

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Rudolph Augarten

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Abstract:

Fighter ace Rudolph Augarten discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II and with the Israeli Air Force during the Arab-Israeli conflicts. He describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time in Europe with the 403rd Fighter Squadron and his time in Israel with the 101st Squadron. Special focus on a bailout over German-occupied France in June 1944, which resulted in a multi-week evasion of enemy troops and eventual escape back to Allied territory, and on his training and missions with the Israeli Air Force.

Biography:

Rudolph Augarten was born on June 16, 1922 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He enlisted in the United States Army in 1941, then transferred to the Army Air Forces and graduated from flight school in 1943. He served with the 403rd Fighter Squadron in Europe from 1944 to 1945. Augarten left the military after World War II to study at Harvard University, but he decided to join the Israeli Air Force in 1948 in response to the fighting the Middle East. He flew with the 101st Squadron and later served as commander of Ramat David Airbase in the 1950s. In his civilian life, Augarten earned a master's degree in engineering and worked for Rockwell International until his retirement in 1989. He passed away in 2000.

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Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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Rudolph Augarten

[START OF INTERVIEW]

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[Introduction and joining the Army Air Forces]

RUDOLPH AUGARTEN: Rudolph Augarten. A-U-G-A-R-T-E-N. I was born in Philadelphia on June 16th, 1922. I graduated at the local high school in Philadelphia. My parents were born in Austria-Hungary. In fact, my father was in the Austrian army for four years during World War I. I thought about flying while I was growing up, but thought it was out of reach because of the limited financial resources that we had there. And at that time, you needed two years of college to be accepted for the Army Air Corps flying program. After graduating from high school, I had some jobs in Philadelphia, but I volunteered for the Army and went into an artillery unit in January of 1941.

After Pearl Harbor, the Army dropped the requirement for two years of college. I then saw that as an opportunity and took the appropriate examinations and was accepted for the pilot training program and graduated in March of 1943 from Moore Field in McAllen, Texas. It was a single-engine school and I had hoped to go to fighter training, but instead they sent me to an instructor school. So I was sent to Randolph Field to become an instructor in the basic program. And I took the course there and then was sent to Greenwood, Mississippi, where I was an instructor in the BT-13s, the Vultee Vibrator.

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I was very unhappy there. I enjoyed the flying, but I wanted to get into combat and I possibly had some transfers and they transferred me to Tuskegee, Alabama, where I trained some [unintelligible-0:03:04] pilots for a while. And it still wasn't getting me any closer to what I wanted to do. I got transferred again, headed to another organization there, and it was a sort of transport. Didn't do much flying but then I asked for a transfer again. I finally was able to get what I wanted, and they sent me to Richmond, Virginia for fighter training in the P-47. And that was exactly the sort of thing that I wanted to do.

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[Deployment to England]

And after finishing the course there, I was sent over to England and went to England on the *Queen Elizabeth*. And there must have been about 18,000 people on the ship there. And the ship went over unescorted and we landed in Scotland and then went to a training base in England for a little orientation. And in the States, when we were flying, there wasn't a gas shortage. We

generally only had 91 octane, so we really didn't have the full capability of the Thunderbolt. But overseas we had 100 octane, and that made a big difference.

Anyway, I then was sent to join a fighter group that was part of the Ninth Air Force. I think it was the 371st Group, the 403 Squadron or the 406 Squadron. I forgot which. And I ended up there in May of 1948 [meant 1944]. Even though I was still a second lieutenant, because of my training experience, I had probably as much hours as most of the pilots in the squadron.

[Bailout over German-occupied France (June 1944)]

I flew a number of missions there. It was a combination of dive bombing. It usually [unintelligible-0:05:40] in France, a few escorts. The escorts of the medium bombers, B-26s. And on D-Day, I found myself flying patrol over the invasion coast. And I flew just about every day at that time, but on June the 7th I was part of a flight of four that was to patrol the invasion coast. It was overcast at that time, and my unit leader lead us down through a thick bank of clouds. And we ended up right over the city of Caen, which was the center of a good deal of the fighting there. It was being held by the Germans, and all this flak came up there. And of course, we pulled up but I was hit and I started to burn. The plane started to burn, and the smoke was in the cockpit there. And I barely had enough time to open the canopy and dive out the side of the plane there.

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And I landed in the backyard of some Frenchman, who was anxious for me to leave because evidently we were close to the front line. So I ran away. It turns out that I was on the German side of the front line. So I walked a few miles and into a farmhouse, knocked on the door, still in my flying uniform there. They had seen my plane burn, and they asked me to come in. And I stayed there for three weeks.

I'm going to make a few corrections of the dates there. I joined my squadron in south of England in May of 1944, not '48. And on this particular mission, when I got hit by flak, that was June the 10th, not June the 7th. June the 10th.

As I said, I was with this farmer for three weeks. We were probably about 15, 18 miles from the front line. In fact, the Germans even had one of their telephone wires connected to the barn there. And every once in a while, they'd come along and I usually had to run upstairs and hide in the attic. I was wearing civilian clothes most—while I was working around the house there. I felt very uncomfortable. I was putting them in a precarious position, if I ever get caught. And I was also—was anxious to get on with my activity.

So I was there for two weeks. I left on my own, but I walked through the woods and I wasn't getting very far. I walked all night and finally I got back to the house there and saw that that was

not the way to walk around. Probably a week later, I left my civilian clothes on, put my uniform in a bundle, and then walked down the railroad track which was near the farm. And I met some French people, you know. Identified who I was and they put me in touch with some paratroopers who had been dropped off, of course, during D-Day and were living in a ditch. Now this is almost a month after D-Day.

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So I stayed with them for a while. They had—somebody would bring us food and we were quite close to the front lines. In fact, we were adjacent to the German motorpark, and after about a week of this, it was obvious that we couldn't stay there any longer because the Germans would be walking by every once in a while. So we decided that we had to get out of that area.

[Captured by German sentries and escape from imprisonment]

Most of the people, by this time—there were about six or seven of us there—decided to go to Spain, which was about 500 miles away. I just felt that I wanted to make a more direct approach. So I and a British paratrooper, we decided we were going to try to sneak through the line. I was given a pistol and a grenade. And when it got dark, we then went in the direction of the firing, and we were walking, crawling, and whatever through most of the night. Ran into a swamp. There was a minefield. Again, you try to avoid these things and you kept going, even though as it started to get light we ran into German sentries. There was a firefight. I threw a grenade at the guy, and after it exploded I hid in the ditch. And it caused a big commotion and there were [unintelligible-0:12:28] Germans running all around and they found me, so I was captured. And the other guy, the other paratrooper, by this time had already given up.

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So they took the two of us to a temporary prison camp and stayed there for two days. And then there were a couple of others that had been—a couple other pilots had been shot down. They moved us to a horse farm. It consisted of about 15, 20 stables and about—I don't know, anywhere from 10 to 20 soldiers in each stable. And I was put in a stable with mostly officers in there. And I was there for about four days. And one of the fellows stole a knife, and we started to cut the boards on the ceiling. We found—we cut a hole there, working all day, cut a hole in there, got up into the hole and found it led to an attic. And there was an opening in the attic to—led to an outside—on the street there. So we thought that that night, we would try to get out. So six of us decided to try that option, and the rest of them didn't want to go.

So we got up there when it got dark and we could hear the guard walking around and he seemed to be making a tour, coming by the location about every 15 minutes. So we timed it, and two of us would drop down about the middle of his tour there and escape into the adjacent woods. And

then the next two would drop down, and I was with the second group of two. And I was with another British paratrooper, but not the same one that I went with on my—originally, when I was originally captured. This was another fellow. His name was Jerry Gordon.

So Jerry and I got out and went—hid in the woods and started to hike through the woods there. And ran into some French people and identified ourselves and then led to somebody else who gave us some clothing. And we decided that the best way to make time, instead of walking through the woods, was to walk on the road and—interspersed with the refugees, which were [unintelligible-0:15:15] walking on the roads there. Of course, there were German vehicles on the same roads there, but we just didn't feel we could make much headway going through thick woods there. So that's what we did there. And had our uniform in our bundle, wearing civilian clothes. Got stopped once, believe it or not, by two Germans who wanted to know who we were, in German. But they couldn't speak French and my French was better than theirs and they let us go. And after that, I thought that, boy, nothing could stop us.

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Anyway, we ended up going to another farmhouse, identified ourselves, and they let us sleep in a barn that was about a quarter of a mile away from the main farmhouse. And brought us food every day. We, uh—and we wore civilian clothes. We stayed there for another few weeks. Again, the same situation was happening. More Germans were coming around, and we had to leave. And this time, we were put in touch with some other people and we—after a couple of days, we ran into an advanced American patrol that was—I guess it was part of the [unintelligible-0:16:54] Army there. And we got through—we got back to our home line there.

[Rest of combat tour]

Jerry and I then split up and they found my unit, which was now based in France there. They had moved over to Sainte-Mère-Eglise and had built an airfield there. And I was given an opportunity to go back to the States because I'd been a captured prisoner, but I wanted to continue flying. So they let me stay. So I rejoined the squadron, and I stayed with them until about March of 1945. We flew off of bases following the Allied advance towards the east there. Usually we stayed at a base that had been vacated by the Germans about three to four weeks earlier. And I flew a total of another 90 missions—I flew a total of 101 missions. Some of them were escorts, but most of them were close support, dive bombing, patrolling, because we were normally close to the front lines. We didn't make deep penetrations into Germany, but—so we didn't run into many German aircraft. But I did have a few encounters. I had a—I was credited with a damaged Focke-Wulf 190. I also shot down two Me 109s in one particular dogfight there for which I got the Distinguished Flying Cross.

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[Joining the Israeli Air Force]

I left the unit in March of '45 when I was in Frankfort. By this time, I was a captain. And I returned to the States, and I was out of the service by the end of the year. After I was out, I entered college. First I went to a school called McNeese College, which was a branch of the Louisiana State University. And then I transferred to Harvard College at Cambridge, Massachusetts. And in early 1948, I was concerned with the fighting that was happening in Palestine. I'm Jewish and my religious training had cultivated in me deep concern for the drive for a Jewish homeland. And I just felt that there was something that I wanted to do or could do, I suppose.

I was put in touch with an organization that was interested in pilots, and they wanted to send me overseas in April of 1948. I told my parents of my plans, but they were very upset. You know, they still remembered the "Missing in Action" telegram that they had received from the War Department in 1944 and, you know, I was missing for over 60 days. And they just didn't want me to do that. So I listened to them. I returned to Harvard, but as the fighting got worse I decided that that was something that I had to do.

So I made arrangements to go to Italy. I did not tell my parents ahead of time, and I dropped them a letter at the airport telling them of my plans. I was, uh—I flew to Rome, made contact with someone there. From there, I was sent to Czechoslovakia and I joined a group of about eight ex-World War II pilots. Most of them were Jewish, and they were from the United States and from the South African Air Force.

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We were sent to a Czech Air Force base in a city called České Budějovice, which was in South Bohemia. We were given a familiarization ride in a plane called an Arado, which is similar to a North American AT-6, and we were given an orientation ride in a two-place, Czech-built Me 109. The Czechs had built the Me 109 for the Germans throughout World War II. But after the war, they no longer had access to the power plant. The original power plant for the 109 was the Daimler-Benz. So they had then had another engine which was built in Czechoslovakia called the Jumo. And the plane was designated an S 199, and it was euphemistically called a mule. But in no respects was identical to the Me 109 except the power plant was not as good and the—of course, it was heavier and not as powerful. The flying characteristics were much different.

I made nine flights totaling less than seven hours at the Czech airbase. Now, this was my first piloting in three years. I hadn't flown at all since I left the Air Force. There was no gunnery involved. And our group was then flown into Israel at night on July the 4th, 1948, during one of the truce periods between the Arabs and the Jews. The Israelis had one fighter squadron and it was called the 101st Squadron. At that time it was based out of [Aqir?], which is an ex-RAF base, ex-Royal Air Force base, about 20 miles south of Tel Aviv. It had concrete runways and was very unsuited for the 109. And the squadron had about eight of these planes.

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And it was in the midst of being moved to an airfield that was being created near Herzliya, which is about 15 miles north of Tel Aviv, which would have one dirt runway, no hangars, and open parking in the surrounding banana groves. That particular truce was to end on July the 10th. To conserve aircraft—and no flying was done during the—until the fighting started. Now we had many more pilots and planes, and our first mission was on July the 18th when another truce was to start that evening.

[Missions with the 101st Squadron]

It was the nature of the war during that period where there would be a period of fighting interspersed with the UN-sponsored truces. Although our pilots had been highly trained, most of them hadn't flown for years and were given inadequate conversion to the type of planes that were available. The situation with regard to maintenance was worse. There were a few manuals available and the mechanics training was very limited. As a result, the aircraft serviceability was low and the accidents were frequent.

The squadron started with these 109s, and then we acquired a couple of Spitfires that were put together from parts left by the British. Later, we acquired the Spitfires, a Mark IX, from the Czechoslovakian Air Force. They had—that was formed from a couple of ex-RAF, Royal Air Force squadrons. We also got two P-51 Mustangs. We were never—the squadron was never able to put more than four planes in the air at one time and most flights were—two planes were a single sorties. But the squadron was very successful in stopping indiscriminant bombing by the Arab Air Force, mostly the Egyptians. And we even shot down the five British planes—one [Mosquito?], three Spits, one Tempest—when they intruded over Israeli territory. To my knowledge, we only lost one to enemy aircraft.

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I had accounted for four victories, all of them which were Egyptian. This was the highest individual total in our squadron during the '48-'49 war. My victories were flying all types. One of them was a—it was in a 109, shooting down a Spitfire. Two of them were flying Spitfires, shooting down Spitfires. And another one flying a 51 against a Dakota. I also [unintelligible-0:27:27] to damage in Italian-made plane while I was landing at El Arish.

[Strike on El Arish Air Base (December 22, 1948)]

And recently, I read an article in the autumn 1994 edition of the British magazine, *Air Enthusiast*. It turns out that the Egyptian pilot, whose name was given as Shalaby El Hennawy,

later became head of the Egyptian Air Force after the 1967 war. At the time, I had identified the Egyptian plane as a Fiat, but the article I referenced, which is also enclosed, identified it as a Macchi MC.205V.

It's this action that I would like to describe. My logbook shows that it occurred on December 22nd, 1948. I was the operations officer of the squadron. We were at the former RAF base, Royal Air Force base, called Qastina, which is about 30 miles north of Beersheba. By this time we only had—we had Spitfires and P-51s. We had some 109s, but most pilots hadn't—that were in the squadron, had not checked out in them. And the maintenance of those 109s was inferior to the other types.

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I was on standby with an ex-Canadian pilot named Jack Doyle. When we were scrambled by headquarters and told to go south, as Arab planes were observed in the area—I was in a Spit, Jack was in a 51—P-51 Mustang. I don't think either of us had oxygen. I led the flying and went down parallel to the coast at about 68,000 feet looking for other aircraft. We went down just west of Gaza but couldn't find anything. We decided to go to the most forward Egyptian airbase of El Arish, which is about 40 miles inside the Sinai.

While circling the base, I noticed a plane that was in the downwind leg of a landing pattern. "Boy," I thought, "what an opportunity, catching a plane landing." But at the same time, also, remember that my World War experience that strafing airfields was extremely dangerous. They tended to be very heavily fortified. They had an open field of vision, and it usually did not pay to be attacking airfields, particularly if they have some knowledge of you being in the area ahead of time.

Well, nevertheless, this was an Arab airbase and the circumstances might be a little bit different. And I told Doyle that I was going to go down and see what I could do. I cut my throttle, dove down, and caught up with this plane just as he was turning onto his final approach with wheels and flaps down, oh, about 100, 150 feet above the ground. By this time I had, you know, jabbed my throttle, fish-tailed to keep from closing too quickly. I fired several bursts, and there were strikes on the aircraft. He kept getting closer to the ground, and I overran him. And then I gave it full throttle, staying as close to the ground as possible, and veered about 45 degrees from the runway. And I kept on this course for about five to eight minutes and pulled up sharply and climbed to about 10,000 feet and headed back to El Arish. Made radio contact with Doyle. Flak was coming up, so I took some evasive action, but still kept the airbase in sight.

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I spotted a crash just off the runway. I didn't observe any [unintelligible-0:32:45] burning and—but noticed that the plane, by God, had crashed there. And we headed back to Qastina, and I

reported the plane as being a Fiat. This was the first time we had seen an Egyptian fighter that was not Spitfires.

Doyle's experience was a little bit different. He had stayed high throughout the episode and indicated that his engine was running very rough. In fact, on the way home, he switched to one magneto. He caught a lot of flak. Caught a lot of attention from the ack-ack.

[Other assignments with the IAF]

The war for Israel ended on January the 7th, 1949. That same day, a flight of four Spitfires from our squadron shot down four British fighters without any loss or damage to our planes. I was not in that flight, though, unfortunately. This ended all the air fighting in that part of the world until the War of 1953.

In February of 1949, I started a training program for the four most advanced Israelis who had been given preliminary training in Europe. My two-month course ended and these became the first Israelis to get pilot wings in Israel. One of them was Motti Hod, who became head of the Israeli Air Force and led it during the 1967 War. Again, this course was conducted at Qastina where I was still in the 101 Squadron. I then transferred to another base, [Aqir?], same base that I landed in when I first arrived in Israel. And I conducted a course for the next class of the advanced cadets who received their wings in 1949. There was about 12 in that class.

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I then returned to the United States and resumed classes at Harvard and graduated in 1950. I returned to Israel for two more years and was the commander of the base at Ramat David in northern Israel. It was—had a wing of two fighter squadrons—one Spitfire squadron, one P-51 squadron—and many of the pilots were my former students. During this time, there was no formal fighting but a couple of accidents to take into conjunction of political events there.

I also took the opportunity to take the parachute course there. Israel has a program where they take people from various organizations and put them through a two-week course. They make five jumps, and you get paratrooper wings. So I had—I was the first person in Israel to have two wings there.

So that's in a nutshell my flying career. And I was inducted into the Air Force Aces Association in 1995. And hope that this information is useful to you. Anyway, give me—let me know how things are, and if there's anything else I can provide, why, give me a call. I have some literature with this. And have a good day.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]