

PLANEGRAM



Another Sweet Mess By William Cable From Lightning Strikes

While assigned to the 23rd Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron and stationed at Sesto, Italy during the winter of 1944/45 I was standing outside the Operations Office looking for a ride into town when somebody stuck his head out of the door and asked if I wanted to fly a mission. I really didn't want to fly that day, but I thought, "It's one more mission on the road to my fifty," so I said, "OK" and went in and received my briefing.

I was wearing a flight jacket, pink pants, green dress shirt, a necktie, my fifty-mission crush cap and low-cut shoes. I was not too concerned about not being properly dressed for flying ever on that very cold winter day because this mission was going to be quite short. I was briefed to photograph some twenty miles of railroad track and marshaling yard in the northeastern portion of Italy. It looked like about a two-hour mission, and I thought I could handle that dressed the way I was. If the cockpit heater worked maybe I could get back before I froze to death. While picking up my gear in the equipment room the sergeant asked if I wanted a Mae West and I told him, "No, I don't think so," as it looked like this one was going to be over land all the way.

The aircraft I was assigned was a P-38 (F-5B) that had one 165-gallon drop tank hung on the left side. I didn't need the extra fuel for a mis-

sion this short, but the tank was there so away I went. All was fine until I entered the PO Valley and began to hear a "weep," "weep" on the radio. I had been told that German radar sometimes caused this sound while it was tracking you. The sound stayed with me several minutes and I decided that maybe they were vectoring fighters to me, so I turned to the east and headed out over the Adriatic Sea.

I was also becoming very aware that this particular F-5B was even colder inside than most of the others. I was cruising at about 25,000 feet and it was 60 below outside. It seemed almost that cold inside; it didn't feel like the cockpit heater was providing an heat at all.

The radio noise quit and I made a slow turn to the north, toward my photo run starting point about 150 miles farther northwest. When I was about fifteen or twenty miles southeast of Venice the carburetor air temperature on the right engine started climbing and the engine began to backfire - and then lost power. I shut the engine down, feathered it and trimmed the aircraft for single-engine operation. With an engine out, I decided that the railroad tracks would have to wait for another day and I would head back to Sesto. I had been feeding both engines with the drop tank, and with one shut down I decided to get rid of the tank. I reached down with my left hand and

pulled the release "T" handle, felt the tank fall away and then reached over to change the fuel selector valve from the drop tank to the main tank. Nothing happened. When I looked down I could see that my fingers were so numb from the cold that it felt like I was using bananas instead of fingers. They just would not grip, and I just couldn't turn the selector valve.

About that time the left engine quit due to fuel starvation, which wasn't too surprising since I had just dropped the tank it was drawing from. The engine was now windmilling and creating considerable drag on the left side. With neither engine running it was very quiet in the cockpit.

At this point I was standing on the right rudder pedal and trying to keep control of an aircraft that wanted very badly to turn hard left and was descending very rapidly toward the Adriatic Sea about twenty miles from the nearest land. Here was another sweet mess I had gotten myself into. Peering over the nose, I was looking right down at some very cold water, with no chance of making it to dry land. Or as a guy told me one time, "It's a lot of water to drink before you can walk home."

I could think of only three options:
#1- Tidy up the cockpit and get out.
#2 -Keep moving my hand and rub-

continued inside

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bing it on my pant leg until it got warm enough for my fingers to work. #3- Slide down and under the control yoke so I could use both hands on the valve. The problem here was that if I still couldn't turn the valve or I became hung up while under the yoke, I might not be able to get back into the seat with enough altitude remaining for me to bail out. I decided on option #3.

I had two things going for me; I was over six feet tall and weighted about 135 or 140 pounds, so I was very thin and flexible, and I was wearing a seat pack parachute, which helped because it gave me some freedom of movement. I was also very motivated! I slipped under the yoke and down onto the floor. I can't remember what the aircraft was doing during this time and I didn't much care- all my energy and concentration were dedicated to getting my hands on the fuel selector valve and turning it. Finally, by using the palms of my hands, I had enough pressure to turn the valve to the "Reserve" tank and "varoom," the engine started and returned to the preset single-engine cruise setting. I have never heard a sweeter sound than that Allison's at that moment. The next few seconds were dedicated to frantically fighting my way back into the pilot's seat. When situated back in the seat I found that the aircraft was still descending and much closer to the water, but was now flyable again.

Strapping myself back in, I started a climb so that I would have enough altitude to cross the mountains into the Arno River Valley. After landing, I told the crew chief about

the inter-cooler difficulty, and he said it was probably a loose baffle and he would fix it right away.

"Some memories never leave us,

and for me the bitter cold of the P-38 cockpit and the feeling of being absolutely alone in a very unfriendly world still linger."

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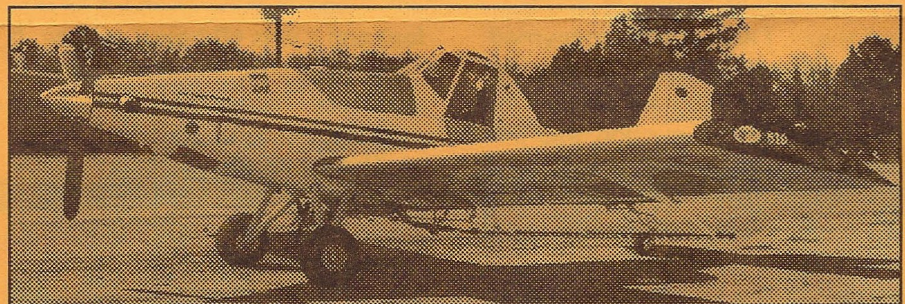
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