RICHARD CANDELARIA REMEMBERS RIDING HIS BIKE from his home in Pasadena to the top of the Hollywood Hills in the late 1930s to look down at the sleek new Lockheed P-38s taking off from the Burbank airport. Coming from a family that had emigrated from Mexico to America a hundred years before California statehood, he was like the other boys in his neighborhood in every way except for one. While they read comics about superheroes, he haunted the local library in search of books about Eddie Rickenbacker and the other Aces of World War I. By the time he was a teenager he was certain that he, too, would someday be a fighter pilot.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor Candelaria tried to join the Army Air Corps but was told that pilots had to have a college degree. He enrolled at USC. After he had studied there for almost three years, the Air Corps dropped the college requirement and Candelaria immediately enlisted. Finally in the fall of 1944 he was sent to England and assigned to a squadron of P-51 Mustangs operating out of the Royal Air Force base in Ipswich.

His group's primary mission was supporting the U.S. bombers flying through heavy flak and streams of Luftwaffe interceptors to pound the German homeland. Along with others in his squadron, he engaged in some-thing of a barter with the bomber pilots, ribbing them as "bus drivers." But as he watched them take their B-24s up after day knowing that they would suffer huge losses, he developed a deep respect for their stoical bravery.

On January 4, 1945, "Candy," as the other pilots called him, was flying as wingman to the flight leader on a mission northwest of Berlin when his squadron ran into eighty enemy fighters sent up by the German high command in a desperate effort to stop the B-24s. The Mustangs immediately attacked. Can-delaria's flight leader was hit on the tail of one Focke-Wulf Fw 190 when three other enemy fighters swooped down on him and opened fire. Candelaria singled out the other jet as attacking him. As he turned to engage, the the other Me 262 unaccountably broke off and headed away. He was credited with a "probable" on the first one.

The U.S. bombers appeared on the scene and almost immediately set off flares to indicate that they were under attack. Looking up, Candelaria saw several Messerschmitt 109s getting ready to feast on the B-24s. He radioed the rest of his squadron, "Get here quick. I've got fifteen 109s cornered." He then singled out the leader, hoping that engaging him would disrupt the Germans' attack on the bombers. After shooting down the lead Me 109, Candelaria went after the remaining German fighters and shot down three more of them before the rest of his squadron finally arrived and the German planes vanished. He was now an Ace.

A few days later, Candelaria led an attack on a German airfield. In his first strafing run he destroyed a gun position along with other Airmen. On some nights the Germans invited Candelaria and other pilots to sing with them. He learned the whole of "Lili Marlene." After several weeks, Candelaria and two British officers managed to overpower a German captain inspecting the farmhouse where they were being kept. Taking the officer's pistol, they hustled him outside and seized the car of the local barmen-tie (mayor). Holding the gun to the captain's side as they drove toward what they hoped was the U.S. Army, they forced him to reassure seniors at a series of checkpoints they had to pass through. Soon they had crossed over into Belgium, where they were surprised to learn that the war in Europe was over.

After the war, Richard Candelaria finished college and joined the Air National Guard. After retiring as a colonel, he started a series of manufacturing businesses, including one that made parts for the X-15 experimental aircraft and the space program. But becoming an Ace remained the high point of his life. "It's the most exclusive club in the world," he says. "You can't buy your way in. You can't talk your way in. There's only one way in—through aerial combat."