Untitled Manuscript

The Story of Fighter Pilot James P. Dibble

Written by Jim Dibble

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Publishing Note

This document is an original, manuscript written by Jim Dibble about the life, military service and investigation into the death of his fighter pilot uncle, James P. Dibble.

Jim graciously donated this, along with hundreds of other documents, photos and artifacts to the Hastings Public Library in Hastings Michigan in January of 2022.

Jim retains all rights to the original but has granted the Hastings Public Library rights to post this document online with the rest of the donated collection.

This document has had minor formatting updates but is otherwise as Jim provided it.

August 15, 2022
DME

PREFACE

WESTERN UNION

GD1 42 GOVT=WUX WASHINGTON DC SEPT 24 845P

MRS MAXINE DIBBLE=
CARE RAY ERWAY=RURAL RTE NUMBER FIVE
I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT THE COMMANDING GENERAL NORTH AFRICAN AREA REPORTS YOUR HUSBAND FIRST LIEUTENANT JAMES P DIBBLE MISSING IN ACTION SINCE NINE SEPTEMBER IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION OF HIS STATUS ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED=
ULIO THE ADJUTANT GENERAL.
855A.

"Death, destruction - war everywhere. Your day consists of eating war food - C rations - ugh. Briefings, missions, friends and tentmates missing in action. MISSING IN ACTION thats all you ever get in the Airforce - no one ever sees you crash or bail out, nothing - just MISSING IN ACTION. Some may be alive - most dead. It isn't the person that gets the burden, its the wives and families that know one thing MISSING IN ACTION. It must be terrible wondering what happened, for months never finding out."

These were the very words of my uncle; First Lieutenant James P. Dibble only four weeks before his family was faced with the reality that Jim had become one of these missing pilots.

On September 9, 1943 my uncle, a member of the 94th Fighter Squadron, First Fighter Group, Twelfth Air force, led a group of twelve P-38 fighters from a temporary base near the town of Catania, Sicily to the beachhead area near Salerno, Italy. After supporting the invasion area, they were ordered to strafe a large convoy of over 400 German trucks and tanks, moving up in defense of the invasion taking place. During that attack Jim was shot down by anti-aircraft fire. He reportedly bailed out of his burning plane and was last seen in his parachute.

On September 10, 1944 one year and one day after being listed as MIA, with no further information available, an official finding of death was recorded under the

provisions of Public Law 490, 77th Congress. The law required a presumptive date of death for the termination of pay, settlement of accounts, etc.

On October 18, 1946, the War Department notified Jim's wife, Maxine, that her husband's remains were interred in the U.S. Military Cemetery in Naples, Italy.

Following this notification, arraignments were made for his return from Italy in December 1948 for burial in Michigan. What had happened was still a mystery. Everyone doubted that any of the lingering questions concerning Jim's fate would ever be answered. Some even doubted it was Jim's body that had been returned.

Jim Dibble
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UNCLE JIMMIE

I grew up in Prairie Village Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City. Fortunately, my Grandmother lived only a mile away, and I spent many wonderful weekends with her. It was late at night just before bedtime that I would hear the stories about my uncle and namesake, Jim Dibble.

Jim was the second son born to Jim and Estelle Dibble in Grand Rapids Michigan, November 3, 1921. Bob, his older brother, was sixteen, and Jim would soon have a younger brother, my father Bill, two years later. In 1930 with the onset of the depression, the Dibbles moved to a farm located in Barry County Michigan, just outside of the county seat of Hastings. My uncle and father growing up on this farm provided the backdrop for most late-night stories. Exploring the countryside, hunting, fishing and swimming in the Thornapple River, the discovery of Indian arrowheads in a freshly plowed field. Attending a one room school house, Edger School, and being the star halfback at Hastings High School. It all seemed very exciting to a boy growing up in a big city. But there was one story that I never tired of hearing. My Grandmother would always tell me about how my uncle Jimmie after parachuting out of his burning fighter plane was shot and killed by the Germans while floating to the earth. It was intriguing yet sad and mysterious, and it was this mystery that always left me wanting to know more. Even though there was very little information about his life and death as a fighter pilot, this lack of information never seemed to stop the questions, nor did it stop my Grandmother from telling her stories. Consequently, a natural curiosity only grew with time.

THE PLANE

My early attempts to learn more about my uncle's military experiences were centered mainly around the type of plane that he flew, the P-38 Lightning. I grew up making models of P-38s and looking for any books to read about this plane. I even built my own P-38, mounted to our wagon and "flew" around the neighborhood shooting down enemy planes. Little did I know at the time that my uncle flew what was then one of the hottest fighter planes in the world. The P-38 was the only U.S. fighter that was in production at the time the war began, and was still in production at the end of the war. The P-38 was a weapon beyond all doubt. It's concentrated firepower of four-.50 caliber machine guns and one 20mm. cannon, along with its high speed, twin engines, long range, and its capability to carry large bomb loads, made it one of the ultimate weapons of its day. It was streamlined and fast. The

Germans called it "the forked-tailed devil"; the Japanese said it was two planes with one pilot. Most agree it was one of the greatest fighter planes of World War II.

As I became older, I was given newspaper articles by my Grandmother reporting Jim's deeds as an aviator. "Hastings Fighter Pilot Bags Nazi Over Italy," "LIEUT. JAS DIBBLE DOWNS NAZI PLANE." When it became clear that my interest was indeed serious, my Grandmother gave me an article from the June 26th, 1943 issue of Colliers. The article entitled "Wing Talk" discussed the fate of a P-38 pilot caught in the middle of combat with only one good engine:

"The Lockheed P-38 Lightning, as practically every small boy in America knows, is an Army Air Forces high-altitude fighter, equipped with a pair of Allison liquid cooled engines, four machine guns and a cannon. The guns are the fixed type, aimed forward. Thus, our audience of practically every small boy in America is going to be (a) dubious and (b) subsequently popeyed as we explained the details of this matter, authentic and fresh from North Africa, about a certain smart and resourceful P-38 pilot. Confronted by a sudden emergency, this quick-witted lad increased his normal and conventional fire-power of four machine guns and one cannon, all pointed forward, with the following protective auxiliary equipment:

Two tail guns.
Waist guns, port and starboard.
A power turret covering 360 degrees laterally.
More guns firing forward.

And with this hastily arranged protection, he flew safely back to his North Africa base on one engine. What happened was this: Out over the Mediterranean as part of the escort for a flock of B-17's, our young friend and his pals met up with some of the Luftwaffe's few remaining fighters in the area. When one of the Allisons quit in combat, he feathered the prop, took a look around, and realized he was probably expected to make a run for it to his field on the one functioning engine.

Then he thought of something better. He swung over to a near-by flight of Fortresses, slid under the tummy of one of the big bombers, adjusted his speed to coincide with that of the Boeing, and rode along underneath as the chick in a sort of aerial hen-and-chick formation. It was quite comforting - all those guns overhead.

For a time, there was some unusual radio transmission in the area. It went something like this, in rather informal phrasing: "Hey, you! Get the blank blank out from under us. Scram, pea-shooter. You're blocking our ball turret!"

But our busy young P-38 sky rider apparently was intently engaged with such matters as what else was in the sky, enginehead temperatures and the multitude of other matters which go with keeping a P-38 in hand, especially with one engine dead. He stayed right where he was until he was within range, although those radio messages, traveling only a few feet, could scarcely have been weak. Later he slid out from under, landed, and all hands decided he probably be safely forgiven."

Jim would later write home identifying himself as that pilot. "A waist gunner fired a burst at me as I was moving in, he thought I was the enemy – fortunately he missed." Quite an introduction to combat with many more exciting times to come.

As a boy this was pretty exciting. As I grew older, it fueled my desire to learn more about my uncle and his P-38 fighter plane.

In 1986 my interest in the P-38 Lightning lead me to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. On the wall just prior to the P-38 on display, were a group of pictures depicting the North African Campaign. Aware only that my uncle was in the North African area, and was a member of the First Fighter Group, 94th Fighter Squadron, made famous by Eddie Rickenbacker, the United States top ace of WWI with 26 German airplanes shot down and the famous "Hat in the Ring" insignia which decorated Rickenbacker's plane, I noticed a photograph hanging on the wall with a P-38 parked in the background. Examining it closer I found that it was a picture of Eddie Rickenbacker standing on the back end of a truck addressing the First Fighter Group. I knew from documents my Grandmother had that Jim was in the North Africa area at the time he was killed Was it possible that my uncle was somewhere in that group of men listening to Rickenbacker's speech? I obtained a copy of the photograph

for further examination. I searched for my uncle with a magnifying glass and was disappointed that I could not find him, but it was at that moment I realized the time had come to try to find out what had happened to my uncle Jim.

THE INVESTIGATION

I formally started my search with the only information I had. It was a letter from the Army to Jim's wife that my Grandmother had given me which detailed how he became missing in 1943:

WAR DEPARTMENT
HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY AIR FORCES
WASHINGTON

AAF 201 - (693) Dibble, James P.
0 733 844

30 October 1943

Mrs. Maxine Dibble
c/o Ray Erway
Rural Route #5
Hastings, Michigan

Dear Mrs. Dibble:

Notification that your husband First Lieutenant James P. Dibble was reported missing in action in the North African Area since September 9th, was sent to you by the Adjutant General on September 24th.

Further information has been received to the effect that Lieutenant Dibble was the pilot of a P-38 Lightning fighter plane which left Sicily on September 9th on a patrol and strafing mission to southern Italy. The report states that about 5:25 p.m. while strafing an enemy truck convoy along a road approximately 30 miles east of Agropoli, Italy, Lieutenant Dibble's plane was observed to climb to about 2000 feet with his cockpit on fire apparently caused by enemy antiaircraft fire. From this position your husband bailed out and was seen with his parachute open about 1500 feet above the ground drifting away from the convoy.

There were no other persons in the plane with your husband.

The above facts constitute all the information available. Your anxiety during this trying period is fully appreciated and you may rest assured that any additional data received will be sent to you immediately.

Very sincerely,

JOHN B. COOLEY,
Colonel, A. G. D.,
Acting Air Adjutant General

Armed with the one letter, I returned to the Air Force Museum in Dayton later that summer to find out more information. At the museum I met Tom Brewer, who was in charge of the "Friends of The Air Force Museum." I explained the reason for my visit and he suggested I contact the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center, at the Maxwell Air Force Base located in Montgomery, Alabama. A major portion of the Research Center's collection consisted of unit histories that various Air Force organizations had periodically prepared and submitted since the establishment of the Air Force Historical Program in 1942.

Before leaving the museum however, I found my best lead in the museum bookstore. While browsing through the racks always on the lookout for something new to read about the P-38, I ran across a book that caught my attention. It was not the title, "Happy Jack's Go-Buggy" that first caught my attention, but rather the small hat-in-the-ring insignia, the 94th's insignia which also adorned the cover. Looking closer I discovered that this was not only the story of Jack Ilfrey, a fellow pilot from the 94th squadron, but the first Ace of the squadron.

Jack Ilfrey had been born in Houston, Texas, and had been working in a bank there for the last twenty-five years. The library had a phone book and I checked to see if there were any Ilfrey's listed. There was, and the first name that was tried turned out to be of all people, Jack's mother. She was over ninety years old at the time and quite helpful.

I immediately contacted Jack asking if he had known my uncle in North Africa. After initially being disappointed to find out that he did not, he told me that he would send a list of WWII pilots who currently belonged to the First Fighter Group Association. As it turned out Jack was leaving the squadron at the same time that Jim was arriving.

I also needed to start collecting all the family information along with finally meeting Jim's wife Maxine who was living in Battle Creek, MI. My parents were living in Hastings, MI at the time and after a call expressing my interest for a meeting, I was on my way.

Maxine Erway, known to her friends as "Micky," went to school in Hastings with Jim. They both graduated from Hastings High School, June 9, 1939. Following graduation Jim entered the employ of the Schulze Baking Co. of Chicago; Maxine graduated from the University of Grand Rapids and had charge of the office of Dr. Beeman of Grand Rapids. Jim and Maxine were married October 31, 1942 in Phoenix, Arizona while Jim was finishing up his advanced training at Luke Field. A year and a half after Jim was reported missing in action, Maxine volunteered for

service in the Navy. She trained as a nurse's aid at Hunter College in New York City. After completing her basic training, she was assigned to the Bethesda Naval Hospital, Bethesda, Maryland. After a few weeks on the wards as a nurse's aid, her superior learned of her medical laboratory experience in civilian life at the Michigan State Health Laboratory in Lansing, Michigan. Immediately she was reassigned as a Pharmacist's Mate at which capacity she served for the remainder of her tour of duty. In early June of 1946, Maxine was discharged from the Navy and returned home in Michigan. Within days she joined Leila Hospital in Battle Creek as a medical technician. In June 1947 Maxine married Orville Ehrhardt, and raised a family in Battle Creek, Michigan.

The meeting with Maxine and my parents was very productive. Along with getting all the letters Jim had written to his mother which my father had saved, Maxine provided more information than I could have possibly hoped for. Besides her letters from Jim that would later prove to be extremely helpful in piecing together Jim's military experiences, Maxine had been sent Jim's original file that listed all of his flight times, places, planes etc. She also gave me a sterling silver "hat in the ring" pin and a dollar bill, a "Short Snorter" with Eddie Rickenbacker's signature on it. From one of Maxine's letters, I was excited to learn that Jim had just arrived at the squadron when Eddie Rickenbacker showed up with General Jimmy Doolittle, head of the 12th Air Force to meet the pilots. Rickenbacker threw a party in Constantine, Algeria and gave each pilot a "hat in the ring" pin, symbolic of his squadron in World War I and they were pinned on each pilot's uniform by Jimmy Doolittle.

The fact that Jim had been with the squadron at the time the photograph was taken turned out to be the catalyst to try to learn everything I could about Jim's military experiences and his final mission. I wanted to be able to tell the stories we would have heard from him had he survived the war.

With the information I had gathered thus far I realized I needed detailed squadron information to help begin to pull it all together. It was time for a trip to the USAF Historical Research Center in Montgomery, AL. At the Center I found "The History of the First Fighter Group," by Major James S. Alford, ordered a microfilm history of the 94th along with supporting documents, and was informed about more detailed mission reports on file at the Washington National Record Center in Suitland, Maryland. I was also introduced to Missing Air Crew Reports (MACRS) and how to obtain them from the National Archives in Washington DC.

Returning home, I received the microfilm. I searched through pages of World War I information until I found a day-by-day diary of events that had taken place in North Africa during World War II. I now had specific missions to go along with the

dates in Jim's file. The information about the missions flown was very brief, however the pilots for each mission were listed and I could now use the roster sent to me by Jack Ilfrey. Letters were sent to all the pilots that showed up on both the diary and Ilfrey's list.

While waiting for the responses from the pilots, I turned my attention to getting all the remaining information from the Government as possible. I started by sending away for a copy of Jim's MACR. During World II the U.S. Army Air Forces required its group organizations to report within two days the name or names of any member of an aircrew who failed to return from a combat mission and to provide the details pertaining to the mission, the missing aircrew member(s), and the aircraft. The group headquarters prepared one report per aircraft and crew, regardless of the number of crew members involved. For the most part the MACR followed a basic format of information no matter which air force was involved.

The information in a typical MACR included the date the crew and aircraft became missing; the type, model, and series of the aircraft; its AAF serial number; the designations of the squadron, group, and air force or immediate higher echelon to which the crew and aircraft were assigned; the name of the air base where the aircraft and crew were stationed; the objective/target of the mission; the time and place where the crew of the aircraft became missing or were last seen; the type, model and serial numbers of the engines; the make, type and serial numbers of the machine guns; listing of the crew. In short, a MACR provided much information about an aircraft and air crewmen at the time the aircraft and crew became missing.

From one of Maxine's letters Jim talked about receiving the Air Medal and having been recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). I contacted the VFW in Washington, DC. and they directed me to the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. I received in the mail an Entitlement to Awards sheet stating that Jim was entitled to the following awards; the Air Medal with 4 bronze oak leaf clusters, and one silver cluster, the Purple Heart (which I had already received from my Grandmother), the Distinguished Unit Citation, with one bronze oak leaf cluster, and the World War II Victory Medal.

The records indicated that Jim had never been awarded the DFC. The medals were received a few weeks later from the Air Force. I was very happy to receive these awards, there had to be some good stories behind them all. But for some reason Jim had not received the medal he wanted most of all, the DFC.

There was one more key piece of information that I wanted from the Army. How did Jim get to the U.S. Military Cemetery in Naples, Italy? The VFW in

Washington, DC. recommended that I talk to Martha Sells at the American Battle Monuments Commission. After a brief conversation, Ms. Sells put me in touch with the U.S. Army Military Personnel Center in Alexandria, Virginia. The response I was hoping for came from John F. Manning, the Assistant Chief of Mortuary Affairs and Casualty Support Division, and included copies of Jim's case history, and record of interment in Naples. What I received was a case history of an Unknown Soldier. According to the case, a detail of US graves registration was dispatched to effect the re-interment of the remains from an isolated grave in a field on the left side of National Highway 19, approximately one and one-tenth miles South of the entrance to the road leading to Padula, Italy, and some fifty feet from the remains of a crashed aircraft. The isolated grave, which had a rough wooden cross marking it, was written in Italian, "CADUTO --- ODRIO 9 Settembre 1943", was opened, but no remains could be found. Questioning of the Italians living in the area revealed that British Graves Registration Service had already removed the remains. The crash site location was recorded as grid coordinates: 380920, sheet 199, Potenza, 1/100,000 and confirmation was obtained from the British that a body from that location had been re-interred in Salerno (Beachhead) Cemetery, plot 5, row E, grave 38.

12th AAF records revealed that a formation of P-38 aircraft from the 94th Fighter Squadron departed their base in Sicily on September 9, 1943 for a patrol and strafing mission in the area south of Salerno, Italy. From this mission only two planes failed to return to their base, one piloted by 2nd Lt. Stanley W. Wojick, and one piloted by Jim. Lt. Wojick had been officially reported as a prisoner of war, leaving only Jim to be accounted for. The remains of the crashed plane were definitely identified as the one Jim had flown that day. Based on this information, the unknown was identified as Jim.

But I still had several questions about the information in the report. Why after bailing out of his plane would Jim be buried next to it? After bailing out wouldn't the pilot and the plane be separated by quite a distance? It did not make sense that Jim would be buried next to his plane. Had he tried to return to his plane? Did he fight with the Germans after he was on the ground? Or had he in fact been shot in his parachute as my Grandmother had feared? In any case the report just did not make sense.

More information was arriving on a daily basis. Jim's MACR I had requested arrived, but other then identifying the pilot that filed the report, Lt. Ray Schulze, it shed no new light on the mystery. The letters from the pilots began to arrive and most contained interesting bits of information, all of which would help reconstruct his life in North Africa, as well as his final mission.

Finally, the one letter I was waiting for arrived. It was from Stan Wojick, now living in Akron, Ohio. After reading Stan's letter I was able to reach him by phone. Stan identified himself as Jim's wingman on September 9, 1943. He wanted to know what information I had about my uncle's last combat mission. Stan said that after I finished telling him what I knew, he would tell me what really happened that day. I could not believe it, after all these years; I was talking to Jim's wingman that day, the last pilot to see him alive. Stan said that he never thought about trying to tell his story to anyone after the war, and nobody asked. He was new to the squadron, and after being a prisoner for so long, he simply could not remember my uncle's name.

I ordered a copy of Stan Wojick's MACR and wanting more detailed mission information, I visited the National Record Center near Washington, DC. where detailed mission reports were stored. The reports contained a lot of information about each mission flown and would prove to be very helpful in telling Jim's story.

In the meantime, Stan Wojick's MACR arrived and Lt. Schulze had also filed his report. The search for Ray Schulze was on. I mentioned Ray to every pilot I had contacted, and one Bob Vrilakas, an old tentmate of Ray Schulze responded. Through mutual friends he had learned that Ray went to work for a bank in Schuyler, Nebraska after the war, and thought he was still in the area. He was and I found him living in nearby Dodge, Nebraska.

I now had a lot of information. The facts about Jim's training, life in North Africa, the combat missions that he flew as well as the details of his final mission were starting to take shape. However, I thought I would make one last attempt for information from anyone who may have remembered Jim through the First Fighter Group's newsletter. I will never forget the day I looked over the mail and saw a letter from Mark Bradshaw. I did not recognize the name and was sure I had not written him in the past. The ad I ran in the newsletter had paid off beyond my wildest expectations. There before me was a letter from Jim's crew chief, the man responsible for the maintenance and operation of Jim's plane. Included in his letter was a picture of Jim in Mateur, Tunisia standing in front of his third P-38 fighter, the other two having been retired from battle damage. He was dressed only in a pair of shorts, and a ball cap. His plane's nose was decorated with two swastikas, and as his letters home had indicated a big "Mickey" adorned the access door to the machine guns and cannon. The picture was taken on September 5, 1943.

Information was arriving daily, but Jim's story could now begin to be told.

JIM'S STORY - FLIGHT TRAINING

When the United States entered the War, Jim was working as a baker at the Schulze Baking Co. in Chicago, IL. During the great depression, jobs were hard to come by. Jim's older brother, Bob was in charge of production at the bakery, and following graduation, Jim was off to work for his brother in Chicago. Jim was followed into the baking business two years later by my father, Bill. At the time, Jim and Bill were living at the Englewood YMCA. During the early months of 1942, the Army realized that its requirement of two years' college education to enter the Air Cadet program needed to be dropped to attract the number of pilots that the war now required. Seizing the opportunity and having expressed no desire whatsoever to be a private in anyone's army, Jim began going to school three nights a week and all day on Saturday, to give himself every advantage to pass the examinations given by the Air Cadet board. The twenty-five-dollar investment in extra schooling paid off by passing all the exams. After a quick visit home, Jim entered the Air Cadet program, April 6, 1942.

Leaving Chicago by train, Jim arrived in ankle deep mud at the Air Corps Replacement Training Center, located in Santa Ana, California. Cadets would remain at this location for at least 30 days. During that time, they would be tested both physically and mentally, to determine whether they would proceed as pilots, navigators or bombardier. One of these tests checked to see if they had the ability to stand high altitude flying.

During this test, the cadets were placed in a low-pressure chamber in which the effects of high-altitude flying were simulated by pumping the air out, and bringing you back down by gradually pumping the air back in. The entire test was carried out as if it were an actual flight. There was room for twenty men and two instructors in the chamber. Normally a pilot would begin taking oxygen at about 12,000 feet, but to show what it was like to be without oxygen the cadets went up to 18,000 feet before being instructed to put on their oxygen masks. Jim experienced no difficulties; however, he was amazed at how his fingernails turned black, as did all the others. The instructors then asked for a volunteer to go up to 24,000 feet without an oxygen mask on to show the effects to the others. "I volunteered as did a lot of fellows. But they chose the fellow next to me as he was near the end. We then put our masks back on and adjusted our oxygen intake. We then went slowly up to 24,000 feet. We were ordered to watch the one fellow without oxygen closely. At 24,000 his face was as black as well as his ears and lips. His fingernails were as black as coal, but he was conscious and felt almost all right. He tried to write a little, but could only scribble.

After about two minutes, he slowly started to slump forward. Then the instructors grabbed him and gave him the oxygen mask. Right away his color came back and he was alright." Everyone learned the importance of oxygen in high altitude flight.

After a few weeks, Jim was finally classified a pilot, however he was aware of the fact that he could be "washed out" at any time. Most cadets were starting to look forward to starting their primary flight training. They were doing a lot of calisthenics and drilling every day. Most began to not like the drilling anymore. Jim's attitude towards the army and the drilling began to change in May. "I used to think that the Army wasn't much and didn't have any special respect for a soldier, but I have changed my ideas quite a bit now since I have a taste of it. A soldier has to know practically as much about his business as any other trade. At least he does to be a good soldier. An officer is even more of a skilled man. Anyhow, this army is quite an outfit."

Mid-May left the cadets with some free time, of which many took advantage of the time to visit nearby Balboa. The cadets found that people in the area treated them like kings. "All you had to do is just go out and get on the road and someone would pick you up and take you wherever you wanted to go." Not all was right with the army, however. The cadets had yet to be paid and Jim was 85 cents in debt.

By May the 18th, the cadets thought that they should have already been on their way to primary training by now, but this was not the case. In the meantime, however, Eddie Cantor visited the camp, and Jack Benny did a broadcast. It had been quite a thrill to see all the celebrities. Still no pay, but at least they were no longer a company, now they were a squadron.

More drilling, KP, guard duty, etc. Good news for all cadets, however. Next week they were heading for primary training. The classes continued. International Morse code, mathematics, map reading and navigation. More tests and you'd better pass because no one wanted to have to stay for another month or so to take the courses over again.

Jim was finally on his way to primary flight training located at the Palo Alto Airport in King City, California. The two hundred underclassmen were met by another 200 upperclassmen. The airport was in a beautiful setting situated on a plateau between two mountain ranges with plenty of grass and flowers. After being issued flying suits, helmets, goggles, gloves and a heavy wool sweater, along with being given instructions on the use of a parachute it was time to go flying. At King City cadets flew little Ryan PT-22 "Recruits". "Low wing and about the snappiest training plane there is," exclaimed Jim. "I really like this learning to fly. I don't see but what I'll be able to learn all right. Some of the other places have two wing planes

(Stearman bi-planes) that are much slower and easier to fly - but I suppose it is better to learn to fly the tougher ones now and then it will be easier later."

The training continued, "So far the instructor has had me doing turns and glides and climbs and I have had two landings, and a takeoff already. Maybe by this time next week I will have soloed." More tests: navigation, engines, more stalls, spins and now forced landings. The instructor would cut the throttle and tell the cadets, "suppose the engine has stopped, where would you land?" The plane would begin to glide down as the cadet would look for a nice level field to land in. When the plane would get down to about 50 feet on its approach the instructor would say "give it the gun" and the PT-22 would be on its way back up for more stalls and spins.

Somewhere between six and ten hours of instructional time, it was procedure to have a check ride by another instructor to see if they were getting along okay. About 20% of the pilots would "wash-out" of flight training at this point. If a pilot was "washed-out," then he was sent back to take training as either a navigator or bombardier.

The day finally came when the cadets got to solo. The instructor would climb out of the plane, say something like, "maybe you can fly this thing better when I am not in it," and you were on your way. The following weeks were spent practicing the things you have been taught and trying to get the 60 hours you will need to advance to basic flight training. Each day, as Jim wrote, began to fall into the same routine. "Tomorrow I'll get up at 4:30 fall out for reveille formation at 4:40, have about ten minutes of exercises and come back to my room - wash, shave, make my bed, help mop and sweep the room, dust venetian blinds and generally make the room spic and span - eat breakfast and be ready for the flight line by 6:00. All of that has to be done in about an hour so you see we are all rushed right along. Well, we get to the flight line just as the sun is coming up and by 6:10 I'll have a plane and be on my way up to about 3000 feet to practice my flying - spins and stalls, turns etc. Each plane only has enough gas for one hour and a half flying so you have to be back at the field in one and a quarter hour, then you most likely will either get that ship or maybe some other one for another hour and a quarter – and so on until about 11:30. At that time we leave the flight line and come back to our barracks. We eat dinner and have to be in ground school at 1:00. We have three hours of ground school - engines, physics and navigation which lasts until 4:00, then one hour of physical training - a lot of hard exercises and games etc. From 5:00 to 5:30 is free time to take a shower. Then from 5:30 till 6:30 we drill out on the field. After that is supper and study period with lights out at 8:50. They have us split up so that half fly in the morning and half go to school and just the opposite in the afternoon." Cadets had to stick to the schedule and do things right or they might find themselves on the ramp, walking of demerits.

By now it was July and Jim had completed his third supervised solo. This meant he got a solo ship to go out and practice by himself. After completing about 50 hours cadets got their final Army check out. "I had my final Army check today and I think I passed - at least I hope so. You see we have civilian pilots for instructors and at about 50 to 55 hours we are checked by a flying officer to see if we are good enough for the Army."

Having passed all his check rides, Jim had only a cross-country trip to complete before heading to basic flight training. "We went on our cross-country trip this afternoon and had a swell trip. Each instructor has about 5 or 6 students and they go as a separate group. Each group is spaced 10 or 15 minutes apart so you can't see any other planes except those in your particular flight. There were 6 planes - one for each of us and the instructor rode with one fellow to sort of ride herd on us. Well, we had our course all figured out from the maps they issued us and put our compasses headed in the right direction and headed out. I was appointed to be the point man in the V formation, so I had to lead the procession and find the way. All the instructor did was follow along and if we got too far off course he would straighten us out - if he could catch us. Mostly we were to fly by the checkpoints we could see on the ground. But after we got up the valley about 40 miles the ground was covered by a fog bank and we could not see the ground, so after I figured we must be just about over our check point, I changed course and started off in the new direction. I guessed it about right because eventually we came out and I saw some mountains and prominent objects that were recognizable from the map. All in all, we were gone about three hours, and it was quite an experience."

The end of July came and with it an end to Jim's primary training. He was sent to the Chico Army Flying School, in Chico, California. The cadets soon would get to fly "real" planes, BT-13's.

Leaving King City by bus, the Cadets arrived later that same day at the next step towards receiving their silver wings. Chico at the time was a town of about 10,000 people. The field was located about six miles north of town, at the edge of the foothills, in the desert. Jim's class, 42-K, was about the third class to go through Chico. The ground was torn up, and they were building barracks and roads as rapidly as possible. The flying school must have looked pretty dreary to the cadets. However, when the cadets got to the landing field and saw those big beautiful airplanes waiting for them, they began to feel better.

To the new cadets, the BT-13's looked to be quite a handful of airplane. "Let me tell you these planes are real planes, a 450-hp. engine, a glass enclosed cockpit,

which is so doggone full of instruments and gadgets you have to be all hands and feet especially when starting the engine."

By the end of the first week of August, Jim had 5 hours of flight time in and was expecting to solo any day. The cadets were again kept very busy in ground school, with tests almost every day. The barracks had to be kept just right. The cadets were also introduced to something new, the Link trainer. "I have soloed now," Jim wrote, "it really is quite a thrill, all over again to be soloed in this big powerful ship. We are getting Link trainer time now. A Link trainer is a cockpit of sorts on a swivel in which you get the basis for flying by instruments. You get in and it is closed up and you keep it straight and level by the instruments inside which are the same as those that are in the plane you are flying." Very soon the cadets would be introduced to night flying, and then the cadets would have to fly by instruments.

One nice aspect about Chico was that Jim and the cadets would go downtown in army trucks every afternoon to the high school athletic field for their physical training. "The high school is a beautiful place. It has a green turf like a park and perfect for playing football, baseball, etc. I like it a lot."

From the air the cadets could see some beautiful snow-capped mountains to the north. When they had some free time, they spent it sliding down the snow-covered slopes on the seat of their pants in the Lassen Volcanic National Park. But the short period of time the cadets had in this part of their training dictated that the instructors push their students hard. After two weeks, most cadets accumulated about 17 to 18 hours of flight time, which were about half solo and half dual.

After another week of training which included quite a bit of Link trainer time, the cadets were ready for their introduction to night flight. For most cadets, including Jim, the experience was both exciting and a little frightening. "Last night I flew at night for the first time. It was really quite a thrill at first. It is awful hard to see anything or figure out where you are, but after a while you get sort of used to it and can get the hundreds of lights that are visible straightened out and know where the landing field is, etc. One thing that was thrilling was the landing. I was pretty scared on the first one, but after that there was nothing to it. From now on we will fly every night."

Once again, the cadets fell into a predictable routine as they worked at getting the flying time necessary to move on to advanced training. "Right now, we get up at 7:30 and go to breakfast, then have until 9:00 to shave, clean up the room, and make your bed, etc. Some mornings though we have to be at ground school at 8:00, then ground school lasts until 11:00. Right now, we are studying engine maintenance and

meteorology, which is a study of the clouds and weather in general. By the time we are finished with this course we will be sort of amateur weathermen. Well, after ground school we have an hour of athletics and eat at 12:30, and then report to the flight line at 1:00 and stay there until 5:30. Eat supper at 6:00 and sometimes drill after supper. Every Friday night we put on a retreat parade for the commanding officer of the post."

With about 70 hours into basic training the cadets began to think about advanced training and what it had in store for them. Each cadet was asked to make a choice of the type of training they wanted, multi-engine, or single engine pursuit planes. Jim wanted to be a fighter pilot, but he wouldn't know what type of training he was headed for until two weeks later. In the meantime, he had to complete a 200-mile cross-country flight, and practice instrument flying on a radio beam.

September 25 arrived and with it the end of basic training and notification that Jim had indeed been selected to go to Luke Field, Arizona, for pursuit training. At this stage the cadets were suppose to be flyers, and from now on would be working on polishing up their rough spots, flying a lot of cross-country flights, day and night. More formation flying, and quite a bit of gunnery practice. The cadets were finally going to learn how to fight with their planes.

At Luke Field the cadets were introduced to their new challenge, the North American AT-6 "Texan," and some new terrain. "This Arizona sure is a desolate looking state if I have ever seen one. It has some beautiful points but it is a hard-barren beauty. The country around here where we fly is desert and high Rocky Mountains. The mountains are bare and just plain rocks. But it's still a lot of fun flying around them." The AT-6 with its 600 hp Pratt & Whitney engine, and retractable landing gear, turned out to be one of the most widely used aircraft in history. For Jim it was a real dream maker.

Another dream came true for Jim at Luke Field. On October 31, 1942, Jim and Micky were married at the First Methodist Church in Phoenix. There wasn't any time to celebrate though, because it was time for the cadets to start learning the deadly part of their new profession.

The pilots really enjoyed the skeet shooting used to train pilots in "leading" a moving target and judging range. Growing up on the farm in Hastings, Jim felt very comfortable in this part of his training. "I like the skeet shooting a lot. They have really good 12-gauge shotguns and I have been having good luck and getting some pretty good scores. Four times in a row I got 23 clay pigeons out of 25." After all the practice with stalls, spins, aerobatics, night flying, formation flying, etc., it was now

time to head for gunnery range at Gila Bend, Arizona. The cadets would stay for two weeks, and it is here that the cadets would begin to learn the deadly art of aerial combat and ground strafing.

The cadets who still remained would soon reflect on the many months of training they were about to complete. The importance of what they were doing became more and more apparent. Working under pressure seemed to bring out the best in the young men. It became apparent to all the cadets just how wrong most of their first impressions had been about the training programs and it became even more evident as many of their friends slipped and fell by the wayside. They learned a new language, new mannerisms, and a new mode of living. Being a part of this country's Air Force began to really mean something to each man. Those silver wings now stood for the sacred emblem of a great group of men. For these remaining cadets, to be finally accepted by this select fraternity seemed the most natural and yet greatest of all their accomplishments.

On December 3, 1942 Jim graduated along with the remaining members of class 42-K. Now with his silver wings, Jim was very excited to learn that his goal of being a fighter pilot was about to come true. His next stop was the 329th Fighter Group, 4th Air Force, and their P-38 Lightnings.

After a briefing in Glendale, CA., and the pilots were transferred to Muroc Dry Lake, now called Edwards AFB, to check out in the hottest fighter of the day.

The Lockheed Lightning had to have been designed by an artist in love with flying. The plane had two enormous engines jutting out from slender booms that tapered into twin rudders. The pilot's Plexiglas cockpit sat on top of a streamlined center section, the gondola, stood almost ten feet off the ground. The pilot used a built-in, retractable ladder at the back of the gondola to reach the cockpit. The wings stretched 52 feet. Two Liquid-cooled 1600 horsepower supercharged Allison engines converted the nine-ton aircraft into a formidable fighter designed to climb high and fast to intercept enemy bombers. Besides its capability to reach high altitude the P-38 was a stable platform for strafing ground targets or dive-bombing. Four 50-caliber machine guns and a 20-mm cannon centered in the nose of the cockpit provided tremendous firepower.

Muroc was the perfect place to fly out of. It had a fairly long runway centered on the bed of a dry lake. There were no obstacles around the base and the dry lakebed provided excellent terrain for a crash or forced landing. The desert surrounding the air base was practically uninhabited, and there was plenty of airspace available.

Living conditions were a bit primitive. Tarpaper shacks provided the living quarters as well as the other necessary buildings.

The new pilots were put right to work checking out in this fighter plane. First, they went to ground school classes where all the various systems on the aircraft were explained. The pilots also spent hours sitting in the cockpit getting familiar with the location of all the instruments and controls. Finally, they had to draw from memory a picture of the instrument panel showing the location of each instrument. Just before their solo checkout they were given a "piggyback" ride in a P-38 that had most of the radios removed from behind the pilot seat. There was just enough room behind the pilot for the piggyback pilot to squeeze in and observe how things were done on an actual flight.

Finally, the day had come. The first time a pilot flew the P-38, he flew it alone. If the ground instructor lacked confidence in a pilot, he was washed out or reassigned. When it was time to go, the instructor would ride out to the end of the runway on the wing and after making sure all latches were secure, gave a thumbs up and slide to the ground to sweat out the take off. The moment of truth arrived when the pilots were cleared on to the runway for takeoff.

To maintain hydraulic brake pressure while taxiing, it was necessary to constantly pump the rudder pedals with your feet. By the time a new pilot had taxied out and was ready to take off, their legs felt like lead weights. New pilots were easily identified by rudders that would constantly flutter as they reached the runway for takeoff. The flutter was caused by their legs shaking from fatigue as they pumped the brake pedals.

The final blow came to the legs when they had to pump up the brakes and hold the airplane back until it stabilized at takeoff power. When the brakes were released the P-38 would shoot forward like a drag racer. It accelerated rapidly to takeoff speed and would respond beautifully to elevator control as it became airborne. The cockpit situated directly between the wings gave a pilot the feeling of being part of the airplane. For Jim as for the other new pilots they found this first flight a thrilling experience. After flying around for a while to get a feel for the plane, each pilot was required to go through an engine shut down and propeller feathering procedure. This was perhaps the most important procedure the new pilots would learn. Many of these pilots would soon learn the advantages of having a plane with two engines in a combat situation when one engine was shot out and the other could still bring them back alive.

After practicing landings at 5000 feet, it was time to return to Muroc for the real thing. Despite the unfamiliar high approach and landing speed the P-38 with its

tricycle landing gear would settle smoothly to the runway. For Jim, December 27, 1942 was the date for his piggyback ride, followed by two one-hour flights. It was the beginning of real love affair.

The month of January for Jim was spent at Muroc working hard to learn as much as possible from his instructors. The pilots worked hard to get in as much flying time as possible. This was often hampered though by the older planes that were being used for training. The new planes were being sent overseas, and it was difficult to keep the training planes in flying condition due to the amount of use they were subjected to and the lack of spare parts.

Air to air and air to ground gunnery was, naturally, the most popular part of the training. Air to air training was conducted on a range west of San Clemente Island, or over the west mountains of Death Valley. Air to ground gunnery was conducted at ranges on the Mojave Desert. A favorite pastime after gunnery over west Death Valley was to fly down into the center of the valley for some low-level flying practice. "The other day a flight of six of us flew up to Death Valley and cruised up and down the valley about ten feet off the ground. We also have been firing gunnery at ground targets. It is quite a thrill to dive down at the target and let go with 4 -.50 caliber machine guns and a 20-mm cannon. They raise quite a cloud of dust."

Jim finished his desert training at Muroc on February 1st, with thirty-three hours in the P-38. For the remainder of February, Jim was back in Glendale, flying patrols over the city and up and down the coast. Once again, the pilots worked hard to learn all they could from their instructors, but best of all the pilots felt good because they were beginning to do something for the war effort. After only another 24 hours of patrolling the skies over southern California, and a total of 57 hours in the P-38, it was time for Jim to be shipped overseas.

NORTH AFRICA

The middle of March 1943 found Jim aboard a large ship in a convoy on its way to North Africa. After an uneventful trip, the ship docked at the Port of Oran, Algeria. The waterfront looked like New York, due to the supplies arriving daily. On the dock, the pilots, after identifying their gear, were taken by truck to the coastal city of Mustagonem. The Army had appropriated a few dozen villas facing the sea for officers' quarters. "I never imagined to hit a spot like this. We are quartered in a little village right on the shore. It is very picturesque. Arabs in their flowing robes, French fishermen, etc. We are sleeping in some empty summer homes and with just a couple

blankets - no beds - and let me tell you the concrete is hard. We are in a replacement pool and doing nothing but rowing boats out into the sea, and sleeping on the sand."

On April 10, Jim received orders directing him to an airfield about 15 miles from Casablanca near a small village called Berrichid. The Air Corps had hastily set up a combat training base, and had directed some P-38 pilots who had finished their combat tour to be the instructors. The pilots began to live as they would for the rest of their tour - in tents and eating out of mess kits. "We are living in tents with some homemade wooden bunks, so with our bed rolls and a mattress cover filled with some Arab hay we are quite comfortable."

The P-38's assigned for the training were war weary and out of commission most of the time, while instructor pilots understandably were also war weary and ready to return stateside. The final battles in North Africa had taken a heavy toll on fighter pilots. Most of the missions had been dive-bombing and strafing. This was a particularly vulnerable type of combat for a fighter because you had to operate in range of every gun the enemy has on the ground. The well-intentioned program to give the pilots a bit more combat training under experienced combat pilots never really got off the ground. During the three weeks Jim spent at Berrichid, he flew only four days and accumulated nine more hours of flight time.

With a little over sixty-six hours in the P-38, Jim finally received orders that he was being assigned to a combat unit. Jim was assigned to the Twelfth Air Force, First Fighter Group, then located at Chateaudun du Rommel, Algeria, a town located close to the city of Constantine. Jim was then further assigned to the 94th Fighter Squadron. The 94th had a wealth of history. Eddie Rickenbacker was not only the United States top ace of World War I but was also its Commanding Officer. The squadron then as it is today was known for its famous insignia that adorned each plane the “Hat in the Ring." A fighter pilot could not have been assigned to a more historic squadron if he had been allowed to choose any outfit in the Air Corps. Jim was transferred to the 94th on May 5, 1943. Unbelievably, nine days later Eddie Rickenbacker visited the squadron.

In April, Rickenbacker had visited the War Department and received another assignment as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson's Special Consultant. Rickenbacker was to visit Russia to check into the Lend-Lease program then in effect. Lend-Lease was the program, inaugurated in March 1941, by which America became the arsenal of democracy, sending military supplies to all nations fighting the Axis. Rickenbacker's trip took him through North Africa, and as such he planned to visit as many Air Corp groups as possible to help boost morale. Knowing that his old squadron was stationed in the area, before leaving the United States, Rickenbacker

had a jeweler in New York make up insignia pins with the hat-in-the-ring motif and had persuaded Hap Arnold, head of the Army Air Forces, to approve them to be worn on their uniforms.

On May 14, five command cars pulled into the base. Jimmy Doolittle, then Commanding Officer of the Twelfth Air Force, stepped out to introduce Rickenbacker to the group. Later that evening Rickenbacker threw a big party for the squadron in Constantine. There were then some 22 pilots in the 94th Squadron. The pilots having been trucked in were treated to a big meal consisting of camel steaks with all the trimmings. Following the cognac and grape juice to wash it all down, Rickenbacker assembled all the pilots on a small stage. General Doolittle called each pilot's name. Eddie Rickenbacker presented the small "hat-in-the-ring" pin to General Doolittle who in turn pinned it on the tunic above the pilots' wings. Jim wrote home to describe the event. "We had a big squadron party last night in a nearby town. Eddie Rickenbacker, who used to be with the squadron in the last war, threw a party for us. We were all presented with a pin of silver in the form of the squadron insignia, the Hat-in-the-Ring."

During the first fifteen days with the squadron, Jim was able to get in fifteen more hours of practice in P-38's. All the training was soon to pay off. May 21, 1943 was Jim's initiation to combat. Scheduled pilots were notified the night before and given the time for the mission briefing to be held the next day. Either the squadron intelligence officer or the flight surgeon would wake the pilots in time for breakfast etc. Pilots from all three squadrons that made up the Group, the 94th, 27th, and 71st, would go to the Group briefing tent for the mission briefing. The mission operations briefing consisted of the designated target, en-route times, routes, altitudes, alternate targets, anticipated enemy ground and air opposition plus expected weather en-route to the target and back. If the Group were escorting bombers, then meeting time and rendezvous points would be discussed as well as radio frequencies, call signs, form up procedures, and armament to be carried. Intelligence would brief on known enemy aircraft and anti-aircraft en-route and in the target area plus escape and evasion routes or tactics if a pilot should go down over enemy territory. On occasion a special briefing by the Group commander would follow.

Because of possible compromise of classified information pilots could not write much on paper. Pilots often wrote essential information on the backs of their hands since that could be easily rubbed off if necessary. Finally, the pilots synchronized their watches, and were issued escape packets. These packets contained foreign money for the country(s) the pilots would traverse plus a small U.S. flag and a map of the area. The group chaplain would ask a blessing and the pilots would be on their

way to the flight line. The trip would take the pilots by the personal equipment storage area to pick up parachutes, oxygen equipment, and then to their respective aircraft.

The squadron in flight normally consisted of three flights of four aircraft each. A flight of four consisted of the flight leader and wingman, and element leader and wingman all in close formation. Each squadron had a call sign. The 94th's was "Springcap," and each flight of four planes was designated red, white, or blue flight. The call sign of any member of the squadron was determined by his flight color designation and assigned position. Red 1 would be the leader, Red 2 his wingman, Red 3 the element leader and Red 4 the element leader's wingman.

It was a general rule that a new pilot flew his first mission as wingman to the assigned squadron flight commander, who in Jim's case was Captain Otto Wellensiek, soon to be the squadron's new commanding officer. The flight commander's wingman position was the most protected and the easiest to fly. From there he would be assigned as the element wingman, known as "tail-end Charlie," the most vulnerable position because he was the farthest back in the formation. The pilots would maintain strict radio silence, even for takeoffs, so as not to compromise the mission. Generally, there would be little or no radio transmissions between aircraft until enemy aircraft were sighted, or the target area had been reached.

After preflight inspection of the aircraft it was time to get set in the cockpit and be ready to start the engines exactly on the scheduled time. The plane's crew chief would always climb up on the wing and help the pilot settle in. The "Mae-west," life jacket, unlike later styles, was bulky and made of stiff rubberized canvas that managed to rub a pilot's neck raw before the completion of a mission. Between it, the parachute with attached dinghy and survival kit, along with the pilot's .45 caliber pistol and canteen made it awkward just getting in and strapped down. At this point there was always a feeling of mounting tension. The crew chief would talk to the pilot and inform him about the plane. It would help fill the time of growing tension and he would stay there until both engines had started and were running smoothly. At the last moment the crew chief would slide off the wing, latch the ladder, and go out front to wait for the pilots signal to be marshaled out of the revetment to the taxiway. He would always be there to meet the pilot on their return, "sweating him out."

Jim's first mission was to escort about 70 B-17 bombers from the 2nd and 301st Bomb Groups to Sciacca, Sicily. Sixteen pilots from the 94th along with formations from the 27th and 71st fighter squadrons took off at 7:40am for the mission. The bombers went over the target at 25,000 feet with the fighters protecting them from 29,000 feet. "I will tell you that my introduction to combat was a merry one," Jim wrote to his wife. "We were escorting bombers and right over the target in the flak

and fighter area, my right engine quit - whew, did I sweat for a minute. I couldn't stay with the formation, and it was a long way from home. So I feathered the bad engine's prop and started down in a hell of a hurry. Luckily the bombers were just leaving the target so I just tucked myself under the wing of one of those beautiful babies and went home with them for protection. Some fun."

It had been Jim's first combat experience that Colliers Magazine had written about in its June 26 issue. Jim would later add to the story, "A waist gunner fired a burst at me as I was moving in, he thought I was the enemy – fortunately he missed."

The following day Jim went on his second mission. Fourteen P-38's from the 94th along with formations of the 27th and 71st squadrons took off at 12:40 PM on a fighter sweep over northwestern Sicily. The pilots liked this type of mission. It meant that rather than be on the defensive protecting bombers, they could be looking for the enemy on their own terms. Hopefully they would have the advantage of surprise and altitude on their side. The formation flew at 5000 feet, and was over the assigned area to patrol for fifteen minutes. During that time, one Focke-Wulf (Fw.) 190 was destroyed, and three Messerschmitt (Me.) 109s were damaged. One of the 94th's pilots, Lt. Donald Lowe, was hit by an enemy aircraft and reported missing. Jim would have a week to contemplate the tension, excitement, death and destruction of his first two combat missions.

After the fall of Tunisia, two small islands in enemy hands posed a potential threat to the flank of any Allied thrust towards Europe. These heavily fortified islands, lying off the coast of Tunisia, were Pantelleria and Lampedusa. Both had harbors and Pantelleria had an airfield. Beginning May 31, 1943 these islands were relentlessly attacked for twelve days.

Mission no. 3 was a dive-bombing mission, with each pilot carrying a one thousand-pound bomb. On June 2, fourteen pilots took off at 6:20 am, to bomb the German airdrome at Milo, Sicily. This was an attempt to suppress the fighter opposition that the Germans were putting up against the Allies attacking Pantelleria. The formation flew on the deck to a point 20 miles from the coast of Sicily where they were forced to turn back due to a low overcast and heavy haze.

For the next three days it was dive-bombing, strafing, and some sorties on weather reconnaissance for the group. On June 3rd, the target was Pantelleria. Mission no. 4 was again a dive-bombing mission. Jim had now been relegated to "tail end Charlie." Captain Wellensiek, along with 14 other pilots, took off at 1:35 PM, together with formations from the 27th and 71st squadrons, each carrying a one thousand-pound bomb. They flew on a direct route to a gun emplacement just north

of the town of Pantelleria. The formation climbed to 5000 feet before beginning their dive. Radio silence prevailed as the squadron leader began a descent toward the target. The squadron leader's job was much more complicated then the rest of the pilots. He had to navigate very accurately and position the squadron so that they could dive bomb without having made their positions known to the enemy any sooner than necessary. At the last moment the squadron leader would break radio silence, telling the pilots to arm their bombs. An arming wire controlled from the cockpit readied the bomb for release. The pilots were directed to echelon to the right. An echelon formation in which each plane is located slightly to the right or left of the one just ahead of it, like a series of steps, made it possible for the pilots to follow each other into the target on nearly the same path. The flight leader announced the start of his run, and the rest of the pilots heeled over and started their steep dive, following their leader. On this day, the order to "drop bombs - -Now!" came at 2500 feet. Hearing the command, the pilots would press the bomb release button. The radio would then fill with chatter between aircraft as they started to climb back up to reform and head back home. No enemy aircraft were spotted; however, the flak was intense so the flight left the area quickly. The flight proceeded directly back to the base, relaxing by flying a loose formation then tightening up on approach to the base for landing. It was a matter of pride for the pilots to look as sharp as possible when approaching their base. They always approached the runway echeloned to the right at an altitude of about 100 feet, and flew a "peel up" landing pattern. This pattern involved flying down the runway in echelon at about 300 mph. The leader would peel up and around the landing pattern in a tight turn. The rest of the flight would peel off individually at about four second intervals, spacing themselves in the pattern at the proper interval for landing. Properly executed it made for a tight pattern in a kind of oblong circle that got several flights down in a minimum amount of time. A good pattern required the flight leader to stay in a bank all the way around, rolling out just in time to flair for the landing. A victory roll was allowed in the pattern if a pilot had scored a victory. The pilots were picked up in jeeps and taken directly to the group-debriefing tent. There the group and squadron intelligence officers questioned the pilots about the details of the mission.

On June 4, Jim was assigned his first plane. The crew chief, Mark Bradshaw, would become a close friend. "Well, I have a brand-new plane of my own now," Jim wrote to his wife. "PILOT-James P. Dibble - right on the side. Nice eh? That's a good way to have it because you get to know it like your own car. Just what it will do and won't do. You see, every plane has its own peculiarities and when you fly a different one each time, you never know what's coming next. I am going to name it "Micky" - may I please? 'Cause then I know she will take care of me if I treat her nice."

More good news on this day. The commanding officer told the pilots that they would be getting air mattress soon. The men really welcomed that news. Most had gotten very tired of "hard sacks."

The weather was also difficult for the men to get used to. During the day there was always a pretty stiff wind, which kept things surprisingly cool. However, at night the breeze would stop and it would turn very cold. Most tents had some sort of stove and the men would sleep with four or five G.I. blankets and still get cold.

Mission no.5 was another dive-bombing mission, and this time Jim would be in his own plane. Flying the "Red-4" position, Jim, along with 13 other pilots from the 94th, together with a formation from the 71st squadron took off at 1:10 PM. They each carried a one thousand-pound bomb. Their target was an air base northeast of Capoterro, Sardinia.

Following the resistance in Tunisia, in order to keep the Axis guessing as to the destination of the forthcoming invasion into southern Europe, the Allies maintained a balance of attack on both Sardinia and Sicily, concentrating particularly on the airfields on both islands.

The formation flew on the deck to a point about 20 miles up the west coast of Sardinia, then directly to the target. The formation dropped their bombs from 3000 feet on the north side of the field near the operations buildings and scored hits on two of these buildings. No enemy aircraft were encountered; however, twelve enemy planes were seen on the field.

From the 6th of June through the 11th, all efforts by the First Fighter Group were devoted to Pantelleria. By the 6th, over 1700 sorties had been flown by the combined air forces in the area against Pantelleria, and had dropped 1300 tons of bombs on the port and airfield.

On June 7th 600 tons of bombs were dropped. On that day Jim flew his 6th mission. The Group was ordered to escort about 45 B-17s over Pantelleria. The P-38s would fly at 21,000 feet with the bombers 2000 feet below them. This meant operating in the rarefied atmosphere and with it the possibility of supercharger problems with the engines. Also, at this altitude, the pilots would become very oxygen conscious. The P-38 had a demand system. It was supposed to feed in the required amount of oxygen at any given altitude until the pilot reached a point where 100% oxygen was supplied. A blinker on the supply diaphragm winked with every breath a pilot took to indicate he was getting oxygen, but it did not indicate whether he was getting enough. The Group had lost a couple pilots to suspected oxygen deficiency

and after that, the pilots became very conscious of being properly hooked up to the system and whether enough oxygen was being supplied. The best check for the pilots was to remove a glove and check the color of their fingernails. If they had started to turn blue, then there was an oxygen problem, requiring the pilot to switch to 100% oxygen until the cause of the problem was detected. The usual cause was a loose mask or disconnected hose resulting from a pilot swiveling his head around the cockpit looking for enemy fighters. The oxygen supply was not unlimited so each pilot had to manage his intake in a way that enabled him to get to the target and back down to 10,000 feet or less where oxygen was no longer necessary.

On this mission, due to engine trouble, Jim had to turn back just prior to crossing the Mediterranean Sea, at Cape Bon. He was forced to land at a nearby airbase manned by the South African Air Force. After attempting some temporary repairs, Jim took off but was forced to return to the same base for more repairs. After two more hours' work on the engines, he was finally able to return to his base at 10:00 PM that night.

Also, on June 7th, surrender leaflets were dropped by 3 P-40s from the 33rd Fighter Group. There was no reaction, so on June 9, the bombardment continued.

Mission no. 7 was a combination dive-bombing and bomber escort mission. On June 9, nineteen P-38s from the 94th, each carrying a 1000-pound bomb, together with formations from the 27th and 71st fighter squadrons took off at 12:10 PM to dive bomb a gun emplacement on Pantelleria and then escort about 28 B-17s from the 301st bomb group over Pantelleria. Just as the formation was about to dive bomb the gun emplacement, they were attacked by about twelve Me.-109s. The formation released their bombs from about 5000 feet and approximately half hit the target area. A general fight ensued which continued for about 15 miles back toward Cape Bon. The 94th destroyed one Me.109, and probably destroyed another. Lt. Dan Kennedy with the 27th shot down 3 fighters, which set a record for the 27th in World War II for the most planes destroyed by one pilot during one combat mission.

At Cape Bon, the squadron rendezvoused with the flight of B-17s and proceeded to escort them to Pantelleria. The flight lasted three and one half-hours.

On June 10, Jim flew two more dive-bombing missions to Pantelleria. Both missions targeted gun emplacements on the island. That day, the island was hit with more then 1500 tons of high explosives. Later that day, another call to surrender was made.

Mission no. 10 took place on June 11. Jim took off at 10:45 am, with the 27th Fighter Squadron to patrol and dive-bomb Pantelleria. His flight patrolled the area for an hour and half, when the formation sighted about 60 Fw.190s dive bombing allied landing barges and ships. His formation jettisoned their bombs and dispersed the enemy aircraft. Jim had to land at Tunis to refuel, and then returned to his base.

At noon on the 11th of June, Pantelleria surrendered as the British 1st Infantry Division was disembarking. White flags and panels were seen, and this was history's first example of territorial conquest by air action alone. It had taken 5285 sorties, 6200 tons of high explosives, with the loss of only 4 aircraft, 10 missing, and 16 damaged. The island of Lampedusa surrendered the following day.

Following the surrender of the islands the pilots got a short break to rest up. They had earned it. In the preceding week, Jim had flown seven missions, and logged over 28 hours of combat flying time.

On June 15, it was "back to work at the President's request." What had started was the pre-invasion air phase for Operation Huskey, the invasion of Sicily. The emphasis was placed on the enemy airfields to render them unusable, and to destroy as many aircraft and supporting maintenance elements as possible. Jim flew this day with 23 other pilots from the 94th. They took off along with formations from the 27th and 71st to escort 48 B-17s over the airdrome at Boccadifalco, Sicily. The formation was over the target for ten minutes. The bombing appeared to be very accurate, with hits seen directly in the middle of the airdrome, however there were no fires or enemy planes seen on the ground.

Mission no. twelve was flown on June 18. Twenty-three pilots from the 94th, along with formations from the 27th and 71st fighter squadrons, escorted 35 B-26's over Terranova, Sardinia, to bomb shipping in the harbor. Though Sardinia was not to be invaded, the air bases and supply lines there had to be attacked to prevent reinforcement of the Luftwaffe units in Sicily. The bombers left 3 large ships on fire, while destroying many of the dockside installations. No enemy aircraft were seen in the area.

On the 20th of June there was another hard-fought battle. Jim got a break from his "tail end Charlie" duties and was assigned to the "Red-3" position. Jim's wingman was one of his tentmates, Lt. Jim Cronin. Jim Cronin had left Chicago with Jim, and the two went through training together. Also on the flight was another close friend, Lt. Ed Esser. Jim had met Ed Esser at Luke Field.

Thirteen pilots from the 94th, along with pilots from the 27th and 71st escorted 36 B-26's over the airdrome located at Castel Vetrano, Sicily. As the formation reached the target, 20 Me.109s attacked the fighters. During the following dogfight, seven enemy planes were destroyed, and one was damaged. However, during that fight, both Lt. Cronin and Lt. Esser were shot down by the Germans and listed as missing.

There were no missions to fly the next three days. Jim had a chance to rest, write a few letters, contemplate about the loss of friends and tentmates and his own mortality. "I can't think of a better way of spending a few hours on Sunday or any other day than going to church. I think since I have been in this war and seen quite a good number of my friends and other people die, I have found a few convictions of my own along the religion lines. It sure makes a person think, at any rate. The boy who said that there are no atheists in foxholes knew what he was talking about. As yet I haven't been in a foxhole, but I have been up where there isn't even a foxhole to hide in. Everything depends on your own resourcefulness and whatever higher powers there are to help. The thing is, how is the help rationed out? Why do some get it - maybe there is a great deal more to it than anyone knows. The more I see of war the more I think that peace is so nice. When a guy gets in a bad spot and does some fast thinking and happens to get out with a couple 109's to his credit, he may get the D.F.C. for it, but you can be sure he didn't enjoy it. 99% of the boys don't want to be heroes, it happens. Any medals they get are well deserved. The hot shots that look for glory - usually find it but with a harp in their hands."

The squadron would try to forget the war from time to time. "We had a big softball game this evening with the enlisted men and got trimmed as usual. Oh well, it was fun and that's the important thing."

More good news for the squadron during this break from the missions. The long-awaited air mattresses arrived. "Well, I have an air mattress and it's soft. Why, it's so super they have to drive me out of it at the point of fixed bayonets to go fly." However, the fun did not last long. The pilots soon returned to their deadly business.

Another bomber escort mission was scheduled for June 24. The First Fighter Group, which included eighteen pilots from the 94th, escorted 40 B-26s to the target area near

Chilivani, Sardinia. After the bombing run was complete, about 20 enemy aircraft attacked the P-38's. Seven of the 94ths' planes were damaged. Lt. John Hay was shot down, and listed as missing. Four enemy planes were claimed destroyed by the 94th.

No missions were scheduled for the next five days so the group could move to its new base. The air base at Mateur, Tunisa was a dry lake about 15 miles south of the Port of Biserte. During the break, Jim had a chance to take Mark Bradshaw for a ride in their piggyback plane. "I just took my crew chief up in the squadron piggyback plane. He sure enjoyed it and I liked it too."

On June 28 Jim flew his plane to the new base. The ground crewmen arrived the following day by truck and railroad. A mission was scheduled for the next day, so the first refueling had to be done with barrels. A lot of hard-working ground crew men managed to transfer the gas by hand.

June 30th would be Jim's fifteenth combat mission. The Group escorted 36 B-26s to the Bo-Rizzo Airdrome over Sicily. The bombers left the airdrome in flames. No enemy aircraft were seen, and all pilots returned safe.

The final phase of the "pre-Operation Huskey" commenced on July 2, 1943. The Germans sensed it coming for they had massed most of their fighters on the Gerbini complex south of Mt. Etna.

Considerable effort had been taken to divide attacks equally between Sardinia and Sicily to confuse the enemy, but the German commanders were both experienced and wise. They anticipated an offensive, and, correctly, they guessed it would come against Sicily.

On the 3rd of July, the Group, including Jim, escorted B-26 Marauders to Sardinia. Following the bombing run all three squadrons peeled off to dive bomb a radar station on the northern end of the island. This raid was strictly diversionary, and just about the last of its kind. For the next seven days all attacks were aimed at Sicily, and in particular, Gerbini.

On July 5, and for the following four days, Jim would fly bomber escort missions. The target for each of these missions was the Gerbini Airdrome, located near Catania, Sicily. B-17s, B-26s, and B-25s were escorted to the target by the P-38s with little difficulty. July 6th was the only day that enemy aircraft attacked the formation. About 25 enemy aircraft attacked the formation three times from various angles. Jim was credited with a "probably destroyed" Me.109. A probable meant that in all likelihood the plane was destroyed; however, the claim could not be confirmed.

Nevertheless, Jim was excited about his victory, and wrote home that evening. "I am sure it will be alright to say that I have an enemy fighter to my credit now. We

had quite a fight and I managed to get one. The type of work we do (tactical) makes very few aces over here. Quite unlike the work in the South Pacific. (The top scoring Aces of the War were in the Pacific, Dick Bong with 40 kills and Tommy McGuire with 38 both flew P-38's.) Anyway, I have no illusions on the subject; I just want to be an ordinary line pilot. So many of the boys that are eager for victories get their glory, but posthumously. The way I see it, every time I return from a mission it is a victory of a very desirable sort. Never run from a fight but do what is necessary and get the hell home to go back another day. Sometimes I get so mad I want to tear in and shoot down the whole Luftwaffe. It's good to see 109's going down in smoke, but it hurts terribly to see one of your buddies going down. And that is what happens if even one man wants to stay in there longer then necessary to carry out the assignment. You see everyone must stay to cover him. I better quit this loose talk."

Ernie Pyle, the famous war correspondent, visited the 94th squadron while they were in North Africa. Pyle focused on the individual combatant. How he lived, endured battle and boredom, and sometimes on how he died. In one article home he echoed Jim's discussions on squadron tactics:

> *"It is hard for a layman to understand the fine points of aerial combat as practiced at the moment in North Africa. It is hard even for the pilots themselves to keep up, for there are changes in tactics from week to week. We will have some new idea and surprise Germans with it. Then they'll come across with a surprise maneuver, and we will have to change everything to counteract it.*
>
> *But basically, at the moment, you can say that everything depends on teamwork. The lone dashing hero in this war is certain to be a dead hero within a week. Sticking with the team and playing it all together is the only guarantee of safety for everybody.*
>
> *Our fighters go out in groups with the bombers, ranging the sky above them, flying back and forth, watching for anything that may appear. But if they see some Germans in the distance nobody goes after them.*
>
> *That would be playing into the Germans' hands. So they stick to their formation above the bombers, making an umbrella.*

The German has two choices - dive down through them, or to wait until somebody is hit by flak and has to drop back. Then they are on him in a flash. When that happens the fighters attack, but still in formation. Keeping that formation always and forever tight is what the flight leaders constantly drill into the boys' heads. It is a great temptation to dash out and take a shot at some fellow, but by now they've seen too many cases of the tragedy of such action. The result is that this war doesn't have many individual air heroes. A team may be composite hero, but not an individual."

D-Day for Sicily was the 10th of July 1943. The P-38 groups went into a rapid scale of operation. On this day, Jim flew his twenty-second combat mission.

Fourteen P-38s from the 94th Fighter Squadron, each carrying a 500 lb. bomb, took off at 1:51 PM to bomb enemy truck convoys in the central part of southeastern Sicily. The formation flew between 5000 and 6000 feet and dive-bombed and strafed two columns of enemy vehicles, each numbering about 40. Numerous hits were observed and no enemy aircraft were observed. One of the pilots, Lt. Howard Gilliam, one of Jim's tent-mates was missing, apparently shot down by the anti-aircraft fire that the pilots had to subject themselves to during strafing attacks.

The following day, all squadrons flew at least two missions during the day. With the British under Montgomery landing on the eastern side of the island, and with the Americans under Patton on the west side of the island, both the Germans and Italians were flushed out of their fortifications. Actually, their positions along the south coast were not strong and they were lightly held. There was little opposition to either the paratroopers or the infantry landing taking place. The enemy's vehicles, tanks, and troops were now forced out in the open, and they were becoming vulnerable from the air.

On the eleventh the P-38's from the 94th did their share of damage to the enemy during their three missions. Forty-one 500 lb. bombs were dropped on enemy convoys. The pilots destroyed 70 trucks, along with strafing an enemy radio station. Three pilots had been hit by flak over the targets. One, Lt. Dee Johnson, crashed into the sea. All the other pilots made it home safely. Jim flew on all three of the missions, however a kink in the hose feeding gas from the belly tank forced him to abort the first mission before he reached Sicily.

The dive-bombing continued for the next five days. On July 12, eight trucks were destroyed by Jim's flight. On July 13, his flight of 14 P-38s bombed the railroad

junction, station, and freight yard at Randazzo, Sicily. They also strafed and damaged two automobiles and destroyed or damaged 25 trucks in the area. The city of Randazzo was visited the following day and the pilots destroyed or damaged another 13 trucks.

Mission no. 28 was flown July 15. Jim was flying "White-4," and the squadron was on its way back to Randazzo. The formation flew at 8000 feet and dropped their 500-lb. bombs from 3000 feet. Flying the "Blue-2" and "Blue-3" positions were Lt. Robert Boggess and Lt. Robert Holcombe. It was another hazy day, and when the two pilots started down to attack, they lost each other in the haze and collided. The two P-38s crashed into the ground and both pilots were killed. While returning to the base the squadron damaged or destroyed another 12 vehicles. The following day, despite the loss of the pilots, the squadron continued to dive bomb targets in Sicily. Jim, along with 14 other pilots from his squadron was ordered to attack targets of opportunity in northwest Sicily. The P-38s dropped their bombs on the railroad station and marshalling yards at Leonforte, Sicily. About 40 vehicles had been destroyed.

On July 19, Rome was attacked for the first time. Twenty-two P-38s from the 94th together with formations from the 27th and 71st fighter squadrons escorted about 72 B-26s over Rome. Numerous hits from the bombs were seen on the target, Ciampino Airdrome. Three Me.109s were seen in the target area, but only one attacked the formation. The fighters drove off the lone enemy attacker. The mission lasted four hours and twenty minutes.

Jim wrote home on July 22 to say that he had received another plane. "Well I have another brand-new plane now. Good old No. 6 has seen her last days. I sure had some rough days in her, but lead and stuff injected into an engine externally, doesn't do them much good. But like I said, if I named her "Micky" she would take care of me."

On July 23, with his new plane, Jim and three other pilots from the 94th, along with pilots from the 27th and 71st escorted a PBY on an air-sea rescue mission near Naples, Italy, to look for four men in a dinghy. The formation sighted what was believed to be an empty raft. The PBY circled the area for about thirty minutes, before the formation left for home.

For Jim, the remainder of the month would be spent on bomber escort duty. On July 26 and 27, Jim escorted B-26s to Italy. The bombers dropped their bombs on railyards to disrupt the flow of supplies to southern Italy and Sicily. All pilots returned safely.

July 28th was a day of rest for the 94th. Jim had completed thirty-three combat missions and took the day off to catch up on letters to home. "Gosh, my hand is shaking today for some reason, I can hardly write. Some of the boys that came here after I did are leaving for rest camp now. Maybe I'll go soon, although I don't know as I want to. I'd just as soon stick it out and get my rest all at once back in the states. But if the Doc says go, I suppose I'll have to."

The pilots were being rotated home after completing fifty combat missions. With seventeen missions to go, Jim occasionally would think about the possibility of completing his tour of duty and then coming back home.

To Maxine he wrote, "I know one thing, that if or when I get back home I should have quite a few experiences to relate which have a lot to do with the history of the war. You know I guess I shouldn't always be spouting off about coming home 'cause I might be terribly disappointed, and you too."

In response to being asked about medals, Jim said, "I have the Air Medal and five Oak Leaf Clusters to it so far. The one I would really like is the Distinguished Flying Cross. I have been recommended for it but whether I'll get it or not is another thing again. That is really a beautiful thing. I guess all pilots long for that one and good reason too."

Late July in the Mediterranean area was hot, the nights generally cool, and the days generally clear. The Mateur Air Base lay adjacent to a railroad running from Mateur to Ferryville and Bizerte, to the north. The northwest skyline was dominated by the black hill mass of Garaet Achkel. It stood out alone and lonely. The whole area had been in the line of advance of the U.S. II Corps in April and May as the Tunisian Campaign was ending. Six highways radiated out from Mateur in addition to the rail line. At the foot of Garaet Achkel lay an immense prisoner of war camp, with thousands of German and Italian prisoners behind its wire fences.

The area was not sandy. The soil was fertile, and a rich farming district surrounded Mateur. Except for the occasional shattered wall or roof in Mateur, there was little evidence a war had gone that way a few months before

On July 29th Jim was back to escorting bombers to Italy. The Group escorted 26 B-26s to the airdrome near Aquino, Italy. Due to heavy overcast the bombers were forced to deliver their bombs from 6000 feet while the P-38s covered them from 6500 feet. No enemy aircraft or flak was encountered. Because of the low altitude, the bombing was very accurate. Two strings of bombs were seen to have hit the entire

length of the airdrome. Returning home, Jim encountered a damaged B-26 flying on one engine at 4000 feet. He escorted this bomber for fifteen minutes. It was losing altitude rapidly and eventually the crew had to ditch her in the Mediterranean. Jim circled the bomber for over an hour while contacting Air-Sea Rescue. When he was certain that rescue was on its way he returned to the base. The flight was his longest, lasting six hours and fifteen minutes.

EISENHOWER'S ESCORT

On July 31st Jim, along with three other pilots, Lts. Jackson, Cram and Thiessen were selected for an escort mission. Following the usual breakfast of powdered eggs, bacon, hardtack bread, margarine and boiled coffee the pilots were told to fly to El Aouina airdrome which was located about 35 miles from the pilot's base at Mateur and 15 miles from Tunis. They were to receive their final briefing after they arrived at the airdrome. The pilots were met by a high-ranking Army officer and told that they would be escorting a C-53 and it was to be protected at all costs. Soon a staff car arrived and the passengers proceed to head for the transport. Jim and his fellow pilots would soon escort General Eisenhower and his staff around the Mediterranean area.

Eisenhower had arrived earlier in the morning to meet with Air Marshall Tedder. The Air Marshall wanted permission to resume the heavy aerial bombardment of Italy, particularly of Naples and of the marshalling yards at Rome. The General gave his permission. Eisenhower had arrived in his B-17 but the fortress burned out a brake when landing at El Aouina. The group transferred to a C-53 which had a Disney insignia painted on the nose which read "Time's a Wastin'."

With the General and his staff in the transport, the P-38 pilots took off and circled the field until the C-53 took off and was on its way to Sicily. Eisenhower's first stop was to see General Patton in Palermo. Palermo had fallen to the Americans one week earlier. General Patton met Eisenhower at the Bocco-di-Falco airfield. As the Generals left to tour the city, Jim and the rest of the escort pilots tried to leave the airfield for their own tour but were stopped because of Patton's orders that anyone in the town had to wear a steel helmet. They had none so they had to stay with their planes. It was hot so the pilots found an olive tree close by and waited for Ike to return.

Upon the generals return the pilots were told that their next stop would be Syracuse. Eisenhower was anxious to meet with Alexander to make sure that there

were no misunderstandings over how the Allies were going to attack Messina. The group landed at a temporary landing strip near Syracuse. Upon landing the pilots were met by General Alexander's staff. Eisenhower's meeting with Alexander took place under an olive tree near the landing strip.

Soon the party was off to the Luqa Airdrome on Malta. Eisenhower was the guest of Field Marshal the Lord Gort and stayed overnight at the Verdala Palace. Jim, along with the other pilots were taken into town and had an English supper consisting of steak and kidneys. Following supper, the pilots were put up in a hotel and had a shower and bed to themselves.

In the morning tea was brought to Jim's room with a wake-up call. Following a breakfast of eggs, cakes and tea the pilots returned to the airfield to pre-flight their planes. About 7:00am a limousine drove up to the field. The driver got out but the man in the back opened the door himself and started walking towards the pilots. Lt. Archie Jackson, the commander of the escort pilots, said "That's Ike!" The pilots jumped to attention. He came toward them and said, "Rest men. I just came out to thank you for the good job yesterday." Eisenhower looked at Lt. Jackson and asked, "Where are you from son?" Lt. Jackson answered, "Louisburg, Kansas," Ike replied "Well I am from Abilene." The General then asked the others where they were from and shook hands with all the pilots. He then said "I won't need your escort today. I will have an escort of Beaufighters so you may return to your home base. I have not had breakfast yet so I better get back, but I wanted to thank each of you for an excellent job yesterday."

After Ike left, a RAF Wing Commander came over and asked the pilots to escort a B-17 back to Tunisia. Upon their return to Mateur, Jim along with the rest of the escort pilots were de-briefed by Captain Brown, the 94th's Intelligence Officer. He told the pilots that the escort mission was secret and there would not be any mention of it in the mission reports.

An air-sea rescue mission was scheduled for the next day, August 2nd. Jim and his tentmate, Jack Hanton, took off with two additional pilots from the 94th, Lt. Jackson and F/O Allan, to escort two air-sea launches to dinghies near the Sardinian coast. Jackson and Allan returned early with radio problems. The flight found eight men in two dinghies. After being relieved by the 71st, Jim and Jack Hanton went down on the "deck." As they were returning to their base they spotted a submarine just off the southeastern tip of Sardinia. The pilots swung around to attack but when they returned it had submerged.

AUGUST 1943

Starting in August, the softening-up raids into southern Italy commenced in earnest. During the weeks between the end of the battle for Sicily and the invasion of Italy, the First Fighter Group would experience some of the war's fiercest fighting. The Groups three squadrons – the 27th, 71st and 94th would lose 39 pilots as KIA, MIA or POW's.

August the 4th and 5th were more bomber escort missions. August the 4th was uneventful as the P-38s escorted B-26s to Italy.

On August the 5th, the squadron leader that day, Lt. Archie Jackson, returned to the base because of radio trouble, and left Jim in charge. The squadron, along with planes from the 27th and 71st, escorted 72 B-17s to Messina, Italy. The P-38s had to continually crisscross above the B- 17s which were considerably slower. The fighters could also get a better view of the sky above them by weaving back and forth over the formation. As the bombers reached the shore and started their bomb run, the formation encountered very heavy flak. The flak could be seen tracking the bombers. Occasionally the bursts would be directed at the fighters at which time the pilots would abruptly change direction. During their bomb run, the bombers could not change direction and were very vulnerable. The pilots could not hear the bursts of flak unless they were very close. If a pilot survived an audible burst, a shell fragment hit could be expected somewhere on the aircraft. No enemy aircraft appeared, so the P-38 pilots could watch the bombs hit the harbor below. Returning from the target, the fighters were attacked by enemy fighters. Lt. Harold Herr was forced to bail out of his burning plane. He landed safely on the ground, but was captured. He was taken to Italy where he later escaped and returned to the Group June 28, 1944.

For the next four days the First Fighter Group was in the vanguard of attacks on the Italian mainland. B-26s were escorted on August 7th, and on August 8th, the Group commenced a week of fighter-bomber attacks with bridges, radar stations, and other targets the objectives.

Mission no. 40 was a bomber escort mission on the 7th. The P-38s escorted about 36 B-26s of the 319th Bomb Group to the highway bridge at Angitola, Italy. The mission was uneventful and the formation returned safely to Mateur.

On August 8th, the squadron went out on a strafing mission. Twenty-four P-38s took off at 12:20 PM to strafe a road and railyard south of Angitola, Italy. The squadron flew low over the Mediterranean to avoid enemy radar. At Angitola, the P-38s came in over the railyard with complete surprise. Several trains were strafed, two

engines were destroyed and several railroad cars exploded, indicating that they were carrying ammunition. The element of surprise on such a mission was all-important because if the enemy were aware of the approaching planes, they could put up a wall of ground fire. The Germans had special cars on most of their military trains that were heavily armed with anti-aircraft weapons. They looked like any other railcar but on attack the car siding could be dropped to permit some very concentrated and effective fire.

During this mission, Jim's plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and lost an engine. He wrote home the following day and described what happened:

> *"I'm going to attempt to give you the thoughts of a pilot when he gets into a tough spot. I ought to know –three times I've come home on one engine - flak holes – enemy fighters - and even a .30 caliber rifle fired from the ground while strafing enemy troops. Can you imagine seeing a truck full of men suddenly explode into flames from the bullets released by the touch of your forefinger. Men running and you in sort of a fiendish glow of murderous instinct, mowing them down. No thoughts of anything - your mind a blank. Pilots have been so concentrated on a target that they have flown right into it with a terrific explosion. No one that hasn't strafed can understand why. But it continues to happen no matter how many warnings are in the pilot's brain.*
>
> *Pulling up off the target almost ticking the hilltop – I guess I gave it to those bastards. Suddenly your plane lurches - almost flips on its back! My God but you are scared, but only for a flash. All the months of intense training you had take over. You have your wings only because your reactions are split second, and way ahead of your brain. You have seen fellow cadets washout not so much because they couldn't fly but because when this happened they would be 20 feet in the ground.*
>
> *Before you know it, the plane is level, the left engine has the gas shut off, propeller feathered to decrease parasite drag which might not let you continue flying. Maybe you shut it off just before it was to explode into flame just like that truck you just left - who knows?*

Anyway, here you are. - How in hell did all those holes get in that engine and wing. I guess those poor jerks down there were trying to kill me, but they didn't know that I wasn't due for about sixty years yet.

Better get someone to escort me home. Who knows, the whole Luftwaffe may be upstairs waiting for me. The old radio is working thank God, so in a couple minutes a couple or three of your buddies are weaving just over your head, ready to take on anyone that has any ideas of hurting you. Do you love 'em - what a wonderful bunch of guys that are flying with you.

How's my good engine? By this time you are screaming for home with nothing more to worry about than 300 miles of open sea and whether or not your good engine is going to hold up! What if there are some bullets in it? Maybe it's going to stop any second. Gosh its getting too hot! Open up all the shutters and cool that damn thing off. Not the damn thing really, instead the wonderful good old American engine that will run forever if given half a chance. Baby it and how. Good, it's ticking along beautifully, keep it up.

My generator is shot out and the battery must be getting low. Shut the radio off, props in manual control. Booster pumps off, inverter, no that runs the compass, got to have that. I guess that's all the electric equipment I can shut off.

Gas, that wonderful stuff that keeps you up there. They say it costs $2.00 a gallon by the time it gets to us. How much - not too much, so the mixture leaned out, r.p.m.s lowered, just enough power on to keep up a good speed. Wow, am I hot, soaked with sweat and it's still pouring out. Well, we're out of danger from the enemy now so relax. Darn, but my rear end aches. It ought to, for the last four hours I have sat in this one spot. And what a spot - 5'7" and my head bumps the top of the canopy if I stretch a little. Tall guys which there are a few of must have trouble. That Co-2 bottle in your seat dinghy is like sitting on a fist sized rock.

Release your safety belt which helps for a couple of minutes. Take a swig of water out of your canteen which by this time is warm as ____, well warm. Light up a cigarette and really enjoy it. Gosh I wish I was back to the field, would I ever hit the sack.

There's land and pretty soon the field -oh gosh a strong cross wind to make a single engine landing in. Well, here goes - I've had two before - but without a cross-wind. I guess it won't be so hard tho - just keep on the ball. Heck that wasn't hard at all - as good as a regular landing. Wow! look at the crowd coming out to look at the holes. The crew chief is actually proud - "look at the holes in my plane" –he says. "And it came back. Oh hell, I guess it will be an engine change. Why couldn't they have hit a less vital spot?" - On the ground it's the crew chief's plane - only in the air does it belong to the pilot. Pilots argue about who has the best crew chief and crew chiefs the reverse.

Oh well, here comes the Colonel. Well, he just congratulated you on a good job of bringing the plane back. Well hell, what about bringing myself back? But I guess that goes without saying. One hundred thirty-five holes in the plane, and two through the cockpit, well, C'est Le Guerre."

Strafing targets, though the most dangerous type of missions the pilots would go on, were what the pilots liked best. Again, Ernie Pyle wrote about this type of work while staying with the 94th.

SCHOOLBOYS TURNED KILLERS

Now it is killing that animates them.

The highest spirits I've seen in that room were displayed one evening after they came back from a strafing mission. That's what they do best, but they get little of it. It's a great holiday from escorting bombers, which they hate to do. Going out free-lancing to shoot up whatever they see, and going in enough force to be pretty sure they'll be superior to the enemy - that's Utopia.

That's what they had done that day. And they really had a field day. They ran into a German truck convoy and blew it to pieces. They laugh and got excited as they told about it. The trucks were all full of men, and "they flew out like firecrackers." Motorcyclists got hit and dived forty feet before they stopped skidding.

Two Messerschmitt-109's made the mistake of coming after our planes. They never had a chance. After firing a couple of wild bursts, they went down smoking, and one of them seemed to blow up.

The boys were full of laughter when they told about it as they sat there on their cots in the dimly lighted room. I couldn't help having a funny feeling about them. They were all so young, so genuine, so enthusiastic. And even they were so casual about everything - not casual in a hard, knowing way, but they talked about their flights and killing and being killed exactly as they would girls or their school lessons.

Maybe they won't talk at all when they finally get home. If they don't do it, it will be because they know this is a world apart and nobody else could ever understand."

The low attacks continued on the 10th of August. The Lightnings were carrying one 500-lb. bomb and one belly tank, in addition to their internal ammunition and fuel. This was Jim's forty-second mission and last before going to rest camp for ten days.

Twenty-five P-38s from the 94th took off to dive bomb and strafe targets of opportunity in southern Italy. The bombs were dropped from 1000 feet on railroad marshalling yards. After dive-bombing, the pilots followed the railroad tracks looking for trains and depots to strafe. Enemy machine gun fire was very intense along the route. While an enemy radar station was being strafed at Cape Spartivento, Lt. Glenn Terry's plane went into a strafing run and never pulled out. His plane hit the tracks and exploded into a fireball. Lt. William Greishaber's plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and bailed out north of Cape Stillo and landed in the sea about 300 yards off shore. He was last seen alive in his "mae-west" in the water without a dinghy. Finally, Lt. John Wilson crash-landed in the water, three miles off shore near Locri, his plane had been hit by machine gun fire. Lt. Wilson was later reported as a prisoner of war.

L'Hotel Balima was an exclusive resort hotel, located high in the mountains of North Africa. The Air Force took the hotel over to use as a rest camp for the combat pilots. After months of intense pressure, the pilots needed a place to relax and rejuvenate.

Jim enjoyed the break in the action. "I don't care if I ever leave this place. It really is a miniature heaven. Swimming pool, ball diamond, tennis courts. There are a lot of mountain streams just full of trout. All yesterday afternoon and this morning I have been fishing. If they won't bite, we shoot them with army rifles. You can't hit them hardly, but the concussion stuns 'em for a minute or so. We got a big mess of them. The food here is swell – steaks and ice cream, a soldier's dream."

By the 18th of August 1943, the campaign in Sicily had ended. The entire island was in Allied hands. The invasion had lasted six weeks, but had been bitterly fought in places by the ground forces. The Allied air forces had lost 375 aircraft, while 740 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed.

The German command was well aware that an invasion of Italy was in the offing, and had correctly anticipated that the Americans would attack in the Salerno area, located twenty miles south of Naples, Italy. As a result, the Germans began to concentrate its air forces in southern Italy.

On August 23, Jim reported back to active duty. He did not like eating "C" rations after the great food he got at rest camp, but it was good to get back to flying. The squadron was preparing itself for a big mission and Jim got back just in time.

The group was practicing formation flying at low altitude near the Mateur Air Base, and the Mediterranean coast. The pilots would fly in formation to a predetermined point, make a practice strafing run over it and return to the base. The reason for the training was kept very secret, but the pilots could tell that something big and different was coming.

The mission briefing on August 25th cleared up the mystery of all the low altitude practice. In preparation for the invasion a photo-reconnaissance mission flown on August 22 revealed at least 180 enemy bombers, 72 fighters and 45 transports concentrated at the Foggia Airdrome complex located near the spur of Italy's boot. Because of the easy striking distance from the projected Italian landing beaches at Salerno, destroying these enemy aircraft was imperative. All three P-38 groups of the Twelfth Air Force, the First, Fourteenth, and Eight-Second, were going on a strafing mission with the hope that they would deal the Germans a serious blow at their Foggia complex.

The dispersal of the enemy aircraft at Foggia made them impossible to destroy by the normal action of heavy bombers. Thus, the Air Force decided to attempt to wipe out this enemy concentration by the first mass, long range, low-level strafing raid ever carried out. One hundred forty aircraft were used for this operation.

Colonel George MacNicol, a senior officer from the 82nd Fighter Group was chosen to lead the mission. Major George Rush, the First Fighter Group Operations Officer, took off from Mateur at 7:06 am, 65 P-38s from the First Fighter Group proceeded to the rendezvous point off the coast of Tunisia and headed out over the Mediterranean. To avoid detection by enemy radar, the pilots flew the entire 530 miles from North Africa to Italy at 50 feet above the water.

They flew across the southern tip of Italy, and finally saw the spur. After a long wide sweeping turn the squadrons divided and lined up abreast, charged their guns and at a speed of 300 Mph at tree top level, headed for their targets. None of the pilots knew for sure what their target might be. Hopefully it would be an aircraft on the ground, but could be hangers, administration buildings, barracks or ground equipment.

Capt. Jim Haggenback, the 94th's Operations Officer was on the left edge of the mass of aircraft. "I could see an airfield dead ahead and then suddenly I flew over roads and orchards with aircraft hidden under trees." With that knowledge pilots started firing at every haystack, clump of trees and any possible hiding place for aircraft. The surprise was complete. Enemy planes exploded or erupted in flames, ground personnel were caught working on the planes, and hangers and other buildings were destroyed. "Each burst of my guns seemed to send up a flash of smoke and flame. I would see the glint of sun reflected off a canopy under the trees or a suspicious mound of camouflage, which turned out to be a gasoline tank farm." Flying across the field, Jim shot up three trucks, one of which blew up. The 94th claimed to have destroyed or damaged fifteen enemy aircraft that day, but the captured P-38 had not been seen.

Overall, it had been a good mission. The total destruction inflicted on the Luftwaffe was tremendous. Sixty-four enemy aircraft were claimed as destroyed, and eighty-six were claimed damaged. In fact, later when the allies occupied the area, it was revealed that a considerably greater number of aircraft had been destroyed. 212 enemy aircraft had actually been destroyed or damaged beyond usefulness.

For this outstanding mission, the First Fighter Group was awarded its first of three Presidential Unit Citations during World War II.

The following day it was back to bomber escort duty. Jim had been flying as a flight leader, and today he flew "White-1," with Lt. Hal Rigney on his wing.

Eighteen P-38s together with formations from the 27th and 71st Fighter Squadrons took off at 10:37 am, to escort 72 B-26s on a bombing mission over the airdrome at Grazzanise, Italy. The Germans were up, but not in numbers. However, one Me. 109 was caught and destroyed by Jim when, with its wingman, it had dived at the rear of the formation.

On August 28th, Jim had a very similar mission escorting bombers to Aversa, Italy. On this day, waiting for the formation just off the coast of Italy were 25 to 30

Me. 109s and Italian Macchi 202s (Ma. 202) fighters. As several of the fighters attempted to dive through the formation, Jim shot down one of the Me. 109s.

Following an Air Force press release stating that Jim had shot down a plane, the local press in Michigan wanted to know more. They went to his mother's home in Hastings. They wanted pictures, and information about Jim's experiences in North Africa. They were not disappointed, and several articles soon appeared in local newspapers. Pictures of Jim could also be seen in the storefront window of the local drugstore. Everyone had good reason to be proud.

August 29th was a special day for Jim, and I'm sure it made his last few days alive very enjoyable for him. Jim's brother Bob had a brother-in-law, Chuck McKinnie, who was in the Army and also in the North African area. Chuck had spent many summers visiting Jim and my father at the farm in Hastings. Chuck was three years older than Jim and they were like brothers. After receiving letters from both Chuck and Jim stating they had been swimming in the Mediterranean, Bob's wife suggested to Chuck that if he had time, he should try to find Jim. As soon as he could, Chuck got leave, stuck a pistol in his pocket and took off walking through the country to try to find Jim. He walked all day, and the following afternoon he found him. "I walked into a tent and there he sat. I had quite a suntan and a pair of large sunglasses on and he didn't recognize me. He said "Can I help you Sergeant," and then I took my sunglasses off and said "Hello Jimmie," and he was so surprised that he actually fell off his chair. Talk about two happy guys. I think tears came to both of our eyes. I stayed all day and had dinner with him and all we talked about was home, and all the fun we had when we were kids, and how we met again halfway around the world." Chuck would come back for another visit on the 31st. Jim had to fly a mission on the 30th, and what a mission it turned out to be.

Jim was twenty-one years old. He had been recently promoted to First Lieutenant. Also, the 94th's Commanding Officer had just been admitted to the hospital with malaria, so the Operations Officer, 1st Lt. Jim Haggenback was appointed as the acting Squadron Commander, and Jim became the acting Operations Officer. Little did anyone know that the mission on August 30, 1943 would be one of its biggest air battles the First Fighter Group would have during World War II.

AUGUST 30, 1943

At 7:00am on the morning of the August 30, 1943, 48 pilots gathered in the 1st Fighter Group briefing tent at their Mateur base. Most had just consumed a breakfast

of powdered eggs, coffee, toast, preserved butter, and the like. They sat on rough benches, dressed mostly in the brown summer flying suit of the AAF or summer khaki uniforms. Most sat quietly smoking cigarettes while telling the inevitable jokes. All wore a .45 automatic in a shoulder holster and a "dinghy sticker" on their belt. This knife was used to stab any rubber dinghy (located in the seat pack) that had accidentally inflated and jammed the pilot against his plane's controls. Of course, the knife could be used for other survival purposes!
Each pilot also signed a receipt for the survival kits handed out. The small kits contained candy for energy, money for bribery or trading, fishing materials, a compass, cloth maps, water purification tablets, a collapsible water bag, and a language booklet.

The briefing was routine and not long, since it was more of the same bomber escort duty to Italy participated in for the last few days. The aircraft were formed into four squadrons of 12 planes each. The 94th squadron "Springcap," 27th squadron "Petdog," 71st squadron "Cragmore," and a fourth squadron "Broadway (a composite squadron of planes and pilots from each of the other three squadrons) were led by uncle Jim, 1st Lt. Frank McIntosh, 1st Lt. John Willey, and 1st Lt. John Hurst respectively.

For days the Twelfth Air Force had been bombing the same general area south of Naples. Again, on this day the target was the Aversa marshalling yards ten miles north of Naples. The 1st Fighter Group was to escort B-26 Martin Marauder medium bombers from the 319th Bomb Group. The call sign for the 1st was "Daylong," and the call sign for the 319th was "Lacework."

The pilots dispersed to their squadrons for final instructions from their intelligence officers and squadron commanders, and collected their parachutes and other personal equipment. Soon the trucks, jeeps and command cars were driving out along the taxiways to the parking hardstands.

The long deathly wait that followed was the hardest part of any mission. Watches were checked every few minutes until the start engine time. Stomachs felt leaden, and palms sweated. Mentally, each pilot computed his missions. For the pilots this mission would be one more under their belt, one more for the total, one less before going home.

At 9:25am, Jim took off, leading the 94th and the Group in a gradual climb. All the planes were up by 10:05 when the Group set course for the B-26s. Rendezvous was set for 10:15am over Cape Siddi Ali El Mekki at a 4,000-foot altitude. As the coast of Africa fell away behind them, ahead a line of specks on the hazy horizon

stood out, seemingly motionless. The tails of the B-26 Marauders seemed inordinately large. Four P-38s returned early because of mechanical problems, leaving 44 fighters escorting the bombers to their target.

By the time Sicily passed to starboard, the Group was parallel with the B-26s. The fighter pilots found it hard to hold level flight, for at 10,000 feet the horizon seemed to disappear. The flight leaders glanced often at the bombers for reference, and back again to their squadron leaders for the same. The haze then seemed to dissipate a little, showing the black smudge of Stromboli's volcano off to the right.

Since bombing altitude was 12,000 feet, the fighters needed to be at around 13,000 feet. Suddenly, a heavy line showed on the horizon ahead, which as the minutes passed was clearly recognized as the coast of Italy. Enemy radar created a humming sound in all headphones that rose and fell of its own accord, then increased and diminished as the fighters wove slowly back and forth.

Without a signal the fighters spread out, since the experienced pilots knew what to expect within interception range. Heads turned, constantly searching the air while the squadrons began to weave back and forth over the bomber formation in the normal escort pattern, one leapfrogging over the other, one always looking outward, and one looking inward.

Suddenly the coastal plain was visible below where a stream meandered toward the sea, with mountains rising behind the plain. The bombers pulled in together and tightened into bombing formation when approaching their "Initial Point," where they would turn in column toward the target. Somewhere ahead were the Aversa railyards. Target time was 12:00.

Since just before the American formation crossed the coast (around 11:50), enemy fighters had been taking off from Italian bases in Pomigliano, Capodichino and Grazzanise. Others with belly tanks on were taking off from Foggia, some of the survivors from that stricken area attacked by the Group five days previously.
As the bombers came out of the target, the first wave of 25 to 30 enemy fighters burst upon the group out of the hazy horizon. The two groups of enemy fighters split up each side of the P-38 formation and attacked. After the pilots had dispersed these enemy fighters and attempted to regroup, 75 to 100 enemy fighters suddenly appeared above the fighter formation. Looking up, the pilots saw the enemies drop their belly tanks and dive into the middle of the formation. Along with the enemy fighters was a P-38 with black crosses on the wings. This new group of enemies had loitered at altitude, waiting the most favorable time to attack after the P-38s were regrouping after expending fuel and ammunition.

Following the enemies' initial dive, the erupting dogfight broke up most of the flights as the squadrons' integrity disappeared. P-38s, Me.-109s and Ma.-202s mixed it up everywhere with many losses on both sides. Everywhere a pilot looked was an enemy fighter or a P-38 in a spin or dive - smoking or on fire, some crashing into the Bay of Naples.

During the battle's initial phase, Lt. Hal Rigney, the "tail-end Charlie" in Jim's flight, was shot down by the enemy P-38 behind him:

> *"I assumed it was one of our aircraft and was joining up for mutual protection. However, it seemed to lag back for a while failing to close or form up with me. About the same time as I dismissed him from my thoughts, I was startled by hits on my aircraft. I immediately broke to the left to see where the shots originated. There was no aircraft except the P-38. I suspected the firing was accidental. There had been times when pilots in their excitement have hit their gun button instead of the microphone button. Both are located on the wheel. As I slowed down the lone P-38 shot by me. It was coming back to my aircraft. I smelled smoke and observed a fire under the cowling of my port engine. Unable to extinguish the fire and recognizing the gravity of the situation, I called for escort home, or at least to Sicily. I was informed that none was available as disengagement was almost impossible. By this time the fire was becoming more intense. I decided to make a run for home. I rolled over, feathered the engine and dove from 17,000 feet to the deck trying to blow the fire out. Needless to say, it didn't work. The fire had spread to the wing. I realized I was in a precarious position, too much fire and too far away from the home base. I made the dreaded decision to bail out. I jettisoned the canopy, unfastened my safety belt, and pulled the nose up for additional altitude. With the canopy gone, smoke and flames were sucked into the cockpit. Visibility was so restricted that I was unable to determine my altitude. Fearing there was probably insufficient altitude to bail out, I reluctantly decided to abandon the aircraft. I shoved the control column forward and the next thing I knew the plane hit the water. I was abruptly catapulted into the water."*

Although taken prison by the Germans, Lt. Rigney was able to escape. While working his way through Italy to reach friendly forces, he met an Italian pilot who

confirmed the existence of a captured P-38 used by one of their pilots on several missions against allied forces.

As the battle continued the enemy planes were everywhere, coming from above and behind, and then from head on. The swirling dogfight that ensued descended nearly to the deck and seemed to grow in intensity. Meanwhile the B-26s completed their bombing run, then dropped their noses and headed for their base. Ed Griswold, one of the B-26 pilots recalled the scene:

> *"Crossing the coast, we were attacked by an estimated 150 fighters, a mix of Me-109 and Macci 200s. Their aggressiveness suggested Germans piloted the Italian aircraft. Seventy-five of the enemy engaged the P-38s at the coast. Our escorts promptly entered a Luffberry for defense. When our formation exited the target and crossed the coast, the scene was awesome. There were so many parachutes that you could not count them. I saw a 109 ram a P-38 and a second P-38 run into the ball of fire."*

Jim now gave the order to work towards the Bay of Naples and reform. Lt. Robert Vrilakas of the 94th Squadron, who earlier had shot down a Ma. 202, was heading for the bay when a P-38 from the 27th Squadron went by with a Me. 109 closing on his tail. Vrilakas was alone so he broke into the 109 firing a good burst at him from close range. However, his maneuver took him directly back towards Naples and the pursuing enemy fighters. Vrilakas dove for the deck to try to outrun his pursuers. As he leveled of just inches above the water, he immediately was hit by enemy fire:
"It sounded like hail on a tin roof with occasional explosions as his cannon shells hit and exploded."

Vrilakas was sure he was going to lose his plane, when realizing he was rapidly approaching another Me. 109 directly ahead and about 100 feet above. He pulled up and got a good bead on the enemy, then fired all four machine guns and the cannon. The enemy began to smoke and went into a gentle turn to the right. However, in pulling up he had turned himself into an even better target for the planes pursuing him. A hail of enemy fire again hit him, this time knocking out the whole rear canopy and putting his right engine out of commission.

By then Vrilakas had made contact with his squadron, and Jim brought what was left of it around in a 360-degree turn, which allowed Vrilakas to catch up. While the rest of the squadron proceeded back to Mateur, Jim and two other pilots, Pettus and Anderson, stayed to escort Vrilakas to Boccadifalco, Sicily.

In all, the battle lasted for more than 40 minutes. Thirteen P-38's were missing. The 94th lost five – Lieutenants John Cram, Ralph Peck, Charles Woodward, David Parlett and Hal Rigney. Parlett and Rigney were captured, escaped and returned to the squadron in the summer of 1944. Cram, Peck and Woodward were MIA.

The 71st lost Lieutenants John Willey, Clarence Southard, Walter Morrison and Ralph Turrentine. Turrentine was presumed killed in a mid-air collision with a German Me-109 fighter. However, the later consensus of those on the mission was that Willey had collided with the 109. Neither Willey nor Turrentine survived, while Southard survived and Morrison became a POW.

In the 27th Lieutenants Harry Warmker, Clifford Randol and Jerome Weinberg were KIA. F/O Donald Deisenroth became a POW.

The severe losses to the 1st Fighter Group on this mission were mainly due to a new tactic developed by the German Air Force. The tactic stationed many of their defense force near the coast of Italy to attack an incoming force upon notification. This wave of aircraft tried to be as aggressive as possible to break up the formations. A second and third wave took off from a rear base in the Foggia area to hit the Allied planes after leaving the target and during the return to North Africa. These later waves of fighters had belly tanks and pursued longer distances then anyone had previously encountered. The aircraft also had engine oxygen tank boosters installed for sudden bursts of acceleration while diving to overtake the fleeing fighters withdrawing from the target. The boosters caused their engines to over rev and "burn out", but the Germans figured that an engine change was worth knocking down many departing bombers. This tactic was later confirmed when Allied occupation personnel examined the excessive number of fighter aircraft engines abandoned due to destruction in use. The fact that the 1st Fighter Group encountered this tactic for the first time on August 30th and was able to completely foil the enemy plan speaks highly of all the pilots on the mission and helps to explain their high loss.
Despite these new tactics and the overwhelming superiority in numbers of enemy fighters, the First Fighter Group pilots demonstrated exceptional escort duty. Dangerously low on gasoline, the pilots continued to fight off the enemy's coordinated attacks, destroying eight fighters, probably destroying three and damaging another three planes. Through their highly effective fighter cover, the bomber formation completed a very successful bombing run, inflicting great damage to the marshalling yards and returned to their base without the loss of a single bomber.

As a result of their heroism the pilots of the First Fighter Group would earn their second Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation.

The difficulty with escorting medium bombers in 1943 or heavies in 1944 was having the fighters positioned over the bomber formation constrained to fight a defensive action. The enemy could pick their spot; meanwhile the escort fighters had to continue their weave pattern over the bombers with an occasional foray by a flight or squadron depending on enemy attacks on the formation. When the fighter pilots could go on the offensive (as on the August 25th Foggia mission), they were usually highly successful and those missions were great for the pilots' morale.

The August 30 mission did lead to an examination of tactics. The standard tactic of 12 planes divided into three, four-finger shaped formations that had evolved early in 1943 was now modified to four flights of the four-finger configuration. This change simplified the weave pattern, but required more P-38s and pilots, neither of which was available in abundance.

Jim's efforts during the August 30th mission had been devoted to keeping the Group and his squadron together as much as possible. Pilots would credit his timely decision to reform the squadrons and work out of the target area with keeping most of them from being shot down or running out of gas before they could reach a friendly base. Jim would have been proud to learn that his leadership of this mission was finally acknowledged by the Air Force in 1990 by posthumously awarding him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

After first learning that Jim had been recommended for the DFC I tried to find out what had happened to the original recommendation. After contacting the Air Force, the most logical explanation was that two months following being listed as missing in action, the First Fighter Group was reassigned from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Air Force and all paperwork was either lost, caused to be resubmitted, or withdrawn when the Group moved to Sicily, Sardinia and finally Foggia, Italy.

Again, I contacted the Secretary of the Airforce to see what could be done to get the medal awarded. It was pointed out that getting the DFC awarded required, according to Executive Order 10189, that a written recommendation for any act or achievement performed between December 7, 1941 and May 2, 1945 to have been submitted on or before May 2, 1951. However, recommendations that were officially placed into military channels but not acted on through loss or inadvertence may be resubmitted to the appropriate awarding authority. The recommendation must be

accompanied by (1) a copy of the original recommendation or a reconstructed version, and (2) a statement from the recommending official certifying the recommendation was officially placed in military channels within the appropriate time period and not acted on through loss or inadvertence.

The acting squadron commander at the time was 1st Lt. James Haggenback. He was living near Los Angeles. I flew out to meet him and discuss the requirements for the DFC. He and Jim had been good friends and he was only too happy to try to help. He certified that Jim would have been cited for the award. It was not possible to truthfully reconstruct the original version for the citation; however, the proposed citation was very clear due to the importance of the mission. A new proposed citation for the award was constructed and submitted by Mr. Haggenback to the Department of the Air Force.

Notification arrived that the Secretary of the Air Force had approved the award, and on December 14, 1990 the Air Force held a formal ceremony at the Air Force Museum located within the Wright Patterson Airforce base. The presentation was made in front of the museum's P-38 and the medal was accepted by my father. The commendation that accompanied the medal read:

First Lieutenant James P. Dibble distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight against the enemy in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations on 30 August 1943. On that date, Lieutenant Dibble was the leader of forty-four P-38 aircraft on a vital escort mission to two bombardment groups which were attacking the important marshalling yards at Aversa, Italy. An aggressive enemy force of approximately seventy-five aircraft was encountered. Lieutenant Dibble skillfully positioned his flights close to the bombers so that penetration was impossible. He led the group with great determination and aggressiveness and his intelligent deployment and courageous tactics caused all pilots to fight a brilliant defensive battle for over forty-five minutes. The overwhelming superiority of the enemy, however, caused severe losses to the fighter defenders while all bomber aircraft returned to base without the loss of a single bomber aircraft. Lieutenant Dibble's aggressive combat spirit and his faultless leadership under stress of this event were superb. The heavy responsibility of operational control and tactical employment during this period is in the keeping with the highest tradition of a combat fighter pilot. His actions during this engagement and his fortitude, flying skills and courage reflects great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

After returning from the mission, Jim would simply say; "I achieved the top spot in flying combat. I led the 1st Fighter Group into combat. I was a little nervous when confronted with the responsibility but I just did my best and I guess it was good enough. At least no one seemed to have any squawks about it."

PRE-ITALIAN INVASION

Following the August 30th mission, the First Fighter Group was inactive for the next three days while they received planes and pilots to replace those lost in the battle. Jim received another new plane during this period. "I just got my new plane all painted up again with a nice big "Mickey" all big and pretty on the nose. Also, two swastikas, a steam locomotive and a slew of bombs, the spoils of past victories and bombs dropped. I wish I had a camera so I could get a snapshot of it."

On September 4th, the First Fighter Group went back to work. That day's mission was split; one group escorted B-26s to bomb Capua and Capodichino airfields near Naples, while Jim led the 94th on a strafing mission to the Grazzanise airfield north of Naples. Though the airfield was very difficult to see due to trees and dense foliage, the squadron's run on the airfield left 3 Me. 109s destroyed and 3 damaged. The squadron had no losses and arriving back home the pilots felt better knowing that somehow, they had started to even the score.

On September the 6th, all twenty-one P-38s of the 94th left for a bomber escort mission and because of the impending invasion of Italy would not return to Mateur. The P-38s escorted B-26s once again to the Grazzanise Airdrome. Though the field had already been bombed several times, and also strafed, the Army wanted it totally demolished. All three B-26 groups were on this raid which would make this attack one of the heaviest single raids in the entire pre-invasion interdiction process. Three enemy fighters were destroyed, along with the entire Grazzanise complex.

Returning from the mission, the P-38s landed at the Gerbini Airdrome near Catania, Sicily. The move was to be temporary. The pilots had been instructed to pack only enough personal items for about two weeks. The Allies were preparing to invade Italy.

SEPTEMBER 9, 1943

September 9th, six days after Montgomery and the British forces landed in extreme southern Italy, the U.S. 5th Army under General Mark Clark staged an assault landing on the beaches near Salerno, 25 miles southeast of Naples.

Gathering in Sicily were the main units of the Allied Air-Forces which would be needed to support the invasion. The main U.S. convoy had sailed from Oran on September 5th. The British troops landed at the southern end of Italy on September 3rd, and resistance to the landings was slight. Both German and Italian forces evaded major engagements and fell back rapidly after carrying out extensive demolition. By September 8th, British advance units were already halfway up the toe of the Italian boot. With the announcement that evening of the unconditional surrender of the Italian government, hostile action by the Italian Army in the south ceased, and the Italian fleet sailed for allied ports to surrender.

However, it was anticipated that the landing of the 5th Army at Salerno would cause an immediate and strong reaction from the Germans. It was expected that they would fight hard to prevent, or at least delay a penetration inland that would trap their forces moving up from the south.

Late on September 8th, the word was passed around the squadron; "We're landing at Salerno tomorrow." During the briefing that followed, the 94th learned that it had been assigned the "Pears" beach area to patrol during the invasion. The mission was to prevent the German Air Force from attacking the invasion forces on the beachhead.

During the first three missions the 94th flew on the 9th, only 4 enemy aircraft were seen and they fled at the sight of the P-38s. Jim would lead the fourth and largest mission of the day. The flight of twelve planes was separated into three flights of four planes each designated “Red, White and Blue” respectively. Having received advance permission to strafe behind the German lines, Jim was jubilant. "We get to strafe," he proclaimed to fellow pilots.

The briefing was short and to the point. Jim told the pilots that they would be given a target to strafe following their patrol of the beach. He told the pilots to kick hard on their rudders while strafing to keep from getting hit. This mission, Jim's 49th, was to be his last. The planes took off at 3:00 PM reaching the beach area at 4:10. Flying on Jim's wing was a new pilot, Lt. Stan Wojcik. Stan had trained to be a P-40 pilot. He had been assigned to the 5th Air Force and was traveling across North Africa

to reach his new base when his orders were suddenly changed. Stan was reassigned to the First Fighter Group while it was on stand down following the August 30th mission. Due to the upcoming invasion, the Group needed pilots in a hurry. When he arrived at his new squadron, Stan got in about five hours of transitional flying before going with the Group to Sicily for the invasion.

After Jim's flight had patrolled the beach area for one hour, "Changer," the aircraft
controller on the USS Ancon, ordered Jim's flight to attack a convoy of over 400 enemy vehicles 30 miles east of Agropoli, Italy. The German convoy was traveling north along National Highway 19 near the small town of Padula.

As the flight neared the convoy, the planes spread out into their individual flights of four planes. Jim led the attack out of the sun at over 300 mph. The Germans threw up a wall of anti-aircraft fire, above them as well as below, from the sides of the mountains as well as from the valley. "Red" flight had just pulled around in the valley following the initial attack when Stan Wojcik noticed smoke coming from Jim's plane. Stan pulled up above Jim's plane so he could look into the cockpit. Blue flight leader, seeing the two planes on fire, Jack Hanton continued west taking his flight up over the surrounding mountains to escape the intense anti-aircraft fire and to locate additional targets to attack. By now the cockpit of Jim's plane was engulfed in smoke and flames. Unable to detect any movement by Jim, Stan shoved the throttles to the firewall to try to get away. Having been close to Jim's plane, the anti-aircraft guns were already trained in Stan's direction. He felt a couple of thuds. The area in front of his cockpit erupted in smoke and flames, extending into the cockpit. He immediately pulled the escape ring above the windshield and the slipstream blew the top canopy off. After gaining enough altitude, and knowing he was vulnerable to being hit by the horizontal stabilizer, Stan pushed himself backward out of the cockpit. Stan waited to pull the ripcord. Fortunately, he missed the tail, his chute opened and he had to turn his chute to miss some high-tension wires near the road. Being low when he bailed out, Stan hit the ground almost immediately.

Fifty years later after realizing it was Stan Wojick he had seen bail out of his burning plane, Lt. Cy Nolen, who was flying "White-2," remembered his escape:

> *"How Stan got out was something that took quick thinking and skill. We flew under him on the way out from the German convoy. I was so low in the grass that anyone standing up would have got hit. His plane hit a hill in front of us and his chute was above us."*

The Germans immediately captured Stan. His face and arms were burned. After the Germans took him to their headquarters, he was taken to a school building that had medical facilities. His face and arms were bandaged and then spent his first night in captivity in a hallway on some straw. The next day Stan headed north in an ambulance. He spent nine days being transported to a hospital in Germany. In a converted convent he spent the next four months recovering from his burns. Finally, in mid-January 1944 he was escorted to a British Officer P.O.W. camp and finally transferred to Stalag Luft I. The Russians liberated Stan in May 1945.

Returning from the mission, the remaining pilots were shaken. Not only from the loss of Jim and Stan Wojcik, but by the German anti-aircraft fire which seemed to have come from everywhere. Lt. Ray Schulze who flew "Red-three," the element leader immediately behind Jim and Stan Wojcik, filed the following reports:

On September 9, 1943 while on a patrol mission to Naples, Italy, the formation leader, Lieut. Dibble, was ordered from the "Pears Area" by the controller to strafe an enemy convoy of approximately four hundred (400) vehicles which was traveling on a road about thirty (30) miles east of Agropoli, Italy. The formation dived down and strafed this convoy from the right and crossed the road on the deck completing a 360 in doing so. A few seconds after the completion of this 360 I saw Lieut. Dibble pull his aircraft up from the deck to about two thousand (2000) feet, open the cockpit and bail out. The cockpit appeared to be on fire, apparently caused by the anti-aircraft fire from the convoy. When I last saw Lieut. Dibble he was in his parachute at approximately fifteen hundred (1500) feet above the ground and on the left side of the road drifting away from the convoy.

Raymond L. Schulze
2nd Lieut., Air Corps.

On September 9, 1943 while on a Patrol Mission to Naples, Italy, the formation of twelve (12) P-38s which I was in was ordered from the Pears Area by the controller to strafe an enemy motor convoy of approximately four hundred (400) vehicles which was traveling on a road about thirty (30) miles east of Agropoli Italy. The formation dived down and strafed this convoy from the right and crossed the road on the deck completing a 360 in doing so. It was just before the formation completed the 360 and was still on the left side of the road that I saw both engines of Lieut.Wojcik's airplane on fire. At approximately 1720 hours a few seconds later, his airplane crashed into the

ground on the left side of the road, burst into flames and was completely demolished. From all indications I believe that Lieut. Wojcik was killed.

Raymond L. Schulze
2nd Lieut., Air Corps.

The confusion about both Jim and Stan Wojcik's fate was based entirely on Lt. Schulze's assessment of the situation. The letter that Stan Wojcik's parents received concerning his fate should have been sent instead to Jim's wife:

WAR DEPARTMENT
Headquarters of the Army Air Force
Washington

AAF 201 - (698) Wojcik, Stanley W.
0 803 508

30 October 1943

Mr. Lawrence Wojcik
1209 Melrose Avenue
E. McKeesport, Pa.

Dear Mr. Wojcik:

The Adjutant General notified you on September 24th that your son, Second Lieutenant Stanley W. Wojcik was reported missing in action since September 9th in the North African Area.

Further information has been received to the effect that Lieutenant Wojcik was the pilot of a P-38 Lightning fighter plane which left Sicily on September 9th on a patrol and strafing mission to southern Italy. The report states that at about 5:25 p.m., while strafing an enemy motor convoy along a road, approximately 30 miles east of Agropoli, Italy, your son's plane was seen to crash to the ground, apparently from enemy antiaircraft fire.

There were no other persons in the plane with your son.

The above facts constitute all the information available. Your anxiety during this trying period is fully appreciated and you may rest assured that any additional data received will be sent to you immediately.

Very sincerely,
John B. Cooley
Colonel, A. G. D.,
Acting Air Adjutant General.

Fifty years later Ray Schulze learned that it had been Stan Wojcik who had managed to bail out of his plane and not Jim. After reading Stan's report of the mission, Ray Schulze responded:

> *"I remember the mission very well. I was happy to hear that Stan survived despite his ordeal. I will not dispute Stan's report of the mission."*
>
> *"However, I say the reports I filed following the mission that day was the way I saw the results unfold. In the turmoil of a gun battle things happen very rapidly and the markings on our planes were not that large and identification of an individual plane was not fool-proof. I do believe that Jim bailed out of his plane that day. There was so much anti-aircraft fire coming in our direction it will always remain a partial mystery of Jim's fate and how he met his maker."*

Ray Schulze's assessment is understandable. The formation was flying at over 300 mph ten feet off the ground. His plane was being shot at from every imaginable direction. Information from other pilots indicated that the anti-aircraft fire was as heavy as they had ever seen it. By the time Ray noticed the planes ahead of him on fire, Stan had already overtaken Jim's plane and was in the lead. The enemy fire was so intense few of the other pilots could even successfully complete their attack on the convoy, and seeing two planes already shot down, returned to the base.

We now knew that Jim had indeed been killed on September 9, 1943. He had not, as my Grandmother feared, been shot while floating to earth in his parachute. His original grave, as reported by the Army, had been 50 feet from his plane, which now made sense.

ITALY

I first became curious about the crash site and the initial location of Jim's grave while reading the Army's case history of Jim as an "unknown." The report was very specific as to the location. Jim's original grave was located in a field on the east side of National Highway 19, approximately one and one tenth miles south of the entrance to the road leading to Padula, and some 50 feet from the remains of a crashed aircraft. A map pinpointed the exact area. Grid coordinates: 380920, Sheet 199, Potenza.

I called the Library of Congress, and was able to locate the original map. The Army had transferred this map to the library on May 12, 1945.

In hopes that the area had not been developed since the war and that perhaps someone was living in the area that remembered Jim's crash, I called the State Department. I was put in touch with Mr. Thomas Glover with the Office of Citizen Consular Services. He in turn forwarded my inquiry to the American Consulate in Naples, Italy. From the Consulate, Mr. John R. Arndt contacted the Mayor of Padula. He indicated that a former custodian of the local cemetery as well as a retired policeman remembered the episode of the crash, but was unable to provide any further details. Thanks to Mr. Arndt's help, I was able to hire a private investigator.

Following a visit to the town of Padula and the site of the crash, the investigator had found one person who remembered the events surrounding Jim's crash.

Several weeks later I received an envelope. It contained pictures of the crash site as well as an interview that had taken place with one of the two men that the German's had ordered to bury my uncle. The area was still very much as it had been at the time of the crash. I was off to Italy, I had a metal detector and I wanted to find a piece of the plane.

PADULA

I first visited the site with my wife in May 1999. We met some friends in Naples who had contacted the mayor of Padula and had arraigned for us to visit the city and see where the crash had taken place. The people in the town were very helpful. They escorted us to the crash site and showed us where the plane had come to rest. A quick sweep of the area with the metal detector revealed a piece of aluminum skin from the plane. It was a beautiful piece with original olive drab paint still intact. An hour later I had uncovered seven more pieces. It was time to go but having verified the location I immediately began to plan a return trip.

The following September I returned to Padula with my father and younger brother. We spent three days searching the area and uncovered several hundred pieces of the plane. We found .50 caliber bullets from the plane as well as engine parts, pieces of aluminum skin and even a piece of the canopy. However, the most amazing piece found was a heel from a shoe that was made in the USA. We knew from the Army records that only one low cut shoe was found in the grave as the body was being moved from the British Cemetery in Salerno to the American Cemetery in Naples.

During our visit we met several local citizens of Padula, including many eyewitnesses to the crash. Their ages ranged from 8 to 17 in 1943. Everyone was very gracious, curious and helpful. From all their stories I now believe that the story of how my uncle died is as complete as it can be.

From these eyewitnesses we also learned about the importance that Jim's attack had on their city. The area around Padula had been anti-German. In fact, there were freedom fighters in that area several of which had been either killed or captured by the Germans. Jim's attack on September 9, 1943 ended the German occupation of the area. The German forces quickly left the area to avoid being trapped between the American and British armies. Many of Padula's citizens still remember the attack by Jim's flight of P-38s. Not because it was their one main battle during the war, but because it symbolized their freedom and the end of World War II as they had come to know it.

Because of our trips to Italy to find Jim's plane, the people in Padula now knew who this young pilot was who "fell from the sky." Our new friends approached us and told us that they wanted to build a memorial on the site of Jim's plane crash. They wanted to honor the sacrifice that he had made for them as well as honoring the United States for what it did in freeing Europe during World War II. The memorial dedication was scheduled for May 6, 2000.

I returned to Padula for the dedication with my two brothers, Tom and Ted, as well as Jack Hanton who was not only Blue Flight leader on the September 9th mission but was Jim's tentmate in North Africa, along with another 94th pilot from WWII, John Mullins.

The Padula area is known for their marble like stone that is quarried in the nearby mountains, and we were amazed to see a very large piece of Padula stone rising over eight feet out of the ground at the corner of the field where my uncle's plane had come to rest. One side had been polished with a commemorative plaque attached to it. On May 6, 2000 the town of Padula came to the crash site to honor our uncle.

The ceremony to dedicate the monument was beautiful. It was attended by many of Padula's citizens. The eyewitnesses to the crash came to remind their fellow citizens what took place that day. The widows of the local freedom fighters came to remind us of the sacrifice made by many from this area and many school children came to listen and learn about their village and its heritage. Following the dedication, Jack Hanton told the crowd what it was like flying down their valley ten feet off the ground at 300 miles per hour 57 years ago. The Air Force reminded everyone how important events like these are to preserving our past as well as our future. But the

brass plaque on the stone monument said it all. The author Enzo Pinto, a former mayor of Padula, and eyewitness to the events in 1943, wrote the following:

"ON SEPTEMBER 9, 1943 LIEUTENANT JAMES P. DIBBLE CRASHED HERE WITH HIS AIRCRAFT WHILE LEADING A SQUADRON OF 12 P-38 AIRPLANES. HE WAS STILL ALIVE AND WOUNDED WHEN BARBARIOUSLY KILLED BY THE GERMAN SOLDIERS. THE FAMILY AND ALL PADULA REMEMBER HIM, AND IN HIS MEMORY, HONOR THE COURAGE AND SACRIFICE OF HIS YOUNG LIFE."

FINALE

On September 9, 1943 following his attack on the large German convoy of trucks and tanks, Jim's plane crashed near Padula, Italy. Located near Padula was a large concentration of Germans who had staged there to be able to rapidly react to the invasion by the US Army. As fate would have it, the P-38s intercepted the convoy near Padula with its German troops, tanks and vehicles. Consequently, Jim's plane was met by a concentration of very intense anti-aircraft fire. With both engines on fire, the plane began trailing heavy black smoke. Being very low and traveling at about 300 mph, the plane hit the ground skipped and then began to break apart as it flipped over and started to tumble. The plane came to rest partially upside down with one of its wings resting against a road embankment. Jim was seen getting out of his cockpit by a local farm boy, Giuseppe Pisano, 12 years old who lived on a farm adjacent to the crash site. Jim was bloody and appeared to have a broken leg. He was trying to reach a bush by the edge of the farm field when German soldiers from Padula arrived at the scene. A firefight took place between Jim and the German troops. Jim having been wounded or killed was then shot by a German with his own pistol. Two brothers, Vito and Paolo Cimino, who had been working in the field at the time of the crash, were ordered by the Germans to bury Jim's body by his airplane. Jim became an unknown soldier because the Germans took all personal items. After a week, Antonio Cimino, the son of Paolo made a wooden cross and placed it on the grave. World War II had come to an end for Jim as well as for the citizens of Padula.

When I started this project, I simply wanted to find my uncle in the picture that hung in the Air Force Museum at Dayton, OH. Along the way, I learned about the

94th Fighter Squadron in North Africa during the early stages of the war. I learned about my uncle's training, his life, and of course his combat missions while in North Africa. I was able to sit in a P-38, received his medals, and found a picture of Jim standing by his plane in the North African desert. However, while I was in Padula for the memorial dedication, I realized the most important thing I had learned was the character and courage it took for these very young men to willingly accept their responsibilities strap themselves into their planes and fly out to meet their fate.

Jim's last mission is no longer a mystery. On his 49th and final mission, Jim made the supreme sacrifice. He did not try to be a hero; he did not have to. He knew the risks and did his job. Today we owe our freedom in part to these men who helped make this a better world to live in.