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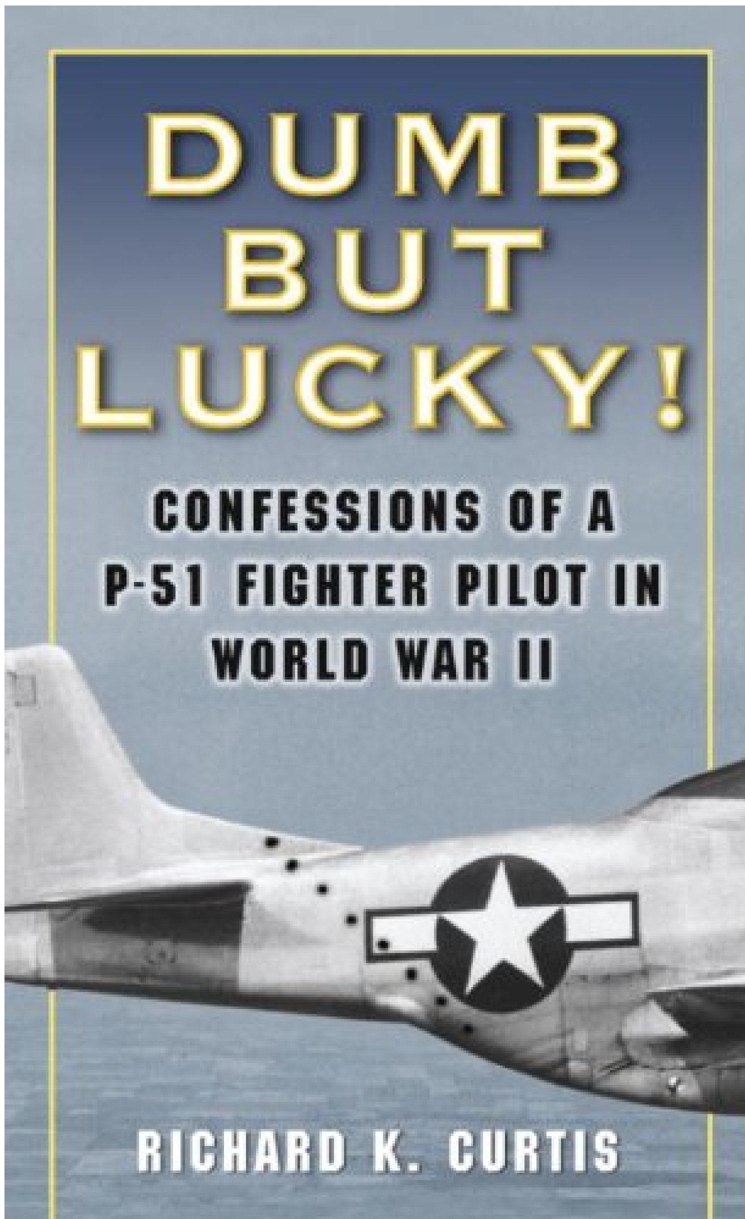
Dumb but Lucky!: Confessions of a P-51 Fighter Pilot in World War II



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Par Richard Curtis : Dumb but Lucky!: Confessions of a P-51 Fighter Pilot in World War II before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dumb but Lucky!: Confessions of a P-51 Fighter Pilot in World War II:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSecond lieutenant Dick Curtis arrived in Italy in May 1944twenty years old and part of a shipment of P-51 Mustang fighter pilots so desperately needed that they were rushed into combat with less than thirty hours of flight time in their new high-performance aircraft.Six of the twelve pilots assigned to the 52nd Fighter Group were shot down in the first two weeks. By his ninth mission, Curtis was the only one

still flying. A maverick, he barely escaped court-martial with his high-flying antics. Escorting bombers sent to pound heavily defended oil fields was risky enough, but strafing the enemy supply lines, ports, and airfields was even more dangerous. Curtis may chalk up his success to dumb luck, but these missions took exceptional skill and courage. This hair-raising account captures the air war in all its split-second terror and adrenaline-pumping action.From the Paperback edition.ExtraitBY THE NUMBERS"This man is not pilot material!"--Joe Webb, Flight Instructor, 52nd College Training DetachmentIt was the last week in October 1942 when I heard on the radio that the president was to end enlistments and rely on the draft, where the military could dictate the branch I'd serve. So I decided, as my older brother Bob had done, to take a shot at becoming a pilot in the Marines. I got Dad's permission to enlist, but not in the Marines. It stuck in his craw that the Navy had rejected Bob for something Dad scornfully dismissed as a "heart murmur." It would be the Army Air Corps. After all, it was the Army Dad had served in during World War I. And even though he'd been grievously wounded in a mustard gas attack, affecting his lungs so he couldn't speak for three and a half months, he remained a true-blue patriot and still committed to the Army.Like Dad, I was putting in sixty-hour workweeks at Norton's, the big grinding wheel company in Worcester, Massachusetts. It proudly floated the triangular blue flag emblazoned with a big E for excellence in the war effort. But now, with others in my high school class already enlisting since June, it was time to call a halt to civilian life. So the next day I picked up application forms at the Army Air Corps recruiting office and was filling them out even as I listened to the latest news of Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, missing in the South Pacific. The following Monday I submitted the application, together with two recommendations, and was told, after a check of the papers, to report with them the next morning at 0800 hours at Fort Devens.It was only thirty-five miles to Ayer, but it took eighty minutes for the train to get there, long enough to introduce myself to five others from Worcester headed there. The six of us chipped in fifteen cents apiece for a taxi ride to the fort where, after producing our credentials at the gate, we were issued passes. I soon realized that it was a lot easier to get that pass than to pass the several exams that made up the Air Corps mental test. There were 150 questions on such subjects as English, geometry, algebra, physics, and current events. Of the seventeen of us in the room, only eight passed, getting at least 76 right. When I learned that I got 112 right, or 19 more than the next highest grade, I had good reason to thank the teachers I had at North High for thorough preparation despite, at best, my lackluster performance.I may have been top man on the totem pole in the exam, but in the eyes of Charlie Rich, my boss and my ride to Norton's since I got a job there after graduation, I was still a dumb cluck. So dumb, in fact, that he offered ten dollars to my five that I'd never be chosen for pilot training. So confident was I that he was wrong that I refused the bet, even at two-to-one odds.On Monday the 9th of November I was back at Devens for a thorough physical, riding the train with Al Barrios and George Arnberg, both in their twenties and Al with a year or more of college under his belt. The only reason the Air Corps was accepting the likes of George and me was that they'd run out of men with at least a couple years of college. The physical turned out to be just as comprehensive as the mental. Nine months earlier my brother Bob had taken his, where the Army also detected something wrong with his heart. Determined to fly, and with two years at Clark University sitting under such professors as Robert Goddard, the rocket pioneer, and with a private pilot's license as well as membership in the Civil Air Patrol, Bob was not about to take no for an answer. So he'd returned no less than six times to convince them he was fit enough to fly. At last he wore them down, and now he was training as a navigator.When I returned to Devens for the results of my physical, I learned that two others had washed out for color blindness, critical for depth perception. That left five of us of the original seventeen, and two of these were in doubt. As I took the train back to Worcester I couldn't help but reflect on my good luck. For ten years earlier, as a result of an eye exam in grade school, Dad had taken me to Dr. Fairbanks, an optometrist. There he found my left eye so bad that he fitted me with glasses in which the right lens was fogged. Finally, after two to three years, my left eye had caught up with my right eye, and I could forgo the strange spectacles that had made me the butt of ribbing at school. Little enough price to pay, now that my eyes were 20/20.It was almost a year since Pearl Harbor, and the war news was hot and heavy. What really caught my attention were the accounts of the fliers. Vividly I recalled the words of Winston Churchill on August 20, 1940, as he stood before the House of Commons but spoke to the world in praise of the RAF fighters who'd turned back Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe, which had been doing its dead level best to pound the British Isles into submission for an invasion. "Never," the prime minister proclaimed, "in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."1 That was the same time that our own Army Air Corps assembled all of its forty fighter planes as part of the largest war games since World War I. Of the forty, only three were airworthy enough to complete their mission. In scarcely

more than eighteen months we were at war with Japan, Germany, and Italy, each with hundreds of fighter planes able to complete their missions.2 Now, less than a year after Japanese dive bombers had laid waste to much of our Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, I was learning from the radio that the Japs, as we nicknamed them, disgusted that they'd not been able to down a single B-17 Flying Fortress, had resorted to bombing them from above with their dive bombers--to no avail. Then came the news that in an air battle over Guadalcanal our fighters had destroyed twelve enemy bombers and five fighters, with the loss of but seven of our own. So it appeared that our pilots were giving a good account of themselves. The question was, if I became a fighter pilot, could I give as good an account of myself?It was Friday the 13th of November, and far from running into bad luck, I learned that I'd enlisted none too soon. For teenage boys, it was announced, could now expect to be drafted, and some before Christmas. More good news, with search planes discovering one of Rickenbacker's crew floating on a raft in the South Pacific. The next day Eddie and two more of his crew were rescued, after an incredible forty days adrift on another raft in shark-infested waters. Now the question was, could I ever be so lucky?The following day, the 14th of November, I was sworn into the Army Air Corps Reserve, awaiting orders to be called up. At the same time it was announced that there would be three registration periods in December when all males who'd turned eighteen after January 1 would sign up. That would have included me, so my luck was holding. On November 20 came the prediction that by the end of the year the United States would have a million men overseas. A letter from Bob in Fort Monroe, Louisiana, indicated that he'd be one of them by the spring of 1943. In between swatting "these damn flies!" he penned that he was "darn glad" I'd been accepted into the Air Corps. After all, he reasoned, it was here that I had "the most opportunity because it [was] the fastest expanding branch of the entire fighting service." It was obvious that, though he'd been disappointed in not being able to follow our cousin, Dick Newton, in becoming a Marine pilot, he was happy to be training as a navigator. Learning that I'd gotten 112 on my mental test, he confided he'd gotten 130, but was kind enough to write, "I think it has been made a little harder since I took it." On the contrary. If anything, by lowering their standards, it would appear they'd made it easier. Not only had he had his nose to the grindstone at North High, but he had gotten a good dose of math and science at Clark.Bob then proceeded to give me some good advice. As for Devens, "Don't believe more than half the baloney they dish out to you, for they don't know a thing about what will happen to you." As for my pay, "Save all the money you can in War Bonds, or you'll have to chop out a big chunk for the income tax." And when it came to my return to Worcester, "Don't plan on getting home again until the war is over." As for his plans, "When I graduate I'll be headed to Egypt, Australia, or England within a week. But," he cautioned, "don't tell Margie Winslow, my fiancee, the bad news. Keep it a secret."Then Bob got down to my choice of a place as a flier on a plane--thinking, of course, of a bomber, where he'd be serving. Would I opt for pilot, navigator, or bombardier? In any case I'd be a commissioned officer. Of the three, Bob counseled the first two, and of these, he confided, "I chose navigator, even though most guys pick pilot." Why navigator? "Because pilot training is the longest course, and the most dangerous," as well as "very monotonous." Furthermore, "It takes lots of practice and not as much brains as a navigator." And, he added, "It takes a certain amount of luck." The question that now hung before me was, if I was deficient in the brains category, could luck make up for it? Before closing his eight-pager, Bob made a point of adding, "Pilot training is chosen by most guys because there's sort of a 'romantic appeal'--a glory--to the pilot's job. But don't let it fool you--size it up according to your opportunities and abilities--and which ever one you think you'll do best in." Then he closed with "That's my advice--if you want it." I certainly did, even though I heeded only some of it.By this time Uncle Sam was leaning on civilians to do their share of the war effort. Not only were there sixty-hour weeks in defense plants, but restrictions were multiplying. On November 30, Worcester, like other cities along the East Coast, was placed under a strict dimout. No lights were to be seen in stores or houses, streetlights were dimmed, and the upper half of headlights were blackened. Across the nation the speed limit was 35 mph, or 30 at night, unless otherwise posted, as it was in Worcester at 25. But at that, it was faster by far than the 8 mph restriction at intersections, as Dad had pointed out. Of course, that was written in the days of the horse and buggy, yet it was still on the books.Now, even with gasoline rationing, the oil shortage in New England was critical, prompting the Office of Price Administration chief to announce that if it came to a choice, he'd rather have New Englanders catch pneumonia than our servicemen do without oil. By November 25, the selling of heavy cream was forbidden. Then I learned that the War Production Board had closed a local plumbing supply store for a year for operating a black market.The next day was Thanksgiving, and I had plenty to be thankful for. To celebrate it after a sumptuous meal I invited Dana, my kid brother by sixteen months, to join me at the movies, along with old-time pal

Malcolm "Specs" Midgley. It was in his house I'd filled out my enlistment papers, and it was his father, the city clerk, who'd provided one of my two recommendations. So it was only right that Specs should join us, as long as he didn't mind risking a ride in the '33 Ford Bob had bought for $50 and had willed me when he enlisted. Downtown we found a long line queued up at the Capitol Theater, waiting to watch The Flying Tigers. Gen. Claire Chennault had his P-40 Warhawks painted to look like sharks, and they'd become a legend throughout the world as they supported the Chinese in the war against the Japs. I left the theater as pumped up as I was when I was sworn in at Devens. My question now was, how long would I have to wait before being called up?As November moved into December and the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the home front was again called on to pull in its belt. Cans were to be collected, schools were to contribute one out of five typewriters, and the manufacture of ice cream was cut to save butter fat. By this time the oil crisis in New England was so bad that no oil would be sold to homes where the owners refused to convert to gas. Luckily, Dad had switched from coal to oil and, the previous spring, to gas, after braving the coldest winter in eight years. Now local stores were being closed for several days at a time to conserve fuel oil. Furthermore, if we didn't want to freeze to death, we were warned, we'd better consider doubling up with other families.FDR, as commander in chief, had bigger problems. For here were railroad workers threatening to strike, all 350,000 of them, if they didn't get a 30 percent raise. And 1,500 workers at Bethlehem Steel Corporation went on strike, in violation of the no-strike pledge of all plants for the duration of the war. So the president cracked down and sent War Department production director William R. Knudsen out to tour the plants. When he got to Worcester he declared that "we must work like hell" if we intended to win this war.Our home-front privations were little enough sacrifice as we learned of the continuing hits the Allies were taking in this, the start of our second year of war. On December 3 we were gripped with the news of the Allied invasion of North Africa. Despite German air supremacy there, the Allies claimed they sank eighteen Axis ships while losing sixteen. According to Churchill, the war was now entering its "tensest phase." On the 5th we learned that the Allies were softening up "the soft under-belly" of Europe, Italy. Our bombers were pounding the docks and railroad facilities at Naples, hitting a battleship and two cruisers without so much as a challenge from Italian fighters in the air. It was fast becoming clear to Hitler that, if it were left to the Italians, Italy's boot would indeed represent a "soft under-belly." So he stripped the Russian front of fighter planes to counter any Allied invasion from the Mediterranean, even as he ordered his Wehrmacht down the boot to reinforce the toe.Revue de presseThe strength of our democracy lies in the wide variety of leaders and heroes we produce at all levels. This story is a wonderful example!Joseph S. Nye, Jr., dean of Harvard Universitys Kennedy School of Government and author of The Paradox of American Power