

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
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Jerry D. Collinsworth

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Abstract:

Fighter ace Jerry D. Collinsworth discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. He describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot and his time in Europe and North Africa with the 307th Fighter Squadron of the 31st Fighter Group. Special focus on several combat missions, including his first aerial victory in February 1943 and a mission on March 8, 1943 in which he downed a Focke-Wulf 190 that had just shot down his squadron mate.

Biography:

Jerry D. Collinsworth was born on December 23, 1919 in Dublin, Texas. He joined the United States Army Air Forces in August 1941 and graduated from flight school the following year. He served with the 307th Fighter Squadron of the 31st Fighter Squadron in Europe and North Africa from 1942 to 1943, then returned to the United States to serve as a flight instructor. After a brief postwar stint with United Air Lines, he rejoined the Air Force in 1947. His subsequent assignments included commanding the 66th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, serving as Director of Operations of the 27th Tactical Fighter Wing, and serving as base commander in Arizona and Thailand. He retired as a colonel in October 1967 and passed away in 2010.

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Transcript:

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Jerry D. Collinsworth

[START OF INTERVIEW]

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[Introduction]

JERRY D. COLLINSWORTH: Hello, Eric. This is Jerry Collinsworth. In trying to establish in my mind the best method of providing information that you might find useful for your book, I've decided to just give you a history of the time of graduation—from the time of graduation from flying school at Luke Air Force Base in March—March the 6th, 1942—down through the—basically through the time that I returned home in September of 1943 from Sicily. Now obviously, you won't need all that, but perhaps you might find some of it—the reason I'm doing this—some of it of interest. Because the reason I'm doing this is because you seemed interested in the fact that the 31st was planning to make—to attempt the first crossing of fighter planes of the Atlantic and didn't. So I felt that might be a good approach, and then you can cut out as—and use as you find—of beneficial to you.

[Early assignments to bomber groups and joining the 31st Fighter Group]

Now, as mentioned previously, I was in Class 42C, graduated March the 6th, 1942 at Luke. We stayed around two or three days and finally received a set of orders to clear the base, to proceed to Wendover, Utah to become B-17 copilots.

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While clearing the base—unfortunately or fortunately, depending on your viewpoint—the orders were canceled and we received a new set which sent us to the 12th Bomb Group, B-25s down in Esler Field, Louisiana. Most of us wanted to be fighter pilots, but we proceeded as instructed. And in fact, 20 of our most eager beavers had volunteered for a special assignment, and they really got the shaft. They wound up—as I see it, they wound up flying submarine patrol in B-10s or BT-10—B-10s or B-something-or-other—or submarine patrol out of Panama. And they were the really eager ones, and I thought it was a shame because they were the guys that really were gung-ho. But in any event, the remainder of us—approximately 60, I would say, or something there about—not 60, 50—proceeded to Esler Field, Louisiana. And some of us immediately began to clamor to be released to go to fighters.

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The Group Commander made the determination that all of us would get a ride or two in the B-25 to see what a great airplane it was. And it was a good airplane. No question about that. But some

of us still agitated, so one day he said, “Alright, proceed over—those who want to get out, proceed over to the adjutant’s office.” So I was in the first group to get there, fortunately, because at nine, they cut us off. And five of us went to the 31st at New Orleans. 31st Fighter Group, P-39s in New Orleans. And the other four went to—I’ve forgotten the name of the unit, but it was at Baton Rouge at the time, or fighters.

From my viewpoint, a P-39 was not a bad airplane. It just a lousy airplane. And I almost was killed two or three times in the 130 hours or so time that I flew it. One time it was my own fault. The other time I—that I recall, was the airplane's fault. It just was not a good airplane and although we didn't know this too well at the time, because we had nothing on which to base our judgment. In early—or late May, I guess it was, we proceeded by train from New Orleans to Manchester, New Hampshire. It was about a three day affair. Pretty crowded, but what the heck. I think the oldest fellow in my squadron—we called him Pop—was 28. Pop Renner.

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On arrival at Manchester—one thing I remember about Manchester was these two or three—met two or three good-looking girls. But the main thing I remember was the outstanding milk, and I was a great milk lover. The outstanding milk we had at the officers’ mess. Been there only a day or two. We proceeded over to Buffalo, New York to pick up brand spanking new P-39s. They were—the, uh—upon return to Manchester, we had to put 150-gallon belly tanks on the airplane. And I remember one flight I took—and I don't know how many I took—but I remember one that went down from Manchester, I believe it was to Washington, D.C., and returned nonstop, which was a pretty good haul those days in a P-39.

[Deployment to Europe]

Just prior to our departure for an attempt at crossing of the Atlantic, the Japanese surfaced a couple submarines, as you may recall, off of Santa Barbara and shelled the oil storage tanks there. The Pentagon sent B-17s that we were to follow across the Atlantic out there. General “Monk” Hunter—a World War I ace, as I recall, with a handlebar mustache—came up and he was somewhat agitated that this had happened to his pet project, as I remember. But in any event, he said we were still going overseas, so we got on trains—went to our train and went down to New York at Fort Hamilton. And a few nights later at midnight in deepest secrecy, we got aboard some kind of a surface ship and went out to a big ship and climbed up the steps, and it was a converted British cruiser called HMS *Ranpura*. Now this was in early—first week in June 1942. I remember the odor. It was very repelling, but after three or four days you didn't pay any attention to it. You didn't notice it. But an uneventful crossing via Halifax, is one place—an uneventful crossing, at least as far as I know.

[*Combat training in England*]

The first thrilling sight I saw was just north part of—the coast of Ireland, where I saw my first Spitfire. Clouds were overcast day and this Spitfire flew by, or a couple of them, and we still didn't know what we were going to get. Or I didn't know anyway, being a second lieutenant. Get off at Glasgow, went down to Shrewsbury at a field called Atcham. And there we checked out in Spitfires. We had trouble with them. There's a good airplane, of course, but it—we had trouble with it because of the braking system. It had a lever on the—lever on the control column that you had to squeeze in order to get brake pressure of any kind, and then you push whichever rudder you wanted to, for that particular—whichever way you wanted to—or you need the braking action. Well, sometimes we'd forget to squeeze the lever and push the rudder until we were already into ground loop or we'd be—squeeze the lever and forget to push the rudder until we were in some kind of a ground loop. But I think that we had about 20 or 22, 23 ground loops in the first three weeks we were there. Once we got the hang of it, it was a piece of cake. I didn't ground loop, but I know that a lot of folks did and some of us that didn't were just lucky.

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After checking out and getting a few flights there, we went to my squadron. They split the squadrons up. My squadron, 307th Fighter Squadron, went to Biggin Hill. Biggin Hill, which is a very famous fighter base, you may recall, in World War II. I believe that some 1400-plus Germans were shot down by pilots from that base, that single base. Sometime in that interlude, we went to the south coast to England to [unintelligible 00:08:34] off of—in the English Channel. And that's where we first learned about this thing called curve of pursuit. I remember none of our people had ever seen an enemy airplane, much less flown against one or fought them. And we learned curve of pursuit. The British kept talking about curve of pursuit. We said, “What are you talking about?” Well, it's like shooting ducks, of course, because we did not have competing gun sights or anything of that order. So it was just like shooting ducks. You had to lead it.

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Well, once we learned this, we practiced a little bit and went back. I think we went from Biggin Hill down there and then back to Biggin Hill. Anyway, we were at Biggin Hill when a Wing Commander Thomas was sent down to fly with us and kind of ease us into flights over the channel. In this time, we saw three or four German Focke-Wulf 190s, and they had told us to stick together. I remember how disturbed Commander—Wing Commander Thomas was when he rolled over after a Focke-Wulf one day, and when he looked back he saw a whole trail of Spitfires following him. The other three Focke-Wulfs were going off on their way.

But out of Biggin Hill, we also flew three days in the Battle of Dieppe. And I know this group lost about seven pilots. I think we lost one, as I recall. A fellow named Wells. [Unintelligible 00:10:06] had told some of them were shot down but were taken prisoner.

Also while at Biggin Hill, I went on with the squadron to escort the first B-17 raid on France. It was August 17, 1942. The reason I remember that: I saw that figure the other day. Oh, I guess it was *Hunters in the Sky* book. And 12—I said 12 B-17s. There's a B-17 gunner up at Prescott. Did not know that it was on that. He said there were 13. But I remember 12. It doesn't matter. We didn't lose any, and they bombed an airfield or something. I don't know what it was. I remember—the main thing I remember was I was freezing. I was—my heater wasn't working, my feet were cold, and I almost wished that somehow it should be force-landed in France so I could get my feet warm. Really didn't, but you know, there's sometimes you get miserable.

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From there we moved shortly afterwards. We were there two or three weeks. We moved down to Chichester on the south coast. And I believe we flew out of a grass field known as Merston. And we just flew over the channel, and I guess it was from there that—well, I don't know what we did, really. I don't remember. But we weren't there long until they grounded us and said, “You folks start practicing low level.” Well, that's when we got to—I don't know about the other fellows, but I got to see the inside of a lot of castles at the third floor level.

[Testing Spitfires in Gibraltar]

Shortly after that, in early October, I was one of ten selected from the wing or group to pack our duffle bags, B4 bags, and gas mask helmet and footlocker, and then we were told the footlocker would follow us to where we were going. We were not told where we were going. Well, the footlocker did follow us. I got it back when I was in the states in 1945, was the next time I saw it. And I was amazed at the difference in the quality of the shoes. I had some brand new shoes in that footlocker, and I was buying shoes now in '45. And there's a great amount of difference in the quality of the shoes of this '42 arrow shoe that I had taken to England, and the '45 arrow shoe at wartime that I bought.

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But in a way, we got—when we went—got on the train and went back to Glasgow, Scotland, and when we got on the ship—board ship—we were told we were going to Gibraltar to test op Spitfires that were going to be put together down there by British people. And that's what we did. We were down there—in fact, I was down there for six weeks. In fact, I test opped about 40-some airplanes for the invasion. We didn't know what they were going to use them for or where

they were going or anything, but we were told to test op them. The British put them together, the—there had—I remember some Australian armorers would fire them out in—fire the guns out into the Mediterranean, and then we'd test op them. And after a successful test op, they'd be stacked against the rock and we'd proceed onto the next one.

[31st Fighter Group in the Mediterranean and North Africa]

Well, long about the first week of November, why, President—well, President—General Eisenhower and his staff came down, and the rest of the group came. The 52nd, by the way, had followed us about two weeks, and they followed us along everywhere we went. They got Spitfires as well. And they came down and then on November the 8th, why, the group took off and went to Tafaraoui, which is just south of Iran about 30 miles. I don't know whether the 52nd went. But I had to stay there and finish test opping, and I don't know whether there was anybody else left with me or not. But a couple of weeks or three before I finally joined—was able to join the unit and I did so, they had then since move from Tafaraoui up to a real nice new base called La Senia, just south of Tunis about eight miles, I believe. We stayed there two or three weeks and then moved up to Algiers, and we were at Algiers for Christmas—December and Christmas of 1942. And we escorted C-47s flying cargo. I believe it was the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing or Group carrying cargo—high-priority cargo, I guess—to the front, which at that time was around near Thelepte, Tebessa—Thelepte, Feriana, Youks-les-Bains, Constantine—all those places.

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And then in early February, we proceeded down. And incidentally at Thelepte was the 33rd Fighter Group, and I believe an outfit known as the Joker Squadron by Phil Cochran. It was commanded by Phil, Phillip Cochran, and they were known as the Joker Squadron. And I remember thinking how staring-off-into-space these guys used to seem when we'd go down there. But shortly in the early part of February, we replaced the 33rd, and I don't know what happened to the Joker Squadron. They left, but I don't know what happened to them. And we started our first operational flying. And February, March, April, May, June, and July, I shot down one airplane a month. Just happened to turn out that way. And it was all—also happened that they were all Focke-Wulf 190s. I shot up a couple of [unintelligible 00:15:49] or shot at a—no, a Macchi 202, I believe it was. In this time at all. I don't think I hit him.

[First aerial victory (February 1943)]

But anyway, the one big—the one—you know, Eric, I don't know whether anyone has told you. I'm sure they have. But you don't know how you're going to react when the real McCoy comes

along. You don't know whether you're going to be brave, scared to pieces, or just what you were going to do. But it just so happened that day that on my first real combat and a first shoot-down, was 11 of us—or 12 of us went out and one guy backed out. I mean, one guy had to return for some kind of trouble. And so that left my flight—I was Tail End Charlie now—and that left me number three in an oddball flight. And I remember thinking if we're attacked today, I bet those so-and-so's will attack an oddball flight. It's just like them. You know, I'm not saying this is rational. It was just what I was thinking. And sure enough, a little bit later I called, I said— incidentally, I had worn contacts—I mean, I wore lenses corrected so I was seeing 20/10. And I called some Focke-Wulfs or bogies or bandits or something at four o'clock high coming in. And so finally they got fairly close. I told my leader, I said, “Break right.” Well, he started a gentle— what seemed to me to be a gentle training command turn up there, and I knew as Tail End Charlie that wouldn't hack it for me. So I did a quick turn, tight turn inside of all the other two, and faced this Focke-Wulf who, by the time I got around, I could see the sparklers flying, and it made me mad. I thought, “This guy's trying to kill me.” And two, they jumped the oddball flight just like I knew they would. And I think that was good. I wasn't scared. I was angry and I remember thinking, “Well, you so-and-so, if you can dish it out, I can, too.” And with that, I squeezed the trigger. Or pushed the button.

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I almost released it because nothing happened out there. The guns fired, but nothing seemed to happen. So green that I've even forgot that it took a bullet, even, time to go from point A to B. And then in a way, even, I got shot—hit him and he belly-landed into the desert. I remember how excited, I was saying, “I got him, I got him, I got him!” And then when I got off the mic, this calm voice, one of my buddies said, “Shut up.” And a very good reason for that, of course, and I did.

[Aerial victory over Tunisia (March 8, 1943)]

But the next mission was the most intense, the next combat mission. The real combat I shot down somebody was March the 8th, 1942. A date that I will never remember [meant “forget”]. I remember this as—or 1943. I'm sorry. One year and two days after graduating from flying school. We had been kicked out of Thelepte by Rommel, who was being pushed heavily by the Eighth Army, and we moved back to near to what the news media referred to as prepared airdromes. Well, a prepared airdrome was a scraped-out piece of dirt with a runway, and that was it. And we moved back to Tebessa about 30 miles, which is a supply point, as I remember it. Stayed there a few days. Rainy, cold. And I remember the scorpions we dug up when we were trying to dig places out of a gully to—

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Johnny White, my good buddy, classmate, and I were trying to—we were going to shelter-half together. You know, you had a shelter-half, and two of you had to put them together. And we could throw two bed rolls under there. And I remember the great big scorpions that we dug up out of this cliff. Never did get bitten by one. We didn't that I know of.

Shortly thereafter, we moved up to Youks-les-Bains. I believe it was Youks. Anyway, it was north of Kasserine Pass out there in the valley. And it's still raining, and so finally the engineers had dug a strip off the side of a hill just south of there a ways, so we put a few of our airplanes over there. And on March the 8th, 1942 [meant 1943], Mitchell—Marlin P. Mitchell—and a fellow from the 309th, I can't remember his name—Woody Thomas, Little Rock, Arkansas—and I—all of us in the 307th except the one from the 309th—were sent on a mission. I really—so green and I hadn't even been briefed. I didn't—we were supposed to go out, I think, and find out where Rommel was or where the German Army was. And I guess that we found out and were to find out by being shot at, which we were. The ceiling was run—ran between, I would say, 1,000—or 800 to 1,200 feet. It varied a little bit. And we're flying along about 500 or 600 feet above the terrain in a box. I was number three, Woody's my number four man. The 309th man was Mitchell's number two man. And shortly, somewhere along there, we were flying in a generally easterly direction. And machine gun fire—we could see it coming up just in the front of us. And as soon as it did, Mitch made a tight left break to get away from it, and I rationalized that if I broke my—I was on his right. And if I broke, I'd just be breaking through that wall of fire that appeared to me. So I hesitated just a little bit and went around it—on past it before I made my turn.

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And when we rolled out, as a result of this, Woody Thomas had pulled in front. He had cut inside the thing, and therefore when we rolled out into our box, Woody is now number three and I'm number four. Well, that's fine. We both got the same amount of experience and been there the same length of time. In fact, he was the class, I think, 42B and—if not A. But Woody, being a good guy that he was, felt if he's supposed to be Blue Four, he was going to be Blue Four on that mission, so he began to slip it and “S” it so I knew he'd chopped his throttle. So I advanced my throttle and it was a light mist, but I advanced my throttle and just as I got past him, I heard guns. And I looked back and Woody was already rolled over on his back, flames coming out of the cowlings, and he went in. We were from that 500 feet and blew up and exploded. And it didn't take that long. And I looked up and this Focke-Wulf that had shot him down was directly above me trying to slow down. He had an overtake, of course, when he hit us. And he was rocking his wings trying to keep me in sight.

Well, as you can see, what I—you can guess where I believe—where I got my belief that a fighter pilot needs three things at least. He needs to be a good pilot. Two, he needs to believe in himself. And three, he needs to have a little luck, and that was my day for luck. That fellow had

been coming up on me, and if Woody hadn't decided that he was still Blue Four, it would have been Woody maybe telling you the story and not me.

So I hollered to Mitchell into the clouds, and Mitchell said, "Hell no. I'm going to fight these so-and-so's." And I—in the meantime, I'm trying to get under this guy and get behind him and I can't. And so then I make up my mind to slide into the clouds, although I can't fly instruments. So he—the Focke-Wulf pulls to the left and I slide into the clouds. And we're about even when I go into clouds.

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And that old Spitfire being very stable, I took my hands off of the controls and gently eased—after getting into the cloud, gently eased the left rudder, which would be the downside rudder. Just gently. Came back out of the clouds. I hadn't been in there but a few seconds. The first thing I see is a Lufbery on the ground and I see this Focke-Wulf that had just shot Woody and was trying to get me, headed for the Lufbery three on the ground. About the time I see him, he sees me, and I know this because I could see the black smoke pour out of that Focke-Wulf. He had firewalled that Focke-Wulf and I was firewalled—I made up my mind quickly that I was going after the guy that got Woody. And that's the only time, Eric that I really ever shot at an airplane with the intention of hoping the pilot would get killed. I was always shooting the airplane and not the pilot, except in this one instant.

But in any event, he proceeded to the deck from that 500 or 600 feet, and I proceeded after him. And we had an emergency boost, which you had to break a wire, a little red knob. You broke that wire. I broke it, and you could run about five minutes in that way before you had to replace the engines. And we didn't know—really know what happened because it was over-stressing the engine.

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I had to hold the throttle and I had that knob broken. And I had everything to the firewall, and I had a little altitude on him and gained on him. We were heading in, I think, a generally south direction, southerly direction, and had no idea where it was. I just knew it was somewhere in Tunisia. But we got down there a ways and he saw that I was gradually overtaking him and he got nervous and he racked that Focke-Wulf into a tight left turn. And I remember thinking, "Friend, you ain't about to out-turn this Spitfire," because I knew he couldn't. I cut inside of him and fired. I don't know whether I hit him or not because one cannon jammed, which the other cannon on the wing gave me a seesaw effect. Whether it hit him or not, I don't know, but he snapped over on his back, and I thought, "If I pass over him, he's going to do a split S and come up behind me." So I rocked the other way to keep him in sight. And then I saw him hit the ground and explode. Of course, we were doing about 350, 375 miles an hour, and I for—I was so

scared I had forgotten we were only 20 or 30 feet above the ground. But when he snapped he may have snap-rolled himself. I don't know if it hit him or not. It doesn't matter.

Well, you can imagine that the adrenaline was flowing in this young 22-year-old. And, uh—or 23-year-old, I guess it was then. But just having seen my buddy, not two minutes before that, hit the ground and explode and burn on fire, and the other one—now then the fellow that got him had just now exploded on fire and burned. I didn't know where I was. I was still full throttle, but I knew enough to turn in a westerly direction because that's—eventually would get to where the Allies were somewhere out there. Or at least get away from the German territory. And I calmed down and dropped down to about ten feet and pulled the throttle back and the mixture back and the prop, RPM.

And going along, headed in a generally westward direction, as I say did not know where I was. And all of a sudden, from my ten o'clock to twelve o'clock position, I see this airplane flying along about 600 or 800 feet. And again, I remember that we had the overcast and the light rain and clouds, overcast.

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And I thought, “Gee, that looks like a Spitfire. Maybe that's Woody.” Or I mean, not Woody, but Mitchell or the other guy that was with Mitchell. But I didn't say anything. I stayed right where I was, and by the time he got to twelve o'clock position, I was close enough to see that it was a swastika on the tail. Then I knew it was a 109. I thought, “You know? I can just turn, stay down here and turn underneath him, directly underneath him, advance everything, get all set up, and I can just pull up and let him slide right in front of me and he'll never know what hit him.” That's what I proceeded to do or start to do. And as I turned underneath him and I advanced the throttle and the props and everything, he still hadn't see me. And I pulled up to the point of where I knew that by the time I pulled up at 500 feet, I would be behind him and probably real close enough to not miss him. And that's when a Britisher back in England saved my life again, I think. Again, you can call it luck if you want. I remember this Britisher saying, “Chaps, remember this always. Where there's one, there's quite often two.” I didn't look back. I just did a 180, still on the deck. As I got turned around, the number two man passed right over me. Neither one of them ever saw me. Had I pulled up on number one, number two would have had a beautiful sitting target just like I was about to have with number one.

Again, the adrenaline is flowing. Again, I'm headed west and still don't know where I am. I flew along a few minutes. I couldn't give you the faintest clue how long. I knew I was going to fly until I ran out of fuel or found an airfield, west. And I came across Thelepte. We didn't have it. Rommel had kicked us out of it, but now I knew where I was. So I picked up a northwestwardly heading and flew back and landed.

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That was my most memorable experience in combat. It is a day that I shall never forget and I think that when you listen to this—after having listened to this you can really understand why. Here's a—[audio distortion 00:30:13]—first real combat, second real combat, combat mission. And having seen his good buddy, Woody Thomas, die and knowing that it could have been him had it been just a separation of five to six seconds difference—or ten seconds, maybe. So I figured I was about ten seconds from death. It would have been me instead of Woody. Then the German and then almost pulling up in front of that other fellow, I'll never forget March 8, 1942—or '43. I'm sorry. 1943.

[Summary of rest of tour]

Well, anyway, things progressed on. As I said, I shot down one a month. A couple of them bailed out. I even went back and thumbed my nose at one of them. We went on then to the end of the war in Africa, went up to Cap Bon Peninsula, flew escort across to Pantelleria, shielding the B-17s. We'd fly between them and Sicily where the Germans were coming out of. And then sometime in June, we moved to a little island called Gozo, which is a mile-and-a-half from Malta. And the engineers had grated out a couple of V—a V-shaped airstrip in a rock pile, and fences were made out of rock, even. And we were there and we used to go up and patrol. And I got my last victory early up there. A Focke-Wulf 190 where the poor chap bailed out. I let him bail out, and he apparently hadn't fastened his harness. He slid out of his harness as I went by.

But we covered the invasion and then were the first Americans into Gala, G-A-L-A, on the south coast, and got bombed by an old French trimotor or Italian trimotor or something at night a couple times. Moved up to a place called Agrigento after a week or so. Been there about two hours and someone started a grass fire. The Germans and/or the Italians had moved out the night before.

00:32:38

I knew better than to go to the beach. Several of the guys were dumb enough to go down to the beach and get their—get themselves blown up with the mines. So someone started a grass fire. And I took four fellows, Johnny White included, and I said, “Let's go down and put that fire out before it causes damage, gets around one of these airplanes.” And that was—the heat set off a hand grenade, which caught me in the stomach and chest. I've still got the two pieces of steel up in the chest. Never have given me any trouble. After a 28-day stint in the hospital—and as I remember it, if you stayed over 30 days from unit they reassigned you to a new unit. That made sense after flying 15, 16 months in Spitfires, they're going to assign you to a new unit with people you knew. So I talked my way out of the hospital and caught up a C-47 back to my unit, and Johnny White picked me up at Palermo and took me to Rimini. We were only there—well, let's see. About two weeks. I had one hop, I think, or two trying to get back into the swing of

things, and then they sent 17 of us home. That was a story in itself, but probably would not be one you'd be interested in.

Now then, I shall close it with that. And if you have any further questions or want to talk to me about anything or further elaboration, why, feel free to call me at [telephone number] and I'll be happy to do the best I can. Hope this is—has some of the things in it that you can use, and we'll be looking forward to your book.

00:34:24

[END OF INTERVIEW]