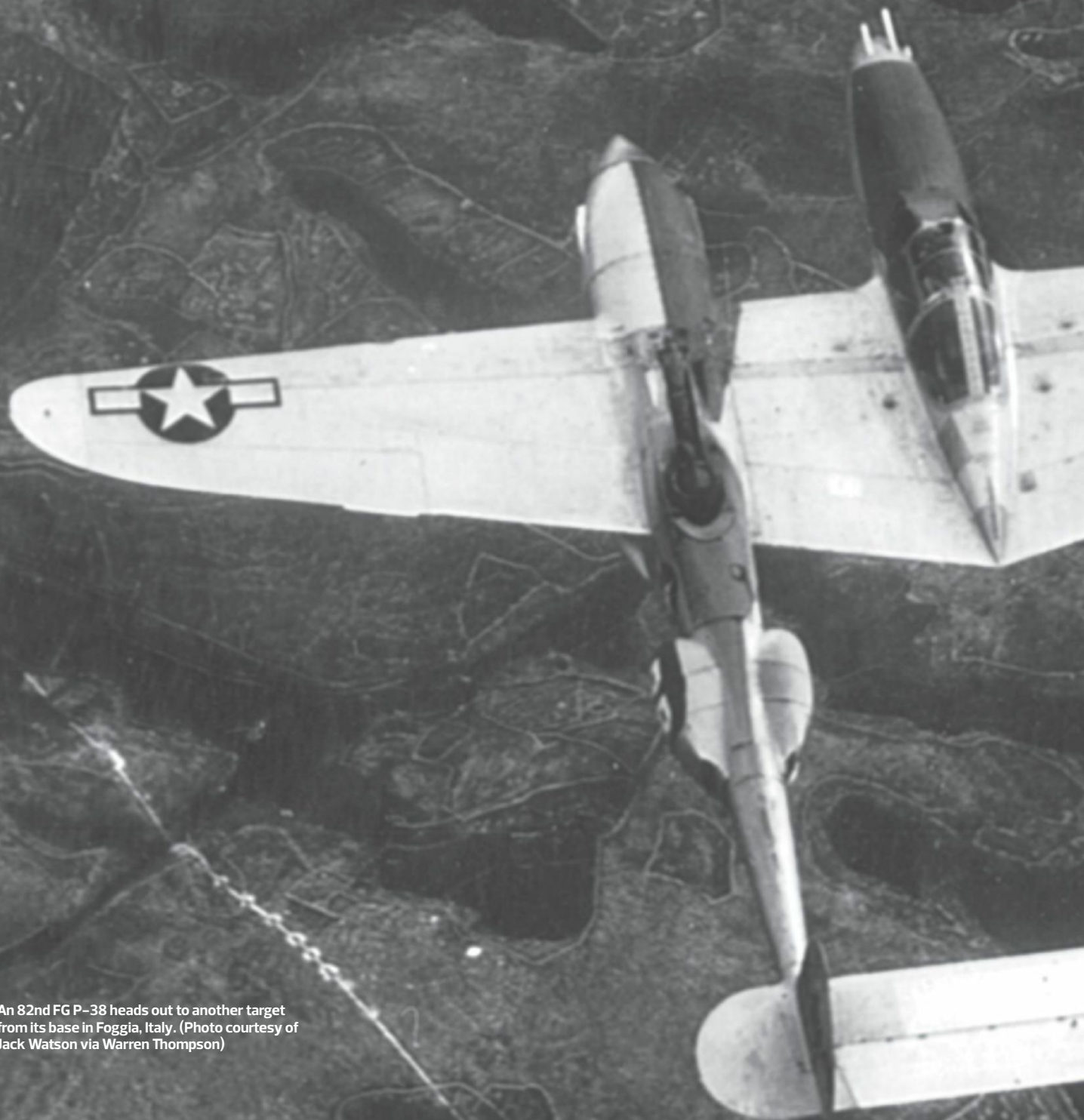


# PIGGYBACK IN A P-38

## A Daring Rescue under Fire

BY THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER



An 82nd FG P-38 heads out to another target from its base in Foggia, Italy. (Photo courtesy of Jack Watson via Warren Thompson)

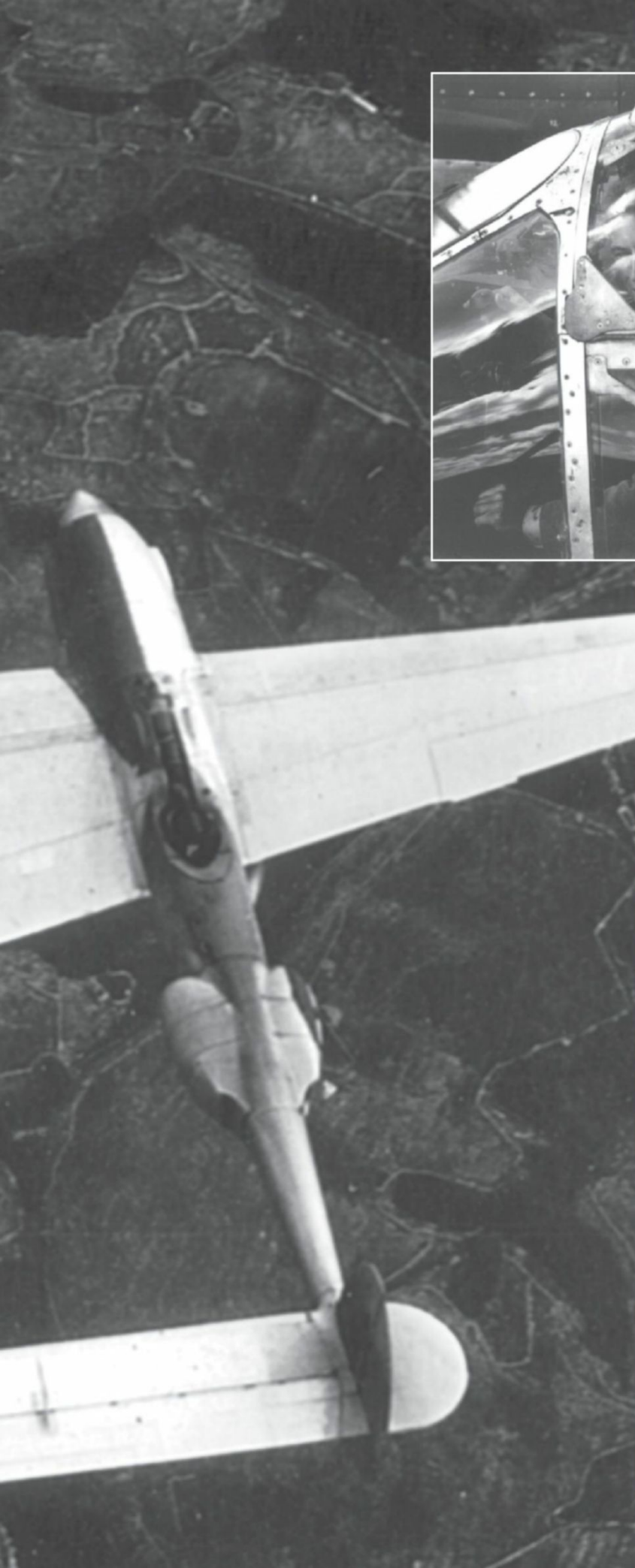


PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

**The early morning light glittered** on the whirling propellers of 48 82nd FG P-38J Lightnings as they taxied for takeoff at Foggia-11/Vincenzo airfield in southern Italy. "Tail-end Charlie" in group commander Col. Litton's flight was Flight Officer Dick Andrews, a 100-hour P-38 pilot who had celebrated his 20th birthday the day before and was looking forward to his first strafing mission. Just behind in the pack of Lightnings was 23-year-old Capt. Richard "Dick" Willsie, the 96th FS's operations officer and one of the most experienced pilots in the group, for whom this would be his second shuttle mission to Russia. Neither could know that this mission—Willsie's 60th and Andrews' 10th—would enter the history books in a way that has only been matched twice since.



This was the 82nd FG's emblem.

The next day, FO Andrews and Lt. Willsie tried to duplicate their position for the camera. They couldn't remember how they had crammed themselves into that small cockpit. (Photo courtesy of author)

Following D-Day, June 6, 1944, the air war in southeastern Europe reached a crescendo as the strategic bombing campaign of the 15th Air Force struck the Ploesti oil refineries and other important targets in the region. With the promised Soviet ground offensive hitting Germany's Eastern European allies, it looked as though the Eastern Front would crack, leading to Germany's defeat.

Commencing in 1943, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, had tried to get Stalin to allow AAF bombers to fly from England and Italy to the Soviet Union on "shuttle" raids that allowed them to bomb previously unreachable targets. If the shuttle raids could be carried out successfully, it was hoped this would lead to the use of bases in Siberia for bombing Japan. The

Soviets had erected roadblock after roadblock, delaying the possibility of such operations through months of negotiating.

As D-Day approached and the Soviets prepared for their offensive, military and political diplomacy achieved a breakthrough; Stalin agreed to allow operations from bases in the Ukraine. American ground crews soon arrived at Poltava, Mirgorod and Piryatin to prepare the way. The shuttle raids were known as Operation Frantic—an apt description of Arnold's attitude.

On June 2, 15th Air Force B-17s escorted by 325th "Checkertail Clan" FG P-51s, bombed targets in Hungary before proceeding to the Ukrainian bases. Operation Frantic I concluded on June 11, when the B-17s bombed targets in northeastern Romania on their return flight, while B-24s flying out of Italy struck Constanta. Nothing truly militarily important had been achieved, but the principle of shuttle-bombing was established.

On June 21, 1944, 114 bombers and 70 8th Air Force fighters participated in Frantic II; bombing a synthetic oil plant in Ruhland, eastern Germany, the B-17s landed at Poltava, while 4th and 352nd FG P-51s—led by Don Blakeslee who used dead-reckoning navigation with a map and a stopwatch—landed at Piryatin within 10 minutes of ETA. The Germans, surprised by Frantic I, sent snoopers to follow the Americans and bombed Poltava that night. They destroyed 43 B-17Gs and damaged another 26 badly, while 15 P-51 were destroyed; Poltava was one of the most successful Luftwaffe strikes against the 8th Air Force of the entire war.



The 96th FS, 82nd FG Lightnings had vertical fin and outside horizontal stabilizer surfaces painted yellow for squadron ID. (Photo courtesy of Jack Watson via Warren Thompson)



The 96th FS's sister squadron, the 97th FS, had a black-painted tail, and it was ID'd by the letter H. The C was part of the pilot/ground crew code. (Photo courtesy of Jack Watson via Warren Thompson)



It would be a month before the next mission, Frantic III, sent 76 P-38s and 58 P-51s on a sweep across Romania on July 22, 1944. Their ground attacks against German and Rumanian installations were described as “devastating,” with the fighters destroying 56 German and Romanian aircraft before heading on to Mirgorod. During their three days on the Eastern Front, the Mustangs and Lightnings struck a German airfield in Poland, before returning to Italy via Romania on July 26 that saw another 20 Axis aircraft destroyed.

On August 4, Frantic IV, a “rerun” of Frantic III, composed of the 31st and 82nd FGs, was the mission Andrews and Willsie were set to fly.

Two hours after takeoff, Willsie looked out over the mountains that separated Yugoslavia from Romania. CO Col. Litton waggled his wings to the others and commenced a descent as the fighters headed across the central Romanian plains. As they passed Ploesti, Willsie took hits from flak.

“We hit Focsani airfield and spotted several aircraft in the pattern. As I dived, I saw three were Ju 52s,” Willsie remembered, “I hit one solidly, and it went up like a bomb because it was loaded with fuel supplies.”

Following Col. Litton, Andrews swept down a railroad track and strafed two locomotives; as he blew a switch control tower to pieces, he ran out of ammunition. “I went right over an armored train, crying and cursing because I didn’t have a shot left.” The flak was heavy and several other P-38s were shot down, including Col. Litton, who survived the crash and was captured.

Willsie pulled out of his run. “I got hit by flak in my right engine. As I feathered the propeller, I spotted a 109 coming in on my right. I turned into the dead engine and came

around on him. I was losing speed so quickly, he couldn’t lead me, and he shot past beneath me. I came out of the turn on his tail and let him have it. At that moment, I took a hit in my left engine. It was still running, but not for long.”

Andrews turned away from the armored train. “I saw Willsie’s P-38 with one prop feathered and coolant pouring out of the other engine, which meant he wouldn’t stay up much longer. I pulled over, flying his left wing, and said ‘Pick a good field, and I’ll come down and get you.’”

Willsie’s first response was to say “no,” but he was too busy with his emergency landing to reply. “I gave a call to the others about my

#### **FACT**

After losing several airplanes and crews in unsuccessful rescues, the AAF forbade such attempts.

Lt. Willsie stands in front of his P-38J Snake Eyes. (Photo courtesy of John Cook)





Above: The day after their historic August 4, 1944, mission, FO Andrews (left) and Lt. Willsie (right) posed with Lockheed tech rep "Stumpy" Hollinger. (Photo courtesy of John Cook)  
 Below: FO Andrews explains what he did during the rescue to 15th Air Force CO Lt. Gen. Nathan Twining, middle, and an unidentified officer. (Photo courtesy of John Cook)



intentions and asked for cover. I expended my last ammo trying to clear out any of them ahead as I glided in to a crash."

Andrews watched Willsie's plane hit the ground, and saw he could land in the field nearby. "One of the other pilots yelled, 'Don't be a damned fool!' I had been called worse, so I went ahead. I suddenly realized the field was plowed and I would land across the furrows; so I poured on the power, pulled around and set up again to land with the furrows. I think the only reason I managed to do this successfully was that the enemy on the ground was so surprised to see me drop wheels and flaps that they didn't shoot. I was more afraid of making a poor landing than anything; it doesn't take much to bust a nose gear."

As Willsie opened his canopy, it didn't sound like the fighting had died down at all. "I managed to smack myself pretty hard against the gunsight when I hit, and it knocked me out for a minute. I came to with blood in my eyes, and three P-38s were going overhead firing at soldiers on the ground, and then another flight came in. I looked out and saw Dick Andrews' plane across the way. I jumped out and started running toward him." Overhead, Lt. Nick Pate bagged a 109 as it lined up to strafe the two P-38s on the ground. Willsie realized he still had his parachute and ran back to try to set his P-38 afire. Andrews had to taxi back to a takeoff position. "Someone yelled over the radio that Willsie was running after me, so I hit the brakes and saw him back there."

Andrews climbed out and shucked his parachute and then reached in and cleared out the seat pack and everything else he could to make room. "I was thinking so fast, I almost didn't realize that bullets were flying around until one grazed the canopy just beside me."

Willsie caught up with Andrews' slowly moving P-38, as Andrews dropped the stirrup at the rear of the nacelle. "I made a running leap," Willsie remembered, "and managed to haul myself onto the wing like I never had before." The two pilots were faced with the prospect of cramming themselves into the single-seat cockpit in such a way that they could still operate the controls and fly their way to safety.

"I was a low-time P-38 pilot," Andrews recalls, "and Willsie was the most experienced guy in the squadron, so I said, 'You fly.'" Andrews dropped into the cockpit and made himself as small as possible so Willsie could sit



atop and in front of him.

"If the P-38 had had a control stick like a P-51, this would have been much easier," Willsie explains. "But it has a yoke that is attached on the cockpit's right side and bends over to the center. I got in, and Dick's foot was in the way and I was farther forward than normal, so I couldn't work the yoke completely. I finally managed to pull his right leg up over my shoulder, and I could just work the yoke. His left leg was just enough in the way to make it hard to operate the throttles."

The next problem was to close the canopy for flight. "The P-38 canopy was very tight around you in normal conditions," Willsie explained, "After Andrews closed it, I had my head jammed up against the lid; I couldn't look behind me at all and could barely look from side to side."

Through all this, the other Lightnings were making repeated runs on the field. Three truckloads of Romanian troops that sped toward the pasture were strafed by Lt. Campbell as they headed toward the Lightning. "We didn't have time to taxi the full length of the field. I started to gun the engines for takeoff, but the nosewheel started



Checking out the 96th FS's scoreboard are the flight operations officer (left) and Lt. Clayton M. "Ike" Isaacson. (Photo courtesy of 82nd FG official website)

to dig into the ground. I had to throttle back to get it to move at all. I started rolling in up-trim, as I accelerated slowly, holding the yoke back and trying to get the weight off the nose as soon as I could," Willsie remembered. There was a line of trees at the end of the field they would have to get over if they were to make their escape. "I kept it on the ground as long as I could. I barely had flying speed when I yanked it off. If I had not had all that up-trim, we never would have made it because I couldn't pull the yoke back far enough to get it over the trees. I was glad they weren't ten feet taller."

## PIGGYBACK EXTRA



Willsie and Andrews made another attempt to duplicate their amazing feat and again couldn't replicate it. (Photo courtesy of John Cook)

## SHARING THE RIDE: THE INCREDIBLE COINCIDENCE

Almost 22 years after Dick Andrews rescues Richard Willsie, in March 1966, one of the more incredible coincidences of war took place. Viet Cong troops laid siege to the Special Forces camp in the A Shau Valley in northern South Vietnam. Air Force A-1E Skyraiders arrived and bombed almost within arm's reach of the defenders. Maj. Dafford W. Myers, CO of the Qui Nhon detachment of the 602nd FS (Commando) was hit and forced to crash his Skyraider on the unused runway, which was short and littered with rubble and debris. Col. Richard Willsie, yes that Richard Willsie of the earlier P-38 rescue, was CO of the 602nd Air Commandos and only that morning had informed Myers he had been promoted to lieutenant colonel. Now, it seemed certain Myers would be taken prisoner.

"I got in communication with Bernie Fisher," Willsie remembered, "and asked him for support." A soft-spoken Mormon who did not drink, smoke or swear—hardly the image of an Air Force fighter pilot—Fisher made his run and dropped his ordnance and then set up to land on a strip that was, according to the book, 1,000 feet too short for even a Skyraider. He touched down and stood on the brakes, as he swung the airplane left and right past the debris and around the craters, all the time under fire and taking hits. Fisher actually ran off the end of the runway and turned around. He had to taxi back to the other end, under fire, to take off into the wind. As he taxied back, Myers ran from cover and leapt onto the wing. Fisher pulled him into the right seat head first. Myers strapped in as they got to the other end of the runway. VC troops fired at the Skyraider as it gained flying speed and managed to lift off just before running out of runway.

For his action in rescuing Myers under fire, Bernie Fisher became the first USAF Skyraider pilot to win the Medal of Honor.

Making the entire adventure even more incredible, Dick Andrews, who had landed his P-38 to pick up Richard Willsie during WW II, was flying top cover the entire time of Myers' rescue.



At that time, a new added weapon to the P-38 was rockets carried in pods of 10 and what looks to be a group of three to the left of the pod. (Photo courtesy of Jack Watson via Warren Thompson)

The big P-38 must have been quite a sight to the Romanian troops on the ground as it rushed into the air through the line of trees. "I thought for a minute we were going to lose a prop and crash," says Willsie, "but we pulled out of there and managed to stay in the air." Andrews recalls checking his watch as they lifted off. "From my touchdown to our takeoff, the entire event took about two minutes."

Once airborne, Willsie put the nose down and gathered airspeed as the Lightning roared low over the heads of the troops who a moment before had been intent on catching them. "I held us as low as I could until we were out of range of the flak and then started to gain some altitude." Willsie asked Andrews for a map, but he didn't have one. Willsie told him to get the map from his escape kit. "He unfolded a cloth map of Southern France and discovered we were headed for Russia."

The other members of the squadron formed

In 1947, with a smiling Mrs. Andrews at his side, FO Richard Andrews receives a Silver Star from former 15th Air Force CO Lt. Gen. Nathan Twining. (Photo courtesy of author)



on the now two-seater P-38 and provided close escort as they set off to continue the flight to Poltava, which was 2 1/2 flying hours away. Soon, they ran into thunderstorms, and Willsie flew through a blinding rainstorm that battered the P-38 with torrents of water. Still at low level, Willsie told Andrews to watch the ground while he leaned his head on the panel cowl and flew instruments. "We didn't talk much on the way, except a few warnings from him that we were approaching a hill and needed a little more altitude," Willsie remembered.

Once at Poltava, Willsie would have to land hot, without a lot of control, and there wasn't going to be a go-around because they were practically flying on fumes. Willsie brought the P-38 in on a long, straight approach and dropped it on the mains onto the runway. As he lowered the nosewheel, one engine sputtered from fuel starvation. "Nobody thought too much of it when I climbed out," says Willsie, "but they were pretty surprised when Andrews pulled himself out." Ground crews found tree branches in the wheel wells when they checked the P-38 later.

The next day, the group public relations officer wanted to restage the flight for photos. Willsie and Andrews attempted to climb into the cockpit as they had back at Focsani, but they couldn't. "We couldn't do it!" Andrews recalled. "Try as we might, we couldn't remember what we had done. It took us thirty minutes to finally give up—and it took us thirty seconds to do it the first time!" According to Willsie, "I just sat on Dick's lap for the pictures, but we never could have flown it that way."

Word of the rescue spread throughout the Army Air Forces. On arrival back in Italy on August 7, Flight Officer Andrews was met by Gen. Nathan Twining, who awarded him the Silver Star and a promotion to second lieutenant on the spot. In succeeding months, pilots of the 15th AF tried twice more to affect such rescues. "The second try ended up with them crashing into a haystack, and it was discovered they were actually in friendly territory, only they didn't know it," Willsie recalls. "Gen. Twining gave a direct order that nobody was to try it again. "Shortly thereafter, Willsie became the 96th FS's CO. "When Dick Andrews had the minimum time to be promoted to first lieutenant, a lot of people thought I was prejudiced when I promoted him. They were right; I was prejudiced!" †