

The 301st flew three more missions from Tafaraoui. Two of these were against the docks at Bizerte, while the other was flown against an airfield at Sidi Ahmed. The three raids met light resistance, with no aircraft lost and only three crewmembers injured during forty-three effective sorties.²³

The official records omit one aircraft that was badly battered, and one crewmember who died from his wounds on 4 December. During this attack on the Bizerte docks, flak damaged two aircraft. Lieutenant Wesley Sloulin's "Dumbo" (32d) lost one engine and fell out of formation where GAF fighters attacked. Although at least two crewmembers were wounded and the landing gear damaged, Sloulin landed safely at a fighter field at Bone. Meanwhile, flak also disabled one engine on Lieutenant Harold Brasher's "Maverick" (352d) and knocked it out of formation; then two fighters attacked. The Germans racked Brasher's Boeing with gunfire, inflicting serious damage to the aircraft and wounding five of the crew. A cannon shell exploded in the cockpit and started a fire, which both pilots fought and extinguished as the plane rapidly lost seven thousand feet of altitude. The navigator, Robert Castle, prepared to bailout. He jettisoned the escape hatch and extended his legs outside the aircraft, when he looked back to see the bombardier, Milton Zahn, struggling to put on his parachute. Castle hesitated, deciding whether to jump or help his comrade. Just then the pilots pulled the bomber out of the dive, saving Castle from having to make that

fateful decision. German gunfire had knocked out the power for the ball turret, severed all but six inches from one of the .50s, and cut off the oxygen supply. Nevertheless the ball gunner, Don Herman, continued to crank the turret around by hand to deceive the Germans. Despite heavy damage, Brasher made an emergency, dead-stick landing at Bone airfield just inside Algeria. "Maverick" was badly battered as the airmen counted fifty-two holes within ten square feet. The gunners claimed five German fighters destroyed; but the entire group received only one credit for the action. Gerald Yates, the radio operator, died from his wounds and became the Group's first known death.²⁴

That night, the four uninjured "Maverick" crewmembers went into town and rented a hotel room, but thought it strange when the hotel manager allowed them to take any room and even gave them some bottles of wine. More suspicious, there was no one else around. At dusk, the air raid siren sounded, but this did not concern the Americans as they reasoned the Germans would attack the airfield, three miles distant. They did not realize their hotel was close to the waterfront where the Allies' stockpiled supplies — a much more lucrative target for the Luftwaffe. The American airmen heard bombs falling (ironic for a heavy bomber crew accustomed to dropping bombs); the third one blew in a window. The men hastily abandoned the hotel, but encountered problems as all the streets seemed to be dead ends. They finally made their way to the edge of town, ending up on top of a hill with the rest of the population watching the fantastic fireworks display as the supplies on the docks exploded. The following day the men returned to find the building next to the hotel completely demolished.²⁵