

George Speranza Oral History Interview

JOHN FARGO: Today is February the 19th. My name is John Fargo and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today I am interviewing George Speranza concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is taking place in his home in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the educational and research center for the National Museum of Pacific War Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information Related to World War II. OK, George, with that out of the way let's start with you telling me a little bit about your early years, when you were born and where.

GEORGE SPERANZA: I, George P. Speranza, was born in the year 1924 in Johnston City, Illinois. My parents, Phil and Gertrude Speranza, were 17 and 16 years old at the time of my birth. My father worked in a coal mine until an accident resulted in the removal of his three middle fingers on the right hand. This took place when I was about four years old. This brought poverty to our household and I suspect that conditions would have been worse if it were not for my -- the efforts of my hardest working grandfather that ever lived.

JF: Do you have any siblings, George?

GS: I have a sister that was born 19 months after I was born. Johnston City will bring the fabric of my life through [a little?] history. For more information on Johnston City, Illinois read the book *The Magic City of Egypt* by Nolan McFarland. Coal was found near Johnston City in 1894. This brought the immigrants from Europe and other places because they had a place to work. By 1919 a dozen coal mines were in operation in the area near Johnston City. The population of Johnston City rose to 7,000 from just a village previously because everyone could find a job in the coal mines. By 1939, however, the whole structure of prosperity had collapsed and 55% of the 1,652 families had no member working. In the early 1900s there were 3,000 people declared -- I'm sorry. People working in Johnston City mines. There were hundreds killed from explosions, roof cave-ins and pit cars running over one another. There were additional adverse conditions brought on by alcohol and even though prohibition was in effect. And prostitution and gambling was present. There was ill feeling between the settlers from Kentucky, Tennessee and the immigrants. And this gives you a background of how I grew up. I did go to Catholic grade school and was valedictorian of my class. It's nothing to brag about

because there was only 13 people in my class. I graduated from Johnston City High School in 1942.

In 1941 several things happened that influenced the rest of my life. First of all I entered my senior year in 1941 in high school in Johnston City. A remarkable sequence of these events took place during that year and in 1942. A nice family from Ohio ran a house in Johnston City and their oldest daughter enrolled in my English class and also I enrolled in a class in chemistry. Dr. [Suesston?] was my chemistry teacher and he told me one day that I should study chemistry and this was a revelation to me because it meant going to college and I didn't know anybody in Johnston City that went to college. Anyway the oldest daughter of the [Skolls?] family that entered my English class and I became close friends. One day we were on a senior picnic, Sunday, May [sic] the 7th in 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. We came home and her parents told me about Pearl Harbor which I had never heard of before and they said the Japs were bombing the Pearl Harbor. Well, I knew then that it was a matter of time before I would be drafted in the Army, but I was still interested in studying chemistry. After we graduated Phyllis Jane Skolls and I became very close sweethearts. After graduation the

Skolls family moved to Dumas, Texas where there was an ordnance plant they went to work for. There was an ordnance plant that was built in Carbondale, Illinois which was about 16 miles from Johnston City. So the Skolls family told me about they had a little chemistry lab there. So I went to find the man in charge of this chemistry lab and asked him if I could have a job after graduation from high school and he said yes. He said, "How old are you?" and I said, "I'm 17. I'll be 18 in August." And he says, "You come back to me on your birthday when you're 18 years old and I will give you a job here."

On my birthday I went to Carbondale, Illinois and he said, "Yes, I remember you and I will give you a job." And so at the same time the Skolls family had moved to Dumas and I thought this is a good chance for me to learn something about chemistry anyway. And I started -- they used coal to heat up the plant of course and their main product was ammonia nitrate. I started working there, first job I had was to analyze the coal that they got, there's several processes, just to see how much water and how much ash was in the coal. And then as I worked more I got to do more things. I got to analyze the ammonia nitrate. At the same time I thought I would start school if I could and

Carbondale had a college, Southern Illinois Teacher's College. In January of 1943 I enrolled in the Teacher's College and took chemistry and English and I may have taken a math course, but I'm not sure about that. Those were the two I remember. And I started, I worked on the midnight shift and the supervisor of the plant lived not too far from me. I lived in a home near the campus of Carbondale, Illinois. So he picked me up. He worked on the midnight shift, as I said, so he took me back and forth from Carbondale to work. It was a very nice setup.

As you might expect, I got my induction notice around March the first of 1943. I went to Chicago for my examination to see if I was fit to join the Army and the man that examined me said, "You've got flat feet and your eyesight is very bad, 2400 in one eye and 2200 in the other. You don't qualify for the Army." I proceeded to tell him I played high school basketball and I played high school football, but my main sport was baseball and I was a pretty good baseball player. And he said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll put you in limited service." And so I thought that was a great deal. Limited service I'd never end up in the infantry or anything dangerous like that. And besides I wanted to get into the Army. I could see coming from a

small town that everybody knew me and they'd say, "My gosh, that guy's 4F. He shouldn't be 4F." So I was inducted into the Army and a few days later I left my nice job and the schooling and enrolled in the Army. The first place I went to was Wisconsin where it was still early March and it was so cold -- I've always sensed the cold. I knew on the first day that we fell out I had my Army blanket over all the clothes I could on. It was cold. Fortunately --

JF: What was the name of that place?

GS: I can't think of that.

JF: Was it basic training?

GS: It wasn't basic training. It was just an induction center.

Then I was assigned to go to basic training in Camp Barkley, Texas. Camp Barkeley is just outside of Abilene. And so after 13 weeks of basic training in Abilene -- in Camp Barkley, I'm sorry -- I was passing by the Captain's office and in the window it showed if you had a certain grade you could sign up for -- in your tests for the Army -- you could sign up for OCS or something called ASTP. I didn't know what ASTP meant but the sign says the Army would send you to college and you would be -- after nine months you would, if you made the grades, you would then go to a higher degree and nine months later you would become a Second Lieutenant.

JF: Let me interrupt you a minute. What happened to your limited duty? Did you go all through basic training (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

GS: -- basic training and at the end of basic training they said, "You're assigned to an ordnance plant." And I could see that we're given the parts for tanks or parts for something else and then maybe handing out rifles or whatever. It was an easy -- I thought it was a pretty easy job and I think it turned out to be a pretty easy job for those assigned to ordnance.

JF: But you didn't go there?

GS: I didn't go there. I signed up for ASTP.

JF: What does that stand for?

GS: Army specialized training program.

JF: So where did they send you then for the ASTP?

GS: They sent me to Bradley Polytech in Peoria, Illinois, University of -- Bradley. And it was a great outfit. There was 200 of us and they had a basketball team and the coach of the basketball team received the honor of -- Bradley had good basketball teams. He was the outstanding coach one year in the United States. I learned more basketball there in two weeks than all through high school. Anyway we had a basketball team and it was a good basketball team. Two people I remember in particular. One

was Lou Groza who later turned out to be an all pro football player with the Cleveland Browns.

JF: Kicker.

GS: Kicker and he was also an all pro guard. He and I were about the same size at the time. He was our center. And another man named Roy [Frailey?] who had played football for Michigan State. And Roy was the best built man I've ever seen. You could touch him with your finger and it wouldn't make any indents at all because he was just made of steel, I think. Anyway he was on the basketball team. We were basketball players together.

JF: You must have been pretty good if you played with those guys.

GS: Well, I could play basketball, but not outstanding. I was probably a better baseball player than I was a basketball player. I was going to try out for the Cardinals once said, "George, I named you George so you'd either be president of the United States or a ball player for the St. Louis Cardinals" and I think she preferred the latter. But she played catch with me when I was three years old. But I knew I'd never make -- I was going to try out one day for the Cardinals. The word got around -- the big guys came around and said they really want pitchers. I never pitched before, but I really got started on. I hurt my arm

pitching trying to pitch fast and trying to do that, so I didn't make -- I mean after I realized by senior year in college that my eyes were pretty bad I was more interested in chemistry than I was baseball at the time.

JF: What did you study at Bradley Polytech?

GS: Science. We were going to probably become engineers or work for the chemistry outfits in the Army. The Army had chemists there. You know, you would be the educated person and know the fields that they wanted you in after you got the basic math and chemistry out of the way. At the same time, after I got out of basic training [phone rings]. Turn that off. OK, after I got out of basic training my girlfriend, Phyllis Jane Skolls, decided that she went to work with her dad in Dumas and she decided she'd go into nursing in Baylor University in Dallas. So she went to nursing after I got out of basic training there. We kept track of each other through letters and so on. But I went to ASTP and unfortunately the Army decided after eight and a half months to discontinue the program, ASTP. That was quite a disappointment because everybody that I knew was assigned to the infantry, but I was called aside and at Peoria we had a Captain and a Sergeant who every day after school at 4:00 would march and exercise at 4:00 to 5:00 and then we studied at night in the study hall. But this

Captain that was in charge of our unit there at Bradley called me aside and he says, "You're listed as limited service. I've seen you play basketball before. You're in pretty good shape. I think you ought to go with the rest of the people." And I said, "all right." I didn't want to (inaudible), I guess. Anyway I along with some of the people there went to the 96th Infantry Division. They were located in Oregon.

JF: What year was that, George, do you know?

GS: That was 1943. The 96th Infantry Division was a new division. They had taken some old soldiers from other outfits to guide us along more or less. So 13 more weeks of basic training we had in Oregon. After Oregon we went to Camp Pendleton and then from Camp Pendleton we went to Oahu in Hawaii and we did jungle training for a few months. And all of this was coordinated for the invasion of the Philippines. And invasion of the Philippines was probably -- the convoy we had was probably the biggest one ever assembled because it took us from Hawaii down south Pacific so the Japs couldn't catch us before we reached the Philippines, of course. Way out of the way down by Borneo. We stopped at Eniwetok after about 20 days and they gave us two bottles of beer, I remember that, and cigarettes and I traded my cigarettes for another bottle of beer. Anyway we

got to Eniwetok. We stayed there for about four months.

And then --

JF: Training.

GS: I mean four hours for one day at Eniwetok. And then we were on our way to the Philippines. And of course we landed on Leyte on October the 20th, 1944. And I was in the first wave even though I was assigned -- I had failed to mention that I was assigned to the headquarters company of the 381st Infantry Battalion. I'm sorry, headquarters company Third Battalion, 381st Infantry.

JF: Infantry regiment?

GS: That's right, infantry regiment. And I never figured out why I was in the first wave, but this headquarters company, the main job of a headquarters company is to furnish food and anything else the rest of the battalion needs.

JF: Ammunition, supplies.

GS: Something like that. Anyway I could never figure out what my job was. They had a little platoon there and three squads and I was in one of the squads and not only was I in the first wave of the Leyte, when I landed there was a path that went straight up to the hills there on Leyte and later on as I was getting ready to dig a foxhole there my Sergeant came up to me and said, "The Japs are located on top of this hill right here and you and your friend, your

buddy, we're going to put up an antitank gun and load the antitank gun with shells" that shot out -- I can't think of the name of this thing right now. I'll probably think of it in a minute. And so an antitank bullet in there, it splatters out like a shotgun if the Japs attack. And that night I told my buddy, "I will stay up until 2:00 and then you take 2:00 to 6:00." Guarding it. We were guards for this tank here, antitank gun. And then of course we had a guy that shoots on the antitank gun.

F: Are you dry from talking?

GS: (inaudible).

F: Do you care for one?

JF: Thank you very much.

F: You want ice in it, right?

GS: No, I don't want ice in it.

F: All right, very good.

GS: Give me the water. Oh, here. Thank you.

F: You're welcome. The (inaudible) will be here in a minute.

GS: But of course I couldn't go to sleep. Right on top of this path I had my foxhole and it rained that night and the rain came down that path and I'm there in this foxhole and I'm catching all the mud in the foxhole. But about 4:00 in the morning I fell asleep and I had to call my friend, "Are

you awake?" And he said yeah and I fell asleep. Next morning I woke up and my gun barrel was [mud?].

JF: Was your rifle?

GS: Yeah, rifle. And I cleaned that thing up as fast as I could. Anyway there wasn't anything happening on the first night. And then actually the next day we started figuring out what was going -- they figured out how they wanted to take care of these Japs. So nothing happened the second day except to our surprise out of the woods came about 40 Filipinos with carbines and they were dressed with nicely pressed khaki pants. And we couldn't figure out where the hell they came from and I didn't find out where they came from, but they were pushed way down the line there, said, "You guard down here." And that night we were still up in the front line right there on the path and all kind of shooting take place behind me and over there where those Filipinos were. And I couldn't figure out what was going on. I didn't see anybody coming down and I was out there in front. And one of the officers, infantry officers, was back of me and one of the infantry officers got shot and the next day when we woke up and all this firing in the air and I heard this guy say, "Oh, they got me in the foot." One of the infantry officers shot himself in the foot.

JF: Shot himself?

GS: And anyway he was a tough bird too. You know how tough they are when nothing's happening. Anyway I've never forgotten that, but --

JF: So were you hit by Japs at that point?

GS: No.

JF: So all this firing was --

GS: Next day, the second day I think, they assigned one of the companies, the rifle companies, to go up there and see what it was all about up there. And sure enough, they were dug in, in a ditch, you know, like this. So they were there and one of the guys that went up there was Roy Frailey, this guy that I was telling you about earlier, and that sucker, he went up there and pulled [out a comic book?]. When they were planning on how they were going to get rid of those Japs they were -- the Japs were in pretty bad shape at that time because they had guards there and I don't think they had too much food to eat. Anyway they had a latrine back there and then some of the stories were that they would wait until they had to go to the latrine and then they'd shoot them. But anyway Roy Frailey picked up a comic book. I shouldn't say this. Anyway they must have thought he was an officer or something. Machine gun cut him in two.

JF: (inaudible)

GS: And that was a sad thing because somebody from that outfit came down and saw me a few days later and told me Roy was dead and I really -- that was a sad affair. It didn't take us long to get rid of those Japs. But then after that came the reconnaissance, they called it. Looking for other Japs. This was in the northern part of Leyte and there weren't many there as it turned out. But I think I was at every search that was instigated. You know you take a squad and you go looking for them. And I don't know if you've been in Washington, DC and seen the different memorials, Iwo Jima and the Korean War and --

JF: Yes, I have.

GS: You've seen that. Have you seen the Korean War where the [twelve one?] squad with those ponchos? That just gave me chills when I saw them last year because you're under tension all the time. You don't know what you're going to see and if you looked at those guys with their ponchos, looks like they're sweating, they're cold in Korean era. Was that the Korean War?

JF: Yeah.

GS: And that brought back memories because, I'm telling you, when you're going out trying to find people like that, you know they're there and they've got you in their rifle sights, that's tougher than sitting in a foxhole where

you're prepared there. But anyway Leyte, as far as we were concerned, the Leyte battle was over with almost after a week or so because that's when we got rids of the Japs that were contending there, were in contention there. After that, and we spent a month searching and couldn't find anything, except we did. This was, as I said, we landed October 20th, I think it was 20th or 22nd. Anyway we were up in the hills and (inaudible) coming on and we're going to get -- the whole battalion was together and we were going to get a turkey Thanksgiving. I'll never forget we were up there and here come the trucks loaded with the turkey and stuff and by the time they got close to us we could smell them. And it was rotten turkey and they had to send them back.

JF: Really?

GS: And we had pancakes or something like that for Thanksgiving.

JF: What was the weather like? Was it real hot?

GS: Oh, it rained. We went through a tremendous rain storm.

We were out in a field, sort of it was over when this thunderstorm came, but actually it was warm. But when it rained, it rained. We had actually got our duffle bags by this time and we took the stuff that we'd build our little tent over our foxhole and wrapped ourselves up in it. The wind was blowing like hell and so we wrapped ourselves up

in it. It was a hard rain. As a matter of fact, last year Leyte had a hurricane and it starts with an H, Hokken or something like that, Hurricane that went right over my foxhole, or our foxholes, and into Tacloban. And Tacloban is where MacArthur -- about four miles from where he walked the shore and said, "I have returned" three or four times until he got to (inaudible). So they had it terrible. I think over 6,000 people were killed in this hurricane that they had.

JF: Really?

GS: Yeah, just recently. It was 2014. It was either that or late 2013. Anyway after we couldn't find -- oh, one thing. We were up in the hills and we did capture a Japanese soldier. He was an officer. And I suspect these Japanese, they had girlfriends there, Filipino girlfriends, I'll tell you more about that later, but anyway he was a young guy, probably 24, something like that, but he was an officer, something like our Sergeant Majors or something like that. So they picked me out. They said, "You're going to take this back to headquarters."

JF: Take the prisoner?

GS: The prisoner. And so there was a truck there and it was one of these was six guys on each side, one of those. So I put him on this side over here and me here and first I took

the safety off of my rifle. I showed the guy I'm taking the safety -- the only thing he said is, "Wasser" and I happened to know that that meant water. My mother was German and my father was Italian. Anyway we're going through these woods and we're jumping up and down and then we hit this big hole. I mean I went up in the air and he went up in the air and I start pointing my rifle at him. I could see the terror in his eyes. So I decided I'm going to kill him with my rifle if he jumps me. I'll shoot him, you know. But he was so afraid, and I was relaxed by this time, that I got him back to the headquarters.

JF: You did?

GS: Yeah.

JF: Turned him over?

GS: Turned him over. But that's the only Jap I saw on Leyte. Anyway we were told we was going to go over to Samar. It's a large island next to Leyte. And so we went over there. I think the capital of Samar was Tacloban. In boats we went over there. Our platoon. They had a big long deck out there and it looked like a pretty nice place and I think it was when we landed. And so we had to find out were there any Japs on Samar. And all the people there in Samar came up to us and told us, "No Japs here. They all left." I think that's what happened to Leyte. Before we

landed they took them to Busan. At least those in the northern part of Leyte they took over to Busan.

JF: That's why you didn't have any resistance then?

GS: Pardon me?

JF: That's why you didn't have that much resistance when you landed.

GS: That's right. Because they wanted to guard Manila probably. Fighting got pretty bad in Manila, but we went over to Samar. So we saw all these Filipinos came down there. One young girl came up to me and she said, "Would you like to have a drink of vodka?" Not vodka, but what the heck's the Filipino -- white wine, I forget what it was. But I said sure. So she said, "Come on." She took me to her house and she gave me this bottle of wine, Filipino drink. And then I thought wow, this is generous. She says, "Eight dollars." (laughter) So I gave her \$8 and shared the wine with our squad.

JF: Shared the wine with the squad?

GS: Yeah. She told me, she said, "There's no Japs here. No Japs, they all left." And the others -- I left her and came back and one of the girls saw me with her and she said, "She belonged to the head Japanese man." A very pretty Filipino woman. Anyway we went up in the hills of Samar and the only thing we found, we got up to the top and there

was a little hut there and we went inside and there was this Jap that was dead. And I felt him and he was still warm. Somebody had taken him. He was [liked?] by somebody and I don't know why he died. Probably dysentery or something. Anyway I felt he was still warm so I said to the guys, "Let's get the hell out of here" and we came back. We didn't have any trouble on Samar. We knew they were all gone out of there too. But then we got back and it wasn't long before we -- I forgot to mention there was a lot of kamikaze stuff going on in the Philippines. And we were close to that. We watched some of them come in. And then we had (inaudible) Charlie or what was he called? Night Check Charlie. This little airplane that came over looking to see what he could see and then report back.

JF: At this point, George, were you still in headquarters company?

GS: Yes, still in headquarters company. I never left them. But we got ready for Okinawa. Okinawa took place on April the first, Easter Sunday, and --

JF: Did you train anywhere before you hit Okinawa?

GS: No. You hit the beach. I didn't say anything about training because when you hit a beach the whole outfit there, they're in these little boats that go in circles like this and then the word is given, all of you hit the

beach at the same time. And that was the case in Okinawa. We did that. Okinawa is shaped sort of like an alligator, like this. Sort of north and south and the closest part to Okinawa was the northern part. The closest part to Japan was the northern part of Okinawa and that's about 500 miles or something like from Japan. Anyway we hit Okinawa. In the middle of the --

JF: What kind of landing craft? Higgins boats or Amtraks?

GS: We had these that open up in the front and you just walk ashore. Run ashore is what you do. I forget what they're named.

JF: Higgins boat.

GS: I guess that's what they're called. Anyway they were standard [trips?]. And there were probably -- some of them were big enough to carry a whole platoon, but some of them were just big enough to carry 12 people, little ones.

JF: You didn't meet any resistance when you hit the beach?

GS: No resistance at all on the beach. As a matter of fact, we walked across the island in three days and we didn't see anybody. No Okinawans, no Japanese. And this has been a mystery to me because there were 200,000 Japanese soldiers on Okinawa.

JF: That was down south.

GS: They were down south. The Marines were assigned to take the northern part because that's where all the mountains were and they thought that's where the fighting would be. Wrong. The Marines just walked down to the northern part of that island not seeing hardly anybody, I think. I remember one month --

JF: They didn't see anybody?

GS: Didn't see anybody. Well, three days we walked across. Then of course we had to stop when we got to the other side, the sea on the other side. Of course I was in the front lines there and we had to dig foxholes and we dug our foxholes and one of the things on the island of Okinawa was when you landed the first night I mean kamikazes were flying all over the place. Boats were going up in the air at the planes and coming back down. It looked almost like a thunderstorm with hail coming down. So the Okinawans had a place they bury their kinfolks, I guess. They were Okinawan mausoleums. First thing we did is when we landed we started -- the first day I guess I saw those things and I looked over there and I say, "This is a good place to keep out of -- protected from the ack-ack falling down on us." So our squad stayed in one of those things.

JF: You opened it up and went inside?

GS: It was open. Inside were all these big vases and so I went over there, I don't know if I did it or somebody did, friends, went over there and we opened the top of it and it was just a guy's skeleton in there.

JF: Really?

GS: Fleas came out of that thing. And we closed it, of course. We stayed in there that night.

JF: Out of the weather.

GS: Out of the weather. Out of the ack ack. Anyway the next day we just walked across the island, started walking across the island. Three days later got on the other side. OK, on the other side, south of us was hills and sort of big hills and stuff on the south. And I guess the hills closest to us might have been about a half a mile from us.

F: Excuse me. The dishwasher man's here. It's the timer and to fix it he's got to put in a timer and it's going to be \$264.20. [break in audio]

GS: I think the name of it was kudzu or something like that, but as all this firing was taking place and I could see the airplanes come back and after the firing stopped they just bombed the heck out of this hill back there. And it turned out that the 96th Infantry Division's orders were to take this hill back there. And the casualties were tremendous. So about four, five days after we were in our foxholes we

were ordered to go down and support the people attacking this hill. Well, we got out of our foxholes and, as I said, the hills to the right of us were only about a half a mile or so, and just as soon as we started across this rice paddy to go over the first hill to join our forces all hell broke loose. I was told later that this was their hills where they practiced their mortar shots. Anyway they rained down a barrage of mortars on us and I got about half -- my Corporal and I were closest to the hills there and we got about halfway to that first hill that we had to -- at the end of the rice field and the mortars came at us so fast that we turned around and started back. And just as we got -- there was a place where they stored their rice in a barn there. There was nothing to the barn, but the concrete floor was still there. And he and I -- I was in front of him and he and I were passing on this [country/conflict?] when the mortars caught up with us and landed between he and I and he was cut in two and I heard him groaning so I says, "Come on, Boose." That was his name, Boose Dillard. I said, "Come on, Boose, let's go" and he just moaned a little bit and then was quiet. I went back to the medics and said, "Boose has been hit back there." So when they got back to him -- they turned off the mortar firing and when they got back to him he was dead.

So we all got back and just wondered how in the hell we made it back. And so about three days later they says, "You've got to go back there. We've suffered a lot of casualties there." And so we started again. We got about halfway up to the hill and they let go. I think they could have put those mortars in our back pocket. Anyway their purpose was to keep us from getting to the hill, to reinforce our people. So back we went to the -- back I went to the foxhole. I don't know how many people were killed there. Probably -- I don't know. I just stayed in my foxhole. Nobody came around to tell us anything. And then on April the 20th back came the orders again. The 96th Infantry Division ended up losing almost 100% of their casualties. It ended up about 80% of the casualties. Somebody would be hurt and a replacement would come in and he'd get killed or hurt, back he'd have to go. On the third day, third time, they told us to go over there I got up almost to the very top of this first hill and then all hell broke loose. And the mortars came down and I knew I was trapped. I kind of dug a little bit of space on top of this hill and I put my rifle over my neck and my helmet on the top of my head so that they would have to hit the helmet to get me, they couldn't get my head. And a shell

came, one of the shells came about two feet from me and cut my rifle at the stock in half. And the rest of it went down my back. And all of a sudden the firing stopped and then the medics came out and got me and Lou Groza, who I hadn't seen since Peoria, was one of the medic guys that picked me up.

JF: Really?

GS: Yeah.

JF: You got hit with shrapnel in your back?

GS: Yeah. And they carried me back to the battalion headquarters. Battalion headquarters sent me -- they were having so many fatalities and injured people, they sent me to the division headquarters and they couldn't take care of me because they had so many. So they sent me to a Red Cross ship and Red Cross ship couldn't take care of me. So they put me on a plane and flew me to Tinian.

JF: Really?

GS: Tinian is pretty far away, but anyway Tinian had a hospital. Tinian is the island that all the B29s took off from and landed in Tokyo. Not land and bomb Tokyo, I'm sorry. Bomb Tokyo and then come back. I was in the hospital there for about five days. They got all the shrapnel out of me and I was numb. I could not think straight. The airport at Tinian took off and over the airport there was a big cove

that the airplanes would go off the airport and they would sink down a little bit towards the ocean and in this cove there were boats going around in circles in case they didn't get off the ground. Because they're all loaded with 500 pound bombs. And after five days I finally, I would go out there and sit in this cove and wonder what the hell was going on with my life and why people were so stupid as to declare war. Just numb. I had a very numb feeling. I forgot about my family or anything like this. My wife, Phyllis Jane Skolls, and I got married when I knew I was going overseas. She was 18 and I was 19, I think. Anyway I was sitting at this cove and this is what I wrote.

On an isolated island in the Pacific Ocean there is a bay which to my knowledge has no name. However, to two American soldiers -- another guy had joined me later -- it immediately became known as Madman's Cove for they soon learned that it harvested great wisdom and embodied in their minds many thoughts. You can't help but say upon first looking that herein is another irregularity in the earth's surface, but now as we'll find out what was as significant about the old Grecian urn whispering men to take refuge in their wisdom. I wrote poem that said listen to me and the sea, you creatures who have named yourselves

rulers of the earth, and I will tell you from experienced years of my own destiny and my destiny's worth. I converse with the sea. I learn from the [millman?]. Beauty controlling has spread my wing as though that I may be thine advisor and mine own consoler. I kiss the sea only to have it take from me my spirit to take and for a [child?] for me. Who is this [America?]? My name, my enemy. I look up, let's speak to the god, the mother of the sea, and review aloud its still and our own destiny. It takes away the Buddhist and gathered it into its breast, this its world's own treasures, cast it back with everlasting, ever increasing zest.

And I signed this. The fellow that came out to talk to me was dressed in nice khaki pants and a clean shirt and I told him I'd written this poem and he says, "Let me read it." And so he took it and says, "I'll type it for you." So he went back and he typed it and when it came back it was my name and his name, JT Mack. And I never figured out -- I never saw him again and he signed my poem. And I tried to figure out who he was and I finally decided that he'd been sent from the main hospital to see what I was doing there because I was all alone there for three or four days just looking at these planes taking off and finding

out whether I had all my marbles or not. I apparently didn't because I was then sent to Saipan -- Saigon. Saipan or Saigon? Saigon.

JF: Saipan, I think.

GS: Saipan. And they had a rehabilitation place there. And in the barracks I had a bed there and not 11 days after I'd been in the hospital there some officer in the Navy came up to me and he said, "Are you George Speranza?" and I said yes. And he said, "Your family has been looking for you. Your wife's father has been contacting the Navy and wanting me to go look for you." I guess that was his job, to find people. I'd been missing in action. I didn't have enough sense to write home to tell them. You're numb when you see that.

JF: I'm surprised they lost track of you, like you're saying, for 11 days.

GS: They had lost track of me, they didn't know. You know, you get 15,000 people in your [movement?] or something like that. So anyway I told him, "Oh my God." It just shook me up. And that was the time, and I don't know if it was a day before that or a day after that that I was walking across to the mess hall and I heard the news over the loudspeaker that the United States had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and it had the force of 100,000 tons of

TNT. Well, I had enough chemistry background and math to know that that was a huge, huge thing. And that broke me up. I just realized that by golly, we're going to win this war pretty soon. Because I was getting better all the time and I realized that I might have to go back into my old outfit and we were going to attack Japan. Anyway that revived me. I was still probably not with all my faculties, but I pepped up. And of course I realized that I had something to come home to, was my wife and I was going to get into this chemistry. Chemistry was really a bug with me because in basic training back in Camp Barkeley I was in a poker game and I had a real good hand and one of the guys in there had Lange's Handbook of Chemistry on his shelf and I had bet \$5 and he said, "I don't have \$5" so I said, "I'll tell you what, you want to call me, I'll take that Lange's Handbook." And he took it down, put it in the pot, and I won the pot and the Lange's Handbook. I carried that Lange's Handbook in my duffle bag. You know, when you go into combat you don't have your duffle bag with you or anything, but I had that and every time we stopped and I could get to my duffle bag the Lange's Handbook was there and I'd take it out and look at it in my spare time. I carried that thing all through the war and kept it with me

when I finally got into research in chemistry. So I had it for probably 30 years.

JF: Amazing.

GS: And it was kind of beat up when I had it on my desk there in front of me on the shelf. And one of the guys who was retiring came in and he said, "Here, I'll give you this Lange, throw that old thing away" and I did and I'm sorry I ever did.

JF: By the time you got to Saipan was your wound all healed?

GS: Yeah, the wounds were healed. You know, I had a patch over my back. What happened was that they had a ball game going on so I went up, I wanted to watch the ball game. Some guys playing. And somebody behind me threw a ball and it hit me in the back and I had to go back and get it -- part of it still had stitches in it and I went back and got it patched. But I remember that.

JF: That was on Tinian?

GS: That was on Saipan. And then for some reason, even after the atomic bomb, all the guys were recovering that took Iwo Jima.

JF: Really? From Saipan?

GS: From Saipan we went to Iwo Jima. And on Iwo Jima were this whole field of guys that were recovering from the Okinawa

battle. And one day a guy came up to me and he said,
"There are still a few Japs left in Iwo Jima" --

JF: At that time?

GS: At that time. And he said, "I want you to just patrol with this jeep." And I said, "I don't know how to drive." We never had a car, I didn't know how to drive. He said, "I'll teach you." So he showed me the keys, said, "You turn it on here. This is your starter and this is your speed, right foot, and this is your clutch. You have to brake and this is the clutch and this is what you do. Let me see you try it." So I did everything there and he said, "Smooth it out, you'll be OK." So he left me with the jeep and at night for an hour I'd drive around Iwo Jima.

JF: All by yourself?

GS: All by myself.

JF: For crying out loud. Did you have a weapon?

GS: Oh, yeah. But you know. But that's how I learned how to drive.

JF: That's funny.

GS: Anyway when we got to Iwo Jima that's when the war was declared OK. And we were going in and boy, I tell you, the Japs had more people left there defending Japan than we ever knew about. I mean what the casualties would have

been would have been tremendous. Anyway I got back, my wife was in Dallas and --

JF: How did you get back to the States?

GS: Troop transport. We got on -- I was on an aircraft carrier. They were using all things to bring us back. I had enough points. You got out by points and you got double points for something like that, for serving overseas and combat and that sort of thing. So I got out --

JF: You got on an aircraft carrier to go back to the States?

GS: Yeah.

JF: Nice.

GS: And so my wife was in Dallas and so somehow we got shipped to San Antonio and from San Antonio got on a train and we got transferred -- I think it was straight from San Antonio to Dallas and I met her there. And we rented a room close to the hospital. She stayed at the hospital.

JF: You were still in the hospital?

GS: No, this was --

JF: She was working in the hospital?

GS: Right. And she was in her senior year and she was telling me, she said, "Why don't you go to SMU?" You know, it was in Dallas too. So I said OK. So I went to sign up at SMU --

JF: So you got discharged when, George?

GS: I got discharged December, early December.

JF: Of '46?

GS: In '45. I went to SMU and SMU's first semester started in January so as I was signing up here come a big guy from SMU and he says, "Are you married, are you a veteran?" And I said yes. He said, "Are you married?" and I said yes. He says, "We're going to have trailers put on our property right here at SMU. He says, "You and your wife can sign up for a trailer" and I said, "OK, we'll do that." So we got to live in a trailer for \$20 a month. And we didn't have a car. I was on campus there and she was too, but she could take a train, whatever you call it, a trolley down to a certain point and then get a bus that went --

JF: To the hospital.

GS: So it was a very convenient thing for us. And I started chemistry at SMU and they had a professor up there, Jeskey, Harold Jeskey, and he took to my wife and I and he was the professor of organic chemistry. And I graduated with a degree in chemistry of course from SMU in 1948, June of '48. And he asked me where I was going to go to graduate school and I said University of Illinois. I was born in Illinois. He said, "That's the best graduate school in the country." So I went to Illinois and three years later I got a masters and then I got a PhD degree.

JF: University of Illinois?

GS: University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. And in June of 1958 my wife and I -- I was thinking about where to go to work and I had DuPont and Dow and a couple of other companies and this guy came in to -- I was working in a lab and he came in with Professor Marlow who was a well known world famous chemist and he said, "I'm the director of the research labs in Austin, Texas, Jefferson Chemical Company. How would you like to come work for us or come down and visit us? You and your wife." I said, "I like that." And it was December and I mean Champaign-Urbana gets cold and my poor wife, she was a nurse, and at 5:00 in the morning I had to get her up and get her to leave. And she was making salaries nursing and I was getting disability. It was not much at the time, but enough so that we were making out pretty good. And the day we graduated we went down and bought a new car. We bought a Nash. You remember Nashes?

JF: Oh, certainly.

GS: It was a pretty car, but that's the only thing we could buy. She had a patient that ran a Chevrolet dealership and while he was in the hospital she told him, "My husband and I want to buy a Chevrolet." He says, "I'll get you one." When she went around to see him he forgot about that. They could sell them without walking out of their office.

Anyway we got this Nash and it was pretty. We paid extra for some seat belts and it was about this time that her uncle and aunt were killed in a wreck up in Iowa and we went up there and stayed at their farmhouse. And I got out the next morning and I was sitting in that car and the seat covers just cracked. It just cracked. Anyway we had that Nash for about three years.

JF: So you came to Austin to join --

GS: Jefferson chemical which then became Texaco Chemical. It was on North Lamar. They sold it the day I retired. I worked for them for 43 years.

JF: And they were bought by who?

GS: They were bought by Hudson Chemical.

JF: What did I hear? What's Texaco?

GS: You know Texaco.

JF: Sure.

GS: Texaco got in that lawsuit.

JF: No, but did they buy -- did Texaco buy Jefferson Chemical?

GS: We were half owned by Texaco and American Cyanamid. And Texaco bought out American Cyanamid. So we then became Texaco Chemical Company.

JF: So you were with them for 30 some odd years?

GS: It was 43 years.

JF: Wow.

GS: Each one of these represents 10 patents.

JF: Really?

GS: Yeah. One of them is the big one. One is my big one, represents 50. So I have about 150 US patents.

JF: No kidding. And they're located here in Austin, Texas?

GS: They were. Hudson bought them and they moved down to Houston. No, I'm sorry. Outside of Houston. Woodlands. That's where their research lab and -- it's Woodlands here.

JF: But you retired from --

GS: I retired here because my wife had gotten awful sick and I knew she was going to die. I was 69 years old and she -- I retired January the first, 1944 [sic], she died May the 10th.

JF: Of 1944?

GS: Sorry, '94.

JF: OK, retired '94.

GS: And she died May the 10th, '94.

JF: George, that's a tremendous story. I really enjoyed it.

GS: I couldn't read this real carefully. This is the original paper that it was typed on.

JF: It was. It looks like it. A little brown on the edges.

GS: But this guy, I couldn't figure out who he was. The more I thought about it I think he must have been associated with the hospital and they sent him down to see what I was doing.

JF: You spent the day there and then you walked back to the hospital?

GS: Yeah. I was only, you know, they took the shrapnel or mortar shell stuff out of me and then I felt pretty good. I didn't have any trouble except that when I came back to - - when I came back here they had a softball team and I joined that because I love baseball --

JF: But your back hasn't bothered you until just recently?

GS: Oh, no, I had pain. I had my pain in my back almost my whole life.

JF: Resulting from the --

GS: You know, I love sports. I watched SMU play basketball and I said to myself, "Hell, I could make this team." But I got the basketball and I could hardly lift it or dribble. I was weak. And I gave up. I played a little intramural stuff and I gave up on that. But after I came here and started an exercise program and so --

JF: Doing a lot of swimming?

GS: Yeah. We had a baseball team here, fast pitch baseball team and softball, and I joined it. And probably about the first or second game I could feel my back. I batted left handed and I hit a drive down the right field line and I was running around past second base and I just stopped, my back started hurting me so bad. And I had my first back

operation then. And then the same thing happened later on. I went to play tennis, which was a bad game for bad backs, and I had another one. And all this time in between these operations I was in pain. The last one I had, back operation, was in 2002 and the guy put rods back in my back, plastic rods, and I haven't had any pain lately.

JF: Is that right?

GS: But of course you see what's happened to me.

JF: Yeah, well, George, again, I want to thank you for your time today.

GS: I'm sorry I wasn't as smooth as I'd like to have been.

JF: It was fine. I really think it was a great interview and I appreciate your time. And certainly I want to thank you for your service.

GS: Thank you.

JF: And I think you will enjoy listening to this interview when we send you a CD.

GS: I hope so. I have my oldest daughter from my first wife, we had four kids, and our oldest daughter is named [Bookoo?].

JF: You'll pass this on to her. She'll enjoy this.

GS: OK.

JF: Thanks again, George.

END OF AUDIO FILE