

## The Last Day

*1/22/99, Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania*

I'm not so young anymore but I'm going to try to reconstruct events beginning with the day *Skipper* went down.

It was January 31, 1944. We made our way up to Capodichino on our motorcycle, thoroughly enjoying the ride on that cloudy but unusually mild morning. The twisted roads took us higher and higher in a thrilling spiral, and the wind whipping around us as we climbed added to the pleasure of the ride.

Once at the air base, we went straight to our morning briefing but were told there were no scheduled missions for us that day as another squadron was to fly that morning.

"Great!" I thought. "It's warm enough for me to get some work done on the motorcycle."

Our forces had landed at Anzio only a little more than a week earlier. The battle was fierce and our losses were heavy. We were told that German resistance was much greater than expected. So it looked like Anzio would drag on. Intelligence claimed the enemy was quickly building strength. Talk was that the Allies were going to be in for it.

But on this morning, I could push the war out of my mind for a little while and concentrate on getting that motorcycle in better shape. My father had given me my love of tinkering with engines, and I could always lose myself in the task. But I had hardly begun when a counter-order came in: there was a mission for the 86th, with immediate take-off!

I had to clean myself off pretty quickly and then head over to the plane they assigned me. It was a P-40L, #49, name of *Skipper*. It was usually assigned to an Edward E. Parsons, who had his name stenciled outside the cockpit. Today *Skipper* would be mine.

After undergoing a quick checkup, the twelve of us were off, in formation, heading for Anzio, flying cover for the ground troops. As we took off, the cloud cover was 10/10 with poor visibility, but Anzio was just a short hop to the northwest, up the

coast from Naples. So I had no serious concerns until I got into the air. Then I noticed that instead of decreasing, as it's supposed to do, my engine temperature was increasing and doing so very quickly. I was puzzled. When it exceeded 150 degrees centigrade, I radioed Major Nielsen, our squadron leader, and reported my condition. He told me to stay with it since Anzio was only a few minutes away. He informed me there was a runway there where I could land. I was okay with that and initially thought that's what I would be doing. But when I looked again, I'll be damned if the temperature wasn't going right through the roof, faster than before!

I radioed again that I couldn't continue. I told Nielsen that I would have to attempt a landing at sea! Once I made that decision and actually said the words "landing at sea," everything started to come to me as clear and precise as could be—everything that I had been taught, everything that I needed to do, as if it were being fed to me. I responded in an incredibly calm and deliberate manner. First, I ditched my reserve fuel and lowered the landing flaps. Then I went into a 180-degree turn so that I could get myself parallel with the coast in a southern direction. When you're flying over water, it's difficult to determine your altitude unless you can get the shoreline in your peripheral vision. I did it with ease.

My calm continued, and everything that I needed to know came to me in a methodical and measured way, sort of like slow motion. I could feel myself breathing, but not hard as though I was scared or anything—just very deliberate, steady and sure. I opened the cockpit and prayed to lose altitude slowly. I wasn't frightened or particularly nervous, but I was concerned about that big radiator under the nose of my Warhawk with the air scoops—the very scoops that were supposed to be cooling my engine! If they hit the water first, the scoops would fill instantly and the plane would roll over, for sure—and I mean, a tail-over-nose cartwheel! I just prayed, "Oh God! Oh God!"

I did not think about drowning or being hurt. I simply knew it was vital for me to calibrate my descent correctly and make sure my tail touched down first. I was not a very religious man at that time, but what they say is true: there are no atheists in foxholes. Now, I was no atheist, but in those days I had not yet come to know the Lord. I guess you could say I didn't talk to Him much, but now I realize that He knew me. I believe He took a hand, especially as I came down lower and saw how calm and flat the sea was. If the sea had been choppy, that, too, could have caused the plane to cartwheel. "Thank God!" I kept saying, "Thank God!"

It was all slow and easy, as if my life had gone into slow motion or I was

dreaming. I wasn't sensing anything bad. I was very calm. The beach on my left was in my periphery and I was able to use it a reference point of altitude. All that intense training paid off pretty good now and *Skipper* came down perfectly, tail first with its big old nose in the air. Again, thank God!

I maintained control of the plane, keeping that nose up the whole time and leaving a nice wake behind me. The nose lowered itself into the water. Again my prayers were answered, because the only thing I felt was the abrupt stop—like hitting a wall—when the scoops finally hit the water. Not crashing into a wall, just hitting it. Believe me, there's a difference. And, of course, there was no rollover! I had done it: a successful dead-stick landing! (I say *I* had done it, but now I know how much help I had.)

I was so grateful to realize that that wonderful little P-40 floated perfectly even though it was taking on water. It was giving me enough time to get myself out of the cockpit and remove my shoulder straps and safety belt. I did get a little nervous when my parachute seemed to catch in the seat. The chute contained my survival kit. Well, to hell with the chute, I thought. I unharnessed myself to get free of it and managed to get out of the plane on the left wing. Now I was in the water, letting the Mae West float me, on my chest, the one hundred or so meters to shore. The water was cold but not unbearable. I was doing fine. I was okay.

As soon as I was in the water, *Skipper's* nose began to sink as its tail rose. And as I watched, the chute suddenly freed itself! It was a final gift from *Skipper* before it would disappear under the sea. I swam back toward the plane, which was already half under water, caught hold of the strap, and pulled the chute toward me. Now I concentrated on getting to shore, pulling the chute after me. Again I let the Mae West float me in. I was not aware of being cold or anything. I just wanted to get under cover as fast as I could.

When I put my leg down to test for depth, I felt solid earth, so I sort of stood up and quickly got myself out of the water and onto the beach. One look back and I saw that *Skipper* had vanished under the sea. It was gone! I couldn't really think about it now. I saw some thick brush along the beach. First, I hid my parachute under one bush, then I stayed low and crawled like a crab a short distance into a row of bushes. I hoped that crawling would obscure the footprints my boots had made when I came out of the water.

Now my heart was pounding hard and I was thinking, "Okay, you're down. What now?" Off in the distance I could hear the drone of a plane...circling overhead.

I thought it was most likely my squadron leader. As he made a pass, I saw something fall from the sky. I rushed forward and found a note saying that Anzio had been contacted and a rescue boat would be sent for me.

“I’m in good shape,” I thought, and again, “Thank God!” Once I returned to the safety of the bushes, I could feel the cold. I was wet and shivering but I could still hear that plane. I removed my Mae West and thought, “They’ll come for me now. I’ll get out of here fast. It will just be a little while. He’s radioed for help. Help will come. I’ll just watch the sea and run for it the minute I see the launch.” I imagined how good it would feel to be in the launch. I just kept playing that through my head while I shook with cold. It wasn’t all that bad, because I was focused on watching for the launch. And that droning sound of the plane was a great comfort. I lay on my belly under the brush and positioned myself so that I could look out to sea. I figured the minute I saw the rescue launch, I’d make a run for it. Really run! I was in good shape. I could see out but no one could see me. I had every reason to believe that help was on the way. I was in good shape. I was getting out.

“*Hande hoch!*” (Hands up!)

I twisted around when I heard that voice and saw the outline of a square helmet.

“*Hande hoch!*” More insistent and angry now.

“Aw, shit!” I thought.

When he leaned forward and extended his rifle barrel closer to me, I could see that he was young and boyish. Younger than me. It’s so strange how in moments of extreme tension, you can actually be thinking something like, “Oh, this German soldier is just a kid,” while fully realizing that this “kid” is the enemy and might just kill you.

I tried to get up on my hands and knees to crawl out toward him, but he shouted again, “*Hande hoch!*” So I put my hands up and struggled out on my knees from under the bushes. I no longer heard the plane above. I remember thinking, “Where in the hell is the plane?” As I cleared the bushes and stood, I saw two other German soldiers. They were each positioned on one knee, pointing their rifles at me from about ten feet away.

“*Haben Sie ein Gewehr?*” the young soldier barked.

“*Nein, ich habe kein Gewehr.*” I answered. No, I do not have a gun.

Then in a more conversational tone, the young soldier explained in German, “We would have shot you if you had a gun.”

Perhaps they would have shot me if they simply *thought* I had a gun. My young captor's expression had relaxed immediately when I answered him in German. At the same time the two others approached. Clearly my German had eased the tensions all around. Dear God, it may have saved my life! They were ready to shoot me, and my words, my German words, a gift from my parents, had made me less of a threat, I guess, more of a human being.

The best part of it was that answering him in German was a reflex. Someone spoke to me in German and so I answered in German without consciously doing so.

With a gesture of his rifle, my captor indicated the direction in which we were to proceed on foot, followed by the other two. We walked just a short distance to a house along the beach. I can't remember thinking much of anything at that point. I believe I was in a dream-like state, just acting mechanically. I was doing what they told me to do and that was enough. When I entered the house, a soldier handed me a blanket and allowed me to stand by a fire to warm myself. Now I realized the discomfort of being cold and wet and I was grateful for the blanket and the fire. It also occurred to me that I was being treated in a very civilized manner. But I told myself, "You're still a prisoner. You are behind lines and you are a prisoner."

I also knew that I had to think and decide what I could do, but I couldn't let myself think too much just yet. I had to get my thoughts together first and be careful how I acted toward my captors. Or maybe it was more that I had to test my strength—my spiritual strength, that is. I wasn't feeling frightened exactly. Anyway, I quickly reviewed what I knew I could bear to think about. Maybe I could use my German to my advantage. That was a good thing. I knew I had to escape, but I didn't know if an escape attempt was a good thing or a bad thing yet. I just knew that I could not let them take me to Germany. I knew that's what they would do and I couldn't let that happen. That was harder to think about just then, but I let it enter my mind in a conscious way and sit there. I had to escape and I would find a way. And that's all.

After a few minutes I was again ordered to follow my captors to their command post about two miles from the house, more or less in the same neighborhood. Along the way, I saw German troops in foxholes. "My God," I thought, "this is what a war is like." I wasn't used to seeing it from ground level. Even back in Naples, I had seen the effects of war but now I was witnessing it in the present tense. The privileged view from a plane surely has its dangers; still, it isolates you from the true sense of war—the flesh and blood of it, the smell of it, and the tiny details of it that put it on a human scale.

During the walk, in a moment when no one could hear or see, the young soldier who had captured me showed me the escape kit he had found in my parachute. Along with other items like a compass and a silk handkerchief with a map of Italy on it, the kit contained about forty American dollars. The soldier asked me not to tell his commanding officer about it. As he was speaking to me, I heard the sound of gunfire coming from the beach and figured it had something to do with the rescue launch sent for me. I felt hope rise up in me like a great warmth.

“The Navy, my comrades, is sending a rescue boat for me. I’ll give you the money if you let me go right now to meet the rescue team,” I offered in German.

“*Nein!*” he said, explaining that too many people had already seen me. His allowing me to escape could get him killed.

I told him to keep the money and promised to tell no one. He could have killed me and didn’t. This kid, who should be at home, still in high school chasing girls, had probably had a tough time of it. That forty dollars might just buy him some little bit of comfort or fun.

We continued on to the German command post. I heard no more planes, no more gunfire. I felt desolate. I tried not to think. I would hold myself together. I would think later.

Inside the command post we were met by an immaculately dressed lieutenant who took the escape kit. I was then led to a room where their commanding officer was seated at a desk. He directed me to sit in the chair opposite his desk and, pointing to a bottle of liquor in his desk, offered me a drink. I refused politely, answering him in German.

Showing no surprise that I spoke his language, he asked cordially, “You fly a P-40?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered.

“Tell me, what do you think of the P-40 compared to the 109?”

I admitted that the 109 was a better aircraft. “But,” I added, “the U. S. had the P-40 in production at the time we entered the war.”

I was shaking with cold as I watched the officer pour himself a drink. I realized that the warmth of the liquor was just what I needed. “I would like to accept your offer and have that drink with you,” I said in German.

He poured me a drink and I gulped it gratefully. “*Danka,*” was all I said.

Abruptly, but still with rather good humor, the officer called for the lieutenant who had escorted me in. I was still carrying the army blanket the Germans had given

me earlier as we walked back into the outer office. As soon as the door to the commander's office was closed, the lieutenant ordered me to remove my leather flying jacket.

"My jacket? It's getting awfully cold out there," I said in German, keeping my voice as neutral as possible. Ever since I was a kid I knew that you never let a bully see emotion.

"Give me the jacket," he answered slowly and quietly. "That blanket is good enough." There was no mistaking his tone. I removed my jacket and handed it over to him. Without a word, he took it from me. When he had it in his hands, he shoved me through the door where two German soldiers were waiting on a motorcycle. Just then, the thought of my motorcycle back at Capodichino made me feel hopeless. I had to force the thought of Capodichino and Naples from my mind. As a pilot I had grown accustomed to coming back after a mission. Back to a bed, a shower, hot food. I knew we were luckier than most. Again I thought what life must be like in a war down on the ground, living in a foxhole. Now *I* was down, cold and wet. I was a prisoner, but I was alive. I had my life. I wondered how long I would be held captive. How long would the war last? Who would win? "Don't think too much! Just hold on!" I kept repeating in my mind. I knew I couldn't let myself get scared or angry. Especially not angry. People do unwise things when they're angry. I had to hold on.

I was told to get into the sidecar. I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders. We drove inland now and quickly arrived at a group of buildings. By that time I was stiff with cold and the warming effect of the liquor was long gone. I had noticed signs that told me we were in the vicinity of Cisterna. Now we were approaching higher ground and a group of houses. We stopped in front of a three-story building. I would be told later that this was the zone command for the German troops. My captors led me to the ground floor of the building where a large group of Allied prisoners were being held in a crowded room. I later learned that this whole building and the surrounding buildings housed Allied prisoners, most of them Rangers from the First and Third Battalions who were captured during the previous night's incursion against Cisterna. The Rangers had been created a couple of years earlier to mirror the daring British commandos. Already they were famous for their stealth and feats of courage.

I was brought before another officer for interrogation. This one spoke perfect English and told me he had attended college in the United States. After asking brief and routine questions, he gave me a pack of German cigarettes. Then I was

taken to the third floor where some thirty Allied officers were being held. Once in the room, my captors led me to the fire where Ranger Captain Chuck Schuster was sitting. Schuster was the ranking Allied officer, which meant he was our commandant. My captors made a point of introducing me to Captain Schuster, because the German commander, I learned, had given orders that I was to be Captain Schuster's interpreter. The captain merely nodded when I acknowledged my assigned role.





