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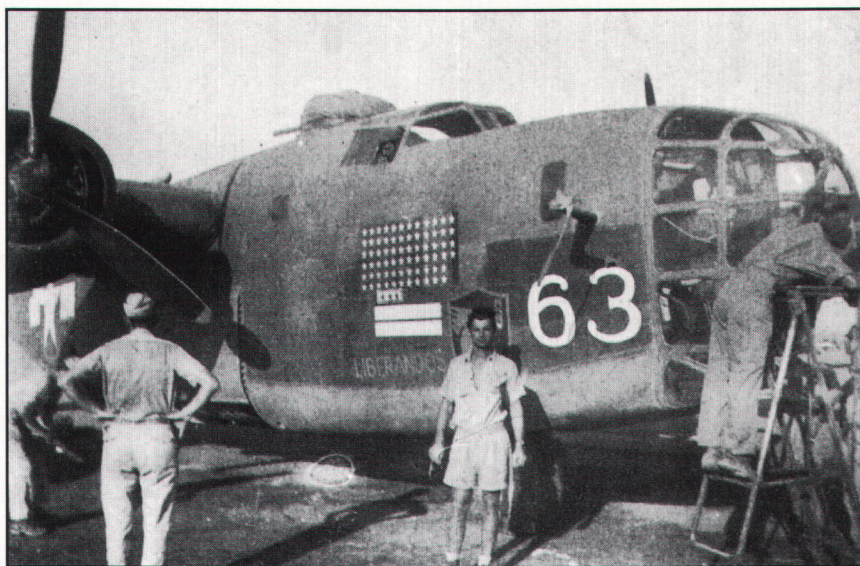


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OPERATION "TIDAL WAVE"



# OPERATION "TIDAL WAVE"



*Ground-crews make the final touches on 63. She was one of the twelve B-24s that flew in operation "Halpro". C/O B. Andrews Collection, AMM*

## Enlisted Airmen in the Air Attacks on Ploesti

by Sean M. Miskimins

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By 1943, the Nazi war machine was engaged in its fourth year of war and still going strong. The allies were trying to figure out some way to slow down, if not completely stop, Hitler. Colonel Jacob E. Smart, a member of General Henry "Hap" Arnold's advisory staff, hatched an idea to cut off the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) and the Wehrmacht (German Army) at the source, their fuel. This meant the destruction of the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania. There would be many raids on Ploesti during the war, but none more famous or costly than the August 1, 1943, "tree-top" attack. Of the 1,700 men who went on this raid, which was the largest bombing mission of World War II up to that time, roughly half were enlisted men.

During World War II, Ploesti, Romania, was producing as much as twenty million barrels of oil a year, or nearly three million tons for the Axis. This source, if eliminated, would cut off approximately one-third of the high octane fuel available to Germany. Smart knew that an attack on Ploesti must be carefully considered as there

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would be opposition to it. This was due to the fact that the attack the United States launched there on June 11-12, 1942, was largely unsuccessful. In operation "Halpro," as it was called, the United States sent twelve B-24 Liberators on a night mission where the bombs were dropped from high altitudes. As a result, few of the bombs did damage to their intended targets. This served as a wake-up call for both the U.S. and Germany in regard to Ploesti. While the United States knew it must find a way to more effectively bomb the often cloud-covered and rainy Romanian city, the Germans knew they must do a better job of defending it. Both sides would learn their lessons well.

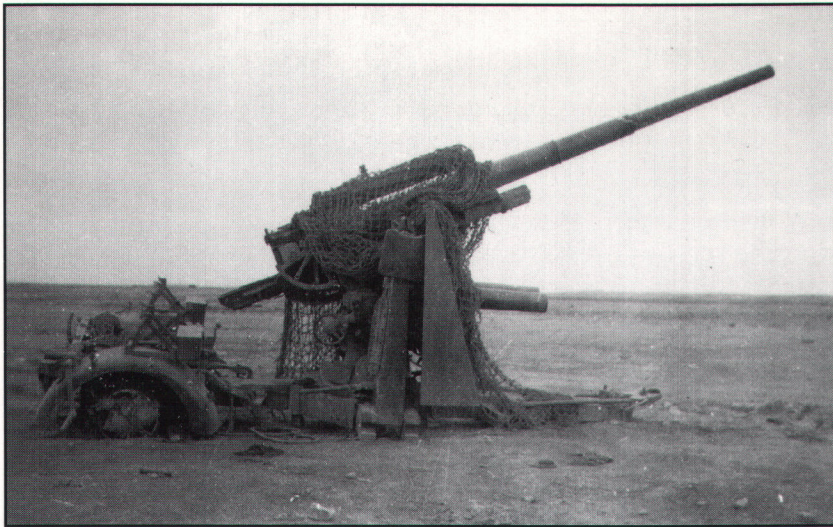
Some, such as Colonel Smart, thought that the destruction of Ploesti could possibly win the war in Europe. By the middle of 1943, Germany's drive through the Soviet Union was stalling; therefore, the chance of oil from the Baku area of the Caspian Sea falling into Nazi hands was dwindling. Smart felt that only a low-level bombing mission would be effective in destroying the seven oil refineries in and around Ploesti. In addition, he believed that a large number of bombers needed to be used and that the attack had to be carried out during the day to increase visibility and accuracy. Operational control of what would come to be known as operation "Tidal Wave" went to Brigadier General Uzal Ent of the Ninth Bomber Command.

The plans for operation "Tidal Wave" called for the 44<sup>th</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> bomb groups of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England, along with the 98<sup>th</sup> and 376<sup>th</sup> bomb groups of the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force in North Africa, to team up with the newly formed 389<sup>th</sup> bomb group to form the strike force. It was decided that the raiders would take off from bases in Benghazi, Libya, to fly the 1,350 mile mission to Ploesti. B-24s would be the bombers for the Ploesti raid as they had proven their long distance flying capabilities just a year before during operation "Halpro." Similarly, as in the case of B-25s used in Doolittle's raid on Tokyo in April of 1942, the B-24s of "Tidal Wave" would have to be outfitted with extra fuel tanks. A Sunday attack was chosen because the factories would have fewer workers in them and civilian casualties would be low. General Ent and General Lewis Brereton, the commander of the Ninth Air Force, differed on whether to attack Ploesti from a high or low altitude. Brereton overruled Ent and decided that the raid would be a low-level one. Brereton felt that given the poor results of "Halpro," Ploesti needed to be attacked from a much lower altitude.

With all the details in place, the five bomb groups began training in Benghazi on July 20, 1943. Training and living in the desert would be an adjustment for most as chronic dysentery and homesickness plagued the majority of men at Benghazi. Colonel William R. Cameron, who would pilot *Buzzin Bear* on the raid, recalled that his radio operator, "SSgt Gerald Sparks, would play his guitar at night to try



*One of the crews from "Halpro" stands by the tail of their Liberator after the mission.  
C/O B. Andrews Collection, AMM*



*German 88mm anti-aircraft gun. There were forty, 6-gun batteries of these defending Ploesti during operation "Tidal Wave".  
C/O B. Andrews Collection, AMM*

to combat the men's homesickness." Practicing bombing targets from low altitudes was the daily routine in the Libyan desert. A model of the target had been constructed in the desert near Benghazi. Training went smoothly with the exception of one mid-air collision between two B-24s that killed eighteen men. One of the survivors, TSgt Earl Zimmerman, would recover in time to participate in "Tidal Wave." He survived the mission but was one of seventy-nine airmen on operation "Tidal Wave" who were imprisoned in Turkey after his Liberator

crashed there. Most men didn't have any idea that their target would be Ploesti until they were briefed on Saturday, July 31, the night before the mission. Sergeant Patrick McAtee attended the briefing in his class A dress uniform stating, "If the Germans get me I really want them to know they got somebody!" The Germans did not get McAtee.

The crews that Saturday night learned there would be no fighter escort either way on the mission. They were told to maintain radio silence on the way there. Once they had crossed over the 15,000-foot mountains in Albania and Yugoslavia, they were to drop below radar level for the rest of the trip to Ploesti. Upon reaching their targets in and around Ploesti, they were to drop their bombs from no higher than three hundred feet. They were also told that 50 percent of them were not expected to return. Tail gunner, Sgt Charles L. Roberts remembered a General saying, "As long as your bombs hit the targets none of you could come back and the mission would still be a success." Such harsh realities of war led TSgt and flight engineer Fred E. Anderson to conclude, "The target must be destroyed to win the war. Coming back is secondary." Anderson, although he had his front teeth knocked out by shrapnel, was one of the guys lucky enough to make it back from "Tidal Wave." Five hundred thirty-two would not be so lucky.

The air crews had been falsely told there would be little anti-aircraft fire at Ploesti. This incorrect assumption occurred because the mission to the refineries the year before had encountered little flak. This was not the case the second time around. The Germans had learned their lesson from the poor defenses they had at the refineries in June of 1942. Ploesti now had forty, 6-gun batteries of 88mm anti-aircraft guns. Each of these batteries also had four, 37mm and four, 20mm guns. In addition, there were hundreds of heavy machine guns. Ploesti had many barrage balloons with long cables which would hit the wings of aircraft, sometimes causing the planes to lose control and crash. An estimated four hundred German fighters were also in the area. In the summer of 1943, Ploesti was more heavily defended than Berlin. The U.S. was unaware of this fact as no pre-mission reconnaissance had been flown, fearing it would alert the Germans to an attack.

The B-24s, equipped with extra fuel tanks in their bomb bays, would carry 3,100 gallons of fuel. If things went according to plan, that would be enough fuel to get them back to Libya after the mission.

The Soviet Union, although an ally, did not want U.S. bombers landing in their country after the raid. Most on the mission felt it was better to land in enemy territory rather than in the Soviet Union. Landing in neutral Turkey was permitted, but it also meant they would be held there for the remainder of the war. Much of the flight home would take place over the Mediterranean Sea. There were not many options available to the U.S. raiders if their plane was unable to make it back to Libya.

The B-24s were also equipped with new, low-level bomb sights. The bombs they would be dropping had timed fuses that would cause them to explode between forty-five seconds and six hours after being released. These fuses were installed with the idea that all planes would get past their targets before the explosions began. This didn't always work. Surviving members of *Porky II*, which would crash during "Tidal Wave," stated that their Liberator was disabled by explosions from the refineries they were flying over. All of the seven targets for the mission were within close proximity to one another. The five refineries located in the city of Ploesti were all within a thirteen mile radius. The two outside of Ploesti, Brazi (five miles away) and Campina (eighteen miles), were not far off. Sixteen photographers would be sent to document the raid. Of them, only TSgt Jerry Jostwick would return.

When the 1,700 men on "Tidal Wave" awoke early on Sunday, August 1, 1943, most had already made all preparations for the upcoming mission. TSgt Richard Byers of *Little Richard* wrote in his journal, "We each gave one letter to the security officer to mail home if we didn't make it back. Mine was to my mom with a letter to my wife inside of it. We stuffed our pockets with candy, gum, cigarettes and even beer. If we were going to crash we wanted some of the comforts. Breakfast that morning was like a condemned man's, the best we'd had since February. As we shook hands with the flight crew at the ship no one spoke. Just silent reflection of loved ones and the grim task ahead."

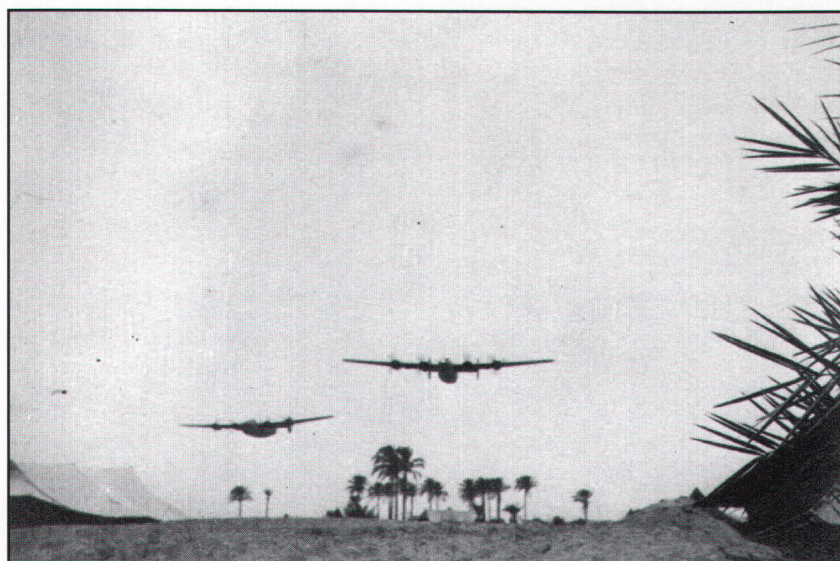
Between 4:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. on that Sunday morning, one hundred seventy-seven B-24s roared down the runways in the Libyan desert to start the trip to Ploesti. Some of the crews had been assem-



An enlisted ground-crew of "Tidal Wave" at Benghazi, Libya. C/O B. Andrews Collection, AMM

bled at the last minute, while others had been together for months. The crew of *Euroclydon The Storm*, which was the first ship shot down on the mission, had all of their original crew minus one. Sergeant Corn had been left behind on garbage detail in Italy after getting caught taking another tent's bottle of bourbon which they had received after a successful mission. Perhaps Corn was lucky as only three of *Euroclydon The Storm's* crew would survive its crash. These included SSgts Jack Reed and James Vest, who became Prisoners of War in Romania. They were among the roughly seventy-five airmen from "Tidal Wave" who would become P.O.W.s in Romania. The massive launch of bombers for the attack on Ploesti was almost a complete success. Unfortunately, *Kickapoo's* engines failed shortly after take-off and one of the wings hit a telephone pole causing it to crash. SSgt Eugene Garner was one of only two survivors.

Although they took off early in the morning, it was already hot in the desert around Benghazi. Not long after take-off, the pilot of *Thundermug* found TSgts J.C. Pinson and Bernard Strnad and SSgts Aloysius Cunningham, Leonard Dougal, Edward Sand, Jr., and Howard Teague sitting naked on some ammunition boxes in his Liberator. Cunningham tried to explain to the pilot, "It was too damn hot before take-off so we..." The mood on most planes was quiet and tense. TSgt William Staats Jr., who was a radio operator on a Liberator, tried to ease this tension by doing his F.D.R. parody over the plane's intercom:



*B-24s practice low-level bombing in the Libyan desert prior to "Tidal Wave". C/O B. Andrews Collection, AMM*

"I hate war. Eleanor hates war. Buzzy hates war. Fuzzy hates war." Staats would survive the mission, but not the war. Nerves were not the only thing troubling some crewmen on the way to the target. SSgt Brendon Healey had to take over the tail guns on his B-24 after the tail gunner became airsick. *Daisy Mae* tail gunner, SSgt Nick Hunt, found this particular mission more ironic than frightening, "To think just a year before I had worked at a gas station."

The mission progressed smoothly until they approached the island of Corfu, which is near Greece. Here TSgt George "Bud" Holroyd

watched in terror from a nearby plane as *Wingo Wango* suddenly plummeted and crashed into the ocean. There were no survivors. Holroyd's closest friend, Lt Jack Lanning, was the bombardier on *Wingo Wango*. Holroyd would survive Ploesti but would die in an air training crash later that year.

Because of delays getting over the mountains, three of the bomb groups had fallen behind the two lead groups, the 93<sup>rd</sup> and the 376<sup>th</sup>. These two groups, which had General Ent with them, made a navigational error over Romania. Upon reaching the town of Floresti, they mistook it for Targoviste, which is where they were to turn toward Ploesti. By making this incorrect and early turn, the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 376<sup>th</sup> were now headed for the Romanian capitol of Bucharest, some thirty miles south of Ploesti. This would actually prove to be a small stroke of luck for "Tidal Wave" as the Luftwaffe dispatched its first fighters that day to defend Bucharest rather than Ploesti. This bought the 44<sup>th</sup>, 98<sup>th</sup>, and 389<sup>th</sup> bomb groups some initial

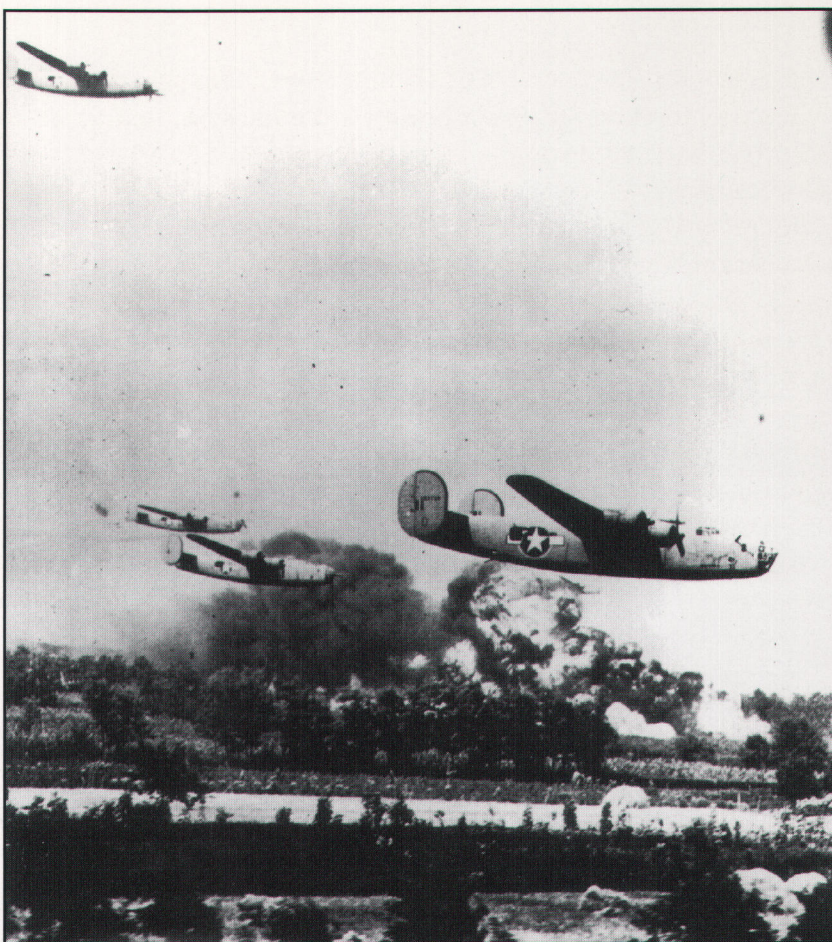
time to attack Ploesti without much airborne resistance from the Germans. General Ent and his two bomb groups would not realize they had made a wrong turn until they saw the church spires of Bucharest. The 93<sup>rd</sup> and 376<sup>th</sup> would be arriving late to the refineries of Ploesti.

Meanwhile, the 44<sup>th</sup>, 98<sup>th</sup> and 389<sup>th</sup> bomb groups continued on their course to Ploesti without knowing of the wrong turn made by the lead groups. As they dropped down to tree-top level after they had cleared the mountains, SSgt Robert Bocek and TSgt Harold Steiner of *Utah Man* both recalled that they could make out the expressions on the faces of the Romanian peasants below. *Buzzin Bear's* tail gunner, SSgt Frank Maruszewski, remembered that he felt lonely on the mission despite the fact there were seventy other bombers of the 44<sup>th</sup> and 98<sup>th</sup> flying

near his Liberator. Meanwhile, *Wahoo's* radio operator, SSgt Anthony Fravega was confident of the mission's success due to his faith in the pilot, his brother Thomas. The two had been stationed together since they enlisted to go to war. That night they would end up sleeping in their plane at Syracuse on the island of Sicily after running low on fuel during their trip home. Four months after Ploesti they would be shot down on a mission over Germany. Anthony survived, but Thomas did not.

As the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 376<sup>th</sup> approached the outskirts of Bucharest, *Jersey Bounce's* tail gunner, SSgt Leyces-ter Havens, was the first man to spot enemy aircraft. Havens spotted Heinkel He-111s, Junkers Ju-52s and Romanian IAR-80s. Soon after the warning, *Jersey Bounce's* pilot got a second message from Havens - this one in a much weaker tone. Havens simply said, "I've had it." Havens was the first American to die from enemy fire on "Tidal Wave." *Jersey Bounce* was shot down later that day. When one of the five survivors, waist gunner, TSgt Maurice Peterson, was brought into a Bucharest hospital, women who saw his badly burned body wept on sight as he no doubt made them think of their sons and husbands off fighting in the Soviet Union. Soon these women were saying the Doina, an ancient gypsy lament, as doctors were unable to save Peterson's life.

As the 44<sup>th</sup>, 98<sup>th</sup>, and 389<sup>th</sup> continued toward Ploesti, the crew of *Buzzin Bear* was surprised at two hundred miles from the target to hear top turret gunner, SSgt Gola Gibbey call out over the intercom that an enemy fighter was approaching. They were even more shocked when they saw it was



*B-24 Liberators of "Tidal Wave" pass over Ploesti at "tree top" altitude. C/O USAF*



*A B-24 passes over the burning Astro Romana refinery during "Tidal Wave". C/O USAF*

felt he needed to stay with his guns since the top turret gunner, TSgt Leonard Raspotnik, and the radio operator, SSgt Joseph Spivey, had both been killed. The ailing B-24 was under heavy fire from approximately seven to nine enemy fighters as well as the anti-aircraft batteries below. Decrevel, who already had a flak wound in his thigh, noticed on the ground below that the sides of a moving train's cars had suddenly collapsed revealing more guns which were now pointed in his direction. Decrevel stayed with his guns despite receiving shrapnel wounds to his head, back, knee and buttocks from exploding ammunition within his flaming plane. The other waist gunner, SSgt Albert Shaffer, was also at his post firing away despite being able to stand on only one leg since most of the other one had been blown off. Soon, *Sad Sack II* had lost an engine and was hurtling towards the belching guns below. Before the Liberator crashed, Decrevel managed to down two enemy fighters while Shaffer had shot down one enemy plane of his own. After the plane came to a stop in a cornfield, Decrevel was able to pull the screaming Shaffer from the wreckage. Unfortunately, Decrevel had no morphine for what was left of his wounded crew member's leg. The navigator, who had been alive before the crash despite his horrible chest wound, was now dead. The pilot, who had survived and pulled the wounded co-pilot from the smoldering wreckage, went with Decrevel for help. All four men would survive and become P.O.W.s in Romania.

actually a biplane out for a leisurely flight. By the time these three bomb groups were within fifty miles of Ploesti they were already encountering heavy flak and some fighters. At forty miles from the target, *Lil Abner* was shot down. The crash killed engineer, TSgt William Schettler as he was crushed to death when the top turret fell on him. By 1:30 or 2:00 p.m. local time, the 44<sup>th</sup>, 98<sup>th</sup>, and 389<sup>th</sup> bomb groups were arriving in the skies over Ploesti. The overcast conditions and slight rain showers they had encountered en route were now gone. The refineries were easily visible, but so were the B-24s.

*Sad Sack II* was in trouble from the time it got over the target area. Before its bombs were dropped, tail gunner, SSgt Thomas Wood was killed. Next, the navigator took a hit in the chest from a 88mm shell. This caused waist gunner, SSgt Charles Decrevel to remark, "All the flesh was gone and I could see the white ribs." Decrevel wanted to help the wounded navigator, but



While the German defenders did not know the attack on Ploesti was coming, they were much better prepared for this raid compared to the first one fourteen months earlier. They were also clever as to where they hid some of their defenses. Germans hid their anti-aircraft guns in places other than flak towers and trains. Waist gunner, TSgt Jack J. Reed returned fire at the "muzzle blinks" of 20mm guns hidden inside of haystacks. These "haystacks" did so much damage to Reed's plane that it crashed before it was able to drop any of its bombs. Reed parachuted out and was the only survivor of his B-24. The fact that he survived "Tidal Wave" and the war was even more amazing because after bailing out of his dying Liberator, he landed on the grounds of one of the refineries at Ploesti.

Luftwaffe pilot, Captain Willie Steinmann, had a hectic day in his Messerschmitt Me-109 over Ploesti. One of the planes Steinmann went after was Captain Rowland Houston's B-24. Steinmann remembered that Houston's wounded Liberator was not going to give up, and neither was its crew. "As I raked the Liberator from the rear, the top gunner (SSgt Walter Schoer) and particularly the tail gunner (SSgt M.L. Spears) were shooting me up. Soon, both my plane and the B-24 were out of control. I don't remember crashing, but I was thrown clear and walked away. No one from Houston's ship did. I admired the tactics of the Americans on that raid." Houston's B-24 had been Steinmann's second and last "kill" of the day. *Brewery Wagon* had been his first.

Steinmann had finished off *Brewery Wagon* after she was already disabled by anti-aircraft and fighter fire. The B-24 was laboring badly after having taken an 88mm shell hit in its nose. This hit killed the navigator and bombardier and blew off one of the pilot's legs. The plane crashed after being strafed by Steinmann's guns. After the crash, TSgts Harold Block, radio operator, and Austin Chastain, gunner, stumbled away from the flaming heap as did gunners, SSgts Clay Snyder, William Thompson and Dallas Robertson. Robertson left the crash with a piece of a 20mm shell in his skull. Meanwhile, the engineer, TSgt Alec Rockinson, managed to get the pilot out and was using his web belt as a tourniquet around the remaining bloody stump of the pilot's leg. Apparently the wounded pilot still had some fight left in him. As German soldiers approached, he drew his .45 from his holster. Rockinson convinced him to put it away. The crew of *Brewery Wagon* was just beginning their time as P.O.W.s.

Not all downed Americans who encountered German soldiers were taken prisoner. Such was the case with some of the crew members of *Shoot Fritz You're Faded*. Their Liberator went down not far from where Romanian Princess Caradja resided. Upon arriving at the scene, the Princess could see that the navigator, although trapped, was still alive inside the wreckage. She quickly had her farm hands free him. As they did this, two German soldiers tried to drag off the unconscious man. Caradja stopped the soldiers, sternly telling them, "He's our prisoner!" SSgt Troy McCrary and TSgt Clell Riffle, who had also survived the crash of *Shoot Fritz You're Faded*, witnessed this from a nearby cornfield where they were hiding. Soon afterwards they were discovered by German soldiers and taken prisoner. The Princess helped hide three other undiscovered crew members of the downed bomber, including SSgt Louis Medeiros. She also saw to it that the flight engineer, TSgt Frank Kees, who had died in the crash, received a proper burial - even going so far as to obtain a priest for the service. The men of *Shoot Fritz You're Faded* were not the only men of "Tidal Wave" to be beneficiaries of the Princess. SSgts Robert Locky, Larry Yates Jr., and Russel Huntley, as well as TSgt Frank Garrett and Sgt James T. Barker were all visited by the Princess while they were P.O.W.s in Romania. She brought them things to aid in their escape plans. Princess Caradja's treatment of downed U.S. airmen was not all that unusual. Despite being under German control, many Romanians did not side with the Nazis.

The two crewmen that survived the crash of *Jersey Jackass* were soon greeted by an angry mob of Romanian farmers armed with pitchforks. The farmers took the men to a German field-dressing station. When the doctor found out the injured airmen were Americans he said, "You killed my wife and daughter on a raid in Germany. I order my men to do nothing for you!" The tail gunner, SSgt Jack R. Ross, who was brought in hairless and colored black from his burns, held out his hands to be treated. The doctor grabbed a knife and said, "I'll cut them off!" Ross quickly pulled back his



*Romanian citizens examine the damage to one of Ploesti's seven oil refineries. C/O USAF*

hands and remarked to fellow crew member and gunner, SSgt Marion Szaras, who would die later from his burns and shrapnel wounds, "What have we got into?" Despite his burns and his time in a P.O.W. camp, Ross survived the war.

Two gunners, SSgts Michael Cicon and Bernard Traudt, parachuted out of their burning aircraft just before it exploded. They were the only survivors, and for that they could thank the pilot and co-pilot whose last actions had been to get the Liberator high enough so the crewmen could bail out. The seventeen year old Traudt spent the night in the bushes after he landed. The next morning he got up and

with his escape letter in hand, which was written in Romanian, he strolled with a smile on his face up to a nearby farmer. The farmer understood none of the letter as he was illiterate. Before he knew what happened, Traudt had been struck from behind, over the head, with a pitchfork by another farmer. Traudt awoke later in an oxcart on his way to captivity. Staff Sergeant Alfred Mash, who was wounded after parachuting out of his ailing B-24, was beaten up by Romanian peasants who mistook him for a Russian. Some injured crewmen were even robbed by the Romanians. The co-pilot of *Sad Sack II* lost his ring and watch in this manner.

Bailing out of wounded aircraft via a parachute was no guarantee of survival. Staff Sergeant Edgar J. Pearson's parachute failed to open after he exited *Let 'Er Rip*. He died in the fall. Second Lieutenant Jesse "Red" Franks of *Euroclydon the Storm* met the same fate when he jumped from his damaged aircraft at an insufficient altitude (after the war, in 1953, the lieutenant's father finally located his son's remains in Romania). This was a problem on "Tidal Wave," as the bombing was being done from only two hundred to three hundred feet above the ground. SSgt Joe Turley's parachute opened after he bailed out of *The Witch*, but he encountered another problem – German fighters. The fighters were trying to shoot him as he fell toward the earth. Turley recalled, "A German soldier at the hospital where I was treated said he counted twenty-six holes in my parachute."

*Hadley's Harem* took a shell hit that killed the bombardier and destroyed the bombsight. Engineer, TSgt Russell Page managed to release the bombs manually. Afterward, the limping Liberator ditched in the ocean near Alanya, Turkey, when all the engines failed. Being boys who were well acquainted with democracy, the crew voted to ride her down rather than bail out. After crashing, Page, despite great difficulty, found his way out of the sinking B-24. When he surfaced he found six other members of his crew, including SSgts Pershing Waples, LeRoy Newton, Frank Nemeth and Christopher Holweger. The seven survivors managed an exhausting swim to the shore of Turkey where they soon met Turkish fishermen armed with old rifles. The fishermen, upon seeing the battered crew, built a fire for them and guarded the airmen. A British ship from Cyprus soon arrived and convinced the fishermen that the airmen sank at sea; therefore were shipwrecked mariners. The Turks let the British take the lucky Americans back to Cyprus. The majority of airmen who landed in Turkey were not so fortunate.

The American airmen who went to Ploesti that warm August day were dedicated to doing their job. Top turret gunner, SSgt Zerrill Steen was the only man on his Liberator to survive his plane's crash. Despite the fact that his crashed B-24 was on fire, Steen stayed in his turret and continued to fire his guns at a nearby flak tower. The SSgt used up all his remaining ammunition just as the flames reached his turret. After freeing himself, Steen was taken to the hospital by Romanians to be treated for his burns. He would survive the war. On board *K for King*, gunner, SSgt Daniel Rowland, who had part of his leg blown off by anti-aircraft fire, applied his own tourniquet to the remaining portion of his leg in order to continue working his guns.

His fellow gunner, SSgt Charles Ducote, managed to down a Romanian IAR-80 as their ailing Liberator underwent twenty separate fighter attacks after leaving the target area. *K for King* managed to make it to Sicily that night after leaving Ploesti. It was one of twenty-three bombers from "Tidal Wave" that landed at allied islands such as Cyprus, Malta and Sicily after the mission.

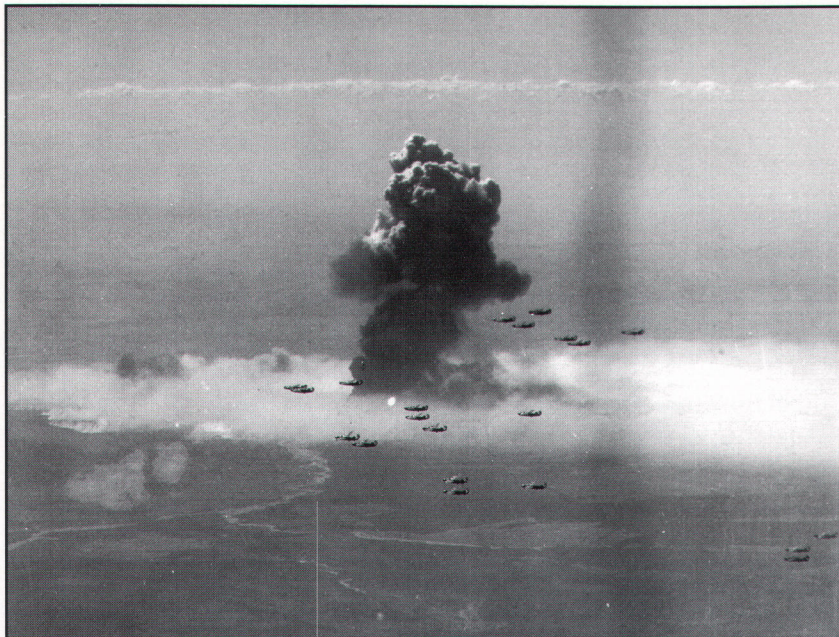
Despite their wrong turn on the way to Ploesti, the belated 93<sup>rd</sup> and 376<sup>th</sup> bomb groups still saw plenty of action. After dropping his bombs on the refineries, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Alva Geron turned the controls over to his co-pilot. Geron had to go back and administer morphine to a wounded gunner, Sgt Paul Daugherty. Daugherty had a gaping flak wound in his chest. The Sergeant begged, "Kill me Lieutenant. Put me out of my misery. You know I won't live." Geron administered morphine and then took Daugherty in his arms. He held his hand and prayed with him until Daugherty died a few minutes later.



*B-24s of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force fly above the smoldering refineries of Ploesti. CMSAF (Retired) Paul Airey took part on this May 31, 1944 mission. C/O USAF*

On *Bewitching Witch*, the radio operator, TSgt John Dayberry, saved the bombardier's life by applying a tourniquet to the man's injured leg. He had been wounded by shots from a Junkers Ju-88. As Dayberry applied the tourniquet, SSgt C.H. Confer and TSgt Harold Cooper, both gunners, managed to shoot down the attacking Ju-88. Many men on "Tidal Wave" had to treat injured crew members while in flight. One such medic was the bombardier of *Black Magic*, who had been a veterinary surgeon before the war. Now, he was using his skills on men rather than

animals. Having this doctor aboard was lucky for the gunners, SSgts John Ditullio and Joseph McCune as well as TSgt Ellis Bonorden. All three had been hit by flak and were crying out for help. Thanks to the bombardier's aid, all three would survive the mission and the war.



*A formation of 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force B-24s passes over the smoking Xenia refinery on a August 10, 1944 attack on Ploesti. C/O USAF*

*Pudgy*, part of the 93<sup>rd</sup> bomb group, had five men survive its crash, including SSgts Francis Doll and Robert Locky. The survivors were soon surrounded by angry Romanian citizens who thought they were Russians. A man from the crowd suddenly emerged in a horse cart, with whip in hand, to keep the Romanians at bay. He had been a flyer

with England in WW I and now lived in Ploesti. He soon figured out these men were Americans, not Russians. Upon relaying this information to the crowd, the downed airmen were welcomed with open arms. Doll would be a P.O.W. in Romania for another year, and his adventures there did not end on August 1, 1943.

Doll received some bad burns from his crash and was cared for in a Romanian hospital. Some months later, as the Germans were retreating from Romania, a German Junkers Ju-87 bombed the P.O.W. hospital where Doll was being treated. After freeing himself from the ceiling that had fallen on him, Doll and a friend escaped to the street. They ran into a Romanian garrison that was about to fight a group of German soldiers who were armed with machine guns. The Romanians gave Doll and his comrade each a rifle and helmet. Doll said, "This made me nervous since I was in the Air Force, not the Army, and the rifle was a foreign one." Luckily, before the fight took place, Doll and his friend were turned over to a local citizen who took them into his home.

Some Romanians treated their American prisoners badly, likewise, some Americans were not kind to their captors. TSgt Edmond Terry of *Lil Joe*, a professional golfer before the war, was questioned by one of his guards about this while in prison. "Is it correct in your army for soldiers to curse an officer the way your men do me?" asked the guard. Terry replied, "How can you expect these enlisted men to respect an officer who begs for cigarettes from them?"

Of the estimated seventy-five men who would become P.O.W.s in Romania after "Tidal Wave," most were not liberated by the Fifteenth Air Force until September of 1944, as the Germans retreated westward. SSgt Michael Sigle did not have to wait that long. His Liberator had ditched in the Mediterranean and his crew was quickly picked up by an Italian launch. Sigle was back in Benghazi two months after the August 1<sup>st</sup> raid thanks to the help of some Italian anti-fascists who aided his escape from Italy. Other Americans from "Tidal Wave" tried to escape but failed. At a hospital in Bucharest, SSgts Charles T. Bridges, who was injured in the crash of *Porky II*, and Donald Wright were severely chastised after trying to escape from the hospital once they recovered from their wounds. Bridges stated, "The staff was hurt. They told us, 'You are guests of this country and should behave yourselves accordingly!'"

SSgt Ben Kuroki, of *Tupelo Lass* in the 93<sup>rd</sup> bomb group, had fought hard to get into the United States military. The Nebraska native was a Japanese-American who had been rejected when he tried to enlist on December 8, 1941. After begging, he eventually joined as a clerk with the 93<sup>rd</sup>. He soon managed to slip into gunnery school. Despite being shunned by most of the group due to his ethnic background, he was shipped out to England with them. On a December 7, 1942, mission he proved his worth as a gunner and won the men over. By the time *Ploesti* rolled around, he had already been shot down once and found his way back to England. He manned his turret aboard *Tupelo Lass* all the way to *Ploesti* and back on August 1, 1943.

The crew of *Liberty Lad* typified the men of *Ploesti* that made it back to Libya that August night. They were battered and bruised but determined, nonetheless. The radio operator, TSgt Oda Smathers, with his head wrapped in bloody bandages from a wound, fixed his disabled radio and exchanged messages with the Ninth Air Force station in Libya so his plane could find its way home. When the pilot broke his seat while trying to maintain leverage on the rudder, TSgts John J. Hayes, a flight engineer, and John Brown, an observer, sat with their backs against the pilot's for leverage on the remainder of the flight. Occasionally, they even massaged the pilot's legs when his legs had muscle cramps. Upon approach, the wheels of *Liberty Lad* were lowered manually by Hayes while Brown held a flashlight on the airspeed indicator gauge so the pilot could read it. When the B-24 touched down in the desert, after sixteen hours in the air, she only had two engines functioning and was the last of the Liberators from "Tidal Wave" to arrive back at Benghazi that night. Her return had truly been a team effort.

Team efforts, in regard to operation "Tidal Wave," did not just mean the flight crew. Col William R. Cameron, the pilot of *Buzzin Bear*, credits the ground crews with the success of the August 1, 1943, raid. "Only one of our thirty-six planes in the 44<sup>th</sup> bomb group didn't make it to the target area. That's a tribute to the mechanics. I was confident about the condition of *Buzzin Bear*. Those engines never sounded better." When Cameron's Liberator returned home that night after thirteen hours and twenty minutes in the air, the first men to greet the airmen were their ground crew members, Sgts Gilbert Hester, Ed Hansley and Marion Begley. TSgt Richard Byers of *Little Richard* recalled a similar homecoming. "The ground crew greeted us as we landed. We kissed the ground." The victory of August 1, 1943, had been the ground crew's as well as the airmen's. The tail gunner of *The Witch*, SSgt Joe Turley, gave plenty of credit to the flight line crew. "Although it was a patchwork job with three engine changes already, *The Witch* flew beautifully thanks to the ground crew."

However successful it had been, "Tidal Wave" was a costly mission. The Army Air Force lost fifty-four bombers that day. Forty-one of them were shot down over the target areas, twenty-three landed

safely in allied territories, and eight were held in Turkey. The Army Air Force, after retrieving the planes from allied territories, lost the service of sixty-two of 177 B-24s sent, or 35 percent of the strike force. In terms of manpower, the United States Army Air Force had lost the services of 532 airmen who were killed, wounded, missing, prisoners of war or held in Turkey as a result of "Tidal Wave."

These losses accounted for 31 percent of the 1,700 men who went on the raid. After the attack, intelligence reported that 42 percent of Ploesti's refining capabilities were destroyed. In addition, 40 percent of its cracking capacity, which is a key part of the oil refining process, was unable to operate for six months.



*B-24s bomb Ploesti on August 18, 1944. This was one of the last raids on Ploesti as Romania surrendered to the Soviet Union five days later. C/O USAF*

Unfortunately, these losses at Ploesti did not knock Germany out of the war. The Nazis would repair the refineries and the United States' Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces were called upon to begin bombing Ploesti again in April of 1944. These twenty-five subsequent attacks (twenty-two by the U.S. and three by England's Royal Air Force)

would be much different than "Tidal Wave." The raiders of 1944 would be flying to Romania from Italy, which was a much shorter distance than flying from Libya. The bombers leaving Italy would also be dropping their bombs from much higher altitudes than the B-24s of "Tidal Wave" had. Floyd Haywood was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt with the 449<sup>th</sup> bomb group of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force when he piloted Liberators on five of these raids on Ploesti between April-July, 1944. "We were effective in our bombing the refineries even though we were bombing the targets from between 19,000-23,000 feet," stated Haywood. "There were no more low-level raids on the refineries after 'Tidal Wave' because it had been a blood-bath. The August 1, 1943, strike was chosen to be a low-level attack because of the poor results from operation 'Halpro.' It was thought that only a low-level raid could be successful." The low altitude attack had been more successful than "Halpro," but it had been more costly in terms of both men and aircraft lost.

For four months, from April-August of 1944, nearly 5,500 allied bombers would terrorize the skies above Ploesti until Romania surrendered to the advancing Soviets on August 23, 1944. While some of these attacks were designed to destroy railroads, most were done to, once again, eliminate the oil. Despite the heavy flak and German fighters, only 223 of the allied bombers, or 4 percent, were lost during these four months of high-altitude bombing. Paul W. Airey, who in 1967 became the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, was a twenty year old TSgt radio operator/aerial gunner with the 485<sup>th</sup> bomb group in the 15th Air Force when he flew on a May 31, 1944, raid on Ploesti. He remembered their losses being small. "We had 481 bombers on that eight hour mission and lost

only sixteen," recalled Airey. "We were dropping our bombs from between 19,000-24,000 feet because of the very heavy flak. They used smoke machines to try and obscure the target."

By the time Romania surrendered in 1944, the refineries at Ploesti were only operating at 20 percent of their capacity. In the end, the results showed that no matter what the altitude, as long as Ploesti was bombed during the daylight, the results were favorable.

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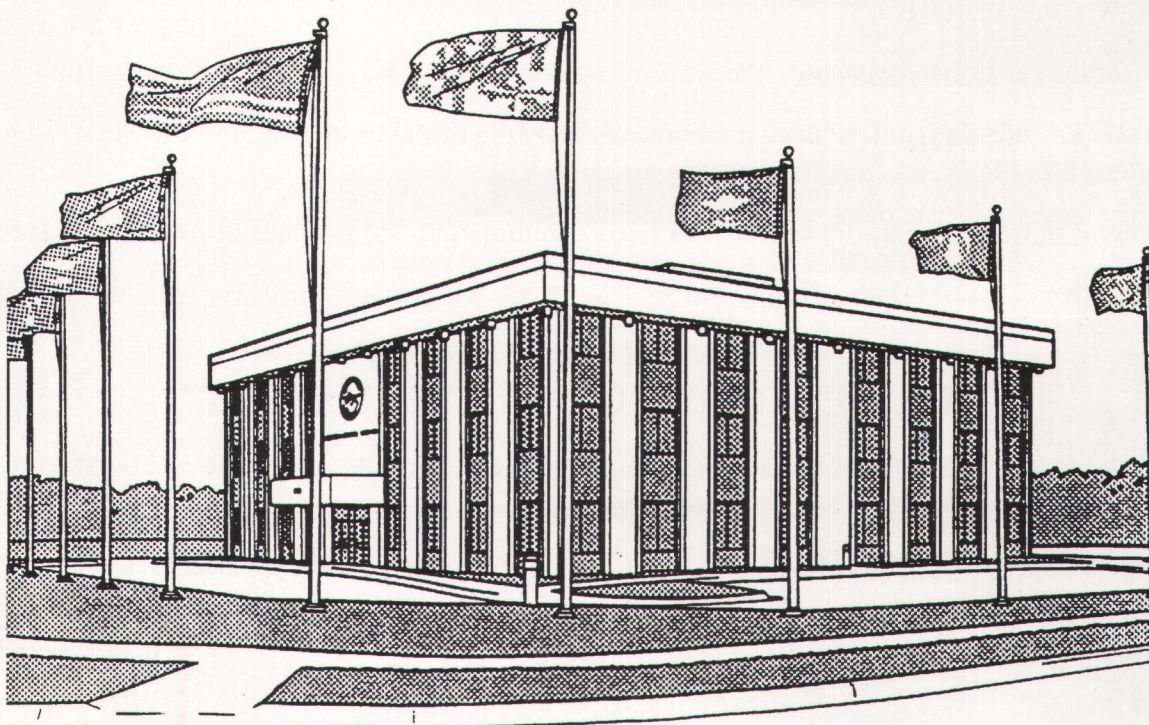


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