

A Volunteer

During WWII Fort Myers, Florida was the site of an aerial gunnery training school. I remember well my arrival at Fort Myers. It was in the evening and they were in the middle of one of their 25-year record low temperature periods. The barracks window material was chicken wire, and there were no blankets. I survived the night by huddling between two mattresses.

My right hand seemed to automatically go up when a call for volunteers occurred. On one such occasion I was the guinea pig in a high altitude chamber demonstration. We went to a simulated altitude of about twenty thousand feet. I took off my oxygen mask, they gave me a pencil and a pad, and I was asked to write repeatedly, "I am Superman. I do not need oxygen."

Afterward I was shown the result. The writing became progressively more illegible until it trailed off in a wavy line. After I passed out, they replaced the oxygen mask, and the process completely reversed itself. When I became aware of my actions, I was writing "I am Superman....."

There was a pleasant side effect of the Superman experience. I had awakened that day with a very severe headache. It was probably a result of my having spent too many hours in swimming and diving in the pool at the base. I didn't seek medical help because of my concern that I might be removed from the training. With some trepidation I had stepped through the doors of the chamber. At an altitude between ten and fifteen thousand feet I felt instantaneous and total relief from the headache. Whew!

Later I was on temporary duty at an airstrip for fighters at Naples, Florida. A fighter had gone down in the Everglades, and volunteers were requested for a search party. My right hand automatically went up.

Shortly after noon, we left dry land and proceeded into the swamp. The water level ranged from knee deep to chin deep, and the bottom was soft. Each step was an effort, and there was always the knowledge that we might be disturbing an alligator or a water snake.

Most of us had sense enough to pace ourselves to conserve our strength. A few macho men tried to maintain maximum effort from the start. Later, we had to carry or drag some of those individuals out of the swamp.

During the night, fighter planes with their landing lights on flew over us to provide a little light. About ten o'clock the next morning our feet were again on dry land. What a great feeling! It had been an exercise in futility, for the pilot was dead when we found him.

I resolved to do something about that right hand.