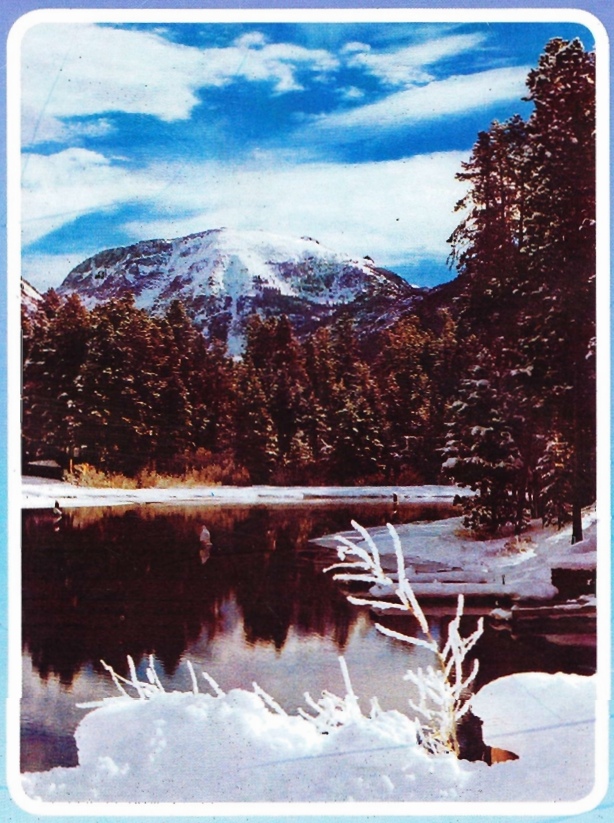
Our Men of the Mountains

Unsung Heroes from a Village High in the Rockies



Our Men of the Mountains: Unsung Heroes from a Village High in the Rockies

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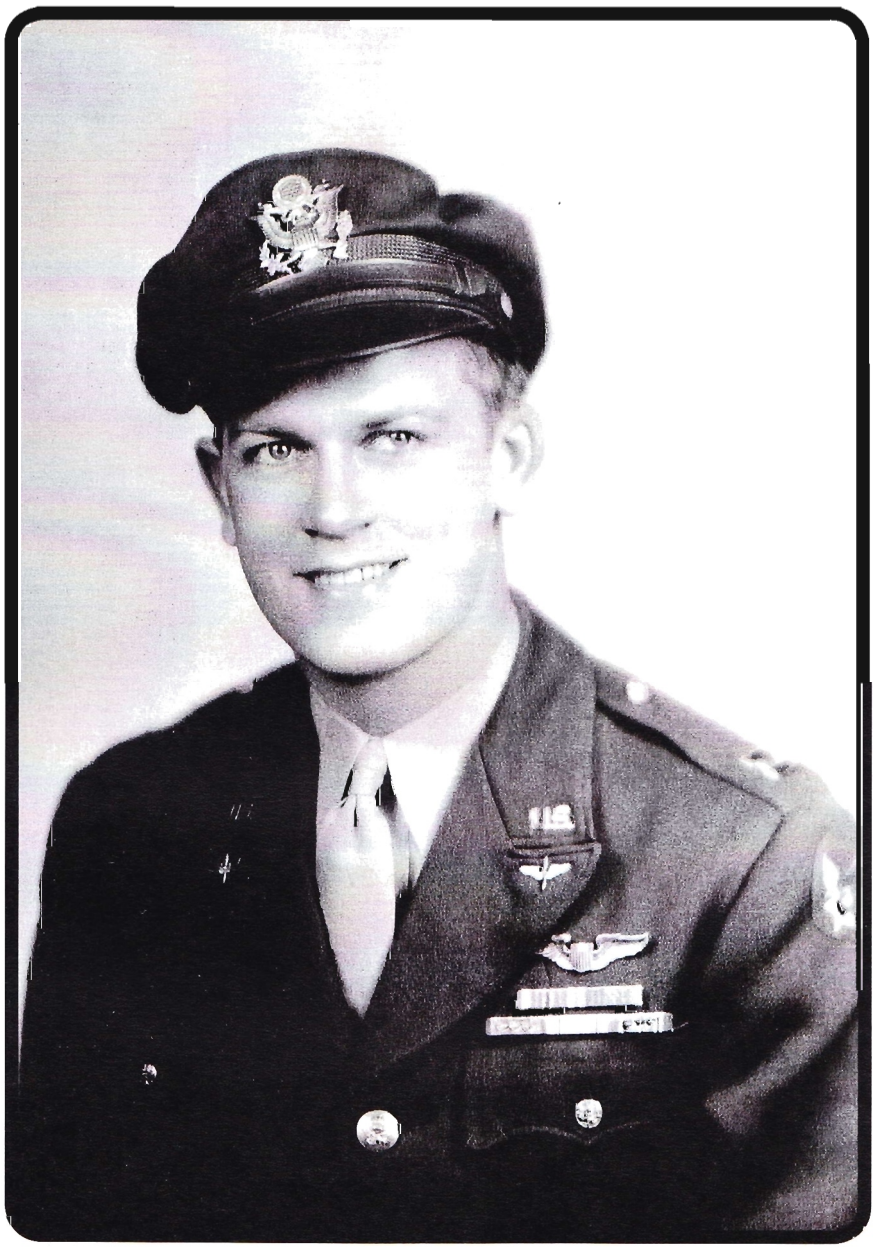


Harry C. Strawn

Shot Down Twice in North Africa

Retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, Harry C. Strawn

Pilot Harry Strawn was shot down twice in North Africa; the first time by his own American ground troops. Regarding his second episode he calmly relays: "I was forced to crash land my SpH 5 in the desert, shortly after a dogfight with a German Messerschmitt. I made it back to base, thanks to the help of an Army tank. My plane, a new MK-9 Spitfire with a supercharged R.R. Merlin engine, sustained 125 hits from night ground fire, some of which hit me. I was taken as a German prisoner for eight weeks and then recaptured by the British Army and returned to my unit, the 31st Fighter Group, 309th Squadron." There is a slight pause. Then, with his defined sense of logic, Harry carefully leads us back to his beginning roots.

The Flags Start Flying

"I was born in 1918 in Swissvale, PA, right outside of Pittsburgh. In high school I was very active in athletics, playing football, basketball, and baseball. Made letters in all three -- 2 years in a row, actually. From there I went to Pennsylvania State College. After two years there, I transferred back to the University of Pittsburg and finished my B.A. degree in advertising. As I think about it now, it was kind of interesting that an instructor told me, in 1939 or 1940, that the United States wasn't all that eager about going to war -- kind of like we are today. He added: 'But wait until the flags get to raising and the drums start to parading up and down, then the flags will start flying and away we'll go.' Sure enough, that's what happened."

"So we finally got involved in the war. It wasn't exactly like Tom Brokaw said it was. It certainly was one of the Greatest Generations, but it took a while to become that, I think. We were pretty much an isolated type of people in those times. We weren't interested in Europe, or North Africa, or Asia. We were a kind of isolationists, and we certainly weren't prepared for the war. We were really NOT prepared."

Shake up these old people, the National Guard

"I'll start this story this way. I went into the service June of 1941, went to flying school at Muskogee, Oklahoma, the home town of my future wife, Marjorie. I graduated from flying school from Brooks Field in San Antonio, Texas on January 9th, 1942. We were training in a PT-19 in basic. Then we went to training with a BT-13. We were supposed to have nine months of training total time. That's what it really took. This was right before the war, in early 1941. Now, remember this was an Army-Air Force. It was a part of the Army. We all had Army uniforms just like the regular Army had. By the time regulation training was completed, the war had started in December, 1941. We had to accelerate our training. They cut off about 4 or 5 weeks of training time and we graduated early. They just went down the list and said 'those from A to L go to hydro-training bomber training schools and those from L to R or S go to ...' They asked what would your choice be and you wrote down your choice, but you just lucked out if you got what you really wanted. Unfortunately, I put down Fighters and Fighter Aircraft, and I got it."

"Anyway, for about four weeks after graduation, there was a training program for the Air National Guard people, who were artillery people. They had what they called spotters. They had a pilot in the airplane and a spotter would go along to locate artillery fire, radio back to the artillery pieces and they could fire back and forth. Of course, these were old men. They were like 25 or 26 years old. Actually we weren't that young. You had to be 21 in order to become an officer in the Army at that time so we were all over 21. We also had to be single, have good vision, couldn't be married, no way at all. A couple of guys of course cheated and got married, but if they'd been found out, they would have been kicked out of flying school."

"When we graduated, we went to what we called O-52, which was an observation airplane. It had a high wing. We flew these old men, the National Guard people. They were scared to death, and they rightfully should have been. Here we were just out of flying school. When we graduated, we had about 300 hours of flying time, all together, in trainers. Now here we were in this big monoplane, floppy looking thing. It was operated very awkwardly and didn't handle very well. But we delighted in taking these guys up and getting them sick. We'd rock the airplane back and forth and up and down, any devilment we could provide. They were scared to death anyway. We were supposed to be flying straight and level so they could look down and see where we were and do the navigation sort of thing."

"But that adventure didn't last very long. I was only there about 4 weeks, and then I was sent to this new fighter group that was being formed. It was the 31st fighter group which was formed from the 1st fighter group. It was located in Detroit, Michigan which was also the site of my first job. After I graduated from college, on Sunday afternoons I used to have nothing else to do since my girl friend was back in Pittsburg, and so I'd go out to the air base and watch the airplanes fly. Lo and behold, that's the group that I joined by accident I'm sure, but I did. We were then set up in New Orleans at the municipal airport where we had P-40's. After about two weeks of P-40's, we got these P-39's which were brand new and which we thought were the world's best airplane -- we were convinced of that. It had a canon that fired through the nose, and the engine was behind us. We straddled a drive shaft that went between our legs to the propeller out here and to the canon..."

"They were designed by Boeing Aircraft Company. The P-40's were also all American, the only thing we had, and we thought we had GREAT airplanes. So we get ready to go overseas, and we're training hard. At this point, we've gone through youngsters in New Orleans that never should have been trained in New Orleans. That was a bad place for them. We trained there for about a total of three months, and we then got these two different fighters to train in. Finally, we received orders that we were going overseas. My commanding officer picked four or five of us to go on the advanced group that was going over to set up the airfields for us and to also make sure that we had the right kind of things coming in to us."

The Queen Elizabeth Bridal Suite

"Luckily, I went over on the Queen Elizabeth on the end of her maiden voyage. They had sent the Queen Elizabeth from Scotland to Australia to get her out of potential enemy territory. They sent her to Australia for fear the Germans would catch her in port and maybe bomb and destroy her. They finished it up in Australia and brought her up to New York, and there they put on radar gear. Then, that's where I got on -- five of us. We were lucky. We were assigned to the bridal suite. Indeed, this was all Army -- there were 17 of us in the bridal suite. In that suite, we found some things that we had never seen before. How about a French bidet??? We didn't know what it was so we would just squirt it up in the air for the heck of it. The suite really wasn't that beautiful. It was lined with 17 bunks -- triple thick with bunks-- all the way around the wall. Believe me, it was packed."

Assigned to the British Spitfire, with a Surprise

"We had about 3,000 personnel on board all together from different places, and we were all going to England. Arriving in England and Scotland was in a sense coming home. There must have been 20,000 people out on the shore. We thought they were there to greet us! We were the first Americans to go to England. We all thought: 'My gosh, they really are glad to see us.' They built this ship, they came to see it, and she finally, came back. From there, we then went on down to our first training camp where we trained for about three weeks in a place called Hierarchal in England. Next, we went to Bognor Regis down on the coast, about two miles off the water actually. From there, we crossed into France."

"England, of course, had been bombed at this point -- starting in 1938, 1939 and 1940. The Battle of Britain was going on in 1939 which was the big battle where all English were evacuated from France and sent back to Britain. This is when, I might add, we got the surprise of our lives. We were assigned the British Spitfires to fly, and we certainly didn't know anything about British Spitfires. We thought: 'Oh my gosh, we're going to be flying this British junk? No. ' As I said, it was the surprise of our lives; it was the finest and best airplane, fighter airplane, in the world. It was a beautiful airplane to fly. We had sent twenty P-39's over to Great Britain on a lend-lease deal. They uncrated five of them and took them up for testing. Churchill called President Roosevelt and said 'Look, I don't like to tell you this, but these old planes will be totally lost against the German fighters that they have. They can't hold a candle to German fighters. Our problem is we need personnel. We need pilots. We've got the airplane and a better airplane. I hate to tell you, much better and it also has the combat experience built into it.'

"This was actually a plane which was designed by a fellow by the name of Mitchell, who designed racing airplanes. We used to have air races all the time. He designed a sea plane called the Sea Fire, and then from the Sea Fire they designed the British Spitfire. The plane was so very easy to fly. If you got into trouble, all you did was take your hands off the controls and let it go. It could literally fly itself. If you got into a spin, you could spin it at 3,000 ft., do a two-turn spin and come out of it with 1,500 feet to spare. By the same token, in the P-39 if you would spin it under 10,000 feet -- you were dead."

"Mitchell was a British. I'm not sure if he was an aviator. He was a designer. He may have flown some, but he didn't do the actual racing. When we got down there, the first thing the five of us early birds did was to sign in these 25 new airplanes as they came flying in. Except for some British transport pilots, the pilots were all dressed in black uniforms. They had black jumper suits on and black helmets, and the first two or three I checked in, they were just British people. Men. Then one came in and I went up to check him out. This pilot takes the helmet off, and this beautiful blond hair starts falling down in cascades. And I thought: 'You're a pretty gung-ho kid.' We're all masculine, you know. Women didn't fly airplanes (except Jackie Cochran) but it shocked me so badly that I said to one of my other buddies, 'My God, if a woman can fly that airplane, I know I can.' That was the attitude that we had. We changed our minds later on in life, but then it was funny. Girls just weren't involved in flying."

"Well, we just signed her off and let it go at that. We had only about three weeks time to train before the rest of our pilots arrived, including our CO. He came over on a cattle boat with the rest of our guys, and he was a little upset that we came over on the Queen Elizabeth and got all that fancy food. It was gorgeous -- we ate in the dining room, with waiters waiting on us. Since I was an officer, graduating from flying school as a 2nd Lieutenant, we officers got all the service while the men were down in the hole eating crackers and tea. We didn't like that."

The Seat of our Pants to Fly By

"The Brits were very much society type -- big shots that were able to fly. Some of them brought their own airplanes. They were all wealthy, well-to-do people who got to fly. When they ran out of their own pilots, they at first didn't have the sense to train some dummies like us. We got our airplanes in and the boys all came over. We did our first couple of missions. They were just simple missions across the channel maybe escorting some B-25's. We were most generally escorting some kind of a bomber across to drop bombs on Le Havre, France, and that peninsula where there were a lot of submarines and submarine bases. Our bombers would try to hit these targets. In those days we weren't very accurate. We didn't talk about collateral damage. It was amazing the advances of today over what we had available in those days. We had nothing but the seat of our pants to fly by. No navigation instruments, no radar. There was nothing."

The Big Raid

"We flew around like that for about four weeks and then finally we got news that we were going on the big, big raid. The big mission was coming up which was the Dieppe Raid, which was the practice landing for the big invasion that would come four years later (D-Day). Most of the force was made up of Canadians, Canadian soldiers and sailors and air cover. The Canadians took a turtle wash. They didn't know that the beach itself at Dieppe was made of shale. Their tanks came off and just sat there and spun around and around. The Germans were up on the hill, right above where we were landing. They just picked those tanks off one at a time, and they killed 3,500 Canadians in that practice run in three days. They were just going in for three days and coming right back out, but they never had that much of a chance."

Almost a Stalemate

"This event did not make much publicized news. It was the teaching and learning method that saved our butts later on—four years later. But Canada had its own system of recruiting. They would take one town and all the guys from that one town left and went into the same unit. It wiped out the male population of the little towns in Canada. They were all from the same town. We learned a lesson from that. We separated people -- they didn't come all from the same town. They were integrated into all kinds of units, but Canada lost a lot of men. In three days, we shot down 101 German aircraft, and we lost 100. There was a difference of one aircraft. Almost a stalemate. But we did our job. We kept them from getting to the troops on the landing barges."

"We were almost face-to-face with the Germans. Oh, my gosh, yes and then some. Either they were on your tail or you were on their tail trying to shoot them down. But it never became personal, you never thought you were shooting some person, you were shooting an airplane. It wasn't a person, it was an airplane. You were either lucky or had better skill and better training than the other guy. The Germans were well-trained, and they had a lot of experience. We had none to speak of."

1942 England Spitfire

Overstressed, Overbuilt

"Their planes were also better than American airplanes, at that time. The Germans had two great fighters. They had the Messerschmitt 109 and the Folker 190. They too were probably like the Americans'-- over-stressed, overbuilt in a way. They had too many things in them that they didn't need. The British were just the opposite -- they had nothing in the airplane. They were just about bare bones. We had a few things, like we had a compass, an engine indicator, an oil pressure indicator, an air pressure indicator. We had a radio which was very good. It was a UHF radio which was really, really clear and good. We weren't used to that. It was all new to us, as was the airplane. Like one little air compressor operated five systems: the flaps, the guns, the breaks, the ailerons and the rudders. One little 2½ pound instrument. We had three backups for everything we had on the airplane. If one didn't work you got another, if that didn't work you tried another. The Spitfire weighed 6,600 lbs vs. the P-47 which weighed 12,000 lbs."

"You've heard the statement: 'less is more.' The Spit was designed as a defensive airplane. It wasn't that big. They hadn't planned on going on long-range missions. The airplane would only fly for 1 hour and 30 minutes. It had 90 gallons of fuel. That was it. And 30 seconds of fire power. That's it. You didn't press the button and hold it down. You fired off little bursts to see if you were hitting something or if you were missing. They weren't really true because the tracer bullets fell faster than a regular bullet. You had a gun sight that had a deal similar to an arrow, and you'd look through it trying to get the airplane in there. It was a fixed thing on the cockpit. What we had in that day and age, was really crude. But the Spit was very simple and very easy to fly. It was almost like a trainer. Trainers were pretty simple to fly then too. At least now as I look back, it's no comparison to today. The airplane today flies itself, the pilot does very little. Everything's planned out and subbed into the computer and there are three computers on-board."

Scramble Missions

"We were the navigator, the pilot, and the fighter pilot. We had to do all of it. Each of us had our own crew chief for our airplane and each of us had our own airplane, so you took good care of them both. Your crew chief was crucial. He was the guy who kept your airplane tuned up and ready to go at all times. We would do scramble missions quite often. A scramble mission is when you are sitting in your cockpit or on the wing waiting with your parachute on and they would fire a red flare and then you'd get into the cockpit, start the engine and take off immediately. Just take off, two people, two airplanes. And when you got airborne you'd call in on the radio and they'd say: 'we have a bogie.' A bogie was an enemy airplane, or an unidentified air-plane, and they would then vector you to where that bogie was. They'd say: 'Angels 15,000, 1,500, 15,000', or whatever it was at 190 degrees which meant 190 from where I was. Angels refer to altitude when talking to other friendly planes. They would vector you on that and keep up with you, and say: 'Now turn left, turn right', whatever 5 degrees right, left until you could see the airplane yourself and hopefully get it. We would have those kinds of missions, and then we'd have fighter sweeps where twelve of our aircraft would take off and we would simply go across the channel, try to entice the Germans to come up so we could fight with them. The more airplanes we could shoot down, the better off we were going to be."

Red Flight, Yellow Flight, White Flight

"I have to contemplate about this one for a moment. The first airplane that I actually shot down—the first one—we won't talk too much about that. It was exciting; it was a split-second sort of thing. It was over within 10 or 15 seconds and you needed to get out of there because you didn't know what was behind you -- whether he had somebody that was with him, and tried to get back into formation. We always flew in formation. We had 12 airplanes every time we'd fly. These we called fingertips. Just like this, this would be the leader, number 2 man, number 3 and number 4. Then there'd be four airplanes down here and four more up here. Hopefully we'd entice the Germans to come down, and then we'd break into them. We could out-turn any of the German airplanes. As long as you SAW the German airplane, he couldn't shoot you down. But if you didn't see him, your head was 'doing this' all the time. Actually it was like a team effort. The team squadron leader was this guy, the squadron commander. These four planes were called red flight, yellow flight, white flight. Then, what we'd do when an airplane would come down to attack us, the leader would call: 'Red flight break right now.' We'd turn like this, all four airplanes, and in a turn-and-a-half we could be behind the Germans. They, however, also knew that we could do that."

"Combat is different from show stuff. We'd do that too—putting on shows and exhibitions. There might be two airplanes flying together and, if I'm flying close to you like this, and you start to take off a little bit, I can see it immediately. If I'm out here and you move, I don't realize it. So it's easier. There is one guy down here, two guys up here, so when you break you break in the same plane and you can't see the other guy either, you just trust. You trust that he's far enough away. You are not flying this close when you're in combat. In combat you're spread out a little further—maybe 50 yards apart. You spread out a little bit so that you can maneuver better, but combat is no show."

North Africa

"Well, we spent about four or five months in England, and then we shipped out for the invasion of North Africa. The largest flotilla of ships ever gotten together before and since was assembled right there in the Atlantic Ocean. We went to Scotland. We didn't know where we were going -- top secret. We got up there and they put us on a ship, and we went out in the Atlantic Ocean and met up with this huge flotilla. They had come from the U.S., and they'd come from England. All these ships were out there: transports, battleships, cruisers, destroyers. Then we headed south. At first we were headed north out in the ocean, and we couldn't figure out where we were going. The next thing we knew we were going south. What they had done, they had gone north and were really out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Then they headed south and east. We began to kind of put two and two together, but it took us 2 weeks to get to where we were going."

"Although we didn't know that we were going to Africa, we knew we were going south, going to Spain, maybe. So we got down to Gibraltar and half of the convoy kept on going south. We then turn and go into Gibraltar. Then our ship breaks out of the convoy of the smaller convoy, all by itself. We had all the pilots

on that one ship, British and American. We got into Gibraltar, and there are our airplanes all stacked up in there, in Gibraltar. Gibraltar is an amazing place. It really is. That tall rock sticks up there like it did, and it was hollow. They had dug in there, and they had hospitals in there. They had food supplies, ammunition supplies, everything you could think of they had in there. Plus they had this little airfield out there, where the airplanes were all stacked up, almost one on top of the other. We were there only three days when we got the word that we were going into North Africa."

Oran and No Gasoline

"We would go into Oran, a port right on the Mediterranean. That was almost a two hour flight, which was more than the Spit could make. So they put a 100-gallon belly tank on to give us that extra time to get into Oran. We took off from there one afternoon and got into this French airfield just before dark and we landed. Of course our troops were coming into the harbor at Oran. Our supplies were also all coming in there and should have been there. Some were there and some weren't. There was supposed to be gasoline at the field for us to re-gas and refuel. There wasn't, the gas wasn't there. We had no food, we had nothing. We slept on the grass, only we didn't sleep. What we did, we found four French transports that were parked down there and they were full of gas, so with five-gallon cans we went out and drained the gasoline into our cans, carried them back over and put them in our four airplanes. Now each airplane held 90 gallons, so we worked all night long. The next morning we got word - this was about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning - that the French Foreign Legion was coming up to knock us out. Most people don't realize that we fought the French the first three days of the invasion. That was the Vichy French, and then there were the DeGaulle free French. Mercenaries were basically under the control of the Vichy French. So when the invasion was going on, they immediately called them up and they started their move up. They had to come through a mountain pass, a narrow pass. They had the equivalent of this WW I stuff. They had these WW I tanks, little bitty tanks made out of tin-like material."

Distinguished Flying Cross

"We finally got these four airplanes gassed up, and we took off. It was still dark almost, just getting daylight, and the four of us flew down and found the Vichy and caught them in this pass. We shot the whole thing up, we all came back empty. We had no ammunition left. Knocked the whole column out, all of them -- they were gone. For that we got the Distinguished Flying Cross, presented by General Doolittle. About a month later, he came in and gave the four of us, my CO, me (I was his number-two man), Peter Payne Rahan, and Colonel Thyng (who was a Major then) the Flying Cross. We had a big ceremony and a big parade, and we were still at this French airfield."

A Port with no Baths

"The funny thing about it was we were all kind of desperate for a place to take a bath. Here was this nice French airbase, but it only had showers in it. We found out there was a nurses station, a hospital about 15 miles east of us. So we sent word down to them, asking if they would like to come to a party. We had a big

orchestra there playing 40's music. I was dancing with this young lady. She said: 'You sure smell good.' I asked: 'What are you talking about?' She said, 'We haven't had a bath, except out of a helmet for three weeks.' So we said: 'Would you like to take a shower?' We stopped the orchestra, stopped the band, and the girls all went up to our area. We got them soap and towels and they went off and took a shower. When they come down, they were beautiful. We went over and got them in what we called a 6 x 6, a big truck with a canvas cover, racks and seats on both sides. We sent two trucks over and brought two trucks back. And the girls rode in the trucks over to our base where we had these nice French quarters, really great, with showers yet."

"The nurses were all American. It was an American hospital, field hospital. We just had a ball. It was a really an exciting time for them and for us. We had great entertainment. We had Tommy Dorsey's band over there and Glenn Miller's. They all came over, well not all. I don't think Goodman was over there. We had entertainers like Mickey Rooney who was a young kid at that time, but Bob Hope hadn't gotten there yet."

Running into Rommel

"Later we moved on out of Oran and got up close to the front lines. We had to stay pretty close to the front lines because we didn't have the travel time that we could fly--so we always moved. We were on the move all the time. They would go out and scrape a place off and say: 'Here's your runway.' We took off of the sand or dirt or whatever it was. That was it: 'our runway.'"

"We then worked our way up towards Tunis, which was another port, and Binzert, which was yet another port. As we did that we ran into Rommel. That's where Rommel was. The British were going back and forth. We were on mission after mission in North Africa, and on this one particular mission, I was flying a brand new airplane -- the Mark 9. What we originally had were called Mark 5's and I got the Mark 9, an MK-9 Spitfire, which was a desert model. It had a supercharger on it, a R.R. Merlin engine. This meant that we could go faster and much higher than we ever could go before, and that we had the ability to climb as fast as the German F.W. 190. This gave us the ability to combat on more even terms. Well, the Germans didn't recognize the airplane because it looked so much like the other one. They didn't realize that we didn't get many of them. We got four to a squadron, and I was one of them to get one."

Bail from a MK-9

"On my second mission with the MK-9, I peeled off to go down and thought I saw a German 190 below. He indeed was down below us, and we were at 28,000 feet up high. I was able to get close enough to squeeze off several bursts of fire and scored several hits on the FW-190. He began to smoke as I squeezed off the longer bursts with more hits. And I thought: 'Boy, it's the first time I've been above a German plane the whole time I've been here.' I peeled off to go down and he saw me coming. He put his plane in a dive, and he kept on going down and I came down almost within range. You had to be within range because your guns fired out like this and they crossed out here and where they crossed is where you wanted to be. Now if you

were back too far they would cross behind the airplane, so you'd miss him. So you had to wait until you were within gauge on this little cross-hair deal on the cockpit. I fired off a burst just to see if I was going to get anywhere close to him, and I saw some hits on his wing. Then I looked at my altimeter, and we were down to about 8,000 ft. I looked up to see where the rest of my squadron was and immediately pulled off from him and started climbing back up. I got up to about 28,000 feet when I got hit by anti-aircraft fire. I mean it knocked the right wing off completely. The airplane was on fire. I didn't know it but I was hit. I was hit in my arm, up here in my hip, and this leg all the way down to my ankle. I knew I had to bail."

German Prisoner in Algeria

"Oh, yeah, even as a fighter pilot, you're still jarred. You knew you had to bail out, so the first thing I did was try to release my canopy. You had a little rubber ball, you pulled on that and the canopy would fly off, then you would stand up and jump out. I wanted to call up my guys and let them know that I was going to bail out because they could come and get me later. I reached over to turn my radio on and my fist was closed -- I'm totally right- handed. I can't do anything left- handed. Your ripcord handle is over here on your left side, to open the chute, the little drag chute, and you'd pull the big chute out and away you went. I really didn't realize I was hit except I couldn't figure out why my hand was closed. Well, the ulnae nerve was cut and so anything that happened after that I must have done with my left hand. I was pretty much in shock at this point, I think. The minute I pulled my canopy and let it go, I started to stand up and when I did, it sucked my oxygen mask off. So I took two deep breaths and the last thing I remember I was still in the cockpit. The next thing I remember was that I woke up on the ground looking at two German soldiers. My parachute was all open and I was lying in the parachute, and I passed out again. At that altitude, at 30,000 feet you just take maybe 1 ½ breaths and you're gone. There's simply no oxygen up there. Well, I had a mask on and that's what you're getting your oxygen through at that altitude, but if that mask was gone, there's no oxygen. Anyway, I woke up and these two German boys apparently couldn't figure out how to get my chute off. We had a safety release on our harness."

"We kept the harness in the locked position so that we couldn't accidentally hit it, and it would then open up. If we jumped out over water, then we wanted to put it in the unlocked position. Just before you hit the water you'd hit it. You'd come out of the chute and fall into the water. These kids couldn't figure out how to get this chute off. So they had a motorcycle with a side car. They picked me up, parachute and all, and I passed out again. I didn't know this was going on. They put me in the side car, and they go putt, putt, putting off. I came to again, and I think 'My gosh, I've died and gone to heaven, look at these beautiful clouds.' My parachute! I wound up in a German field hospital in Bejaia, which was German territory at that time. Then I became scared because I had heard lots of propaganda about how the Germans did this and the Germans did that ..."

"However, they took excellent care of me. The doctor who did this was the only surgeon they had in the whole hospital. It took seven hours to operate. He cut the nerve, cut the ends off of it, ran it from here

inside to here and sewed it together. Plus he dug out all of this shrapnel. This whole arm was full of shrapnel, this leg too. I've still got some in here I'm sure. See these little tiny black spots? They just left them in there. They cut out a whole bunch, part of my leg over here."

German Field Hospital and Mistaken Identity

"The German field hospital was a big room all right. It was kind of bare. There might have been maybe fifteen or twenty cots, ten on each side of this room that I was in. By the way, I had a British uniform on, not a uniform but a flying suit. I had a British helmet on, of course. I had British shoes on, British boots on and British trousers on. I did have my own jacket. I had a leather jacket on, an American leather jacket. So they assumed that I was English. They didn't like the English at all."

"Then you see what happened, this guy came in and he said something about you damn British. I said: 'I'm not British, I'm an American.' He said,' American! I don't buy that, you're flying a Spitfire.' They didn't know the Americans were flying British Spitfires. So anyway, I remembered I had a package of cigarettes in my pocket -- Lucky Strike Greens. I pulled those out and I said, 'Will this convince you I'm an American?' He looked at me and he said: 'My gosh, you are an American aren't you?' I replied: 'That's what I've been trying to tell you, I'm an American pilot.' He then asked: 'Well, how about a cigarette?' He wanted one of my cigarettes."

"Anyway, to make a long story short, they operated on me the next day. The surgeons and the doctors were really professional. They had a lot of things that we never had. They had developed sodium pentothal among other things. You know how they learned a lot of this stuff was by operating on the Jewish people. They experimented on the Jews. That's exactly right. And there are people to this day; I don't really understand it, who refuse to believe it ever happened. Well, they kept me totally out of it for seven hours, and when I came to, I didn't even have a headache. This arm was in a cast from here up to here, this leg was in a cast."

"The British had overrun this area when I was in the hospital. They had already taken the town so it was in British control. Probably four or five days after the British had the hospital, I informed them and told them what my outfit was. They somehow got the word back to them."

Credit for Capturing a Hospital

"Although many Germans had evacuated, there were still Germans working in the hospital who had surrendered. Actually, I got credit for capturing a hospital. This is real funny. I was a senior officer, an American officer, who was there. The rest of our people who were in this hospital were enlisted personnel. So this German boy came to me, a Sergeant, and says: 'Here's my gun.' He had a black band on his shoulder. He said: 'You're now the CO of the hospital.' Remember, I'm flat on my back in bed. That's how my mother and father found out that I was a prisoner of war. My CO, he enhanced the story pretty well. He got it to

the press, and of course the press at home picked it up. They also called my mother and dad to tell them that they had word that I had captured this German hospital."

Walking Patients, Only

"I was in that hospital for about eight weeks, a prisoner of war. There were probably in the neighborhood of twenty other Americans there, but they were all ground troops people. There was one other aviator there whom I knew. He was all bandaged up-- his face probably hit the gun site when he crashed. They always took the pilots. If they had American or English pilots, they tried to evacuate them back to Germany so that they couldn't fly again. So, they take me and this other pilot, who is walking. His face was all mashed up but he could walk—there was nothing wrong with his legs."

"They then take us out to this German airport in Tunis. There's this great big, huge transport, a 6-engine transport that the Germans had, with no medical or Red Cross on it or anything. They were evacuating our people back to Italy and then back to Germany. Well, they get me up in the stretcher up to the steps of this airplane and the pilot says, 'No way, walking patients only, no way.' So, they take me back. Well, guess what? My own outfit shot down six of those airplanes the next day. There were probably 50 to75 Americans on those airplanes, but they didn't know it. They were just great big transports, and my own squadron shot them down."

"Then one morning, I woke up and I looked out. I was in a tent by this time because they had moved us again. Here came some of my American buddies from my squadron. They found out that I was there. They came up and picked me up and took me back to my squadron. From there I went to an American Hospital for about four to five weeks, I guess, back in Rabat -- that's in Morocco on the west coast, on the Atlantic coast. When the Queens were in charge over there in Morocco, Rabat was their primary city in Morocco."

Casablanca Criminals

"Before I was shot down, I did get to Casablanca, which was in Algiers. I went there and went to the Casba where Humphrey Bogart was, and it really was everything like they said it was. You went up these real narrow steps. The Casba was cordoned off by a brick wall. When you went over that wall, you were really taking your life in your hands because it was full of criminals, and all kind of thieves, and all kinds of murderers. That's where they would go because they couldn't be touched by British policemen or French for that matter. So we would go up there, go up these steps, go up to where they had some guns on top of the roof. On the way up, these girls would be standing in the doorway as you went by, these little narrow steps. There would be a doorway here and a doorway over there. The way you knew they were prostitutes, they had marks on them. They had marks on their face, kind of blue marks. Of course you stayed as far away from them as possible because you didn't know what was going on, disease and what have you. The Casba was a place to go to find jewelry. I have since lost it, but I bought a ring while I was there. It was silver, hand-carved ring -- it was a beauty. But the Casba was interesting, it really was. There were no police in

there. We took our own guards with us when we were there. We took military police with us since it was full of criminals, lots of them."

Not on the Queen Elizabeth

"But back to the less-fun subject of being returned to the American Hospital. The doctors kept me there looking at me. They said: 'Well, we think you can stand up and walk now.' I was flat on my back. I said: 'Oh great!' I was anxious to get up, and so I got up, put my legs over the edge of the bed and put some weight down on my foot. I then let out a scream. The medic said: 'What's the matter?' I yelped: 'My ankle, my ankle!' He replied: 'Your ankle?' He got me back to bed, and sure enough I had broken my ankle. They didn't catch it, and I didn't know it either. I just thought all this soreness was coming from my leg. I didn't realize I'd broken my ankle. They put a cast on that, a walking cast, and kept me for another couple of weeks. Then finally I came home via boat-- a ship back to New York and back home. Not on the Queen Elizabeth, though. Came back on a normal passenger boat, and I totally forget the name of it."

Time for Reflection.

"By both lying in the hospital and by coming back home, there finally was time for reflection. In my opinion, The Desert Fox, Rommel, was probably the greatest general including all of ours and all of Great Britain's in the entire war. He was a tactician expert. He just was great. If Hitler had let him alone and let him fight the war, we might have been in trouble. But Hitler, the egotistical so-and-so, decided he knew more than anybody else. He was going to do this and do that, but he made all the wrong moves. He should have invaded Great Britain. He didn't, when he had an opportunity. Great Britain had nothing. They had lost all or most of their Army and most of their Air Force. About six months before we got there, he could have invaded Great Britain. He decided not to because they shot down a whole bunch of his airplanes. He sent a whole bunch of airplanes over there at one time and the Brits shot them all to pieces. They were building a new fighter and a new bomber but he also had a jet, the first operational jet in the business, the ME-262, twin engine (Messerschmitt 262) which was a two- engine fighter jet. We didn't know what a jet engine was. We saw them when they came up. Anyway, the head of their Air Force, a big, heavy-set guy, wanted to build more airplanes, more jets. Hitler said: 'No more, no more money, we're just not going to do it. You don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to do this and we're going to do that and we're going to cut this out and cut that out.' They had taken a pretty good loss but they had the advantage, and the Generals recognized it. But Hitler, he'd had enough. He didn't want to go any further. He decided he'd stay with what he had. He had France, he had Poland, he had Czechoslovakia, he had them all, so he didn't feel like he had to go across the Channel. That was his mistake, the biggest mistake of the war. Rommel, on the other hand, was a brilliant tactical thinker, but he was unfortunately killed. Some say a forced suicide, but we're not sure that he wasn't killed by Germans. No, Hitler and he didn't get along. There were a number of German Generals that did not agree with Hitler, but they wouldn't dare say anything."

"Rommel was shot by an airplane while he was in his touring car. He had big touring cars and his driver

and he were going somewhere. This was in Germany. He was back in Germany on leave, when somebody's airplane who obviously knew where he was, set him up and killed him.. He was very outspoken. He didn't agree with Hitler just as many other Generals did not."

Hard-nosed Patton

"Patton was down in North Africa at that time too. General Patton was, excuse the expression, a "son-of-a-bitch", and most people recognized it. He was a hard-nosed, hard-headed, big show-off, with silver guns with pearl handles on them. He carried them like he was going to do the fighting. He never did any fighting himself. He was a General, and he had read all the histories of the great Generals of previous times. He was trying to copy some of their tactics, I think. But he made a terrible mistake in North Africa. That's when the Germans almost overcame us. He got his tanks in Oran and got his Army together, where we were. The idea was to push the Germans on to the east -- on up to Tunis -- and get them out of North Africa."

"In about 1943, Patton decided that he was going to run Rommel out of business. He drove his tanks 150 miles over desert roads all the way up to where the front was. The front was that far away from Oran by that time. Rommel had simply backed his people up through a valley, backed all his tanks up into this valley, and then got 88 mm cannons and guns sitting up on the top of the mountain. He sent one tank out and Patton saw him. This guy does a 180 and comes back. Patton, believe it or not, sends all of his tanks after this one tank. They got the hell knocked out of them, just shot them up, tank after tank. He was, in my estimation, the worst General we had."

"Ike did not like him that well either. Ike was pretty much on his back, finally, because Patton disobeyed orders. He didn't follow orders. He just went his own way, did his own thing and he wasn't as smart as he thought he was. But, Rommel WAS smart. He knew what he could do, and he had better tanks than we had. He just wiped out the whole tank corps, right then and there, over 100 tanks."
"Some might ask why we were in Africa to begin with? The idea was to invade Europe from the south, through Italy. The debate was: should we invade from the north first or should we invade from the south first? And there was a conflict of interest about which was the better way: coming up over the Alps and all that, or bringing our troops through Italy. So it was decided then, of course, to come up through the south first. That's when we extended it to North Africa, and we went to Sicily and then to Italy. This was after I left. I left on the 17th of April of 1943, the date I was captured. Our outfit kept on going, went all the way up through Sicily, Italy and on up through to Germany before the war ended."

The 31st Fighter Group

My outfit was the 31st fighter group, which got very little publicity. There was very little known about the 31st fighter group because we flew British airplanes. We were a fairly well-kept secret. We had one occasion in England when Life Magazine sent Margaret B. White, the great black and white photographer, and her entourage over, and they interviewed us. We had met the King and Queen of England, they had come by

and the Archbishop of Canterbury all came by and reviewed our troops. By that time, we knew what we had in the British Spitfire. We knew we had a great airplane by comparison to what we had been flying around. So we were being interviewed by them. Pictures were being taken, and we were spilling our guts. We were saying: 'You know, by the time we get a decent airplane, the P-39 won't be worth a damn.' We had to escort P-39's when they would fly into North Africa. We'd go out and fly with them. They couldn't keep up with the 109 or the 190.'

"Well, Life Magazine came out, an issue about National Heroes, this big splash about American fighter pilots complaining about American airplanes that weren't worth a damn. We never saw another reporter from that moment on, never was another reporter let anywhere near us. In Italy, we finally changed over to P-51's -- American airplanes. By that time they had included and changed the engine in the P-51 and put in the Merlin engine, which the Spitfire had. It was manufactured by Packard—the car people—on an English design. They built the Merlin engine and also put it in the Mustang P-51's, which made it one of the finest airplanes in the war. It had a lot more range, it was a bigger airplane, it weighed about 12,000 lbs. It was a much bigger airplane than the Spit. The Spitfire was a great airplane, though. We loved it."

Americans, Brits, and the Spits

"There were 75 Americans in our first group, who could fly the Spit. Our group was the first one, with three Squadrons all having Spits. From ours, a little later on, we divided our group to another group. There were then two groups. That would have been 150 in total. As far as any further publicity, the deal was that one of our great Generals owned stock in General Motors. General Motors built the Allison engine that went into all American Airplanes and that's why we didn't get any publicity."

"Not only that, we complained about the American-made radios. You could be sitting here flying side by side and you couldn't understand what the guy was saying just over there. In the Spitfire, you could be 100 miles away talking like you were on a telephone. They had radar, we didn't have radar. They had UHF radios; we had normal, standard radios. We had no idea. To look at a Spitfire it looked like somebody had hammered it with a hammer somehow and beat it. Things didn't gel together nice and tight. It looked awkward. It had real narrow landing gear, but it was long this way, in the wing span and it looked like it would be grounded real easily if you didn't steer just correctly. But, all in all, it was a great airplane."

Running Out of Pilots

"The British had the Spitfire, but they had run out of pilots. They had lost 23, but I'm not exactly sure about that figure. But they were down to getting kids out of high school, fifteen-sixteen years old and starting to train them. They'd give them maybe a month's training and then they'd throw them into combat. Well, that just wasn't working for them, and they knew it. They knew they were in trouble. They had lost a lot of airplanes with these youngsters flying. Yet they didn't have time to train them. In fact, when we first went over there, we went to one of their training schools for gunnery practice. We'd never fired at a target in

our life, never, never shot a gun. We shot at ground targets once in a while, and that was about it. We had never shot at tow targets or anything. You know, you had to know how to lead an airplane. Well, the kids who knew how to fire a gun in an airplane were kids from the farm who had been out shooting doves. They learned that you didn't shoot at the dove; you had to shoot ahead of the dove because the dove was flying. Same thing with airplanes. If the airplane is flying here and you're here and you shoot at it there, by the time the bullets get there, it's actually up here. So you've got to go up and shoot out here in front of it."

Flight Training School

"After we practiced and practiced and learned - well, I've got that as the next part of my story. When I came back to the States, one of the first things we did was to set up a fighter training school here in Naples, Florida in January, 1944. We set the first one up, the first one we ever had, to teach flight tactics to advanced instructors who had some 1,000 flying hours but no combat experience. We didn't have any such training schools. There were about five of us from my squadron who all came back, including my CO. We all went down and set up this new training school using the British experience and using the British-type school. Then we got flying instructors from advanced flying schools who were Army pilots with lots of flying time. We brought them in to our fighter training school down in Florida, and we taught them the kind of tactics that the fighter pilot had to learn before he got into combat. My CO convinced the man-to-be that we needed a training school for fighter pilots, and we didn't have it. And he then said: 'Good, go down there and there's the field.' We went down to Naples and maybe there were 200 people in Naples, Florida at that time. We took over the airport there, but it was a small airport."

"Naples really was kind of the end of the world. Anyway, we set up down there and that's when Marge and I got married—just before. This was a Top Gun School. We didn't actually call it that back then. That's what it's called today, Top Gun School. We did a lot of low-level flying. We were flying right down on top of the decks. That's the way you flew in combat. You went over low, stayed out of the radar so the radar couldn't pick you up. When you got to where you wanted to go, you popped up and there you were. We took gunnery; we taught by tow targets. They'd pull a tow target; it's kind of a loop. Well, you know what the wind dock looks like-- a wind dock at an airport, a sleeve. This is what a target looked like, a little thin sleeve only much longer, bigger. Then it was on the back end of a 300 or 400 ft rope, nylon rope. This was being pulled by another airplane. We would go up, make practice runs just like you do in combat, and fire color-coded bullets. We had purple, blue, green, whatever, and would try to hit that tow target. It wasn't easy to do. It wasn't that big, maybe that big around. But it gave you some idea of how you had to lead it. The poor guys who were pulling it were scared to death."

"Then we also were teaching bomber pilots and their crews how to fire at a fighter aircraft which was coming in to fire on it. They had guns in the bombers which were taking camera pictures of us coming in and attacking them. Well, they were flying B-24's, and there were eleven to fifteen people on board each one of those airplanes. They would fly down the coast from Ft. Meyers, Florida. That's where they were stationed.

They'd fly down the coast and we'd go up and fly and meet them, and they'd run down the coast and back. We were making passes at them all the time. One of our kids knocked one down, at 4000 feet, flew into our bomber, knocked it down. Killed everybody on it, everybody and there were fifteen people on board, plus the crew. So we moved up to 8,000 ft after that and got up a little higher. We were there at our training command almost a year. That was our honeymoon."

The Germans Had Their Own Tactics

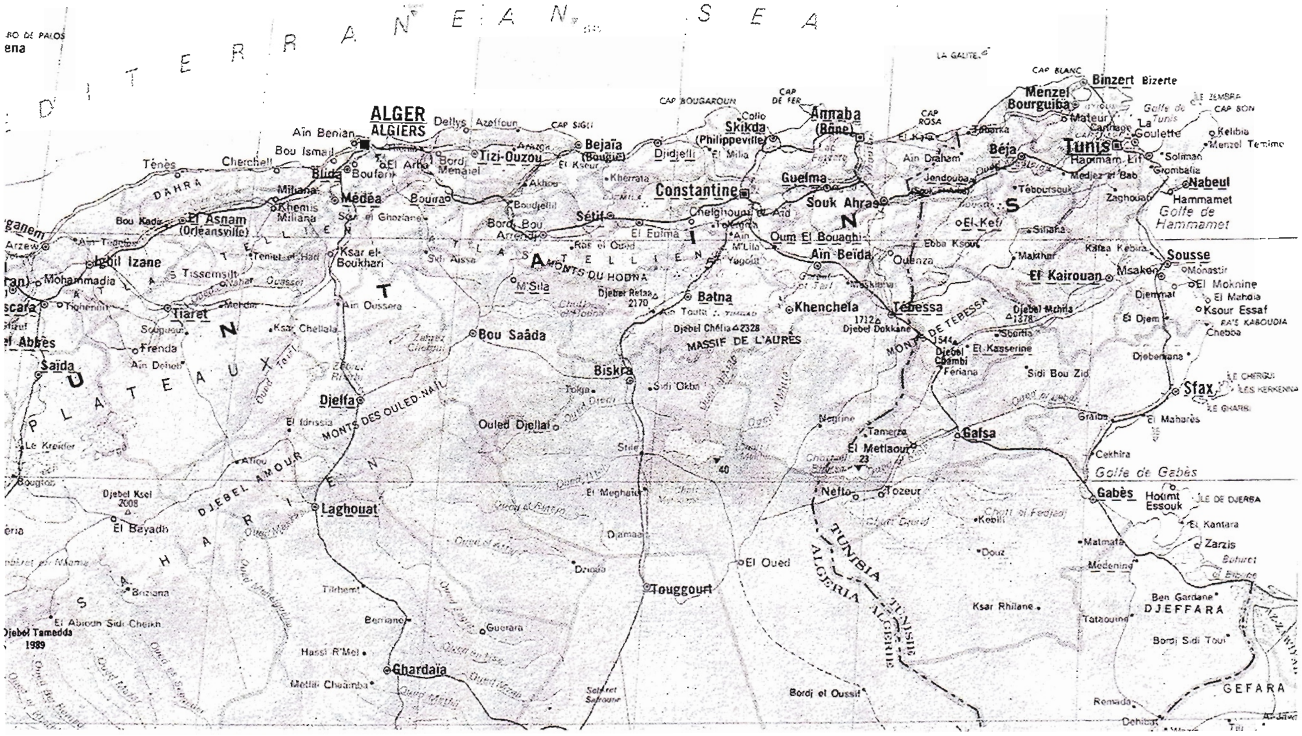
"The morale was great at our training school. It was a good time. We had great pilots because they all had lots of flying time. They knew how to fly the airplane. It was just a question of tactics, teaching them the tactics of flying, and saving their lives when they got over there."

"Of course the Germans always had their own tactics. They always came in from above, up high. They tried to get the sun on them, one side of them -- so if we looked up we'd be looking directly into the sun. They'd come out of the sun and come down at you, and they knew we could turn inside of them. If we'd break into them, they'd immediately roll over and dive down faster and then pull straight up. We couldn't stay with them going up. We could stay with them for a while going down, but we couldn't stay with them. They were that much heavier, therefore they fell faster. We just couldn't stay with them. If you saw them, they couldn't shoot you down."

Shot Down in North Africa by American Ground Troops

"I never got hit by a German fighter, but I got show down twice in North Africa, once by Americans. I belly landed the airplane, on its belly, in the desert. But I was behind our lines at the time. What happened was I was chasing an ME-109, which was a little slower airplane down on the deck. He had been doing some strafing at troops on the ground when I caught him. I went after him, but the troops couldn't tell one airplane from another. One guy would fire and then everybody would get nervous and start firing. I had just fired a burst at this guy to see if I was on top of him. I really didn't know if I was close enough, when all of a sudden my prop stopped. You know normally you look right though the prop and you can't even see it. All of a sudden, the kids would be firing at maybe this plane you were chasing—not knowing they had to lead it. What they would do is they'd hit you right behind it. Instead of shooting out here, they were shooting at the airplane, which means they hit me. Well, I finally got on the ground and came to a screeching halt. The prop was off, they had knocked it off. I had landed wheels up. You had to land them that way, it was safer. If you landed wheels down and hit a hole, you flipped over on your back. Belly-landing, you do less damage to the airplane. You lose the prop, you might have to put on a new prop. A brutal few seconds. Boy, are they ever.

I moved the canopy back and got out of the airplane. There is some heavy looking stuff growing in the desert, I don't know what it's called. Anyway, these guys were popping up, sneaking through it. I knew they were Americans because I was behind our lines. They didn't know that I was an American. They thought they'd shot down a German plane!"



Northwestern Africa

"We of course had I.D. We had a star on each wing; we had a great big round circle on the side. So as I turned to go back to find a place to land, I was rocking my airplane like this, many degrees, so they could see it. They still kept firing at me. So when I finally got on the ground, I saw one of these guys stick his head out. In the meantime, I had my 45 out, and I was going to scare the hell out of him. I was so mad. He said: 'My gosh, that's an American airplane.' I said, 'You better believe it, and you better come up here with your hands up.' 125 holes went through that airplane. It was small arms fire -- 30 caliber machine gunfire. One of them went right through the cockpit and I never knew it. I never got hit myself, nothing hit me. But anti-aircraft fire is different. When it blows up it sends all kinds of shrapnel. I got hit by German anti-aircraft fire, but not ours. Ours was just small arms fire and rifle fire."

Wanting More Action

"Well, backtracking a bit, after the year with the flight school, my CO, whom I had been with in combat and he was also my CO down at Naples, got a call from Washington. He went back to Washington. They wanted him to take a new outfit, new group over to the Pacific. He called me up and wanted to know if I would like to take one of the squadrons and I said: 'You bet!' I'd only been married a year. I'd had enough. I was the kind of person who wanted action. I just couldn't stand this business of sitting around doing training. We organized a group up in Wilmington, North Carolina at Luthenfall Field where we were flying the big P-47's. We trained up there for about 2 or 3 months."

Okinawa

"So we put together the 413th Fighter Group and were assigned overseas to Okinawa doing escort and fighter raids over Japan. We were flying P-47's, huge airplane, 18,000 lbs.
It was a long range. It just went from what we were used to in the Spitfire, it went in the opposite direction. We could fly it for 12 hours. Imagine sitting in the cockpit all by yourself for 12 hours and over water all the time. From Okinawa to Japan, back to Okinawa. We were out there when the war ended."

"Our mission over there was to burn Japan down. This was the end of the war. I'm sure you've heard people complaining bitterly about the fact that we dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What they don't understand is that we probably saved 200,000 American lives. That's what it would have taken if we'd of gone in there and invaded, because the Japanese were desperate. I mean they'd kill you at the drop of a hat. And yet when they surrendered, they became like little sisters. We didn't believe that kamikaze pilot business, but I saw it with my own eyes. They were coming down to attack the Navy and tried to get a ship in the harbor that was supplying our troops on Okinawa. It was unbelievable. They were just flying a bomb, that's all they were. They had no wheels to land on. They had to hit that ship down there and blow it up and kill themselves. They knew they couldn't go back. That was it. Then they hit the ground they were going to blow up."

"Yes, the wheels dropped off when they were airborne. At any rate, we were on a little island right off Okinawa about 5 miles west of Okinawa. This is the island where Ernie Pyle was killed, the great writer, and he was a great writer. We were doing escort with B-29's, the big bomber that dropped the A bomb actually. I was up flying the day after, we didn't know that was going to happen. We didn't know anything about an A-bomb. But we're flying the next day up there, and there's this haze all over the darn place and we're flying right through it. We didn't even know what happened. We didn't know any better. Nobody had said anything. We just thought it was a cloudy day, hazy. Prior to the time the bomb was dropped, we had to circle around Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Now they said: 'Do not, under any circumstances fly over these areas.' Well, we thought the reason for it was that they probably had prisoner of war camps for their prisoners in those areas and we might accidentally drop a bomb. That was the only thing we could figure out. And here, lo and behold, this is where the A-bombs were dropped."

"I'll tell you another good story. About a week before we were getting ready to go to the Pacific, Marge thinks she's pregnant, but she's not sure. So I go by train, we go clear out to the west coast. The day before I get on a ship to go to the Pacific, I call her and she says, 'Well, the rabbit died!' Now, I've got lots of things to worry about. We have a daughter, a first girl, and I get home before she was born."

"Well, a continuing funny story: When I came back to San Francisco I was put in charge of a troop train going to Indianapolis and I had all black troops on that train. We had picked them up out in the Pacific off an island out there, and they were dressed up fit to kill. I mean, their trousers were pressed; they looked like

they were going to parade down Fifth Avenue, New York -- just shining from everywhere. And so I thought, 'Oh me, what do I do?' There were probably a couple hundred of them all together and I was supposed to get these guys to Indianapolis, plus myself. Well, every time the train would stop, for whatever reason, it was some little town; they would pull off and stop. These kids would all get off the train and go into the nearest beer garden and pick up a case of beer or a bottle of whiskey or whatever, get back on the train and they'd be drunk as ..."

Coming Home

"Anyway, we got them to Indianapolis and I did get back home. Then Nancy was born about 3 weeks after that. Coming back home from Indianapolis, I took another train to come home, because Marge was in Muskogee, Oklahoma. The big deal in Muskogee in those days was to go down and meet the train at night, see who was going and who was coming. And every Mother and Dad would get in the car and drive 6 or 7 blocks down to the train station. I was on the back end of this train. I was clear in the back. Marge and her Dad were clear down here at the front. A couple of guys got off in front of me in civilian clothes, they each had a briefcase, and they're walking down in front of me, 10 or 20 paces ahead of me. I'm behind them and Marge all of a sudden spots me and she starts to run. Now, she's 8 ½ months pregnant, she runs down to meet me, and these two guys were walking along, and all of a sudden they saw her coming. She was waving, these guys start slowing down, slowing down. Marge always says that she scared them to death."
"Coming home was both wonderful and a little anticlimactic. I felt very strange getting in civilian clothes, I really did. Everybody staring at me, thinking: 'Why didn't he go to war?' It was a strange feeling. Five years on active duty time and two years overseas -- you were in a uniform and all of a sudden you're in civilian clothes. You felt like you stood out like a sore thumb."

"Of course I stayed in the Reserve and Air National Guard for about 20 years all together. I had 28 years service all together, and I got 20 good years in, but 28 in total. I was in the National Guard and I flew jets, the first jets that were out, the F-80's. They were operational; they went to war in Korea actually. They used the F-80 and the F-84. Then I did some correspondence work and went to schools, stayed in the Reserves. When I retired, I was Commanding Officer of NORAD at Kansas City. I was temporarily there as a Reservist, but should we have had war, my assignment was to be the Commander of NORAD. And that's what we were practicing. I was in charge of the administrative section, the police section, the whole base, all the base functions except engineering. So I had a huge outfit there. At that time we were flying, I had grounded myself. They were flying twin engine transports which I didn't like. I was a fighter pilot, I wasn't a transport pilot. We were flying stuff over to Vietnam; our planes were going over to Vietnam. I didn't go, but that's what our mission was."

Looking Back

"Well, you know, looking back, the good Lord was with me, I guarantee you. He was with me when I first got shot down, all the way down. He must have pulled the rip cord for me, and He was with me many times after that. And I've often thought: 'Why did He save me, for what reason?' I guess it was to take care of her, my wife of so many years…."