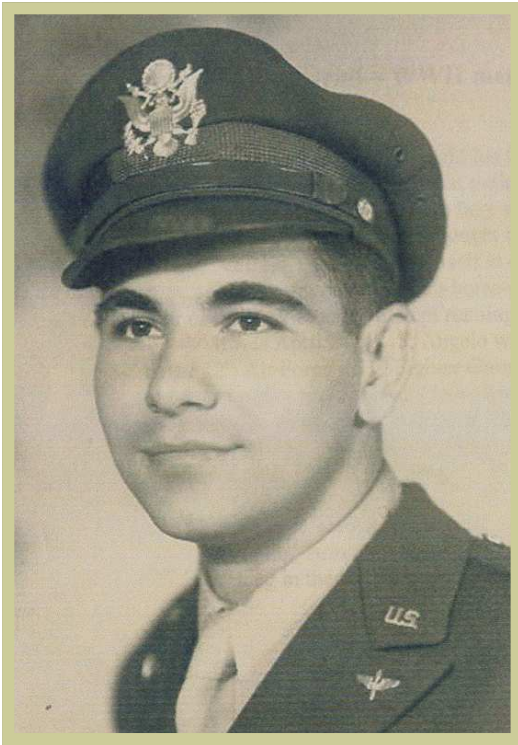


Angelo Alesandrini

U. S. Air Force



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Angelo Alesandrini thought his fighter plane had been shot down. The first lieutenant had just pulled his P-47 fighter out of a strafing pass against a Nazi armored column in northern Italy when an anti-aircraft shell tore into his plane's engine at about 3,000 feet. He thought he'd had it. "Oh, boy," he said to himself in alarm. "Oh, boy." The fighter plane's 2,000-horse-power engine immediately lost power. It had lost four of its 18 cylinders, but kept running.

It was April 24, 1945; Angelo was on his 71st combat mission. He was assigned to the 12th Air Force's 57th Fighter Group, and was based north of Rome. The 21-year-old Pekin, IL native was leading a four-plane strike against German trucks and

tanks. The fighters dove down, firing rockets and machine guns. The Germans shot back. Suddenly, there was every possibility that Cola Black Leader – Angelo's call sign – was going to spend the rest of the war as prisoner. He prepared to bail out. Angelo radioed a fellow pilot. "I'm hit. Bring me home," he said. "Hang in there," the other airman replied. "Maybe we'll get it back to the base."

Angelo has had a number of jobs – milkman, owner of a Borden distributorship, Tazewell Country supervisor of assessments. But, his love affair with the big, tough P-47, known as the Thunderbolt, clearing continues. At his Pekin home, Angelo answered the knock at his door one recent afternoon, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with a depiction of the fighter he had flown in combat.

"Best thing in the world to fly – as long as no ack-ack gets you," he said, referring to anti-aircraft fire. "When they're shooting back at you with ack-ack, that's a different way of life!" He hasn't forgotten, though, that war meant death. The Italians were no longer combatants, but he knows Italian civilians died in the Americans' attacks. "I'm Italian, and these are my people," he said later. "I don't know how many of them we killed. I don't know. 1/4 That always bothered me. Still does."

Surrounded by photos and memorabilia of his combat days in his living room, it's easy to picture a young, dark-haired man in the cockpit, his helmet and oxygen mask strapped on, his hand on the joystick, his finger on the trigger.

"I dream about it. I wish I was able to" still fly a fighter, he said.

He would have to be satisfied with watching gun camera films from actual combat missions. Angelo turned on his television and inserted a

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videocassette into his VCR. The film showed a fighter pilot's perspective of a strafing run – blowing up trucks, tanks and “anything that moved.”

“There I am!” Angelo called out at one point.

“That’s what I did. My job was to go down and protect the boys. It’s the real stuff here.”

With his hands, Angelo showed how the American fighters attacked – by rolling upside down, then diving down as the nose “fell through” the horizon. He couldn’t hear the fighter’s eight .50-caliber machine guns when he fired them, but he felt their recoil. When he released his bombs, the fighter lurched upward, suddenly devoid of 1,000 pounds of explosives.

“Peeled off like that ¼ pull out,” he said, moving his hands to simulate a fighter attack. Then he described the bursting ack-ack shells. “Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!”

On some missions, he was assigned to knock our anti-aircraft guns as American bombers hit their own targets. “They’re shooting at me now!” Angelo said. “I was so young ¼ it was just a job to do. You had no time to think. You do your job. Some of my guys died like that. In my outfit we had 600 pilots come and go” and 125 died in combat. “You never forget those things,” he said. When asked if he had regrets about combat, he replied, “I don’t know. Hitler ¼ he caused it all.” Angelo said softly, “I was only 20 years old.”

The German anti-aircraft shell badly damaged Angelo’s fighter that April day, but he did make it back to base. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for that mission. According to the citation, he had exhibited “great courage and superior flying skill” as he led the low-level attack. By the time Germany surrendered a short time later, Angelo had flown a total of 81 combat missions and had been promoted to captain. He also received four Air Medals and two Battle Stars. He was sent to the Pacific

to fight the Japanese, but the surrender occurred before he arrived, ending his days of combat. He returned home to his life in Peking as a milkman.

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