Stranded: 
Trapped on Greenland’s Ice Cap

Lt. Harry Spencer’s WWII Saga, 1942-1943

By

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PART I

Born in 1920, Harry E. Spencer, Jr., grew up in Highland Park, a small city surrounded by the city of Dallas. He attended Highland Park High School and graduated in 1938. He received his college education in engineering at Texas A&M University and Southern Methodist University (SMU). While at SMU, he began flight training in a university program. After learning to fly, Mr. Spencer worked as a flight instructor for a short time.

In April 1942 Harry Spencer married Patsy Caroline Blaylock, also of Highland Park. She, too, attended Highland Park High School and SMU.

Mr. Spencer joined the U.S. Army Air Corps in September of 1942. He was commissioned a lieutenant and entered active duty in the Air Transport Command, 5th Ferrying Group at Dallas. One week later, he was transferred to the 2nd Ferrying Group in Wilmington, Del.

While co-piloting a B-17 bomber from the U.S. East Coast to England, his plane crash-landed on the Greenland Ice Cap. Spencer was stranded on the Arctic wasteland for three months. It was five months before the entire crew was rescued. This exhibit tells the story of the crew’s hope, despair, persistence and rescue.

Harry Spencer left the service after WWII and moved to Irving, Texas, in 1946. He came to Irving as part owner...
of Trinity Hardware, which his brother-in-law Louis Blaylock opened in 1936.

Not long after his arrival in Irving, Spencer began a long-lasting civic involvement with the community. He served two terms on the Irving City Council from 1952 to 1957.

He followed that with two terms on the Irving School Board. He was elected board president in the early 1960s. Spencer was also a director of the Rotary Club and the Irving Chamber of Commerce. In addition, he served two decades on the board of the Irving Community Hospital.

In 1960, Spencer opened an air conditioning business selling and installing Carrier products.

In 1960, Harry Spencer opened Spencer Air Conditioning which he ran for almost 40 years.

Harry and Patsy Spencer moved to Irving in 1946 where Harry joined his brother-in-law in the hardware business. In 1960, Spencer opened an air conditioning business selling and installing Carrier products.

Harry and Patsy Spencer had three children — two daughters and a son. Their son died of leukemia at the age of eight. Both the Spencers were
involved in youth activities with their growing family. Mrs. Spencer was president of the Irving High School PTA in the early 1960s. Mr. Spencer was on the board of the Dallas Girl Scouts Council and was District Commissioner for the Boy Scouts of America. He also served as president of the Dallas County branch of the Wadley Leukemia Association and was on the board of stewards at First Methodist Church.

Harry Spencer built himself an extraordinary life. He spent his years in Irving raising a family, building a business, and involving himself in civic, church, and youth programs.

This exhibit focuses on five remarkable months in Spencer’s extraordinary life.

PART II

AIR TRANSPORT COMMAND

Organized in May of 1941 as part of the U.S. Army Air Corps, the Air Transport Command (ATC) supplied vital war materiel, planes, and personnel wherever they were needed around the globe. In 1941, the ATC began with four officers and enlisted men. Throughout the war, the demands on the ATC grew, and in 1944 the ATC logged over 600 million miles supplying Allied forces worldwide.

One of the tasks of the ATC was to ferry aircraft from American factories to the war fronts overseas.
Spencer served in the ATC, Ferrying Division, Second Ferrying Group. A lieutenant, he was co-piloting an ATC flight ferrying a B-17 bomber from the northeast coast of the United States to Europe when the plane crash-landed on the Greenland Ice Cap.

It would be 129 days before the entire crew was rescued.

Displayed is the insignia of the Air Transport Command (ATC) which was a part of the U. S. Army Air Corps during WWII. ATC crews flew hundreds of millions of miles, delivering men and materiel to the war fronts in Africa, Europe and the South Pacific.

While ferrying a B-17 bomber from the East Coast to England, co-pilot Harry Spencer and a crew of eight went down over Greenland.

The insignia shown here is from Lt. Harry Spencer's flight jacket.

Spencer served in the ATC, Ferrying Division, Second Ferrying Group. A lieutenant, he was co-piloting an ATC flight ferrying a B-17 bomber from the northeast coast of the United States to Europe when the plane crash-landed on the Greenland Ice Cap.

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This map showing the routes traveled by ATC flight crews is from the Nov. 2, 1942, issue of Newsweek magazine. The accompanying article states that “Less than 18 months ago, even the beginnings of the ATC did not exist.” Today it is a place “where men whose faces have been bronzed by the African sun or hardened by Arctic storms walk in.”
GREENLAND

The topography of Greenland resembles a shallow bowl. The coast is rimmed with mountains, and the interior is a vast plateau. Trapped on the plateau inside this mountainous rim is a sheet of ice, which covers the entire island except for the narrow coastline. The massive sheet of ice, which in some places is two miles thick, is known as the Greenland Ice Cap.

Under the pressure of its own weight, ice slowly flows from the center of the plateau toward the coastal mountains where the land breaks downward toward the sea. Along the coast, great chunks of ice break off and form North Atlantic icebergs.

CREVASSES

Near the edges of the Ice Cap, the irregularities of the ground far beneath the ice and the pressure of the ice flow itself cause the snow-covered ice sheet to crack, forming crevasses of various widths which are hundreds of feet deep.

Layers of snow of varying thickness, known as “ice bridges,” cover most of the crevasses. The only safe manner in which to traverse the region is to test the footing by poking a pole in the snow and ice directly ahead. A moment of inattention or a false step can prove fatal.

Spencer and his fellow B-17 crew members were ferrying a bomber from the East Coast to England. Their route was to take them to stops in Newfoundland, Greenland and Iceland. From Iceland they would fly to Great Britain.

While in Greenland, the crew was asked to go up and look for an overdue plane that might have crashed. During the search, bad weather overtook Spencer’s plane, and it went down about 25 miles inland from the southeast coast of Greenland.

The Greenland Ice Cap is covered by crevasses, especially near the coastlines. The ice flows slowly from the center of Greenland toward the coast, where the slope toward the water causes the ice sheet to crack open and create deep crevasses. The openings often become covered with snow, and someone crossing the area has difficulty knowing where the danger lies.
THE CRASH

On Nov. 6, 1942, a B-17 piloted by Lt. Armand Monteverde and co-piloted by Lt. Harry Spencer, Jr., was being ferried from the northeast United States over Greenland to the warfront in Europe.

The plane made a stop in Greenland, and while there, the crew was asked to help search for a cargo plane which was overdue for landing in Greenland. Monteverde and Spencer’s B-17 flew search missions on Nov. 6 and 7. The weather on the Nov. 8 was bad, preventing them from flying that day.

The weather improved on Nov. 9, and the search continued. The B-17’s crew flew over the ice cap toward Greenland’s east coast, where they had to climb and turn to avoid bad weather. After, they descended to a low altitude to resume searching.

When flying in the Arctic, it is often difficult for a pilot to locate the horizon or judge his altitude due to the haze, blowing snow and clouds. Arctic fliers describe this experience as “flying in milk.” Being only feet above the surface, but thinking they were at a safe altitude, Monteverde began to turn the plane when its wingtip struck the snow. The plane’s belly hit the snow-covered ice, sliding 300 feet before stopping.


Spina broke his arm in the crash. None of the other men was seriously injured. O’Hara, wearing leather boots, quickly began to suffer from frostbite on his feet.

The fuselage of the plane broke in two over the wing. The crew took refuge in the rear portion of the fuselage. The fierce wind and blinding snow made it impossible to leave the plane for three days. The men had
some rations and were wearing winter flying clothes, but had no arctic equipment.

Nov. 12 dawned clear, and Spencer and O’Hara struck out to the east to see if they could sight the coast. They had not gone far when the snow beneath Spencer gave way, and he disappeared into a crevasse. He fell about 100 feet before landing on an ice block wedged in the side of the crevasse. Unbelievably, Spencer was unhurt. The crew members on the surface fashioned a rope from their parachute lines, attached a parachute harness to the rope, and after two attempts and several hours of effort, were able to pull Spencer to the surface.

Aware of the danger now, the crew checked and realized they were in a field of crevasses, which would make any sort of rescue attempt extremely dangerous.

On Nov. 24, 1942, Thanksgiving Day, and the 15th day on the ice, a plane located the crew and dropped supplies to the men. The first batch of supplies was dropped by parachute, but before the men could retrieve them, the supplies were blown away by the stiff wind. On the second pass, the supplies were allowed to free-fall into the crash site.

The plane had been located 25 miles from the small weather and rescue station on the east coast of the island. Two rescue plans were put into action.

Sgt. Don Tetley was part of a two-man rescue team. His partner fell to his death in an ice crevasse. Sgt. Tetley remained with the downed fliers until their rescue.

He showed the men how to dig a shelter in the snow so they would no longer have to stay in the broken fuselage of the plane.
A two-man motor-sled team, led by experienced Greenland explorer Lt. Max Demorest, accompanied by Sgt. Don Tetley, struck out from the weather and rescue station for the crash site. Their going was slow. In order to avoid the heavily crevassed area around the plane, the two took a roundabout approach to the site. For safety’s sake, Demorest skied ahead to test the surface, while Tetley advanced one sled and then returned to the other to advance it.

Monteverde elected to send out Tucciarrone and Puryear. Both men were suffering from frostbite, but were strong enough to walk the distance back to the rescue plane. The more seriously injured Spina, with his broken arm, and O’Hara, now suffering with frozen feet, needed care more urgently, but were in no condition to make the trek. Pritchard made a
successful takeoff, freeing the first two crew members after 20
days of cold and darkness on the ice cap.

By the evening of the same day, Demorest and Tetley arrived on the edge
of the crevasse field about a mile away from the downed men. Leaving the
sleds, they felt their way through the crevasse field on skis and arrived at
the plane about midnight. The rescuers spent an hour giving medical care
to the frostbitten men and delivering other supplies. They then returned to
their sleds on the trail they had made coming in.

Sgt. Alex Tucciarone was one of the first two downed crew members to be
rescued from the crash site. Above is a a brief excerpt from his report of the
crash.

On November 9, 1943, we departed from BW-1 about twelve noon
C.M.T. About 15:00 C.M.T. we were flying in high winds and the air
was rough. We were turning back in a slight left bank when the left
wing struck some unidentified object. The plane hit the ground and
slid along about 300 yards; when it stopped, I was still in my seat
with the seat wrapped around my shoulders. At the time of the crash I
was in the radio compartment with Pvt. Spina, Cpl. Norarth and Pvt.
Vadell. Lt. O'hare was in the pilots compartment with the pilot.
Purdy, were in the navigators compartment. The crash was a complete
surprise to everyone because it was blinding and snowing hard at the
time and no one realized we were anywhere near the ground.

The next morning Demorest and Tetley set off on their sleds for the crash
site. Having found a safe trail the night before, the two men believed it
was not necessary to feel their way in. Lt. Demorest led, following the
established track, with Tetley trailing. About 100 yards from the crash site,
Demorest swung off the track in order to turn the sled around so they
could go back out on the same track. Just after beginning his loop, Lt.
Demorest and his sled disappeared into a crevasse. The men could see no sign of Demorest in the opening and received no answers to their calls.

*As part of his report on the crash, Tucciarone drew a sketch of the crashed plane showing that the fuselage had broken in two just behind the wings.*

*The rear section of the plane served as a cramped home to the downed crew for several weeks. Later they dug a shelter into the snow under one of the plane’s wings.*

In the meantime, Lt. Pritchard and radioman Bottoms had returned in their small seaplane. Cpl. Howarth went to tell Pritchard what had happened to Demorest, but by the time he arrived where the plane had landed, the weather was deteriorating rapidly. Pritchard was advised to take off immediately to avoid the coming storm. Howarth joined Pritchard and Bottoms aboard the plane. Pritchard took off flying low over the men gathered around the crevasse.

The seaplane flew toward the coast. It had made radio contact with the Coast Guard ship which was supplying its crew with weather information when Pritchard cut in urgently requesting “M.O.s,” or his location coordinates. This was the last ever heard from the rescue plane. Several days later, the wreckage of the plane was sighted along the coast just minutes from where the Coast Guard ship waited. Pritchard and radioman Bottoms had flown two daring rescue missions for the crew of the B-17. The second mission cost their lives and that of crewman Howarth.

The crew’s hopes for rescue faded. Demorest had fallen to his death, and Pritchard, Bottoms and Howarth had died in the crash of the rescue plane. The increasingly bad winter weather forced the Coast Guard ship to
depart, and no planes could fly over to resupply the men. Tetley was also trapped with the men. He showed them how to increase their comfort by digging out rooms in the fallen snow for living areas.

**SEVEN DAYS GONE BY**

A week after the disastrous rescue missions, the weather improved enough for a B-17 to drop fresh supplies to the men. From this point on, and through the grueling winter, Capt. Kenneth Turner of the ATC and his crew would risk their lives time and again flying supply missions over the crash site.

The sun shone on Dec. 7, 1942, and Monteverde decided that Tetley, with the sled carrying O’Hara, whose feet were frozen, along with Spencer and Wedel, should make a run for the weather station more than 20 miles away. Tetley would take the trail he and Demorest had blazed the week before. Spencer, wearing snowshoes, walked ahead of the sled checking for crevasses. Wedel trailed behind the sled. The team came to a steep rise. They needed speed to get up it, so the men decided they would all board the sled and gun the motor to get the sled up the hill.

Spencer walked back to the side of sled, and Wedel came up on the other side. The men were talking as Spencer removed his snowshoes. Suddenly Wedel fell through the surface as if a trap door had opened beneath him.

They had stopped directly across an eight-foot wide crevasse over which an ice bridge had formed. The bridge held up under the sled and Spencer’s snowshoes, but Wedel, who was not wearing snowshoes, had stopped on a slightly softer section and plunged through. The men remained for two hours watching and calling for Wedel, but eventually had to give up the vigil and move on.

Pvt. Clarence Wedel was part of the downed crew who attempted to take one of his fellow crew members who was suffering from severe frostbite to safety at a radio station located along the coast. While traveling from the crash site to the station, Pvt. Wedel fell to his death in an ice crevasse.
Proceeding slowly and with great caution, the sled crew made six miles more when the motor on the sled gave out. Spencer, Tetley and O’Hara were now stranded on the Ice Cap six miles from the plane and many miles from the weather station. O’Hara’s frozen feet left him incapacitated. The other two men pitched a tent and dug snow holes for protection against the elements.

For two days the weather was impossible. Conditions improved on Dec. 10, and Turner’s B-17 located the sled camp and dropped supplies to the men.

**CONDITIONS WORSEN**

As December wore on, the weather continued to worsen. No rescue attempts by sled or airplane were possible. When conditions permitted, Turner dropped supplies to both camps of stranded men. To keep their spirits up, he also dropped news of the outside world and messages from home. They were also made aware that a dogsled team had been unable to reach them and a motorized sled team had had to turn back.

A plane borrowed from the far north reaches of Canada was brought in for a rescue attempt. On Dec. 22, the plane took off from southern Greenland headed for the weather/rescue station on the east coast. The plane encountered strong headwinds and bad weather, and it ran out of gas one
hour short of the weather station. The pilot crash-landed the plane on a frozen fiord on the east coast.

The two men aboard the plane spent four days fighting their way through the elements until they came upon a group of Eskimo hunters who took them to their village and cared for them until the weather cleared. On Jan. 2, 1943, the Eskimos escorted the men to the weather station. The elements became so bad that it was four more months before the two could be returned to the United States.

RENEWED RESCUE ATTEMPTS

In December, U.S. Army Air Force Colonel Bernt Balchen, who had worked with Admiral Richard E. Byrd on his expeditions to the North and South Poles, took over planning a rescue operation. He arranged with the Navy for two Catalina flying boats to be sent to Greenland. The plan was to land one of the aircraft on the ice on its pontoon belly, with wheels up, as though landing it on the sea, using the pontoon as a gigantic ski. The planes arrived in Greenland, but the weather remained so bad that no rescue attempt could be made during the remainder of December or throughout January.

The Consolidated PBY Catalina was a rugged and versatile aircraft. About 4,000 of them were built between 1937 and 1945. The letters PB stood for patrol bomber, and the Y designated the Consolidated Aircraft Corp. Catalinas were used in a variety of roles during WWII. They saw action in anti-submarine warfare, as patrol bombers, as transport planes, and as search and rescue vehicles.

A PBY made a wheels up landing on the Greenland Ice Cap in early 1943 in order to rescue the crew of a downed B-17 bomber. Spencer and Tetley had to rock the wings of the plane to break it free of the ice before it could take off and return them to safety.
At the crash site and the sled camp, the men were supplied by air as often as possible and passed the dark days looking after their health and trying to make the camps as livable as possible. So much snow fell on the sled camp that Spencer and Tetley ended up with a three-story dwelling dug into the snow.

In late January 1943, the men at the sled camp were advised by a note dropped to them that Balchen was ready to try landing the Catalina at their camp. Spencer staked out a crevasse-free area suitable for landing the plane.

On Feb. 3, a walkie-talkie was dropped to the men, and for the first time in two months, the men in the supply plane learned which of the men were stranded at the sled camp. The next day, the winds were too strong to attempt the landing.

Feb. 5 would be the day. The two Catalinas and a B-17 circled over the sled camp. Balchen’s plane would attempt to land while the others circled above in case of a mishap. The Catalina came in on its belly with wheels up and wing pontoons down just as it would if it were landing on water. The plane cut a wake through the snow and stopped just short of the camp.

Wasting no time, the rescuers loaded O’Hara into the plane. Spencer and Tetley then boarded. The pilot of the Catalina revved the engines to take off, but the plane remained stationary. Several attempts yielded no better results. Balchen ordered the able-bodied men out of the plane. Inspection revealed that the plane had become frozen in the ice and snow. One man went to each wing pontoon and rocked the plane while the pilot revved the motors to try and break the craft free of the ice.

The plane broke free, but once free, it could not stop or it would refreeze in place. The plane began taxiing slowly in a wide circle. The men spaced themselves along the track of the plane and as it came by, they leapt and were pulled into a portal on the side of the fuselage. Once all were on board, the plane sped down the ice and took off.
Spencer, Tetley, and O’Hara were now free from the Arctic wasteland for the first time in 89 days.

Spencer and Tetley were suffering only from fatigue. O’Hara’s feet were frozen, and both had to be amputated. Now there were three men remaining at the original crash site.

**RESCUING THE REMAINING SURVIVORS**

Monteverde, Best and Sgt. Spina remained on the ice at the crash site of the B-17. Their radio stopped working, and a walkie-talkie dropped to them did not work either. Their only form of communication was from notes dropped to them from the supply plane. Often, these fell too far from the plane for the men to safely retrieve them from the crevasse field. The men supplying the plane never saw all three men at one time, so they were not sure if all three were still alive.

In early January, the men learned of Balchen’s plan for the Catalinas. Their hopes were high, but the weather was awful, and the month dragged on with no rescue attempt. In early February, Turner dropped the men another walkie-talkie. This was the first time that those on the outside knew that all three men were alive. The rescue at the sled camp had succeeded, but

*Sgt. Paul Spina broke his arm in the crash of the B-17 bomber in Greenland. After five months on the ice, he was one of the last three crew members to be rescued from the crash site. He was stranded for so long that his broken arm had time to heal before he was rescued.*
the word was not passed to the men on the ice for fear their hopes of rescue would be elevated, only to be dashed by bad weather.

What followed were 22 days of violent wind and snow that grounded any rescue efforts. It was not until early March that the supply plane was able to reach them again. The men were on the ice so long that Spina’s broken arm had healed. In the meantime, Best became severely depressed in the sunless days and black nights.

The weather improved during early March, and the men learned that Balchen was going to land dogsled teams at the sled camp. The teams would then cross the crevasse field to come and take them back to the plane and rescue.

On March 17 the men were informed that the plan was under way. Monteverde and his companions scanned the distance the entire day. Late that afternoon, they spotted the dog teams in the far distance. Then, that night, the three sleds made it into the stranded men’s camp. All the rescuers were veterans of the Arctic and had been with Admiral Byrd in the Antarctic.

It was 129 days since the B-17 crashed onto the Greenland Ice Cap.

On March 19, the three crew members and the three-man rescue team left the downed plane behind and headed toward the old sled camp. After a difficult day’s travel, the men arrived at the sled camp to await the landing of the Catalina the next morning. As their luck would have it, the weather deteriorated, and for several days no attempts at rescue could be made.

On April 5, the Catalina was finally able to land at the sled camp. The plane had been stripped of unnecessary weight and laden with only enough fuel to make what amounted to little more than a 50-mile round trip. They took the men on board in the same manner as they had with Spencer and his crew, but the plane would not rise to

Sgt. Alfred Best was among the final three crew members rescued from the ice cap.

He spent five months during the Arctic winter stranded on the Greenland Ice Cap.

Equipment was dropped to the crew to help them survive the brutal conditions of the Greenland winter. This parka was worn by Lt. Harry Spencer during the ordeal.
take off. Ironically, after weeks of howling winds, the day was too calm. The plane could not lift off without a headwind.

The next day, the wind came up in the afternoon, and after three attempts, the plane was able to take off. Due to the failed attempts the day before, the plane was short on fuel, and the starboard engine overheated and caught fire while in the air. The plane flew just above the surface for some miles until the land sloped away toward the coast, thus allowing the plane to gain some altitude. The plane headed out over the sea in case it ran out of gas and had to make a forced landing. The Catalina was able to limp its way safely to the base.

On April 6, 1943, the last of the crew that had been marooned on the Greenland Ice Cap since November 9, 1942, was finally in safe haven.
REPORT TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT

After the last of the crew were rescued from the Ice Cap – Monteverde, Tetley and Spencer – along with chief of the Army Air Corps, Lt. General Henry (Hap) Arnold, related the story of their Arctic order to President Roosevelt.

Left to right - Pilot Lt. Armand Monteverde, rescue team member Sgt. Don Tetley, and co-pilot Lt. Harry Spencer along with Lt. General Henry (Hap) Arnold met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to talk about their Greenland adventure.

The story of the men’s crash and rescue was made into a radio play entitled Nine Men Against the Arctic. The play was performed on the program “Cavalcade of America” in 1943.
Lt. Harry Spencer was awarded the Legion of Merit for staying with and tending to an injured crew member while they were trapped on the ice after a plane crash in Greenland. This Dallas Morning News article documented the occasion.

In this photograph, Lt. Harry E. Spencer, Jr., is awarded the Legion of Merit in 1943. The Legion of Merit is one of the awards that can be bestowed on a member of the armed services for non-combat heroism.

The September 6, 1943, edition of the The Dallas Morning News ran a front page article on the award.
Acknowledgements:

Material in the exhibit is courtesy of the Harry Spencer, Jr., family and from the Harry Spencer, Jr., Collection in the Irving Archives, Irving Public Library.

Information concerning the crash and rescue is derived from a series of newspaper articles written by Capt. Oliver La Farge as told to him by Lt. Spencer, Lt. Monteverde and Sgt. Tetley in 1943.