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Bill Spahr defied death a few times over the years, but he didn't go out of his way to jump off of cliffs or attempt other outrageous feats.

"I didn't try any of that crap," said Spahr, who turns 100 years old on Thursday. An informal celebration of Spahr's 100th birthday takes place Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Hilton Garden Inn, 2520 14th St. S.W. in Great Falls Marketplace.

Spahr's life certainly was at risk a time or two when he spent a decade in the U.S. Air Force from 1941 to 1950, including the early dark days of World War II.

A boat ride from New York to Casablanca in North Africa proved to be Spahr's scariest moment of the world war as a group of three transport ships — former ocean liners dubbed the Brazil, the Uruguay and the Paraguay — rocked and bobbed their way to Morocco over 12 days in 1942. Nazi submarines were cruising the Atlantic Ocean, even sinking ships off the American East Coast.

"Our company was on D deck," said Spahr, who was commissioned as a second lieutenant. "(In case of attack), you wouldn't have stood a chance getting out of there."

"We landed in Casablanca," said Spahr, who was pleased to have survived the voyage. By the way, Spahr really likes the classic film of the same name, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

In Africa, Spahr soon was involved in a desert war, pitting the Allies against Germany's Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.

"I never got shot at, thank you," Spahr said. "I did see a lot of Germans surrender, though (in North Africa)." With all the German prisoners, "we had to go at half rations," Spahr recalled.

The Americans also revived a bakery in Tebessa, Tunisia.

"We started baking bread," he said. Airmen took military helmets and bashed the round tops of the helmet against stones, so the helmets would sit on table tops. Then they poured dough into the helmets and baked bread. Voila!

Spahr survived the desert war and ended up in Oklahoma City, where he was a junior officer to Gen. Fred Borum, who oversaw the outfitting of B-29 bombers that bombed Japan.

At the start of the 1950s, a lung disease he obtained in the north African desert sent him to the veterans' hospital at Fort Harrison near Helena. He went on to gain a college degree from then-Western Montana College in Dillon.

In 1955, Spahr took a job with KFBB-TV in Great Falls, then began to teach at Great Falls High School three years later. He taught classes including English, journalism, photography and yearbook over 23 years.

In 1960, Spahr accompanied a student who was writing for the high school newspaper, the *Iniwā*, to the Civic Center, after arranging for her an interview with Democratic vice presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson after he spoke in the Electric City.

“You promised this girl you’d give an interview,” Spahr reminded Johnson, who hugged the high school girl and then answered several of her questions.

That was probably the most exciting moment Spahr had as a journalism adviser. He also arranged for notable Montana writers such as A.B. Guthrie Jr. and Joseph Kinsey Howard to talk to aspiring journalists in his classes.

Spahr, who grew up in Pennsylvania, commented on a variety of subjects:

- *Why long life?* “I think that we were just a Depression family,” he said. “We didn’t eat really well. We didn’t eat a lot of fat.” He said his military service might have helped, plus “I haven’t smoked for 65 years.” One of his brothers is 96, another brother is 84 and a sister is 81; two other sisters have died.

- *His Air Force uniform.* Spahr kept his Air Force uniform for years, then lent it to be used in a college play. “Somebody stole it, with all my little ribbons on it.”

- *The high school newspaper.* Spahr said it was “terrible” the Great Falls High School newspaper he oversaw, the *Iniwā*, stopped publishing a few years ago. “I think they’re going to try to publish it next year,” he said.

- *Getting old.* Spahr said it’s not easy approaching the century mark. He has painful arthritis, and must take oxygen around the clock because of heart trouble. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t think it’d be this hard. It’s wonderful, though; I have my kids, and that’s good.”

- *Family.* Spahr has three daughters, two step-daughters, nine grandchildren and three great-grandkids.

- *Broadcasting.* He came to Great Falls and worked for KFBB-TV for three years beginning in 1955. In those days, World Series games were broadcast a day or two after they happened after the network sent them film for each game. In 1955, the Brooklyn Dodgers finally won the World Series. “I was always a fan of the Dodgers,” Spahr said. “We were only on the air for an hour or two a day then.”

- *Legislature.* Spahr served four terms in the Montana House of Representatives in the 1960s. “I liked it,” Spahr said.

- *Early life.* Spahr grew up in Newville, Pa., in a house that didn't have indoor plumbing until he was 15. "You could take a bath about once a week," he said.
- *Worked early.* As a child, he delivered the Harrisburg Patriot newspaper (two cents an issue), milk, ice, and bread. "You'd have to cut the ice for their refrigerator, with a pick. It was very easy to cut," he said. His dad hauled bananas, oysters and other things from Baltimore to Pennsylvania.
- *Early adopter.* Under Spahr's tutelage, the Great Falls High School Roundup was one of the nation's first yearbooks to use color photographs in 1960 and color photos of all the seniors in the 1961 edition, he said.
- *African food in WWII.* "We weren't supposed to eat any foreign food," he said. "The only thing I tried was fried grasshoppers. It was just like eating burned peanuts, not that good."
- *Saw JFK.* President John F. Kennedy visited Great Falls in 1963, before he was assassinated, and Spahr had a special ticket to see him. He took 8mm movies of Kennedy entering Memorial Stadium and giving his speech.
- *Prostitution.* "In the 1950s, Great Falls was wide open," he said. "They had a lot of houses of prostitution here. I think they had five or six." Then Marian Erdmann became mayor. "She closed 'em up," Spahr said, adding some people were upset by that.

How about the future?

"I'm optimistic," Spahr said. "I think right eventually overcomes wrong."

He always thought the Allies would defeat Hitler and Japan, and he was right.

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