

**Si I. Spiegel
Veteran**

**Michael Russert
Wayne Clarke
Interviewers**

**New York State Military Museum
Tarrytown, NY
February 4, 2003**

MR: This is an interview with Si Spiegel at the Hampton Inn, Tarrytown, New York. It is February 4th, 2003, approximately ten twenty AM. The interviewers are Michael Russert and Wayne Clarke. Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?

SHS: Yeah, my name is Si Spiegel. You want me to look at you or____

MR: Whichever. Wherever you feel comfortable.

SHS: Okay. I was born in New York, May 28th, 1924.

MR: Prior to your military service, what was your educational background?

SHS: I graduated from high school in 1942.

MR: Where were you and what do you recall your memories of when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

SHS: Well, I remember it was a beautiful Sunday. My mother and father and, I guess, my younger brother and I went out in the country for a drive. We lived in New York City. On the way back, we heard a little bit about Pearl Harbor on the radio in the car. I think we had a radio in the car then. If not, it was immediately after we got home, but I think it was in the car.

MR: Did you have any reaction to that?

SHS: Well, we really weren't sure what it meant. I mean, who knew where Pearl Harbor was?

MR: Yes, that's what most people say. Were you drafted or did you enlist?

SHS: No. My brother was one of the first to be drafted. They had this on the newsreels at the movies. They showed pictures of this big cage with people's names that they drew out. I have a brother who is five years older than I am. He was born in 1919. He was one of the first drafted. I was in high school and while we didn't know about Pearl Harbor, I grew up in a family that was, at least on my mother's side, politically involved in what was going on in Europe and the Nazis. I'm Jewish. My parents both migrated to this country from Eastern Europe, my mother from Romania, my father from Moldova in the Ukraine. They were watching what was going on with Hitler. We knew about the war in Spain, in Ethiopia, the rise of fascism in Italy and in Germany. We pretty much had an idea that war was coming, even though we didn't think it would come from Japan. I was in high school taking academic courses up until about 1940. I generally had an idea that I wasn't going to college. I'd probably be going into the Army sometime. So in 1940, two years before I graduated from high school, I took machine shop courses at a school in Manhattan, New York City. It was then known as Textile High School. They specialized in textiles, although I didn't go there for that. You had to take one textile course in that school, but basically I had academic courses. I continued with academics, but also took machine shop courses. When I graduated from high school, I got a job in a machine shop in Harrison, New Jersey, where my cousin was head of the drafting department. I worked as a machinist, as a cylindrical grinder in a company that was making catapults for the Navy. They had been a small machine shop with about fifty employees when I started and they had about fourteen hundred when I left about six months later.

MR: Wow.

SHS: And every little bench, every tool had a little sign, USN, on it. The Navy provided everything for them to switch over from being a general machine shop to one that made catapults for the Navy. After about six months, I looked around. I was Jewish, war was going on in Europe. We knew something about what the Nazis were doing to Jews, and I didn't think I should be in a machine shop. I joined the Army. Before there was an Air Force, it was the Army Air Corps. When I joined the Army, because I had a machine shop background, and I guess because the government was trying to build up the Army Air Corps, I was selected to go to aircraft mechanics school. I went to three different schools, each one maybe six weeks. Casey Jones School of Aeronautics in Newark, the Academy of Aeronautics at LaGuardia Field and the Aircraft Mechanics School at Roosevelt Field in Long Island. Roosevelt Field was the field from which Lindbergh flew, and I think Amelia Earhart and Wiley Post. It was a pretty famous field, although it was a terrible airfield. I saw planes taking off. They went down a runway and then back up a runway to take off on propeller planes. [laughs] They picked up speed and then lost speed on the runway. [laughs] I got to the point where I was graduating from this aircraft mechanic

school. I guess I'm a slow learner. I realized I might as well have stayed in the machine shop. I was going to be fixing planes, somebody else would be flying them. The only action I was going to see was when a plane came back where somebody else had been in combat. You know, that's not so much different from just working in a machine shop, except you didn't get paid as well.

I asked around, where do you learn how to fly the plane? Someone told me to get out on Hempstead Avenue where Roosevelt Field was, take a bus about two miles down to Mitchell Field. Neither of these are airfields anymore. Roosevelt Field became a shopping center. I don't know what happened to Mitchell Field. That was what I did. I got on a bus, got off the bus right in front of the office building in front of Mitchell Field, went in, took a test, and that day I became an aviation cadet. I was sent almost immediately. I mean, I went into the Army and was at Fort Dix, New Jersey. I had basic training on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and in lots around it. I had been in Newark and LaGuardia Field and Roosevelt Field, and for the first time I was down at Nashville, Tennessee. Then out to Santa Ana, California for Western Command training [Western Defense Command], and Hemet, California for primary training. In primary training, we flew Orion [Fairchild] PT-19, Primary Trainer 19. A little wooden plane, wooden frame with canvas wings, open cockpit, celluloid windshield, no radio. To start the plane, somebody had to pull the prop. They pulled the prop, you turned the magneto on, and if you were lucky, the engine caught. You taxied this plane by making S-curves because you couldn't see straight ahead. It had a tail wheel, not a nose wheel. If you wanted to take off, you went to the end of the runway, looked up at the tower, and waited for a red light or a green light. If you got a green light, you got onto the runway. When you got into the plane, you had these little leather helmets with two pieces of copper tubing coming out at the ears. In the cockpit, there were two little rubber hoses. You took one and [gestures one side and then the next] plugged it into this piece of copper tubing, and then plugged it into that piece of copper tubing. The instructor could speak to the student, but the student couldn't speak to the instructor. The instructor had a funnel at the end of the tube, and he hollered into the tube.

MR: What year was that?

SHS: That was 1942.

WC: They called that the Gosport system.

SHS: That was 1943. I graduated as an aviation cadet in the class of 1944 B. B was the February [class]. A was the January [class]. You couldn't hear him anyhow, because the wind was blowing by. It was an open cockpit. [laughs] The propeller was making noise

and the wind was blowing and he was hollering into the tube. Of course they were connected, the pilot and the student. I had one instructor who had a stick. If you did something wrong, he took his stick and wrapped it back and forth. It hit your knees to tell you that you did something wrong. [laughs] Meanwhile, the planes were going like this. [rocks his arms up and down] [laughs]

They were civilian instructors in primary training. Hemet, California was up in the mountains east of Palm Springs, which in those days was just a gas station. After primary, you learned to solo and where they taught you how to get out of a spin and do a lot of aerobatics. It was more fun than any other flying that we ever did because you did loops and barrel rolls and snap rolls and lazy eights and pylons. If you got through that, you went to basic training. I was sent to Lemoore, California for basic training. The first part of basic, we flew a BT-13 made by Vultee. No more Vultees, I guess. And then to twin-engine. Not everybody in basic had a twin-engine, but they started to prepare for bomber pilots, and I had twin-engine in basic training. Then to advanced training in Douglas, Arizona, from which I graduated as a pilot and second lieutenant, from an aviation cadet to a second lieutenant.

Then we were sent to Hobbs, New Mexico, to get the B-17 transition. We learned how to fly B-17s in heavy crosswinds, because Hobbs, New Mexico had a lot of heavy crosswinds. I remember sometimes the wind was blowing and you were trying to keep the plane on the runway. [laughs] You had both feet on one pedal to keep the aileron pushed all the way over to one side. I always wondered if the wind was any heavier, I would have been off the runway, because I had it all the way and that was as far as it would go. [laughs] Maybe if it got worse than that, we wouldn't fly, but I don't ever remember not flying in Hobbs. When I finished the B-17 transition, I was sent to Ardmore, Oklahoma. Well, before Ardmore, we went up to Nebraska. I think it was Kearney, Nebraska, and picked up a crew. I don't remember. I went to Nebraska twice. One time to Lincoln. One of them was to get a crew, and the second was to go overseas. We flew a plane overseas. I don't remember which, whether the first was Kearney or the second was Lincoln, or vice versa. But we went to Nebraska, picked up a crew, went to Ardmore, Oklahoma as a crew, and trained for I don't know how long, two months, give or take a couple of weeks. We flew coordinated, did a little formation flying, a little high-altitude flying, long-range round robins, and stayed overnight somewhere. And back to Nebraska to one of those [cities], picked up a plane to fly overseas.

When I got the plane to fly overseas, I thought about this a lot. We had a plane that had been sabotaged, and I always wondered. Because at the time, I don't think I ever spent

time going over with anybody the fact that this plane had been sabotaged. The first thing that happened was that we got in the plane to check the plane out the day before we were to take off for overseas, and we had a problem with a tire. The tires were big, B-17 tires. A B-17 used to be a big plane. You see them today, they're small planes. [laughs] But we had a tire, and as we were taxiing to take off, one wing was going up and down, up and down. We stopped the plane and looked at it. On the side of the tire there was a bulge about that big, on the side, bulging out on the side of the tire. [gestures about twelve inches in diameter] I brought the plane back, and there was a tech sergeant who had been at Corregidor who came back with stripes all the way down here. I was a second lieutenant just a few months out of being commissioned. I told him that I can't fly this plane, we need a tire. He said, I don't have any other tires. You're going to fly the plane the way it is. I told him my training said if the plane's not safe, I shouldn't take it off, and I was not taking this plane off. He started screaming at me that there were no extra tires and I had to take the plane. I said, I'm responsible for the plane and the crew, and I'm not taking it off. He finally said, all right, I'm going to check that tire, but if there's nothing wrong with it, I better not see your ass around here, and a few other choice words. I never heard from him again. They changed the tire, and a few days later we took off. Planes took off at midnight, two minutes apart. Why midnight? I don't know.

In those days, when you flew to England, you didn't take a plane off from Nebraska and fly to England. We flew to Grenier Field in New Hampshire. From Grenier Field in New Hampshire, we flew to Goose Bay, Labrador. From Goose Bay, Labrador, we flew to Iceland, from Iceland to Wales. So a trip by plane to England had a full crew and a full load, because every plane was carrying as much as it could, both in fuel and supplies. Whatever we had to take, whatever the government wanted us to, whatever the Air Corps needed over there. So we were taking off down the runway. It was dark at night. When I got about three-quarters of the way down the runway, just before taking off, the plane began to bounce a little bit. I got a radio message from the tower to turn my running lights on, the outside lights. I said, they are on. They said, that's what we thought. They went off as you were taking off, so circle north of the field. They were taking off to the south. We'll wait till everybody else is off. Come back in and check them out. The plane landed. After everybody was gone, I made a landing with a full load and a full tank of gas, so that plane settled down. [laughs] There was no bouncing on that one. We were there for four or five days while they were trying to find where the electrical problem was for the lights. Towards the tail section, they eventually cut away a panel of the plane and found some wires that had been stripped so that as the plane bounced, they made contact with part of the fuselage, I guess, and shorted out. And there was no way for anybody to

get to that. They had to cut a panel out of the plane to do that. So we don't know when that came about.

It was fixed a few days after that, and we were back again, and we flew to Grenier Field in New Hampshire. As we were coming into Grenier Field, some of my crew members said, Lieutenant, look at all the fire engines down there. We didn't know that they were there for us. They were seeing some flames coming out of our plane. We landed and they asked what was wrong, and I didn't know what they were talking about. They checked the plane out for a couple of days, so we lost a few more days. They didn't find anything and we went to Labrador. They had it set up so that about half the planes went to Grenier Field and half the planes went to another field. From there, half of them went to Goose Bay, Labrador, and others went to, I think, a field in Nova Scotia. We were coming into Labrador, and this time my waist gunner looked out the wing as we were coming in for a landing, and he saw flames coming out of one of the engines. Nobody was looking, I guess, the first time. They were all in position to land. And again, there were all kinds of emergency equipment on the ground waiting for us. They saw the flames as we came in. We landed and there was nothing. They couldn't find anything. They saw marks from the flame on the bottom of the wing. Anyhow, we were there for about two weeks. We were socked in, first because of that and then because of bad weather. There was nothing to do in Labrador. Eventually they found that somebody had put a pinhole in the diaphragm of the fuel pump. The fuel pump sat almost directly above the turbochargers. Turbochargers got red hot, so a little bit of fuel leaked onto the turbocharger and created a flame that came out the back of the engine. I suppose we were lucky that we just didn't blow up or really have a fire. They found it. Nobody else saw it or found it before. After that, we flew on to Iceland. But I never thought about...we were on the way out. I wasn't reporting this sequence of events to anybody, and I don't imagine that anybody who was in Nebraska at the time was looking to see that there was a tire and that there was a short that was put in there and that there was a hole in the diaphragm of a fuel pump. After that, we had no further problems with the plane.

We flew on to England. We had other problems because we had a headwind instead of a tailwind. You usually have tailwinds going from the United States to Europe, and we had a headwind. Planes, I think, were running out of gas and then had no place to land, and I was just very lucky to get into, not the field at Keflavik that we were headed to, but Reykjavik. We found a small opening in the clouds to get in. Anyhow, then on to Wales, and from Wales to Southampton, where we were spread out to different air bases. We were a replacement crew for the 490th Bomb Group. I had an interesting crew. I was the pilot and I'm Jewish and up until shortly before then, that was very unusual. My co-pilot

was Catholic, [William] Bill Hall. My navigator was Raymond Patulski, also Catholic. My bombardier was [Daniel] Danny Shapiro, who was Jewish. He flew most of his missions with me, but we didn't have a bombsight. Eventually, he was taken away from us and put into a lead crew. Maybe his third or fourth mission with that lead crew, he was blown out of the sky and found himself falling through the air. He was over the target, and bombardiers had...I don't know why they did, but they had chest packs, like most of the crew did. The pilot and copilot had backpacks. Everybody else had chest packs. That's the parachute. It was hooked right on here. [gestures by his chest front lapels] They had a harness and a clip here and a clip here. And when he was over the target looking through the bombsight, the chest pack was in his way, so he unhooked one side and let it hang down. They had a direct hit of anti-aircraft on the plane. So he found himself falling through the air. His hands were all cut and bleeding. He thought maybe he was trying to get out. He didn't remember what happened at that point. His chute was going up this way [gestures upward] and he had bloody hands trying to get them hooked on, and he eventually did, pulled the ripcord, and broke both ankles when he landed, which was not uncommon. You know, we didn't wear shoes on these flights. We had these sheepskin boots and gloves. The 8th Air Force lost more men to frostbite than to enemy action. By the time I got there, they were learning how to deal with these planes that weren't heated. When you got dressed, you had to put on a pair of silk gloves and then cotton gloves and then something else and then an electric heated suit in which the mittens snapped onto the main body. Most of the time they worked, but usually the mittens and the booties lost their electrical connection so that your hands and feet were frozen, but the rest of your body was fairly warm. You had sheepskin boots on top of that. Generally, you took your shoes off and tied them onto some of your equipment so that when you landed, you put shoes on. A lot of times, though, when you pulled the ripcord, the shoes broke away and you were without them anyhow. But anyhow, Danny was lucky in that he was Jewish. A lot of our guys were getting killed by civilians. At that time in the war, Germany was being bombed pretty steadily and there was a lot of rage. He landed almost at the doorstep of a prisoner of war camp. The guards came out, picked him up, and took him in, treated him. He died just a year ago. I went to see him in January, a year ago, when he had liver cancer and knew that it was inoperable. Anyhow, let's see, where am I?

MR: You were talking about each member of your crew.

SHS: That was Danny Shapiro. He was the bombardier. He later was replaced by Charles Sandusky [?], who was a togglier. We never had a bombsight. We didn't need a bombardier. That became interesting later on when we were in Poland and were with the Russians and they were looking for our bombsight. [laughs] We didn't have one.

MR: Why didn't you have a bombsight?

SHS: The bombsights were pretty scarce. They didn't have enough of them to go around in all the planes. We did pattern bombing. The lead planes opened their bomb bay doors. Let me finish with the crew and I'll get back to that.

MR: Okay, sure.

SHS: Our radioman was Frank Sanchez [?]. He died last August, I mean, the year before. He went home when his leg was shattered in one of the missions. He was hit by some heavy flak and was then replaced by someone else. But he flew most of our missions with us. He was a Mexican-American from Arizona. He went back and lived in California until he died almost two years ago, a year and a half ago. Let's see, the waist gunners, there was Sam Navarro [?], Italian-American Catholic. Sanchez was Catholic. The ball turret gunner was a guy named Frank Stockton. Top turret gunner was Harold Bennett. Harold Bennett was the only real WASP that we had. Stockton was, too, but he grew up in Chicago and looked like he came from some pretty impoverished conditions and was kind of a street kid, although he was a good guy. All of them were. Finally, the tail gunner was Dale Tyler, who was Mormon. So, we had two Jews, I don't know how many Catholics, maybe five. In the beginning, most of the guys in the Army Air Corps were all WASPs. Things, I guess, had started to change. But I don't think it was an accident that my crew got a lot of this type together. [laughs] But it was a harmonious crew. We worked well and did things well.

But we didn't have a bombsight because bombsights were scarce, and they didn't have enough for every plane. Lead planes had bombsights. When you took off in formation for a target you had a rallying period where you kept circling around until planes caught up with the formation. Then took off across the English Channel. You didn't fly directly to a target, so as to not give away where you were going and give them an opportunity to prepare. The German's most effective anti-aircraft gun was the 88mm cannon, anti-aircraft cannon. They had a lot of them on rails, on flatbed railcars, and were able, in the beginning anyhow, to move them around a lot. We were bombing a lot of the railroads and marshaling yards and so on which stopped them from doing some of that, but not all of it. You made a couple of zigzag turns, but eventually got to what was called the initial point of the target. You had a target, and before you came to the target, you went to the initial point. At the initial point, you made a turn. The whole group turned onto the target. As you swung around onto the target, the formation then spread out. There were thirteen planes in a squadron. I was in the 849th Squadron of the 490th Bomb Group. There was an 848th, an 849th, an 850th, and an 851st Squadron. Usually we were flying with three of our four squadrons so that there were roughly thirteen planes in each squadron. They

had about thirty nine planes from our group on each mission. On rare occasions, they might have had all four. I don't remember when that happened, though. It wouldn't make any difference because you were just filing into a certain spot. When you turned from the initial point to the target, everybody spread out. Instead of being three planes here and another three on top and another three on the bottom where you got protection of multiple guns on all the planes against fighters. You were much more vulnerable as you spread out and you were spreading out both in width and in length. You watched your lead plane. As soon as you turned onto the target, he opened his bomb bay door and everybody opened their bomb bay doors. But from then on, if you didn't have a bomb sight, and you were not one of the lead planes, you simply watched when he dropped his bombs and the target leader hit a button and they [bombs] all dropped. So they all dropped together and it was called pattern bombing. You had an area and as the planes were spread out, if the first plane was close enough. The first plane, I don't know, but I would imagine was always trying to drop a little short, because everybody else was going to be past him. Then as soon as you finished that, you rallied as fast as you could to make the next turn off of that and brought the planes all back into formation to fly back. Can I take a break?

MR: Sure.

SHS: As a group, we joined the 490th Bomb Group and were integrated as a replacement crew for a group that had started flying B-24s. Then the B-24s were taken away from I think all the groups in the 8th Air Force and sent to the Pacific and were replaced with B-17s. So this group that I was in had not trained in B-17s as I had. They trained in B-24s and transitioned [to B-17s] in England.

MR: Had you flown a B-24?

SHS: No, no, I never had. But there was a big advantage to flying with guys who were trained in B-24s. The configuration of the cockpit on a B-24 was such that you could see a lot by looking up through the plexiglas on top. They flew tighter formations than we flew. The B-17s generally spread out a little bit more just because of the way your visibility was.

WC: Did you keep the same B-17 that you flew over with?

SHS: No. I never saw the plane again after we landed in Wales.

MR: Did you fly the same plane all the time?

SHS: Yeah, we flew [the same] almost all the time. I mean, I had planes that were damaged.

MR: Did you name your plane?

SHS: No.

MR: Any nose art or anything?

SHS: No, nothing.

MR: Was your plane painted or was it silvery?

SHS: It was silver and it had a red tip at the top of the tail. We had a letter on it, and I don't remember what the letter was.

MR: How about your jackets? Did you ever decorate them or anything?

SHS: No. Most of the planes were painted and decorated, and they had all that kind of stuff when the guys who trained together in the United States as a group, and then the whole group flew over together. With me, we were just there to do a job. I don't think I personally ever had the kind of social life that led to that kind of thing. And most of the guys that I was with were the same way, I think. But I suppose it would have been fun if we thought about it. I guess it wasn't us. There were a lot of planes there that had nose art and that kind of stuff. But anyhow, we went into the group and I flew my first mission as co-pilot for another crew. The easiest mission we ever flew was that first one. And that was to give the pilot an opportunity to get acquainted with what it was to fly a mission. So that when he went with his crew, at least he had [already] gone once before. Except that my first mission was some kind of support. I think we were bombing a bridge at Aachen. It was not normally what B-17s did. Aachen is, I think, Belgium [Germany], which was close in. You flew over, dropped bombs and came back. We never saw any aircraft. We never saw fighters or anything. It was short. It was the easiest mission I ever flew, and the missions were never easy after that. [laughs] But I thought, oh, this is not too bad. [laughs] But replacement crews, it was a pretty good idea to let the pilot go out on the first mission without the crew and then come back and [then] go with the crew.

And most of the missions were the Ruhr Valley, a lot of places like Stuttgart and, I don't remember all the names of the towns, but there was a lot in the Ruhr. Cologne, Hamburg, but then some of the deeper ones. All of our guys knew of a target called Merseburg, which was probably the most difficult of all. I don't know what the Germans had there, but Merseburg was deep near Czechoslovakia. It was a long run, and the anti-aircraft was terrible, and you generally had fighters in that area. I was fortunate that all the delays that I had in getting overseas, during that time, the Germans were losing the war, were losing fuel and replacement parts, and so they had fewer fighters. The fighters were really the most devastating of all. We saw flak that was black going in, and most of the planes came

out okay. But I started to say before that, we flew tighter formation because this was a B-24 group, and they continued to fly the B-17s as though they were 24s. But we also had several midair collisions that killed a lot of people, including my top turret gunner who flew on a training mission and was in a midair collision in which his parachute never opened. I don't know if he was conscious or unconscious when that happened. His name was Harold [S] Bennett [Jr.]. He was from Massachusetts, the youngest of a large family, and the most animated and innocent guy. You would think, you know, naive about everything, but very excited about being in the Air Corps and flying and always volunteered for training. We had training missions where we were training new crews. A lot of times, the guys from my crew were selected to go out and train new crews.

MR: How many missions did you fly?

SHS: Thirty three.

MR: Could you define a deep mission? How long would that be in duration?

SHS: We got up very early in the morning, around four o'clock in the morning. First of all, the day before a mission...I was in the 849th Squadron. In the 849th Squadron, I don't know how many guys there were, but the officers were two crews of officers in a barracks. Every once in a while you went on a mission, or maybe not, but somebody else went. You came back and somebody came into your barracks and took all the belongings of the crew, rolled up the bedroll and took everything out, and you knew you were going to get a new crew. Because those guys didn't come back. That happened from time to time in our barracks. And eventually it happened where we didn't come back, but we all survived.

It was the four officers in the crew who were in this kind of barracks, and then our enlisted men were in different barracks with other enlisted crews. The 849th Squadron had a squadron headquarters room, and every afternoon you went in there. You didn't have to go on the inside of it. They generally had something posted, but you could go in also. They gave you your condition. Most of the time it was standby. Standby meant you didn't leave the base until it was determined whether or not you were going to have a mission and who was going to fly. And at three or four o'clock in the afternoon or later, they let you know, because it was probably when they found out, you know. You were either on standby or stand down. Stand down meant you guys could go into town, you could do whatever you wanted in the area. You were not going to fly the following day. Standby meant you were waiting. Then after that, if you were not going to stand down, there was an alert. With an alert, you went inside and took a look. They had the thirteen planes in your crew on a position on a board, the names of the pilots of each crew, so you

know whether or not you were flying or whether somebody else was flying. In most cases, every time that there was an alert, it meant that we were going to fly, but you weren't allowed to fly more than three days in a row. So if you had three days in a row, on the fourth day, you knew you were going to stand down. It also told you where you were in position in the formation, usually. It had a silhouette of every plane with the pilot's name on the plane in the place he was flying in the formation. I never paid too much attention to anybody else. I just looked for where my name was and where I was going to be on it. That meant that at around four o'clock in the morning, and sometimes it was earlier and rarely a little later, they woke you up and you got up and showered. The showers were not in the barracks. You had to shower somewhere so that you walked out in the cool air in England. At times, it was very cold. We only had a limited amount of coal to heat the nissen huts, the quonset huts we were in. I think they're the same thing, a nissen hut and a quonset hut. Then you went to the mess hall, got breakfast, and put a lot of gear on and headed to a briefing room. You went through the briefing of where the target was and anything special about the mission that you had to know. I don't know if they told us how long it would be, but you got a whole briefing. But the first thing that happened, you came into a room in which the whole crew was sitting out on chairs in front. There was a stage with a podium, and behind that stage, there was a big sheet hanging down. There came a point where they ripped the sheet back, and you saw the layout of the target, where you were going to cross the Channel, and what the destination was. And you either heard sighs of relief or moans and groans about where you were going. One of our missions was a place called Peenemünde. We didn't know what they were talking about, but they said we were going to bomb a heavy water site. The guys, we were twenty years old, twenty two, twenty one. Guys were joking about heavy water, you know, that, hey, here's a pail of water, you can't pick it up. [laughs] We didn't know what it was and later learned that it was a site where they had German scientists, engineers, nuclear physicists gathered. Apparently our intelligence had learned something about it and we bombed that area. That was a place where there was no anti-aircraft at all. That was one of the easy missions.

On February 3rd, yesterday was the anniversary. Fifty-eight years ago, we bombed Berlin. I saw an article recently, within the last year. An article by the pilot who led that raid and talked about it. In Berlin and over the target, we lost two engines. I didn't think that we were going...this was February 3rd, 1945. It was towards the end of the war, and a lot of crews who landed in Germany were massacred as soon as they hit the ground. If they weren't killed, if they bailed out or they were able to belly land the plane. It was civilians who were killing them with clubs and axes and whatever else. Hanging them in the streets and whatnot. So we knew that was not a good idea to try and go back to

England when I didn't think that we could make it all the way back. So I headed the plane east. We followed the news that the Russians were coming across Poland. And if I could get far enough, I could get behind Russian lines. Eventually, we got to Warsaw. I turned the plane, I'm not sure why. I was looking for a place to land and gradually lost altitude. I found a small field within thirty five kilometers of a city called Plötzk. Now, in Polish, the letter C is pronounced TS or TZ. So P-L-O-C-K is Plötzk. The field was very tiny. There were woods all around it and a few houses and some trees. I decided to put it down there because all around I saw woods. We were fairly low and came down and as we skidded along, wheels up, going towards trees at the end of the field, I was able to ground loop the plane a little bit so that the wing went into a tree and stopped without anybody getting hurt. We didn't know whether or not we were behind the Russian lines or not. When we got out, all these villagers came out. If we were anywhere near Russians we had been taught to say "Ja Amerikantsy". That was what we did. The villagers came out and all they wanted to do...there was a little bit of gasoline leaking out of the plane and people hollered, benzin, benzin and ran back into their houses and got little buckets or pots or whatever they had to catch the gasoline. Some of them came with cigarettes in their mouth. [laughs] That was the first indication I had that I was an authority, because I started telling them about the cigarettes. No smoking. No fumar. I don't know what language it was, but they understood and they immediately put their cigarettes out and stamped them out. I had a .45 caliber pistol. I guess all the officers had. I don't think the enlisted men had any guns other than the .50 caliber machine guns. We learned then that the Germans had left, the Russians hadn't come in yet, and we were in that sort of a no man's land with Polish civilians. A short time later, a couple of Polish partisans showed up and took me. We bedded the crew down around the area, and they took me to a house several kilometers away. It was an amazing thing because I went back to Poland last year, and I found the village and found the house.

MR: Really?

SHS: And I found a guy whose aunt owned that house. He was twelve years old at the time. He said he was so inspired by what he saw with this crew that he joined the Polish Army and became a pilot. He became a lieutenant colonel. He retired, I think he said, twenty years ago. The guy's seventy years old. He's seventy years old, retired for twenty two years. I retired when I was seventy.

WC54: Did you find out what happened to the plane? I mean, obviously it was carted away.

SHS: I brought pieces of it with me. I brought it back this past summer when I went to see these people.

MR: The plane was still there, or parts of it?

SHS: The plane was gone. And the field was much, much larger than when I landed in it. They had cut the woods down and expanded the farm area. They said the trees died from frost. I don't believe that. The trees died from them cutting them up and making farmland out of it. But I recognized the field right away. As soon as I got there, I knew exactly where I was. The corner where the plane stopped is almost exactly the same, although the trees are not the same trees. The trees that were there are gone, but they've grown back to just about the same size they were when I was there. But there's a barn that was there, and so on. I have photographs of all of that from this past summer. Last summer, Danny Shapiro died, and I'd been thinking about going back to Poland. Danny wasn't with us in Poland, but he was the bombardier that flew most of his missions with us.

Anyhow, we landed in Poland. The Polish partisans took me to the Russians and later took me and the crew to the city of Plötzk. Plötzk was a city at that time of about ten thousand people. It was not a major city, but it was a large city in central Poland. A medieval city with an old cathedral and town square with cobblestones all through it. Language was a big problem there. A Russian captain had taken the city just a few days before, and then they brought us into that city. What I understood from him was done with hand signals and other things like that. The Germans were still there, and there were snipers, and we weren't allowed to go in certain areas. The Russians were warning us not to go anywhere in the streets that hadn't been cleaned out. They were still cleaning snipers out of it. And he described how in order to get this city without a huge battle, the Russians camped outside the city and got ready to take it. The Germans were inside. At two or three o'clock in the morning, they snuck in two machine gun crews to the central crossroads of the city, and they set up the machine guns. At dawn, the Russians made a big noise, not really to go in, but to seem like they were coming in. As some people ran in the other direction away from them, the machine guns fired and they panicked and just ran like hell. Then the Russians came right in behind them and took the city almost without a fight. [It was] Almost without a fight to them. It's not what we would call almost without a fight. But at that point they were coming across Germany with a great deal of revenge in their hearts. That Russian captain took my .45 caliber pistol and gave me his Russian .38, and he said this was an exchange, but I had no choice. [laughs] He also gave me St. Christopher's medals that were not metal, they were made out of embroidery. He was one of these faces that you saw in a painting by some of the old masters, Rembrandt and so on, [who had] these heavy lines and outdoor, weather-beaten [faces]. He had been in the Russian Army since World War I. He was a captain and not higher because he was obviously not a communist. The guy gave me St. Christopher's

medals and explained to me that it's the patron saint of travelers, and I was a traveler. These were going to help keep me [safe], and it's kept him well, and so on. He also gave me a bunch of German medals that they had taken from prisoners, which I brought here. Anyhow, we were in Plötzk for, I don't know, about a week or so with the Russian Army. They threw people out of hotel rooms and put us in, and then moved us to the city of Torun. I made this whole trip last summer when I went to Poland and visited Plötzk and found this village of Reczyn where we had been. When we were there, there was no electricity, there was no running water, the roads were not paved, and it took us four and a half hours by horse cart to go from Reczyn to Plötzk. I had rented a car and I found the veterans organization. Somebody told me that I should go to the veterans organization in Plötzk to see if we could find the village. I never thought I'd find this village.

WC: Let me stop you right there.

SHS: Sure. The Russians took us from Plötzk to Toruń. At Torun, there was an airfield. And another B-17 landed at that airfield in Torun. He had damage and did the same thing that I did. There were two fighter planes, P-51s. One of them was damaged and the other flew top cover for him. And they landed at this airfield. Then the Russians brought us to Torun, where the airfield was, and housed us in an old stone building. The pilot of the other crew...all of us wanted to get out of there. Now, as a child, I went to school to learn Yiddish. When my older brother grew up, only Yiddish was spoken in the home, although my father had a business and spoke English at his laundry store. Just a shop where people brought laundry and, you know, they washed and ironed. and so on. As a kid, I helped in that store. The pilot of the other crew felt that we could repair his plane with parts from my plane. He was really...instigator is the wrong word. He was the spirit behind the whole idea of fixing his plane so that we could fly out of there. His name was [George] Ruckman. I was communicating with Russians. There was nobody there who spoke English, almost nobody, except when the Russians brought people to interrogate us. They brought a woman named Nadia who had never spoken English to anybody, and she spoke perfect English. She learned it by listening to the BBC on the radio. She was the interpreter. The Russians brought her as they kept interrogating us. They kept asking, where is our radar? We didn't have radar. Where is your bombsight? We didn't have a bombsight. Where is some other piece of equipment that I forget what it was, but whatever it was that they wanted, we didn't have it. There was one thing that we destroyed, and I don't remember what that was, but I saw it in the notes of the debriefing that we had. In recent months, I went over this with one of my crew members who now lives in Ohio. He said, when we were...well, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll get back to that later. Eventually, Ruckman, I guess, bribed some of the Russians to get a truck to go to my plane, which was quite a ways away. It was on the other side of Plötzk, so it was

about a three-hour ride. We took parts off of my plane and repaired his plane. The two crews together did that. I had some training as an aircraft mechanic. There were other crew guys there who were maintenance people. But we did everything by hand. We had some tools that we got that had been in a fire, and we didn't know if they would hold up. But we took the engine off. We replaced the engine. We did it with the help of Russians and Poles. Got wooden poles, put them underneath, braced them up and had men hold on to the ends and lowered the engine down. A big prop with the engine. We put them on a truck and brought it with parts of the landing gear. The two pieces that he had were one engine and parts of a landing gear, and we fixed the plane. We went to the Russians all the time trying to get permission to leave. They said that they need permission from Moscow. Well, I'm sure we were the least of Moscow's concerns at that time.

I never thought about it until I went to a New Year's party and I met a woman who had heard about this and asked me some questions about it. She said, you guys were lucky that you flew out of there. You don't know what the Russians would have done to you. I said, we were allies at the time. And she said, so was, what's his name from Sweden. So was Raoul Wallenberg. So what? [laughs] I never thought of it in that light. We were allies. We were pals with the guys on the ground. I found a Russian Jewish pilot and we were able to communicate in Yiddish between the two of us. I didn't know I could speak Yiddish. I went to school, but I was not a great student. Yiddish was spoken in the home less and less. I had a brother who was five years older who grew up when only Yiddish was spoken at home. By the time that I was seven years old, he was already in the first grade and English was being spoken at home. By that time my parents had been in this country longer and my father was in business and my mother had gone to school for English. My younger brother was ten years younger than me, there's fifteen years between my older brother and younger brother. By that time, only English was spoken at home. I learned some things. I didn't realize that I could speak Yiddish. But when there is no other language to speak, your brain is strange. Suddenly I found words coming out of my mouth I didn't know that I knew and I could communicate with people. Not only in Yiddish, but people who spoke German. Much of it is similar, particularly in Alsace, where it's almost identical. Alsatian and Yiddish are very, very close. I learned that later. So I was communicating a lot with the Russians about us getting out of there and working on these things, and they kept telling me, no, no, no. Eventually we just decided. We pulled whatever things we had, a few wristwatches and things, and got enough fuel into the plane. And one morning, with the Russians waving their arms in front of the plane like this, [gestures a wave to stop] the two crews and one of the two fighter pilots got on the plane. We took off and we flew to Italy. It was Ruckman's plane, so he was the pilot and I was the copilot. The Russians, you know, we were afraid that they might do

something when we took off without permission, but they didn't. Then I was afraid that we were going to be shot down by our own planes as we came to Italy. Because whenever we took off on a mission, we were given colors of the day and other identifying marks or words or things like that, so that they would know that we were not the Germans who had found an American plane and were going in to drop bombs somewhere. But as it turned out, as we came down across the Adriatic and looked at Italy, I was handling the radio trying to explain...we went to Foggia. That was the one big airfield that we knew was in American hands, although most of Italy was then, maybe all of it by then. I told them we were an American plane. We have two crews on board. We don't have any identification because we're coming out of Poland where we've been for a couple of months. And they said, come on in, land, come on in. [laughs]

WC: That's an amazing story.

MR: So overall, you were treated well by the Russians? Yeah, yeah.

SHS: Yeah, yeah. They fed us every day. I mean, the food was identical, every single day. Seven days a week, we got the same food. We ate with the officers. They killed a cow and they ground everything. All the meat, it didn't matter what part of the meat. I went to several banquets, and they were really banquets. The high officers, the colonel and up ate very well. That was different. The Russians had a much bigger distinction between classes than we did. Of course, I didn't associate with too many generals during the war. So I'm not sure about our guys, but this was supposed to be that great communist society where there was no class distinction. But, it was much greater than we knew.

WC: I take it your family was notified that you were missing in action?

SHS: Yeah, yeah. I still have the telegram that they received. It's kind of in bad shape. They got that telegram that said, "I regret to inform you that your son, Lieutenant Si Irving Spiegel has been missing in action on February 3rd, 1945." I forget what else it says there, but it's kind of brief. My mother always knew that I would come back. My father was certain that I was dead. And it used to drive him crazy because my mother always said, when Si comes back we're going to do this. When Sy comes back we're going to do that. He knew I wasn't coming back. When I got to Italy I was able to telephone, no, I couldn't telephone. I sent a telegram. [It read] "I'm safe and well. Letter to follow". Nobody was hurt in our crew and we got back safely and flew one more mission and had an abnormal landing in Belgium. I just learned recently that the guy who replaced my radioman only flew two missions with me. One was to Poland, and the second one, we landed at a fighter field in Belgium and couldn't move the plane after that. We were taken by jeep back to Brussels and then repatriated back to England a few days later. He said he flew two missions with me. [laughs] I didn't realize that. I thought

that he had flown more missions than that with me, but only two, and both of those we didn't bring the plane home.

WC: You didn't get credit for the mission to Italy when you flew out of Poland, did you?

SHS: That wasn't a mission. [laughs] Anyhow, I was in England when Roosevelt died.

MR: What was your reaction to that?

SHS: I think I cried. You know, I grew up, he was the only president I really knew.

Roosevelt was elected in 1932 when I was eight years old. [laughs]

MR: That's true.

SHS: And here it was, 1932, so he had four terms, right? So what would that bring him?

He didn't serve out all four, so it was about fifteen years, I think, that he was president.

1932 to 1945.

WC: He died in 1945.

SHS: 1945, yeah. So it wasn't even fifteen years. But anyhow, we had a family that felt that Hoover was uncaring and the policies of do-nothing in spite of the Depression of 1929, 1930, 1931. You know, by the time Roosevelt came along, it was like, we need somebody to help. [laughs] And Hoover's policies were the Republican approach of, you don't interfere with business, these are cycles, and it'll come out of this cycle.

I had a choice of flying a plane home or taking a boat, or staying in England for a little while. I stayed in England for a little while because they said if you came home, the war with Japan was still on, so, and you could go to the Pacific, and I think I had as much [of war] as I wanted. So I stayed in England for a little while and then came home by boat, the Queen Elizabeth, with more than thirteen thousand troops on that boat. The governor of New York, Governor [Herbert H.] Lehman and Jimmy Stewart were on that boat. [laughs]

WC: Did you ever meet Jimmy Stewart?

SHS: No. And I came back and got discharged and went to school, and I found that I could____

MR: Did you use the GI Bill?

SHS: Yeah. Well, I went to City College in New York, so I really didn't need the GI Bill for that.

MR: How about the 52-20 Club? Did you ever make use of that?

SHS: Oh, sure, sure. I was collecting on that. But I didn't use the GI Bill. I couldn't concentrate in school. Kids came in, they were seventeen, eighteen years old, bouncing around and playing. I think I saw too much, so I went to work. I left and went back to working in a machine shop and then went back to school for machine shop skills. Became a machinist, began to build machinery. Eventually, I went to work for a company that made machinery for the brush industry and built the machines and then later redesigned them because they were all made for the 1800s, not the 1900s. Some of the machines were used to make ladies' hair curler brushes, and we began to make ladies' hair curler brushes. We were making five hundred million hair curler brushes a year. And we weren't the only ones making them. We were selling machines to people who wanted to make them, and selling the brushes to people who didn't want to buy the machinery, they just wanted the brushes. [laughs]

MR: Did you ever join any veterans organizations?

SHS: No.

WC: Did you do any flying after the war?

SHS: Just a little bit. I was back in New Mexico for a while after the war, and I did some flying then, but not for long. Most of the flying I did was when I started traveling on business, and taking jet planes. The first, I don't know, maybe three, four, five years that I flew jet planes, I was scared to death every time I got on a plane because the angle of flight was wrong. Planes that I knew had to go up this way. [gestures a slight angle upwards] Jets went up that way. [gestures a steep angle upwards] If you went up that way [on the planes I knew], the plane stalled. [laughs] I had white-knuckle flights. In my brain I knew that there was nothing wrong with this, but until the plane leveled out, it just scared the hell out of me. My tail gunner has never flown in a plane since he flew with me. Dale Tyler is out in Idaho or Utah now, I think. He said, you know, I've never been on a plane since you were my pilot.

MR: Well, you have some things you brought with you. Would you like to show us? Why don't you show us the medals first? Tell us where you were.

SHS: [shows medals] Well, when I was in Plötzek in Poland and this Russian captain was telling me about his stories and asking me about mine, he threw these over to me and said, take them. Most of them have Nazi insignias. This one is dated 1914-1918. There's an Iron Cross here that says 1914 and 1813 on the other side. Of course, here's one with a Nazi swastika on it. It says 1939. Another one that looks like it's signed by A. Hitler, the 10th of December, 1938. I'm not sure what this one is.

MR: What is that map?

SHS: [shows a scarf imprinted with a map] We carried these silk maps with us if we were shot down somewhere. Girls loved them as scarves. We were supposed to carry these for where we flew, but we wound up in Poland and they didn't have any [scarf maps of Poland]. We weren't supposed to be in Poland. So this is Belgium and Germany. I had others for France that disappeared over the years. I'm sure my cousins have nice scarves.

MR: You have some unusual items here. Why don't you tell us about those? Whichever, it's up to you.

SHS: A year ago, I had been thinking for many years about maybe going back and seeing if I could find out where I crash landed. When Danny Shapiro died a year ago, just about this time of the year, I thought, if I don't go now, I'll never go. So I made arrangements to go to Poland. In Poland, I found the little village where the plane crashed. [shows photo album] This man over here...well, before that, this man right over here said, I have something you'd like to see, and he showed me a little piece of aluminum that he had formed into a sort of a downspout, like a square tube that he used for something, and it came from our plane. Other people came with other parts. Oh, here's pieces of the plane that I didn't bring back. Here's another piece that I didn't bring back. [shows photographs]

WC: Can you hold that? Yeah, just like that, so I don't get all the glare. Do you know what that piece is?

SHS: I'm not sure what that piece is. I didn't really see that. [shows pieces from his plane] I know this is a gear from one of the instruments on the plane. And this is a piece of cowling from around the engine. These opened up to let air into the engine for cooling at certain points. [shows photographs] Here are these two pieces that he gave me. He was there at the time. He was our age at the time that we landed, or maybe a little older than me. This fellow over here was thirteen years old. I have a lot of pictures of him. The one who was thirteen years old drove one of the two horses and wagons that took us from Reczyn to Plötzek. He was the driver of that. That was a four and a half-hour ride that we took [last year] by car in twenty five minutes. So I thought it was a long way from Reczyn to Plötzek. It wasn't such a long way. It just took a long time to get there. Well, this guy came out later and he was very upset that they didn't call him out when I was there to discuss all the things that happened. They were having arguments and I couldn't understand what the arguments were all about. He was shaking his hands at them, at the other people in the village. [points at photo] Here he is over here. He's upset because they didn't include him in celebrating my return to this village. This is the woman that we got as an interpreter. Her name was Pheona. She came from the hotel that I was staying

at. She said, he said, that he knew all about it. And they said that he didn't know what he's talking about because he was too young. He wasn't even born then. And he came out of the house with this huge piece of sheet metal. [gestures about four feet] It's like this. And he said his father told him all about it and he has this sheet metal. I asked him if he could cut off a piece of it so I could fit it in my suitcase. And this is what he got. [shows a piece of sheet metal] It is Alclad. The grade of aluminum that went into our plane. On the outside of the plane there was no writing, but on the inside they didn't bother taking off the identification of the aluminum. There was no need to. Anyhow, it's funny. [laughs] And these are part of the celebrations that we had in parties all over the place. [shows photographs] This is the propeller from my plane that they turned into a garden ornament. This is a house where some of my crew members slept on the floor of the house. It's vacant now and so on. This is the guy who drove that little wagon with half the crew. They could only fit about four or five guys, and we had nine altogether, including me. I wasn't with them, but they had put four in one wagon and four in the other. The Russians brought me to Plötzk. Everybody else came by wagon.

MR: So this must have been one of the most important events that happened in this village when your plane landed there.

SHS: [points to photograph] This is the man, Stanislaw Pechaszewski [?], who was twelve years old and became a pilot in the Polish Air Corps. He created a museum and everything else out there after he retired. He's been retired for twenty two years. I don't know when he got a piece of the propeller, not when he was twelve years old. This is his aunt's house, which I recognized as soon as they brought me there. This is a museum that he created. But here is that propeller, and he made a garden ornament out of it. He cemented the bottom of it. You know, there were three propellers on an engine. How he got one, I never did find out. This is the house where the Russians interrogated me. I recognized the room as soon as I went in there. He gave me old photos of the house, although this fence is something that wasn't there when I was there. That's something they added. I think they added some columns in the front, but it still was recognizable. We drove up to the place. I had no idea. He said, you have to come to my house. He didn't know that I was interrogated in that house, but he wanted to show me the propeller. I got to the house. [points to a photograph] We had celebrations with this...oh, and then I have pictures of the airfield. I found the airfield where we took off from. I also went and saw some of the Holocaust stuff.

MR: I know you said politically your family was aware of what was being done by the Nazis. Were you ever aware of the concentration camps or the existence of these camps?

SHS: We were aware of antisemitism. I don't remember that we were aware of the concentration camps or the extent of the rest of it. But I knew that. [continues flipping through the photo album] This is a lunch that we had in this farmer's house which is directly across from the field where we landed. They came up with some home brew that was wonderful. And his wife drank quite a bit of it and was smiling all the time. She was a wonderful cook. You could see from him. [points to photographs] That's his daughter and so on. But this land has been in his family for many, many, many years, and he's the generation that came after us but knew all about it. Here's the field. This is the city of Toruń. It's an old Teutonic city. The Teutonic Knights were there. But this is the airfield where we took off from. These little planes in the background. I later went to Gdańsk. There was a concentration camp that they turned into sort of a museum. I went to see it. Pretty grim. I drove from there back to Warsaw and came home.

WC: Well, thank you.

MR: Thank you very much. That was very interesting.