

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

Newell O. Roberts

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Abstract:

Fighter ace Newell O. Roberts discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. He describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time in the Mediterranean Theater with the 94th Fighter Squadron of the 1st Fighter Group. Topics discussed include his service history, stories about fellow servicemen, and notable combat missions. Special focus on a reconnaissance mission on December 2, 1942 over the Tunisian coast, during which Roberts and his squadron scored several aerial victories against a flight of Messerschmitt Bf 109s.

Biography:

Newell O. Roberts was born on August 7, 1916 in Little Rock, Arkansas and grew up in Indiana. He joined the United States Army Air Corps in 1940 and graduated from flight training the following year. Assigned to the 94th Fighter Squadron of the 1st Fighter Group, Roberts participated in several stateside assignments, including test flying the Lockheed YP-38 Lightning and flying shore patrols along the West Coast. In 1942, he was deployed to England and subsequently sent to the Mediterranean Theater, where he flew missions over Algeria, Tunisia, and Italy. Leaving the military after the end of the war, Roberts went on to earn a doctorate in medicine from the University of Liverpool and a psychiatric degree from Baylor University. In 1960, he joined the psychiatry department at Audie L. Murphy Memorial VA Hospital in Texas. He retired in 1989 and passed away in 2010.

Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.

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Transcript:

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Newell O. Roberts

[START OF INTERVIEW]

[Begin Side A]

00:00:00

[Introduction and explanation of Collier's article]

NEWELL O. ROBERTS: Mr. Eric M. Hammel, [address in Pacifica, California], this is Dr. Roberts speaking, and I'm intending to answer your communications written on July 20th, 1989, December 21st, 1989, and more recently August 28th, 1989. I am sorry that I have not been able to accomplish this before, but as you know, I was quite busy treating veterans at the Audie Murphy VA Hospital as a psychiatrist. I have retired as of November the 1st of last year and now have gotten some information together, which I wish to relay on to you. I have also discussed some of these matters with Jack Ilfrey, who at that point in time was my wingman and eventually element leader in the 94th Hat-in-the-Ring Fighter Squadron of the 1st Fighter Group in North Africa.

First, I must talk to you a little bit about the article which I was supposed to have written in *Collier's Magazine*, September 4th, 1943. At the time the article was written, I did not write it. But some authors and writers at Lockheed Corporation, Burbank, California, wrote the article. I merely spoke to people there at Lockheed at that time about some of the several incidental things that I had done and accomplished while in combat in North Africa. When the article was published and I received a copy of it, there were several errors in the article, of which I objected to. Since the article had already been printed, there was no way that I could change it, even though I went to an attorney friend of mine there in Los Angeles by the name of Paul Zeffrin, who told me that it would cost too much money and too much embarrassment of people to set the article right at that point in time. The other thing about it was, too, that I had been recently married to a lovely little girl called Sylvia Opert, who had been a longtime sweetheart of mine, and since I got \$875 for writing—or participating in writing the article, it was decided to spend this because we needed the money for our honeymoon.

00:03:22

[Reconnaissance mission over the Tunisian coast (December 2, 1942)]

NOR: At the time of the flight, I was flying a P-38G. As you know, my flight took off on December the 2nd, 1942 at 0645 hours from Youks-les-Bains. And we flew a course of approximately 120 degrees to Faïd Pass, where we strafed it, and then continued on to Sfax. The number of miles from Youks-les-Bains to Faïd is approximately 90 miles,

which took us approximately 15 minutes on 120-degree course, and then from Faïd Pass to Sfax is some 60 miles, which we made in approximately ten minutes, considering we were flying at 360 miles per hour.

There was a huge battleship in the harbor at Sfax, at which point in time Jack Ilfrey wanted to break away from the formation and reconnoiter the battleship, which I gave him permission to do so. But we were flying on this course at some 300 to 100 feet off the ground. And of course, when Jack pulled up to 500 feet, looking over the battleship, this gave us away to the Germans' radar and alerted everybody in our course. Nevertheless, I called him back and he re-gained the formation. But before he re-gained the formation, I went down the long street in Sfax with my wingman, Lieutenant Lovell [William Lovell]. And we were flying some three feet off of the street, and there were no obstructions through the whole of the length of the street. And much to my amazement, I saw Me 109s and German airplanes parked in buildings on each side of the street, which they obviously were using as hangars, and all they had to do was taxi off in the street and take off. Now, *Collier's Magazine* says that there was flak flying all around. That is not true. Nobody shot at us during that part of the mission. The weather at that time was excellent. Blue skies, no rain, visibility unlimited.

After Jack Ilfrey and his wingman, McWherter [Richard McWherter], came back in formation, we flew at approximately 195 to 210 degrees along the coastline of the Gulf of Gabès, which is some 80 miles to Gabès from Sfax. We flew as low as we possibly could to the ground, usually treetop level. And when we approached Gabès, on the northwest side of the woods there, I saw 12 Me 109s taking off to the northeast: three groups, four each. They were leaving a dust trail behind them, as there was no runways on the airdrome. There were also other airplanes sitting on the ground.

I called to my element leader, Jack Ilfrey, and stated, "Jack, there are enemy airplanes taking off to the northeast—[audio distortion]—follow them. Let's get them." With that, Jack said, "I see them." I opened the throttles on my P-38 wide open past the red stop, at which time it was no problem catching the Me 109s taking off whatsoever. As a matter of fact, they were like sitting ducks. The first Me 109 I shot down was the leader, and I was so close to him that when his airplane exploded in front of me, pieces of the wings of his airplane, et cetera, hit my plane. I made a sharp turn to the left and was on the tail of another Me 109 and shot him down. He also blew up in midair, I was so close to him—something like 20 to 50 feet.

The battle raged on, and I noticed that there was one Me 109 that climbed up to about 1,000 or 2,000 feet above us and just circled. The gun batteries at the airdrome saw what was happening over the airdrome to their airplanes that they had sent up to attack us, at which time they completely ignored their own fighter planes—Me 109s that they had sent

up—and they cut loose with everything that they had and firing at all of us, including their own friendly Me 109 pilots. The smoke and fire from the gun batteries on the base filled the air with a huge cloud of smoke, which was so extreme that it was necessary for me to fly on instruments when going through it. And I did go through it on two or three different occasions, looking for more enemy airplanes.

I suddenly heard a screaming, curdling voice come over the intercom, which was Jack Ilfrey. Jack said, “Robbie, I have been hit.” I did not know where Jack had been hit himself—or where his airplane had been hit, and at that point in time, I told him to get on the deck, which meant three feet off the ground, and head towards our Base Youks. He soon came out of the cloud of smoke and was headed in the direction of Youks with only one engine running, and I went down to escort him home, flying approximately three feet off his wingtip. We were around three or four feet off the ground, the propellers just clicking over but not hitting any kind of vegetation.

I kept my eye on the Me 109 that was circling above the airport at some 2,000 feet, just in time to see him do a half-roll. He pulled his nose through and landed when he rolled out right on the tail of Jack Ilfrey, not more than three feet from his tail. At this point in time, I tried to shoot the man but could not because I was out of ammunition. This was a very helpless feeling. I could see the bullets going into Jack Ilfrey’s airplane, peeling the metal up as they penetrated, and I could also see the German sitting in his Me 109, and he looked around at me and laughed. I could see the blue of his eyes, that’s how close I was. And he was blondish.

Now, we don’t think about things that we’re going to do at this point in time in combat. We just do them. And the thing that happened was that I started to ram this airplane with my left propeller, at which point in time the German saw me coming, and he immediately turned to the left. And when turning to the left, his tail assembly hit my left wing and tore it off. The Me 109 then dived into the ground and burned up with the pilot in it.

Neither McWherter or Lieutenant Lovell were around at this point in time. I could not see them anywhere, and I assumed that they had left the area and had gotten lost. At no time did Lieutenant Lovell ever shoot the airplane that was on Jack Ilfrey’s tail. Now, I probably damaged several other airplanes that was in the group of 12 Me 109s, but I had no confirmation of this. Neither did I count the airplane that I collided with and knocked down that was on Jack Ilfrey’s tail as an airplane that I shot down because I was without ammunition to do so. There were no more Me 109s in the air. And Jack Ilfrey continued on to Youks-les-Bains, and I was escorting him home, flying close formation with him. Lieutenant Lovell came in to Youks-les-Bains about an hour later, and McWherter came in some hours later. After, he stated he had landed, filled his airplane up with some

automobile gas from the Arabs, and managed to get the airplane back to our base at Youks-les-Bains.

It was the right engine on Jack's P-38 that was shot out. When I was flying on Jack's wing, escorting him home at the time that the German attacked, I was on the right side of Jack Ilfrey's airplane. So I made a quick turn into the Me 109 that was on Jack Ilfrey's tail to the left, at which time the tail assembly collided with my left wing and knocked it off.

At the air base at Youks-les-Bains, we counted some 268 bullet holes in Jack Ilfrey's airplane. The number of German Me 109s destroyed in the air on that particular day were 12. Nine of these airplanes were shot down in aerial combat, one airplane was destroyed by my cutting off the tail of it when it hit the wing of my airplane, and the other two were shot down by the enemy's gun batteries on the base at the airdrome. It could well have been also that the two airplanes that presumably were shot down by the enemy gun posts on the ground were shot down by one of the four of us, and we were never able to confirm this.

00:18:00

[More on the Collier's article and an aerial victory against a Cant Z.1007 bomber]

NOR: Now, back to the article in *Collier's Magazine* on September 4th, 1943, where it says that there were flak fired at us at Sfax. That is not true. There was no flak, and nobody fired at us. *Collier Magazine* again says that at the edge of the woods I saw several Me 109s take off. I could not tell how many there were for dust, but I called to my flight leader, Jack Ilfrey—I did call my flight leader, Jack Ilfrey, but there was 12 airplanes taking off and they were leaving a slight dust trail behind them but nothing remarkable. It was an easy thing to count 12 airplanes, three flights of four each, being airborne almost simultaneously.

Again, the *Collier's Magazine* says, quote, "As I swerved, the Jerry veered left into the sides of Bill Lovell, who had come up beside me, and Bill's squirts brought him down." This is not true. Bill Lovell wasn't anywhere around, and I've always been concerned about this, as I thought perhaps that Lieutenant Lovell quickly left the scene of action and that accounted for his coming home to Youks-les-Bains some—approximately an hour after Jack Ilfrey and I had landed.

While I'm speaking of the errata of the *Collier's Magazine*, I might well draw your attention to the fact of the story of the incident about the Italian bomber, Cant Z.1007. That, too, is erroneous. There were several flights of P-38s on that particular day. One of the flights was led by myself, one flight by Major Hubbard [Glenn Hubbard], and another

by Bucky Harris [Francis “Bucky” Harris]. At the time that the Cant Z.1007 Italian bomber was spotted, Major Hubbard was to the right or north of the formation, I was in the middle, and Bucky Harris was some distance behind with his flight. The flights were all spread out considerably and not in tight formation.

Lieutenant Umphrey [Everett Umphrey] made the first pass at the bomber, which was uneventful. I had gained altitude on the bomber, and as Umphrey veered off to the left towards Philippeville, I attacked the bomber, shooting it down. The bomber, as I shot it down, seemed to pull its nose up, it shook, and then exploded in midair and fell into the Sea of the Mediterranean. There was quite a fire and debris all over the area where the bomber lit. It just completely disintegrated.

I then went down to help Lieutenant Umphrey out, who was flying towards Philippeville. When I got into formation with Lieutenant Umphrey, he was smoking his cigar. It was not lit. What I mean is, he had the cigar in his mouth. He was looking straight towards Philippeville, and the airplane suddenly settled on the surface of the Mediterranean, went along like a big motorboat for a short period, and then sank just a few miles north of Philippeville on the Mediterranean.

At no time did Major Hubbard make a pass at the bomber. When we got back to our base, I had several bullet holes in my P-38 airplane. Major Hubbard, at that point in time, came to me at my airplane and stated that since he was along on the mission and had not shot down anyone so far in combat, would I give him one fourth of the victory and one fourth to Umphrey and take a half for myself. In order to keep peace in the squadron, and especially to the squadron commander, I gave him a fourth of the victory. Bucky Harris came by and stated Robbie was the one who shot down the Cant Z.1007 Italian bomber. That is the way that Major Hubbard got credit for one fourth of a victory in the war.

00:24:07

[Service history]

NOR: Eric, your questions in your August 28th, 1989 letter are quite extensive. Special Order Number 161, dated 12 July 1941, Paragraph 81, relieved me from the Air Corps Advanced Flying School, Brooksfield, Texas, and assigned me to duty at Selfridge Field, Michigan to the 1st Fighter Group, 94th Hat-in-the-Ring Fighter Squadron. At that time, Colonel John N. Stone was commanding officer of the 94th Fighter Squadron.

As I understood it at the time, the 1st Fighter Group was at that time being re-formed, which dated back to the 1st Fighter Group, 94th Fighter Squadron of World War I fame. That is Eddie Rickenbacker’s old—Eddie Rickenbacker was the commanding officer of the 94th Fighter Squadron. It was re-formed at Selfridge Field, Michigan and consisted of

three squadrons: the 94th Hat-in-the-Ring Fighter Squadron, the 71st, and 27th. At that point in time, we were flying P-43s. Colonel Stone was transferred to headquarters and—at Selfridge Field, Michigan—and Garman—that's Ralph Garman—became commanding officer of the 94th Fighter Squadron.

On or about September of 1941, a group of us went to Lockheed Corporation, Burbank, California, where we learned to fly the YP-38, and flew these back to Selfridge Field, Michigan as experimental training airplanes. We flew these YP-38s at Selfridge Field, Michigan, and to my best recollection, some of these airplanes buried themselves in the earth from high altitudes while doing combat or acrobatic maneuvers. On this one occasion, I had a YP-38 up to 20,000 feet and was doing acrobatics with it and I did a slow roll, at which point in time the airplane would not come out of the dive. The Lockheed representative had told me that if I ever got the airplane into a dive and it would not come out, to quickly roll back the trim tab, and if I was lucky and had enough altitude, it would come out of the dive. I quickly rolled the trim tab back, and the airplane came out of the dive at about 100 feet off the ground.

I brought the airplane back to Selfridge Field, Michigan and landed, at which point in time they went over that airplane from stem to stern, and the wings were buckled on it. We couldn't fly it anymore, and they took the airplane apart, finding out that, on that counterbalance shaft controlling the back rudder, there were two stop bolts, which kept it within a certain arc, and that these, when the airplane would vibrate, had gotten loose and turned down so that there was no way of getting the airplane out of a dive at high speeds without using the trim tab to do so. They corrected this aeronautical engineering monstrosity at Lockheed Corporation, and from that point in time on, we had no difficulty bringing the airplane out of a dive.

Most of the YP-38s that we got from Lockheed were either buried in the ground or unable to fly any longer. Of course, when it buried itself in the ground, it also buried a pilot. We were later supplied and outfitted with P-38Ds at Selfridge Field, Michigan. We learned to fly these airplanes and do acrobatic maneuvers and excellent formation flying. We participated in maneuvers in Carolina and then came back to Selfridge Field, Michigan. And three days before war was declared, after Pearl Harbor, we were sent to the West Coast to defend the United States against the possible invasion by Japan. Lieutenant Ralph S. Garman was commander of the 94th Pursuit Squadron of the 1st Pursuit Group—[audio cuts out].

On the day of Pearl Harbor, I was flying one of the 20 P-38s from our home base, Selfridge Field, Michigan, to Southern California area, where all 20 of us were to perform daily shore patrol missions for the purpose of detecting any enemy activities. It was during a fuel stop at Biggs Air Force Base in El Paso, Texas that we learned of the

attack on Pearl Harbor for the first time. During the following six months, the three squadrons of the group, operating from three separate bases in Southern California, performed coastal patrol missions and in June flew to Bangor, Maine, where we prepared for our group flight to England via Labrador, Greenland, Iceland, and Scotland. During the time we were in California, we were stationed at North Island and Long Beach. That is to say, the 94th Fighter Squadron was at that—those two places.

Ferrying a group of fighter aircraft over the Atlantic to the war zone in England was indeed a first, and all of us were proud to have participated. We remained in England approximately four months, during which time we trained our pilots in tactics and gunnery and actually did fly several short escort missions over enemy territory in France. In December, the 1st Fighter Group—or the 1st Fighter Wing, as I believe it was then called—received orders to fly non-stop from England to Algeria in North Africa. This extremely long—nine hours and fifteen minutes—flight was completed when we landed in Oran, Africa in North Africa. Within just a few days, after much-needed aircraft maintenance had been performed on our P-38s, our wing was considered a fully operational unit.

During the next seven months of the war in North Africa, it is an underestimate to say that we were conducting fighter operations under extremely difficult circumstances. Our initial combat requirements involved Army ground [aircraft?] escort and high-altitude close support for two B-17 wings. In the following weeks and months, our losses in pilots and aircraft were unbelievable. In two instances during this period, our total number of aircraft in our three squadrons went from the usual total strength of 80 aircraft down to approximately only 30 aircraft, and in most instances, this involved the loss of the pilots as well.

In answer to your second question, the missions ordinarily were dreamed up by General Doolittle at Headquarters, which were then sent down to, at that point in time, Colonel Garman, who then relayed the information over to me. To my best recollection, Colonel Garman just called me into his headquarters in his tent and asked me if I would volunteer for the mission and explained the mission to me, and then I accepted the mission. Colonel Garman was a very fair individual and would oftentimes ask for a volunteer for a very hazardous mission. He never at any point in time ordered any of his men to do anything, to my recollection. He always asked them to do it.

For example, another instant was on the 22nd of February 1943. I was asked by Colonel Garman to lead a flight of P-38s into the Battle of Kasserine Pass, and I volunteered to do so. This was a very dangerous mission, and there was a possibility that none of us would ever return. I mustered together all the P-38s available and picked the best pilots with the most experience in combat. Of course, my lifelong buddy Captain Rimke, Clarence

Rimke, was one of the most experienced pilots in the organization, and I told—and I chose him to lead half the flight, and I led the other half.

We went into Kasserine Pass line abreast at just about 50 feet over our own troops. And at that time, our troops cut loose with everything they had right at us and shot some of us down, including Captain Rimke and Lieutenant Chambers [Thomas Chambers]. We flew on into the pass, the weather being down to about 500 feet. Shot-up pillboxes, troops, tanks: you name it, and they had it there coming through the pass. I have never seen in my whole life so many dead bodies and dying bodies lying—just lying on the ground just before we went into the pass. And it was very interesting that Captain Rimke was on my left, and we were taking this flight of P-38s into that pass to clean it out, which we did. Captain Rimke and Lieutenant Chambers never returned. They were lost in the maneuver.

In answer to your third question: where exactly is Biskra? I'm sending you a map which shows Biskra on it. It is some—[audio cuts out]—280 miles due west of Sfax. At Biskra, there was a small oasis and then, of course, the town of Biskra and also the famous Garden of Allah, where I had walked around in many times. The airdrome was merely a place on desert sand. It was not really what you'd call an airdrome, just a space where we had our airplanes and enlisted personnel—mechanics and so forth—in pup tents and foxholes. We officers initially stayed in a pup tent over a hole in the ground, which we dug, but later we were moved to one of the hotels in Biskra, where we resided until we left Biskra.

00:39:11

[Mission logistics]

NOR: In answer to your fourth question, the Faïd Pass target was a strategic military objective, as Rommel—tanks, troops and so forth were all coming through Faïd Pass. They had pillboxes there, artillery and so forth, the usual thing. Faïd Pass was some 90 miles from Youks-les-Bains, which was about 15 minutes in our P-38 travelling at some 360 miles an hour. Sfax was some 60 miles further, which took us about ten minutes to get there from Faïd Pass on the same heading of approximately 120 degrees. From Sfax to Gabès was approximately 80 miles, starting out on a course of 195 degrees to 210 degrees and following the coastline of the Gulf of Gabès.

We ran into no air opposition either at Sfax until we got to Gabès. We had heavy losses leading up to December 2nd mission, both airplanes and pilots. Our losses in pilots and aircraft were unbelievable. As I stated before, in two instances during this period, our total number of aircraft in our three squadrons went from the usual total strength of 80 aircraft down to approximately only 30 aircraft, and in most instances, this involved the loss of the pilots as well. I recall a bomber escort mission from our base in North Africa

to Naples in Italy. Of our 45 P-38s that participated in this mission, we lost 14 aircraft and 14 pilots.

We were always in need of replacement fighter aircraft and fighter-qualified pilots, but with the requirements for aircraft and pilots in England, there were long delays in our getting pilots and fighters in our theater. For example, I remember one time when Jack Ilfrey's airplane was shot up quite a bit, and they were repairing it by using parts from other airplanes and that they had to use some baling wire in splicing one of the control cables. Jack Ilfrey, at that point in time, didn't know that they had spliced his control cable with baling wire but flew it anyway.

The air opposition was tremendous. The German pilots in their Me 109s were extremely excellent combat pilots. And of course, the Me 109 was a tremendous airplane—a tremendous combat airplane.

In answer to your fifth question, Colonel Garman and Major Hubbard always selected the most qualified combat pilots, of which I was one, Captain Rimke being the other. My duties in the 94th Fighter Squadron were to lead the 94th Fighter Squadron on many combat missions, which consisted of strafing missions, bombing missions, high-altitude bomber escort, and also I led the wing on many missions throughout the whole of Algeria and Tunisia and over to Sicily. The reason why that I chose McWherter and Lovell to fly with Jack Ilfrey and myself on that particular day was because they were considered the top-notch combat pilots in our squadron. And Jack Ilfrey was qualified to be an element leader. Naturally, when I went into combat, it was a matter of myself and choosing the most competent combat pilots that we had.

In answer to your question number six, Colonel Garman usually briefed me on the importance of the mission. The briefing usually took place in a pup tent, which was considered the group and squadron headquarters. Our group commander in England and early North Africa was Colonel John N. Stone, who was followed by Ralph Garman, who became group commander sometime late in December after we arrived in North Africa.

In answer to your question number seven, we took off at 0645, December the 2nd, 1942, on a course of approximately 120 degrees to Faïd Pass. It was not a straight-in approach but necessary to turn a few degrees to the right to go through the pass. The formation was our usually—

00:46:12

[End Side A]

[Begin Side B]

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NOR: Question number seven. We took off at 0645, December the 2nd, 1942, on a course of approximately 120 degrees to Faïd Pass. It was not a straight-in approach but necessary to turn a few degrees to the right to go through the pass. The formation was our usually—usual type of formation, which consisted of a leader, his wingman, my wingman on my right, then an element leader on my left and his wingman on his left. Of course, this formation was a highly maneuverable formation and could change real quickly.

We initially went into the pass with myself being the leader and my wingman, then following in trail, Jack Ilfrey and his wingman, Lieutenant McWherter. The description of the attack was the usual thing, which we dived straight at a tank or a pillbox or some other armament emplacement and when we got in range—which was real quick-like, as we were going some 360 miles an hour—shot it up.

The P-38 had a marked concentration of firepower, consisting of four 50s and a 20-millimeter cannon. And when that thing hit a tank, that was the end of the tank. And the same way with the pillbox. We only made one pass through—flying pass, shooting tanks, pillboxes and strafing the road. The course then to Sfax was a continuation of the 120-degree course that we had taken when we came out of the pass. It took us then about ten minutes to fly some 60 miles to Sfax. I could see Sfax on the coast some five or ten miles before we ever got to Sfax. You might even say 15 miles before I got to Sfax. And we could see the big battleship in the Gulf there.

Well, in answer to your question number eight, it was a lovely little desert peaceful town. I did not see any airdrome at Sfax, but my eyes were on the city all the time and also on the battleship that was in the bay. I remember the buildings being white, for the most part. The buildings were small, two- or three-story buildings, and the street was wide. It went from north to south. I flew our two airplanes—that is, myself and my wingman, Lieutenant Lovell—and we were about three feet off the street, which was paved, and the props of the airplane just barely clicking over, of course, without hitting the street. I was flying as low as I possibly could, which was right at the level of some of the buildings.

We were, of course, going some 360 miles an hour, and when I looked right and left, here are all these German Me 109 airplanes parked inside the buildings, which had the front of the buildings excavated. Each of the many buildings was just like taxiing into a hangar. I had plenty of room on each side of my wing, not touching any obstruction while I was going down the street. I imagine, in retrospect, that the street was about as wide as one-and-a-half widths of the airplane of a P-38 from wingtip to wingtip—something like that. Anyway, I went down the street, and my wingman followed in the same position and

direction as I went. Then as soon as we got through the city, I noticed that Jack Ilfrey had climbed up to about 500 feet, pretty close to the battleship, and I asked him to come back in formation, which he did immediately. Certainly the Germans were using the street as an airplane runway to take off and be airborne immediately.

In answer to your ninth question, I did no shooting at Sfax, and nobody shot at me.

In answer to your tenth question, I flew to Gabès along the coast, which is approximately 195 to 210 degrees, at approximately 360 miles an hour. The airdrome was situated a few hundred yards south—or perhaps a half-mile south of the city of Gabès, by the side of a whole bunch of trees, which were on the northwest side of the airport. The town of Gabès sits on the coast of the Gulf of Gabès, and I was, say, a mile from the coastline, flying low, coming up to the little forest of trees on the northwest side of the airport and Gabès. There were no runways on the Gabès. The terrain around Gabès was quite conducive to being able to make a forced landing most anyplace.

The answer to your 11th question, when I alerted Jack Ilfrey to the 12 Me 109s taking off, the lead Me 109 was treetop level, which would be about, what, 50 feet in the air. I initially didn't climb to 1,000 feet above them because when I turned in to get the lead Me 109, he was only about, oh, say, 100 feet in the air. They did not turn to meet me but were still continuing their takeoff to the northeast. But then after shooting down two or three of these airplanes, there was one or two of them that made a head-on attack. Like I have said in the past, I merely made a turn to the left, real quick-like, put my throttles past the red stop—which was the water injection on the airplane, which would cause it to go faster—and then in a matter of a fraction of a second, I was on the tail of the leader and shooting at another as I turned to the left, blowing both of them up. The leader was the first man off, and I shot him down.

In answer to your 12th question, my aiming point on the Me 109 was dead to the stern of the Me 109 at his tail and whole body as it—of the airplane as it appeared in my sight. And I was not more than 50 yards away, if that much—perhaps 50 feet. In other words, he was a sitting duck, and I was right on him before you could say “Jack Robinson.” You're exactly right, I was gaining on him from straight behind his tail. Pieces of the airplane flew apart and hit my airplane when I shot him down. That's how close I was.

In answer to your question number 13, it's a similar thing. I turned to the left, and there was the airplane in my sights, and I shot him at close range. In the brief portion of a second, he tried to evade, but there was no escape. Again, I was not more than 50 yards or 50 feet from him when I fired, and his airplane disintegrated. There was no crash landing. The plane just disintegrated.

In answer to your 14th question, his course to Youks-les-Bains was approximately 300 to 315 degrees. He was leading with his right engine stopped, and his left engine full throttle. I told him to get on the deck, which means that his props were flying something like—his props were turning something like three feet off the desert sand. You say “on the deck.” Certainly on the deck, and that means that his props were clicking over just as close as he could get it to the sand of the earth without hitting the sand. This makes it difficult for anybody to come down and shoot you because they may run their own nose of their airplane into the ground and crash while they’re trying to get their sights on a person. Flying low for Jack Ilfrey and myself was never a problem. We could strafe at a foot off of the ground or—that is, the props clicking over a foot off of the ground or ten feet off of the ground. At that point in time, Jack Ilfrey was one of our best combat pilots and certainly could fly that P-38 well. Flying low like this certainly was not a bad risk. It was the only maneuver to do in a case like this in combat.

In answer to your question 15, I was flying on Jack Ilfrey’s right wing, approximately my wingtip three foot—three feet from his, slightly behind to his right. I made a slight turn to the left, got the Me 109’s nose in my sight and fired, and nothing happened. It was real close quarters. The German pilot looked at me, laughed, and then is when I started to ram him. And when he saw me coming in to ram his airplane with my left prop, he turned quickly to the left, broke off the combat—it may well have been that he was out of ammunition, too. But he—his—I was going to cut him in two at the position where the cockpit was. And I could see that he was a blond German, he was light complected, he had blue eyes. And when I went to ram him with my airplane, he turned slightly—he turned to the left, broke off combat, and his tail hit my left wing, knocking the tail of his airplane off, and crashing, at which time he was killed.

In answer to your question 16, you do things in combat on the spur of the moment without thinking. You act instinctively. You don’t wait, concentrate, try and make up your mind, but it’s something that is instilled in the person who is a combat pilot to act automatically to save your comrade’s life. In combat, you have a devotion to comradeship that very few people ever—[audio distortion]—that you have a devotion to comradeship that very few people ever achieve anytime in their life.

I hope that this little resume on some of my activities in North Africa will be of some benefit to you in writing your new book. It was nice talking to you over the phone the other day, and I hope you enjoy the dissertation. If and when you ever come to San Antonio, drop by and we’ll have a Glenfiddy Scotch. Perhaps, since I am now retired, one day I will be out in California and look you up. Anyway, in the meantime, Eric, have a nice day. Fini.

[End Side B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]