

Losses on the first large-scale Ploesti raid were staggering, heroism unsurpassed.

Into the Mouth of Hell

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TRADITION rests on a foundation of great deeds done together in the past. A keystone of Air Force tradition is the August 1, 1943, bombing attack on oil refineries at Ploesti, about thirty miles north of Bucharest, Romania. That mission stands as a monument not only to the skill and courage of Air Force crews but also to the ability of our combat leaders to pull together strands of a broken plan and salvage limited success from the apparent certainty of disaster.

The Ploesti raid was unique in several respects. It was the first large-scale, low-level strike by heavy bombers against a well-defended target and the longest—1,350 miles from base to bombs-away—of World War II up to that time. For extraordinary heroism that day, five men were awarded the Medal of Honor, a record that may hold for all time.

Why did Ploesti merit that unprecedented effort? In mid-1943, seven refineries in and near the city were producing an estimated thirty-five percent of Germany's oil and an equal proportion of her aviation gasoline. Some Allied planners thought that destruction of the refineries might even force the Nazis out of the war.

The task force put together for Ploesti was composed of two Ninth



A B-24 Liberator over a burning Ploesti, Romania, during the daring August 1943 raid. American airmen flew the longest mission of the war at the time against a heavily defended target in hopes of drying up Nazi fuel supplies.



Air Force B-24 groups—the 376th and 98th—based in North Africa and three B-24 groups from Eighth Air Force—the 93d, 44th, and the recently arrived 389th—that were moved from their UK bases to fields in North Africa near Benghazi, Libya. The attack was set for Sunday, August 1, in order to minimize casualties among impressed workers at the refineries. It was meticulously planned and thoroughly rehearsed, including two full-scale practice missions against a simulation of the Ploesti targets, laid out in a remote area of the desert.

Surprise and Precision

In concept, if not in execution, the plan of attack was simple, its essence: surprise and precision. The bomber stream would be led by the 376th Group under Col. Keith K. Compton, followed by the 93d, 98th, 44th, and 389th in that order. Specific buildings within the five refineries in Ploesti; the refinery at Campina, eighteen miles northwest of the city; and one at Brazi, five

miles to the south, were assigned to elements of the five groups.

The task force, totaling 177 B-24s with Brig. Gen. Uzal Ent as mission commander flying in Colonel Compton's aircraft, would take off between 0400 and 0500 hours, fly north in a tight column of groups to Corfu (off the coast of Greece), then climb over the mountains of Albania and Yugoslavia to the Danubian plain, where they would descend below enemy radar coverage. At Ploesti, the first Initial Point (IP), the 389th would break off to the left and proceed to the refinery at Campina. The four leading groups would drop to 500 feet and continue to the final IP at Floresti, where they would begin a thirteen-mile bomb run on five refineries in the city and the one at Brazi, descending to treetop level for bomb release. All six refineries would be hit almost simultaneously by a single wave of bombers, flying line-abreast, that would saturate the defenses. That was the plan.

Winston Churchill is credited with observing that "in war, nothing

ever goes according to plan except occasionally, and then by accident." Ploesti was no exception. In the long flight over the Mediterranean, the column lost some of its cohesion, with the 376th and 93d Groups slightly ahead of the other three. Then, near Corfu, the lead aircraft with the route navigator went out of control and crashed. (General Ent and Colonel Compton were not in the lead bomber, but in a position to assume the lead when a final turn to the bomb run was made.) A second 376th aircraft bearing the deputy route navigator followed down to look for survivors. Unable to climb back in time to rejoin the group, it returned to Benghazi.

Now ahead of the formation towering cumulus clouds rose above the mountains. The two lead groups threaded their way through or under the clouds, while the 98th, 44th, and 389th penetrated the cloud line at varying altitudes. By the time those three had reformed a column and resumed a heading for Ploesti, the first two groups were twenty minutes ahead of them.

Because of radio silence, General Ent and Colonel Compton could not contact the trailing groups. Not knowing whether or not those groups had turned back, they decided to follow the operations order even though they might have to go it alone. Thus, the five groups actually proceeded toward Ploesti as two widely separated forces. A surprise attack on the refineries in Ploesti by a single wave of some 140 bombers, that dominant key to success at an acceptable cost, was beyond redemption.

The Wrong Turn

The chain of circumstance was not yet complete. The 376th and 93d Groups made their turn at Ploesti and headed for the final IP at Floresti. Halfway between the two IPs lay the town of Targoviste, which closely resembled Floresti. Flying at very low altitude, the 376th mistook Targoviste for the IP and turned southeast on the briefed bomb-run heading, which took the two groups to the west of Ploesti—an error that wasn't discovered until they were on the outskirts of Bucharest. At that point, General Ent broke radio silence, ordering



Lt. Col. Addison Baker pressed the attack on the Columbia Aquila refinery.

the two groups to turn north and attack targets of opportunity in the complex of refineries.

The 93d Group, led by Lt. Col. Addison E. Baker, a National Guard officer who had been called to active duty in 1940, caught a glimpse of refineries off to the left. He and his pilot, Maj. John Jerstad, who had completed his combat tour but volunteered for the mission, bored in on an unidentified refinery, which turned out to be Columbia Aquila, a 44th Group target. Enemy defenses, much heavier than anticipated, were thoroughly aroused. More than 230 anti-aircraft guns, supported by many barrage balloons and smoke pots, surrounded the refineries, with perhaps 400 fighters in the area.



Maj. John Jerstad was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Into a maelstrom of ground fire, Colonel Baker led the group. Short of the refinery, his B-24 was hit and burst into flames. Baker and Jerstad could have belied in on open fields or pulled up to bailout altitude and probably saved themselves and their crew. But this was a mission on which some thought the outcome of the war might hinge. Without wavering, they led the bombers straight on to the refinery before crashing into the ground. Both Addison Baker and John Jerstad were awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.

Off to the right of their funeral pyre, a second element of the 93d bombed two refineries assigned to the 98th Group. Meanwhile, five B-24s of the 376th Group led by Maj. Norman C. Appold hit the

Concordia Vega refinery, originally assigned to the 93d, and "emerged covered with soot" as other 376th bombers unloaded on various segments of the Ploesti complex.

While the 376th and 93d were making the best of a bad situation, the other three, led by veteran pilot Col. John R. "Killer" Kane, commander of the 98th, turned at Pitesti as planned. The tail-end 389th under Col. Jack Wood broke off to the northeast, bombing the refinery at Campina to complete destruction. Four aircraft were lost to flak, one of them piloted by twenty-one-year-old 2d Lt. Lloyd H. Hughes, who was on his fifth combat mission. His B-24, hit by ground fire, leaked streams of gasoline from wing and bomb-bay tanks.



2d Lt. Lloyd Hughes drove his damaged bomber to a fiery bombs-away.



Planners had intended for the bomber force to hit Ploesti in a single wave at low level, but the vagaries of weather and war disrupted that plan of attack. The commanders and airmen on the scene nonetheless elected to press on against the odds and salvaged limited success from the attack.

Below lay wheat fields, where Hughes could have landed, but instead he drove on through the smoke and flame created by the bombers ahead of him, struck his target, and came out with his left wing sheathed in flame. His desperate attempt to save the crew by crash-landing on a lake bed failed when one wing of the blazing B-24 hit a river bank and the plane exploded. The mission's third posthumous Medal of Honor was awarded to Lieutenant Hughes.

No Turning Back

When Colonel Kane's 98th Group and the 44th, commanded by Col. Leon W. Johnson, a 1936 graduate of the Military Academy, turned at Floresti on their bomb run, they saw ahead columns of black smoke

laced with flames and torn by explosions, the result of bombs dropped by the 376th and 93d Groups minutes earlier.

Both men knew that beneath those black clouds, which hid barrage balloon cables and tall chimneys, lay many delayed-action bombs that would detonate at random. With only about half the number of bombers planned for a simultaneous attack, enemy defenses would be far from saturated. They would have been fully justified in abandoning the attack. The probability of survival was low, but the rewards of success could be immeasurably high. For those two courageous leaders there was no turning back.

Colonel Kane led forty-one of his B-24s straight into a scene that resembled the background of a medieval painting of hell, losing fifteen Liberators to flak and fighters in the target area and three more to fighters over Bulgaria. His own plane, with one engine out at Ploesti and fatal battle damage from flak, was demolished in a crash landing at an Allied field on Cyprus.



Col. John R. Kane led forty-one B-24s into the mouth of hell at Ploesti.

Colonel Johnson, followed by fifteen of his 44th Group crews, flew through flak, explosions, heavy smoke, and blistering heat, avoiding by a hair some 376th Group B-24s that were coming off a target, and successfully attacked the already burning Columbia Aquila refinery. Only nine of the sixteen survived the gauntlet of fire. Colonel Johnson's plane was hit repeatedly, but made it back to Benghazi more than thirteen hours after takeoff. While



Col. Leon W. Johnson got back to Benghazi thirteen hours after takeoff.

he was attacking his target, twenty-one of his B-24s led by Lt. Col. James Posey had a clear shot at the untouched refinery at Brazi, which they leveled, but lost two aircraft to fighters on the way home.

Both Leon Johnson, now a retired four-star general, and Col. John Kane were awarded the Medal of Honor for their courageous deci-

sion to press on, regardless of the consequences, against targets the planners had considered so important as to justify the loss of half the attacking force. In fact, more than thirty percent of the B-24s that reached the target area were lost to enemy action or landed in neutral Turkey with battle damage and were interned.*

There are enough other stories of heroism on that mission to fill a book. The Distinguished Service

*Figures relating to the mission vary considerably according to source. Those that appear to be most thoroughly researched are from a study by T. E. Davidson, Jr. They are: B-24s launched, 177; actually attacking a target, 161; combat-related losses, 44; interned in Turkey, 7. One B-24 crashed on takeoff at Benghazi. Also thanks to Gen. Leon Johnson, Lt. Gen. Keith Compton, and Col. William R. Cameron, who helped resolve some conflicting information about the mission.

Cross, second highest decoration for valor, was awarded to several men, among them General Ent, Colonel Compton, Col. Jack Wood, Lt. Col. James Posey, Maj. Norman Appold, and then-Capt. William R. Cameron of the 44th Group, like John Jerstad a volunteer for the mission.

Improvisation and raw courage overcame the vagaries of war—inaccurate intelligence on enemy defenses, unforeseen weather, human error—and a plan that perhaps demanded too much of too many in a strategy and tactic that had not been tried before. We honor the men who met the tests and trials of an historic mission and the nearly 500 who did not come back that day. ■

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