James W. Dibble

From: <RVrilakas@aol.com>
To: <jwdlmd@coastalnet.com>
Sent: Tuesday, January 07, 2003 10:41 PM
Attach: Mission #19.doc
Subject: Re: Armageddon '43

Jim, there are only a couple of items that I would suggest checking into or revising.

a. On the 2nd page (last paragraph) you say "It was at this point that the 1st Fighter Group was assigned to the 42nd Bomb Wing". To me that would mean that we were under the command of the 42nd B. W. which would not be accurate. I think you intended to say the 1st Ftr. Gp. was tasked (or directed) to escort the 42nd Bomb Wing——.
The 1st Ftr. Gp. remained assigned directly to 12th A.F. Hq. at that time.

b. In the account of Hal Rigney's experience he is quoted as having dived from *17,000* ft. to the deck trying to blow the fire out. Since the bombers were flying at 11,000 ft. it would be unlikely that any of the P-38 escort would be 5000 ft above them, at 17,000 ft. I don't have anything to confirm Hal's altitude, but you might want to check that out a little further. I think Hal's altitude was 12,000 which is about where we were when we entered the target area.

You may have had access to my account of the 30 Aug. mission in my memoirs, but in the event you haven't I'm attaching a copy for you. You are welcome to use any part of it that you think appropriate to your story.

Going in with the bombers we encountered the usual heavy flak then a pretty stiff battle with 25 or 30 fighters. The bombers completed their run and we were on the way out with minimum losses when someone called in a new batch of "bogies" (estimated 75 to 100) high. I looked up to see a whole gaggle of them drop belly tanks and dive into the middle of us. They had been loitering at altitude awaiting the most favorable time to attack which was after we had expended a good bit of our fuel and ammo. and were attempting to regroup from the first air battle that day. Following their initial dive into us a real dogfight erupted during which our flights were completely broken up and much of our squadron integrity disappeared. There were P-38's, ME109's and Machi 202's mixing it everywhere with many losses on both sides. Everywhere you looked there was an enemy fighter or P-38 in a spin or dive--smoking or on fire, some crashing into the Bay of Naples. A P-38 from the 7lst Squadron and a Mel09 collided headon exploding in a gigantic ball of smoke and fire. As one of the pilots described it years later it looked like one of those old WWI movies such as Hell's Angels or Lilac time. I saw several P-38's on fire and one (Lt. Rigney) on fire and bellying into the water off shore.

Since our fuel was getting low from the two encounters the squadron leader that day (Lt. Dibble) gave the order to work toward the Bay of Naples and reform as best we could. About the same time a P-38 from the 27th Squadron went by me toward the bay with an Mel09 closing in on his tail. I was alone and broke headon into the 109 firing a good burst at him from close range. He broke off the 27th P-38 in what appeared to be a fast, uncontrollable spinning dive. My maneuver, however had taken me directly back toward Naples and into a beehive of enemy fighters. The squadron, by then, was loosely formed up and heading out to sea.

It was obvious the 109 pilots were literally choosing lots to see which got the honor and that there was no way I could best their numbers, fuel, or altitude advantage. I took the only real choice available which was to firewall it and dive for the deck out over the Bay of Naples. Almost immediately tracers went by. They were actually converging in front of me and I looked back into a spiral painted propellor spinner not more than a hundred yards behind me. As I leveled off at what appeared to be a few inches off the water he started hitting me. It sounded like hail on a tin roof with occasional explosions as his cannon shell hit and exploded. To make a more difficult target I kicked left rudder causing his tracers to go over the end of my left wing. As he worked back and started hitting the aircraft again I would try a skid the other way. This ploy was used several times and it reduced his effectiveness, but he still got quite a few hits each time as he worked back through. I was so low on the deck that he no doubt had problems avoiding the water, plus my prop wash. At times his bullets raised plumes of water ahead of me indicating he was trying to shoot from an elevated position and was over-leading me.

It seemed certain my aircraft was either going to lose an engine or explode and I was considering how to handle that when I noticed I was rapidly overtaking another Me109 directly ahead and about a hundred feet above me. He was apparently trying to catch up with the other P-38's ahead. That meant that if I went under him there would be two of them on my tail. If I pulled up and eliminated the skid to fire at him the guy behind me would have a sitting duck to work on. I pulled up, got a good bead on the Me109 ahead and fired all four 50 calibers and the cannon. He started to smoke and went into a gentle turn to the right. Almost simultaneously there was a crash as my pursuer gave me a long burst, enveloping me again with a hail of tracers. One of his bullets creased the canopy bar beside my head, which knocked out the whole rear of the canopy. Plexiglass flew all over the cockpit--even into my mouth. I dove for the deck again and for some reason experienced no more shots from the 109 behind me. Within seconds during which I expected to catch more fire my right engine oil temperature began to rise rapidly and the pressure began dropping. I feathered the right engine and watched the left with no little anxiety, but despite apparent gaping cannon holes in both wings and numerous 30 cal. holes in the engine

nacelles and wings the left engine continued to function fine. Happily the gauges showed no rapid fuel loss and radio contact was made with the squadron.

Lt. Dibble brought what was left of the squadron around in a 360 degree turn allowing me to catch up. Three of the 94th pilots, Lts. Dibble, Pettus and Anderson stayed with me while the rest of the squadron proceeded back to home base in Africa. We headed for Sicily, the nearest friendly landfall and after what seemed an endless time arrived over northern Sicily and proceeded to the nearest airfield.

The airfield was under construction, but there was enough P.S.P. (pierced steel planking) installed to land on so I set up an approach. Just as the end of the runway was reached an Italian truck being used for construction drove directly across in front of me. I managed to add enough power to get over him but decided against a go around, not knowing what the condition of the hydraulic system was and whether or not the gear could be raised. (the landing gear had to be raised to effect a successful pull-up and go around on single engine.) The landing went o.k. with sufficient speed left to taxi over to some tents being used by the Army Combat Engineers. Upon shutting down the good engine it caught fire but was quickly extinguished by an awaiting fireman.

The plane looked like a sieve. I estimated there were 60 to 80, 30 cal holes plus 4 or 5 exploded cannon round hits that in each case flared a large piece of the wing skin up. Even the props had bullet holes through them. Lts. Dibble, Pettus, and Anderson, after seeing me down safely, buzzed the field and continued on to home base in Africa. I stayed at the field that night then made my way back to the base at Mature the next day on a C-47 transport. I've always regretted not getting some pictures of the P-38, but doubt if a camera was available.

I was credited with one victory that day and one damaged. The Me109 firing at me either ran out of ammunition and/or broke off to go to the aid of his comrade. The credited kill and damaged was inadvertently listed as Machi 202's but it didn't make that much difference to me at the time.

We lost Lt. Parlett, Lt. Peck, Lt. Cram, Lt. Woodward and Lt. Rigney that day from the 94th Squadron. The other squadrons had similar losses. Lts. Parlett and Rigney survived being shot down and were taken prisoner by the Germans. Both of them along with Lt. Catledge from the 7lst squadron escaped and after months of working their way down through Italy, finally reached friendly forces in Southern Italy and safety. The group was again awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

Upon my arrival back at the base I was greeted like a long lost relative, debriefed by intelligence, and then went to my tent for a much needed rest. My air mattress for my army cot was missing. The squadron didn't have enough air mattresses to go around so they were inherited from pilots rotating home or "requisitioned" directly by one of the newer pilots when someone failed to return from a mission. I was building up a head of steam when one of the more recently assigned pilots came in looking very embarrassed and dragging my air mattress. He sheepishly apologized and it was good for a tension relieving laugh.