



*Intelligence Officer (right) shows other members of the crew at San Giovanni the radio compartment door Col Gunn squeezed through to climb up behind the pilot in the Me 109.*

scape, southwest of Cerignola. I had been in Italy two months and had flown seven missions, two to Ploesti.

The 29th of August was a day off for me and we were having a small stakes poker game in my tent. I was facing the entrance to the tent (approximately north) when I noticed a low flying fighter doing a 60 degree bank a half mile away over the gravel road leading northeast to Cerignola. The first pass was fast but now he pulled up to about 600 feet and dumped his gear in what appeared to be the pattern for an approach to San Giovanni Airfield, the home of two bomb groups of our neighboring 304th Bomb Wing (heavy). When I saw the gear come down, I was sure it was an ME. Only two years before I had made a balsa solid model of a 109E and I knew every panel and bump. Now, at nineteen I was seeing the real thing. I jumped up and ran out toward the rapidly disappearing 109 yelling, "It's an ME, it's an ME" At S-2, 30 yards away, they assured me that no ME could get by our defenses and that I should go lie down until I "felt better." I was adamant and certain. My own poker buddies pooh-poohed the idea although several had seen the second, slower pass. Perhaps it was a 51? "No, dammit! It was a (invective) ME 109!"

We had just started to re-deal the cards when the S-2 officer, a 1st Lt. Lange,

soon to make captain, came driving up in his jeep in hi-blower. With the dust still flying, he leaped out and yelled, "Col Gunn is back, Col. Gunn is back." People came from everywhere to the S-2 office to hear the incredible news. It was particularly incredible to us who didn't know about the Rumanian handshake agreement with the POWs. I could visualize the mad dash to the sitting 109, past the German guards, the quick dopping out of the primer/starter switches and jamming all handles forward while tail-up taxiing to the nearest runway, "Come on, baby" Then the sober second thought, "Boy, I hope we don't run into 200 P-38s near Barletta." Have the British ever used those 40 mm guns around the U. S.

airfields? I don't know what actually happened in those mind-numbing seconds as the 109 sat down on the south end of the north/south runway.

This was the month when anything could happen. On 4 August, one guy even landed a P-38 on a farm field near a Rumanian airstrip to rescue his flight leader who had crash-landed. The flight leader ditched his chute, calmly lit his P-38 on fire and pointed out a relatively clear area for his rescuer, a new guy, to set it down. The rescued captain did the takeoff while sitting on the lieutenant's lap. Yes sir! that August 1944 was something. Following the U. S. 1st and 3rd Army breakout at St. Lo, the Germans gambled their Seventh Army in a futile attempt to recapture Mortain. The 1st Army didn't budge and the 3rd Army closed the trap in a wide, counterclockwise sweep around the back door at Falaise.

The proud German Seventh Army was junk by the third week of August. The run to the Rhine was started and the Germans, much to the world's amazement, were giving up land at the same rate they had captured it in 1940. Fresh allied troops in the south of France pushed up toward Lyon. I attended both the textbook invasion on 15 August and the 11 September squadron strength fly-in at Bron Control outside of Lyon. Ooh, la, la.

But what happened to Col. Gunn's trophy, the stolen Rumanian ME-109? Gunn was going to fly the ME down to Bari where it was going to be shipped stateside for some massaging by the boys at Wright Field. On takeoff, the pilot's hatch flew open and Gunn tried to reach up and close it, nosing the 109 over. That was the sad end to a great feat of daring.

The End

