

Memoirs of a WWII Fighter Pilot, Part I



By Lt. Col. Charles L. Hoffman, Jr., USAF (Ret.)

Lockheed P-38H-5-LO Lightning, 42-67079, similar to those flown by the author. (Lockheed photo from the Ray Brashear collection)

I'm a lucky guy. I flew 50 combat missions in "The Big One" and lived to tell about it. Many of my buddies weren't so lucky. I was also fortunate to fly one of the sweetest fighters ever built - the Lockheed P-38 *Lightning*.

My story, unlike many sagas that have come out of World War II, doesn't take place in "jolly olde" England. Rather, the scenes of my experiences are the deserts of Tunisia and Libya, the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, the craggy spine of Italy, the Alps of Italy and Austria, the south of France, the jumble of the

Balkans, and the omnipresent Mediterranean Sea. Few movies were made about the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO) and even fewer movie stars served in this area.

Transitioning to Fighters

My combat career started while I was still an aviation cadet at Craig Army Air Field (AAF), Selma, Alabama, in May 1943. The Army Air Force was testing a program to see how well aviation cadets with about 35 hours in the North American AT-6 *Texan* could do in a fighter plane. Consequently, when I showed up on the Craig Field flight line one morning for a normal training mission, I found that ten of us were to report for Curtiss P-40 *Warhawk* transition training. We had seen the well-used *Warhawks* on our flight line, but hadn't imagined we would be using them.

When we reported to the instructor, he started talking to us as though we were familiar with P-40 specifications. It eventually dawned on him that we had not attended ground school and knew absolutely nothing about the aircraft. He promptly produced a test with questions about P-40 oil temperatures, coolant temperatures, speed limits, the hydraulic system, and the operation of the coolant control door. We didn't know the answers so he read the questions and gave us the answers. When he didn't know the answers himself, he "winged"



Like most WWII pilots, Lt. Hoffman transitioned from the North American AT-6 Texan, (similar to this AT-6D-NT, 44-81363) to fighters, only in his case under a very abbreviated program. (USAAF Training Command photo from the Al Hansen collection)



A P-40 cockpit similar to the one Cadet Hoffman had about an hour to get oriented to before putting these lessons into practice. (Photo from C.H. Hamilton collection)

acceptable answers. After he finished the test, he gave each of us a grade of 100 and assigned us a plane.

We gathered our flying gear and went to the planes to get some "cockpit time" (just sitting in the cockpit and getting familiar with the controls, instruments, and switches). There were different models of the *Warhawk*, ranging from original P-40s to F-models, including some that had seen their better days in the African desert. After about an hour, the instructor poked his head in and asked how things were going. Being a good cadet, I answered, "Great, sir." He asked me to cover my eyes with one hand and identify certain items in the cockpit. When my hand wavered uncertainly, he firmly guided it to the correct location. This continued until we had covered every salient feature in the cockpit. Then he asked if I'd like to fire up the engine. Upon my affirmative response, he called over the fireguard and we proceeded to start the engine.

The noise from the Allison engine was deafening (probably contributing greatly to my current hearing difficulties). The instructor then yelled that the training outline called for the student on his first flight to practice some shallow and medium turns and return to base to shoot several landings. He thought I would be better off to do a few turns and then some acrobatics. Maybe I should try some rolls first. I WAS DUMB-FOUNDED! This guy wanted me to fly the plane now!

However, he was a combat veteran and no student questioned the words of such an august person.

I shakily got my taxi instructions from the tower and proceeded to the runway. A million questions were going through my head, but I didn't dare go back and tell the instructor I wasn't ready. To do so would be the same as resigning from the program and I wanted to be a pilot.

I started my take-off roll and I couldn't believe the amount of torque the P-40 developed. Thank goodness Craig Field had a wide runway, because I used all of it. I took off to the east and am proud to say that I kept that P-40 under total control.

I did have a little trouble with the landing gear. Initially, when I raised the gear handle nothing happened. After the second try, I remembered there was a lever on the stick that you had to operate with your little finger to get the gear up. The lever opened the hydraulic valve to the gear and flap systems. It was a bit of a "safety valve" that had been added to the system to make the pilot do two things to get the gear up or down.

I had only a few other problems in my short flight. Montgomery, Alabama (50 miles east of Selma), was in sight before I managed to close the coolant doors. A Johnson bar-type lever controlled the doors, and when I unlocked it, I was almost shoved through the canopy. The plane flew like a dream, but in order to fly it you had to trim, trim, and trim again. A five-mph change in airspeed required a change in the rudder and elevator trim. I had no other problems in this or any of my subsequent P-40 flights in the test program.

The same can't be said, however, for one of my compatriots. At the end of his first P-40 flight he made a good approach



2nd Lt. Charles L. Hoffman, Jr. in June 1943. (From author's personal collection)

and attempted a three-point landing. He touched down, however, on the main gear first, causing the plane to bounce in the air. He tried to add a little power to fly it back on the ground, but again he bounced. Realizing he could not salvage this landing, he quickly applied go-around power. Since he had trimmed the plane for a glide (full left rudder and up elevator), the application of a high power setting caused the P-40 to pitch up at a steep angle and start rolling to the left. (Unless one anticipated a sudden power change and re-trimmed accordingly, there was no way a normal human being could keep a P-40 under control.)

My fellow cadet did a wingover to the left, still continuing in the original direction of the landing, but now vertical. He struck the ground nose first, tearing off the prop as the P-40 dropped on its belly and skidded backwards. When the dust cleared, I could see the pilot, with his chute slung over his shoulder, walking towards Base Operations. After going a couple hundred yards, he suddenly stopped, turned, and stared at the broken P-40. He then dropped his chute and changed his direction for the barracks. His next stop was Cadet Headquarters where he resigned from the program.

On May 28, 1943, I was commissioned a second lieutenant and designated a pilot in the Army Air Force. After 10 days' leave, during which I went home to Memphis, Tennessee, I reported to Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Florida, in early June 1943 for processing and subsequent assignment to Sarasota AAF, Florida, for my formal combat crew training in the P-40.

The main gate at Dale Mabry was on the runway side of the base, so the road to the administration buildings and the quarters passed around the end of the main runway. When the planes were on a landing approach, the tower would activate a signal to stop vehicles on the main road. As my taxi approached the end of the runway, the signal light turned red and we waited for a Republic P-47 *Thunderbolt*, which I later learned was being flown by a Chinese student pilot. We anxiously watched him get lower and lower on his approach. The runway was about 50 feet above the surface of our road and it looked as though he was going to land on our road! At the last moment he applied full power, but it was too late. He struck the ground about 10 or 15 feet below the level of the runway, scattering pieces of the P-47 up the hill, over the top, and all over the end of the runway. The pilot, of course, was killed. This was my introduction to combat crew training.

337th Fighter Group Assignment

I was soon assigned to the 337th Fighter Group, 303rd Fighter Squadron at Sarasota AAF for my P-40 training. Training at Sarasota was very intensive, but since I already had 10 hours in the P-40 while stationed at Craig, my transition was easy. Because of this, I was not required to attend ground school. This made it possible for me to fly mornings and after-



After only 35 hours in AT-6s, Cadet Hoffman was "checked out" in the P-40 Warhawk under a testing program to see how well these novices could handle the "big iron." (USAAF photo of a P-40E (no serials) from Pete Bower's collection)

noons and finish the program in four, rather than eight weeks.

Escape and evasion training was conducted at Lido Beach two or three afternoons each week. One might think participation would be grudging, but not so! There were lots of girls at Lido Beach.

We almost lost a couple of guys during the training that prepared you for parachuting into the water. We were required to jump from a 10-meter platform into the deep end of a swimming pool. This didn't seem to be so bad until we found this must be done while wearing a Mae West, flight suit, boots, and a fully deployed parachute. There was a lot of thrashing around trying to unbuckle the parachute harness, inflating the Mae West, and swimming out from under the parachute. Some of the guys needed lifeguard help when the exercise got the best of them.

I flew several models of the P-40, but mostly the "N" because it was only 500 pounds heavier than the British *Spitfire*. Rumors abounded that we were flying the "N" because we were scheduled to fly the *Spitfire* in North Africa. The "N" was much lighter than other models of the P-40.

I have already mentioned that the P-40 was a torque machine. One of our pilots was preparing to takeoff when he moved the throttle too quickly to takeoff power. The result was such a violent ground loop to the left that he damaged the right wingtip. He quickly closed the throttle, applied right brake, and managed to damage the left wingtip.

The P-40's torque taught me a lesson about taking care of my equipment. During ground operation one could turn most airplanes right or left by using the rudder. Not so with the P-40! Because of the torque, the only way to turn to the right was with full right rudder and braking; therefore, the right brake would wear out much faster than the left. One day I came rolling up to the parking space like I was the hottest pilot on the base. When I got out of the cockpit, the crew chief pointed to the right brake. It was so hot that smoke was curling up as though it would soon burst into flames at any second. My lesson for the day - intermittent braking prevents overheating. My penitence - help the crew chief change the brakes.

The instructions we received during transition training were sometimes of dubious quality. Our flight leader was a big, strong fellow. He told us that when dive-bombing, we were to fly over the target, split S, pull the gun sight onto the target, hold the sight on the target while doing a half roll, drop the bomb, and then chandelle to the left. At 400 mph, no normal human can turn the P-40 to the left. The engineers designed drag in the right wing and offset the vertical stabilizer, both causing the plane to turn to the right. At high speeds, with the engine power reduced, this offset design was more than a person with average strength could handle.

Sometimes our maintenance wasn't too hot either. On air-to-ground strafing training missions we only used the outboard gun on each wing. The idea being that, if we could hit the target with the outboard guns, the other two guns on each wing would be on target also. One day I did the preflight on my P-40 and found it was not airworthy, so Maintenance assigned me one that was "ready for air-to-ground." This, of course, meant to me that only the outboard gun on each wing was armed and there was a practice bomb on the fuselage rack. When I made my run, all six guns fired and I totally destroyed the ground target. The range officer accused me of skipping my bomb into it. The frame holding the target was made of 4x4 timbers and those six guns made splinters of it. This impressed me as to the power of six 50-caliber machine guns.

Accidents had been a way of life in the flight school and they continued in transition training. A friend demolished a P-40 one day during takeoff. Just after he became airborne, the electric prop control malfunctioned and drove the blades to a full-bite position, causing the engine manifold pressure to exceed the maximum level. He could do nothing but throttle back and crash land straight ahead. Across the road from the airport was an orange grove. Fortunately, the trees were planted so that he could line up with a space between the rows and he descended in a nice glide. His wings began to clip the tops of the trees, and gradually worked their way down to the trunks. There, the hammering became too great and both wings sheared off the fuselage. The cockpit, led by the engine, continued nicely between the trees until it slid to rest.

His problems weren't over yet. The correct procedure for take-off in the P-40 was to lock the canopy in the open position. The canopy lock wasn't easy to operate, so we usually didn't bother with it. After all, we closed the canopy as soon as possible after takeoff because of the exhaust noise. This was one time that he should have locked the canopy. To brace himself for the impact, he had placed his left hand on the windshield frame. During the crash landing the canopy slammed shut on his hand, breaking all four fingers, and trapping him in the cockpit. He had to sit and wait until the crash crew could



Lt. Hoffman flew a variety of P-40 models. Most frequently was the P-40N such as this one seen in AVG "Flying Tiger" colors at a CAF air show in Harlingen, Tex., in 1977. (Photo from the C.H. Hamilton collection)

extricate him. In a somewhat painful and expensive way he had proved to the rest of us that the P-40 was a solid plane. My friend went on to become a P-40 "ace." He totaled five P-40s in his career.

Because the space between the two main wheels was narrow, the P-40 wasn't an easy plane to land - one could easily lose directional control. This was especially true when there was a crosswind. One of my fellow pilots lost control upon landing and applied full power in an attempt to save the landing. Torque and improper trim (those old bugaboos) caused him to lose control of the plane and strike the ground in an extreme yaw. The gear collapsed and the plane slid across the ramp into the side of a hangar. The hangar was made of bricks for the first eight or so feet and then metal. The engine punched a hole through the bricks, but the wings tore off the plane. The engine, cockpit, and tail section ended up on the hangar floor. The pilot climbed out unhurt.

I remember only one fatal accident while in P-40 training. We entered traffic for landing by approaching the runway at cruise speed and at about 700 feet above the ground. When we were over the desired touchdown point on the runway, we would make a tight turn to our downwind leg for landing. The landing control officer judged the turn to be "proper" if there were condensation streamers coming from the wingtips. If you didn't pull a streamer, he would advise, "Loose pitch - take it around." On this day there was very little moisture in the air and it was almost impossible to pull streamers. One of the pilots had been sent around several times because of a "loose pitch." On his fatal approach he attempted to satisfy the landing control officer by entering such a tight turn that the plane stalled, snapped into a spin, and crashed. Unfortunately, this was a case of our ignorance of aerodynamics and atmospheric. We didn't realize that it was easy to cause streamers on a humid day and very difficult on a dry day.

Initial Overseas Assignment - Africa

Finally, on July 30, 1943, I was directed to return to Dale Mabry Field and draw my equipment for overseas assignment. This included a parachute, winter and summer flying suits, jackets, boots, winter and summer uniforms, gas-resisting overalls, gas masks/canisters, bedroll, half of a two-man tent, steel helmet, and personal items - a total of 175 pounds allowed. Needless to say, I conveniently "misplaced" a lot of this stuff before reaching my final destination - North Africa.

Forty-two newly trained P-40 pilots were sent to the 36th Street Airport (now a part of Miami International Airport) in Miami, Florida, for transportation overseas. We were to be flown by a Pan American DC-4 to Natal, Brazil, via Guantanamo, Cuba, and Georgetown, British Guiana.

It was quite an experience for a bunch of single-engine pilots to be getting on a big, four-engine bird. We couldn't believe the size of the thing! Eager to see as much of the plane as possible, some of us boarded early and started investigating the interior - some in the cockpit and others back in the cabin. Suddenly, one of the guys in the rear of the plane yelled, "This thing has a kitchen on it!" Like a bunch of rubes, we all rushed to the back of the cabin. This caused the center of gravity to shift rapidly aft and the tail of the plane sank to the ramp. Our flight was delayed several hours while the tailskid was repaired.

Since this was a commercial flight, there were some civilians on board. Al Jolson and his accompanist were en route to Africa to entertain the troops. He regaled us on the plane with songs and stories and we got to see his show in Cuba and Brazil.

Our flight from British Guiana to Natal took us across the Equator. When crossing the Equator, the custom was to start a "short snorter." Everyone took out a fresh one-dollar bill and started collecting signatures. One of my great disappointments of the war was when my wallet was stolen in Casablanca and I lost my "short snorter" with Al Jolson's autograph.

In Natal it was late winter and the weather was just great. Lots of fresh fruit and vegetables made the meals a joy to attend. Of course, things like this came to a quick end, as I was to learn many times over in the next year. We were soon loaded into the bomb bay of a converted Consolidated B-24 that the Army had designated a C-87 "Liberator Express." Although classified as a cargo plane, it was far from being an acceptable mode of air transportation. The plane reeked of gasoline fumes and we complained to the crew about it. They shrugged it off as an everyday occurrence for the C-87. Understandably, we were unable to smoke for the entire flight.

After one of the longest, most miserable flights of my life, we arrived in Dakar, Senegal, on the West African coast. Compared to the luxuries of Natal, Dakar was "the pits" and a fitting introduction to the comforts of the MTO. Our "accommodations" were tents with dirt floors and wooden rack beds with rope "slats" woven to support our blankets, which served as mattresses and sheets. About this time I was wishing for the bedroll that got "misplaced" in transit. The meals were poorly prepared "C" rations eaten from mess kits. We had to eat quickly before the flies got the best parts.

Thank goodness the stay in Dakar was short; however, our next destination wasn't much better. Marrakech, Morocco, was a desert area also, but the city did have some nice hotels, and if one looked hard enough, one could find a decent restaurant.

It was in Marrakech that I first saw the black troops of the French Army. These men were all over six feet tall (I was five-four) and so black that they looked dusty. No troops were better disciplined than these men were. A soldier's uniform consisted of a fez, a pair of short pants, an overcoat with red lining, and a military rifle of considerable vintage. The soldier would button the top of his overcoat at his neck and button the bottom flaps behind his legs, thus exposing the red lining.

Their camp was on the road between the airport, where we were quartered, and the city. It consisted of a white gravel road with tents equally spaced on each side, a flagpole, and the commander's tent at the end of the road. The camp entrance, guarded by two sentries, was a pile of rocks on each side of the road. There was no fence or marked boundary around the camp; however, discipline dictated that the soldiers could enter and leave only by the main entrance. No troops ever gave a thought to leaving camp by way of the open area around the tents.

The antique rifles were precious to these French troops. The worst punishment that could be administered to these soldiers was to take their rifles away. It was a disgrace to be seen without a rifle. When the men went to the city on pass, they took their rifles with them (sans the bolts). They would form up and the senior man would march them to town. They went everywhere as a group - bars, shows, restaurants, etc. Since they could not take the rifles inside these places, they stacked them outside and one soldier remained to guard the treasured possessions.

After a few days we journeyed on to Casablanca. Now we had really moved uptown - a beautiful city with nice hotels, restaurants, bars, stage shows, museums, unusual buildings, and unusual people - but no Humphrey Bogart or Ingrid Bergman.

It was in Casablanca that the military system of censoring mail briefly broke down for me. We were directed not to tell the folks back home where we were because it might help the enemy. (Personally, I think we gave the enemy too much credit.) Anyway, I saw some postcards that had pictures of Casablanca and, in English, gave explanations of the subjects and where the pictures were taken. In my message to the folks I wrote that I couldn't tell them where I was, but they somehow figured it out.

The replacement depot in Casablanca directed that 25 P-40 pilots be assigned to the Ninth Fighter Command. At that time the Ninth was somewhere east in the Libyan Desert and we understood some of its groups were flying *Spitfires*. The rumor we heard at Sarasota about flying *Spitfires* must have been true! Needless to say, we were a happy bunch of fledgling fighter pilots.

We boarded two Douglas C-47s for our flight east. We stopped in Oran, Algeria, for fuel and then pressed on for Algiers. We had to spend a little time in Algiers because of

engine trouble on one of the C-47s. Apparently, the trouble wasn't adequately fixed because, upon landing in Tunis, Tunisia, we were grounded for several days for an engine change. Some of the pilots went on to the Ninth Air Force, but 19 of us waited for our plane to be fixed.

Joining the 94th Fighter Squadron

On August 23, 1943, a pivotal day in my life, a captain (a high-ranking officer for a bunch of first and second lieutenants) instructed us to gather our gear and get aboard the 6x6 trucks that had rolled up in front of Base Ops. Without question, 18 of us (one guy was in town) climbed aboard and began the dusty ride to a place called Mateur (about halfway between Tunis and Bizerte, a major port in North Africa). After passing through the town of Mateur (a dirty, wide place in the road), we started to see fighter planes flying in what appeared to be a traffic pattern. Some were P-40s and some were P-38s. The P-40s (these were from the 325th Fighter Group) were flying over the left side of the road, so when our truck started slowing down to turn off the main road, we all leaned in anticipation of a left turn - after all we were P-40 pilots. We almost fell out of the truck when it turned right! We yelled, "Hey, you turned the wrong way!" But the captain assured us that we were on the correct road. It seemed that replacement pilots for the P-38s had been slow in coming and we were about to make a quick transition from a lightweight, single-engine plane to a heavy, twin-engine job. At the time I didn't know it, but I was about to start flying the best and most desirable fighter in the Army Air Force.

The trucks stopped in front of the group commander's tent where we unloaded and stood in a line of sorts. Lt. Col. Ralph S. Garman, Commanding Officer of the 1st Fighter Group, and the three squadron commanders welcomed us. They split us into three groups; the first six in the line went to the 27th Fighter Squadron (FS); the next six to the 71st FS; and the last six (which included me) to the 94th FS. By chance I had just become a member of the World War II version of the famous "Hat-in-the-Ring" squadron of World War I fame - Eddie Rickenbacker, Raoul Lufbery, et al.

The 94th FS had lost the use of its "Hat-in-the-Ring" emblem shortly after World War I. Captain Eddie used the "Hat-in-the-Ring" to advertise some of his post-war business ventures (such as the Rickenbacker automobile - a casualty of the Depression) and the War Department directed the 94th FS to find another emblem; so, it adopted an Indian chief in profile - hence the name of the squadron's athletic teams, the Indians.

When World War II cranked up, Rickenbacker convinced the authorities to re-adopt the "Hat-in-the-Ring;" to which they acceded. Later, he distributed miniature "Hat-in-the-Ring" pins to 94th FS pilots when he visited the unit in May 1943. I received my pin sometime after I joined the squadron and still have that pin today. When Captain Eddie handed out the pins, General Carl Spaatz was with him and told everyone that they were authorized to wear the pin above their wings. We got away wearing the pins overseas, but back in the States we got

so much guff from "by-the-book" types, that we stopped wearing them.

Bigwigs were always passing through. Sometime later, I received a bottle of whiskey from General Jimmy Doolittle. The folks back in Memphis, Tennessee, would never have believed that little Charlie Hoffman would have, in the space of a month, rubbed elbows with Al Jolson and Jimmy Doolittle! War was a great equalizer.

Transitioning to P-38s

We quickly began our transition to the P-38 - after all, there was a war going on. The invasion of Italy was imminent and the 1st Fighter Group, with its long-range P-38s, was to play a vital role.

Transition training was simple. I read the operating manual, talked with the crew chief, and spent a lot of cockpit orientation time. When I was ready to fly one of the P-38s, I grabbed my parachute, headset, and throat mike, and headed for a plane that the status board showed to be in commission. The crew chief, like most of the pilots, didn't want to have anything to do with a single-engine throttle jockey, so as I approached the plane he quickly changed its status to "Red X," which placed it out of commission. This happened several times over the next few days. My debut as a P-38 pilot seemed to be on hold.

On August 27, I ran into a tech sergeant that I had known in my enlisted days at Maxwell Field in the communications section. After bringing each other up to date on our careers, I told him about my "Red X" problem. He introduced me to a crew chief friend and, all of a sudden, there was a plane in flying commission!

I was ready for my first P-38 flight. The chief helped me get strapped in and talked me through the engine starts. The field at Mateur was a dry lake, so the taxi strips and the runway were outlined with used oil, empty cans filled with sand, and oil drums painted yellow. The plane was pointed toward the taxi strip, so all I had to do was release the parking brakes and start rolling.

No one had told me, nor had I picked it up while reading the ops manual, that the hydraulic pressure for the brakes had to be pumped up by pressing rapidly on the brake pedals. By the time I realized how to get the brakes to work, I had crossed my taxi strip, passed dangerously close to some foxholes, and was rapidly arriving at the next taxi strip. I turned down that strip and proceeded to the runway as if nothing had happened.

After checking the magnetos and controls I was ready to go. The standard procedure for taking-off in the P-40 was to release the brakes and slowly advance the power to the proper manifold pressure (about 54 inches). The P-38 manual called for about 45 inches, depending on the aircraft weight. Again, I had not been informed that the proper way was to hold the brakes, advance the power to 30-35 inches, release the brakes, and then move the power to the desired pressure. When I talked to the chief, he said most of the pilots used full power for takeoff. Believing the chief, I moved into takeoff position and started advancing the throttles to the full-power position.

It was a good thing I was on a dry lakebed because, due to asymmetrical power, I swerved from one side of the runway to the other until I realized I had enough airspeed for take-off. I figured it was much better to be in the air fighting this monster than on the ground. It was then I saw the manifold pressure on the left engine was over 60 inches. I had moved the left throttle so far forward that the turbo-supercharger had kicked in.

In a short time I had the thing under control and found it flew like a dream. There was no torque, it was easy to keep trimmed, and was also much quieter than the P-40. I didn't know what to do with my left hand; in the P-40 you had to change the rudder trim when the airspeed changed as little as 5 mph. Of course, now there were two of everything - engine instruments, throttles, mixture controls, prop controls, coolant doors, and oil cooler doors. Another small difference was the flap control being on the right side of the cockpit.

As I've related earlier, my P-40 instructor at Craig Field told me the best way to get the feel of an airplane was to do aerobatics. He may have been right, but one had better know the best entry speeds and power settings for the various maneuvers. Due to lack of speed, I stalled out of the first two or three loops and Immelmans I tried. Fortunately for me, the P-38 was a most forgiving airplane in a stall. It just slowly dropped its nose below the horizon and the airspeed started to increase. Unlike the P-40, it didn't snap into some unusual attitude. After two hours, I returned to the base, where I learned the P-38 was quite easy to land. I finished August 1943 with three hours of flying time.

While I was learning to fly the P-38, the 1st Fighter Group was doing some heavy fighting. On August 25 it attacked enemy fighter bases in the Foggia, Italy, area and destroyed 88 planes. For this action, the group was awarded its first Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC).

Five days later on August 30, the 1st FG earned another DUC while escorting B-26s of the 319th and 320th Bombardment Groups (BG) to the Aversa, Italy, marshalling yards. Seventy-five enemy fighters intercepted the formation and a wild melee broke out. The fighters were beaten off with 13 P-38s lost, but the bombers got through unscathed and made a successful bomb run.

During September 1-5, I flew a little over 9 hours in the P-38. Most of this was getting the feel of the plane and flying formation with some of the combat-experienced pilots. One of



Lt. James P. Dibble, Red Flight Leader. Lt. Hoffman flew his first combat mission as Dibble's wingman. (From the author's personal collection)

the pilots, Lt. Ralph A. Thiessen, was very helpful. He told us how to handle a twin-engine plane when one engine was out. Knowing that the most critical time to lose an engine was just after takeoff, Thiessen suggested practicing engine-loss procedures. I climbed to about 8,000 feet, put the gear down, set the flaps to takeoff position, slowed the plane to just above a stall, applied take-off power, pulled one throttle to idle, and held the nose straight ahead with the rudder. If a wing started to drop, I used the rudder, not aileron, to level the wings. I thanked him a number of times for that sound advice. Unfortunately, Ralph (affectionately known as "Mother Thiessen," because he was so fastidious) was later killed in a Stateside training accident.

Meanwhile, the British Eighth Army had invaded Italy via the "toe" of the Italian "boot" on September 3. "Il Duce," Benito Mussolini, had been deposed and placed under "protective custody" on July 25, and Marshal Badoglio assumed leadership of the Italian government. The same day that the Brits invaded Italy, Badoglio's government secretly agreed to an armistice that would be effective on September 8. It was hoped that the Allies would land and quickly secure key points in Italy before the Germans could react. Alas, it was not to be so.

First Combat Mission

My first combat mission was on September 6, 1943. I told Lt. James P. Dibble, Red Flight Leader (I was assigned to fly his wing), that I hadn't yet fired the guns on the P-38. He replied, "Don't worry. When you see me shoot, you shoot. Your main job is to stay on my wing and not disrupt the formation." If you think the Thunderbirds fly close formation, you should have seen me when we arrived over Italy that day.

About two weeks earlier on August 24 the 1st Fighter Group had been made a part of the 42nd Bombardment Wing of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force. The Wing also included the Martin B-26 *Marauders* of the 17th, 319th, and 320th Bomb Groups and the P-40s of the 325th Fighter Group.

On September 6 we departed Mateur to escort our B-26s to bomb the enemy airfield and satellites at Grazzanise, Italy, north of Naples. Shortly after the bomb run, about 20 Me 109s, Macchi 200s, and Macchi 205s attacked the formation. The Group bagged three of the enemy and lost none. Lt. Richard J. "Dick" Lee of the 94th Squadron got one of the victories. Rather than returning to Mateur, we landed at an airfield named Dittaino in Sicily, which would be our temporary base for a while.

Dittaino (named after the nearby Dittaino River) was not far from the city of Catania, that is located on the eastern coast

of Sicily, with smoky Mount Etna just north of the base. We were supported by the British, which meant that we existed on their "C" rations. This meant oxtail soup, hardtack, and tea for breakfast; hardtack and tea about 10 a.m.; oxtail soup, hardtack and tea for lunch; hardtack and tea about 3 p.m.; and oxtail soup, hardtack, and tea for dinner. We were happy to trade the hard candy from our "D" rations for oranges, eggs, and what passed for coffee.

From Dittaino we supported the invasion of Italy at Salerno. We were temporarily assigned to the 12th Fighter Wing (Provisional) for the invasion because the XII Air Support Command did not have enough fighters to provide ground support for the invasion troops and top cover for the troop and supply ships off the coast of Italy. A typical mission was to provide cover over the invasion fleet and attack targets as assigned by ground control.

On September 8 I flew one of those typical missions. We flew top cover for the invasion convoys as they approached the Gulf of Salerno. I saw no enemy aircraft that day. On that same day the Italian government announced they had surrendered to the Allies, but since the Germans were still in charge, we didn't expect it would be any easier.

"D Day" for Salerno was September 9, 1943, and my mission on that day gave me a taste of what this war was all about. The controller ordered our flight to attack a convoy of about 400 vehicles of all types on the road between Pola and Lagonegro, south of Salerno. We strafed a convoy at Sala Casalina and three trucks were left burning. Flying at no more than 50 feet above the ground, we approached the top of a hill. It was here that we came under heavy ground fire. Lt. Dibble and Lt. Stanley W. Wojcik (on his first mission) were hit. Both aircraft went out of control and struck the ground. I was flying the number 4 position (Tail-end Charlie, literally) and I did not see anyone escape. Some pilots thought they saw Dibble pull up to about 3,000 feet and bail out. Later we learned that Dibble was killed and Wojcik had been captured. Wojcik and I had graduated in Class 43-E, attended the P-40 training at Sarasota, and had been assigned to the 94th FS at the same time. I shall never forget how important Lt. Dibble was to me. He took good care of me on my first combat mission.

As I mentioned earlier, Dittaino was near Mount Etna. Our missions started very early in the morning, so we were taking off while it was still dark. In a combat area there were no runway lights on the field and we were not permitted to use our landing lights. We used a flashing beacon at the end of the runway to help us maintain directional control. Since we could not use our navigation lights, the only way we could locate and join our flight leader was for him to flash his identification light located on the underside of the plane. Red Flight Leader used his red light, White Flight Leader used his white light, and Blue Flight Leader used his green light. When there were 12 airplanes taking off at very close intervals and trying to locate their leaders in the dark, it got very exciting. On a September 9 mission later that day, one of my good friends, Lt. Frederick B. Messmore of the 71st Squadron, flew into the side of Mt. Etna during the early morning take-off and form-up. There was a red beacon on top of Mt. Etna and I believe my friend

mistook the beacon for his flight leader. There was no official explanation for his accident.

I flew my fourth combat mission on September 10. It was another patrol covering the invasion troops. Ground control assigned us no targets and we saw no enemy aircraft. One P-38 from another squadron was lost due to enemy ground fire.

The next day we were tapped again to patrol over the invasion beachhead. We were dispatched to strafe an enemy column and four trucks were destroyed. Most of the mission was to fly top cover for the ships off the coast of Italy. Although I flew two times that day, "they" gave me credit for only one combat mission. Such were the ways of the operations folks.

The following day we were sent to patrol the coast from Salerno to the Isle of Capri. Several enemy planes were seen, but they took evasive action and we made no contact with them. On the beachhead the Allies were desperately battling a German counterattack that threatened to push them back into the sea.

It was becoming very difficult to keep the aircraft in commission. Dittaino was an advanced echelon base, thus we had limited facilities (not that Mateur was that much better). Pilots and ground crews were kept very busy throughout these operations. The pilots were, in many cases, flying two missions a day. The mechanics were hampered by a lack of equipment and having to fill the planes from five-gallon gas cans - a very laborious process.

Like the others, I pitched in to help. After completing my mission, I told my crew chief that I would come back to help him with some of the maintenance and the refueling. It was about a mile from the tent area to the flight line, so I planned to hitch a ride. Just as I reached the road, a jeep with a captain at the wheel approached. I stuck out my thumb and yelled, "Hey captain, how about a ride?" He stopped and I jumped in the back seat. It was then I noticed the person in the front passenger seat was a two-star general! I apologized for not recognizing him as a general officer, but he assured me that it was no problem. He asked where I was headed and I explained I was going to my plane to give the chief a little assistance and refueling and maintenance. The general had his driver take me

MOVING?

IF YOUR ARE PLANNING TO MOVE PLEASE SEND US YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. We cannot get your Journal or Newsletter to you if we don't know where you live. To ensure uninterrupted service please let us know at least six weeks in advance. And to be sure it is your address we change, please include your current mailing label!!!!!!



Group photo of the 94th Fighter Squadron in Mateur, Tunisia, in September 1943. Front Row, seated (L-R): Robert H. Anderson, Ralph L. Kipper. Second Row, squatting (L-R): John D. Pace, Marion L. Phillips (POW), Harold P. Niles, Edward G. Brophy, William L. Jacobsen, Ralph A. Thiessen, Richard J. Lee, Raymond L. Schulze, James E. Bower, Stanton N. Opdahl, John T. Hanton. Third Row, leaning (L-R): Jerome G. Sweickert, Nicholas Sokol, Jack D. Pettus, Robert A. Vrilakas, Walter D. Pittman, unidentified pilot. Fourth Row, standing (L-R): Charles L. Hoffman, Jr., Stanley Wojcik (head only) (POW), Donald D. Keinholz (sunglasses & cap), Warren J. Schaper, Emory L. Cogswell (hat), John H. McEachern, Louie Mimms (head only), Charles W. Howard (hat), Robert B. Van Sice, Willard R. Duff (KIA), Fred M. Devenny, Jr. (head only) (KIA), Daniel Darnell, Jr., Robert D. Harris (head only), Harley T. Barlow, unidentified pilot, James J. Hagenback.. Note: The author apologizes for mis-identifying any individuals - the mind grows bleary with age. Corrections are welcome. (From the author's collection)

right to the plane. I executed my best salute and climbed aboard the plane. As I began to work, I noticed my crew chief kept looking past me and when I turned I realized the general and his driver were still there. I returned to the jeep to explain to them that I would be there for some time and it wouldn't be necessary for them to wait for me to finish. With that information, the general and his driver sped off to wherever they were originally bound.

We continued to fly missions in support of the Salerno. Mission number seven on September 13 was a "milk run." We patrolled the coast between Agropoli and Capri. It was a short mission with no flak and no fighters. The next day we dive-bombed, destroying nine trucks and several boxcars in an area south-southeast of Salerno. It too, was a short-duration mission and we encountered neither flak nor fighters.

Dive-bombing in a P-38 was quite different from the P-40. The angle wasn't nearly as steep and things didn't happen so fast. We came in on about a 50-degree slope, pulled the gun sight through the target to the 100-mil ring, and then released the bomb. It was almost like lob bombing.

On the September 10 mission, Flight Officer Joseph B. Boyd, a member of the 71st Squadron (and one of the 18 of us "shanghaied" into the 1st Fighter Group on August 23), had been hit by flak and was last observed descending on a head-

ing toward Sicily. He didn't make it back that day and there was no sign of him in the water. Every day we were reminded to search for him while en route to and from the Salerno area. On September 14 F/O Boyd returned, somewhat the worse for wear. A British launch found him floating in the water off the coast of Sicily.

He shared with us some very useful information about ditching the P-38. He advised us to be completely ready before hitting the water because the aircraft sank rapidly. We should get the canopy off, the windows down, the cockpit cleaned up, the oxygen hose disconnected, and the dinghy attached to the parachute harness - then get out fast!

He damaged his dinghy and his Mae West had a slow leak. Eighteen hours in the water with nothing but a leaky Mae West for flotation and a small canteen of water made for a miserable time. He went down late in the afternoon and he could see the Sicilian coastline and Mt. Etna. That night the current carried him north and the next morning he could just see the top of Mt. Etna. It was most discouraging. However, the will to live was strong and Boyd continued to paddle until the Brits found him.

I flew two missions on September 15. The first one was dive-bombing truck convoys and supply points around the invasion beachhead. The bombing was successful, but not spectacular. On the second mission we bombed railway yards,

troop concentrations, bridges, and other targets of opportunity, inflicting severe damage. Enemy flak in the Eboli and Campagna area (south-southeast of Salerno) was heavier than on past missions, but we had no losses.

By the September 16 the enemy threat to the beachhead was over. I attempted to fly a mission on that day, but had to turn back because of engine trouble. The rest of the squadron had to jettison their bombs and chase enemy aircraft, but didn't catch them. Almost as retribution, I had two combat missions on September 17. On the first one we dive-bombed targets of opportunity in the Campagna, Serre, and Attaviano area. On the second mission, while dive-bombing a railway bridge near Benevento, we encountered heavy flak.

One of our pilots either received a hit in his wing near the aileron or the blast and debris from another pilot's bomb struck his plane. The hit caused his aileron to be stuck in the fully deflected position. He started descending in a tight spiral that looked like a spin. About 2,000 feet above the ground, he regained control of the plane by using full rudder against the turn, closing the throttle on the engine outside of the turn, and using maximum power on the other engine. Later, he was able to regain control of the aileron. If he had been in a single-engine airplane, he would not have been able to recover. Having two engines gave him the advantage of asymmetrical power and rudder to overcome the aileron deflection.

On September 18 we were released from the duty of ground support for the invasion and returned to our base at Mateur. Also, we received the good news that we had been removed from combat operations for about two weeks. We spent the next few days getting back to normal - doing the laundry, relaxing, fixing things around the tent, and eating some pretty good meals. We had not appreciated how good our chow was until we had to live on British rations.

For the next few days we flew training missions. On one mission Lt. Dick Lee was leading a group of three four-plane flights. He had us in a very tight formation and then he started a descent to gain airspeed before pulling us up into a loop. This was the first time I had ever accomplished a loop while in formation.

Major General James H. Doolittle (Commander of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force) and Brigadier Robert W. Webster (42nd Bomb Wing Commander) passed through on September 26 to present verbal and written commendations to the Group for the work we had done during the past operations.

Our two-week stand-down didn't last long. On September 30 I pulled my 13th mission. We carried two 1,000 bombs on each plane to bomb highway bridges in the Liri Valley north of Naples. The bomb pattern looked pretty good, but we found it was difficult to do much damage to those stone-arch structures.

I closed out September 1943 with a little over 62 hours in the P-38, more than I had accumulated in all of my P-40 training.

Base Life at Mateur, Tunisia

Our base at Mateur left me with some "fond" memories. As I mentioned earlier, it was located on a dry lakebed and it had a range of mountains around it - much like the desert of

California. Like any desert, Mateur had its share of formidable insects. Hairy, brown spiders (almost as large as my hand), scorpions, and mosquitoes were plentiful. The mosquito net was a "must" to keep all of them from my body.

My morning ritual was built around these crawly "visitors." First, I captured the spiders in a large juice can that had a small amount of gasoline in the bottom and set fire to the gasoline. I had to do it this way because the spiders usually had hundreds of their young attached to their bodies. Next, I made sure that all the scorpions were out of my boots and clothing (which I had kept on the bed with me) before I put them on. Now I was ready to clean up and get some breakfast.

The usual breakfast fare was powdered eggs, Spam, canned butter, orange marmalade, and pretty good bread and coffee. (The Army Air Force broke me of the habit of using milk and sugar. The milk was a terrible-tasting canned product and the sugar was so coarse that it wouldn't melt.) Our cooks were magicians, considering what they had to work with. They had a hundred different ways to fix Spam and they could doctor the powdered eggs with Spam and other things we were afraid to ask about. The coffee was probably the best item on the menu.

We had a few diversions at Mateur, one being the movies. After dark, the men carried small metal stools to the "movie theater." Actually, the stools were the frames that protected the fins on our 500 and 1,000 pound bombs while in shipment. (I'll bet that some of the Tunisians that wandered throughout our tent area are still using those stools.) We had only one projector, so the operator would declare an intermission at the end of each reel. Since our help wasn't what you'd call "top-notch," it wasn't too unusual to see the first reel of the movie and have it followed by the third or fourth. At times this really didn't matter, because the Germans would arrive for their nightly raid on the port of Bizerte and we would have to shut down the movie due to the blackout (no indoor theater for us). Also, these were the same movies we had been seeing for the past month. In fact, we had seen all these movies before in the States. The first run movies were still being seen by the 8th Air Force boys and didn't make it to North Africa.

We did have a nice feature that somewhat approximated the luxuries of 8th Air Force. Not too far from our base was a military hospital. That, of course, meant NURSES! I was introduced to the hospital just after we completed our tour at Dittaino. Every pilot that flew missions during September received a ration of liquor. My 12 missions qualified me for a fifth of bourbon. A young flyboy with a bottle of bourbon was well received at the hospital. The only problem was that I had to fly my thirteenth mission the morning after my visit to the hospital. This was when I learned that 15 or 20 minutes of pure oxygen before take-off could do wonders for a hangover. So that I would not run low on oxygen, my understanding crew chief replenished the supply before I departed on the mission.

Within sight of Mateur was Hill 609. This was the location of a last major stand by the Germans before they evacuated Africa. The hill had not been cleared of munitions and we had been warned not to visit the area. As you might expect, a warning like this only served as an invitation to some people to

see what it was that “they” didn’t want us to see. I heard that unexploded grenades and shells hurt several men. Some did come back with German weapons that had been abandoned.

Hill 609 also became the final resting-place for a German Ju 88 bomber and a British Beaufighter. On one of the Germans’ nightly raids, the Beaufighter locked onto the Ju 88 and was observed firing at it several times. On one of the passes he started firing and the Ju 88 exploded. Seconds later the Beaufighter exploded. He had not shot the bomber down; rather, it had struck Hill 609 and the Beaufighter quickly followed suit.

While we were on the air-echelon to Sicily, our parachute tent at Mateur burned down. I had been issued a parachute before leaving the States and it hurt to think I had lugged that thing from Miami to Mateur (almost a month en route) just to have it destroyed before I ever got it fitted. As it turned out, it really didn’t matter because I found the backpack-type parachute I had been using was much better suited for the P-38. With a backpack chute I could sit on a soft cushion, rather than a hard dinghy. If I wore a seat pack, a tightly folded one-man dinghy replaced the seat cushion. I might add that the compressed air bottle was positioned so it felt as though something was stuck up your butt. The backpack chute placed a two-man dinghy with a nice, soft rubber cushion between your bottom and the dinghy - a real advantage on a six-hour mission!

On October 1, 1943, Naples fell to the Fifth Army - the first major Italian city to do so. At the time we thought Rome wouldn’t be too far behind, but the Germans, dug in behind the Gustav Line that stretched across the waist of Italy, weren’t going to give up that easily.

On October 3 I flew my 14th mission - dive-bombing bridges around Naples. Our missions were designed to disrupt surface traffic as much as possible. If a bridge was destroyed in this part of Italy, it was very difficult for the Germans to find alternative routes. We were after one of those stone-arch bridges so prevalent in the area. In many cases a near miss could do more damage than a direct hit, but these were tough targets to knock out. With our dive-bombing ability, we got plenty of those near misses. Flak was light and we saw no fighters.

The next day the squadron was alerted that we would be moving to provide cover for British and American shipping in the Dodecanese Islands located off the southwest coast of Turkey. During September the British had over-extended themselves in the Aegean moving too far into territory controlled by the enemy. German counter-moves had put the British into a bit of a “sticky wicket” and they had to withdraw. Our task was to cover the ships that were taking them out and keep the Luftwaffe off their backs. To provide this coverage, we had to fly out of eastern Libya.

Gambut 2, near Tobruk, Libya

On October 5 I took off from Mateur for the six-hour flight to our new base. We were told to load all of our living equipment on a C-47 that was to support us in the move. For once I played it smart - I decided to put my bedroll, air mattress, some changes of clothing, food, cigarettes, and toilet articles in the

gun bay and baggage compartment of my plane. As it turned out, the C-47 crashed en route and all equipment was lost. Unfortunately, this also included the kitchen, tents, rations, water containers, and spare parts for the planes.

Our desert airfield, known as Gambut 2, was located about 20 miles from the Mediterranean coast and between Tobruk and the Egyptian border. I have no idea where it got its name. There wasn’t a building or settlement within miles of the place. There were four or five Australian troops stationed there to support any aircraft that might use the field. These guys were really happy to see some English speaking people.

For the first three days my crew chief and I slept under the wing of the airplane. Each morning we received a canteen of water and were told we could drink it, wash in it, or whatever, but that was all we would get for the day. Needless to say, beards started sprouting and you maneuvered to the up-wind side of everyone. The water shortage was so bad that we had to use fine sand for the initial cleaning of our mess kits.

When the trucks delivered our fuel, they just dumped several 55-gallon drums on the ground in front of the plane. It took about 750 gallons to fill the wing and drop tanks of a P-38. One complete revolution of the hand pump would move about one quart of fuel from the drum to the aircraft, so refueling took a lot of time and energy. Since we were on an air-echelon, we were working with a skeleton ground crew and they needed all the help they could get. All of the pilots were quick to assist the maintenance folks.

Until our replacement kitchen arrived, we ate cold “C” rations. We ate them from the can because there wasn’t any water to wash out the mess kits. Later, someone located a German water trailer out in the desert. After some tire repairs, a trailer hitch modification, and a thorough cleaning, it was cleared by our doctor for use. We hitched it to a personnel carrier and transported some water from a nearby British military installation. At last we were able to wash and shave!

On October 7 I took off on what should have been my 15th combat mission. I experienced aircraft trouble after more than two hours en route and had to return. Just my luck, because the squadron encountered some Ju 88s, Me 109s, and FW 190s. A 71st Squadron pilot destroyed one Ju 88.

I flew again the next day and got to shoot at my first enemy airplane in flight. We spotted a German ship convoy that appeared to be a landing party. There were two Ju 88s giving them top cover and also bombing a small town on Leros Island. Flak was pretty heavy over the convoy. As the Ju 88s were making their turn at the end of the convoy we made a gunnery pass on them. After several passes, we saw many large pieces coming off one of the Ju 88s and it ditched between the ships of the convoy. The other Ju 88 escaped to the north. By this time we were too low on fuel to give chase. The downed Ju 88 couldn’t be credited to any one pilot, so it became a squadron victory.

Mission 16 on October 9 turned out to be interesting and educational. We provided cover for a friendly convoy in the Karpathos Straits. Not one enemy aircraft was spotted. Earlier that day, 14th Fighter Group P-38s had massacred a large flight of Ju 87 *Stukas*, leaving nothing for us. On our return to

Gambut, the surface winds had reached about 50 mph and the dust was so thick we could not safely land. Eventually we found a friendly, alternative base of the Island of Rhodes.

The airfield had *Spitfires*, but the pilots were Greek. They had escaped from Greece when the Nazis invaded and made their way to England for pilot training. At first, their reception of us was a little cool, but when we told them about the Ju 88 we had bagged the day before, we became guests of honor. They broke out fresh eggs, Greek bread, wine, and other goodies. Less than a year later, I would marry an American girl whose father came from Greece and we would spend many happy days visiting her relatives in Athens and the surrounding environs.

On October 12 our stint at Gambut was finished and we returned to Mateur. After our return, we learned we had been sent to Gambut because a Beaufighter squadron located in the same general area had been surprised on the ground by the Germans and had all their planes destroyed or badly damaged. We received a very nice commendation from the commander of the RAF's 201st Group, thanking us for coming to their aid. Later in the month, Prime Minister Churchill expressed his appreciation for our support of the British operations in and around the Dodecanese Islands.

On October 13 Italy became an ally when they declared war on Germany and Italian fighters began escorting some of our B-25 bombing missions. Less than two months earlier we were shooting at them and now we were on the same side! Things happen like that when you're dealing with the Italians.

The autumn rains had begun in Tunisia and the dry lake at Mateur was starting to fill up. The mud was little like that of Texas - if you let it dry, you had to chip it off like cement.

I flew my seventeenth mission on October 21. The Group escorted B-26s of the 319th and 320th Bomb Groups to hit rail and highway bridges at Marsciano, Montemolino, and Orvieto, Italy. A group of Me 109s attacked the bombers very aggressively. Our flight turned into the attacking aircraft, but no one got any decent shots. The Group shot down six enemy aircraft and we lost three, all from the 71st. Lts. John T. Hanton, Donald D. Kienholz, and F/O Willard R. Duff, all of the 94th, each got an Me 109.

Because the action had been furious and I was flying in the number 4 position, I had used an inordinate amount of gas. There was no way I could make it back to Africa, so I diverted to Sardinia. It was really nip-and-tuck on the fuel. I reduced my engine to about 1800 rpm and used just enough manifold pressure and a slight descent of 200 fpm to maintain airspeed. I used a fuel tank until the pressure would start dropping, then changed to another tank. By the time I had the field in sight, I had drained my leading-edge tanks dry and the main tanks both indicated zero fuel.

I requested the tower allow me a straight-in approach and landing. They approved and had the emergency equipment standing by. I decided I would not lower the landing gear until I was absolutely sure I could make the runway even if the engines should quit. Just as I lowered the gear, the tower frantically called for me to abort my landing because they had a



Lt. Hoffman's group frequently served as fighter escorts for the 319th and 320th Bomb Groups that flew Martin B-26 Marauders. This particular aircraft of the 320th BG, a B-26G-5-MA, 43-34396, was shot down by enemy fighters November 5, 1944, after Hoffman's tour had ended. (USAAF photo from Al Hansen collection)

B-26 with an engine out just behind me. I told them to tell the '26 to land on the right side of the runway because I was going to use the left. Just as I touched down the B-26 passed me like I was parked. He touched down and eventually ran off the end of the runway because of excessive speed.

I turned off at the first taxiway, but ran out of gas before I could reach the parking area. If I had tried to go around like the tower requested, I probably would not be writing this today. At low altitude, with the gear down, and go-around power on, losing an engine would have meant total loss of control of the plane and probable fatal consequences. After a couple of cigarettes and a refueling, I headed back to Mateur.

On October 23 we escorted our *Marauder* friends from the 319th and 320th BG to bomb railroad bridges at Marsciano. The bombers were successful, but about five minutes from the target we were attacked by about ten Me 109s. They appeared to be firing rockets at the bomber formation. We turned into their attack and they broke off. The Group claimed two Me 109s destroyed, two probably destroyed, and two damaged. We had two planes damaged. Again, I was not in position to get a good shot.

Mission 19 the following day was escorting B-26s to bomb bridge and railroad viaducts at Terni. The 27th Squadron was attacked by about 20 Me 109s and Macchi 202s. The 94th FS and the 71st continued providing cover for the bombers until we heard the 27th's call for help. We turned to support them, but did not sight any enemy aircraft. The bombing mission was successful.

Our missions were quite long because we were stationed in Africa and the B-26s were based in Sardinia. This meant we had to take off, get in group formation, and fly 30 plus minutes to join the bombers at Sardinia. Several times we made the trip only to find the Bomb Group had cancelled the mission due to bad weather in the target area. To correct this problem, we were to relocate to Sardinia as soon as our new base was ready.

Djedeida, Tunisia

Meanwhile the weather soured and our landing strip at Mateur turned into a mud hole. Since the ground echelon in Sardinia was not ready for us yet, we were dispatched to a field near Djedeida. Djedeida was a small town on the road between Mateur and Tunis. The Germans built the field, which consisted of one rather narrow runway that was partially constructed from an old road. The Germans used a little winding road along a hillside as a taxi strip and they had cut revetments into the slope. It was a great set-up for the Germans, but our P-38s were much too large for the taxi strip and the revetments.

Djedeida gave me my first opportunity to operate a P-38 on a paved surface. Up to now, pierced steel planking (PSP) had been the only hard surface from which I had flown. PSP consisted of metal panels about 10 to 12 inches wide and about 10 feet long. The panels had holes in them to make them lighter and the edges were bent down for strength. They had hooks and slots so that they could be assembled like a giant Erector set. PSP stabilized a landing surface, provided the soil under it didn't get too wet. In that event, the weight of the planes would push the PSP down into the muck.

The narrow runway at Djedeida prevented us from taking off in formation which was a real time and fuel saver on long missions. Instead, we had to take off singly, which meant flying through a lot of prop and wing wash. One of our pilots decided to beat the take-off turbulence by staying low and leaving further down the runway. His high speed while still on the ground caused his P-38 to "hug" the runway. Alarmed at his situation, he applied a lot of nose-up pressure, which caused a sudden rotation. The high G-force tore off both of his drop tanks (165 gallons each), forcing an early return to base.

It was beginning to turn cold in North Africa and we didn't have any way to heat our tents until we discovered ethylene glycol (antifreeze) would burn with a very hot, blue flame. We cut the bottom out of a heavy-duty oil drum (sides were about 8 inches high), placed some large stones in it, and poured the antifreeze over the stones. With a little 115-octane avgas to start the fire, we were soon toasty warm.

F/O Cyril L. "Cy" Nolen, the "wild man" in our squadron, decided to liven things up a bit one day by tossing 50-caliber tracers into our fire. This produced a bright red flame and, from time to time, one of the slugs would rocket across the tent. We warned him that he could start a fire if he wasn't careful. When Cy tossed a 20mm tracer into the fire, we abandoned the area post haste. Sure enough, he started a fire. We were lucky to get our gear out of the tent before the whole thing went up in flames. Again, I had to sleep under the wing of the airplane for a couple of nights.

Shortly after this, the commander of the 325th Fighter Group came to visit our group commander. The 325th had recently converted from P-40s to P-47s, but their commander flew over in a P-40. When he was ready to leave he couldn't get his plane started. Since it wasn't important to get the P-40 back right away, our commander flew him back to his base in one of our "piggybacks" (a P-38 with the radio equipment moved to the nose to provide a small area for a passenger behind the pilot).

Several of us had flown the P-40 back in the States and we were curious as to what could be wrong with the plane. One of our crew chiefs had worked on P-40s, so we got him to check it out. He found that the starter dogs were stuck and he was able to free them with a screwdriver. We decided it would be fun to fly the plane, so we flipped a coin to see who would go first. As fate would have it, Cy Nolen won.

Before I relate Cy's flight, one should understand the P-40's power-on stall characteristics. Stalling with the power on could result in some violent maneuvers. First, the rudder controls would lock in the full left or right position and the stick would lock in the full aft or forward position (usually aft). This would result in a spin in the direction of the applied rudder. The controls could not be moved until the power had been moved to idle.

Anyway, Cy started the plane, taxied out, and took off. He made several low passes over the field and pulled up into several rolls. (This was known as "beating up the field.") He made a pass, pulled up, and started rolling. In the middle of the third roll he "slopped out" and came very close to the ground. The next pass he was going a little faster and was able to com-



The 94th FG provided fighter escort for almost all bomber types in the MTO including both heavy and medium bombers such as the North American B-25 Mitchell, represented here by a B-25H-5. (North American photo from the Al Hansen collection)

plete the three rolls. Then he approached and pulled up into an Immelmann. At the top the plane stalled, snapped a couple of times, and headed for the ground.

We could hear the engine power was still on and we started yelling for him to cut the power. Of course he could not hear us, but our collective ESP must have been working because the exhaust stacks started popping, indicating that the power had been cut. Immediately, the plane started to stabilize and Cy pulled out of the dive. He couldn't have been more than 10 or 15 feet above the ground. As expected, Nolen returned again at a much greater speed and completed the Immelmann. Unhappily for Cy, Lt. Col. Robert B. Richard, the Group Commander, was witness to his exploits. When Nolen parked the P-40, Col. Richard was there to ground him for 30 days.

We shared Djedeida with a British squadron that flew the Wellington (known as the "Wimpy") medium bomber. The condition of these planes was so bad I was afraid to walk under the wings, much less fly one of them. The crewmembers were a carefree bunch - casual in dress, always had a bottle handy, and looking forward to their night missions over Italy.

Their missions consisted of individual aircraft flying in trail about 10 or 15 minutes apart. The lead ship would outline the target with flares and each succeeding ship would bomb the area identified. They usually started taking off just after dark and would continue until about midnight. Shortly after the last plane departed, the first planes would start arriving home.

Trying to sleep on the nights they flew was almost impossible. An example of their carefree attitude was the remark one of them made following a mission: "We had a great mission. No flak, no fighters, and we lost only three planes." We would have called that a disaster!

On the last day of October I flew my twentieth mission. We escorted B-26s to bomb the docks at Anzio. We observed several hits on the docks and small ships. Almost like the British "Wimpy" pilots, we had no flak, no fighters, but we all returned home safely.

Home, in this case, was not Djedeida, at least not right away. Because of a damaged aircraft on our runway, we diverted to Sidi Ahmed. I had seen some P-39s flying around in the area and this was their base. Their mission was to patrol the African coast in the vicinity of Bizerte, our major seaport in this part of North Africa. It was just a short 20-minute flight to Djedeida after the runway was cleared.

On November 1, 1943, the 1st Fighter Group and the 42nd Bomb Wing became part of the newly formed 15th Air Force, commanded by General Doolittle.

During the first few days of November 1943, our ground echelon arrived in Monserrato, Sardinia, near Cagliari. They began preparing the field for our arrival later in the month. Monserrato had a new, hard-surface runway and taxi strips and there even was a hangar, albeit without a roof, for the ground support people!

On November 6 we were back to dive-bombing bridges and rail lines around Montemolino, and strafing targets of opportunity on the way back. We hit a train, destroying the engine and about 20 boxcars. Also, several trucks were hit, but there was no flak and no fighters. Due to excessive fuel use, I had to land in Sardinia and then return to Djedeida.

Three days later on mission 22 we escorted B-24s at a much higher altitude than we usually flew with the B-26s. This mission was to the Villar Perosa ball-bearing works west of Torino. We saw 12 and 15 enemy fighters in the area, but only one contact was made with them. Lt. Dick Lee, leading one of the flights, destroyed one FW 190 for his third aerial victory. All aircraft returned safely.

The flak was very heavy and concentrated in box form. (An area about 2,000 feet square would be saturated in one salvo.) This was different from the tracking-type flak we had experienced in southern Italy. There was a lot of noise if you were in the affected area.

All of our winter flying gear had been transported to Sardinia with the ground echelon, so we were ill prepared to fly at altitude. The P-38 cockpit was very cold because air entered around the guns. The heating system was almost primitive; air was collected from around the manifold and distributed to the cockpit via a flexible hose that the pilot could direct as desired. I wore all the clothing I could find (two uniforms, two pairs of socks, gloves, and leather flying helmet). During the mission I sat on one hand and flew with the other. I stuck the heater hose in one boot until that foot was warm, then put it in the other boot. Two of our pilots were sent to the hospital with damaged feet. I still suffer from a slight case of frostbite in my thumbs and index fingers.

I flew again on November 15 and it turned out to be a tough day for me all around. We picked up B-25s over Sardinia and set course for a bombing mission to Athens, Greece. I really wanted to make this one, but I had trouble with the turbo-supercharger on one of the engines. The throttle linkage mechanically operated a waste gate that allowed engine exhaust to drive the turbo. When the throttle was advanced on my problem engine, the gate would go to full open, allowing too much exhaust to escape and causing an over-speed condition. At our altitude I needed the turbo to provide enough engine power to stay with the formation. When I would advance the throttle on the bad engine to a point where the turbo cut in, the manifold pressure would surge well beyond the desired setting. When I reduced the throttle, the turbo would cut out and the power would drop so low that I could not keep up with the group. I tried for over three hours to maintain my position in the formation, but eventually I had to return to base. I used so much fuel trying to keep formation that I had to stop off again in Sardinia before returning to Djedeida.

Mission 23 on November 21 was escorting our old friends, the 319th and 320th Bomb Groups, to hit bridges over the Cesano River and at Fano, Italy. Cloud cover made it impossible for the B-26s to find the target, so they selected a secondary target, a railroad bridge south of Fano. One direct hit was seen, along with several near misses. (We sure could have used some of today's "smart bombs" against those Italian bridges -

it would have saved a lot of lives and aircraft.) Fifteen enemy aircraft were reported, but only four made passes at the bombers. One of our pilots took a long shot at an FW 190 and it was seen trailing smoke as it left the area. Two of our planes were slightly damaged. Again, I had to divert to Sardinia for fuel.

As mentioned earlier, our missions were long because we had to pick up and drop off the bombers at, or near, Sardinia. When one flies the number 3 or 4 position, one uses much more fuel than number 1 or 2. Many times other pilots and I had to divert to Sardinia to refuel before returning to Africa. This problem was rectified, of course, once we moved to Sardinia.

We took the 319th and 320th BG to Italy again on the November 22. We escorted them to bomb the railroad marshalling yards at Foligno. No flak or fighters were reported. Again, this was a long mission where we had to go to the target by way of Sardinia. Since there were no enemy fighters, I was able to fly back to Africa without a "pit stop" in Sardinia.

It took a few days before I flew my twenty-fifth mission. The weather had been bad in the target area for almost a week. Several times we were briefed for a mission only to have it called off at the last minute. We were already airborne for a couple of them before they were cancelled. Of course, this mission was significant because it was the halfway point in the number of missions required to complete a combat tour.

Number 25 finally came on November 28. The mission was to bomb an airfield at Salon de Provence, France, near Marseille. This was my first time to fly over France. We could not observe the bombing because the visibility was so limited. There were 35 of us and we were bounced by seven FW 190s. It was obvious they were experienced pilots because they really kept us busy protecting the bombers. The Group claimed three enemy aircraft destroyed, but none were scored by the 94th FS.

On November 29 we left Djedeida to join the ground echelon at Monserrato, Sardinia.

Monserrato, Sardinia

A sad thing happened when we landed at Monserrato. Lt. Russell E. Williams (a pilot with whom I had gone through cadet training, P-40 combat training, and all of the assignment depots in Africa) was killed upon landing on the new runway.

The runway was made of a mixture of cement and crushed seashells. The shells would flake off and cause prop damage, so the people maintaining the runway would use street brushes to sweep the loose shells to the edge of the runway and then pick them up later for disposal. On this particular day, there was an 18-inch pile of shells on the right shoulder of the runway, running the full length of the strip.

Upon landing, Williams' right main tire blew, causing his plane to swerve to the right. By the time Russell regained control he was paralleling the runway; however, his nose wheel was plowing through the pile of shells. The drag on the nose gear was too much and it collapsed. The nose of the plane dug into the shells and the aircraft slowly flipped over on its back. The crushed canopy pushed Russell's head down so severely that he choked to death on his oxygen mask. The crash crew



These are 94th Fighter Squadron pilots at the Monserrato airfield. Front Row, L-R: Cecil H. Quesseth, Raymond J. Geyman, Charles L. Hoffman, Jr., Louie Mimms, Jerome G. Schweickert, James J. Hagenback (Commander), Ralph L. Kipper, Jr., William L. Jacobsen, Richard J. Lee, and Herschel W. H. Baird. Middle Row, L-R: John H. McEachern, Cyril L. Nolen, Robert D. Harris, James W. Griffis, Harley T. Barlow, Fred M. DeVenney, Jr., Daniel Darnell, Jr., Robert L. Laurent, Williard R. Duff, Charles H. Brown, and Paul E. R. Vachon. Back Row, L-R: Raymond L. Schulze, Donald D. Kienholz, Robert B. Van Sice, Jack D. Pettus, Kastner, William L. Hines, Charles W. Howard, Raymond J. Meredith, Franklin C. Lathrope, Harmer, Kenneth M. Kirchhofer, Lipowicz, Warren L. Schaper, and Benjamin Hallock. Author's note: Kastner, Harmer, and Lipowicz were with the squadron only a few weeks when they were lost on a mission in late December 1943. Nobody could remember their first names. (From the author's collection)

tried to lift the plane, but this was impossible, because the P-38 weighed more than 18,000 pounds. Our crash equipment had not yet arrived from Africa.

I was airborne at the time and had to divert to Elmos, Sardinia, and wait for the runway to be cleared. Obviously, this type of accident could not happen with available emergency equipment. So we eventually had to make a precise landing on the left side of the runway until the equipment arrived.

The apartments the ground echelon had located were as nice as had been rumored. It was great to get out of tents and have a solid, dry floor under our feet. Since we in the air echelon were the last to arrive, the only apartments left were those on the third and fourth floors. The view was great, but climbing those stairs several times a day got old fast.

We had to walk about a half-mile to the dining hall, but it was worth it. The cooks had a regular kitchen in which to prepare the meals and they were able to supplement the menu with local, fresh vegetables. We sat at tables and ate off real plates! A real kitchen and real apartments - it was almost as if we had been transferred to 8th Air Force!

A co-occupant of the airdrome was the famous Italian Air Force "Black Cat" squadron of the 155th Autonomous Fighter Group. They were touted to be on par with the German "Yellow-Nose" squadron. The rumor was that only fighter

aces could fly with them. Later we found that this was not true, but I will say they were good pilots. Since their Macchi 202s, 205s, and Reggiane 2001s could fly inverted, the Italians would buzz the field in a tight formation with half of the planes inverted. Our planes were limited to a very short time in the inverted position. The P-38 did not have a fuel injection system and the oil system needed gravity to work properly. In the inverted position, the engines quickly became starved for lubrication and fuel. All the Italian planes were exceptional aircraft. We were glad the Germans insisted on flying their own aircraft.

My first mission from Monserrato came on December 1. We escorted our old pals, the B-26s, to bomb railroad bridges at Sarzana, near La Spezia. The bombing appeared to be very effective. Twenty enemy aircraft attacked us. They were very aggressive and appeared to be experienced combat pilots. They continued their attack well out to sea. We lost four aircraft and pilots of the 27th Squadron destroyed two enemy planes. Two of those lost were F/O Duff from the 94th FS and from the 27th FS, Lt. Eldon E. Vondra, one of the "shanghaied" P-40 pilots.

I sighted Vondra's lone P-38 with an engine on fire and being attacked by three enemy aircraft. I turned into them and forced them to break off. I remained with Vondra until he had to "hit the silk." Hovering over him, I dispersed two enemy

fighters that attempted to strafe him while he was still descending in his chute. Unfortunately, this was all for naught. We never saw Vondra again. I eventually received the Distinguished Flying Cross for this action, but it was tarnished by the loss of my friend.

I hated to fly on December 6. The previous night we received our liquor ration for the missions flown during the past two months. The squadron received two ounces of liquor for each sortie flown. Since some of the pilots had returned to the States or had been lost, the ration was divided among those left. Most of us received a quart of a terrible-tasting, vile-smelling whisky called "Old Overholt Rye." Some guy back in the States got rich when he unloaded this stuff on Uncle Sam because he couldn't have sold it on the commercial market. With nothing but a canteen of water as a chaser, we had one, gross party. There were smelly bodies all over the place.

My flight that morning was not a combat mission. The operations officer sent Lt. Robert A. "Smokey" Vrillakas and me to Catania, Sicily, to pick up one of our planes that had been repaired following a belly-landing while we were supporting the invasion of Italy back in September.

We flew to Sicily in a piggyback P-38 with the side window rolled partially down because we both were suffering from terrible Old Overholt hangovers. I read the map while Vrillakas flew. When I shifted the map, the bottom half tore off and was sucked out the window. Murphy's Law was operating in those days too, because the airfield for which we were looking was on the south side of Sicily and that part of the map was no longer with us.

After several sweeps along the coast, we spotted the field and landed. We parked next to the plane I was to pick up and I put my chute, helmet, and other gear on the wing. We found that the only "repairs" made to the plane were new props and a few patches on the belly. A mechanic approached and asked, "Are you going to fly the Colonel's plane?" I responded in the affirmative and we hurried off to the operations building.

On the way we discussed what the mechanic had said and came to the conclusion that some colonel on base had "adopted" our plane - patches and all. Since the 94th FS was short on aircraft, we decided that we would file a flight plan for some base in North Africa to cover our tracks while we took the plane home to Sardinia. Because we had no idea of the condition of the plane, we decided I would take off first and then let Vrillakas know if everything was OK.

Just after I got airborne, I gave Vrillakas the signal to join me. There was a ceiling of about 600-700 feet and the clouds were about 500 feet thick. Just after I entered the overcast, the right engine began to cut out and backfire. Reducing power didn't help; consequently, I had to kill the engine and feather the prop. There was no way that I could return to the field with "the Colonel's plane," so with Vrillakas leading, this became the longest (over 300 miles) single-engine flight I ever made in a two-engine aircraft.

When we got back to our base we were met with some good news. F/O Duff, one of the pilots shot down on the December 1 mission, had returned after evading the Germans and being picked up by friendly forces.

The next day, the second anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, was a memorable one for me. General Webster, Commander of the 42nd Bomb Wing, presented me with the Air Medal and my first oak leaf cluster. There may be other medals and presentations, but receiving your first medal for combat will always have a very special meaning - and the excitement of it all.

On the December 8 we got some bad news. We were to leave our idyllic life in Sardinia for a place called Gioia del Colle, Italy. It was a tiny town about 20 miles south of Bari, a major port on the Adriatic Sea and site of Headquarters, 15th Air Force. I flew my twenty-seventh mission on that same day. We escorted B-26s to hit the Foligno railroad yards, but ended up dropping on the Spoleto viaduct because of the overcast.

About the Author

Charles L. Hoffman, Jr. was born March 20, 1921, in North Little Rock, Ark. Reared in Memphis Tenn., he graduated from high school in 1938. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1940 and became a pilot in 1943. Upon return from overseas, he was stationed at March Field, Calif. After three years as a recruiter in Missouri, he returned to flying duties as an instructor pilot at Perrin AFB, Tex. This was followed by training duties at Spence AB, Ga., and Landsberg AB, Germany. He returned to Perrin in 1958 and then finished his career at Moody AFB, Ga., retiring as a Lt. Col. in March 1963. After obtaining a college degree, he instructed at the American Airlines Flight Academy until retirement in June 1983. He lived in Dallas, Tex., with his wife Georgia until his death on June 17, 2005.