

## WE STRIKE FOR OIL!

For the members of the *Old Crow* crew, the morning of August 1, 1943, started somewhere between 3:00 and 3:30 A.M. (local time) when the charge of quarters called us. After a breakfast of powdered eggs, bacon, prunes, and oatmeal we went to the briefing room. The briefing was simple and short. Everything had been said that could be said except, "Make certain that you each take your water canteens. There is one big canteen on each ship along with K rations. Good Luck!"

Mark Morris recalls that morning:

The morning of the flight we were given a final early briefing and we walked out to our aircraft, the *Old Crow*. Bombs were still being prepared. Our crew in the rear section, (right waist gunner, A.G. Kerns; tail gunner, Jack Edwards; and I) wiped the red sand of the desert off our guns, mounted our caliber 50's, and checked the ammunition. To pass time, we assisted the ordnance men by packing small incendiary bombs atop the bombs in the bomb bay and discussed the presence of the huge fuel tanks also mounted in the bomb bays. A.G. and I were given boxes of incendiaries to carry. We were instructed to manually throw these out upon hearing bombardier Joe Young's announcement "bombs away"! Thank God he didn't indicate whether they should be thrown one at a time, and I didn't ask. Our entire crew of officers called us aside and we gathered under the wing of the *Old Crow*. McAtee and McCash handed A.G. (Kerns) and I each a 1st Lt. bar and briefly explained that if we had a big problem, we could claim that rank. Only I know how much that gesture meant to me at that point in time. Maybe I wouldn't walk out. We linked hands chaining to pull the props through, cleared the cylinders and climbed aboard.

The chaplains made their rounds of the aircraft or gathered small groups together in some convenient spot. They also gathered last minute letters that had not been left in the hands of other personnel.

Gunners silently rechecked their weapons while other crew members made certain that they had everything that was needed to complete their assignment for the day.

All too soon it was time to start the engines and taxi into assigned takeoff positions.

The *Old Crow* immediately had a problem. Mark Morris recalls:

As we taxied out our nose wheel tire went flat. It was promptly repaired on the spot.

Earnest Cutshall reports that there was also a problem on *Mr. Five By Five*:

George Rebich, the pilot became ill. Major Beam moved into the pilot seat and Lt. Michaels climbed into the copilot's.

Each ship, as it taxied into take off position, turned its tail slightly down wind so as to avoid the billowing dust.

Mark Morris relates:

As we took off we could see smoke rising from a B-24 that had crashed. It was over where the 98th ships were taking off. Thoughts of sabotage crossed our minds."

John Huber remembers:

We carried full wing tanks plus two 480-gallon bomb bay tanks and six 500-pound general purpose bombs with special delay action fuses. I was never told what delay our bombs had, but it could have been 45 second or it could have been one-hour fuses. The object was to discourage a bomb crew from disarming the bomb. If you attempted to take out the fuse, it would go off.

The first 506th ship lifted off at approximately 4:40 A.M. (local time). The last was in the air and forming up by 5:00 A.M. (local time). It took nearly an hour for all the groups to get into position. We then turned to the north and started across the Mediterranean.

As we flew over water the formation started to loosen up. Late in the morning we saw the first rocky islands of the chain that lies off the coast of Greece. The island of Corfu was still ahead.

Not long after that, an aircraft left one of the formations ahead. It crashed in the water. Another aircraft followed it down and was circling below. Little did we know the importance of this mishap. The crashed ship was the lead ship. The circling ship was the deputy lead. These were the men who had received all the special briefings on the target

and how to get to it. Because of radio silence word was not sent out to the other ships in the formation. (Recent information seems to indicate that the ship that went down at Corfu may not have been the lead ship. Compton, the Group Commander of the *Liberandos*, contends that the lead ship was in place when they started into the mountains, but never came out.) All we knew was that one of our ships had sent a distress signal to Malta. The formation droned on toward Corfu and the range of mountains that loomed off to the right.

We crossed the southern tip of Corfu and turned inland. Soon after the turn a B-24 left the formation well ahead and turned back. It passed below us with two engines feathered on the port side.

John Huber remembers:

The day was clear. We assembled much as usual except that on the trip across the Mediterranean the formation was below 10,000 feet and loose until we came close to the coast. Then it tightened up. One B-24 pulled off from the group ahead and flew parallel for a short time and then exploded leaving not a single trace of the plane.

When the coast line fell behind us, we started the slow climb to 15,000 foot that would allow us to clear the mountains. Well ahead appeared another obstacle that we would have to cross. It appeared to be a solid wall of cumulus clouds. By now the formation was well spread. The two lead groups were far ahead and approaching the bank of clouds. The lead group found a hole and took advantage of it. The second group followed.

On approaching the cloud bank the three trailing groups found there was no way through. The clouds were solid. We banked off and started to look for another way. Now there were only two groups in our formation. We were still following the pink colored aircraft of the *Pyramiders*. The *Sky Scorpions* behind us were lost from sight. All of the months of planning were shattered. A simultaneous strike by five groups could not be accomplished with the attacking force so badly spread over the Balkan Peninsula.

Then another bit of hard luck! Above us appeared a fighter. It was a biplane that had no intent of coming within range of our guns. It quickly left the scene. However, all chance of a surprise was now gone. Because we were committed to radio

silence the rest of the formations could not be alerted.

Then the opening we had been looking for appeared. The formation moved into the opening. The *Pyramiders* down close to the mountain tops and the *Eightballs* about 3,000 feet higher. The 70 ships of the two groups followed the contour of the mountain range upward and then back down. During the descent the *Sky Scorpions* appeared behind and very high. When we reached the muddy Danube River, in the foothills of the mountain range, we circled once while the *Pyramiders'* Group Commander verified that the Group behind him was the *Eightballs*. During the turn we tightened our formations and allowed the *Sky Scorpions* to catch up. We were now at 3,000 feet. One hundred miles away across the plains was Pitesti, our first check point and Ploesti was still 60 miles further on.

Some ships reported that while we were making the circle over the Danube some single engine aircraft were in the vicinity. However, they made no attempt to come close to us.

Things were not going well aboard *Heaven Can Wait*. Donald Chase wrote:

We aborted some 125 miles short of the oil complex, near Craiova, Rumania. Fuel transfer problems and, as proved later, oiling difficulties caused us to shut down number one engine and feather the propeller. We were "tail end Charley", eating everyone's prop wash. We kept lagging farther behind. When number four engine lost power we fell further back. We had no choice. Navigator Robert Ricks, from Richmond, Va., gave Whitlock a course heading to the nearest friendly landing field, Cyprus, some five flying hours distant.

Flying southbound, we recrossed the Danube River at a point where people were wading and swimming. We didn't want to hurt them so we dumped our bombs farther down river. Then we overflew Bulgaria into the Aegean Sea and skirted west of Turkey. Twenty minutes from the Cyprus coast number four engine quit entirely. We were running out of altitude.

When we reached 500 feet and were still going down, Whitlock turned and asked if I was set up for a distress call. "Yes Sir." I knuckled out repeated SOS morse signals, giving our code and holding the transmitter key down for 15-to-20 seconds so Air/Sea/Rescue could home in

on us. Meanwhile, the crew threw out clothing, radio tuning units, ammunition, and canteens to lighten our load so we could make landfall. The coast loomed and, luckily, we were lined up to land on the east/west runway. No turning; just straight in. I fired red flares to ward off pattern aircraft. It was a good landing.

It was about this time that a lone fighter made a halfhearted pass at *Ruth Less*, flown by *Slough*.

The trailing three groups raced toward *Pitesti*. Unknown to them, the two leading groups had reached this first check point on time. They proceeded toward the second checkpoint where they made a decisive error. Thinking that it was the Initial Point, *Floresti*, they turned and started their drop to tree top level. This course would take them to Bucharest and near what later proved to be the most heavily defended area around *Ploesti*. At this point the other three groups were coming into *Pitesti*.

Now the fully alerted German Air Force was airborne and assembling over *Floresti*. This was the final briefed American checkpoint and their turning point toward *Ploesti*.

The *Flying Circus* continued following the *Liberandos* until they were about half way to Bucharest. At that point, the *Flying Circus* Commander could see, off to his left, the smoke and haze of the oil refineries at *Ploesti*. He turned to attack their assigned target. He headed for *Ploesti*. He was approaching the city from the west. He had been briefed to approach it from the north. Elements of his formation passed on each side of the target that was assigned to the 506th. They did not bomb, but continued on toward their assigned targets.

The trailing three groups were approaching the second check point when over the radio the words, "Wrong turn! Wrong turn", were heard. It was here that the *Sky Scorpions* were briefed to proceed up a valley on the way to the *Red* target.

Once again an error was made! Because of clouds on the mountains, their navigators could not see a monastery high on the mountain side. It was the key to which valley the *Sky Scorpions* would follow. (Note: It was also the key that was probably missing and may have contributed to the leading two groups turning toward Bucharest rather than continuing on to *Floresti*. The missing key resulted in both forces turning too soon.) Then the *Sky Scorpions* discovered their mistake,

skipped over a ridge and were on their way to the Red target. The *Pyramiders* and *Eightballs* continued on to the Initial Point at Floresti.

The *Flying Circus* was under heavy ground fire as it passed over the outskirts of Floesti.

The German Air Force, looking at the widely dispersed American formations and not knowing what the true target was, ordered all aircraft into the air. They also ordered the fighters to leave their stations over Floresti and attack the *Flying Circus* in the streets of Floesti.

As the *Liberandos* drew near to Bucharest, they realized their mistake and General Ent ordered the formation to turn east across the railroad tracks and then north, back toward Floesti. They were coming up to the city from the south. The briefed approach was from the north.

Now the *Flying Circus* was under fire as it flew through the streets of Floesti.

General Ent could see the beating that the *Circus* was taking. His aircraft also were subjected to withering ground fire. He ordered his formation to look for targets of opportunity. In the process his formation eased further east to escape the ground fire.

At about that time the *Circus* bombs rained down on *White 4* and *5*, the assigned targets of the *Flying Eight Balls* and the *Pyramiders*.

These two trailing groups were now on the turn at Floresti. Off to the south they could see the city of Floesti. It seemed to be enveloped in a dark cloud bank. Or was it smoke? The force under Posey started to ease off to the right toward Brazi, their assigned *Blue* target. The other two forces continued south; one on each side of the railroad tracks.

By now *Liberandos* had passed the eastern suburbs of Floesti and turned west on the north side of town. The remnants of the *Flying Circus* were over the eastern suburbs of Floesti and were turning north and west for the briefed return to Africa.

There was a railroad freight train proceeding down the tracks which the *Eightballs* and *Pyramiders* were following toward

Ploesti. Suddenly the boxcar sides fell away. Antiaircraft guns mounted on the flatcars started firing level and point blank at the two formations on either side of the tracks. Aircraft of the 506th were further away from the train and were probably out of range of the lighter guns, but some of the pilots were still apprehensive. All bomb bay doors were now coming open. The cloud bank over Ploesti became clearer. It was smoke and there were flames.

John Huber recalls:

On the run to the target area there was a B-24 lying on its side and an airman was standing on the ground waving us on with his A-2 leather flying jacket. I could have sworn it was Lt. Young, but then it was a blur because of the speed of closure and I could have been wrong.

I opened the bomb bay doors, unlocked the racks, turned on the camera that took pictures of what was happening behind us and turned on the bomb sight. As we approached our power house target, with its 120 foot stack, the plane was at an altitude of 150 feet. I hit the toggle that released bombs as close in trail as 25 feet. We put four out of six bombs right in the power house.

Aboard the *Old Crow* Norm Kiefer had just gone down into the bomb bay. He had to assure that the bomb bay doors did not creep shut and that all the bomb racks released their loads when the bombardier tripped them. These functions had to operate correctly today. A malfunction could slow down our withdrawal from the target area. Speed was the key to survival.

Down there, you couldn't see very much. We were close to the ground. Everything was a blur. I could hear and feel the ships guns firing. Once or twice I thought that I saw a tracer below us.

Dave McCash, up in the nose compartment of the *Old Crow*, could see much more. For the time being his job as navigator was over. McAtee and Laudig, in the pilot compartment, could now see the smoke stacks of our assigned target. Dave remembers:

Near the Initial Point there was a bellied in B-24. On the right was a building that looked like a 10x10 shed. Suddenly its sides collapsed outward as we neared it. Pointing at us was a multi-barrelled gun. It looked

lethal, but did not fire. There was no operator on its seat. Thirty-yards away, running towards the gun was a uniformed soldier. All guns on the right side of our plane, and I suppose our wingman's, opened up and dirt spurted all around him. He hit the ground with a plop that seemed to also raise a dust cloud. Was he hit or just being sensible?

Seconds later, off the left wing, we were looking down into a circular sandbagged revetment with a very large antiaircraft gun in its center. There was no one near the gun, but huddled back against the sandbags was the gun crew making themselves as inconspicuous as possible. I think that we just flew by them without firing. After all, we were the last flight in the formation and they could do us no more harm.

Dale Lee saw:

A German Sgt. had three rows of troops lined up in formation. I just wanted to even the score for them having wiped out so many of my good buddies. In my anger and frustration I aimed my 50-cal. gun and mowed right down their lines. At the time it seemed so justifiable and right.

At some point on this run, Reinhart, from the 67th Squadron, brought "G.I. Gal" over to the left wing position off from McAtee. This position had been vacant since Whitlock in *Heaven Can Wait* aborted.

Back in the waist of the *Old Crow*, Mark Morris remembers:

We were roaring along at a hundred feet or less above the ground. Many people waved. I saw dogs, and I swear even some chickens running. In one picnic group the women even waved aprons. At some point I lifted the box of incendiaries and balanced it precariously on the ledge of the waist window. Suddenly there was a lot of flak and a surprising amount of tracer fire. At one point a group of civilians were in an area between two gun emplacements that were concealed in grain shocks. Suddenly some of them fell as our gunners swung from firing at one gun emplacement to another.

Dale Lee recalls:

Another picture that comes to mind was the old lady that



stood right out in the middle of all this commotion. She was calmly pumping water into a bucket.

In contrast with this sight was the scene near the end of our run. There, in a corn field, were a number of high two-wheeled carts pulled by a team of oxen. Those poor oxen went berserk from all the noise and ran. The excited farmers were in hot pursuit trying to bring them under control.

**John Huber remembers:**

When we descended to the low level bomb run, we saw that the Germans were ready for us. Hidden in some of the corn shocks were 20-mm flexible machine guns. We shot at anything that moved. We also shot at some 88-mm guns that were firing from platforms that required the gun to be aimed below the horizontal. (So much for the intelligence that said they couldn't do it.)

**Steve Bugyle, aboard Timb-A-A-Ah, reports:**

We brought along a dog named Eightball. When the guns began to fire, Eightball curled up under the pilots seat and stayed there for the rest of the mission."

Ahead in *Earthquake* they were under fire as they approached the distillation plant. Butler relates:

We took some hits in the hydraulic system and the #3 engine. Bunker, the pilot, called for me to feather the propeller on #3. In the excitement I feathered the #4 engine on the same side. About that same time we hit a balloon barrage cable which tightened and then broke. Our wing dropped. Aircraft were rushing past us like we were standing still. I quickly rectified my mistake and Bunker righted the ship.

Neeper in the top turret of *Earthquake* tells how their left wing shot up in the air when both engines quit and they hit the cable.

Someone on *Earthquake* saw a flak gun that was mounted near three buildings which bore the international sign of nonbelligerence, a huge Red Cross.

Allen in the nose of *Lynn Bari II* saw shocks of grain fall apart with guns firing at them. He swung his twin

guns and started to fire back.

Stevens, in *Trouble*, saw many guns concealed in haystacks, wood patches and growing crops as they plunged toward the target. Just northwest of the target they drew heavy flak from guns in pill boxes. Also, there were light flak guns placed on the top of water towers.

About 3/4 of a mile before the target, Strong, in *Baldy and His Brood* flew over what looked like a house, but it had a flak gun in it.

About 1/2 a mile from the target, the crew of *Mr. Five By Five*, flown by Beam saw a B-24 with what they believe was a letter "C" on its tail. It had nosed into the ground, but did not appear to be otherwise damaged.

*Lynn Bari II* flown by Anderson was sustaining considerable flak and machine gun damage as they approached the target.

To Mark Morris aboard the *Old Crow*:

It seemed that bombs were already exploding and billowing smoke was visible at numerous spots on the ground. I recall mentally comparing it for a brief second to a fireworks display which I had witnessed as a child at Soldier's Field, in Chicago, one 4th of July.

Far to our left, the two attacking forces that were flying parallel to the railroad tracks were bearing down on their targets at Ploesti. Ahead loomed a wall of flame and smoke coming from exploding bombs, airplanes and oil tanks. Colonel Johnson, could see that his target had already been hit. Suddenly a terrific explosion sucked smoke skyward. There lay a refinery that had not been hit. They had missed the cracking plant. This is the most vital spot that must be destroyed. Before the flames could again close, Johnson and his *Eightballs* zeroed in on the critical plant. They didn't all make it before the flames returned, but their bombs were on the target. Wildly crisscrossing from the left were ships of the 93rd and the 376th. Only skillful flying avoided further losses as the two converging flights wove their way away from the target.

Back on the *Old Crow* Mark Morris found:

We were literally bouncing along. It was all I could do to stay upright firing the caliber-50 with my left hand

and balancing the box of incendiaries with my right. I knew I was being very inaccurate. I was just raking the area in the general direction of the incoming fire. At one point we raised up over some stacks and immediately dropped to ground level again.

I was becoming very apprehensive about holding on to those incendiaries. They were at chest level and there was an awful lot of junk coming at me. I recall thinking "Oh God! isn't Joe Young ever going to say bombs away?" I never did hear it, but after what seemed an eternity, I sensed the ship lighten and give a big lurch.

Just before the bombs dropped, McAtee:

Was flying as tightly as possible on the tail of *Baldy and His Brood*, piloted by Strong. He saw Strong's bombs leave the bomb bay and strike an oil storage tank before skipping into the powerhouse which was protected by a low block wall. As the *Old Crow* skimmed across the storage tank, the top peeled off like a sardine can. Edwards, the tail gunner, saw the tank explode in flame just after we cleared it.

Hickerson, flying the tail guns in *Southern Comfort* saw that tank exploding. He also called out the oil tanks that were hit by the incendiaries that were thrown out by Dale Lee.

Dale Lee recalls:

About this time there was a big concussion from a large gun. Purcell was knocked on his butt as he stood at his right waist window. The remaining incendiaries in his box spilled all over the floor. We both made a mad scramble to pick them up and toss them out in a hurry.

Down in the bomb bay, of *Old Crow* Norm Kiefer:

Was holding on for dear life and wondering if those bombs would ever go out. When they did, I quickly closed the doors and scrambled on to the flight deck. It seemed a much safer place to be. I plugged in my headset and heard Joe Young say, "It looks like a rat race! Let's get the hell out of here!". Just then I saw ahead and off to the left a B-24 pull straight up into the sky. It hung there a moment and two chutes came out. Then it nosed over and plunged earthward. As we passed it telescoped into the ground. All that was left was flame and smoke. (Will

Lundy's records show that this was Lt. G. W. Winger of the 66th Squadron.)

Almost everyone in the formation saw this ship crash. Mark Morris remembers:

Another vivid memory was of a ship at our 9 o'clock position climbing vertically. It hung for a second as it stalled. Then the tail skidded down. Just at the apex of the climb I saw at least 2 parachutes appear from the bottom hatch. The ship was at an altitude no greater than 800-to-1,000 feet at the most. I was mindful that the pilot or copilot had certainly given the rest of the crew the chance to survive at great sacrifice. There is no way they could bail out of the bottom hatch unless they were pre-positioned and ready when the climb was initiated. I doubted if the chutes got fully open, but I was too busy watching the fighters and we were moving too fast to witness their fate" (Will Lundy's records show that waist gunners Cicon and Traudt survived. Both men landed relatively unhurt. One crawled into a haystack and fell asleep.)

Dale Lee, on *Southern Comfort* states:

I saw two parachutists slump in their harnesses when they were struck by gun fire. I also saw B-24's flying on a quartering course to our line of flight.

Back in the waist of the *Old Crow*, Mark Morris:

Saw that our left wing man was in real trouble. He had been snuggled up very close. His aircraft suddenly rolled to almost 45 degrees and I was sure that the then vertical wing tip was digging into the ground. It veered behind us and disappeared. I subconsciously noted the large identification letter on the vertical stabilizer, which I think was "Q". The roll was so sudden that my thought at the time was that he may have gotten caught in our prop wash. I took a quick look over my shoulder and saw that A.G. (Kerns) was rid of his box. I just released my grip on mine. I had already edged it as far out the window as I dared. (Note: Reinhart flying in "Q" lost part of a wing to cannon fire. Immediately after the target the fighters picked him up. Although badly damaged, Reinhart tried to gain altitude. He managed to reach 3,500 foot. Eighty miles from the target the crew jumped. Only the copilot did not survive.)

Just then another battery of flak guns came into view. "Oh Boy", I thought, "a chance to get even." I saw the gunners huddled and cut loose again with both hands on the 50. I raked the position as we raced over and started to turn out of the target area.

It was about this time that the IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) radio equipment blew up on the *Old Crow*.

In the target area, waist gunner Lonny Ackerman, on *Baldy and His Brood*, saw a railroad train. He aimed for the locomotive and blew it up.

Aboard *Mr. Five By Five*, right waist gunner, Earnest Cutshall blew up an oil storage tank near the cooling tower in the northeast corner of the plant. Earnest remembers:

My bullets were hitting the tank about half way down the tank. Gasoline was pouring out in a number of places. Suddenly they were on fire. Then the top half of the tank went straight up in the air to an extreme height. Burning gasoline was spread in all directions.

Back on *Old Crow*, McAtee could see the fighters ahead as he made a flat skidding turn out of the target area. In that first fighter attack Houston was hit and fell out of formation on fire.

Aboard *Mr. Five By Five* the crew observed a B-24 with its #1 engine burning. It seemed to just barely clear some trees and then was lost from sight. (Note: This was probably Houston of the 68th Squadron. There were no survivors.)

In the waist of the *Old Crow*, Mark Morris:

Saw the first of the Fw-190 fighters. One attacking fighter just dove into the ground. At some point we flew over a B-24 that rested at the end of a long furrow on the ground. I think it had a "W" on the tail. I was surprised to see crew members standing on the wing and waving."

The crew of *Mr. Five By Five* also saw the B-24 with the tail identification of "W" that belly landed and the crew were standing around the plane. (Note: There was no ship from the 44th that carried the call letter "W" that day.)

Steve Bugyie also remembers seeing that ship. He screamed

into the slip stream, "DESTROY THAT SHIP! DESTROY THAT SHIP!

The top turret gunner on the *Old Crow*, Mike Davis, started to shout:

"Mac go back and land! *Mr. Five By Five* belly landed back there." Jack Edwards, the tail gunner chimed in with, "Yea, go back! They are on the wing. We can land and get them."

McAtee considered it for a moment and then told them to, "Shut up!". Ahead he saw more fighters.

Slough, flying in *Ruth Less*, was the last 506th ship off from the target. He reported that there were many explosions. Smoke and growing fires were rising from the target area. Once he completed his flat turn, he really turned on the gas. He went by other aircraft like they were standing still. (Years later Jansen asked him how he did it. Slough indicated that he was drawing 53 inches of manifold pressure.

In the waist of the *Old Crow*, Mark Morris noted:

A couple of fighters were eyeing us and I them. At one point two of them were parallel to us a thousand yards or more out. They seemed confused and flew erratically. I awaited their turn in. When they did turn, they slid rapidly to the rear. I let off a few bursts just to let it be known that we were aware. Then Edwards' tail guns became very busy. I also realized that Mike Davis in the top turret was firing at something overhead.

Up in the front of the *Old Crow*, McAtee saw Davis in the top turret shooting at a fighter which no one could identify. McAtee believes that Mike shot that aircraft down. We later guessed it must have been a Bulgarian or Rumanian aircraft. In the tail, Edwards shot down an Me-109 that attacked from 12 o'clock high. Edwards got him as he flattened out his dive and tried to turn away.

*Mr. Five By Five*, which had not been shot down, was also under fire. Fighters made six passes at the ship. On one pass, an Me-110 attacking from 6 o'clock, was caught in the cross fire of the tail and top turrets. It is believed that Williams in the top turret was the one that sent the ship into the ground.

The gunners on *Ruth Less* were also getting a workout. The

enemy aircraft seemed to be working in pairs. Caillier, at the left waist gun, nailed a Me-109. The crash of this ship was observed by Harbison and Siegfelt. Harbison, in the top turret, caught another Me-109 as it passed over and set it afire. The crash was observed by Grimes and Griffin.

The fighters were swarming around the *Lynn Bari II* because of the flak damage which the ship had sustained. McMennamin, on the tail guns, saw a Me-109 coming in at 7 o'clock above. He fired his guns and the enemy aircraft went down on the opposite side. Hearne saw it crash. A Me-109 was making a partial circle over the ship in a clockwise direction when Goodson, in the top turret, fired at it. He started to fire when the enemy aircraft was at about 7 o'clock. The fighter continued on its circular course and crashed at about 2 o'clock. In the nose of the ship, bombardier Scott picked up a Me-109 coming in at 1 o'clock. It turned and swept the length of our aircraft. Scott fired as it passed. The crippled fighter crashed in the rear.

Aboard *Timb-A-A-Ah*, the pilot Larson was getting his first look at enemy fighters. He had never flown combat before. He had never even flown low level before. He was told to follow the plane ahead. His top turret gunner, Klinge destroyed a Me-109 as it approached from 7 o'clock. It was seen to crash at 5 o'clock. Also, Steve Bugyie, flying on the tail guns, caught a Me-110 coming in from 6 o'clock. The crash of this enemy fighter was confirmed by the waist gunner on *Baldy and His Brood*

On *Southern Comfort* Hickerson shot at three attacking Me-109's. Dale Lee saw two fighters crash. He recalls:

During the flight our right wing was very low to the ground. The pilots had the control wheel against the stops and the wing just stayed down. We must have been caught in another aircraft's slip stream. Fabiny reached over and got just a little bit more power out of the #4 engine. The wing quivered and came up ever so slowly.

In spite of all the fighters that were swarming around the retreating aircraft, there was only one 506th ship that did not come under attack. Strong's crew did not get off one round at enemy fighters from their newly installed twin 50-caliber nose and waist guns.

Aboard the *Old Crow* Mark Morris was worried:

At the low altitude and resultant higher temperatures, guns overheated very quickly. I hoped the barrels would hold out. I got a pretty decent burst then at a single fighter which I thought was a Reg. 2000.

The sky was full of debris. Aircraft, including other B-24's, were going in many different directions. At one point I saw another B-24 approaching at 90 degrees and could see little puffs of smoke spurting from its gun positions. At times I couldn't tell who was firing at what and was concerned about spraying another B-24. The fighters were on our backs about 10 minutes, but it seemed like hours. Well that was a busy time. In all, I saw six B-24's that were on the ground.

After the fighter attacks broke off, the flight out seemed very quiet.

John Huber recalls:

After we passed over the target, the plane dropped down to where we were climbing slightly to clear farm fences. Our top and tail turrets did the job of keeping the fighters off our top side and the waist gunners were equally busy and equally successful in protecting us from the fighters. Once we got out of the area I do not recall anything special.

Steve Bugyle remembers that a few months later:

After being shot down at Wiener Neustadt on October 1, 1943, I was being transported by train from Vienna to Stalag Luft. I had two infantry guards. I had not let them know that I understood and could speak German. The train was crowded. A German Captain came into the compartment that we were occupying and took a seat. The Captain had been in command of one of the gun emplacements at Ploesti on August 1st. The Captain was telling the guards about the battle. The thing that he stressed the most was the noise. Noise of fighters and bombers. Noise of guns firing and bombs exploding. Noise of oil burning and tanks blowing up. I had some private wishes that the Captain had been closer to some of those explosions.

The withdrawing aircraft were now winging over the plains that they had crossed just a few hours before. This time they were in greater disarray than when they had gone in. There were fewer of them. Some of them now carried obvious



battle damage and could not maintain full power. Here and there aircraft that were damaged tried to keep together. In other cases, aircraft that were capable of flying cut back their power so as not to leave a comrade alone. The crew of Baldy and His Brood saw one of the damaged ships wave and head for Turkey.

The Old Crow picked up some wing mates while flying back to the Danube River. Mark Morris recalls:

I realized that we had been steadily gaining altitude and as we approached the mountains of Greece we saw some flak come up. Not really close enough to be of any great concern, but we sure didn't need that. Navigator McCash informed McAtee of the best course home. Mike Davis, flight engineer, apparently now out of the top turret, reported fuel conditions and transfer settings. We were still climbing. My adrenaline had subsided and I began to realize that although dressed fit to kill, I was very, very cold. My teeth were chattering. Great planning. My disdained heavy clothing was still on the ground at Libya.

Descending then over the coast we had a serene ride across the Mediterranean. We began assessing damage. Everyone was all right and everything seemed to be in working order. Occasional queries concerning the possible fate of our wing mates prompted bursts of chatter.

A few days before the mission I had purchased a wrist watch in Benghazi. Somewhere, yet a few hours out over the Mediterranean, I looked at the time. The hands on my new watch were stopped at 02:10. I reasoned that must show the exact time that I had dropped the incendiaries and went to work seriously with the caliber-50. That action had blown the main spring, but it was worth it! I turned to A.G. Kerns, pointing to my watch and yelled in his ear to explain. After second thoughts I removed it, caught A.G.'s attention again by feigning a toss. He nodded and I just tossed it into the sea, a gesture of elation at survival and freedom from care at the moment. Damn thing couldn't have been fixed in Africa.

All kept a searching eye on the calm water a couple of thousand feet below for less fortunate ships that may have made it that far at least. None were sighted. As we neared home base at Benina, Norm Kiefer, our radio operator, reported that the I.F.F. apparently wasn't working. At that point I added yet another small prayer.

"Please put us down safely"!"

The crew of *Baldy and His Brood* did observe what looked like a parachute on the water and a large oil patch.

Larson put *Timb-A-A-Ah* down on the dusty strip at Benghazi. When he climbed out of the ship he turned to some of the experienced members of the crew and asked, "Are they all like this?" Regardless of what the future held, his first mission had been rough!

John Huber recalls:

Our pilot, Stevens, hardly ever spoke a word on the flight. He flew the whole mission without much help. I felt sorry for R. A. Harris, the copilot. Everybody had something to do or a gun to shoot, except for Harris. That was no Fox Movietone news feature he was watching! Maybe he saw us hit the tree sapling that we brought back in our #4 engine cowling. He left the crew after we got back to base.

Dale Lee remembers:

After our return to base, the first thing that three different crew members (Fabiny, Jett and myself) did was to go out and examine that wing that had come so close to the ground. We had not previously voiced our anxiety. However, we now just stood and looked at each other and then the wing to see if the paint was rubbed off.

Colonel Johnson met us at the Interrogation Shack. He shook my hand and said, "One of these is enough in anyone's life time."

As the 506th ships straggled in the author once again thought how lucky the Squadron had been. We had put up ten ships. Only one had not made it back to Benghazi. Operations reported that the missing ship had successfully landed at Cyprus. Norm silently expressed his thanks for that luck.

Many years later, Norm Kiefer's sister, Theresa, told how her mother, during the night of July 31, roused the family from bed. She told them to get their rosaries because Norman needs help. The August 1st evening radio news broadcast told of the Liberators going to Ploesti.

The Group had not been so fortunate. Seven of our ships were

down in the target area. Two ditched on the way back. One crew was not rescued. Three of our ships were in Malta. Two were interned in Turkey. Only 22 had returned to Benina. Of those 22, nine were from the 506th. One squadron had two planes return to Benghazi out of the nine they had sent.

In the attacking force of five groups, the losses were just as bad. In the morning 179 aircraft taxied out for takeoff. That night there were only 88 ships that returned. Eight ships were interned in Turkey. Twenty-three ships were at bases in Cyprus, Malta and Sicily. Of the ships that landed at friendly bases, 53 had battle damage. In some cases, the damage was so great that the ships were scrapped. In all, the groups lost 53 aircraft.

Among the personnel, the losses were proportional. In the morning 1,620 men climbed into aircraft. The official report shows that by nightfall, 446 men were dead and 54 were known to be wounded. This does not include the wounded in prisoner of war camps. Another 79 of our airmen were interned in Turkey. Some men that returned would never fly combat again because of combat fatigue. A small portion had now completed their combat tour and would be rotated. The five groups were no longer a fighting force. The Ninth Air Force days were numbered.

Was it worth it? The 506th could answer yes. All of their ships and crews were accounted for. They had destroyed their target. In fact, unlike the White targets, the refineries at Brazi never were repaired or rebuilt. The source of high grade oil that maintained the German fighting force on the Russian front was gone. The following newspaper article relates how the Russians did start to move into the Balkans:

#### NAZIS MAP DNIEPER RETREAT; PLOESTI RAID HELPED DEFEATS

The Russian drive to smash the German supply lines in the Donetz Basin gained speed yesterday, as the German war machine, handicapped by the destruction of their Ploesti oil supply in the American Liberator long-range bombing attack, was reported mapping a retreat to the Dnieper River.

Newspaper accounts of this raid were numerous. The *Flint Journal* printed:

#### NAZI-RULED OIL FIELDS

IN RUMANIA HARD HIT  
BY AMERICAN BOMBERS

175 Liberators Fly 2,400-Mile Round  
Trip in "Biggest Low Level  
Mass Raid in History"

An armada of 175 Liberator bombers of the United States Ninth Air Force flew a 2,400-mile round trip Sunday to dump 300 tons of explosives in a low-level attack on the Ploesti oil field in Rumania, one of the chief sources of the Axis fuel supply.

Announcement of the raid, described as the "biggest low-level mass raid in history," was made by Maj. Gen Lewis H. Brereton, Commander of the Ninth Air Force.

Fliers' reports indicated serious damage to the Astro Romani refineries where large fires were seen. The Astro Romani is the largest group of refineries in Europe.

Rumania's newest refinery, the Creditul Minier, which is the source of 100-octane aviation fuel, was well covered with hits returning pilots said.

A communique issued by the Middle East Air Command today said "20 of the Liberators have been shot down over the target area and a number have not returned to base.

At least 51 enemy planes including Messerschmitt 109's and 110's and Focke-Wulf 190's were claimed destroyed, the bulletin added. It described enemy opposition over the target area and on the return journey as heavy.

(The German High Command in its Monday communique asserted 36 four-engine bombers were shot down. It said 125 planes participated, but that only 60 to 70 were able to make "a coherent attack" on the oil district).

The big bombers using special sights swept in at smoke stack height to drop their cargoes on seven huge refineries and other installations, with the result the oil field was reported left a mass of fire.

Brig. Gen. Victor H. Strahm, Chief of staff to Gen Brereton, praised the 2,000 specially trained airmen who took part in the attack and predicted the raid would "materially affect the course of the war."

The Germans had spent considerable time in an attempt to camouflage the field and anti-aircraft positions were hidden in bushes, tree tops and haystacks the pilots said.

Another newspaper account stated:

#### KING HAILS PLOESTI RAID

The White House released a message which King George of Great Britain sent to President Roosevelt on the Ninth U.S. Air Force's raid on the Rumanian oil fields at Ploesti.

King George wrote, "I have learned with the deepest admiration of the memorable and inspiring achievement of the Ninth U.S. Air Force in attacks upon Rumanian oil refineries. Bombing this heavily defended center of Axis production after one of the longest operational flights of the war called for endurance and courage of the highest order, as well as for practical skill of navigation and brilliant organization on the part of those who planned the attack. The gallantry with which the crews pressed home their attacks at very low level is beyond praise, and their devotion to duty despite heavy losses has stirred the hearts of all who fight with us in the cause of freedom.

General H. H. Arnold wrote:

#### TO OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE 201st COMBAT WING OF THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE:

I have listened with greatest interest to the stirring accounts brought back to me of the details of the attack on the Rumanian oil refineries by heavy bombers of the Eighth and Ninth U.S. Air Forces. The destruction of these oil wells will be far reaching in its effect upon the German ability to carry on their operations. In fact, it might well be the "straw that broke the camel's back" and cause the dislocation of the German war effort. The dogged determination to reach and destroy each of those vital installations, and an utter disregard for personal safety, characterized the action of officers and men of your striking force and evokes my profound admiration.

The heroic accomplishments of the combat crews, and the splendid efforts of the members of the ground echelons who made the mission possible, are all deserving of the

highest praise.

You were assigned the tremendous task of destroying in one day a target that could have been reached by surface forces only after many months of combat involving great losses both of men and material; and you carried your attack home in spite of the strongest kind of opposition built up by the Axis forces. Some of your comrades fell in the attack--others are now held as prisoners of war. Those of you who returned to fight again must realize, as I do, that those who gave their lives did so that others might live. The officers and men of the U.S. Army Air Forces all over the world take pride in your achievement.

The 44th Bomb Group received its second Unit Citation for their actions at Ploesti.

Every man that went to Ploesti received a decoration for that day. In the 506th two Distinguished Service Crosses, two Silver Stars and 77 Distinguished Flying Crosses were awarded.

A few months later the following newspaper article was published:

#### TWO RAID LEADERS WIN HIGHEST HONOR

Award of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Colonels John Rodger ("Killer") Kane and Leon William Johnson for "conspicuous gallantry in action and intrepidity at the risk of their lives" was announced by Maj. Gen Lewis H. Brereton.

The awards, which are the nation's highest, were for leadership in the mass low-level attack by Liberators of the Ninth Air Force on Nazi-operated oil refineries at Ploesti, Rumania. This is believed to be the first time two congressional medals have been given for a single aerial action.

Brig. Gen Uzal Girard Ent, commanding the Ninth Bomber Command, was awarded the Oak Leaf Cluster to the Distinguished Service Medal, second highest decoration.

Decoration ceremonies for all three will be held later.

The citations for Colonel's Johnson and Kane related that their elements had become separated from the leading

portion because of bad weather. When their groups reached the target they found that other elements had mistakenly attacked their area.

Despite intensive antiaircraft fire, enemy fighter planes and the great danger of exploding delayed action bombs from the previous element, the two leaders each decided to go in for the target. Both succeeded in doing heavy damage to the important refinery because of their courage, and flying ability, the citation relates.

The citation for Gen. Ent details his outstanding work in planning and executing attacks on enemy targets, "as best exemplified by the successful raid on Rome on July 19, 1943, and the devastating attack against the oil refineries at Ploesti, Rumania on August 1, 1943.

At a later date, announcement was made of the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously, to three other Ploesti raiders.

General Brereton, upon his retirement wrote his memoirs. He dedicated this work to the Ploesti Raiders because he did not believe that he ever asked his men to accomplish a more difficult mission.

General Huston stated that Alfred Speer, who headed up the German war production effort, was reported to have said after the war that the August 1st attack destroyed one quarter of the German oil supply. He also said that although they didn't realize it at the time, this day was the beginning of the end. There was now no place in Germany or it's allied countries that was safe from American bombers.

Dale Lee was told by General Doolittle that his raid on Tokyo was nothing compared to the Ploesti raid.

The leadership of then Colonel Johnson is clearly displayed by the story that was told many years later when a number of Ploesti raiders were gathered together. The story relates to a meeting that occurred not long after the 44th had been badly hurt on its first Distinguished Unit Citation raid on Kiel on May 14, 1943. In the meeting were a number of pilots and Col. Johnson. The subject of discussion was a new low-level bomb sight. This was the first hint that a low-level raid was under consideration. Murmurs and apprehensive comments filled the room. Col. Johnson rose and indicated that "If the Air Force asks us to make a low level

raid, Gentlemen, we will go. You will not go alone. I will be in the lead aircraft." The room quieted and Col. Johnson sat down. The rest of the story is written in history.