

P38s, Jungles of New Guinea, Landing Strips, Battle of Leyte Gulf

RK: Yeah, the two engines was really good. But the P38 was very fast, and so with two engines we could outrun the enemy aircraft, and it was good to have those two engines. If you got one out you could go home on the other one. So, it was our favorite. The P47 was a good fighter but it only had one engine. So, we didn't like that.

Because we're flying over jungle, New Guinea is one giant jungle. And so is most of those islands in that area. They're just inhabited only by natives, who would - many of them had never seen a white man 'til we came to the war, 'til the war. And it's jungle - jungle, jungle, jungle. And if you go down in that jungle, you're gone, you're dead, that's all. So it was important to have two engines. Not only to get us home if we happened to lose an engine, but because it was much faster, and a great fighter that fought very, very well in the Pacific. The twin-engine fighter didn't do as well in Europe, but it sure did well in the Pacific. And we were able to do the job with that airplane.

SA: Where did you stay, exactly, if not in the jungle? Did you stay on the coast, or in New Guinea, when you were stationed there?

RK: Well, generally speaking, we would be on the - New Guinea is a large island. It's about 1500 miles long and almost 500 miles wide. And we would push the Japanese - the Japanese had occupied New Guinea. And by the time America had joined the war, they had almost 90 percent of New Guinea. And, our soldiers come in when we got into the war, and pushed them back, and then we begin to build air bases, up through New Guinea. And then we operated out of those. They were in the jungle, because New Guinea is one giant jungle.

And they'd cut down - just cut a swath out of the jungle - and put down what we call PSP, which is steel planking. And they lay the steel planking down and connect it with hooks. And that's what we landed in. That was our air strips, we operated off those strips. And whenever the wind - then the army and the marines would take another section of it then we would move up, and they'd build us a new air strip and then we'd move, and we just kept hop, skip, and jumping, up the whole 1500 miles of New Guinea, and then on up into the Hall of [unintelligible] and then into the Philippine Islands.

My last duty was in the Philippine Islands at Leyte Gulf. That was the largest sea battle in history, was at Leyte. And one wild battle. Remarkable battle. And if you want to read a great story, that story about the Battle of Leyte Gulf is the greatest war story I've ever read. It involved the heroism of a handful of Destroyers - American Destroyers - and a handful of navy pilots. Just a remarkable story. how they fought off the whole Japanese navy. They took on battleships and stuff, and it was just - it was just fabulous.