all of February, all of March. My father's birthday is April 3rd and I think I may have landed in Italy(started another train of thought @17:33) We repaired the plane of another crew. In between all this, the Russians had taken us from where we were - a little village in (unclear@17:46) Poland to the city of (unclear@17:50) to the city of Torin. Torin was an airfield the Russians were using and an American plane, a B17, had landed there with one engine out. We took an engine off of my plane and put it on his plane.

Q: Now the Russians were kind of holding you as hostages?

SS: No, we weren't hostages. We were allies at the time, but they wouldn't give us any information at all about when we would leave other than they needed permission from Moscow to let us go. We ran away from the Russians, we wound up bribing people over there to give us gas, tools, a truck to go to where my plane was. It was about seventy-five miles away. There was frozen ground and broken bridges, all kinds of things. Between the two crews, the help from the Polish people in the village of (unclear @18:58) we took the engine off of my

plane, switched it, all kinds of stuff. [waves his hand for emphasis]. And we did this without a winch to hold the engine up. We had poles, the Polish people had cut small trees down and made poles that we tied onto the engine. We had eight Polish men lifting this engine up, putting it on the truck bringing it back to Torin. Eventually we got on the plane, we had another fighter pilot with us. There were two fighter pilots the Russians had also brought there. One had a damaged plane, the other one flew cover for him. Nineteen of us flew out of Torin, Poland. Torin is spelled T-o-r-i-n, not like the one in Italy.

Q: You had been reported as Missing In Action and your family, that was the word they got?

SS: Yeah (unclear @20:21)

Q: So they didn't know that you were still alive?

SS: Well, I know that when I got to Italy I had sent my parents a telegram wishing my father a Happy Birthday and that I was safe and well and would send a letter.

Q: And once you got back, you flew a couple of more missions?

SS: We landed in Italy at Foggia and my navigator was great. No maps, no nothing he got us right down there. That was Ray Pettoeski (spelling?) In Foggia, they checked the plane and the engine, tightened the two bolts and said everything is fine. We took that plane and flew it back to England. The other pilot flew as first pilot and I flew as co-pilot cause it was his plane. They dropped us off at our base and they went on to theirs.

Q: I imagine everyone was quite surprised and shocked to see you?

SS: Yeah, they had packed up all our clothes, [Both laugh] we had to get everything new and then we went back and flew two more missions.

Q: On your later missions, did you ever run into the German jets?

SS: No, we didn't. The German jets attacked while we were in Poland. It's just fortunate for us that they got them so late. We didn't have any jets, although when I came home from England, the British jets buzzed I came home on the Queen Elizabeth, there were 13,000 on that when we came back including Jimmy Stewart and Governor Lehman. Lehman was Governor of New York at the time.

Q: You were with the 490th Bomb group-849th Squadron?

SS: Yes, we just had a reunion in Dayton, Ohio last week.

Q: How many of you guys are left?

SS: At the reunion we had ninety-one people, of which twenty-three were veterans. The rest were family members. Now, not everybody attends the reunions so I don't know how many are left beyond that. But I know we used to have 125-150 veterans attend the reunion. We have a memorial at each reunion

for those who have passed in the previous year. This was a very long list this year. But we're planning for another one in Savannah next year.

Q: Where were you discharged from?

SS: Greensboro, North Carolina

Q: At what rank were you discharged?

SS: First Lieutenant

Q: When you got out of the service, did you make use of the G.I. Bill?

SS: I tried to go to college. I don't know if it was the G.I. Bill, I remember 5220 was a big help. [Both laugh]. I went to City College in New York. I thought I'd go to engineering school. Either I wasn't good enough, or there might have been enough trauma there that I couldn't sit still in class with a bunch of kids that were not much younger than me, but acted I thought more childishly. So I started going back to school for machine shops and taking jobs in machine shops. Eventually I went to work for a company in Mt. Vernon, New York.

Q: Did you consider becoming an airline pilot?

SS: They weren't taking Jews then, right after World War 2.

Q: Oh really?

SS: Yeah. They were blatant about it. It wasn't that they gave you some excuse. They told you, we don't hire Jews.

Q: So you went back into the machine shop business. Did you stay with the same company?

SS: I was with the company for twenty-seven years. I went to work for the company in 1954 and I left them in 1981. By that time it wasn't a machine shop, it was a company that manufactured artificial Christmas trees. I started my own company and ran it for ten years then sold it in 1992.

Q: Did you join any veterans organizations?

SS: Not really, not other than the 490th Bomb (unclear @26:00) and the Air Force Historical Society.

Q: How long have you belonged to that?

SS: I really didn't get active with it until about fifteen years ago. I was busy with raising a family and running a business.

Q: So you got married after the war?

SS: Yeah, in 1950. My first wife died in 2000, I remarried three and a half years later.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed and effected your life?

SS: Probably the most exciting time of my life. I think what changed my life were those machine shop courses I took in high school. That got me into aircraft mechanics and from that to pilot and to what I did during the war, coming out and going back into the machine shops, and making a career out of it. I built machines, did work for IBM, General Foods (unclear @27:29) all kinds of companies.

The company I worked for was American Brush Machinery Company, Inc. When I first went to work there they had a proprietary line of brush machinery. I wound up building a lot of them, and a lot of other types of machines. Also, making machine parts and things like that. Eventually, that brush machinery became Christmas tree machinery. It gets to be kind of a long story but the company had patents on these machines, we tried to sell them to other companies that made Christmas trees, they were copying all of our machines. The company wound up suing and that took many, many years. In the meantime they decided that the people that should be buying our machines were going to make trees. When they didn't do too well and wanted to close up I asked them to let me run it. Eventually, when I left the company, they were the largest Christmas tree company in the United States. We had fifty-four million a year in sales. Only when they had gone public and were being taken over by another company and I didn't think they were going to do it the way I would, I left them and started my own company.

Q: Alright, well thank you for your interview.

SS: Thank you.