

1st FG in NORTH AFRICA AND ITALY

An account of Dick Catledge, Major General USAAF, Retired,
P38 fighter pilot on Med theatre and over Italy.

Originally published at <http://www.1stfighter.org/warstories/Catledge.html>

This might be more appropriate as a footnote because it's related to my last combat mission in the P-38. However, it's pertinent to ALL of the files I'm typing, and this is a good place to insert the incident. It lends to the veracity of all the things I describe about my life. I know that "war stories" are frequently told, with some degree of exaggeration. For that reason I seldom talk about my experiences unless I'm asked. I'm sure people think there's some degree of exaggeration regardless. I never exaggerate. To describe an experience, any experience, I have to live it again. And since I have very little imagination I can only describe things as they actually happen. I think the year was 1987 when a Lieutenant Perry called me. He told me he was with the Air Force Historical Department. He had researched my biography, noting I had participated in two wars, etc. He asked if he could come here with a tape recorder and ask me questions about my career in the Air Force. The information would be for the Air Force archives. I agreed to his visit.

Lt. Perry came with his tape recorder, and a lot of questions for me to answer. One of his first questions was about my last mission in the P-38. He asked me to describe the events of that mission. I lived the mission once more from beginning to end and gave him the complete story. Lt. Perry was here for two days and asked a lot of questions. At the end of the two day session he said he had a document I might be interested in, and handed me a 3 page document. The document was dated 4 June, 1944 with my signature at the end. I was amazed! One of the things I had to do after returning to friendly territory in 1944 was sit down with the intelligence people and describe the events of my last combat mission 28 August, 1943. The document he handed me was the one I wrote, and signed in 1944! Why, and where it was kept I'll never know, but here it was! I read it. What I'm very proud of is that what I had described to him the previous day was verbatim of what I had written in 1944 when describing the events of that mission. I mentioned that to Lt. Perry and he replied that he had checked and noted that.

After arriving at the First Fighter Group at Mateur, we were housed in tents with a dirt floor, with 4 cots, and mosquito netting for the cots. Our mess hall was a large tent, and the food was mostly warmed up K-rations. While at Mateur I lived primarily on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The people back in the States were severely rationed, but the food wasn't getting to the boys fighting the war. My tent mates were my good friends, Charlie McCann, Roger Miller, and a red head whose name I don't remember.

My first P-38 flight at Mateur was on 11 July, 1943 and was a local flight of 20 minutes duration. My second flight on 12 July was my first combat mission, and was in support of ground troops on the first day of the invasion of Sicily. It was an early morning bombing and strafing mission.

A little bit about squadrons, and flights. Each squadron has 25 assigned aircraft, and a flight is made up of 4 aircraft. Normally, a squadron on a combat mission, consists of three 4 ship flights. Due to shortage of parts, etc. it was sometimes difficult for the maintenance to provide even 12 combat ready aircraft, so we often had only two flights for the squadron effort. Each Fighter Group has three squadrons, for a full complement of 75 aircraft. Normally, the Group is tasked to provide three squadrons for each combat mission. On some missions we would have a total of 36 aircraft airborne (3 squadrons), and on some we would only have 24 aircraft airborne (still 3

squadrons). I was always more comfortable when we had 36 rather than 24, because on ALL of our missions from Africa to Italy, we were vastly outnumbered by the German and Italian fighters.

Within the flight there is the flight leader, and on his wing is the #2 pilot, then on the opposite wing is the #3 pilot, or the element leader, and on his wing is the #4 pilot. The progression within the flight is for a new recruit to always be on the Flight Leader's wing, and after a few missions, moves to the #4 position, and after a few more missions, and experience, then moves to the #3 position, or element lead. After much experience, the element leader moves up to become a Flight Leader. The Flight Leader is always the pilot with the most experience, but is not always the best pilot for the job! I flew with many different Flight Leaders, and saw a tremendous difference in their aggressiveness, pilot ability, and courage. There were only three whom I thought did an outstanding job of leading on combat missions. One was our Operations Officer, First Lieutenant Lee Wiseman, a First Lieutenant Willy, and First Lieutenant Russell. Our Squadron Commander, Captain Joe Miles, must have had most of his missions completed when I arrived, because he flew only one mission while I was with the Squadron. I flew with him on that one mission, to Sicily, and his aggressiveness left a lot to be desired. I note in my flight log that I flew 3 missions as #2, on leaders wing, 6 missions as #4, tail end charlie, and 13 missions as #3, element lead.

By the time I arrived at Mateur the Germans had been driven out of Africa, and had consolidated their forces in Sicily. My first three combat missions were to Sicily, bombing and strafing, in support of the invasion. After that, with the exception of one, all my missions were to Italy. The missions to Italy were tough! The primary task of our Group was to provide fighter support for B-26 bombers (medium altitude). There were three P-38 Groups operating in North Africa, the 14th Fighter Group, the 82nd, and ours. The P-38 was the only allied aircraft with sufficient range to make the round trip from Africa to Italy. The 14th provided fighter support for the B-17 bombers (high altitude), and the 82nd provided fighter support for the B-25 Bombers (medium altitude). The B-24 Groups had no fighter support.

From the day of our arrival at the First Group, it was impressed upon us that on bomber escort missions our duty was to protect the bombers, and never, never leave the bombers no matter what! That was OK, because without protective fighter coverage the bombers would have been annihilated by the German and Italian fighters. Still, it was frustrating to have enemy fighters make a firing pass at us, or the bombers, and then dive away safely, and we couldn't give chase! The P-38 had 4 machine guns, and a 20mm cannon, all were in the nose of the gondola, and all fired straight ahead. The enemy fighters were very much afraid to see the nose of a P-38 coming in their direction because of the awesome firepower, and in many cases, this was our salvation. Often, all a P-38 pilot had to do was start a turn toward an incoming fighter, and he would break off the attack. The B-26, Marauder, was a medium altitude bomber. All of our escort missions were at the altitude of 12,000 feet, which was a deadly altitude because it was optimum operating altitude for the enemy fighters. The P-38 had superchargers that would automatically cut in, or out, at about 12,000 feet. The B-26 climbed at 160 mph, and cruised at 160 mph. Our normal cruise speed was 250-275 mph. To stay in close proximity to the bombers our flights were constantly "bee-hiving", i.e., turning away from the bombers, then turning back over them to the other side, and back again. This kind of maneuvering kept us always over and around the bombers. Because the bombers approached the target at 160, dropped their bombs at 160, made the 180 degree turn to exit the target area at 160, we were always in the target area for a LONG time!

I won't try to describe all the missions to Italy, only the memorable ones. However, on every mission to Italy, the bombers, and we were attacked by vastly superior numbers of enemy fighters, mostly the German Messerschmitt F-109. (ME-109). Luckily, they never appeared to be really aggressive, only making a high speed pass, firing (usually out of range), breaking away, and doing it all over again. This was their tactic from the time we penetrated the Italian coast, bombed, and departed the coast. Normally we could expect the fighters to continue their attacks until we were about 50 miles out to sea, at which time they began to have shortage of fuel problems, and had to return to their base. Many times, after the bombers were safely away from the target area, the enemy fighters would try to run the P-38's out of gas. They would start a pass on us, and we had to turn into them, thus going in the wrong direction to Africa. After we had committed to turning into them, they broke off the attack, far out of firing range, and so we turned back to a heading for Africa. Then, others would attack again, we would turn again, but always trying to work our way westward. There were times when we were deep inside enemy territory for too long a period of time, after having gone around, and around with enemy fighters in the target area. We knew we were becoming low on fuel, and would be sweating out making the 400 mile trip back to our base. When we could finally head West, we knew we didn't have enough fuel to make very many turns when the enemy fighters came in on the attack. Many times the lesser of two evils was not to turn into them, continue on our heading, but bob up and down. When we didn't turn into them, they came in close, and I well remember seeing the front end of their aircraft light up like a Christmas tree as they made their firing pass. Trying to run us out of gas was a good, safe tactic for them! I should explain that not turning into the ME-109s wasn't as risky as it might seem. They usually were coming in from the left or right with a very high angle of deflection, and the possibility of being hit was very slight. I have no idea of the capability of the ME-109's fire control system (gun sight) but assume it was no better than ours. On the P-38 we had a completely mechanical gun sight. When we turned on the gun sight a lighted hundred mil circle appeared on the windshield. Protruding from the bottom of the circle up to the center was, what we called a Christmas tree, for that was what it resembled. The top of the "tree" was the aiming point. That's where your bullets would hit if you were firing at a stationary ground target. In air combat with a moving target the pilot had to estimate the targets speed, the precise distance, the angle of deflection to the target, i.e., 10,20,40,60, or 90 degrees, Newton's Law (gravity), and build in your own airspeed. Then one had to decide how many radii of the 100 mil circle to lead the target. For a 90 degree deflection shot, the pilot may have to lead, (aim in front of the target), as many as 5 full diameters of the 100 mil circle. It wasn't an effective gun sight, and was always a guessing game. Technology later gave us a computing gun sight. One could put the "pipper" of the sight on the target, track him for a few seconds with the pipper on the target, and the computer would do all the calculations, and you could assume that the bullets would go exactly where you placed the pipper. Distance was still a problem, but later technology gave us radar ranging gun sights that then included distance in the calculation. In WW II, we lived with the mechanical sight. As you might surmise, a 90-degree deflection shot was almost impossible for a pilot to calculate with any degree of accuracy. It was almost impossible to hit a moving target when the deflection was that great. . During each mission briefing we were always reminded that if there was anything wrong with the aircraft we should abort the mission before leaving the coast of Africa. A couple of spare aircraft and pilots always accompanied the Group to fill in if some one had to abort. There was always a little bit of a stigma to having an early return. If someone had an early return, you always wondered if there really was something wrong with the aircraft, or if the pilot just didn't want to fly that mission. We had one pilot, one of my classmates, a big fellow who looked like a tough prizefighter, who had

an early return on every scheduled mission. It became ridiculous! I don't know how he could live with himself, but he never flew a mission. Don't remember what happened to him.

On one of my early missions to Italy I should have aborted because just after takeoff, and while the Group was joining up over the field, my right propeller went "out". That is, the automatic feature of maintaining a constant RPM whether climbing or diving, malfunctioned. I wanted to complete the mission badly, plus I didn't want to have an early return. Since I had a switch on the left console with which I could manually increase, or decrease the RPM, I made the decision to continue on the mission to Italy. Wrong thing to do! When over Italy we were attacked, as usual, by large numbers of enemy fighters. For 20 or 30 minutes we were climbing, diving, or turning. When we dived I had to constantly manually change my RPM or the prop might fly off the engine it would revolve so fast. When we were climbing, or turning, with airspeed dropping down, I had to constantly manually increase the RPM, or I would have little power from that engine. There were many times when I thought it was going to be impossible to stay with my flight, and the Group. Several times I remember thinking to myself, "what a stupid thing to do", never again! It was a tough mission, and I had learned a good lesson.

The following mission wasn't funny at the time, but it has always stuck in my mind, and is humorous in retrospect. On this particular mission to Italy, we had a heck of a fight with the enemy fighters in the target area, had stayed too long, were getting low on fuel, and our flight had completely lost the rest of the Group. My flight leader was Lieutenant Russell, whom I had flown with several times before, and considered him an excellent flight leader. By the time we reached the coast we were on the deck and streaking, or trying to streak, for Africa. Enemy fighters were pursuing us from our 6 o'clock position, but were out of firing range. The weather was a little hazy out over the water, and as our flight is at full throttle, and skimming the waves, we could see over to our left a flight of 4 P-38's down on the water and going in the same direction as our flight. Overtaking them and diving down from a higher altitude is a gaggle of enemy fighters. Must have 10 or 12 of them. Russell made a call on the radio to alert the flight of their problem. We didn't know who they were, and Russell tried to somehow get their attention and make them aware they were in deep trouble. The flight continued straight ahead for Africa and the enemy fighters were closing to firing range fast. We had to help! At the last second, just before the enemy fighters were in firing range, Russell broke hard left into them, and they broke off the attack on the 4 unknown P-38's, who continued merrily on their way home. Now we're in trouble, low on fuel, and heading towards Italy with enemy fighters all around us. Our Group radio call sign was "Cragmore", and on that day our flight radio call sign was "Red" flight. Knowing our flight is really in trouble, as we're mixing it up with the Germans, Russell, in a calm voice calls, "Cragmore Leader, this is Red one", and still in a calm voice described our situation, and requested assistance. No answer---nothing! Lieutenant Willy, from our Squadron, happened to be the Group Leader on this mission, and was a close friend of Russell's. After a couple of minutes Russell called again, this time in a high pleading voice, "Willy, Willy, this is Russell, Please come back, Please come back!. In a couple of minutes Willy, and a bunch of P-38's appeared out of the haze, the enemy fighters scattered, and we made it home safely.

My tent mate, Roger was the first of my friends to be shot down. We were returning from an escort mission to Italy, and were well out over the Mediterranean, probably about 100 miles from the coast of Italy. We were in a squadron of three flights, and our squadron leader was Lieutenant Willy. This distance from Italy normally put us well out of the range of enemy fighters. We had relaxed, loosened our seat belts, and had a drink of water from the canteen we always carried. Suddenly, Zap, 4 German

fighters hit us. They were very courageous pilots, for we were a squadron of 12, and they were a flight of only 4. They were also very smart, for in fact, they had us outnumbered as it turned out. They must have carefully planned their mission, and carried external fuel tanks in order to engage us this far from their home base. They obviously knew our tactics of religiously maintaining our formation of a 4 ship flight. We had three 4 ship flights, they had four individual fighters. As we went around and around with them, everywhere I looked there was an F109 crawling up the tail of a flight of 4 P-38's. Lt. Willy with our flight was kept busy chasing a German off the tail of a P-38 flight. In this fight I think we lost three pilots and their aircraft. One of the pilots lost was Roger Miller. When we reached home and were on the ground, I was angry, and frustrated. How could 4 Germans outnumber 12 of us? Of course I knew the answer! The policy of maintaining flight integrity at all costs really put us at a disadvantage, and was stupid in my estimation.

Immediately upon landing I went to Lt. Willy and asked him why we couldn't split each flight into elements in a situation like we had just encountered. We, in effect, would then have six elements of two aircraft each, and would have then outnumbered the Germans. In maintaining a four ship flight, only the leader can freely fire his guns. Those behind him have to be very careful shooting at an aircraft the leader is going after, for fear of hitting the leader. Lt. Willy had no answer and suggested I talk with Lt. Wiseman, our Operations officer. I immediately went to Lt. Wiseman, described the events, and told him I thought we should change our tactics, particularly in a situation similar to the one our Squadron had just encountered. As I recall, he didn't agree or disagree, but said he didn't have the authority to change the policy, and that I should go talk with Captain Miles, our Squadron Commander. This I did! I described the mission to Captain Miles, and how we were in effect outnumbered because of existing policy. I told him I thought the tactics were stupid and should be changed, that it seemed to me to be just common sense to split each flight into elements of two when confronted with the situation we had just experienced. He had no answer and suggested I go see Colonel Garman, our Group Commander. I was determined that something should be done to change our tactics, so I went to Colonel Garman. I explained to him what had occurred on the mission, and how 12 of us were outnumbered by 4 enemy fighters because of the policy that demanded we maintain a 4 ship flight regardless of the circumstances. Garman's rationale was that it was necessary to stay in a 4 ship flight at all times in order to better insure the safety, and survival of those inexperienced pilots in the flight. That's what we had to live with! Colonel Garman never flew a mission to Italy!

I was well aware of the fact I was a new Second Lieutenant, only six months out of flying school, and was beating the drums to change fighter tactics. I wasn't even aware of what "fighter tactics" meant at the time. I have no idea if other Fighter Groups used better tactics during the war, but I know our Group never changed. In fairness to all, my superiors had only a little more experience than I, and at that time, no one in the Army Air Corps considered, or thought about developing fighter tactics for air-to-air combat. It was some years before the Air Force fighter pilots came to realize the importance of developing, standardizing, and setting down in writing, the optimum in air-to-air fighter tactics. It was interesting to note that the basic strategy developed, was that a flight split into elements of two, and provided mutual support for each element. A further refinement was splitting the element, and each individual then provided support for the other. In 1943 I only knew that what we were doing was stupid, and that there was a much better way of fighting the war. Returning from a very lively mission over Italy I found myself suddenly becoming a flight leader. Over the target area the German and Italian fighters had been especially aggressive, and somewhere in the ensuing fight, (I was leading an element), I lost my flight leader. When you're fighting over the enemy's homeland, and your base is 400

miles away, and over water, you're fighting a defensive fight. Once the bombers drop their bombs, and are heading toward home, we, the fighter escort, because of fuel concerns, are primarily interested in working our way out over the sea. After losing the flight leader, I gradually worked my wing man and I out to sea, and began to see other P-38s heading in the same direction. An element from my squadron came in on my right wing and I now had a flight of four. The element leader on my right wing I recognized as Lt. Diamond, an experienced flight leader, and motioned for him to take over the flight. We were still maintaining radio silence. Diamond shook his head, no, so I kept the lead. I decided to try getting together with all the other P-38's, and return home in some semblance of order. Eventually I joined on the left side of another flight.

When we were well out to sea, and out of range of enemy fighters, (has a familiar ring) most everyone relaxed. I should explain about "relaxing". On every mission we had a big fight with the enemy fighters, and working hard in a hot cockpit resulted in being absolutely soaked with sweat. Once we thought we were out of range we always loosened the formation, sat back and relaxed. Perhaps it was because I remembered that we were surprised once before, although much closer to Italy, or I felt a little more responsibility, this being the first time I was in the flight lead position. In any event, although the other flight was flying straight and level (not bee-hiving) I continued to weave a little from left to right so that I could keep a better eye on our 6 o'clock position. This made the members of my flight work harder, but that was OK, it made me feel better. Suddenly, as I'm in a slight right bank, and looking back over my shoulder, I think I see a little black speck very high, and very far away, but at our 6 o'clock. I turned the flight back to the left, and look over my left shoulder to see if I can still see the black speck. I can! Our flights are moving along at about 250 mph, and the black speck is now a single aircraft, and coming in on us at a very high rate of speed, but still far back. I calmly push my mike button and called to the other flight, "Cragmore flight we have a bogey at 6 o'clock, coming in fast, break LEFT NOW!!!! The "LEFT NOW" was blurted out because his rate of closure was much faster than I had anticipated, and he was almost in firing range when I said "NOW". I was already breaking hard left when I yelled, "NOW!". The German aircraft must have been doing at least 450 mph. He didn't get a shot at us, and continued diving down and reversing course for Italy, My flight and I are going straight down after him, but with so much greater speed he was fast pulling away. About the time I realized the chase was useless, the other flight leader called and suggested we break it off, that we'd never catch him. I broke off, and continued home without further incident. The #4 man in my flight, tail end Charlie, would have been the first one hit if the German had not been spotted. After landing, I learned that Lt. Stuber, one of my classmates was flying #4, because he looked me up. He told me that he had thought me foolish to be weaving the flight when we were so far out over the Med, and making the pilots work. He said, but if you hadn't, I'd be dead, and I want to thank you for saving my life. That made me feel pretty good! One mission was a little different. The Germans and Italians were still in Sicily, but were trying to evacuate their forces across the straits of Messina, a narrow band of water separating Sicily from Italy. Our mission on 5 August was to provide escort for a Group of B-17s, the Flying Fortress, and their target was the mass of people and equipment waiting their turn to cross the straits. Good targets! The B-17s flew at 30,000 feet, quite different from the 12,000 we normally flew when escorting the B-26. The air is much, much thinner at this altitude, and constantly turning and bee-hiving the P-38 required a lot of our attention. As we approached the target, the air, in the vicinity of the bombers, turned black with enemy flak. At one point the Bombers penetrated a virtual solid block of black flak. Nothing deterred them, and they continued to the target. The enemy flak guns on the ground must have been

numerous, and highly concentrated. We saw nothing to compare with the flak of that day, even on our missions to Rome. Needless to say, since there were no enemy fighters around, we stayed well clear of the B-17s when they encountered the heavy flak. I've always felt a deep admiration, and respect for the bomber pilots and crews who maintain their formation and keep a steady course to the target, no matter the adversity.

We flew one other mission that was quite different from the escort missions. It was FUN, and very productive, and all three P-38 Groups participated en masse. For some reason the Germans and Italians concentrated their fighters on small satellite bases around an Italian town called "Foggia". Some very wise officer in 12th Air Force Headquarters, our major Fighter Command, came up with the bright idea that we concentrate all P-38 Groups on a strafing mission of those satellite bases around Foggia. The mission was scheduled, and flown on 25 August, '43, but we flew a practice navigation, and strafing mission in Africa, with all 3 P-38 Groups, on 24 August. There was a lot of pilot excitement about this mission. On all our escort missions, we could see from about 50 miles off the coast of Italy, the enemy fighters taking off (dust), to intercept us. I had many times argued with the flight leaders in my squadron that we should send a couple of flights, on the deck (low level), to arrive over those airfields a few minutes ahead of us, just before the enemy pilots took off. I thought it was a terrific idea, and would really catch them off guard. It never happened! Now we were given the opportunity to surprise the enemy with the Foggia raid.

On 25 August our Group rendezvoused with the other two P-38 Groups at a point over the water just North of Sicily. We all were flying at minimum altitude over the water. We proceeded at minimum altitude, with Groups in trail, and crossed the Italian peninsula down South, around the ankle of the so-called Boot. We all had dropped our external fuel tanks before crossing the coast of Italy. As we skimmed over hills, and fields, there were people working in the fields, and they all stopped, looked up and waved. I'm sure they didn't know we were U.S. aircraft. We crossed over Italy and into the Adriatic Sea. As soon as we crossed the coast we turned parallel with, and just off, the Adriatic Coast of Italy and headed North, still in trail. Colonel George McNichols, Commander of the 82nd. Group, was leading this entire effort. Our Group Commander, Colonel Garman Mediterranean, didn't make the mission. As we flew up the coast we flew over many small boats, and a few small ships. Every P-38 pilot that passed near them fired at those that fired at us. At a pre-determined point Colonel McNichols gave the signal for all P-38s to make a 90-degree turn in place. This maneuver now had us all line abreast as we crossed the coast, and were immediately over the enemy airfields. WE HAD A FIELD DAY!! Aircraft, hangars, equipment, and people were all over the place. We're at tree top level, and had managed complete surprise. I fired at so many aircraft, and things on the ground that I ran out of ammo. We were briefed to make only one pass, and to continue on across Italy at low level and return to Africa. I later learned that our three P-38 Groups had a confirmed total of 150 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground! A very good day! We should have accomplished many missions like this one, but our task was providing escort for bombers, and I guess we couldn't be spared for such effective missions. But a few fighter sweeps over all the airfields in Italy, and the bombers wouldn't need protection from enemy air.

Evidently the Foggia bases had gun crews on alert because we did encounter considerable flak as we passed over the airfields. At low level the puffs of black flak looked like groves of trees. As we proceeded across Italy to return over the Mediterranean to Africa, we were no longer an integral part of our Group, as most all flights had gone their separate way, and we could best be described as a "gaggle". Our flight wasn't with another flight, but we weren't alone either, for there were many

flights and some elements scattered around the area. There was also motor traffic on the roads, and trains running on their tracks. Again it was a field day for those who still had ammunition. We spotted an airliner above, and off to the right, at about 5,000 feet. It looked like our DC-3, but of course was a German or Italian airliner. Another flight was closer to it, and I could hear their conversation as to whether or not they should shoot down an airliner. They made the decision to shoot it down, and up they go. I could tell when the pilot of the airliner first spotted the P-38s, because he suddenly nosed down violently, but it was too late. It was shot down! I felt a little bad about it, but war is you know what!

Our flight continued across Italy toward the Mediterranean Sea and Africa at minimum altitude. We expected the enemy fighters from other airfields would be airborne and looking for us, but we saw no enemy air. Shortly after leaving Foggia we happened upon a P-38 tooling along on one engine, probably doing about 200 mph. We contacted him by radio and learned that it was a pilot from our squadron, Matty Warren. His left engine had been hit by ground fire, but he wasn't hurt. We slowed down and stayed with Matty until we reached Sicily, which was entirely in allied control by this time. Matty didn't have sufficient fuel to make it to Mateur, so we looked for a landing strip in Italy for him. We found a small dirt landing strip with tents around it and Matty decided he could land there. His gear wouldn't come down so he had to put it down gear up. He did a good job. The other two members of our flight, because of low fuel, had decided to go on to Mateur a few minutes earlier. I was circling the field while Matty was making his landing pattern, and landing. After the landing he crawled out of the cockpit and stood on the wing. I could see that he was OK, but by this time I figured I didn't have enough fuel to make back to Mateur, and decided to land on the airfield beside Matty's aircraft. I came in on initial, pitched up, and was on final approach, when Matty jumped off the wing and began frantically waving me off. I pulled up, looked the situation over, and Matty was still waving me away. I had no idea what the problem was, but decided not to land. I found another dirt airfield several miles away, landed, and was able to get enough high-octane fuel from the army to make it back to Mateur. When Matty finally made it home he told me the reason he didn't want me to land was because the field was covered with about 6 inches of mud, and I probably would have damaged my aircraft. My 22nd. Mission was escorting B-26s on a bombing mission to Naples. This turned out to be my last mission of the war. My flight leader was Lt. Rudnick, who had just returned to the squadron from several weeks of R&R (Rest and Recuperation). I had never met, nor seen, him before this mission, but he was an experienced pilot with over 40 missions. All of his missions had been during the campaign to push the Germans out of Africa, and this was his first mission to Italy. After take off our Group formed up over the field and we then proceeded to rendezvous with the bombers. As usual, as we approached the coast of Italy we were attacked by a large number of enemy fighters, and our Group turned into the first attackers, then turned back to stay with the bombers. For some reason Rudnick didn't turn back with the rest of the Group, but continued his turn, and made a full 360 degree turn. By the time we completed the 360 degree turn we were well behind the rest of the Group, and were on our own with regard to the enemy fighters. Seeing a flight of 4-P38s separated from their Group, every enemy fighter in the area converged on us. Rudnick had to turn into the closest attackers, and of course this put us farther and farther away from the Group.

It would be difficult to estimate how many enemy fighters were now attacking us, but they were coming in from every direction. My good friend Matty Warren, was flying my wing in the #4 position, and was the first to be hit. He called that he was hit, and on single engine. We immediately began bee hiving over and around him to provide some kind of protection. There was no chance to join the rest of the Group who were

with the bombers and heading for the target, and I'm sure Rudnick was trying to edge us away from Italy. It wasn't long before I had to leave the flight and turn into someone coming in on me. From then on I was on my own, for Rudnick and his wing man were busy elsewhere. From time to time I would catch sight of a P-38 with enemy fighters all around him, and I knew it had to be a member of our flight. On one glance I saw a P-38 diving at a 45-degree angle and smoking heavily. On another occasion I saw a parachute floating down, and assumed it to be a member of our flight. I had no idea how much time had elapsed, but I knew the bombers target was just past the coast, and that after dropping their bombs, they would make their turn, and come back out on the same course they went in. I was hoping that the P-38s with them would see me going around and around with all these enemy fighters, and assistance would arrive. Not to be! We had started all this at 12,000 feet. When I still had about 5,000 of altitude I saw the bombers, in perfect formation, and not a fighter around them, heading out to Sea. The P-38s were in perfect formation bee-hiving around the bombers. At this time I was inland just a bit, and over some hills. I looked down at the terrain, and for the first time saw Italy, and realized that I wasn't going to make it back to Mateur. Subsequent to this my aircraft was hit hard in the left boom, and there was hole there that I could have crawled through where the coolant shutters were located, or used to be located. My left prop stopped rotating, and I mechanically did what I had been trained to do when you lose an engine, went through all the procedures for feathering the propeller. I didn't need to, but it was instinct I guess. I'm now on single engine and having to trade altitude for airspeed, and when making hard turns the altitude is rapidly lost.

One of the first things you're taught when flying a twin engine aircraft is that when you're on single engine, don't turn into the dead engine, but if you have to, use a shallow bank in the turn. At one point a Messerschmitt 109 made a pass from my left at a very high rate of speed. He misses me, but stands his aircraft on its wing in a continuing turn to the left. He's really moving because he's already well out in front of me and has a very wide radius of turn. I'm in a shallow left turn, and watching the ME-109 pilot standing it on the wing well out in front of me. As he continues his turn, I'm thinking, this guy is trying to come around on my tail again. I began to gently increase my bank to the left, into the dead engine, with the intent of intercepting him as I cut across the circle. Because of his wide radius of turn I was beginning to approach the intercept point, and was tracking him with my gun sight well out in front of the aircraft. Although probably not quite in firing range, I fired a short burst. As I'm getting in range, with my finger on the trigger button, I thought my guns were "running away", because I could hear them firing but had not yet again pressed the trigger button. Then I suddenly realized I was hearing the guns of someone behind me. I glanced over my left shoulder, and there a few ship lengths back is a ME-109 with a white spinner on the nose of his prop, just blasting away. The only thing I could do was make a harder turn to the left, into the dead engine, to prevent the pilot behind me from getting enough lead on me. To have turned to the right at that time would have been suicide. As soon as I rolled into the hard left turn, my aircraft flipped over on it's back. I'm now upside down, and looking at the little whitecaps on the water that were so close I could almost touch them. I knew that I had been fairly low over the water when the ME 109 had gone by me, but I had been concentrating so much on him I failed to realize exactly how low I was. I really didn't think I had enough airspeed, or altitude, to get my aircraft back to the upright position, but I cut the power on the right engine and managed to flip back. Now I'm really out of airspeed and altitude, and had to concentrate on setting down in the water as smoothly as possible. As I brought the nose up to stall the aircraft just as if I was landing on a runway, the left wing kept dropping, and I had to use more and more right rudder and right aileron to keep the wings level for impact. Just before

impact I had full right rudder, and full right aileron to keep the wings level. Undoubtedly this was caused by the extreme damage to the left side of my aircraft. I'm sure the aircraft was skidding to the left because when I hit the water I was thrown against the right side of the cockpit and canopy. This skid to the left probably saved my life, because just before touching down I could see tracers flashing over my right wing. The German pilot behind me wasn't correcting for my left skid, and was missing me.

This part of my experience I don't like to think about, or talk about, but here it is! I think I may have been knocked out for a short period of time because I was thrown against the right side of the airplane at impact. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had cuts on my head, abrasions, and bruises, on my right arm and shoulder. I knew my aircraft was under water, but I didn't know how far, nor which way was up. I unlocked my seat belt, and canopy, and somehow made it to the surface. I can remember thinking that it was fortunate I was a strong swimmer, and that getting to shore would be relatively easy. I was wearing a Mae West life preserver with CO-2 capsules on the left and right side, and I tried to pull the string on the CO-2 capsule on the right side of the Mae West. I still had my parachute, emergency survival kit, web belt with a canteen and .45 pistol, strapped to me. I must have been a little breathless because when I reached to activate the CO-2 capsule, and stopped treading water, my head would go under, and I had to forget activating the capsule and use both arms to keep my head up and get air. I tried to activate the capsule several times, and was rapidly running out of breath, and strength. I finally decided to get that capsule activated, no matter what. So I held my breath, found the little string and gave a yank. Nothing! The CO-2 bottle didn't activate and my life preserver didn't inflate. I never knew if the capsule was missing, or empty. By this time I was completely exhausted, and just gave up the struggle! I began going down, and I remember having a calm, peaceful, relaxed feeling. As I'm drifting downward I can see myself, with all my paraphernalia on, in the middle of a large room filled with clear water. For some reason a thought entered my mind that no one would ever know what happened to me. That thought motivated me to struggle for the surface, and somehow I made it to the surface. When I reached the surface I found that my parachute, and emergency kit were gone, and it was somewhat easier to tread water. I found the string to activate the CO-2 capsule on the left side of the Mae West, and that side inflated.

Getting rid of the parachute and emergency kit made it possible to reach the top and stay afloat long enough to inflate the life vest. For several missions prior to this one I was bothered in a fight, with my parachute right shoulder strap slipping off my shoulder. It was a real hindrance, and I always intended to have the strap tacked back, so it wouldn't slip off at a bad time. We always left our parachute in the aircraft, and I always forgot to tell my crewchief to have it repaired. I suspect that when I relaxed with my arms hanging at my side, the strap slipped off, and my arms were free when I struggled again. Fate! I was perhaps a couple of miles out from the coast, and unable to see land, so which way should I go. I remembered that just before I landed in the water, out of my peripheral vision, I caught sight of a P-38, at tree top level, going straight into the ground. I looked around for smoke from that crash, spotted it, and headed in that direction. When I reached the beach there were 3 Italian soldiers, with rifles, waiting for me. I was now a prisoner of war!