

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

**Reade F. Tilley (Part 2 of 2)**

**Interviewed by:** Eugene A. Valencia

**Interview Date:** May 4, 1968

Abstract:

In this two-part oral history, fighter ace Reade F. Tilley discusses his military service with the Royal Air Force during World War II. In part two, he continues to describe his experiences with No. 603 Squadron while stationed in Malta. He also touches on his service with the U.S. Army Air Forces after transferring in October 1942. Topics discussed include military life and conditions in Malta, notable combat missions, and stories about fellow servicemen.

The interview is conducted by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia.

Biography:

Reade F. Tilley was born on March 15, 1918 in Clearwater, Florida. Determined to be an active duty fighter pilot, he tried to enlist with the Spanish Republican Air Force during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and with the Finnish Air Corps during the Russo-Finnish War (1939-1940). However, both conflicts ended before he reached the front lines. In 1940, Tilley enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was deployed to England the following year and served with No. 121 Eagle Squadron, flying defensive missions over England and fighter sweeps over France. In 1942, Tilley was reassigned to No. 603 Squadron and assisted in the defense of Malta. Later that year, he transferred to the U.S. Army Air Forces. Remaining in the military after the end of World War II, Tilley served with Strategic Air Command (SAC) and on the staff of General Curtis LeMay. He retired in 1971 and passed away in 2001.

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

Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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**Reade F. Tilley (Part 2 of 2)**

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

*[Combat missions in Malta]*

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: Reade, when was your next combat?

READE F. TILLEY: Well, the first one that I had out there, if you—what we might laughingly call a combat, was—they—as I recall, about four of us were scrambled against about a 60-plus raid. And it was my first experience there and very nearly the last, because we were climbing up to the meet the Ju 88s, which we were getting very good direction from the ground where they were and [unintelligible]. And as I recall, they were reported as about 40 miles north at 18,000 feet. So we climbed up-sun to get there, and just about the time they were 30 miles north, we were bounced by about 30 or 40 109s from all directions. And it was one of those situations where you take immediate evasive action as the tracers go by. And you just keep taking evasive action because there are more tracers that come from different directions and you couldn't stop long enough to sort things out or you get clobbered. You know where everybody was.

But after those first tracers came by, I found that there were about six characters shooting at me from the rear. And I took some rather violent and evasive action and then found there were several shooting from the front. So it was one of these cases where you just couldn't stop, sort things out. And there was only one thing you could do, and that was try to get the hell out of there. So I opened everything up wide and kicked full rudder in one corner of the cockpit and full stick in the other corner forward and started going down in a hell of a corkscrew and wound this thing up pretty fast and came out in a spiraling dive and just barely missed the ground.

And about the time that I had got this thing slowed down to the point where I figured it wouldn't break up or something, why, more tracers started coming by. And I think being—during the course of that mission, which lasted about an hour and a half, there were six on my tail about two or three times. And hell, I didn't have a chance to shoot at anybody, I was so damn busy keeping from getting shot. [laughter] So when I got that airplane on the ground, it had an enormous number of holes in it: 20-millimeter holes and 30-caliber holes and everything else. And I said to myself, "Jesus Christ, you sure do get in the big league quick down here. There's no gentle breaking-in period." But that was the first combat, and that wasn't too good. But I did learn a hell of a lot.

And the next one was a little more successful, I think. We were attacked in a similar situation while we were climbing up to hit the bombers. But it wasn't a complete surprise, which is so devastating, as you know. We spotted the guys and had a pretty good idea what to do when they came in. And when they came in, well, we got in a hassle with them. And I had a warrant officer flying as my number two guy. He picked up two or three Messerschmitts on his tail as we broke, and I managed to pick off the one that was giving him the most trouble. And he went down. And we got back without losing any airplanes on that particular mission.

EAV: Did you ever talk to any of the German pilots that were shot down?

RFT: Oh, yeah. I talked to many of them. I talked to Neuhoff [likely Hermann Neuhoff] and—

EAV: No, I mean at the time.

RFT: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, they would—normally, when they came down, they were hurt. High-speed bail outs or shrapnel wounds in the arms and the sides. And some of them with burns. So we would go to the hospital usually about once a week, talk to our guys, and there would always be some new Germans—

EAV: Well, this is where—I see.

RFT: Yeah.

00:05:18

*[Thoughts on the defense of Malta]*

EAV: What was your reaction to the defense of Malta, with the few planes that they had?

RFT: Well, I thought it's indicative of what you can do with a few airplanes when you have brilliant leadership, such as we had from Sir Hugh P. Lloyd, the air officer commanding—Air Marshall Sir Hugh P. Lloyd. And when you have British—and the motley group of pilots that we had. We had Englishmen, we had Australians, New Zealanders, Dutchmen, Malaysian, Americans, Poles. We had just a few of everything down there. But in my estimate, the British, New Zealanders, and Australians are absolutely great on your side. They're the great fighting men. No odds about it. They'll just keep going at it.

EAV: A job to do.

RFT: Yeah. And when you got that kind of determination—these guys don't give a damn about anything, you know—and you've got brilliant leadership, you don't need many airplanes. And there's one other thing that I think is important in a situation like that, and that is that

men develop a sort of a feeling after fighting under great odds and a lot of adversity—lousy food, short of fuel, short of ammunition, being bombed day and night—you develop a sort of a feeling that maybe you're not going to live through this, you know. And once you get that feeling—this is just my observation—it's kind of like getting your second breath as an athlete, you know—your second wind. And from there on, nothing matters, you know. And therefore, there's no limit to which you won't go and—in doing things that might, in another circumstance, be foolhardy as hell, you're just doing as a matter of routine. Well, when—looking at it from the German point of view, you're fighting guys that are that kind of motivated, you got a hell of a problem because these guys don't care. Well, this is the way it seems to me.

EAV: Flying Tigers were something of that order, too.

RFT: Yeah, except they weren't harassed day and night.

EAV: No, no.

RFT: You can't imagine the intensity of these damn bombings, you know. And sometimes for days you would be under continuous air raid. The sirens would never quit. For days, you'd be like this. It's day and night.

EAV: Did many of the pilots crack up?

RFT: No, no. No, they didn't. As a matter a fact—

EAV: [overlapping/unintelligible] that second breath.

RFT: You see, the pilots don't have the problem. Because as soon as these sirens go and the ack-ack starts and the scramble has fired, you take off, you see. And you have nothing but the fun and the glory of going up there and hunting those goddamn Germans. You could do something about these bastards, you see. These poor bastards on the airfield, the guys that maintain the airplanes, they can't leave the pen. They're not allowed to leave the vicinity of the pen. As a result, they've dug slit trenches around the damn thing. And what they do is they see you disappear. Christ, you're up there flying and shooting Germans, just having a hell of a ball. And these guys are there when the bombers get through, you see, and bomb the hell out of the airfield. Well, Christ, they're watching these bombs coming down day after day after day. And some of them—many of these guys were killed. Christ, some of them going around without arms and things. A few of them cracked up. Well, a few pilots cracked up, too.

EAV: You can't blame them. [unintelligible].

RFT: You can't operate under those tensions. Some people can, but as you know, there's a spectrum of—I don't know what you—human courage or stamina or a combination of them. And people go all the way across. Guy at this end, hell, they'll never break

00:10:02

***[German reaction to Malta and stories about controller Woody Woodhall]***

EAV: Well, Reade, did the Germans express amazement at the few number of planes that were opposing them and knocking them down?

RFT: They didn't believe it. It's—the Germans just didn't believe that there were that few airplanes. And of course, we did many things to screw them up electronically. You know, quite often, when we only had two or four planes to put in the air, each guy would announce himself as a squadron leader airborne, you see. "Red Squadron airborne" and "Green Squadron airborne" and "Blue Squadron airborne" and different voices. And the Germans monitor all this crap, you know. "Jesus Christ, four squadrons." [laughter] And sometimes it would change their plans.

One very famous incident, there was a guy controlling, who was unquestionably the world's greatest controller, Group Captain Woodhall. We called him Woody. And he controlled the Battle of Britain. A hell of a great, close friend of Johnny Johnson and other of these real top guys. But Woodhall, actually, one day, when he didn't have any airplanes that would fly—they were all out of commission. They were shot down or something like that. And a big German raid came in. He got to working on the mic, and he had some guys on radios on the ground announcing themselves airborne, climbing out to meet this raid and all like that. And my God, he got this thing maneuvered around until he had—saw some 109s that were due to pass under—on radar—due to pass under another flight of 109s. And he called out, "109s above, watch them. Watch them. They're passing over second place." And Christ, the 109s looked down and see these airplanes and come down, and they shot down a 109.

EAV: No kidding.

RFT: Yeah.

EAV: That's [unintelligible].

RFT: This is a matter of official British record. [laughs] They shot down one of their own guys.

EAV: Woodhall?

RFT: Yeah. Woodhall. It was absolutely great.

EAV: Fantastic.

RFT: Christ, they'd come in and they'd start—first it would be radar. As they came in, he'd direct us. Then, it was a very personal war. He'd call you by your first name once, you know, you had become established as the leader. And it would be Woody and Reade, for example. And it was real amazing. But on radar, you get your vectors out, and then as you'd come in and you'd get up overhead, Woody would go up on the roof of this damn place and direct visually—control visually on [unintelligible].

EAV: Fantastic.

RFT: Yeah. Especially when the 109s and the bombers were coming in right low right there over the island.

00:12:57

*[Surprise encounter with a flock of German aircraft]*

EAV: Reade, what was your most unforgettable combat? Both the ones that you mentioned were—the last one, I'm sure you won't forget, the six chasing you.

RFT: Yeah, that was the first one. I don't know whether you'd call it unforgettable or not. And it wasn't. It didn't last very long. But we had followed—two of us followed some—a raid back to Sicily just to see what would happen, if they'd get careless and we could pick somebody off the rear end. [coughs] And it turned out that we couldn't. We got almost to Sicily, and it was time to turn around and go back to Malta. So we started back. And I had some sort of sixth sense that all wasn't quite well, and I called Malta Control Gondar and asked them—

EAV: Gondar?

RFT: Yeah. G-O-N-D-A-R. And asked them if there were any bandits between us and Malta. And they said, "No, absolutely none. The sky is clear." Well, about two minutes later, we suddenly found ourselves heading directly into a swarm of about 60 airplanes coming back. Messerschmitts and I think there were some [unintelligible] mixed up in there. For some reason or another, these hadn't shown up on the scopes. And there were 60 of these bastards, and we were coming head-on together. Two of us and 60 of them.

EAV: You had good intuition. [laughs]

RFT: Yeah. [laughs] Well, there was only one thing to do, you know. This is an ideal situation for the stupidest fighter pilot in the world to be in because you can't turn or it's your ass, you turn either way. The only thing to do is just push the tit and fly straight ahead and do like that right through the middle. But we went right through the middle of these guys,



and we took squirts at as many as we could, kicking the rudder around and just happy squirts, and firewalled everything and dived to beat hell. And we made it. But I'll tell you one thing. I have never seen anything like a whole damn wall of Messerschmitts. And it was so unexpected because it [unintelligible]—

EAV: It must have been a terrific double-take.

RFT: Yeah. We went straight through. And the gent that was flying with me—I forget who he is, but he thought he got one dead center. And I think that—as I remember it—it was so long ago—but it seems to me that the radars reported one of them going down.

00:15:59

***[Reaction of ground personnel to combat flights]***

EAV: Reade, when you returned to the field and the crewmen could see this action—

RFT: Yeah.

EAV: It wasn't something like the most [unintelligible] carriers or some place where you're off, but where they could look up and see enemy planes falling—

RFT: Yeah.

EAV: ...were they jubilant when you returned, especially with airplane? Here comes the pilot with his machine that he peaked and—

RFT: Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that because that's really one of the more important things that I noticed down there. And one day, we had a hassle right over the airfield, very low altitude. We had just taken off and climbed up right inside of the field. And some 88s came down, and we got into these 88s. And there wasn't any time. They were in their dive, so we couldn't go in them head on. We slid in and came down with them. And there were four—let's see. Wait a minute. Myself, a mad Dutchman, guy named Rowe. There were—

EAV: R-O-W-E?

RFT: Yeah. There were four of us that got into these 109s and came down with them. And I got the first one, and it went into the sea. And the Dutch officer, [unintelligible], got the second one, and it crashed right off the edge of the airfield, a hell of a big fireball. And Rowe, a South African, clobbered the third one, and it peeled off. And it was, you know, putting out spurts of black smoke, and you know that's pretty near the end. And it disappeared going down into the sea. And I'll never forget when we landed. I had never

seen anything like it. These guys went absolutely mad, absolutely mad. And gosh, they fought that battle over for years—or for days, they fought it over.

And another time, a very similar thing—as a matter of fact, I think it was Fourth of July. They always did a show for the Americans. But I happened to be on the ground. We had a pongo as our operations guy, an Army guy who was in the little, oh, circular thing made out of stones with a piece of sheet steel over the top, corrugated iron to keep the sun off, and with a telephone box and the wires went to the various things. And he was what we laughingly called operations. His name was Jenkins, as I remember. A lieutenant.

And some BR.20s came in in very tight formation. This was a twin-engine Italian bomber. And we had a flight of Spitfires up, and these guys came in from between 19,000 and 22,000, 23,000 feet. And they believe in precision bombing. They're not like those Germans. They don't take it right down and drop it on the target. Precision bombing, precision flying. They were all tucked in, and they were—as I remember, six of these things—five of them, think, in this beautiful formation. And, Christ, you could see them, you know, approach. And they were follow—the ack-ack was following them and ahead of them and everything. Hundreds of white puffs bursting all around them in just perfect formation. And we knew damn well we had two or four Spits up there, I think. We had four Spits up. And of course, there were a hell of a lot of Messerschmitts around. And we could hear firing in the distance, which meant to us that they had tangled with the Messerschmitts. Some of them had and had to fire [unintelligible].

And then all of a sudden, we heard these beautiful, long bursts. And you can tell the long bursts. And of course, you could tell the difference between the German and our cannon because our cannon would go [makes sound effect] and the German cannon would go [makes sound effect], like that, see. They fired about twice as fast. And we were launching these things, and all of a sudden, the lead airplane sort of hesitated. A little white smoke came out, and there was a hell of an explosion. And it blows up, and it blows up the airplane on its right and the airplane on its left. All three of them blow up. They got the bombs on this first one, the Spits did. Blew up the goddamn bombs, and it blew these three guys up. And the two guys on the outer edge, all they did—before they even got into a halfway 180 turn to get the hell out of there, they were both in flames. And all five of these airplanes come down. And this guy, Jenkins, he damn near went nuts. He was up there. He was pounding himself on the head, and he was cheering for the Americans. And eventually, when everybody got together on the ground there, this guy was telling tales. It was just fantastic, you know, how all this had been done in a matter of ten seconds. They all disintegrated and came down.

EAV: That's wonderful.

RFT: This guy was really charged.

00:21:30

*[Work on a fighter tactics manual and transfer to the U.S. Army Air Forces]*

EAV: Reade, what do you—well, first up, before I get—you were there when the Eagle Squadron pilots were—not turned over, but transferred to the Air Force. Did that affect you there at Malta?

RFT: No, no. No, there was effect at all at Malta.

EAV: So you stayed right with your—at Malta?

RFT: Yeah. Yeah, I stayed at Malta. And when I got back, why, the transfer had been completed. As a matter of fact, when I got back, Gene, I was working on a fighter tactics manual. I had gotten real interested in two things: the line abreast formation, which was the only way [unintelligible] to fly, and I was real interested in this head-on attack technique. So when I got back, I was sort of writing down our experiences there and how to go about doing this and, you know, in a head-on attack, there's a certain way you do it. At about 600 yards, you throttle all the way back so you slow down your approach speed as much as possible and then hit this thing and just hold it down and miss as close as you can for your own protection. Because those gunners can't do much on that sort of offensive.

And I had this thing pretty well worked up when I got back there. And they asked me if I wanted to transfer, and I told them no, that I didn't want to. I stayed in the RAF. And as a matter of fact, they sent me up with some Spitfires to a base in Northern Ireland, where we had some—let's see—the 82nd Fighter Group.

EAV: [unintelligible] Londonderry.

RFT: Well, it was real close to the northern and southern border—the border between North and South. I forget the name of it. I keep thinking of Eglinton, but Christ, that's the name of the Scottish airfield that I first went through. I don't think there's Eglinton in Ireland. But anyway, the 82nd were flying P-38s. They wanted us to check them out on single-engine fight tactics, German fighter tactics. So I went up there and did that while still in a RAF outfit and came back. Then there was a gent named General Monk Hunter [Frank O'Driscoll "Monk" Hunter] at VIII Fighter Command, and he had a fellow by the name—named Hank Stovall [William Howard "Hank" Stovall], who was his Chief of Staff, as I recall. And Stovall had heard that I was writing this thing, so he sought me out and said that he wanted very much for me to transfer and would I finish this thing

[unintelligible] the American Air Force? And I told him I'd think about it, but I wasn't too interested in transferring.

And about that time, I ran into a buddy of mine from high school back home. And he was a sergeant in—he was tail gunner in a B-17—radio operator and top gunner, I guess. So we went out to dinner one night in London, see. And it came down to pay for the bill, and this guy hauled out a great big wad of pound notes that thick. And he was a sergeant. So I reached down. I'd gotten paid that day, too, and I hauled up my little old pile, and it was only about that thick. So I figured, "God, a captain must get a fortune." So I went out and transferred the next day. [laughter] You know, the first job they gave me was carrying the orders for the invasion of North Africa to the fighter units around there.

EAV: I'll be darned.

RFT: And they gave me a Spitfire and a set of orders I'll never forget. I wish to God I had them now, but it was the—these orders were unbelievable, that this officer was on a mission vital to the future security of the United States of America. He's to be given anything and everything he wants. Airplanes, cars, feed him at any hour of the day or night, give him escorts, the whole works. So I started out, and I flew a few places. And then finally got socked in tighter than hell, and I commandeered a car and took off and went to a few more. Got all the orders delivered.

00:25:47

**[Other service details in Malta]**

EAV: Fantastic. Did you get back in combat again, Reade?

RFT: No, I never did, as a matter of fact. I went—I came back to the States. They were going to send me—

EAV: You got your seven planes in Malta.

RFT: ...back for six months. I got six at Malta, plus a lot of damaged and [unintelligible]. But I was going back for six months—

EAV: Well, excuse me, Reade, I wanted to ask you one question. Were you ever shot down?

RFT: Yes, I was shot down a couple of times. Had to crash land. But everybody got shot down—

EAV: Oh, yeah.

RFT: ...or shot up out there.

EAV: They would have to.

RFT: And this fantastic guy, Tiger Booth [Douglas “Tiger” Booth], who flew with me time after time—Tiger got shot down, as I recall, five times. But Tiger was always independent as hell, you know, and he would always straggle. I thought he was the ideal when he was flying number two because, you know, he’d straggle back there and, hell, they’d shoot him instead of anybody else, especially me. [laughter] But Tiger would come back, and he’d have holes in that damn airplane from one end to the other. Have to make a crash landing, wheels up. And he came back once with his canopy all shot off and holes through the airplane. Just a fantastic guy who made it.

EAV: Well, how did you get shot down? Just in a big gaggle?

RFT: Yes, in gaggles. And our big problem, as I mentioned to you earlier, against those odds—and we figured out something to do about it—is when you were out of ammunition and you were out of petrol and you had to get on the ground and there are 109s in the pattern. I mean, you know, you can’t stay up. You got to come down. And you got to come down on an airfield because it isn’t the kind of place—it’s just made out of little fields, you see, with rock fences around them. And, hell, they’re only about a hundred feet square, and you—there’s no place to crash land or anything else off the airfield or to land.

So we finally—well, I got clobbered a couple of times in the circuit. We finally gathered all the ack-ack—you know, the 40-millimeter and the heavy machine guns and things like that we could—and put them around one airfield and used that as a recovery airfield. And that was kind of discouraging to the 109s who would get down in the pattern. And scared the hell out of the Spits sometimes because these guys, you know, were pretty close to you and some of the ack-ack gunners would shoot real close. But the—we used another plan. Sometimes when it got so bad, if we had four airplanes, we’d send two up in the strike force and send two out to orbit just off the water down south of the island and save their ammunition, you see, in order to get the other two on the ground when they’d come in from—

EAV: I’ll be darned.

RFT: ...from tangling with the bombers. And the combination of the two things began to work pretty good, you know.

EAV: I understand there were many times they actually ran out of ammunition on the island.

RFT: Well, you always ran out in combat.

EAV: No, I meant the gunners on the ground, antiaircraft.

RFT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EAV: I mean, out of ammunition.

RFT: It was rationed. It was rationed.

EAV: For goodness sake.

RFT: And it was a very interesting thing, you know. The convoys would bring in ammunition and food and gasoline. These are the important things: ammunition, food, and aircraft petrol. And they would bring it in under tremendous odds. The big convoys were merchant ships. I recall 14 of them set out, and I think three of them got there. These were all 10,000 tonners. Christ, they sank one about every 50 miles down the coast of Africa and then clobbered a couple in the straits between Pantelleria and the North African coast and—

EAV: I don't think people realize how rough Malta was. I didn't. I'll be perfectly frank, until I started to dig in before talking to you, I had no idea.

RFT: Yeah. Well, it's not so rough. I mean, it's a fight pilot's paradise.

EAV: Oh.

RFT: You know, where the hell else could you find such a setup? Unlimited number of enemies. You fight right over your own base, so we'd get back the majority of guys. You know, they'd get shot down, bail out, come back, and they'd be flying in the—that afternoon, another mission, you see. Of course, there were some killed. We buried some of them. And there were some hurt, shot up, burned.

EAV: Yeah.

RFT: All like that. But actually, that was absolutely ideal.

00:30:56

[END OF INTERVIEW]