

over the enemy rear. Bombing very nice. There was the usual heavy screen of flak with ground not visible through it. No enemy planes seen.

In FR218 again later the same day flying top cover to 3 Squadron who bombed near the Sidi Abd El Rahman mosque. I didn't see the bombing this time but no flak or enemy aircraft seen either.

2-11-42 In FR218. The northern sector was now pushing west towards Daba. With each of us armed with a 500 lb bomb, we escorted twelve Baltimores and six Air Corps Mitchells to bomb troops near Daba. Heavy bursts of flak about. You could tell the difference between the various types as the 88mm bursts were black, as against the grey or white bursts of the lighter calibre stuff. No enemy aircraft seen this time either.

Hec Fullerton announced in the mess that night that two hundred Germans had walked into our lines with their hands up. The poor buggers had had enough.

This night F/Lt M. C. H. Barber, a Rhodesian in the RAF who had been newly promoted to Squadron Leader, arrived to succeed S/Ldr Williams as our C/O.

3-11-42 In FR218 once more. Although I didn't know it this was to be my last combat operation. I was flying top cover to the usual twelve and six bombers. The US 66th Pursuit were flying close cover. I was in our bottom six (behind Harry Gregory) for the first time in several shows. I think we bombed somewhere behind the central front. No Jerries about and no flak either to my recollection. We were well on the way home and had in fact already crossed our lines when Commander rang up and ordered our top six to proceed home with the bombers and our six²² to proceed west again over the Americans, presumably to intercept some fighters. We were at 10,000 feet.

Did I relax a bit? Thinking the show was over? Maybe. I can't remember. We had taken off at 9 am and it was now 10.25 and a bit.

Not long after this I reported "6 Plus 9 o'clock" and the sun was just above my tail. A sudden call from control: "Bandits 6 o'clock!"

Of a sudden a dreadful explosion right between my right thigh and elbow and the pain of the splinters of hot metal slamming into me! Christ! Hood open, throttle wide open, pitch full fine, roll her over to get out of the way! Cockpit so full of white smoke I couldn't see a thing.

Blind now. I must try and get out to level. She's still roaring earthward. Can't see – mustn't pull the stick back too far or she'll flick into a high speed stall and that'll be the finish. Still shaken by that bloody explosion. Suddenly thought of Mother at home – I must get out! Helmet off to get rid of oxygen and radio leads at once then coolly leaned forward until my face was against the dash so I could see the ignition switch and turned it off. What good that was seeing I was about to leave (or at least hoped to) I do not know, but I did it.

Now, undo the harness straps, legs up on the seat and give the stick a bloody good kick. I tried but of course couldn't see it, only collecting it with half a kick, and I only got half out! Now I was caught up with the front of the hood in my back!

Christ! Don't panic. Stay calm or it'll be the end of you. Wriggle, wriggle, wriggle. Suddenly I'm thrown clear, but have enough sense to count to five or maybe four. At any rate the 'chute opened and there I was in a clear blue sky – and as silent as silent – no sound at all.

But then a loud bang! A great gout of flame and black smoke as FR218 buried herself in the desert.

I had, as said, not got straight out, and when I did finally get free, my head must have missed the tail unit by a very narrow margin indeed. And I had probably got free of my aircraft with a mere five seconds of life left – very bloody lucky.

Talking of blood, as I floated down I noticed I was dripping a fair bit from both thigh and elbow, and a pair of very sore eyes caused by the white smoke or fumes. Engine coolant the cause so the bastard must have bracketed my kite nicely. Rather an expert shot I've always thought.²³

Just to digress a little. In Minchin's story in the *Boys Book of the RAAF* he writes that I was warned time after time the 109s were onto me, but that I took no notice. He concludes my R/T must have been useless. This is absolute 'bull'. The R/T was OK else how did I hear Ops say they were at 6 o'clock? Nobody warned me and, in any case, the buggers were in the sun.

My last 1 hr 30 ms of operation.

To proceed. Hell! If any Jerries happen along they might shoot me up. I pulled down on the shroud cords to quicken my descent from about 1,500 feet and hit the ground right in the middle of half a dozen Jerries

with a Mercedes car or half track. Bugger it! Didn't make it One bastard grabs my flying gloves. Suddenly some shots over our heads. They bundle me in and drive like hell westward with one of our vehicles chasing them. But no luck – the Jerries' vehicle was too fast.

On demand I gave them my name, rank and number but nothing else. In reply to an enquiry as to where I came from at home I even refused to tell them that. So the atmosphere became very cool but they did at least bandage my wounds. We drove north westward I think and camped out at night in a smallish tent. Some food and I suppose a cigarette or two and so to bed, with the usual warning: "If you try to escape, you will be shot!" One was named 'Kuehl' judging by the name on one of the kitbags. This has stuck in my mind because I remember, from my time in Italy and Germany, a South African of the same name.

The next day I was delivered to the Italian Hospital POW Tent at Mersa Matruh and it was here that I saw what war can do to men in the way of knocking their bodies about.

There was an Australian WAG who had survived when his plane blew up. He was heavily bandaged on face, arms and legs. An Australian 9th Division soldier, Sgt Webber, who had had both kneecaps shattered by a burst of Spandau machine gun fire. Another Australian, a battalion runner²⁴ who had collected a shell splinter through his cheek which had mashed his gums and teeth into a horrible stinking mess. I'm sure it had turned gangrenous for it gave off by far the most horrible smell I've ever known. He could not speak. There was a corporal from the British Royal Tank Regiment who looked okay, but he dolefully informed me, and I quote: "My balls are gone." There was P/O 'Sin' Duigan, a Rhodesian pilot from 145 Spitfires who had broken his shoulder on the tail unit when bailing out. (How lucky was I?) The air gunner was unconscious and delirious but he had enough sense left to answer questions. From 223 Squadron Baltimores, the kite had been hit on the run in and the bombs had gone up. He told me his name, rank and number which I memorised and kept through the following long, long years. The day I was there the Italians dressed his face for the first time in five days. There was nothing left.

At 9.30 that night he was still and quiet. I felt his chest. It was icy, icy cold. He had gone. I crossed his arms over his chest, murmuring aloud, "May God rest his soul in peace." It was a sad, sad day.²⁵