

## RALPH FORT OF THE 15<sup>TH</sup> AIR FORCE

Iris and I have had the pleasure of knowing Ralph and Jeanne Fort since we first moved into the Wedgewood I building at Bonita Bay in 1989. We've spent many Monday nights talking and eating at the beach park along with other friends, and I've played a lot of golf with Ralph. He's a fine person, as is Jeanne, and a better-than-average golfer who occasionally will shoot his age. I've particularly enjoyed our Wednesday golf group of two foursomes partially made up of WWII veterans who will sometimes relate incidents that they experienced while in the service of our country. Usually these are only the funny episodes of their military career and not the really serious times.

Because I wanted to know more about his stint in the service, I asked Ralph if I could interview him about his experiences in the service. I sat with Ralph for nearly two hours on April 1, 2003, and again later and listened to him tell of his time in the Air Force. This is a summary of what I learned.

Ralph grew up in Morton, Illinois, not far from Peoria. Ralph was the fourth of eight children, graduating from high school in 1938. College was out of the question then so he joined his father in the trucking business, hauling coal, milk and other commodities. Soon his father accepted a government job in Springfield and Ralph ran the trucking business. But Ralph really wanted to fly, and when there was a change in the requirements to join the Aviation Cadet Training Program, he jumped at the opportunity. Previously the program required two years of college to join, but because of

a shortage of pilots in 1942, this rule was waived. Ralph and a Morton friend, Willis Musselman, took written entry tests at the local Post Office, much of which was current events, and also passed the physical examinations. Both enlisted and took the oath in July 1942 at Chicago. Ralph was expecting to be called into the Air Corps within a few weeks, but it wasn't until January of 1943 that he was told to report to the Classification Center at San Antonio, Texas. Here he was tested for his potential for pilot training – vision, depth perception and coordination. Some of the trainees were passed for pilot training but others were assigned to bombardier or navigation training. Ralph passed easily and began preflight training in the cadet program. This involved tough physical training and schooling and lasted for nine weeks -- four-and-a-half weeks as underclassman, and the same time as an upper classman. In those days the hazing of underclassmen was accepted, and Ralph smiled remembering some of those experiences. But he was learning to take orders and all about military discipline.

The next step in his career was Primary Training at Quero, Texas, in April 1943, class 43-K, where he got his first ride in an airplane --- a Fairchild PT-19 open cockpit trainer. This was a low wing, two-place trainer with fixed gear. There were no paved runways at Quero, only grass strips. Riding with his instructor Bud Wilt, Ralph received only 8 hours of instruction before he was told, "This is it. Take it up by yourself and show me what you can do." In this program some of the cadets were washed out because of lack of ability or airsickness, but Ralph was accepted and finished the 9-week course successfully.

It was during this training that a hurricane was headed for the Brownsville area. The small planes were only tied down to the sod field so the cadets were ordered to try to prevent damage to the planes by holding the

tie-down ropes as the storm passed. Although winds hit 60 mph the planes were not damaged. Ralph also remembered that during this training one of the cadets in his class failed to fasten his seat belt, and during a rollover he fell out of the open cockpit but was saved by his parachute.

In the summer of 1943 Ralph began his nine weeks of Basic Training at Waco, Texas, in BT-13 trainers made by Vultee. The BT-13s were equipped with 450 hp radial engines and fixed landing gear. The training was intense with no leave available and no weekends off. He had some acrobatic training at Quero, but here it was more intense with barrel rolls, spins, and inside and outside loops. It was the final test for pilot training with some cadets going to multi-engine training. Ralph finished near the top of his class and moved on in his pilot training. .

The next step was Advanced Training at Moore Field at McAllen, Texas, in AT-6 aircraft. These planes, made by North American, had 850 hp radial engines and with retractable landing gear. It was during this training that he first flew the P-40 Warhawk fighter. These were single place planes with no room for an instructor, so trainees were on their own from the beginning. They were equipped with oxygen for altitudes above 10,000 feet. Madagorda Island, off the coast of Texas, was used for gunnery practice with a tow plane pulling a target sleeve. The fighters each had different colors of bullets so it was possible to find out which of the pilots were the most accurate at the end of the practice.

For graduation, Ralph's parents had flown down for the special event (his mother's first and last flight), but they missed the ceremonies because of inclement weather. Instead of proudly marching to the front and having his gold wings and 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant bars pinned on, his parents were presented

them at a later time. Ralph was given some leave at this time and flew home with his parents to celebrate his well-earned commission.

In December of 1943 he was ordered to Tallahassee, Florida, and was assigned to Hillsboro Field at St. Petersburg for transition to the P-51 Mustang. This was the aircraft Ralph knew he wanted to fly, and in 10 weeks he logged more than 100 hours of flying time in the high-powered aircraft. Ralph noted that the early P-51s were fitted with Allison 1200 hp engines and lacked sufficient power. Soon these planes were re-fitted with Rolls-Royce 1650 hp engines, which Ralph flew, and were thought to be the world's best fighters with a top speed of 450 mph and a maximum altitude of 40,000 ft.

He recalled that it was standard procedure when taking off to slowly ease the P-51 down the runway gradually increasing the power to full throttle. On one occasion Ralph had his engine quit just as he reached full throttle after he lifted off the runway. He knew that if he put the plane back on the ground and braked as he approached the end of the runway, the aircraft would tip over on its nose. So he put it back on the ground and guided it off to the side into soft sand where he came to a safe halt. His superiors asked what happened. "Well, the engine just quit", said our hero. He was ordered back to the barracks while his superiors investigated and soon heard his engine being tested. Sure enough, upon reaching full throttle the supercharger failed with the same result. It was because of this that the take-off procedure for P-51s was changed, and full power was applied with the brakes on at the start of the runway before starting to roll for takeoff. Ralph knew that he had a definite part in this.

In April of 1944 he was ordered back to Tallahassee and learned that he would be going overseas from Newport News, Virginia, and was bound for

combat in Italy. Upon arriving at Newport News Ralph was told that there was a delay in the sailing schedule and three-day passes were being issued to the men, one-third at a time. He recalled that four of them hired a taxi who drove them to Washington, D.C. where they had a great time and met some of the local beauties. When the three of them were about to return to their base they arranged for the next group of airmen who were going on leave to take the same taxi to Washington and meet the same ladies. Ralph was always thinking of his friends.

Upon arriving back at the base the trio assumed that they had 6 more days of freedom but without official leave. Ralph along with two friends longed for home and quickly caught commercial flights to Chicago leaving their phone numbers with a friend back at the base. But within 30 minutes after Ralph arrived in Morton, and before getting to see his parents, he received a phone call at 2:00 in the afternoon saying that he must return to Newport News by 6:00 am the following morning. The three friends then hurriedly met back in Chicago and caught a flight to Detroit and then another to Newport News, arriving only 30 minutes before the 0600 roll call. This was a close call for the three of them as they might have been charged with AWOL had they been late.

The troop carrier, the USS Grant, that was to take the new pilots to Italy was a fast ship, not needing an escort as its top speed was about 30 knots which was faster than the German submarines. The pilots and crews sailed in early June, making the trip in about 7 days. Disembarking in Naples, Italy, the pilots immediately were transported to Foggia on the East Coast of Italy where the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force was headquartered. Ralph was assigned to the 325<sup>th</sup> fighter group and the 317<sup>th</sup> fighter squadron. These units had only been in Italy since early 1944 after leaving North Africa. The 15th had more

planes than pilots --- P-40s, P-47 Thunderbolts and the new P-51D with a bubble cockpit. The 325<sup>th</sup> fighters had the tail of each plane painted in a checkerboard design and were called the Checkertail Clan. Ralph's group flew out of Lesina near the Adriatic sea, and he was assigned to fly as "wingman" for the ace of the squadron, Herschel Green, who had about 15 kills to his credit. Ralph was with Green when Green shot down two enemy planes. After a few missions with Ralph as his wingman, Green completed his tour of duty, and Ralph was assigned to fly Green's #11 "Hells Angel".

There were still some enemy aircraft in the area but they soon disappeared. The 317<sup>th</sup> acted as escorts for the large B-17 and B-24 Allied bombers who had taken off from bases in Italy and were attacking targets in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. His squadron made one bomb run on Berlin and accompanied bombers several times to Ploestri, Rumania, destroying the oil fields there.

The fighters would meet the bombers often over Yugoslavia and accompany them to the target. On other missions they would accompany reconnaissance planes, and it was on one of these missions that a Messerschmidt 210 attacked the Americans fighters. Ralph and his wingman left the recon formation after telling the other fighters to keep their positions. The enemy plane dove to escape the P-51s but Ralph's guns started the Messerschmidt on fire and the wing man finished the kill when Ralph's six .50 caliber machine guns ran out of ammunition.

On another occasion Ralph and his wingman were accompanying a crippled P-51 with an oil leak when they spotted an enemy airfield that was previously unknown. There were many German planes on the ground covered with camouflage. The two P-51s dove and together made 7 passes at the planes on the ground, destroying several. Ralph was credited with

destroying 6 enemy planes that day, and later received the Distinguished Flying Cross at group headquarters for his heroic action. The Morton newspaper was notified of the citation and carried the story on page 1.

Ralph related that on one mission his group accompanied hundreds of DC-3s that were each pulling a glider filled with troops and bound for the South of France near Nice. This was after the D-Day landing at Normandy. The planes encountered no opposition either in the air or on the ground when the gliders were cut loose and landed in France.

An unforgettable mission for Ralph involved the safe return of hundreds of Allied prisoners held near Bucharest, Rumania, toward the end of the war. A Rumanian pilot had hidden a POW American officer in his ME-109 and flew to an American base in Italy, somehow landing safely. The American officer told of how the Germans had vacated the POW camp and it was only held by Rumanians that could be trusted to release the prisoners. Because the Russians were approaching from the East, the air command planned to go to the prison camp, landing at a nearby airfield that had been taken over by the Rumanians, and load the prisoners in B-17s and B-24s that had been stripped to carry the men home. Ralph's group accompanied the stripped-down bombers and protected the mercy operation from the air while the prisoners were loaded into the planes. Ralph was proud to say that all of the prisoners were returned safely.

After his first 15 missions he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant as a flight leader, and later to Captain as a squadron leader.

Ralph credits his mechanic, Chuck Brown, for keeping his "Hells Angel" in good condition. In his 55 missions, Ralph was never hit by enemy fire but he did have some close calls. In one of his later missions his P-51 was fitted with bombs in place of external wing tanks, and he and another pilot

were ordered to practice dive bombing on a nearby bridge. The two pilots reconnoitered the bridge one day, and the following day attacked the bridge. The other pilot started his dive first, but because of a malfunction of his landing gear he was not able to pull out of his dive and crashed. Ralph was radioed by an observer to "Pull out, pull out" which he did without injury to him or the aircraft. Mechanical locks were installed on the landing gears following that accident, but that was the end of the dive bombing for the P-51s.

On another occasion Ralph was returning from a mission over Yugoslavia when some engine problems occurred. He landed at an American base on the island of Zis, Albania, for repairs. Soon after he got down a crippled B-24 tried to make an emergency landing at the field, and after one failed pass, crashed very close to where Ralph had taken refuge behind a tractor. Although two parachutes came out of the stricken aircraft, only one of the crew survived. Ralph said they took the survivor to a nearby bar for some rehabilitation immediately after the crash.

Ralph noted that after such incidents the airmen were usually ordered back into the air very quickly so as not to become depressed over the loss of friends. Ralph had that experience when he lost two tent mates who collided in the clouds just after taking off. At that same time and because of the poor visibility Ralph lost sight of his wingman and the plane spun out, but he was able to regain control of his aircraft after he got under the low ceiling. That mission was scrubbed. It was on a later mission that a member of his squadron and one of Ralph's tent mates had to bail out due to engine failure, and Ralph watched the pilot's chute open and float to earth. On the ground the pilot waved that he was OK, but later was taken prisoner then released by General Patton's troops toward the end of the war. Coincidentally, the



next time Ralph saw his friend was when they ran into each other at Wrigley Field in Chicago after the war.

Although only 50 missions were expected of these pilots, a new commanding officer raised the quota to 55 near the end of the war in Europe. On V-E Day (Victory in Europe) Ralph was aboard the USS Mariposa, a converted luxury liner heading for the States. They heard the good news as they were passing Gibraltar. On the trip back Captain Fort bravely volunteered to be Officer of the Guard for the mess hall. Starting at 120 pounds Ralph said he gained 11 pounds on the 11-day trip back to the States. He disembarked at Boston, and went home for a three-week leave.

Following the leave he went by train to Santa Ana, California. Because he had plenty of points accumulated to leave the service he was sent to Fort Sheridan, near Chicago, for separation. This was not actually a discharge since the Air Force wanted him available if again needed. Fortunately he was not re-called. His decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross for his attack on the German airfield, the Air Medal with several clusters and other medals.

I'm very proud to have known this genuine hero of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force and to be able to hear his story.