

L. James Siracuse – “I KNEW I Wasn’t Coming Back”



Cap. L. James Siracuse

World War II – Army Air Corps

Pilot – 9th Air Force ,416th Bomb Group, 668th Squadron,



Mr. Jim Siracuse

Were you drafted or did you enlist in the service?

“I enlisted.”

When was that?

“Well when I was a young kid – like eight years old, nine years old – I was playing touch football on one of the streets where I lived in upper Manhattan. And I heard a whirling sound in the sky. And low and behold, an airplane – I don’t know if I had ever seen an airplane. *[He looks at me intently]* This goes back now...”

What year would that be?

“...19...28 And I looked up and it disappeared and I said, “One day, I’m gonna fly an airplane.” And that was it for a long number of years.” *[He chuckles.]*

Did you learn before you went in the service or did they train you once you got?

“No, nothing came of it until I went into the service. So when the war broke out I was in my early twenties and I didn’t want to be drafted as a foot soldier, so I enlisted in the Air Corps. I was accepted and had a physical and my dad took me down to New York with a friend of his. I got on a bus and I’m sitting there looking at my dad and his friend and all of a sudden, the bus started off. And I looked back and my dad fell to the floor behind his friend to hide himself. He was crying like a baby.”

Awwwwww....

“They sent me to Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. I figured I’d get on some kind of plane pretty quick, but I was there two or three months and I hadn’t even seen a plane!”

So what did you do those two or three months?

“Everything was ground school. But a funny thing happened. I ran into a real close friend. Well, he became a real close friend – Bill Peck, from Atlanta. And we became rivals. He was the hottest pilot in the Air Corps. And I was,[too]. *[We laugh.]* So Bill Peck and I teamed up for the whole time all the way till we went overseas – and still in the same outfit.

“Anyway we were in ground school for two or three months.”

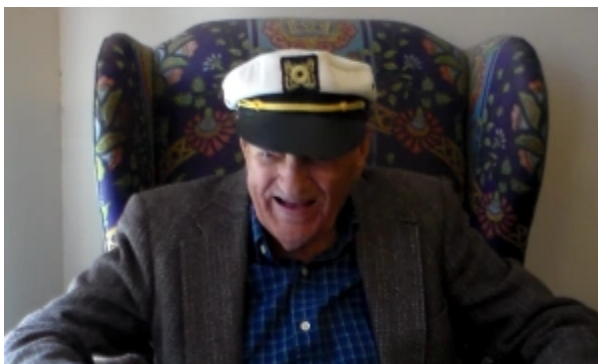
What kinds of things did you learn in ground school?



“Morse Code...that was tough for me. There was visual Morse Code and there was the regular *[auditory]*. Well, comes the first test and I couldn't make any sense out of it. I was just totally ignorant about it – you know, that **DOT D-D-D DOT D-D-D DOT**, you know, all of that. I was afraid they were gonna wash me out. Well the next test, I got a few more correct. And Bill Peck and I were both taking that test and we finally passed the audio test. Now was time for the visual where they used lights *[He demonstrates by opening and closing his fingers.]* I was getting along pretty good and Peck and I were friendly rivals right from the beginning – we were buddies.”

Spur each other on?

“Yeah. So after the test they posted the marks on a big long piece of paper – all the people who took it and the marks. So we started at the bottom, Peck and I, at what score we had. And about midway up, we find Bill Peck's name. So he passed it. And we kept going up and up and said we must have missed it so we started at the bottom all over again and couldn't find my name – and lookin' and lookin' and lookin' – and right there at the very TOP *[He laughs]* was my name! *[He chuckles]* I couldn't believe it!



Wow, wow!

Bill Peck couldn't get over it! And I was the first to ever get a perfect score up to that

time! I can't believe that! It just floored me!

That's impressive!

Anyway we finally ended up at Maxwell and they sent us to Tuscaloosa. Now Tuscaloosa had been a civilian air base and the army put them under contract to train new pilots. So my instructor was the nicest, most gentle gentleman and we got along so well. And it generally took six hours to solo. Well on my fifth hour I soloed. Wait let me back up. The first flight I was ever off the ground, Mr. Dake (?) took me up and it was a two-seater, bi-wing, Steerman airplane – open cockpit – two open cockpits. He's sittin' in the back and I'm in the front. And so the first time I'm off the ground in my life!

(Click [here](#) for a video clip of Mr. Jim telling about his flight training)

That must have been something!

Yeah [*He chuckles*], and we took off and he's flying and I'm looking down, and I see people and they're getting smaller and smaller. It was a thrilling feeling!

Then it seemed like the south was full of paper mills and you had that odor everywhere!



And so, unbeknownst to me, he heads for the smoke from a paper mill. It's the most horrible smell! And thick! [I had been] looking around and then all of a sudden [*He coughs and screws up his face at the imagined smell*] and I'm choking! So as we went through this column of smoke, he ducks. And when we get through it, he pops up and laughs. And I'm choking... [*We laugh!*]

So anyway, after five hours, he okayed me to solo. Now during the fifth hour, in the last part of the flight, he says, "I'm gonna show you something, but I don't ever want you to do it alone."

It was an inverted spin. Now what he did was, he pulled the plane up about 5000 feet and he put it on its back and he pushed the rudders and all that and he got it into a spin. Now the spin is different than a regular spin, because you're inside of a regular spin. In an inverted spin, it's trying to push you out of the plane and the only thing that's holding you in the seatbelt! The blood rushes to your head and oh, it's a tough situation!

"But don't ever try it now!"

And stupid me the next time up I'm alone, the sixth hour, and I had to try it – oh, god – and I'm up there about 5000 feet and I tried to get it into an inverted spin, but I couldn't do it. And then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, it started. BOOMP! *[He motions the spin with his hand]* Wooh! Wooh! And it's trying to throw you out of the plane. And we had a log book that we sit on and as I was spinning, that log book came loose and it flew all over the thing – pages here, and there. I'm going down *[spins his head]* trying my best to straighten out and I couldn't! I could not get it out of that spin! And there was a fellow in my room who had some previous flying experience as a civilian and I happened to go into the room as he was saying, "Boy, that's a good little plane. It'll almost fly itself." I heard that. So the last second, I quit trying anything. I took my feet off the rudders. I took my hands off the wheel. And that plane was going this way *[spinning]* and then *[His hand levels]* by itself!! And it was right on the trees! Just touching the tree tops!

Oh wow!

And, uh – I made it. *[He chuckles]*

And your instructor said...

He never knew! *[He laughs]* I never told him! *[We laugh]*

I thought he may have been observing you.

Aw no, I don't think so. He'd have mentioned it. *[He chuckles]*

Well I'm glad you pulled out.

Me too! *[He laughs]*

Only six hours and then you solo?

Five hours. The sixth hour I soloed.

That just seems really fast.

That was like a bi-plane also?

Yeah, right.



Well, somewhere along the way, might have been my tenth hour, the army came in to test us. This captain took me up and he was a mean devil. He would tell me to do something and he'd bang the plane on both sides screaming! *[He yells like the captain yelled]* Man I didn't know – my first instructor was such a gentleman. This guy was a monster! And later I figured out that they're trying to see how much you could take, you know. So, I didn't

remember that during that flight.

But, [the instructor said] “Okay, take me in!”

So I [*He motions with his hands an landing motion*] took him in. And I didn’t hear anything. I didn’t know whether I’d washed out or not. Several people just washed out. They got rid of ‘em.

Well finally I finished primary training in Tuscaloosa and now they sent me to Blytheville, Arkansas. Basic training. The plane was different. It had a canopy. It had flaps. It was just a step up. Single wing and heavier – a much heavier plane.

Were the wings on top like a Piper Cub, or were they underneath?

No, they were on the side. Well this was the Army, not that civilian outfit that I first went to. And I get a mean devil for an instructor. And this is all set up, but I don’t realize it – and they try to see who can take it and who can’t.

So, we go up and he’s sitting behind me and he starts yelling – screaming and doing all kinds of stuff to shake me up. Finally I wrote home that I was gonna quit. [*He*



chuckles] He really got to me. But after I wrote home, I was up with him and he started those shenanigans again and I turned around in my seat and I stared him in the eye [*He squints*] and he began to kind of wonder...[*We laugh*] wondered if I was gonna dive it into the ground or not!

And so, from then on, I said, “I’m gonna beat this thing.” So I stayed in. And toward the end of that deal, we had a “round robin,” they called it. We had to go from Blytheville, Arkansas in the evening after dark, and we went down to Memphis, Tennessee and over to a city in Georgia.

That’s a long way!

And then back to a little town in Arkansas. And the wind was supposed to be coming from the north when I arrived there, so you had to kind of adjust your flight to make up for the wind blowing you in the wrong direction. But apparently it shifted to the south while I was in flight. So I corrected for the north wind, but the south wind pushed me way out of the flight line. And I wound up in the pitch of night – somewhere around 11 o’clock at night – dark – it was no lights anywhere – just a part of Arkansas that was desolate! And I didn’t know where I was! ‘Cause I was off course compared to where I was supposed to be.

What I forgot was, when I took off, this plane had flaps, and you know your flaps are down when you take off, then you roll ‘em up. Well I forgot to roll ‘em up. And I couldn’t get any speed and I was wondering why. Finally when I get halfway to Memphis, I discover my flaps are still down. So that used extra gas, slowed me

down, and here I am now way out of my flight plan in the pitch dark – there was nothing! No lights. No nothing! I didn't know what to do. And then I spot a little, tiny light way south – was just barely able to see it. I had no choice. If that's not a landing field, I'm going in and I'm cooked. So I headed for that light. And it was so distant, that even though it was a revolving light it didn't seem to register till I got closer, then I knew it was an airfield. I got into the landing pattern and I had about 3 drops of gas when I hit the ground.

So that was a close one!

Yes it was! That was still in basic training in Arkansas?



Yeah. We had primary training and then basic training and another one that I can't remember. So then I finished that basic training – thank God – that stinking instructor! But it's all set up! They want to get rid of people that are skiddish.

They sent me to – us – a group of us to Selma, Alabama. That was the final training and I got the most gentle instructor. He was an RAF [Royal Air Force] English guy.

I wonder why he was over here?

He was – I don't know – but he was over here. And he and I hit it off and enjoyed trying to top one another. And so, I didn't have a problem graduating.

We used to play a game in our off time. We'd get a – what's a civilian plane – a very basic plane?

A Cessna, or a Piper Cub?

Maybe a Piper Cub, yeah. We used to put a parachute in the middle of a grass field and then we'd get up about 3,000 feet straight over it and cut the engine off and glide until we hit the ground and we'd try and hit that parachute. That was a lot of fun. *[He smiles]*

My dad came down from on a Greyhound bus from New Jersey and we were on a mission of – we had to go up 20,000 feet on these planes and when I took off my Dad was standing with the base commander right there on the flight line. And when I started up the engine, the whole thing blew up. Had a big fire. But it was not unusual. They just spray it and it's okay.

So I took off and I went up to my 20,000 feet and I had time left over and gas. And I figured my dad was still watching – so I put on a show. *[He chuckles]* And I wrung that plane out.



So he went home and said I was the hottest pilot in the whole army!

You probably were!

Well HE thought so! *[He laughs]*

I was sent by myself because of some kind of mix up, I was sent to Tampa, Florida from Selma Alabama. And in Tampa they were flying dive bombers. I didn't much care for that.

They started these A-20's – we get orders – Bill Peck and I to go to Oklahoma City. They yank us out of that dive bombing thing and we drive – Bill Peck had an old Plymouth convertible and we used to go everywhere in that thing.

And we drove up to Oklahoma City to fly A-20s – this was a brand new plane, very fast. And it was designed to fly on the deck. In other words, very low. You'd hide behind trees and in river beds. You'd come up on a vertical building of some sort and you'd skip bomb it. You dropped the bomb and it would skip until it hit something vertical. That was what that plane was for. The only thing is, they could shoot it down with a hand gun! We lost so many of them that they lifted us up to 12,000 feet from then on. All our missions were up at that level.

So no more skip bombing?

No more skip bombing.

So anyway, we're going up to Oklahoma City and as we're approaching the air base there was a plane – one of the A-20s in the landing pattern and it was on fire! Flames all over the place! And I don't remember whether he made it or not, but I believe he did. So anyway, that was a little scary.

So we trained up there and then we got shipped overseas. We went up from Laurel, MS which was my last base. And we flew the [A-20s](#) from that base and they shipped us up to a port of embarkation near the Hudson River.

We just got paid and on the train going up I got into a poker game with some of the guys and lost everything. Every nickel. So when we got up there, I was broke. But fortunately they let us out about 3:00 in the afternoon and we didn't have to report back to the base until the next morning at 6:00 AM. And my folks lived 50 miles south of that port. So I was able to go home. And [a girl I dated] lived in the same neighborhood. So I called her and we went to New York. [My friend's] father loaned me his car and we drove to New York over the bridge. It was \$.50 to cross that bridge one way. To go the other way [out of New York] it was free. Today it's \$18.50 – one way.

What? Wow.

Can you believe that?

So I asked [my girlfriend] to go to New York. She had \$19.00 and I had zip. So we went. We went to the Copacabana. We danced and had a drink and then we called for the check. And the waiter comes over and says, “No charge!” *[He chuckles]*

Because you were in uniform?

Yeah – wow!



And then we went to the Latin Quarter. And once again, “No charge!”

And we went to a third one – “No charge!” *[We laugh]*

We made out like bandits. *[He chuckles and we laugh]*

How long did you stay in the port?

About ten days.

And fortunately we got on a French luxury liner that they converted to a troop ship. And they had the same staff! The best cooks in the world! I never tasted food that good! They would make sunny side up eggs and they would bake it slowly overnight. The food was the best I had ever seen.

And I borrowed five bucks and we played poker all the way over and I won a fortune! *[He laughs and grins]* I was loaded when we got over.

I'm glad you didn't lose that five bucks!

We landed either northern England or southern Scotland on the Atlantic Coast. I can't remember the name of the city. And the first thing I ran into was a guy and he'd say, “Ay bub, you gah a igareh?” *[speaking with a strong accent]* I finally figured out he wanted a cigarette. I was smoking at the time, so I gave him one.

And we wound up in a town called Braintree and we flew out of that town. It's 50 miles north and east of London.

Are you still in the A-20s?

Yeah. A-20.

I was flying over German occupied France and got my left engine shot out. And so

the group had to leave me because there was nothing they could do. So they went on and here we were stranded over there with one engine.

How many were on the plane with you?

I had a bombardier/navigator in the nose and two gunners in the back. But we made it home.

And on my twenty-third mission – they had a system – when you flew twenty-six missions, they'd send you home. I don't know if that was for good or for a month or two.



But I was on my twenty-third mission. I got the plane trimmed up so it could fly on one engine. We had to fly no less than 200 miles an hour or the plane would stall and go crazy. So I put it in a shallow dive heading home across the Channel. As we approached the English Channel one of the gunners said, "Fighters! Seven o'clock!"

And I looked back and there were six dots on the horizon and I could swear they were ME-109s which was German fighters. And man, we were sweatin'. So as we got halfway across the channel, this plane comes up almost touching me and he flips over to show me the shape of his wing and I recognized it as an RAF fighter.

Wow.

And so one of those planes stayed with us and the others went back and he escorted us to a landing field in the south of England right at the white cliffs of Dover. *[And then he and I had to hum a few bars of the song "[The White Cliffs of Dover](#)."]*

So as we got to the white cliffs of Dover there was a crash landing field, so the RAF guy kissed off when we got there and I got in the traffic pattern and it was a short runway. I knew I was over shooting so I kicked one rudder to make the plane go this way *[three-quarter turned instead of nose straight in]* and that slowed me down. We landed and just got up the barrier at the end and just barely stopped. I had a guy in the nose. See he would have been crushed.

And I don't remember at all how we got back to our base – if they fixed the plane and we flew back or what. I don't know.

You were at least in safe territory.

Yeah! Oh, yeah.

That's all that fancy flying you did back in basic training that helped you do all that!

Yeah. *[He chuckles]*



Lucian James Siracuse
Squadron

416th Bomb Group

668th

Did you always fly out of Braintree?

When I got shot down we were still in Braintree.

When was that? I didn't hear about you being shot down!

Well [while I was] on my 23rd mission, early in the morning a group from our base were ordered by the general – the top dog – to knock out a huge ammunition train in Amiens, France that was going up to the front where they invasion took place later. And he wanted that huge train knocked out. Well they got there, but they couldn't break in, there was so much flack. So they just dropped their bombs on an alternate target and came home. Well the general was furious! Well I was just coming back in from London and somebody said as I was walking on the base, "Siracuse, you're flying one o'clock!"

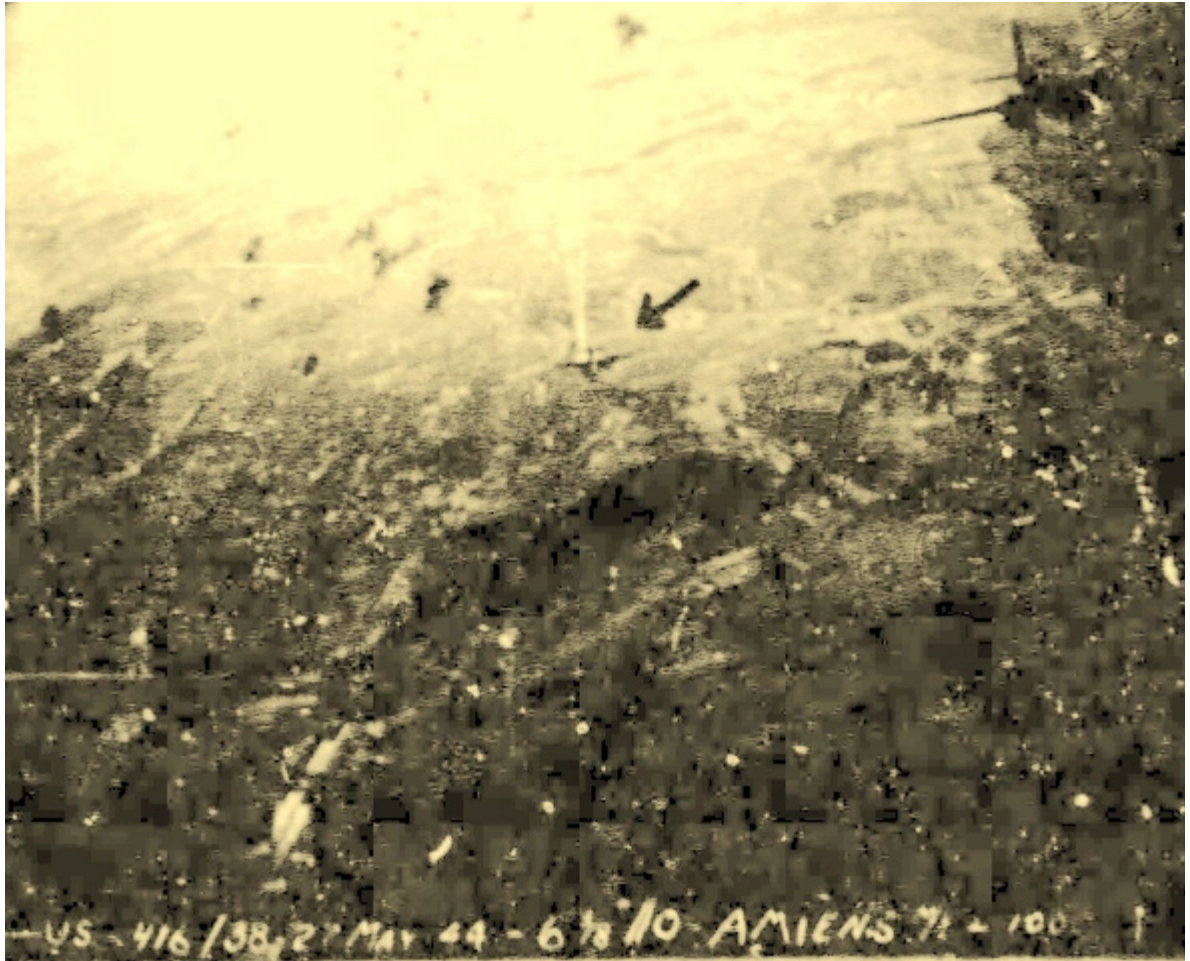
They never let anybody fly when they came from a weekend off. Never. But they made me fly. So at one o'clock, two gunners and I – didn't have a navigator that trip – were sitting on the tarmac and were waiting to board to take off. And this guy, Brownie, one of my gunners says, "Man, I hope we get home early," he says, "I got a heavy date."

And right then and there, something came over me. It was powerful. And I knew that I wasn't coming back.

Was it dread? Or just a knowing.

It was a premonition and it was so real that I KNEW I wasn't coming back.

So we took off, got to Amiens, went through a lot of flak and I got hit again. My right engine was blown away – torn off and blown away. But I was still able to control the plane with one engine. And there was a huge fire where that engine was and right below the engine is one of two gas tanks in the wing that were huge. Two gas tanks is all we had. And that big fire right above the tank could have blown any second.



Jim Siracuse's plane on fire (arrow points to it) in flak-filled skies over Amiens, France. This photo was taken by a member of his squadron on May 27, 1944.

But stupidly, I had to get in the action and I stayed in formation with one engine and dropped my bombs with the rest of them. After that I pulled out and my plane is on fire and there was no way to resolve this, so I trimmed it at 200 mph because slower and it would have stalled. I told my gunners to jump. Both of them jumped. And I jettisoned my canopy. And when I tried to get up to climb out. We didn't have anything like an ejection seat. Well when I tried to climb out and stand up in my seat – and the wind 200 mph, blew me back like a feather. Boom! I tried several times but it was no use. So I gave up. And I sat there and began to think of my mother and dad and how they were gonna go crazy. And so I got an idea. I turned around and got on my knees facing backwards and I was able to brace myself against the wind. And I crawled over the seat between these props – even that engine that was blown away, the prop was still spinning and they were very

close to the fuselage and I had to crawl back between those two –

Going 200 miles an hour...

200 miles an hour. And I got halfway back and there's all kind of radio equipment and it's blocked and I can't go any further and there's no way out. No exit. And so I climbed up on the top of the plane and – I don't know how I did it because if you stand up with nothing to hold onto with a 200 mph wind – how do you stay there? And I got up on top of the plane. And I'm standing there looking at this huge tail. The A-20 had a big tail. And the only thing I can think of is to jump as far as I could [away] – and I did. I leaped and I missed the rest of the plane, but the tail assembly hit me in one leg. And that kind of messed me up.

I went tumbling in the air – 200 mph.

Did you have a parachute?



I had a parachute. It was a backpack. So I pulled the string. The chute opened up. Going 200 mph though, it was like pulling me like you pull a chicken apart. And then I straightened up and started going down and it was the most peaceful quiet after all that agony – floating down – a wonderful transition. I tried to angle it but I went straight down. Below me was a newly planted tree orchard and it was huge! And they had like 10 foot poles holding up each tree. And I said I could be skewered on one of those! Fortunately I missed those.

So I hit the ground with kind of a hard hit. And I gathered up the chute and I limped over to some leaves and I buried the chute under the leaves. And I started walking toward a thicket of trees to hide and all of a sudden, I hear the shatter of a machine gun. And machine gun bullets were going everywhere and fortunately not one of them hit me. And I could feel the air, they came so close!

There was one driving a three-wheeled motorcycle. The other guy standing up with this machine gun spraying bullets at me. And I threw my hands up and he quit.

So they grabbed me and took me to their field headquarters which was just a shack in the woods in northern France. And there's a bunch of German soldiers there.

And one guy said, "Ven ees da invasion!" And that was just before the invasion! A week or two.

I said, "I don't know." They believed me and of course...

Did you know?

No, I didn't know. Nobody knew.

So anyway the ammunition train that we hit was a direct hit. It was blowing up for like hours. And some explosions were so great that the whole earth shook.

And I'm standing there and one of the German soldiers – a big, blonde, good-looking guy – walks up to me and he's got a hand-held machine gun and he puts it in my ear and he's spittin' and screamin'! I mean, he was going crazy! I mean I didn't know how he would control that finger. So I didn't know what to do. So I smiled at him. And I can't believe it. He quit yelling. He lowered his gun. And he turned around and walked away. [he laughs!]

Wow! Goodness! What did he want? Was he yelling for the sake of yelling at you?

He was mad because of the train blowing up!

So he knew you were a pilot? That you did it?

Yeah.



Then they sent me to a ramshackle tarpaper building in the middle of a swamp. I got a room in there that was like this wide *[about 4-5 feet]*. The only furniture in there was some straw on the floor about an inch thick. And that was it. And around this building was a walkway. And these foot soldiers walked around stomping their feet – walking around, walking around. I guess it was designed to unnerve you. Fortunately I had a window out onto the swamp. I think I was in there about a week.

After about a week, they pulled me into an office that was separate from the little building. The guy in there greeted me like I was a long lost brother. Called me by name. Offered me an American cigarette. And I was a little surprised. So we kept talking friendly. And finally he said, "What was the number of your plane?"

I wouldn't tell him. And he kept after me and I wouldn't tell him.

And he got mad. And he said, "Alright, I'll tell you!" And the Germans were great at keeping records. And he was telling me stuff I don't know how he knew. And he was mad. He was furious!

And I didn't tell him anything. That was what we were supposed to do.

They put me up in an apartment house – a three or four story apartment house – and locked me in there. And the next day, we were on our way to Frankfurt. We got to Frankfurt and there were an accumulation of mostly airmen that were shot

down. There must have been a hundred of us on that train. They were taking us to Stalag Luft ... something – I forget. The one they made the movie out of with Steve McQueen , [The Great Escape](#).



And so we hadn't had anything to eat and then they take us off – about a hundred of us and we're standing on one of the streets beside the train station. There are four old men with machine guns guarding us. Pretty soon the town's people from Frankfurt started gathering and their town was decimated and they began to scream and yell and try to convince these old guys with the machine guns to "let us have these guys!"

And I didn't know what they were yelling or saying. But one of the guys standing next to me on the street was "Moose." We called him Moose. His name was Herv Simala – German descent – and he understood the language. And he said, "They want to take us in the woods and hang us."

And so we're standing there, wondering. *[He chuckles]*

Well after a while, they took us into the station and down under the ground and there was kind of a makeshift dungeon down there. It looked like it was carved out of a pile of shells. It wasn't very substantial. We sat there for three hours waiting for our train to come – a connecting train. And we got on that train and took off. And we went all the way to, near the edge of Poland.

I hadn't eaten for four or five days – maybe more. And I never ever felt such torture in my life. Starvation is horrible!

And when we got to that camp *[Stalag Luft III]* there was a prisoner standing out watching us come in. And he was eating something. And he broke off a piece and gave it to me. You never realize how torturous it is to be that hungry!

Well there we were. There were 15 of us in each room – a pot belly stove. That's the one where [they dug a tunnel right out under the fence and out into the woods](#). And they had an escape and some of them were killed. Others really got freed. And the way they managed it, they would tie the pants to the leg tight. They would put the earth in their pants and they would loosen that when they were on the surface and they would walk around and deposit it.

That was before you got there?

No, during!

We used to get [Red Cross parcels](#).

What was in those?



They were about a foot square and about 3 inches high and in there was a lot of dried food, coffee, — the year before we got there they used to put raisins in there. And that year these prisoners — they called them krieges [the German word for prisoner] the POW's decided together to save the raisins and for Christmas, they made wine. And man, they were all drunk and they were climbing over fences! Oh man! [he laughs] and from then on the raisins disappeared. The Germans opened the boxes and took'em out! [we laugh]

Anyway the Red Cross parcels were designed for one package to a prisoner. It wound up when I got there, it was one per eight prisoners.

Were the packages from the Germans or the American Red Cross?

No, from here.

Were there British prisoners there or just Americans?

All kinds.

Any other pilots?

All kinds of airmen. Not necessarily flyers, but people in the plane.

How long were you in the camp?

Good question. I think about a year — maybe a little more.

Did you have any contact with anybody outside?

No, but an occasional letter came for some of the guys. I got one from my dad. It was so emotional. I wish I had it.



Lucian James Siracusa 416th Bomb Group (L) – Squadron 668

How long before the invasion were you put in the prison camp?

Let's see, I got shot down nine days before the invasion in May.

You said you were in there for a year. Then did the Germans release you or did the Americans come and release you?

It was the end of the war.

So you got out because it was the end of the war.

The Russians were coming close and they pulled us out of that original camp. They notified us at 7 PM one night and they gave us two hours to get ready to move. It was in January I believe, in the dead of winter and 10,000 of us got on a road and there were guards on both sides of us. And the first thing that happened was – I don't know what set it off – but they started shootin'. Just shooting across the road that we were on. And we all dived into a snow bank on the other side. And one of our guys from our room – an Irish fellow – he was able to speak German. And he stood up in that fire – bullets going everywhere – and he started yelling, "We're not going anywhere! We're covering ourselves in the snow!" Because a plane had just gone over, that's what started it, I don't know where it originated. Apparently they didn't know either. So then we got them calmed down and we started walking again – in the snow – and "Boom!" they started shootin' again. We got it settled down again and we kept marching.

And we marched – we had a little food that we had accumulated like Spam and a couple of other things. And we're carrying that as well. And so the road was just icy and snowy and you'd break through the ice and go down a foot. And we marched for 56 hours to a town called Spremburg and that march was a terrible march. We lost men on the way. They'd stop every time we got to a town looking for a place to put us, but there was nothing on the way.



One of the country homes there along the way, the owner invited a bunch of us to come in while we were waiting. We'd wait for an hour or two while the guards would try to find a place to put 10,000 prisoners, but there was no where to put us. This one little home accommodated a dozen or more of us. We sat on their front porch in front of the fireplace for maybe a half hour. But that was a wonderful little stop.

Moose was with me, side by side. We got so exhausted that a can of Spam was worth more than a million dollars, but you threw it out because you couldn't carry it anymore. It was like throwing away your own child.

And suddenly Moose said, "Hit me! Hit me Lou! Hit me!"

They called me Lou. And then I punched him in the jaw.

"Harder, harder!"

"Boom!" He was losing it!

Oh man!

He wound up – when we finally got to Spremburg there was an old five-story factory – pottery factory and we all crawled in there. It was all beat up. And we just fell on this concrete floor – just wantin’ to die.

Moose wound up on the Mayor’s front porch [*He laughs*] He fell asleep.

So he made it?

He made it.

They put us on tiny freight cars. Just jammed us in. And it had a lot of straw on the floor plus horse dung and cow dung. And there was one guy standing up being very calm. He was an English guy. And we marveled at his calmness.

And we got to the town of Regensburg which was a high-level target. They bombed Regensburg over and over and over again. And here we were stopped in Regensburg. And we’re wondering. And sure enough here comes planes overhead.



There were only two little windows on either corner up at the ceiling. And we are jammed in there – tons of us in each car. And I remember the feeling when those planes went overhead [*he doubles over*] – I could feel bombs coming down on us – but we weren’t a target that day fortunately. The Germans that were guarding us took off and left us locked in there. And they ran for shelter.

We escaped that day and then we were on our way to Moosburg. There was a prison camp there but it was a horror. The place we came from was tolerable, but this was a horror. There was a series of big open buildings and they had cots almost touching each other and I remember waking up the next morning and one of the prisoners walked by and his face was all bit up. I mean, you’ve seen people with real bad acne? It was all over and all over his body. He got all bit up that night.

What was biting him? Rats? Bugs?

All kind of vermin. I don’t know exactly.

It was the dregs of all places. There was no latrine. The only place you could go were several slits in the ground out in the open. So we were there seven months.

How many people were in there? All 10,000 of you?

Yeah, it was a large camp, but it was terrible! [*Some reports say there were 70,000 prisoners there near the end of the war.*]

Patton’s army was coming down south from the north and they got on one side of our camp and the Germans were on the other side. And for three hours they lobbed

shells right above our heads. We were dug somewhere to try and get some cover but it was just hazardous. And finally everything went quiet! All of a sudden the Germans disappeared – vanished. And we got up out of our holes. And there was a school house right adjacent to the camp and it had a flag pole on it. And we looked up there and they were raising the American flag. And you should have seen these hardened, beat-up soldiers crying like babies watching that.

That's so awesome.

So pretty soon they had trucks — pick-up trucks take the prisoners to Le Havre which was right on the coast in north east France. And there was nothing to hold on to. They just stood up jammed in the backs of trucks. Full of prisoners.

And I said, “I ain’t gonna do that. Forget it. I figure if we go flying off that truck...!”
[He chuckles]

So I slipped away *[He chuckles]* until the trucks left. And I started hitchhiking. I had learned that my group from Braintree moved to northern France. So I was headed that way – and I hitch-hiked all the way. All kind of people stopped and took me – Germans, French, and I arrived there and everyone was so glad to see me.



The first thing I see was this whole gang of guys I flew with around a big bon fire and they had handfuls of 50 mm shells that we used on our A-20s and threw them in the fire, and ducked! Having been through the war—!! I couldn’t believe it. I tried it one time and that was it! *[He belly-laughs!]* Woah!

Boys will be boys!

Well, they were all glad to see me and they gave me \$750 – part of my back pay. And Akin Hand, my bombardier/navigator, he and I decided we wanted to go to Paris. So we got one of the guys to drop us off down there. And he was coming back for us on Saturday. This was about Wednesday.

We sat down in a sidewalk café – pretty afternoon about 4:00 – and here comes a young lady right toward me and drops a newspaper and she goes that way and sits at a table by herself. So I jumped on that paper! I went over there and said, “Mademoiselle, you droppay your poppiay?”

And she said [softly], “Oh thank you, so very much.”

“You speak English?!” *[He said shocked and wide-eyed]*

“Oh, yes!”

Now she was – I guess being in prison for a year and not seeing a woman had something to do with it, but she was a GORGEOUS thing. What she was doing in Paris was studying medicine. But she was a Russian.

And I asked, “May I sit a moment with you?”

“Yes! Sit down.”

So we talked and I asked her out. She said she was on her way to the country and her train leaves in a little while and she’s coming back Sunday afternoon. Well we arranged that I’d pick her up at the train station.

So [Akin and I] walked the streets and tagged up with a few girls and took them to the Lido. It was an expensive place, but I didn’t care. Champaign! A bottle of champaign on base was \$2.50. The same bottle at the Lido was \$25.00!

So Saturday afternoon, I had totally forgotten, a buddy was coming back to pick us up. So I’m in a quandary now – should I or shouldn’t I – I decided to leave.

Oh, no. Oh, well.

But I often think, man she was so beautiful that I might have fallen for her and ended up in Russia. Putin would have been my boss! *[We laugh]*

Oh well.

You had a lot of close calls with the ladies!

Ha! Yeah! *[He laughs]* I did! I used to chase women! I was awful!



We wound up back at the base and I got a ride over to Le Havre which was a port of embarkation and I get there and there is miles and miles and forever, white tents touching each other, maybe twelve abreast for the whole area.

And I’m saying to myself [shaking his head], “I’ll be here for six months!” I didn’t like that at all.

So I’m wandering around and I see a landing strip nearby and there’s a plane on it ready to take off! And I knock on the door, and it opens up and the pilot is ready to take off. And I said, “Where you going?”

He says, “England!”

I says, “Can I hop a ride?”

“Yeah! Come on. Let’s go!”

So I get on a plane and I wind up in London!

Oh man! You just bypassed all the redtape!

Yeah! [we laugh] In ten days, I was on a ship going home!

And boy, when I saw that Statue of Liberty, [shakes head] whew! I bent down and kissed the deck.

And so we went back to where we left – up near West Point. And they wanted to give me 10% which would have been about \$30 a month. I was so anxious to get home, I said, “No, I don’t want it.”

Was that to stay in?

No! That was just a bonus!

Oh!

Now I regret it! I’m running out of money!

So in time, they let me loose and I got on a bus and I arrived home. And everybody was waiting for me outside – the whole family and neighbors.

And the first thing, we went in the house and I took my hat off and they all [did a big inhale!] I lost my hair in prison. So I looked different.

And they had a big party, but I got sick so I couldn’t go to the party.

The guest of honor wasn’t there!

No, hah in bed.

So did you ever fly anymore?

No. I got claustrophobia. I believe I got claustrophobia from the experience of being kept in that tar-paper hut when I was shot down, or somewhere along the way.

Wow. What an experience. Thank you so much for your service and all you went through during the war, Mr. Jim.



9th Air Force



668 Squadron