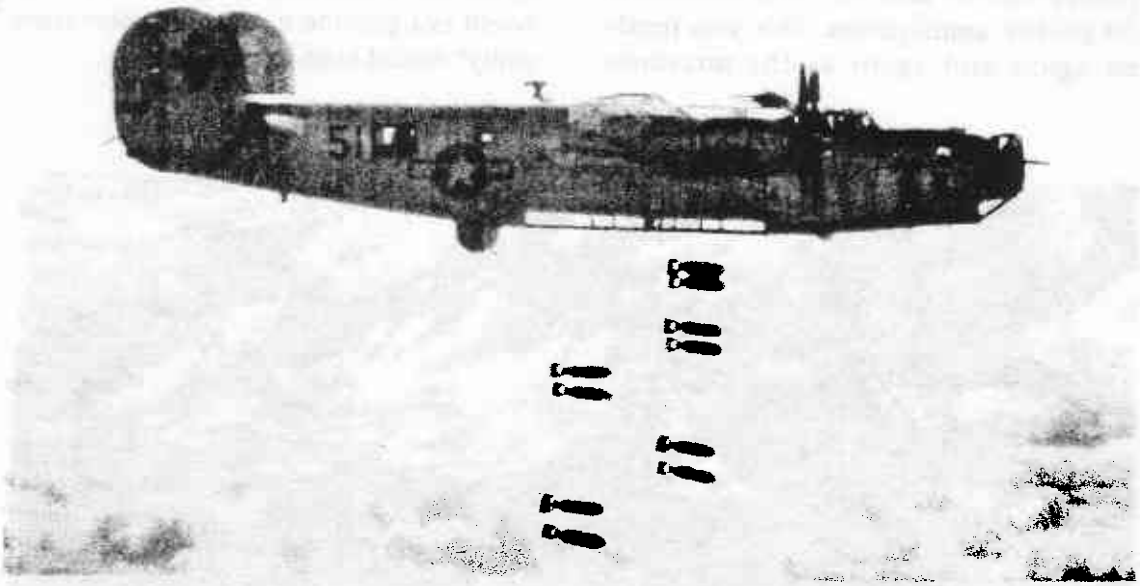


Flight of the Vulgar Vultures

1943-1945

The First 100 Missions



Our first 100 missions represented a milestone of achievement. There were major successes in destroying enemy targets but not without losses. Each mission is numbered and briefly described for each month starting in February 1944. At that time, the 5th Army was bogged down in southern Italy. They were having problems advancing against Kesselring's Army, poised on the high ground looking down on the Allies. The 5th Army had been bottled up on the Anzio beachhead since January 24th.

The 15th and 12th Air Forces were called on to bomb troop concentrations and supply areas to ease the pressure. We had briefed four or five times to bomb targets in the Anzio beachhead area but weather held us up until the 12th of February when we were able to get the planes off the ground.

FEBRUARY 1944

Mission 1, February 16 Forty-four B-24's took off to bomb targets in the Anzio area. We were to bomb troop concentrations around Campoleon, Italy. The target was completely covered by clouds and Colonel Cool decided it was too risky to bomb that close to our own lines without visual sight of the target, so we brought our bombs back to base.

Mission 2, February 17 Our target was still the same and this time the entire 15th Air Force was out to help the Armies pinned down on the Anzio beachhead. Twenty-three of our B-24's bombed the area near Fresceti, Italy. Flak was light and inaccurate, and all of our planes returned without casualties.

Mission 3, February 22 Our target was the docks in the harbor of Zaro, Yugoslavia. Thirty-nine B-24's took off with ten 500# GP bombs each. Two aircraft returned early, leaving 37 which dropped 92 tons of bombs in the target area. Flak was light and inaccurate. All aircraft returned without casualties.

Mission 4, February 25 Thirty-one B-24's took off to bomb the Talerhof Airdrome in Graz, Austria. Each aircraft carried ten 500# GP bombs. Flak was very heavy and accurate at the target area; 15 to 20 enemy fighters made repeated attacks. One of our aircraft was shot down with ten men missing in action. We were fortunate as the neighboring Group, the 454th, reported 50 men missing in action.

Our first month of combat was over. We flew a total of only four missions because we had only ten days of flyable weather. During the month, we flew 132 aircraft over the target while dropping 228 tons of bombs. We lost two aircraft and had ten men missing in action. We received credit for one enemy aircraft destroyed and one probably destroyed. This was a good start for a new Group.

MARCH 1944

March began with a spell of good weather. With it we were back to helping the 5th Army troops at Anzio. This was in keeping with Air Force policy of assisting our ground forces wherever possible. The Stars and Stripes Mediterranean edition on the 17th of February reported air support was at a new high. They reported that the Air Arm put their full power against the German forces attacking the Anzio Beachhead. In that light, many of our attacks against marshalling yards were in direct support of the ground forces as we cut the enemy's supply lines.

Mission 5, March 2 Thirty-nine of our B-24's, loaded with fragmentation bombs, took off to bomb the enemy troop concentrations around Cisterno, Italy, for the continued support of the Anzio beachhead. Six of our planes returned early and only 33 aircraft were able to bomb. They dropped 35.5 tons of bombs in the target area. Flak was moderate to intense and accurate. The crews came away with more respect for the danger of flak since four planes suffered flak damage. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 6, March 3 Thirty of our B-24's dropped 75 tons of 500# GP bombs on the airdrome at Fabrica Di Roma. Little damage was done to enemy aircraft, but a string of bombs ruined one of the runways. Flak at the target was light and inaccurate. Enemy fighters were observed but they did not make any attack. All planes returned safely.

Mission 7, March 7 We returned to the Fabrica Di Roma airdrome, this time 36 B-24's with the same bomb load. Our aircraft dropped over 89 tons with a good concentration on the airdrome. Flak again was light and inaccurate. None of our aircraft received damage and all returned to base.

Mission 8, March 15 After many stand downs due to snow and rain, we managed to get 40 B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs off the ground. They were to bomb the town of Cassino where our ground forces were held up by Kesselrings's forces. Thirty-four aircraft bombed the primary target but five bombed the town of Vallarotonda by mistake. There was no flak at the target. Our only claim to fame today was that we dropped 120 tons of bombs. All planes returned to base.

Mission 9, March 17 On St. Patty's day we sent 34 B-24's to bomb the aircraft plant at Bad Vaslau. The primary target was cloud-covered so they bombed the alternate, Vienna, Austria, by offset methods. The flak at the target was moderate to intense and accurate. It was easy to tell when you were near Vienna, since the flak increased in intensity. The Group dropped 62.5 tons of 100# incendiaries on the target. All planes returned safely.

Mission 10, March 18 All groups of the 304th Wing were sent to attack the Maniago Airdrome in the Po Valley. Our group managed to get 39 B-24's off the ground. Four aircraft returned early and 35 dropped 41.5 tons of fragmentation bombs on the target. Bomb strikes showed that five enemy aircraft were destroyed on the ground. There was no flak at the target and all planes returned safely.

Mission 11, March 19 The Group was briefed to bomb the aircraft factories at Steyr, Austria. Escort was provided by P-38's to the target area. The Wing leader turned away from the primary target because of bad weather, so the 455th bombed the airdrome at Graz, Austria. The bombing results were poor. Flak at the target was intense and accurate. Eight Me-109's made an overhead attack through the formation. Our gunners claimed one enemy fighter shot down and one probably destroyed. Two of our aircraft collided on the way back to base with all crewmen lost. No parachutes were seen. Twenty crewmen were missing in action. Several other aircraft in the formation suffered damage from the flying debris of the two aircraft that collided.

Mission 12, March 22 The Group was briefed to bomb the marshalling yards at Verona, Italy. One group of P-38's escorted us to the target. Again, our primary target was cloud-covered so we bombed the secondary, the marshalling yards at Bologna, Italy. The group dropped 82.5 tons of 500# GP bombs from 32 B-24's. Flak at the target was intense but inaccurate. No fighter opposition was encountered and all planes returned safely.

Mission 13, March 24 We were again briefed for the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aircraft Factory. Again, clouds foiled the 36 B-24's that took off loaded with 100# incendiary bombs. These aircraft managed to drop their bombs on the Rimini, Italy marshalling yards. Bombing had mixed results and all planes returned to base.

Mission 14, March 26 The Group was again briefed for the Daimler-Puch Aircraft Factory at Steyr, Austria. Again, weather turned the Group back and Rimini marshalling yards were again a target of opportunity. This time, only 19 aircraft dropped their bombs. The others either brought their bombs back to base or jettisoned them in the Adriatic. All planes returned safely.

Mission 15, March 28 A maximum wing effort was ordered to attack and destroy the marshalling yards at Verona, Italy. Forty B-24's took off but 17 returned early as they lost the wing formation because of bad weather. Twenty-one of our B-24's dropped 52.5 tons on the primary target. Flak at the target was intense and accurate. Twenty to 30 enemy fighters were observed in the target area but they did not press their attacks since our escort of P-38's drove them off. Eight enemy aircraft were observed to be shot down by our fighters. All planes returned safely.

Mission 16, March 29 The entire Wing was to attack the marshalling yards at Milan, Italy. The 455th put up 40 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs. Two aircraft returned early and 38 aircraft dropped over 97.5 tons of bombs on the primary target with very good results. There were no flak or fighters at the target area. All planes returned safely.

Mission 17, March 30 The Group sent 38 B-24's loaded with 500# incendiary bombs to the industrial center of Sofia, Bulgaria. Nineteen of them dropped their bombs by offset method through broken clouds. Thirteen aircraft could not identify the target and brought their bombs back to base. Flak

at the target was moderate to intense and accurate. Bombing results could not be observed due to cloud cover. All planes returned to base.

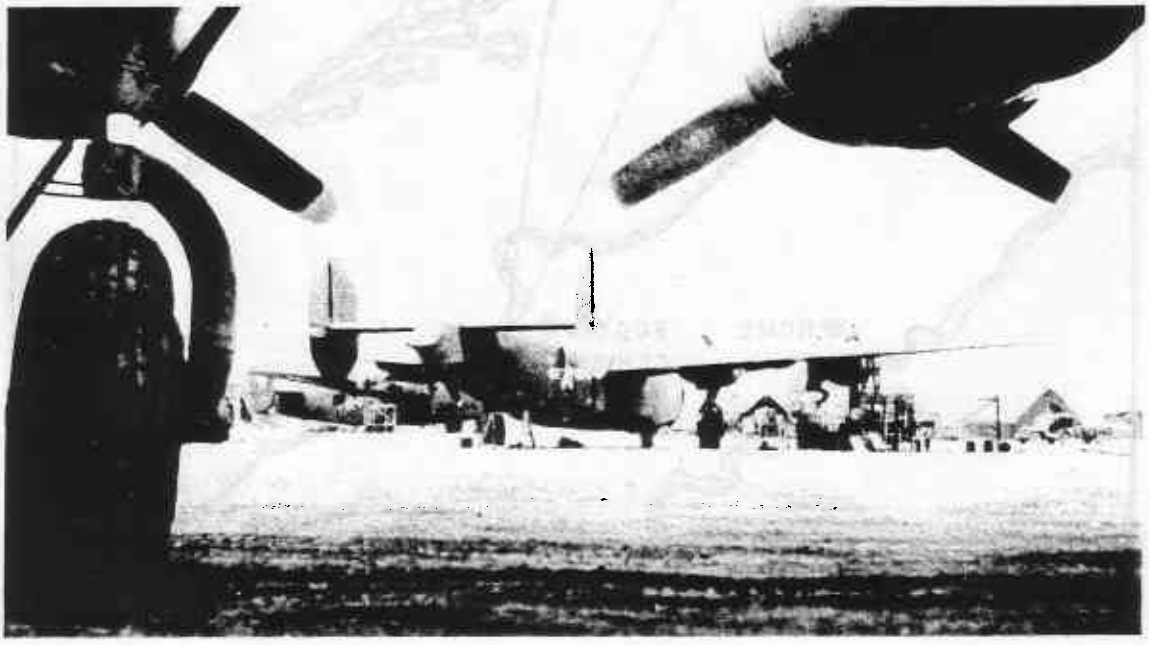
The Group flew 13 missions in March. We put 447 aircraft over the targets and dropped over 877 tons of bombs on the enemy. We lost 20 crewmen and two aircraft. We claimed one enemy fighter shot down and one probable. Enemy flak damaged three of our aircraft. That's not bad for what we had been through. Weather improved and we were kept busy in the months ahead.

APRIL 1944

April was the beginning of "Operation Pointblank" designed to break the back of German fighter manufacturing. This was a threat to the entire Allied bombing effort. The Germans expected to get some immunity from air attacks by locating many of their biggest assembly and production complexes to the south and east. These were out of range of the British and 8th Air Force bombers based in England. Several missions had been flown by the 15th Air Force bombers against Regensburg and Wiener Neustadt fighter production and airfields. This would be a month of operations principally against aircraft production and airfields. By its end, production estimates stood at 250 aircraft a month within range of the 15th Air Force vs. a planned rate of 650.

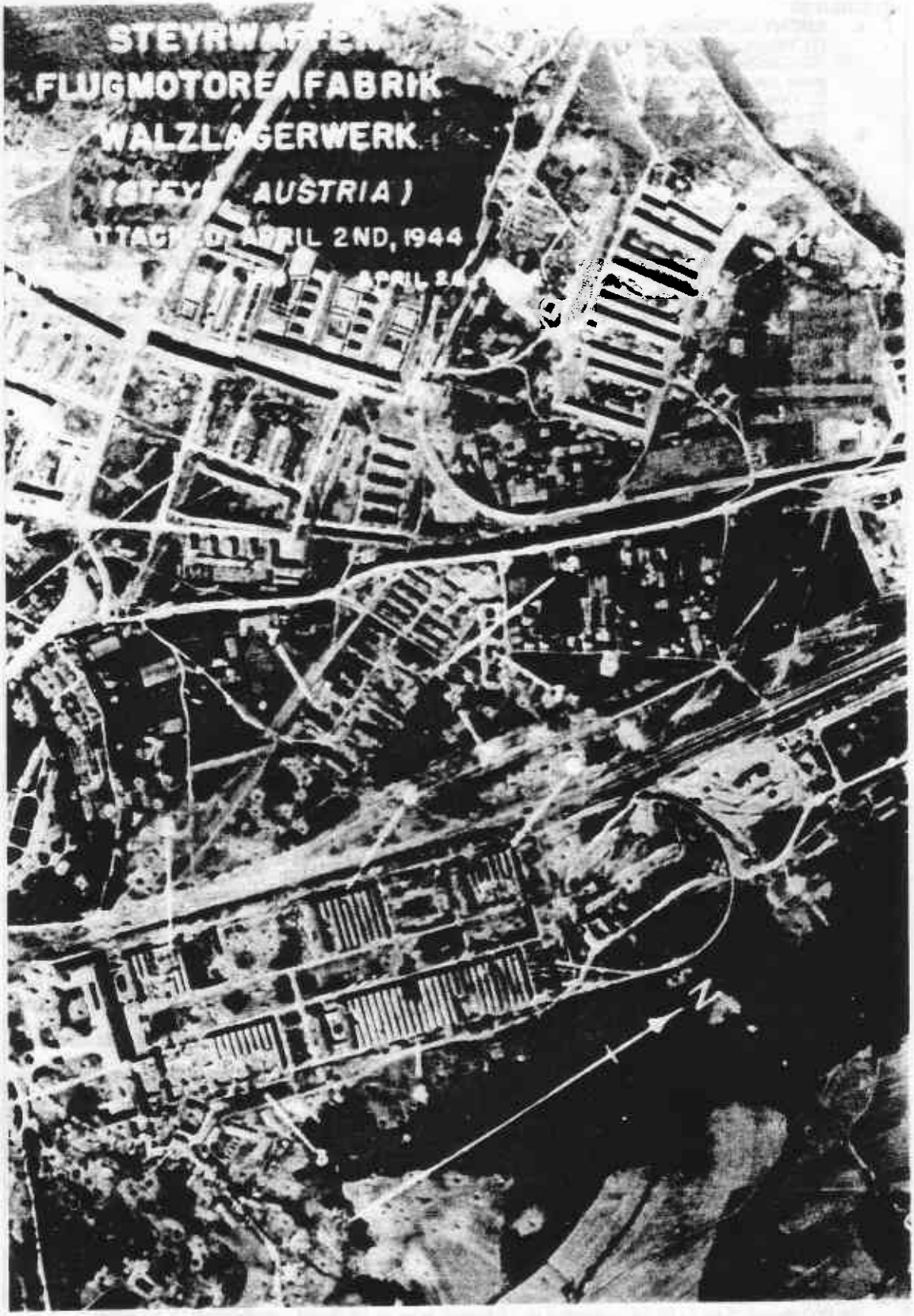
Mission 18, April 2 The Group was ordered to bomb the Steyr Daimler-Puch Aircraft Factory. This mission can best be described by presenting some of the Air Force historical records. These show the amount of planning and documentation which was needed for a combat mission and the evaluation of the bombing results. A mission for the Group starts with an operational order from the 304th Bomber Wing. This is translated into a detailed field order by the Group Headquarters Operations staff.

The following is the Field Order and related papers that resulted from the mission to Steyr.



MISSION ROUTE




FLUGMOTOREN FABRIK
WALZLAGERWERK
AUSTRIA)
APRIL 2ND, 1944

FIELD ORDER 2 April 1944
NUMBER 23

1. a. ENEMY DEFENSES:
(1) Target is STEYR-DAIMLER-PUCH AIRCRAFT FACTORY. Secondary target is KLAGENFURT AIR-DROME and last resort will be LJUBLJANA MARSHALLING YARDS. Sixty-one heavy flak guns may be expected at the primary target.
(2) One hundred seventy-five (175) to two hundred (200) single engine fighters and forty (40) to fifty (50) twin engine fighters may be encountered in the target area.

b. FRIENDLY FORCES:
Penetration escort: Largest group of P-38's will make line interception with the bomber formation at 44°40"N-15°20" E at 10:00 at 10,000 feet and provide general cover to prudent limit of endurance.
Withdrawal escort: Two groups of P-38's will rendezvous with bomber formation at target at 11:00 and provide general cover to prudent limit of endurance on withdrawal.

2. This group with thirty-six (36) B-24's (plus spares) will attack the STEYR-DAIMLER-PUCH AIRCRAFT FACTORY. The bomb load will be ten (10) 500 pound General Purpose bombs. Fuse setting will be .10 nose and .01 tail.

3. This Group will attack the target in two (2) units of eighteen (18) ships each (plus spares), units being stacked down. The leader of each unit will sight for range and deflection, the leader of each box for range and the others will toggle on the leaders. Bombing altitude will be 21,000 feet. Intervolometer setting will be 200 feet. Rally will be left in a gradual turn losing altitude at a rate of 300 feet per minute. Return to base via turn point to base.

4. RADIO FREQUENCIES:

a. Command .....6440 Kilocycles
A.G.L. .....4585 Kilocycles
Interplane ....."B" Channel
Collective call sign.....Large Cup 23
IFF to be used in accordance with instructions.

b. Group Leader.....Lt. Col. Kenneth A. Cool
Deputy Group Leader.....Major Hugh R. Graff
Group Navigator.....Captain James Moeller
Group Bombardier .....Captain Jack Horner

By order of Lt. Col. Cool:
HUGH R. GRAFF, Major, Air Corps, Operations Officer.

BRIEFING OUTLINE
ANNEX NUMBER 1
Field Order Number 23

1. Number of A/C on Mission.....40 B-24's
2. Group Leader.....Lt. Col. Kenneth A. Cool
3. Deputy Group Leader.....Major Hugh R. Graff
4. Second Unit Leader.....Capt. Wilbur C. Bechtold
5. Second Deputy Leader.....1st. Lt. Robert A. Robards
6. Other Groups on this Mission .....454th, 456th, 459th Bomb Gps.
7. Escort on this Mission.....Largest group of P-38's will make line interception with bomber force at 44°40"N, 15°20"E at 10:00 Hours at 10,000 feet and provide general cover to prudent limit of endurance. Maximum P-47's will intercept bombers east of Klagenfurt at 10:50 Hours at 17,000 feet and provide general cover to the limit of endurance. Withdrawal escort will be two groups of P-38's rendezvousing with bomber formation at 11:40 hours and provide general cover to limit of endurance.
8. Bomb Load.....Ten 500 pound General Purpose Nose .10 sec fuse, tail .01 sec fuse.
9. Ammunition.....5,200 Rounds
10. Fuel Load.....2,700 Gallons; full oil service.
11. Stations .....06:45 Hours
12. Taxi and Take-Off Instructions: Taxi to south for take-off to north Take-off time 07:55 Hours
13. Bomber Rendezvous.....1st Combat Wing (459th, 454th) at Guilia at 4,000 feet at 08:45 Hours
.....2nd Combat Wing (455th, 456th) at San Giovanni at 3,000 feet at 08:45 Hours.
14. Course.....Base to Key Point, ANDRIJA ISLAND, (43°02"N 15°46"E) at 09:29 Hours: to Turn Point (47°36"N, 14°35"E) to I.P. (47°53"N, 14°35"E) to Target.
15. Target Time.....11:40 Hours
16. Return Course .....Via Turn Point
17. Initial Point.....47°53"N, 14°35"E
18. Axis of Attack.....337 M.
19. Bombing Formation.....Group will bomb in nine (9) ship front, attack units stacked down.
20. Bombardier Information.....Leader in each attack unit will sight for range and deflection, leader of each box for range and others toggle on leaders.
21. Rally .....Left in a gradual turn losing altitude at the rate of 300 feet per minute.
22. Weather Forecast .....Target Able 6 to 7/10 cumulus at 2 thsnd. tops at 10,000 thsnd. 5 to 7/10 altocumulus at 12 thsnd. tops at 18 thsnd., visibility 8 to 10 miles.

Freezing Level: 4000 feet.
HUGH R. GRAFF, Major, Air Corps, Operations Officer.

In the continuation of the mission narrative there are eight pages written by Major Alvin E. Coons, Group S-2 Officer. The following are excerpts from that report.

"The attack on Steyr was a highly coordinated operation with 13 heavy bomber groups hitting the Steyr targets, three heavy bomb groups carrying out diversionary raids on Brod, Bihac troop concentrations and Mostar. This was the largest operation in point of numbers of planes the 15th Air Force had attempted up to that date. A total of 432 heavy bombers dropped on Steyr with 127 B-17's and 137 B-24's operating against the Walzlagerwerke and 168 B-24's hitting Daimler-Puch.

"AIRCRAFT AND CHRONOLOGY: At 07:55 35 B-24's took-off (12 from 740th, two from 741st, ten from 742nd, 11 from 743rd Squadrons). One aircraft returned early because of a gas leak in the bomb-bay and three returned prior to bombing because of engine troubles which prevented them from staying with the formation. One aircraft which did not go over the primary bombed Rimini. Twenty-six aircraft dropped their bombs on Steyr Walzlagerwerke and returned to base at 15:00. Four aircraft were missing, all shot down by enemy aircraft prior to target.

"ASSAULT: The briefed axis of attack on the Steyr Daimler-Puch was 320°. On the approach to the target it became evident that a cloud would obscure the target so that offset bombing would have to be used. On the other hand, the Walzlagerwerke was clear and had not been hit. It was at this point the Group leader, Lt. Col. Kenneth A. Cool, made the decision to bomb the open and vastly more important target. The attack was carried out on an axis of 330° magnetic.

"The first enemy fighters were encountered at 1030 hours. Between 60 and 70 single engine fighters appeared from the west and south in the vicinity of Nuovo Mesto. They were engaged by the P-38 escort, with violent individual encounters taking place. Another group of enemy fighters was engaged by the P-47 escort at about 1040 hours. With the exception of four to six Me-109's which attacked the lead bomber group, all of these fighters were effectively dealt with.

"Between 1100 and 1115 hours other fighters from Austrian bases were assembled just north of the frontier. Twin engine fighters were concentrated over Graz and the single engine fighters over Klagenfurt. The single engine fighters made contact first and the twin engine fighters followed. Most of these fighters attacked aggressively all the way to the target and back as far as the Klagenfurt area. The total force put up from Austrian bases was about 100 single engine fighters and 40 to 50 twin engine aircraft. Approximately 15 to 20 Me-109's attacked the bombers over Yugoslavia on their return flight. These were aircraft making their second sortie from the North Adriatic bases.

"The total enemy fighter opposition to this operation is conservatively estimated at about 215/220 single engine and 40/50 twin engine aircraft. Including shadowing aircraft, between 260 and 275 sorties were put up against the Wing formation.

"The first enemy fighters encountered by the 455th Group was at 1045. Between 15/20 Me-109's with belly tanks were engaged by the escort but did not attack the formation. The heaviest concentration of fighters was encountered 15 miles west of Graz and continued the attack until the target area. Most of these aircraft were Me-109's, FW-190's and Me-110's. Between 20 and 25 Me-210's and JU-88's attacked the formation through the

bomb run, while large groups of single engine aircraft picked up the attack on the return trip.

"The Me-109's and FW-190's attacked low and level from four to six o'clock then rolling. They were very aggressive and seemed to be experienced pilots. They appeared to be trying to find blind spots on the B-24. Twin engine aircraft made attacks from the rear firing rockets into the formation. The formation was attacked by 15/20 Me-109's over Yugoslavia on its return flight. These attacks occurred at about 1320 hours.

"The attacks on this mission were the heaviest the Air Force had encountered since the Regensburg raid of 25 February and certainly the heaviest the 455th Group had encountered thus far in its operations.

"Despite the severity of the attacks, the Group leader managed to keep his formation together and in the face of intense, accurate flak made and executed a decision to bomb another target than that assigned. In the face of overpowering odds, this Group's formation destroyed a highly important objective thereby demonstrated remarkable courage, determination and a high degree of professional skill and devotion to duty.

"RESULTS OF BOMBING: The assembly, testing, packing and ball and roller bearing Building No. 2 was very heavily damaged. Of the total area of 116,000 square feet, only 43,000 feet remained and that suffered internal damage. Building No. 5, the other assembly and testing plant, was less heavily damaged, but one bay was wiped out. Building No. 3 was two-thirds destroyed. Building No. 6 was half destroyed."

Colonel Horace Lanford, USAF (Retired), provided this account: "I was Colonel Cool's co-pilot on the Steyr mission. Inbound to the target, we were alerted by the top turret gunner that seven Me-109's were overtaking the Group on our right flank. I observed seven Me-109's fly up to the head of the column, opposite our aircraft, in single file. On reaching the head of the column the seven Me-109's turned into the formation flying seven abreast on their firing run. I immediately called the fighter escort 'Red Dog 1, this is Large Cup 23. We are under attack by seven Me-109's and request assistance.' Red Dog 1 responded 'Wa-l-l (southern drawl), we're kinda tied up ourselves right now but we'll send someone up (up the bomberstream) as soon as we can free someone.' A single P-38 appeared shortly and the Me-109's withdrew. The Me-109's had made three passes at our formation, seven abreast from the right flank and I believe we lost four B-24's as a result of their action."

MISSION STATISTICS

ANNEX NUMBER 2
Field Order 23 2 April 1944
ENEMY LOSSES::

Destroyed	
Me-109's	15
FW-190's	11
Me-210's	1
Total-	27
Probably Destroyed	
Me-109's	13
JU-88's	3
FW-190's	1
Total	17
Damaged	
Me-109's	3
Total	3

The following is a list of the crewmen who received credit for enemy fighters during the mission.

740th Squadron:
T/Sgt. Genero A. Amoruso
.....1 destroyed 2 probable
S/Sgt. Albert A. Alt
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Charles G. Bolling
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Alvin Rosefield
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Leo J. Seiter
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Willard M. Somers
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Leonard W. Zielinski
.....1 destroyed
1stLt. Fred A. Gross
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Samuel E. Austin
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Henry H. Kolbe
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Melvin F. Kruse
.....1 probable
Sgt. Oscar D. Childers
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. John A. Balough
.....1 damaged
S/Sgt. George R. Johnson
.....1 damaged
Total .....7 destroyed, 7 probable
and 2 damaged.

742 Squadron:
T/Sgt. John A. Carroll
.....1 destroyed
T/Sgt. William B. Roberts
.....1 destroyed
T/Sgt. John E. Warren
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Dale E. Dearing
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Edward C. Kimberly
.....1 destroyed
Sgt. Eddy D. Grauwiller
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. J.A. Abbondondello
.....1 probable
Total .....6 destroyed and
1 probable.

743rd Squadron:
2nd Lt. Leo A. Stopa
.....1 destroyed
T/Sgt. Abraha Aziz
.....1 destroyed
T/Sgt. Emmet Ledbetter Jr.
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Duane D. Bush
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. M.W. Hilgendorf
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Donald R. McNeil
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Luther B. Minyard
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Reid B. Peck
.....1 destroyed
S/Sgt. Duane S. Vance
.....1 destroyed
T/Sgt. George W. Kloos
.....1 probable
T/Sgt. Frank H. Paige
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Albert C. Cracker
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Richard I. Keene
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Clyde J. Kennedy
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Donald R. Petrie
.....1 probable
Cpl. Gerald E. Sasser
.....1 probable
S/Sgt. Henry C. Paris
.....1 damaged
Total.....9 destroyed, 7 probables
and 1 damaged.

OUR LOSSES: The 741st Squadron which had two aircraft over the target was the only squadron to suffer no crew losses during the operation. Four aircraft were lost: one from the 740th Squadron, one from the 742nd

Squadron and two from the 743rd Squadron.

a. 740th Squadron: Plane No. 41-29282, flown by Lt. Powers, left the formation at 1100 hours. The left wing and number three engine were on fire. Six crewmen were seen to bail out and their chutes opened. Two more were seen to bail out and their chutes opened just before the plane crashed.
b. 742nd Squadron: Plane No. 41-29407, flown by Lt. Pardoe, was last seen leaving the formation eight miles west of Celje with the number four prop feathered on a heading of 250. Four enemy fighters were following this aircraft. Five members of this crew successfully evaded the enemy and the full story was pieced together from them. In the course of a running battle which lasted 30 minutes, this crew shot down seven enemy fighters. Yugoslav Partisans who assisted them verified this number. The gallant crew fought the enemy until their ammunition ran out, then all ten crewmen bailed out. Five landed in Partisan territory and after 31 days were returned to their base. The rest were captured by the Germans.
c. 743rd. Squadron: Plane No. 42-52271, flown by Lt. Brunson, was last seen with a fire in the bomb-bay and waist section. Three crewmen bailed out and their chutes opened. One man jumped from the waist section without a chute. One jumped from the waist with his back type chute on fire. The plane pulled into a stall, took one turn of a spin and then exploded.
Plane No. 42-52224, flown by Lt. Cheeseman, was last seen ten miles west of Graz with a fire in the waist section. Four crewmen were seen to bail out but two chutes were on fire.

ASSESSMENT OF DAMAGE TO OUR PLANES:

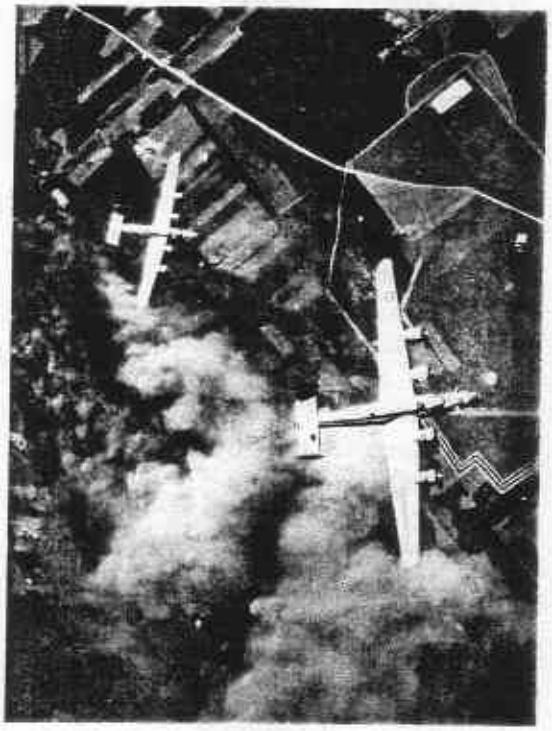
a. By enemy aircraft: two severe and two slight.
b. By flak: three severe and four slight.

SQUADRON LEADERS:

First Attack Unit:
A-Box - Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth A. Cool
B-Box - First Lieutenant Alvin I. Fisher
C-Box - First Lieutenant James W. Knight
Second Attack Unit
A-Box - Captain Wilbur C. Bechtold
B-Box - First Lieutenant Robert L. Cook
C-Box - First Lieutenant Jack D. Saine

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION:

The Group received the Citation under General Order Number 3225 dated 12 September 1944 for the mission.



HEADQUARTERS
FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE
APO 520

GENERAL ORDERS 12 September 1944
NUMBER 3325
Citation of units.....1

455TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H). For outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy. Although handicapped by a shortage of personnel and operating with only (40) percent of their maintenance equipment, ground crews, working for fourteen (14) to sixteen (16) hours daily, maintained a high percentage of operational aircraft during the early months of the group's combat operations. On 2 April 1944, thirty-five (35) B-24's, carrying ten (10) five hundred pound General Purpose bombs, took off on a vital mission to destroy the Daimler-Puch Aircraft Factory at Steyr, Austria. As part of the same operation, four (4) heavy bomb groups from the Fifth Wing were scheduled to destroy the Steyr Walzlagerwerke Ball Bearing Plant ahead of this group. The success of the entire operation was endangered on the bomb run when a group of B-17's were seen in the target area and a low cumulus cloud floated over, completely obscuring the target and the B-17 group. Approximately a mile to the northeast loomed the important ball-bearing plant, the Steyr Walzlagerwerke. The group leader, making a hasty decision, decided to bomb this more vital target which had not been bombed up to this time. Throughout the bomb run, the group was under aggressive attack from approximately seventy-five (75) enemy fighters which used rockets, aerial flak, cannon and machine guns in an effort to disrupt the formation. Despite the heavy, intense and accurate anti-aircraft fire and continued enemy fighter attacks, the group maintained a close formation and scored direct hits on this unbriefed target. The coordination between the attack units resulted in twenty-seven (27) enemy fighters destroyed, seventeen (17) probably destroyed, and three (3) damaged, to the loss of four (4) aircraft by the 455th Bombardment Group. Many direct hits were scored on the machine shops and a large explosion occurred, covering the plant with dense smoke. The tremendous material damage contributed greatly to the curtailment of aircraft production by the enemy at a time of great importance. A later Fifteenth Air Force Monologue on this day's operation particularly mentions the "greatest number of hits" by the 455th Bombardment Group. By their grim determination, their outstanding skill and unhesitating courage in successfully completing this mission through the heaviest of enemy opposition, the officers and enlisted men of the 455th Bombardment Group have upheld the highest traditions of the Military Service, thereby reflecting great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

BY COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL TWINING:
R.K. Taylor, Colonel, GSC, Chief of Staff

Mission 19, April 3 This Group along with all the groups in the 304th Wing attacked the main marshalling yard at Budapest, Hungary. Twenty-eight B-24's of our group, loaded with 500# GP bombs, attacked the marshalling yards. The flak at the target was intense and accurate. Enemy fighters were sighted but did not press their attack. Casualties were one bombardier killed in action, one navigator seriously wounded, and one pilot and four gunners slightly wounded by flak. All planes returned to base.

Mission 20, April 4 This group and all other groups in the 304th Wing attacked the marshalling yards at Bucharest, Rumania. Thirty-four B-24's of our Group dropped 85 tons of 500# GP bombs with good results. Several strings of bombs were seen to fall in the target area, although the results were obscured by smoke from previous bombing. Flak at the target was moderate and accurate. Fifteen to 20 Me-109's and FW-190's made unaggressive attacks on the formation and were driven off. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 21, April 7 Four hundred sixty-nine B-24's and B-17's of the 15th Air Force attacked the marshalling yards at Treviso, Mestre, Bologna and Ferrara. Our target for 32 aircraft was the marshalling yards at Bologna, Italy. The Group dropped 64 tons of 100# GP bombs with good results. We met no enemy fighters and flak was slight and inaccurate. All planes returned to base without incident.

Mission 22, April 12 Thirty B-24's of this group dropped 65 tons of 100# GP bombs on the airdrome at Bad Vaslau, Austria. This airdrome is in the vicinity of Vienna and when you go into that area you can expect fighter opposition. Between the IP and the target, the Group was attacked by 50 to 60 enemy fighters trying to break up the formation. They were not successful as the group gunners claimed seven destroyed, five probably destroyed, and three damaged in the air. Flak was very intense and heavy but did not get to our Group and all planes returned to base.



Mission 22: Bad Vaslau Assembly Plant and Airdrome. Bombing accuracy, not obtained. Group Leader, Major William Keefer; Deputy Group Leader, Major David Harp; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Richard Gosline; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. M. Jones; Lead Navigator, Lt. Fred Gross; Bombardier, Lt. Harold Ohlmeyer.

Mission 23, April 13 This group and other groups of the 304th Wing attacked the Tokol Airdrome at Budapest, Hungary. Thirty-six B-24's took off loaded with 100# GP bombs and 36 of the aircraft dropped them on the target. Flak at the target was moderate to intense, and accurate but the

group sustained little damage. Thirty to 35 enemy fighters attacked during the bomb run. Our gunners claimed two destroyed, one probable, and we claimed nine destroyed on the ground. No losses for the group.

Mission 24, April 15 We went back at the marshalling yards at Bucharest, Rumania. This time we had 36 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs. We also had our friends with us in the form of P-38's. They kept the enemy fighters away, but we hadn't found a way to stop the flak. We came through with minor damages and all planes returned to base.

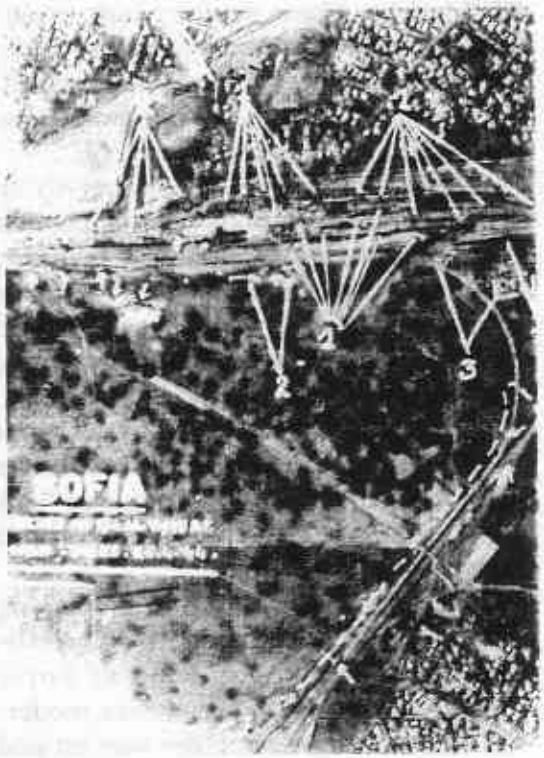
"The B-24 was an easy airplane to fly. It was easy to land and take off, but at high altitudes in formation it was another kind of plane. With the high wing loading, it became sloppy on the controls and it was difficult to hold in position." — *Pilot's comment*

Mission 25, April 16 Forty B-24's took off to bomb another Rumanian target, the airdrome at Turno Severin, not far from Bucharest. We again were loaded with 500# GP bombs. We should have run into stiff fighter opposition but they surprised us. Flak was light and inaccurate, and the fighters never showed; a "milk run" for a change.

Mission 26, April 17 We were back to Sofia, Bulgaria. The bomb load was 100# incendiaries. The weather turned bad and the formation split up. Only 29 of the 37 B-24's bombed the target. The remaining airplanes brought their bombs back to base.

Mission 27, April 20 We sent a maximum effort of 42 B-24's to bomb the Monfalcon, Italy shipyards with 500# GP bombs. What should have been an easy target turned out to be a real rough one. We were jumped by 30 to 40 single engine enemy fighters. We lost one airplane and ten men were missing in action.

"In the early part of our missions we were without fighter escort after we reached the head of the Adriatic. For that reason, enemy fighters were a real thorn in our side. They could always pick on a straggler or someone out of position in the formation." — *Pilot's comment*



Mission 26: Marshalling Yards, Sofia, Bulgaria. Bombing accuracy, not obtained. Group Leader, Major David Harp; Deputy Group leader, Captain Alfred Asch; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Richard Gosline; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. M. Jones; Lead Navigator, Lt. Fred Gross; Bombardier, Lt. Harold Ohlmeyer.

Mission 28, April 21 We went to the well once too often as we headed for the marshalling yards at Bucharest, Rumania. Thirty-four B-24's dropped 85 tons of bombs, but ran into a hornet's nest of enemy fighters. We claimed five enemy fighters shot down

and seven damaged, but we suffered the loss of four planes and 40 crewmen missing in action. We were jumped by over 40 enemy fighters, not a good day.

Mission 29, April 23 We were briefed for the Bad Vaslau airdrome south of Vienna, Austria. Our bomb load for the 26 B-24's was ten 500# RDX bombs. These are very high explosive bombs. Both the flak and the fighters were not up to Viennese standards. We escaped without damage and did a fine bombing job on the target.

Mission 30, April 24 Thirty-three B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs took off to bomb the marshalling yards at Bucharest. Although the flak was heavy and accurate, we managed to come through with a few holes and all planes returned safely.

Mission 31, April 25 We were back to bombing airfields in Italy. This time it was the airfield at Turin. Flak was light and no fighters challenged us. All planes returned safely.

Mission 32, April 28 Our bombing efforts were still in Italy. Thirty-three B-24's attacked the harbor at Porto Stefano. Flak at the target was moderate but one of our airplanes was hit and lost control. It ran into another in the formation; we lost two planes and 20 crewmen missing in action. There were two parachutes seen but that was all from the 20 crewmen.

Mission 33, April 29 We took off to bomb the Aircraft Industrial Complex at Toulon, France. This was our first raid over French territory and we ran into enemy fighters as we approached the target. Our bomb load for the day was 1000# GP bombs and the 30 B-24's dropped 85.5 tons on the target. Flak was heavy and accurate. We saw six enemy fighters but suffered no casualties. All planes returned to base.

"Flak in the area around Toulon is very heavy and accurate. It was rumored that there is an anti-aircraft training school in the area and the instructors are practicing on us." — *Pilot's comment*



Mission 34: Marshalling Yards, Milan Italy. Bombing accuracy, not obtained. Group Leader, Major Edwin Ambrosen; Deputy Group Leader, Major David Harp; Second Unit Leader, Captain Alfred Asch; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. Wayne Smith; Lead Navigator, Captain John Tyykila; Bombardier, Captain Ross Strode.

Mission 34, April 30 We ended the month with a raid on the marshalling yards at Milan, Italy. Thirty B-24's dropped 500# GP bombs on the target with good results. The flak was very heavy but inaccurate, perhaps that is why our bombing was so good. All planes returned safely.

April was our busiest month to date as we flew 17 missions with 648 planes

over the target. It was also our costliest as we lost 15 aircraft and 110 men missing in action. The group dropped over 1,313 tons of bombs on the enemy. We claimed 53 enemy fighters shot down, with 42 probables and eight damaged. So we did inflict some damage on the enemy fighter force but in our eyes, not enough to compensate for our losses.

MAY 1944

May would mark the beginning of the Groups' entry into the attacks on the oil production of the enemy. During May we would make our first raid on the infamous Ploesti oil fields. They would take a toll from our group as well as the rest of the 15th Air Force. May would also prove to be our busiest month of combat. As the weather began to improve we were able to fly more missions. This put an extra load on the support personnel as well as the crew members as it meant long hours on the flight line to prepare the airplanes for combat, as well as some long flights to the targets. The 455th Group was within striking distance of over 50% of Germany's total gasoline and lubricant production. These included three major crude oil basins in Rumania, Hungary and Austria. There were also a series of synthetic oil plants in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia where oil was extracted from coal. Enemy resistance was concentrated around the oil producing facilities by fighter aircraft and some of the heaviest known concentration of flak.

The oil offensive started late during the war because the targets were four or five times more numerous than aircraft factories and eight times more numerous than ball bearing production facilities. The 8th and 15th Air Forces and the RAF bomber command did not have enough heavy bombers to undertake a systematic attack on oil targets. There was a resurgence of the Luftwaffe that had to be overcome and there were demands on the Allied Air Forces to provide direct support for the ground and sea campaigns.

When it became apparent that POINTBLANK would be successful, interest started developing by the Allied Chiefs in attacking oil production. This was pushed by General Carl Spaatz, Commander, U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. He felt that a strategic attack on enemy oil would "flush" the Luftwaffe and would contribute more to the success of OVERLORD than any other type of air campaign. However, there were those who believed railway systems of Western Europe should be destroyed in a long-range bombing campaign. This did not prevent the 15th Air Force from starting an oil offensive.

The Germans had anticipated an oil destruction campaign so they increased the defenses by both fighters and flak. They went to great lengths to obstruct the targets by the use of smudge pots. In and around Ploesti there were 2,000 smoke generators placed in patterns to take advantage of the prevailing winds. There were at least five refinery targets in the Ploesti area, the largest one being the Astro Romana with a capacity to produce two million tons per year. These refineries provided approximately one-fourth of Germany's petroleum supplies. The railroad yards in the area were also inviting targets where tank cars were filled to make up long supply trains to carry the gasoline to support the German war machine.

A way had to be found for the 15th Air Force to strike the targets through cloud cover and smoke screens. A page was taken from the 8th Air Force textbook to send out a P-38 reconnaissance

flight in advance of the bombers. These flew high over the Ploesti target area and reported back by radio to the bomber stream which targets were open. This met with some success, but some targets never became exposed.

During 1943, radar bombing techniques were developed by the British and United States to bomb targets when they were obstructed by cloud cover or smoke. By January 1944, high altitude radar bombing was getting a good start in both the European and Pacific theaters. The radar and the Norden bombsight were becoming a significant tool to heavy bombardment.

In March 1944, the 15th Air Force received 25 sets of the APS-15 radars, nicknamed "Mickey," for its B-17 and B-24 bomber groups. Two of these were assigned to the 455th. Lead crews (pilot, navigator and a bombardier) were selected to operate with the Mickey operator. A "crash" training program was started for radar high altitude bombing. These crews always led the Group in a Mickey-equipped B-24 when it was known that the target would be covered by a smoke screen and/or clouds. The lead ship was named "Pathfinder."

Early results of pathfinder bombing were disappointing. On 10 June 1944, the 15th tried to circumvent the smoke screens and radar detection at Ploesti by sending 46 P-38's with thousand pound bombs slung on their bellies to attack at ground level under the smoke. The overburdened P-38 were surprised by Messerschmitts before reaching the target. Twenty-three of them were lost, or half the force. Escorting P-38's did, however, destroy ten enemy fighters. This was the last low altitude mission against Ploesti.

With practice and experience, pathfinder bombing improved. The 15th then started a relentless pounding of Ploesti and other oil targets from high altitude. The P-51 fighter was joining the P-38's in large numbers, so the operation also took its toll on enemy fighters. Although German fighters were badly needed to support operations against POINTBLANK and OVERLORD, they were not withdrawn from the defense of oil facilities because of their importance to the German war machine.

The last attacks against Ploesti by the 15th Air Force were from 17 through 19 August, with the 455th participating. With the aid of a night attack by the RAF, these assaults brought production down to an estimated 10% of the original capacity and by 24 August all work had ceased. Soon afterward, the Russians occupied the region. The destruction of the Rumanian oil facilities, principally those at Ploesti, denied the Germans of gasoline and lubricants on the Russian front and helped in their defeat.

After the fall of Rumania, the 15th Air Force continued concentrating on the remaining refineries and synthetic petroleum plants in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Most were heavily defended by the addition of flak guns moved from other targets. There were as many as 300 fighters on some missions attacking the bomber stream. Many of the targets were successfully bombed using pathfinder techniques. This led Lt. General Ira C. Eaker, Commander of the 8th Air Force, to pay tribute to the 15th. "The 15th AAF is undoubtedly the leading exponent in the world today of blind bombing." It was estimated that by September 1944, only 32% of the oil production remained from its pre-attack level. This was catastrophic for the Germans. Albert Speers, the Nazi Minister of Armaments and War

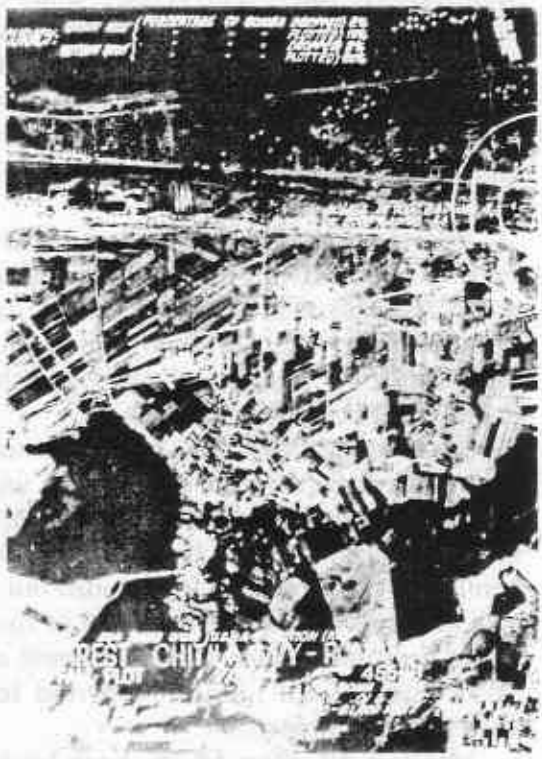
Production, later declared: "The raids made real what had been a nightmare to us for more than two years."

Mission 35, May 2 Thirty-six B-24's loaded with 1000# GP bombs took off to bomb the marshalling yards at Verona, Italy. The target was completely covered by clouds and all the planes returned to base without incident. All crews received credit for a mission.

Mission 36, May 5 Thirty-six B-24's were scheduled to take 500# GP bombs to bomb the marshalling yards at Ploesti, Rumania. It was enough to make you catch your breath when you saw that long red line of the flight path on the map of the briefing room go all the way across the wall to all those flak guns!! The target was covered with smoke but the lead bombardier got a good sight on the target and we were able to drop our bombs. The fighters pressed their attacks and we lost one aircraft to them. Flak at the target was very intense and accurate. We chalked up our losses at one aircraft and ten men missing in action. One crew member reported that the flak was so thick we could have walked on it.

Mission 37, May 6 That line on the briefing room map was still pointing in the direction of Ploesti, although this time it was the marshalling yards at Campina, Rumania. This is between Ploesti and Bucharest. Thirty-four B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs struck the target. Flak at the target was intense and accurate. Fighter attacks were very heavy by as many as 50 enemy aircraft. We lost one aircraft to fighters and many more damaged by flak and fighters. We had one crewman killed and ten crewmen missing in action.

Mission 38, May 7 We were back to Rumania for the third day in a row. It couldn't get any rougher than that. This time, 36 B-24's would drop their bombs on the marshalling yards at Bucharest. The flak was intense as always at this target and 15 fighters made repeated attacks on the formation. We came through unscathed, with no casualties and all planes returned to base.



Mission 38: Marshalling Yards, Burharest, Rumania. Bombing accuracy, 20% within 1,000 feet CEP. Group Leader, Major Horace Lanford; Deputy Group Leader, Major Jack Reeder; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Robert Robards; Deputy Second Unit Group Leader, Lt. George Keahey; Lead Navigator, Lt. Jackson McWilliams; Bombardier, Lt. C. Loecher.

Mission 39, May 10 We headed in a different direction, the aircraft factory at Wiener Nuestad, Austria, just south of Vienna. Thirty-nine B-24's carrying ten 500# GP bombs attacked the target. The enemy fighters were there in great numbers and the flak was very intense and accurate. Ten of our planes received

heavy and 27 slight damage. One crewman was severely wounded and three others slightly, but we managed to bring all planes back to the base.

Mission 40, May 12 We were briefed to bomb communication targets in northern Italy. Thirty-one B-24's found the primary target covered by clouds and we bombed the harbor at Spezia, Italy instead. Eight of our planes brought their bombs back to base as they could not see the target. There were no casualties.

Mission 41, May 13 Thirty-three B-24's loaded with 1000# GP bombs attacked the marshalling yards at Bologna, Italy. There was no flak at the target and we brought all planes back to base without any casualties.

Mission 42, May 14 The push was on by the 5th Army for Rome and we helped by sending 41 B-24's to drop 9,840 twenty-pound fragmentation bombs on the airdrome at Piasenza outside of Rome. There was light flak at the target and no fighters. Crews claimed a "milk run" as all planes returned to base without incident.

Mission 43, May 18 We were back in the oil business. We sent 41 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs to bomb the refinery at Dacia Romano, Rumania. This time the flak took its toll as we lost three aircraft to flak and 30 crewmen were missing in action. We bombed by pathfinder for the first time and saw many fires burning in the target area; a good mission but a heavy price was paid.

Mission 44, May 19 We sent 36 bombers to bomb the harbor at Genoa, Italy. The flak was light and not very accurate so it turned out to be an easy mission for a change.

Mission 45, May 22 We sent 35 B-24's to bomb the harbor at La Spezia, Italy. Although the target was partially obscured, many bombs dropped in the target area. Flak was light and no fighters were seen. All planes returned to base safely.



Mission 41: Marshalling Yards, Bologna, Italy. Bombing accuracy, 36% within 1,000 feet CEP. Group Leader, Major Hugh Graff; Deputy Group Leader, Captain Wilbur Bechtold; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Lawrence Liberty; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. Myles Waters; Lead Navigator Captain Beverly Brookshire; Bombardier, Lt. H. Manning.

Mission 46, May 23 We were still helping the 5th Army as we scheduled 39 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs to bomb troop concentrations around Nemi, Italy. Light flak was seen in the target area but it was ineffectual. Only 26 aircraft dropped their bombs on the target as the second section did not have a clear view of it due to the cloud-cover. All planes returned safely.

Mission 47, May 24 Thirty-seven

B-24's loaded with fragmentation bombs were scheduled to bomb Munchendorf Airdrome in Austria. Flak at the target was heavy, intense and accurate. We lost two aircraft to flak with 20 crewmen missing in action. The results were not good as only 19 aircraft dropped their bombs on the cloud-covered target. The remaining planes dropped their bombs on the Varazidan marshalling yards.

Mission 48, May 25 We sent 37 B-24's to bomb the Airdrome at Piasenzia, Italy. The flak was light but the fighters were very aggressive and pressed their attacks most forcefully. One of our aircraft was shot up so badly it was forced to make a belly landing at a British base, and two crewmen were severely injured. All the remaining planes returned to base.

Mission 49, May 26 We took 35 B-24's to Grenoble, France. Our target was the marshalling yard. There was no flak nor fighters and we dropped over 85 tons of 500# bombs on the target. All planes returned safely.

Mission 50, May 27 We flew our 50th mission. Thirty-seven B-24's carrying 100# demolition bombs dropped them on the airdrome at Montpellier, France. The airdrome was called Frejorges and we did a good job of bombing on its west end. Flak at the target was moderate and accurate, and over 17 of our airplanes received damage. No fighters were seen and the group returned to base with no casualties.

Mission 51, May 28 We sent 38 B-24's to bomb the harbor at Genoa, Italy. The flak at the target was moderate but very accurate and 14 of our planes received damage. No enemy fighters were seen; we had a good bomb run at the target. All planes returned safely.

Mission 52, May 29 On this date we briefed for two missions. This was the first time we had attempted this and it was an unusual occurrence. The first mission was to Bos Crupa, Yugoslavia where we sent 40 B-24's loaded with 100# GP bombs. Little resistance was met and we had a successful bomb run in the target area. We returned to our base for our second mission of the day.

Mission 53, May 29 On the second mission we sent 39 B-24's to bomb troop concentrations at Banja Luka, Yugoslavia. Again we loaded 100# GP bombs and had a successful bomb run with little or no opposition and all planes returned to base.

Mission 53, May 30 Our mission was a little rougher than the last two as we sent 35 B-24's to bomb the airdrome at Welz, Austria. We were pleasantly surprised as we had little opposition, either in the way of flak or enemy fighters. We did find a new way to lose an aircraft as one plane dropped its bombs on the plane below. This resulted in ten crewmen missing in action.

Mission 55, May 31 We ended the month by sending 36 B-24's to drop 500# GP bombs on the Urinea Sperantza Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. Flak at the target was intense and accurate. Twenty-five fighters were seen but they appeared to be waiting for stragglers, as they did not press their attacks against the formation. We did lay claim to three enemy fighters destroyed and one probable. All aircraft returned safely.

May would turn out to be our most productive month. The 455th put 745 aircraft over the target while flying 21 missions. We dropped over 1,631 tons of bombs on the enemy. We claimed nine enemy fighters destroyed and five probable. On the other hand, we lost nine aircraft and 90 crewmen missing in action. In addition, we had one crew-

man killed in action. In the last ten days of the month, we flew 11 missions and had 411 aircraft over the target. That's an average of over 37 aircraft per mission for the last ten days of May. What a tremendous effort on the part of the ground crews as well as all the support people in the Group and the 304th Service Group.

JUNE 1944

The month of June saw the 15th Air Force and the Group concentrating on communication targets, namely marshalling yards. We bombed them eight of the 15 missions in June. This strategy was mainly aimed at disrupting their flow of oil and other supplies to the enemy. With the outlook of good weather ahead, our effort to strike deeper into the enemy's territory increased.

Mission 56, June 2 We sent 34 B-24's to bomb the marshalling yards at Miskole, Hungary. Each plane was carrying ten 500# GP bombs. Flak at the target was heavy but not very accurate and we came through the mission without any casualties.

Mission 57, June 4 We were scheduled to bomb industrial targets in northern Italy. Thirty-six B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs followed the 454th Group into the target area only to see the target covered by clouds. We elected to bomb the alternate target, the Port of Genoa, Italy. Flak at the target was light and ineffectual, and we got a good bombing pattern on the target. No enemy fighters were seen. The Group came back without incident or casualties.

Mission 58, June 6 We were back in the oil business. This time, 37 B-24's loaded with ten 500# GP bombs hit the marshalling yards at Brasov, Rumania. This was one of the marshalling yards servicing Ploesti. Although the flak was heavy and nine Me-109's attacked, we came through without any losses.

Mission 59, June 7 We received news of the invasion of Europe by the Allies on D-Day, June 6th. Our spirits were lifted as it meant the war would be shortened. Thirty-five B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs attacked the shipyards at Voltri, Italy. This was our secondary target and the results were not very good as the target was partially covered by clouds. Flak was light and no fighters were sighted. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 60, June 9 Thirty-eight B-24's carrying 1,000# GP bombs were scheduled to bomb the marshalling yards in the Munich area. When the pathfinder equipment malfunctioned, the Group had to bomb on ETA and the results were not observed. Flak was very heavy and those fighters who were in the air attacked other groups. We lost one aircraft and ten crewmen missing in action. The rest of the Group returned to base safely.

Mission 61, June 10 Our bomb load was fragmentation bombs. Thirty-eight B-24's attacked the airdrome at Ferrara, Italy. Results were good as there were a good number of aircraft sighted on the field. Flak was light and there were no enemy fighters sighted. All planes returned safely.

(Fragmentation bombs are the least liked bomb load, they are very 'touchy.' They drop out of the plane in clusters, separate very quickly and become armed. They cannot be jettisoned safely as other bombs can. The only safe way to get rid of them is to toggle them out and in an emergency that takes too much time. One of our pilots salvoed his frag bombs and one blew up shortly after it left the bomb bay, forcing a water landing in the Adriatic.)

Mission 62, June 11 Today we were after oil supplies. Thirty-eight B-24's

were to bomb the oil storage facilities at Giurgiu, Rumania. The flak was moderate at the target area so we had a good pattern and many fires were seen in the target area. Seven Me-109's attacked the formation. One fighter got too close, was shot down and seen to crash. We lost one aircraft and ten crewmen were missing in action. The rest of the planes returned to base safely.

"As an aircraft flight engineer, I rode in the top turret. It gave me a good view forward and almost 360° of fire with the two 50 caliber machine guns. Most of the fighters I shot at came from the front, diving through the formation from nine, three or 12 o'clock. While the fighters were attacking, you would be in a cold sweat and after they left, you froze all the way back to base. I could at least shoot back at them. I felt sorry for the pilot and co-pilot who had to sit there and take it." A quote from Emmitt Ledbetter Jr. of the 743rd Squadron.

Mission 63, June 13 Our target was the BMW Aircraft Engine Factory in Munich, Germany. Thirty-three B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs attacked the target. It was well defended and the flak was very heavy, extremely accurate and we lost one aircraft. Two crew members were killed by flak and one seriously wounded in the returning aircraft. Ten crewmen were missing in action.

Mission 64, June 16 Thirty-seven B-24's loaded with 250# GP bombs took off to bomb the oil facilities at Winterhoven, Austria which is near Vienna. We dropped our bombs on the target and many fires were seen. As usual, flak at the target was very heavy and accurate, and we lost one plane over the target from it. Many fighters were seen in the area. They pressed their attacks vigorously, but we managed to come through without additional losses. We lost one aircraft on the way home without explanation. Twenty crewmen were missing in action.

Mission 65, June 22 A maximum effort was ordered as 42 B-24's carrying 250# GP bombs to attack the Motor Repair Facilities at Chivasso, Italy. The Group had an outstanding bombing mission as over 82% of the bombs fell within a 1,000 foot radius of the aiming point and all bombs fell within 2,000 feet. Flak was light in the target area and all planes returned safely, a picture-perfect mission, as can be seen from the photo.



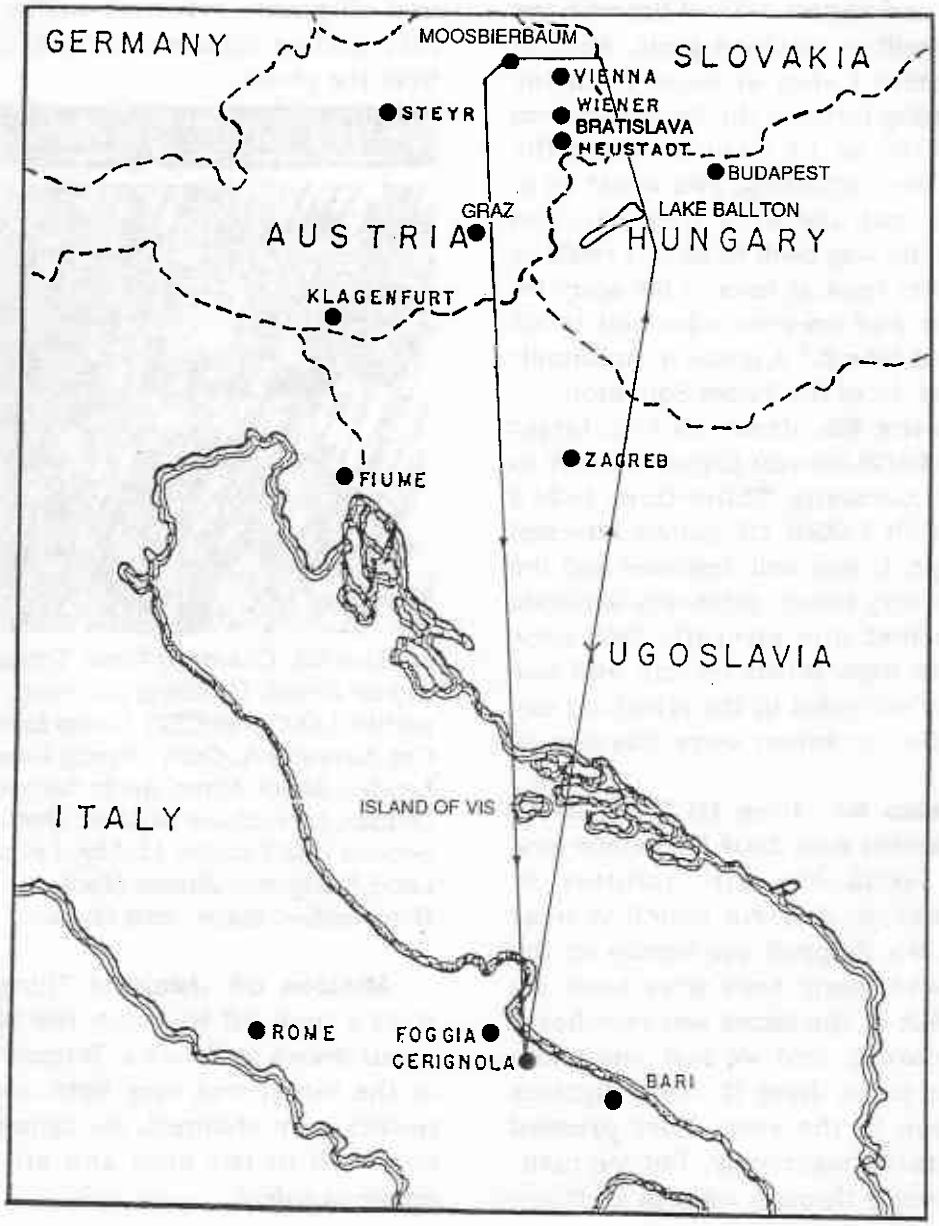
Mission 65: Chivasso Motor Transport Repair Depot. Bombing accuracy, 82.5% within 1,000 feet CEP. Group Leader, Col. Kenneth A. Cool; Deputy Group Leader, Major Alfred Asch; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Richard Gosline; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. Lloyd Beachem; Lead Navigator, James Moeller; Bombardier, Major Jack Horner.

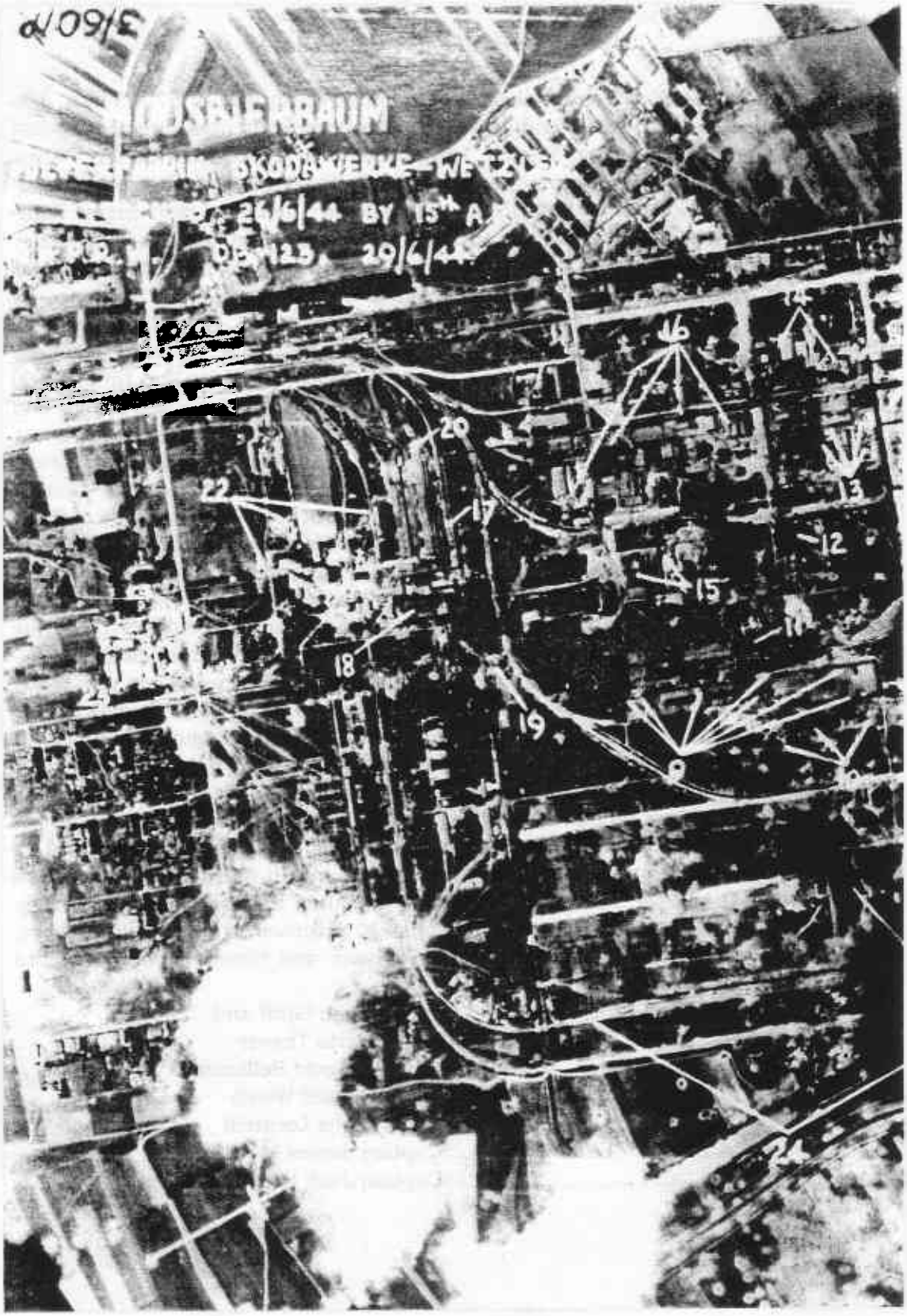
Mission 66, June 24 Thirty-seven B-24's took off to bomb the railroad repair shops at Craiova, Rumania. Flak at the target was very light and good results were obtained. No fighters were observed in the area and all planes returned safely.

Mission 67, June 25 We tried something a little different for a heavy bomb group. We bombed from 14,500 feet and found that the B-24 flew much better formation at that altitude. Thirty-seven B-24's dropped 110 tons of bombs on the target area, a railroad bridge at Arles, France. Although we had a good concentration of bombs in the target area, we could not determine if the bridge was hit. Fortunately, flak in the area was very light and none of our planes were hit. All planes returned to base.

Mission 68, June 26 Moosbierbaum, Austria Oil Refinery. The following is the field order and all other related papers that resulted from the mission to Moosbierbaum.

MISSION ROUTE – MOOSBIERBAUM




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MOOSBIERBAUM, JUNE 26, 1944

The Strategic Air Force dispatched 1165 Aircraft comprised of 575 B-24's, 165 B-17's 144 P-51's, 131 P-38's, and 46 P-47's. The main effort was directed against oil refineries at Budapest and Vienna. In opposition to the attacks in the Vienna area, the enemy put up its most aggressive fighter attacks yet encountered. An estimated enemy effort of 150 to 175 aircraft with a large number of twin engine fighters, chiefly Me-210's and showing a more than usual willingness to fight. They made every effort to draw off the escorting fighters so as to leave the bombers unprotected. Flak at the targets was intense, accurate and heavy.

The 455th Bomb Group was leading the 304th Wing with 161 B-24's from the 454th Group, the 456th Group and the 459th Group following. In the ensuing air battle, the Wing lost 18 aircraft, all of them to enemy fighters. The total initial claims of all groups were 53 enemy aircraft destroyed, 25 probably destroyed, and seven damaged. This did not include those shot down by our missing aircraft.

Our Group sent 38 B-24's loaded with 250# GP bombs to bomb the Oil Refinery at Moosbierbaum, Austria. The refinery was located just northeast of Vienna, Austria. Our approach was to be from the east with a bomb run on an axis of 250°. To approach from this angle, our route took us east of Vienna and made a long slow turn to the left. When the Group neared the IP, the second section of 18 airplanes began to lose its position and swung far out to the right on the slow turn being made by the lead section. This spread out the formation and the fighters made the most of it. The Group was attacked from the front by enemy twin engine fighters. They made one pass with approximately 20 aircraft and headed down and away with our escort in hot pursuit. While the formation of the second section was strung out, it was attacked from every angle by approximately 60 twin engine and 60 single enemy fighters, a relentless attack on the bombers. Harried on all sides by the swarm of enemy fighters and flying through intense flak, the group stubbornly pressed forward to their target. One of the bombers collided head-on with one of the fighters. Despite its mortal wounds it persisted through the bomb run, dropped its bombs and plummeted to the ground. Two other aircraft set afire in the attack struggled over the target, released their bombs and then the crew abandoned their airplanes. Of the 36 B-24's that took off, only 26 returned to base and of these, three had severe damage inflicted by enemy fighters and three crewmen received severe wounds. The leaders that day were:

Group Leader.....Major Hugh Graff and
.....Major David Thayer
Deputy Group Leader.....Captain David Bellemere
Second Unit Leader.....Major Russell Welsh
Second Deputy Leader.....1st Lt. Julio Locatelli
Group Navigator.....Captain James Moeller
Group Bombardier.....Captain Jack Horner

EXCERPTS FROM SQUADRON HISTORIES

740th Squadron

June 26. The Squadron's first casualties since the 24th of May occurred today. Lt. Lubsock and crew went down over the target on the organizations 68th mission. Eleven Liberators with 44 officers and 66 enlisted men took off at 0540 to bomb the Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery, Austria. Seems as if the enemy was waiting for us. An impressive fighter defense was put up by the German Air Force. It is estimated that approximately 200 enemy aircraft were airborne against our formation. Moderate to intense and accurate flak was also encountered at the target. Heavy black smoke was observed rising from the target of the bombing.

Nine enemy aircraft were officially confirmed to be destroyed by the following men: T/Sgt. Logan – 1 Me-109; S/Sgt. Franceschini – 1 Me-109; Sgt. Eaton – 1 Me-109; S/Sgt. Bischoff – 1 Me-109; S/Sgt. Sievers – 1 Me-109; Sgt. Forbes – 2 Me-109 and 110.

The following men received credit with having destroyed one-third of an enemy aircraft as indicated: S/Sgt. Harris – Me-109 ; S/Sgt. Berg – Me-109; S/Sgt. Sister – Me-109; S/Sgt. Schramm – Me-109; S/Sgt. Merrill – Me-109; Sgt. Blackwell – Me-109.

741st Squadron

June 26. At 0540 hours, nine Squadron A/C took off to bomb the Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery, Austria, escorted by P-38's and P-51's. An excellent concentration of bombs struck the target and heavy, black smoke was observed rising from the target area. Enemy aircraft were first encountered at Bratislava at approximately 0920 hours. In this area one group of Me-109's, Me-210's and JU-88's succeeded in separating the escort from the formation. Fifty to 60 enemy fighters then broke up units of our formation and made aggressive attacks from head-on, closing 50 to 100 yards and diving through the formation. All enemy fighters attacking were firing 20mm ammunition and rockets. The fighter attacks lasted until the IP. In the target area and after bombs away, approximately 60 Me-109's and FW-190's were encountered. The enemy attacked from out of the sun at 11 and 12 o'clock high, diving on the formation and pressing as close as 30 yards. One enemy fighter dove head-on into the B-24 of 1st Lt. Bernard M. Keogh of this Squadron and both planes went down. The enemy fighters dove through the formation and came up for attacks from six o'clock low and around the clock. Attacks came singly, in pairs and threes. Moderate to intense, accurate, heavy flak was encountered at the target. Photo interpretation showed a good concentration with over 200 hits in the target area. Ten hits were scored on oil storage in the NE area of layout, starting fires. Eight hits were made on the power station and several other fires were started at different locations. A cluster of hits were scored on the railroad line, siding and parked rolling stock on the east side of the plant.

742nd Squadron

26 June 1944. We suffered the hardest blow on a raid today that this Squadron has ever experienced. Six combat crews are lost — 59 officers and enlisted men. Several were on their 50th mission and 21 were scheduled to go home soon. Many of our original crews went down. We had ten ships scheduled for a raid on a synthetic oil refinery at Moosbierbaum, Austria — about 20 miles northwest of Vienna.

Three of the B-24's returned early. Of the seven remaining B-24's which reached the target, only Lt. Kelly and his crew returned safely. Enemy aircraft were encountered at 0920 hours at Bratislava. Attacks were made singly, in pairs and threes from all around the clock. Some of the enemy twin engine planes stayed out of range and lobbed rockets at our formation, all were firing 20mm ammunition. These attacks lasted until the IP was reached. Our planes were in F box, with Lts. Kelly and Jackson in D box, second section, and our planes bore the brunt of the enemy attacks. In the target area and after bombs away, about 60 Me-109's and FW-190's attacked out of the sun. They dove into the formation and pressed their attacks aggressively to within 30 yards. One enemy fighter crashed into a bomber, both planes went down. As usual, flak was encountered, intense, accurate and heavy. Very little definite information is available about any of our crews who went down. The following crews were lost: Lt. Robert A. Montgomery's crew was lost in the target area. This crew carried the Squadron photographer, S/Sgt. Francis M. Moore. Lt. James B. Brown's ship was last seen in the target area with smoke coming from his engines. There was no definite information as to the fate of Lt. Ralph D. Sennsenbrenner and his crew and there was no news about Lt. William C. Jackson's crew. Lt. Samuel A. Archibald's airplane was last seen in the target area with fire streaming from the #2 engine and they went down slowly, straight and level, feathering #2 and then went into a spiral. Six parachutes were seen coming from the stricken plane. Since Lt. Kelly's was the only plane to come back, these are the only claims to be made by this squadron. Cpl. Anthony C. Browdeur, nose turret gunner, claims two FW-190's destroyed; Sgt. Howard (NMI) Blumberg, right waist gunner, claims one FW-190 destroyed; Cpl. James R. Thomas, tail gunner claims one FW-190 destroyed and Sgt. Chester R. Pratt, left waist gunner, claims one FW-190 destroyed and Sgt. Chester R. Pratt, left waist gunner, claims one FW-190 destroyed. It is felt certain that our six lost ships accounted for a number of Nazi fighter before they were downed. Today's disastrous raid was a blow to morale in the squadron with so many of our original combat men lost. We only have nine planes after today's raid and by juggling men, six complete crews are all we can put in the air.

743rd Squadron

26 June 1944. Nine B-24's took off to bomb the Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery, Austria and dropped 126 250# GP bombs on target with the result that excellent concentration struck the target. Heavy black smoke was observed rising from the target after bombing. Flak: Moderate to intense, accurate and heavy at target. E/A: During, before and after target, about 100-125 single engine and twin engine fighters made aggressive attacks and knocked down ten A/C of our group. Squadron planes all returned safely.



RESTRICTED
HEADQUARTERS
FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE
APO 520

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 232 15 JANUARY 1945
Citation of Unit .....Section 1

SECTION I – CITATION OF UNIT

Under the provisions of Circular No. 333, War Department, 1943, and Circular No. 89, Headquarters NATOUSA, 10 July 1944, the following unit is cited for outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy:

455TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP. For outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy. Notified to prepare maximum aircraft for a mission against the highly important and heavily defended Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery, Moosbierbaum, Austria, the ground crews, despite acute shortages in personnel and equipment, worked untiringly and with grim determination to have their aircraft in the peak of mechanical condition to insure the success of this vital operation. On 26 June 1944, thirty-six (36) B-24 type aircraft, heavily loaded with maximum tonnage, were airborne, and, assuming the lead of the other groups of their Wing, set course for their destination. En route to the target the formation was intercepted by approximately twenty (20) twin-engine enemy fighters which were engaged by the escorting fighters. Immediately thereafter, the bomber formation was attacked by approximately sixty (60) additional twin-engine fighters in a series of vicious head-on attacks, firing rockets, heavy machine guns and 20mm cannon in a desperate effort to destroy the bomber formation. Nearing the target, sixty (60) more single engine fighters joined in the aggressive and relentless attacks against the Group's formation. Heedless of this seemingly overwhelming opposition, the gallant crew members battled their way through the heavy enemy fire to the objective. One of the bombers, after colliding with an attacking fighter, remained persistently with the formation for the bombing run before dropping out in flames. Two other bombers set on fire by enemy gun fire, continued over the target, successfully dropped their bombs and then exploded in mid-air. With complete disregard for the continued heavy opposition, displaying outstanding courage, leadership and fortitude, the Group held its lead of the Wing formation, bringing it through the enemy defenses for a highly successful bombing run. The oil storage area of the refinery was heavily hit with large fires started. Eight direct hits were sustained by the power station and numerous rolling stock and vital installations were severely damaged throughout the plant area. During the fierce aerial battle to the target, the gallant gunners of the Group, through their skill and determination in the defense of their formation, accounted for thirty-four (34) enemy fighters destroyed, to hold the losses of their Group to ten (10) heavy bombers. By the conspicuous gallantry, professional skill and determination of the combat crews, together with the superior technical skill and devotion to duty of the ground personnel, the 455th Bombardment Group has upheld the highest traditions of the Military Service, thereby reflecting great credit upon itself and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

BY COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL TWINING:
R. K. Taylor, Colonel, GSC, Chief of Staff
OFFICIAL::
/s/ J. M. Ivins
/t/ J. M. Ivins, Colonel, AGD, Adjutant General

RESTRICTED



Mission 69, June 28 We were only able to get 29 aircraft ready for our mission to bomb the airdrome at Karlova, Bulgaria. We dropped 57 tons of bombs on the target. Flak was very light and no enemy fighters were seen. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 70, June 30 Our last mission in June was to the Oterdal Oil Refinery on the Polish and Hungarian border. Thirty-seven B-24's loaded with 250# GP bombs were forced to turn back due to bad weather. They all returned to base safely.

During the month of June, the Group flew a total of 15 missions, putting 557 aircraft over the targets. The group dropped 1,247 tons of bombs on the enemy while shooting down 50 enemy aircraft with 15 more probable. On the other hand we have paid a frightful price for our efforts with the loss of 16 aircraft and 150 crewmen missing and two killed in action.

JULY 1944

July brought an intensive effort on the part of the Strategic Air Forces to continue knocking out the enemy's oil resources. In the next two months, the 455th Group would make 18 raids on the oil refineries or oil storage facilities of the enemy. Thirteen of these would be against the refineries at Ploesti.

Mission 71, July 2 The 15th Air Force sent 1,128 aircraft to the area around Budapest, Hungary, 551 B-24's, 161 B-17's, 198 P-51's and 140 P-38's. The 304th Wing sent 149 B-24's to bomb the Shell Oil Refinery and of these, 32 B-24's of the 455th Group dropped 57 tons of bombs on the target. The flak was heavy and accurate in the target area, but we came through without any casualties. We did, however, lose one aircraft on take-off. Two crewmen were killed and one seriously hurt. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 72, July 3 Twenty-four B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs struck the Malaxa Locomotive works outside of Bucharest, Rumania. We ran into very little flak and no fighter attacks. The bombing pattern was excellent with over 67% falling within 1,000 feet of the aiming point. All planes returned safely to base.

Mission 73, July 6 We sent 28 B-24's to bomb the North Oil Refinery at Trieste, Italy. It was a lucky day for the Group as the flak was light and generally inaccurate, and no enemy fighters were seen. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 74, July 7 Our target for this day was the Odertal refinery on the border of Poland and Germany. Twenty-seven B-24's dropped 59 tons of bombs on the target. Flak was very heavy and accurate in the target area. Fighters were aggressive and pressed their attacks vigorously. We lost one aircraft to flak but none to enemy fighters. Ten crewmen were missing in action.

Mission 75, July 8 While the rest of the Air Force was attacking oil targets in the Vienna area, the 455th attacked the Airdrome at Munchendorf, Austria, just south of Vienna. Twenty-six B-24's loaded with fragmentation bombs had good results on the bomb run and did an outstanding job on the airdrome. Flak was not heavy or accu-

rate. Enemy fighters were seen but did not press their attacks. All planes returned to base safely. One very happy crew finished their tour of duty with 50 missions completed.



Mission 73: North Oil Refinery, Trieste, Italy. Bombing accuracy, 35% within 1,000 feet CEP. Group Leader, Major David Thayer; Deputy Group Leader, Capt. David Belemere; Second Unit Leader, Lt. Winfield Bowers; Deputy Second Unit Leader, Lt. L.R. Jenkins; Lead Navigator, Capt. B. Brookshire; Bombardier, Major J. Horner.

Mission 76, July 12 We sent 29 B-24's to bomb the marshalling yards at Miramas, France. The flak was very heavy and accurate with almost all of the planes in the formation receiving damage. All planes returned to base safely.

Mission 77, July 13 We were briefed for the refinery at Trieste but found the target covered by clouds. Twenty-two of the 28 B-24's bombed the alternate target of Porto Margera, Italy. Six aircraft brought their bombs back to base as they could not identify the target. All planes returned to base.

Mission 78, July 15 The 15th Air Force and 304th Wing were back in the oil business. We were assigned Wing lead to bomb the Dacia Romano Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. The target was smoke covered so the Group bombed by pathfinder methods. The results were very good as we could still see smoke when we were 50 miles from the target. Flak at the target was very intense and accurate. We lost two aircraft to flak and 20 crewmen were missing in action.

Mission 79, July 16 We sent 28 B-24's loaded with fragmentation bombs to bomb the Airdrome at Munchendorf, Austria. The target was completely covered by clouds so the planes brought their bombs back to base. All planes returned safely.

Mission 80, July 17 We briefed to bomb the east marshalling yards at Avignon, France. Twenty-nine B-24's from the 455th carrying ten 500# GP bombs dropped them on the target with excellent results. The flak in the target area was very intense and accurate. We lost one aircraft to flak and ten crewmen were missing in action. All the other planes returned safely to base.

Mission 81, July 20 We were briefed to bomb the Maybach Aircraft Engine Factory at Fredrichhaven, Germany. Thirty-seven B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs dropped 328 of them on the target. The results could not be observed as there was too much smoke in the target area from earlier bombing. Flak in the target area was heavy and intense, but we suffered no losses and all planes returned to base safely.

Mission 82, July 21 Thirty-one B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs were

sent to bomb the Brux Oil Refinery in Czechoslovakia. This was our first mission to this area and the reception there was no different than any other well-defended target. The flak was very heavy and intense; we lost one of our planes. This one had a squadron commander aboard, Horace Lanford of the 741st Squadron. They were last seen falling behind the formation and no chutes were seen. (This crew escaped through the help of the Partisans and returned to fly again.)

Mission 83, July 22 This was another all-out effort by the 15th Air Force with 1,105 aircraft participating in the raid on the oil refineries at Ploesti, Rumania. The 455th effort was directed toward the Romano Americano Oil Refinery and 28 B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs dropped their bombs by pathfinder methods. The results were not observed as smoke and clouds covered the target area. The flak as usual was heavy and accurate, but we came through without any losses. Unfortunately, on the way back to base, two aircraft collided and we lost two aircraft and 20 crewmen; a real tragedy.

Mission 84, July 25 Twenty-five B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs were briefed to bomb the Herman Goering Tank Works at Linz, Austria. Flak at the target was very heavy and intense, and many of the planes received damage. One aircraft was so badly shot up that the crew was forced to abandon their plane. Fortunately, they parachuted over friendly territory and all were safe and returned to base though somewhat later than the rest of the crews.

Mission 85, July 27 We were briefed to bomb the marshalling yards and the Manfried Weiss Armament Works at Budapest, Hungary. Twenty-eight B-24's loaded with 500# incendiary bombs were the last group in the Wing formation. Not only was the target obscured by smoke but the fighters were waiting for us as well as the usual flak. We were attacked by as many as 90 enemy fighters and they were very aggressive. We had a running battle for over 30 minutes. We lost five planes in the battle and 51 crewmen were missing in action, one of our biggest losses to date. We claimed 17 enemy fighters shot down with 14 probables. Seven of our planes received serious damage from flak and fighters, and two more suffered slight damage.

Mission 86, July 28 This day we sent 19 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs to bomb the Astro Romano Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. We dropped 49 tons on the target area by pathfinder methods. While the flak at the target was intense and heavy, we managed to come through without casualties.

Mission 87, July 31 We had a whole weekend of rest, and on Monday we sent 25 B-24's loaded with 500# RDX bombs to the Oil Storage area at Mogosaia near Bucharest. The target area was well covered by bombs as we bombed by visual methods for a change. Flak was very heavy in the target area and many planes received damage. One of the planes had its hydraulic system shot out and ended up over the hill at the end of our runway, "totaled."

July ended our sixth month of combat with some impressive numbers. We flew 17 missions with 525 planes over the target. We dropped a total of 1,110 tons of bombs and shot down 20 enemy aircraft with 16 probables. We lost 23 aircraft and 121 crewmen missing in action. We also lost three crewmen killed in action and many more wounded. This was a rough month of combat for the Group.

AUGUST 1944

The start of the month of August promised a lot of good flying weather. That meant more and longer missions. Longer daylight hours didn't mean the ground crews wouldn't work longer hours, they worked long enough hours as it was, it just meant that they would be able to work in the daylight. The object of our missions had not changed. It was still oil, oil, and more oil! Along with that, we would be asked to help in the invasion of southern France. On the 3rd of August we began our seventh month of combat.

Mission 88, August 3 We loaded 34 B-24's with 500# GP bombs to bomb the Zahnrad-Fabric Works in Friedrichshafen, Germany. Fabric here means metal fabrication, not cloth. The flak was not heavy but was very accurate and we lost one plane which was last seen dropping back over the Alps with ten crewmen missing in action. Results of the bombing could not be seen due to cloud-cover at the target.

Mission 89, August 6 We were back in the Oil Business but this time in France. Our target was the Port Herriot Oil Storage facilities at Lyon, France. We loaded 34 B-24's with 500# GP bombs and dropped over 83 tons on the target. Results were very good as we saw smoke rising from the target 30 minutes after leaving the area. Flak was moderate in the target area and no enemy fighters were seen. All planes returned safely.

Mission 90, August 7 Twenty-eight B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs took off to bomb the Bleckhammer South Synthetic Oil Refinery at Glewitz, Germany. This was one of our longest missions to date and our longest into Germany. We ran into very little flak and no fighter opposition. What flak we encountered severely damaged two of our planes. The target was smoke-covered but we managed to bomb it successfully. Smoke was also seen at Budapest as we passed on the way back to base. All planes returned to base safely.



Mission 89: Port Herriot Oil Storage, Lyon, France. Bombing accuracy, 88% within 1000 feet CEP. Group Leader, Major Alfred Asch; Deputy Group Leader, Major David Harp; Second Unit Leader, Richard Haney; Lead Navigator, Capt. Fred Gross; Bombardier, Capt. H. Ohlmeyer.

Mission 91, August 10 Our target was the Campino Stevea Romano Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. Although the flak was still awful at Ploesti we managed to come through without any casualties and dropped 64 tons of bombs on the target area. All planes returned safely.

Mission 92, August 12 We were briefed for a slightly different target for this day as we bombed gun positions in

southern France along the coast. This signaled the start of another ground offensive. It was an easy mission as we encountered no opposition either from flak or fighters. All planes returned safely.



Mission 96: Romano Americano Oil Refinery, Polesti. Bombing accuracy, N.A., PFF. Photo shows numerous bomb craters at the target. Group Leader, Major Jack Reeder; Deputy Group Leader, Major Horace Lanford; Second Unit Leader, Lt. James Vandergrift; Lead Navigator and Bombardier, unknown.

Mission 93, August 13 Back to France again, this time it was the railroad bridge at Avignon. Thirty-five B-24's dropped over 82 tons of bombs, but again missed the bridge. Flak was very intense in the target area. We suffered no casualties but did have a few aircraft damaged by flak. All planes returned safely.

Mission 94, August 14 The targets that we received from the Wing and Air Force indicated that more is afoot than they will let on. We were to bomb gun emplacements in Southern France. We sent 30 B-24's loaded with 1,000# GP bombs. The flak at the target was moderate and accurate but we came through without any casualties, only one plane had slight damage.

Mission 95, August 15 The Group experienced its first take-off and assembly at night. We assembled 25 B-24's carrying 100# GP bombs to attack beach position 263C in southern France. As we assembled we saw explosions from crashing 24's and 17's from other groups. Our hearts were beating much faster this night as we knew the invasion was on in southern France and we were all a part of it. Those who flew this mission will never forget the sight of all those Allied ships approaching the coast and the terrific bombardment that hit the coastline. We dropped our bombs and came back to base to await the news of the invasion.

Mission 96, August 17 With news that the invasion was a huge success, we returned to the business at hand. Our target for this day was the Romano Americano Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Rumania. Thirty B-24's took off loaded with 500# RDX bombs. Eight airplanes returned early with various malfunctions so that only 22 bombed the target. Flak at the target was, as usual, heavy and very intense. Seven FW-190's attacked the formation but did not press their attacks. We lost two aircraft to flak and 20 crewmen were missing in action. Six airplanes received damage by flak.

Mission 97, August 18 We were back to Rumania again. This time we had as our target the Romano Oil Refinery at Stevea. We encountered flak en route to the target as well as in the target area. It varied from light to intense. We dropped our 500# bombs and returned to base with only one aircraft damaged by flak. No fighters were observed.

Mission 98, August 20 This was our third mission in a row on oil refineries. This time it was the refinery at Dubova, Czechoslovakia. Of the 30 B-24's we sent, only 21 dropped their bombs as "C" box was not able to line up on the target. As a result, they returned to base with their bombs. Flak at the target was light and not very accurate. All planes returned to base without any casualties.

Mission 99, August 21 We were sent to bomb the airdrome at Hadju Roszormeny, Hungary. Thirty B-24's loaded with fragmentation bombs took off but only 20 were able to bomb as the "C" box leader could not get his bomb bay doors open. These aircraft jettisoned their bombs over the Adriatic. No flak at the target nor fighters were seen, so it was a relatively easy mission.

Mission 100, August 22 For our hundredth mission they gave us a long and difficult one. Twenty-six B-24's carrying 500# GP bombs were to bomb the synthetic oil plant at Bleckhammer, Germany. Flak at the target was intense, accurate and heavy. We saw our first enemy jet at 1,000 feet above the formation but did not make any passes. We lost one of our aircraft to flak and ten crewmen were missing in action. It was our longest mission to date, seven hours and 45 minutes.

Mission 101, August 23 Twenty-six B-24's were briefed to bomb the railroad bridge at Ferrara, Italy. Planes were loaded with 1,000# GP bombs and we dropped 87 tons near the bridge. No hits were observed but the target must have been important as the flak was heavy, intense and accurate. We suffered damage to ten aircraft. Two aircraft landed at different bases as they could not make it back to home base.

Mission 102, August 24 Twenty-seven B-24's loaded with 500# RDX bombs attacked the Vacuum Oil Refinery at Kolin, Czechoslovakia. Bombing was accomplished visually with many bombs falling in the target area. There was no flak at the target and no enemy fighters were encountered. All planes returned to base safely, an easy mission for a change.

Mission 103, August 26 We were scheduled for the last time to the Ploesti area, this time to bomb the German barracks at the Baneasa Airdrome. Thirty B-24's loaded with 100# GP bombs hit the assigned target. This mission was the day following the "100th Mission Bash" and many of the men were a little under the weather but they responded as always. Flak at the target was nonexistent but flak was encountered along the route. Fighters attacked a straggler and we saw several chutes from that plane. We also lost the lead crew from the 743rd Squadron along with the Deputy Group Commander, Col. Hugh Graff, with 21 crewmen missing in action. It was later reported that 10,000 German troops were killed and numerous enemy aircraft destroyed by the 15th Air Force that day.

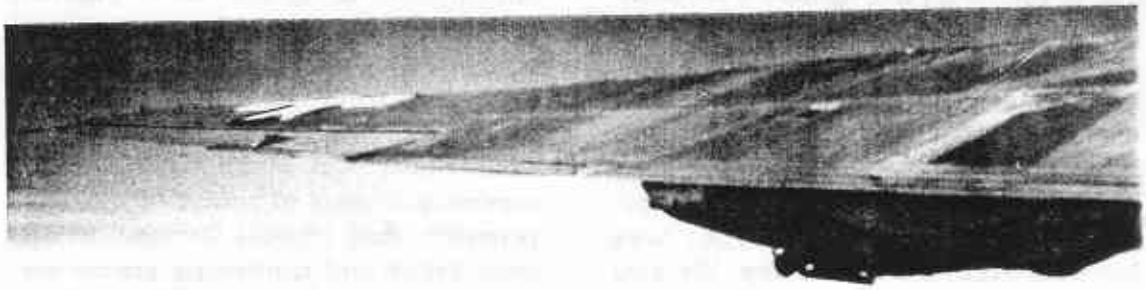
Mission 104, August 27 Another long mission to Bleckhammer, Germany, these were long, usually very rough and were always over seven and one-half hours in duration. That was tough on all crewmen and their support crews back at the base. This day we sent 28 B-24's loaded with 500# GP bombs. They bombed with good results but as usual the flak was very heavy and intense over the target. We lost another plane. It was last seen with one engine feathered losing altitude off to the left of the formation. Ten crewmen were reported missing in action.

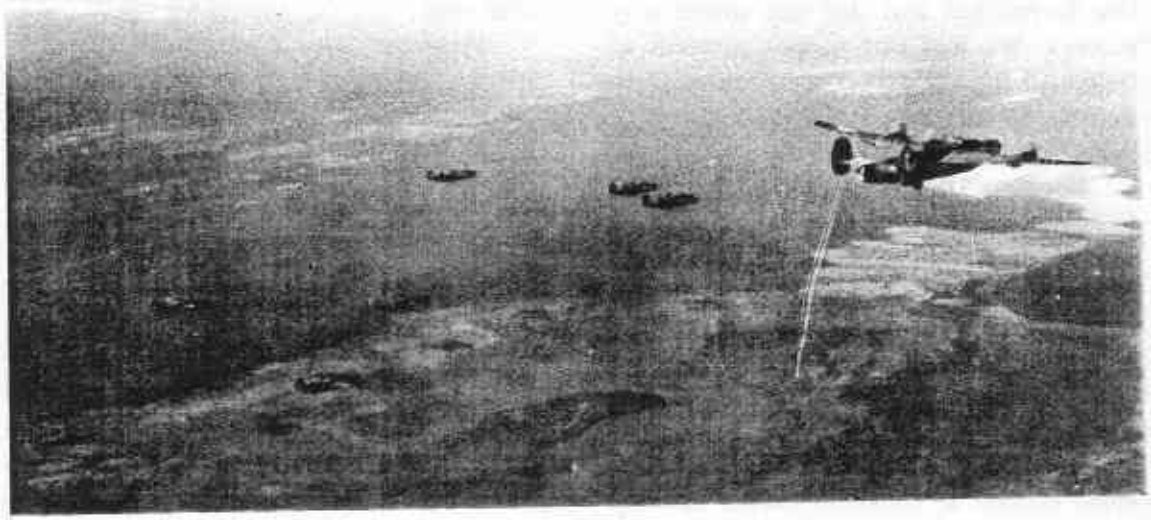
Mission 105, August 28 We sent 31 B-24's to bomb the railroad bridges

in northern Italy. Our assigned bridges were at Avisio and Pescheria. Their destruction was to disrupt the German retreat but we did not do a very good job. Only one bridge was identified and we missed that one. One aircraft was severely damaged by flak but all returned safely.

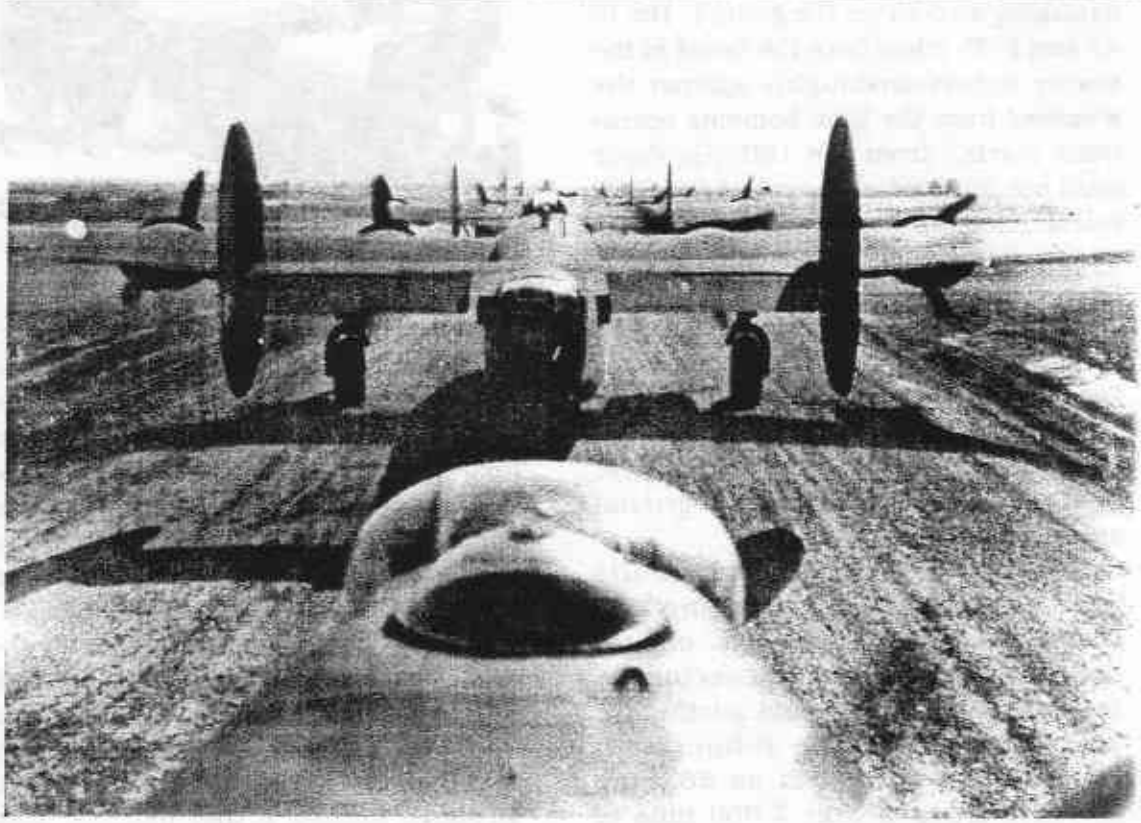
Mission 106, August 29 On the last raid for August we were briefed to bomb the Moravaska Ostrava Tank Works in Hungary. Thirty B-24's dropped over 77 tons of 1,000# GP bombs on the target area. We had an escort of P-38's which were always welcome. Bombing was accomplished by pathfinder methods and the results appeared to be good as smoke was seen coming through the overcast. Flak was light at the target and we suffered no casualties.

August was over and the results of our bombing this month were improving. We flew 19 missions with 563 aircraft over the targets. We dropped over 1,275 tons of bomb on the enemy. Our losses were nine aircraft with 92 crewmen missing in action. Enemy fighters were getting scarce, as we saw fewer and fewer of them. We claimed no fighter victories this month, the first such month since we started combat.





We Became A Seasoned Combat Group



The end of August 1944 marked major milestones for the Group. Its 100th mission was bombing the Bleckhammer oil refinery on 24 August 1944 and by month's end, we had completed 103 missions by hitting the Moravaska Ostrava Tank Works in Hungary. Indeed, the Group had many reasons for celebrating the completion of 100 missions. It had inflicted considerable damage bombing German targets; in fact, the back of the Luftwaffe was broken so badly that the last enemy fighter attack against the Group was on its 103rd mission at the end of August. The relentless bombing of the German aircraft production, airfields and oil facilities helped bring this about. The enemy was running short of experienced pilots because of the shortage of fuel for flight training and the new ones were no match for the Americans. The morale was at a low ebb as there was no fixed combat tour for the German pilots; they flew until killed or hung on until war's end.

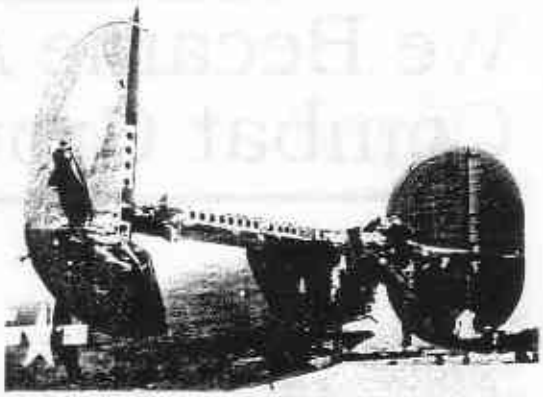
The Group formations were attacked by at least 780 enemy aircraft and our gunners accounted for 119 enemy fighters destroyed and another 80 probably destroyed. Also, the Group received credit for destroying 30 enemy aircraft

on the ground and 39 damaged from bombing enemy airfields. Our fighter protection took its toll of enemy fighters. They not only engaged in air-to-air combat to protect the bombers but strafed airfields as well, destroying and damaging aircraft on the ground. The P-47 and P-38 pilots bore the brunt of the enemy fighter onslaughts against the bombers from the time bombing operations started from the 15th Air Force until our 26th mission against the Sofia marshalling yards in Bulgaria 17 April 1944, when we had P-51 fighter escort for the first time. They were most welcome as they had a greater range and could stay in the target area longer to fend off the enemy fighters from the bombers. Their arrival permitted the P-47's, a much heavier and shorter range fighter, to be used more in a ground support role.

The Group's operational results were incomparable, receiving two Distinguished Unit Citations, one for bombing the ball bearing factory at Steyr on 2 April 1944 and another for destroying the oil refinery at Moosbierbaum, Austria on 26 June 1944. It dropped over 7,000 tons of bombs while flying 3,387 sorties during the first 100 missions. These accomplishments were not without losses. The Group lost 30 bombers from enemy fighters, 15 from flak and 19 from other causes, and there were 515 crewmen missing, six killed and 33 wounded from enemy action. The two aircraft losses while en route to Italy and the 19 noncombat during our first 100 missions would be totally unacceptable under today's flying safety standards.

The Ground Echelon Support

The combat achievements would not have resulted without the outstanding support of the ground echelon. Every



Yes, after outstanding maintenance and engineering, they flew again.

individual was dedicated to the destruction of the German war machine. The aircraft maintenance and supply people maintained and "patched" the airplanes for the following day's mission. Some airplanes seemingly beyond repair from enemy action would fly again from the efforts of the 304th Service Group and Squadron Engineering. The combat crews marvelled at the repair techniques used. Many airplanes returned filled with holes, some having more than 50. These were patched by simply taking sheeting "skin" from a wrecked airplane, cutting it into patches to fit over the holes, and rivetting in place. There simply was not time to remove sections of skin and replace it with new as is the requirement of today's aviation repair standards. Some airplanes were patched so much that they were nicknamed the "Sieve." The rugged B-24's never failed because of the makeshift patching.

The administrative and supporting organizations worked diligently to improve living and recreational facilities and programs. Each squadron was given a tufa block building, 20' x 50'; built by the engineers. The rest was left up to them. The squadrons made use of Italian soldiers and civilian workers,

using the tufa block and other local materials to build mess facilities, officer and enlisted men's clubs, medical dispensaries, orderly rooms and operations offices. More sanitary toilets and showers with hot water were appearing and most welcome. The Post Exchanges were better supplied with cigarettes, candy, toilet articles and even beer on rare occasions. The food had improved, but most of us don't remember. Nevertheless, historical records show where hotcakes and fresh eggs were sometimes served for breakfast and on rare occasions, there was fresh steak and ice cream for the evening meal. Some will recall being served butter from number ten cans for the first time for our hotcakes. It was soon removed as it was packed for tropical use and a large percentage of it was of a paraffin substance and would not melt. Each squadron had received one field generator which provided lights, one bulb for each tent hung in the center of the ceiling for the sleeping quarters and the common support and recreational buildings had electrical power. The wiring was generally strung on top of the ground and, at best, make-shift poles. The electrical insulation would not meet today's standards and there were problems during rainy weather and from vehicles driving over wires.



Stealing pipe for tent heaters!

Ross Strode, 742nd Squadron Bombardier, gives this account: "On several nights, the electric lights were flickering and grew dim. The cause could not be immediately determined. An unannounced inspection of the bivouac area was made and the inspection team found several crew members plugging their electric flying suits into the system to keep warm at night. This over-taxed the output from the generator. The squadron commander ended this practice on the spot." The generators ran several hours a day, seven days a week and some parts started wearing out, causing failures. It was sometimes difficult to get replacement parts but there was always someone to be found in the Group who had the skills to make the repairs.

The following are a few items found in the Air Force historical records of May 1944 which typify events of the Group: "Rifle inspection. New 24 hole latrine had its formal opening — successful patronage opening day. Group received letter of commendation from Col. Williams of the 304th Bomb Wing on its efforts and efficiency. A practice red alert. Work started on Italian-Civilian kitchen. Joyous occasion, each man received a quart of beer. Jewish men took off to Bari to attend a Seder for the first night of Passover. Easter Sunday. Sunrise services were held which appeared in papers in the States. Cake and ice cream. Red alert at 10:30, all clear at 10:45. New parking area established. Removed and burned tons of horse manure and debris from the area, some of which was centuries old. Some meritorious awards were made by Lt. Col. Kenneth A. Cool. Stream behind Headquarters cleaned out and barricades set up at various sections as mosquito control efforts. A system for constant flow of oil in stream set as fur-

ther aid to mosquito control. Work started on new motor pool, as well as a flag pole for the Headquarters area. A softball diamond started. Malaria day Lecture by Major Frank V. Thompson on malaria prevention. Started taking atabrine tablets. Beds covered with mosquito bars. Work started on new communication room. Gas mask day. New mess hall opened today, what a beauty. Volleyball court installed. Pay day and everyone attended."

The yellow atabrine tablets for malaria prevention started giving some a yellow pallor, especially the whites of their eyes. Some had to discontinue taking them as they lost their appetite and became undernourished. The red alerts were always false alarms. Nevertheless, the lights were doused if it occurred at night. There is no record of the Group's airfield coming under air attack and one can only speculate what impact it would have had on operations. The manure came from the old stable used for mission briefings for the combat crews.

Two of Our B-24's Collide on a Mission

There was always the concern by the pilots and other crewmen about the possibility of having a midair collision during flying formation, especially our B-24's with a full gas load, ten-man crew and up to 6,000 pounds of bombs. Many times the airplanes felt "mushy" and the controls were sluggish to respond. This was compounded at the higher elevations of 20,000 feet where the air was thinner, making the B-24 not very responsive because of the high wing loading of the Davis airfoil. Nevertheless, more than 95% of our missions required flying close formation at high altitudes. We were always in fear of one of the airplanes going out of control by damage from enemy action or a malfunction such as a sudden surge of power in an engine by the propeller going out of control and the B-24 colliding with another one in the formation. There were sometimes errors in judgment by the pilots in flying formation. This caused at least one midair collision. The results were always catastrophic with the four propellers running at more than 2,000 RPM's which cut each other to pieces. At least two airplanes and crews would be lost and the debris from the collision would go through the formation striking other airplanes and damaging them. There was a tragic midair collision between two airplanes of the 741st on a combat mission over Porto San Stefano, Italy on 28 April 1944. It was between two B-24's flown by 2nd Lt. Jerome E. Slater and 2nd Lt. Michael C. Callen. These two pilots were part of a six-plane flight led by Lt. Eugene (Gene) Hudson. This is Gene's account of the incident:

"My six-plane flight was part of the larger Group formation of 36 B-24's. There were no enemy aircraft and the flak over the target area was slight to moderate, but accurate. I was the pilot leading the flight with Slater flying on my right wing. Callen was flying the "diamond" position which was just below and behind my airplane. Callen had an airplane flying off each wing of his B-24. On the bomb run after passing the IP, three bursts of flak were seen directly ahead at the precise altitude of the six aircraft in my flight. The fourth burst struck Slater's number one engine and severed the wing and engine from his airplane. His plane immediately went out of control. My co-pilot, Lt. James H. Smith, said that Slater's airplane immediately rolled to the left and it happened so fast that he could not warn my crew or me. My waist gunner,

S/Sgt. Elliott, reported that he fully expected Slater's aircraft to hit us. Then my tail gunner reported that Slater's aircraft collided with Callen's B-24 flying just behind and underneath us. Slater's airplane flipped over on its back and struck Callen's plane back-to-back. Debris was flying everywhere. Only one parachute was seen to open. The 20 crewmen were listed as missing in action."

The regular navigator of Callen's crew, Lt. Guy T. Kuntz, was flying with Gene that day as his navigator. Lt. Kuntz wept all the way home after seeing his crew lost through this horrible tragedy. There were many who survived the war through chance assignments, making one ponder the meaning of the word "destiny."

Replacement Crews

Replacement crews and aircraft started coming none too soon. The Group needed both crews and airplanes from the "pounding" it took during the first 100 missions. Maximum effort was reduced to less than 40 B-24's per mission. The assigned aircraft got as low as 52 from an original strength of 64 B-24's and crews. However, General Arnold made good on his promise to provide replacement aircraft and well-trained crews to take care of our attrition. They started arriving during March 1944 and were most welcome to help carry us through the first 100 missions. The crews with their airplanes were integrated into flying combat in different ways to meet the needs of the squadrons. Sometimes a combat seasoned co-pilot would take over the new crew and be the first pilot until he completed his tour. The crew would then be put back together to complete its combat missions. The worst case would be the breaking up of a replacement crew by giving their airplane to a seasoned crew that had lost their's and then using the replacement crew members as fillers for crew personnel losses. This was demoralizing for them after training together as a crew and flying their B-24 over the long overseas route to get to Italy. Most had named their airplane with the usual artwork on the nose section. Nevertheless, they were indeed outstanding and well-trained for having only about 300 hours of flying time with a relatively small amount in the B-24. This is an account provided by one replacement crew member, Woodrow W. Dunlap, of the 740th Squadron: "We picked up our brand new B-24 at Mitchell Field, New York. We shined, waxed, polished and cleaned her. She was our pride and joy. We even paid an artist to paint pictures on her nose and we named her 'Cheri' after a crew member's daughter. We departed the U.S. in March 1944 and flew the southern route through Brazil. As soon as we arrived, your Col. Cool said, 'I'll take that for my lead plane,' supposedly because it was new. He did just that — painted off our picture and name; we never saw her again. On 2 April 1944 we went on our first mission over Steyr, Austria. We were in an old B-24 so beat up the nose turret (where I was flying) had to be tied shut with wire. On our first mission we were shot down! For 13



months, one day, two hours and 20 minutes I was a POW at Stalag 17-B, Krems, Austria. My memories of the 455th Bomb Group and Col. Cool are not what it is to others. I never got to know anyone except Lt. John Powers who flew as first pilot that day. He was killed along with four others of our crew. We left our original co-pilot at base that day and our regular pilot flew as co-pilot. I should have been right waist gunner but on that mission, I had to fly as nose turret gunner."

Another experience by a replacement crew was provided by James (Jim) W. Shumard, Jr. of the 743rd Squadron as follows: "I was the aircraft commander of crew #200, which was formed in March 1944 at the Charleston AAB, South Carolina. After completing training at Charleston, the crew received its new B-24 at Mitchell AAB and proceeded overseas via the northern route through Manchester, New Hampshire; Gander, Newfoundland; the Azores; through north Africa and to the replacement depot at Gioia, Italy. The crew was so proud of its new B-24, thinking all the time she would be our 'lifeline' in combat and return us safely, and we nurtured her constantly so the oncoming flak and fighters could be adequately handled. But at Geoia, our B-24 was taken from us and we waited for an assignment to a group for war duty. Soon there was a beat-up B-24 which took us to the 455th Bomb Group for the 743rd Squadron. We were given one of the 'war-weary' B-24's, number 184, that no other crew wanted to fly into combat. It looked fairly good from its olive drab appearance because it had not been flown much but it had a history of at least ten mission aborts. We were all disappointed and the bombardier was so inflamed that he coined a song about 184 to the tune of 'Lily Marlein' and it went like this: 'Down on the hardstand sits an aeroplane doomed to all the officers and enlisted men, going to take off and leave the shores, never to return to the base no more, and this is 184, and this is 184.' Possibly due in part to my previous experience as an aircraft mechanic, crew chief and flight chief, I worked with our airplane maintenance crew to put 184 in condition for combat flying. We flew her on at least nine combat sorties without an abort. Following this, the squadron decided my crew deserved a better airplane so we flew another one named 'CENSORED' for a few sorties then received a new B-24 and named it 'CENSORED II.' The B-24 'CENSORED' was lost in combat by another crew and the Squadron Operations Officer, Major Bechtold, was furious we had named our new airplane after one which had been lost in combat as it brought bad luck. Nevertheless, we continued flying with good success. However, while we were at rest camp, CENSORED II was lost in combat by another crew. We continued flying in other planes until we had 52 sorties and were proud that we never aborted a mission for any reason."



New crews coming in as replacements for those that had arrived earlier continued to go through the same frustrations until they gained combat experience and were considered combat seasoned.

Escape and Evasion

The combat crews were always briefed by S-2 personnel before each mission on escape and evasion. Emphasis was on making contact with Marshall Tito's Partisans of Yugoslavia and avoiding the Chetniks under General Mihailovich as they believed them to be pro-German and would sell an American prisoner dead or alive to the Nazis. It was later seen that this was a mistake. The British supported Mihailovich at the beginning of the war but in December 1943, Winston Churchill made the fateful decision to abandon the pro-Democratic national resistance army in Axis-occupied Yugoslavia and to support instead the Communist guerrilla forces and their leader, Josip Broz Tito. All radio traffic from Tito and Mihailovich went to Cairo for relaying to England. The operators in Cairo were Communists and gave all the credit to Tito for any attack on the German forces in Yugoslavia in their radio transmissions to the Allies. Churchill felt that if only Tito was fighting the Germans, why give Mihailovich weapons? Tito took the weapons supplied by the Allies, some he used against the Germans, but a greater part was used against his own countrymen, especially the pro-Western resistance forces led by General Draza Mihailovich. When the war was over, Tito was in power and Yugoslavia firmly in place as a strategic part of the Communist bloc. The Communists were three British officers who operated the radio in Cairo sending the disinformation. They fled to Russia at war's end and were never heard from.

After our Group flew combat a few months in 1944, it was recognized that Mihailovich remained pro-American. Both the Partisans and Chetniks had a small number of American and British officers and noncommissioned officers attached to their organizations for liaison with the Allied Forces. These officers would report back to the Allies the geographical areas held by both and call for rescue aircraft to pick up downed flyers they were holding.

General Mihailovich was awarded the Legion of Merit in the grade of Commander by President Truman in 1948 for his leadership in fighting the Nazis and in recognition of the role he played in saving the lives of more than 500 United States airmen in Yugoslavia during World War II.

The following is an account by William (Bill) L. Rogers of the 740th Squadron about his crew being shot down over Yugoslavia and picked up by the Chetniks. This is a typical experience for those crews going down and falling into the hands of the Partisans and Chetniks. Bill emphasizes the part his radio operator played to assist in the escape of the crew: "Jim Barker was the radio operator on a replacement crew for the 740th Squadron. His life in the Squadron revolved around the six-man tent, which he shared with other crewmen, the mess tent, writing home, and flying combat missions. Our crew had flown 16 combat missions over Rumania, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, northern Italy, southern France, Bucharest, Ploesti and 'once-is-enough' to Fredrickshaven. The mission on 8 September 1944 was to destroy the three bridges across the Danube River in the City of Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

"Belgrade was a relatively short distance from our base. The Group arrived within eyesight of the IP at least 4,000 feet below the assigned bombing altitude. The lumbering formation was led into a 360° turn to gain more altitude. Precious little added footage had been

earned when the whole nightmare surfaced again with at least 40 bombers making a second very slow full circle turn to the right! Still in the shadow of the target, the mission was modified from the 20,000 feet specified to only 18,500. There was frenzied recomputations by the lead bombardiers for their bombsight settings as we pressed on to the IP and target to bomb at 18,500 feet. After 'bombs away' the next maneuver was to execute a turn to the right and get the hell out of there! Being a flight leader for the first time, I held my heading for an additional 30 seconds to insure all B-24's in the flight had dropped their bombs for good coverage when all hell broke loose inside our plane. We received a direct hit from a battery of four German 88mm antiaircraft guns. I gave the signal to bail out by ringing the warning bell while in a steep turn to get away from the flak and then issued orders over the intercom, 'BAIL OUT!'

"Jim Barker was one of the last to leave the airplane and he was met by German soldiers who had sped from Belgrade to capture those just shot down. Barker always carried chewing gum, cigarettes, and candy bars in his flight jacket when on a mission. He landed on a highway just as the Germans arrived. Rather than putting his hands in the air, he slowly dragged out those goodies — the chewing gum which the Germans accepted greedily and looked for more, then the candy bars and finally the cigarettes came from Barker's jacket, in a ploy that was potentially explosive, he detained his captors as long as possible. Fortunately, this distraction, which was an overt ruse, was successful even though Barker did not know its benefits until much later. In Barker's bold manner, he risked his own safety so that others of the crew could escape capture. Because of his delaying actions, the Serbian Chetniks underground 'Freedom Fighters' were able to whisk away other members of Jim's aircrew to secure areas. Seven members, including the co-pilot William (Bill) B. Crawford, were back in Italy within eight days. (Bill gave this account of their escape: "The crewmen were hidden in two-wheeled ox carts covered with corn stalks and straw. They slept in farm houses and barns and were fed by the local people until arriving at an airfield near the Adriatic Sea where they were picked up by a C-47 escorted by P-51's during daylight and flown to Italy.")

"As pilot, I was the last to leave the crippled B-24. I felt a warm surge in my right leg as I bounced down to the bomb bay catwalk to bail out. I did not have time to remove my flak vest, mae west, and my oxygen mask hose was flapping in the wind as I opened my parachute. I felt a sharp pain in my injured leg but was able to wiggle my toes; there was hope. After painfully hitting the ground on a small hill, my waist gunner, Gerry Wagner, appeared and we heard voices saying 'Chetnik.' Because of the briefings that crews downed in Yugoslavia should seek Tito's Partisans since the Chetniks would kill Americans, here was a dilemma. Gerry suggested that he would go to the main highway below to get the Germans who were believed to provide medical aid and decent treatment for prisoners. However, the same voices behind the hill were saying 'docteur.' I reasoned that no one would administer medical care to someone and then kill them so we waited for them to arrive. They were friendly and offered their assistance for medical care and escape. I was grateful that Wagner stayed although not knowing that the Chetniks continued to be

pro-Allies.

"I was placed in an ox cart but could not stand the pain in my injured right leg from the bumpy road although there was a layer of corn stalks for my comfort. The rescuers switched to a wood siding from the cart, using my parachute fabric as a cushion, and positioned three wooden poles under the siding for six men to carry me to a small village of Ripanj. While a Chetnik doctor attended my wound the best he could, the German searchers entered the other end of the village. Again, the Chetniks carried me to a more secluded spot in an abandoned school house where we stayed for three days.

"Within this short period of time, almost 3,000 friendly Serbian people came to see a genuine American despite the loss of civilian lives caused by erratic bombing that was supposed to destroy the bridges. One of those 'friendly' visitors snitched and informed the Germans of our location. At about midnight, I was placed on a metal cot into a small panel truck which took us to a Serbian peasant's house where no German soldier dared venture inside. I was placed on a large round table in the kitchen where chickens scurried back and forth on the dirt floor.

"The next day, we were passed on to a grocer's home where we had a separate bedroom which was used for downed airmen. While there, the Chetniks had to retreat back into their Ravna Cora mountain stronghold. I declined the invitation to go along because it took six men just to carry me. I was not discovered by the Germans and two days later, a Partisan Lieutenant showed up to provide a means for escape to Italy. The first few days of travel was via a four-wheeled wooden wagon with corn stalks as bedding and drawn by a team of horses. Besides the driver, who went the shortest route cross country, a lone Partisan soldier with a rifle walked silently about 30 feet behind the cart. On the third night, I slept in a Partisan hospital and then was loaded into a railroad freight car early the following morning together with about 50 other wounded men and women. The straw on the floor was infested with lice and ticks. I traveled all day and night lying mostly flat on my back because of my injured leg. About noon, the door opened to the box car and a man's head popped inside and yelled, 'Are there any Yanks here?' An American officer helped me from the box car and I had a most welcome hot bath, new clothing and a wonderful home cooked meal. I was then flown to an American general hospital in Bari, Italy on 17 October 1944. Soon thereafter I was evacuated medically to the U.S. on a Liberty ship converted into a hospital. Thankfully, I fully recovered."

Capture by the German soldiers was the prelude to extended suffering that Barker prefers to forget. He was hustled through Budapest and Vienna to uppermost Germany where he remained captive five months in Stalag Luft IV prior to being forcefully evacuated in midwinter because of the Russian offensive. Barker marched nearly 800 miles during the debilitating three months which followed. During this 'Black Hunger March,' the worn, hassled prisoners of war had to sleep in barns and open fields plus enduring the bombs and strafing by their own Allied Air Forces. For a seemingly endless five or six days, Jim and other POW's had no food or drink except melted snow. He was freed at Bitterfield, about 15 miles south of Dessau, Germany. He had withered away a third of his normal body weight and required two months hospitalization in France before being able to trav-

el. He convalesced for two months at home and remained a patient in a military hospital for another 60 days where he was presented the Purple Heart and other decorations. Jim fully recovered.

Back in his own Squadron, Bill Crawford took command of his depleted crew with a replacement co-pilot and other crew members and flew combat mission number 18 to Munich only 18 days after their escape. He and his crew completed the required missions early January 1945.

Some Landed at the Isle of Vis



The Isle of Vis was a haven for crippled bombers and fighters that could not make it to Italy from bombing targets in Austria, Hungary and the Balkins. It is one of the three most western Dalmation islands in the Adriatic Sea, nestled between Bisevo and Susac. Vis, a rock island, had no fresh water but boasted of a natural and protected harbor for ships. The runway was gravel and only 3,500 feet long located in a valley. The island was a junkyard of wrecked B-24's, B-17's, B-25's and other types of aircraft. They had been bulldozed off the runway and stripped of usable spare parts and equipment. Some airplanes were repaired and flown back to their bases. On occasion, there would not be room for a crippled bomber to land and the crew was asked to bail out over the airfield and let the airplane crash in the sea. In the early stages of our combat, the island was frequently bombed by German Stukas. To invade the island would have been very costly for the Germans, thus it provided a safe emergency landing space for the Allied airplanes. While at Vis, downed flyers feasted on Yugoslavian wine and Spam until their transportation back home arrived which was a small high-speed supply boat or a C-47.

Tom Ramey of the 743rd Squadron found haven at Vis: "The target was Rumania. Fighters were encountered and flak was very heavy. We lost an engine from flak near the target but rather than leave the defense of the Squadron, we continued to the target and released our bombs with the formation. We lost the second engine from flak while pulling away from the target but was able to hang in there long enough to be away from the danger of fighters. The crew lightened the B-24 by throwing everything out that they could. When the remaining two engines began to falter, and with no hydraulics, I realized we could not make the long journey across the Adriatic Sea to our home base. The navigator vectored our plane into Vis. The hydraulic system operated the wing flaps, nose gear and brakes so the aerial engineer manually 'kicked' and locked the nose gear down. Faced with an extremely short landing strip with no brakes or flaps, I instructed the crew to tie a parachute onto each of the two waist guns and to pop the chutes when the bailout bell rang. As the main gear touched down, followed by the nose wheel, I rang the bell, the chutes popped and the B-24 squatted to a stop in the landing area. We were

taken to Italy by C-47 to fly another day."

Crews going into Vis with crippled airplanes had only one chance for landing as a go-around for another approach would probably have been fatal.

Prison Life in Rumania

The oil refining, storage facilities and the marshalling yards in Rumania were important targets as they supplied the German war machine with approximately 25% of its petroleum products. The Group started hitting these targets in May 1944 and the last strike was flown on 26 August when we bombed German barracks at Baneasa airdrome north and west of Bucharest. During this time period we lost six bombers to enemy fighters, seven to flak and seven from other causes. From these losses, we had 163 airmen missing in action (MIA). The targets being in and around Bucharest and Ploesti made the missions about eight hours long. This taxed the range of our fighter protection. Although they could fly that far and return, they did not have enough fuel to stay in the target area very long and fight. Thus we sometimes were subject to enemy fighter attacks.

Early in the war, Marshal Antonescu, Chief of the Rumanian Army, overthrew King Michael's government and appointed himself Premier. The King was 18 years old. Antonescu capitulated with the Germans when they entered Rumania and the oil resources were left unharmed. The Rumanian Air Force joined with the Luftwaffe in defending the oil targets from Allied bombing. The royal family, through public pressure, was permitted their freedom and they placed pressure on Premier Antonescu and the Germans for Rumania to manage the POW camps. The Germans, however, reserved the right to interrogate POW's. This turned out to be very fortunate for the Allies as our POW's received better treatment than those in Germany. Furthermore, the Rumanians prevented the Germans from taking our POW's to Germany when they overthrew them in August 1944 with the Russians fast approaching the cities of Bucharest and Ploesti. Premier Antonescu then gave his resignation to King Michael and the Rumanian government changed to pro-Allied and released the POW's.

The following is a story of the experiences of Lt. Wilmer S. Wallack and his crew of the 740th Squadron: "The early morning hours of 21 April 1944 began for our crew as other mission mornings had before with the unpleasant wakeup call about 4:00 a.m. The normal grunts, groans and pleasantries were tossed at the disturber of sleep in a not too complimentary manner by the four officers who occupied the four-man tent. Similar activities were underway by our six enlisted crew members in another part of the Squadron area. Breakfast, mission briefing and launch of the first aircraft at about 8:00 a.m. occurred routinely. However, the crew would be called upon this day to utilize to the maximum extent their training and skills to survive the rigors of high altitude combat operations.

"The target was the railroad marshalling yards at Bucharest, Rumania deep within German-held territory and defended by heavy concentrations of flak guns and large numbers of German and Rumanian fighters. It was a major effort with 17 bomb groups being launched by the 15th Air Force. My crew was made up of the following: 2nd Lt. Ben B. McInturff, co-pilot; 2nd Lt. Michael Constantino, navigator; 2nd Lt. Jack L. Hager, bombardier; S/Sgt. Merlin Lodge, engineer; S/Sgt. John L.

Moore, Jr., radio operator; S/Sgt. Joseph E. Abbink, ball turret gunner; S/Sgt. James P. Cronin, waist gunner; S/Sgt. Harry J. Gaynor, waist gunner; and S/Sgt. John F. Franco, tail gunner.

"Following assembly of the groups into their flight formations, we headed over the Adriatic Sea with fighter escort on a course for Bucharest. As we crossed the coast of Yugoslavia at 10,000 feet, a heavy build-up of clouds was forming and the formation flew between layers and changed course frequently to keep aircraft clear of the clouds as the Group continued its climb to 20,000 feet. Our 'tail-end-Charley' position in the second section of the formation and the varying rates of climb to stay clear of the clouds, required us to use excessively high power settings to stay with the Group. We were unable to do so and fell behind the formation. It seemed unwise for us to return to home base alone as we were too far into enemy territory and enemy fighters had been sighted; rejoining the formation was our best alternative. Because of the solid cloud-cover over the targets, the 15th Air Force issued a recall for the bombers to return. The 455th and three other groups failed to receive the recall and continued on to the target without fighter escort.

"About 20 minutes from the IP we had an electrical failure on the supercharger of the #3 engine, reducing the power and consequently, the airspeed. I ordered Hager, our bombardier, to salvo the bombs to lighten the ship in hopes of building up our airspeed and rejoining the formation. My intent was to cut across the flight path of the Group and to rejoin it after the bombs were dropped and the formation turned from the target to return to base. The flak was moderately heavy and accurate, and we were hit by shrapnel in the #1 and #2 engine superchargers which caused a further loss of power and we fell farther behind the Group formation. We also took a direct hit between #1 and #2 engines. Luckily, there was no fire. Any protective cover from enemy fighters the Group formation would have given us was no longer within reach; we were on our own.

"As we left the flak area, we were attacked by seven enemy fighters equipped with cannons. They fired their cannons during repeated attacks but stayed out of range of our 50 caliber guns. They hit the #2 engine and we had to feather it. We took numerous hits in the rear of the fuselage and a large part of the right vertical stabilizer was shot away making directional and horizontal control difficult to maintain. Our gunners were out-gunned by the enemy cannons but prevented the fighters from coming into closer range with a steady stream of machine gun fire.

"I put the B-24 in a steep descent to enter the undercast and lose the fighters but the clouds were farther below than I had estimated. The fighters continued attacking and hit the #3 engine which we feathered and continued for the clouds. By this time, the gunners in the rear had exhausted their ammunition and our aircraft was just barely under control. I ordered Cronin and Gaynor to assist Abbink in retracting the ball turret and helping him back into the aircraft as he could not exit it in its extended position. In their continuing attack, the fighters completely disabled the #1 engine, causing the propeller to overspeed (runaway). We could not feather or stop it and were rapidly losing altitude. We used full power on our remaining good engine, #4, to maintain altitude and control the aircraft but it was hopeless, so I ordered the crew to bail out. Franko

and Gaynor were hit by shrapnel from two shells that exploded in the rear of the aircraft with Franco's injuries being the most serious. Cronin and Abbink fastened (snapped) Franco's parachute on him and dropped him through the camera hatch; Gaynor, Abbink and Cronin followed. Loge and Moore went out the bomb bay doors with Constantino and Hager going out the nose wheel door. This left Mac and me with the aircraft as we fought to keep it flying.

"Seeing the parachutes, the fighters closed in and raked the ship with their smaller caliber guns. One burst shattered the co-pilot's side window and windshield. I yelled at Mac to leave and I would be close behind. As Mac left his seat, I shifted to the far right side of mine and held full right rudder and aileron with my left foot and hand. The ship passed through the first layer of clouds and I kept full power on #4. I looked back to see if Mac had cleared the bomb bay. He was hanging on to the front edge and then I saw his hands disappear so I proceeded to leave the crippled ship. The altimeter showed 12,000 feet so there was time. With #4 engine power full on, the ship went into a flat spin to the left, throwing me against the radio table and onto the flight deck floor. I managed to crawl to the rear of the bomb bay on the cat walk and dove head first out the aircraft. Our active combat and the B-24 was no more but the fate of our crew was yet to be determined. What awaits our destiny?

"I passed through the last layer of clouds and came down in a newly plowed, muddy field about one-fourth mile outside a small village, 20 miles south of Bucharest. Thinking I might avoid capture, I headed in a direction away from the village. I was spotted and two shots were fired over my head which brought me to a halt with my hands raised. I was captured by four soldiers from a small garrison in the village and about 25 villagers. I was searched, taken to the village, interrogated and held in a small headquarters type building. Shortly afterwards, Hager, McInturff, Abbink and Loge were brought in. Constantino, Franco, Gaynor, Cronin and Moore were picked up and taken to another village some distance away. Some village women brought us sweet cakes and tea as we sat on benches under a large shade tree. Villagers gathered around, some solemn-faced and some smiling, making comments and gestures that were not unfriendly or threatening.

"After sleeping on the floor of a small building, we were taken to Bucharest in a large, horse drawn, high two-wheeled wagon by four guards. We were carried in a street car from the outskirts of the city to the Queens Guard Garrison which was being used as a temporary holding point. While on the streetcar, McInturff was given 1,500 Rumanian lei by a young matronly woman for cigarettes and other small personal items. Both the Rumanian and German military had administrative offices within the garrison. We slept in our clothes for the first seven nights without mattresses or blankets. Constantino and Moore came in on the 23rd of April while Franco, Hager and Cronin were held at a hospital for treatment. Franco's multiple shrapnel wounds were serious, Gaynor and Cronin's less so but infected and painful.

"After having been interrogated several times, we were taken to our permanent POW camp where we joined other POW's. The food was bad and there was not enough of it. It consisted of unfla-

vored beans, coarse, dry grain bread, and goat- and perhaps even dog-flavored soup as indicated by pieces of jaw bones with teeth in it. One night we were brought a field pot of plain cooked barley which looked and tasted like glue. Constantino, of Italian descent, could carry on a fractured conversation with the Rumanians. After dark, he got one of the guards to help him carry the pot back to the kitchen in the middle court yard and exchange it for a pot of barley soup seasoned with a small amount of meat, potatoes, tomatoes and onions. He did this without the senior Rumanian personnel being aware of it. We had a feast.

"The weather was damp and cold much of the time during April and into May and there was no heat in the buildings. We only had one blanket each so we slept in our clothes to stay warm and stayed under cover most days. Some of us caught colds and had sore throats, and at least one POW had to have his tonsils removed at a Rumanian hospital. There was very little medication at the camp but shots for diphtheria were given to all POW's in the compound. My three crew members who were wounded by flak returned from the hospital but Abbink looked bad and there were still pieces of flak remaining in his throat area the doctors did not get.

"The 15th Air Force continued to bomb the oil facilities near our camp during the day while the British bombed at night. Some bombs fell dangerously close with one landing in the courtyard which damaged one side of the building and blew all the windows out. We spent a lot of time in the basement and under bunks during air raids by the Allies. On some occasions, we were locked in our rooms during bombing attacks and crawled under our bunks with our hands over our heads.

"King Michael of Rumania visited our camp in April and we filled out POW forms for the Red Cross. A small canteen was set up for Rumanian and German use, but available to the POW's if they had money to buy sweets, cigarettes and other small items. We sold watches, rings and crash bracelets to the canteen owner to purchase these items. This boosted our morale!

"On the 29th of April, two POW's escaped but were captured and placed in solitary confinement. The cooks, kitchen help, latrine orderlies and barbers were Russian trustees and quartered apart from other POW's. The food continued to be bad and there was not enough of it. We spent time cleaning the lice from our blankets and clothing and on one occasion, we were furnished blow torches to burn the lice from our bed springs. Shower baths with warm water were infrequent and we were without water altogether on many occasions. During water outages, sanitary conditions became intolerable, particularly in the toilets. We took sun baths by laying across sidewalks alongside of the building which made the Germans walk in the street to get around us to their administrative offices. They ordered the Rumanian guards to run us back into our rooms. We 'badgered' the Rumanian officers about who was in charge. This provoked them and they ordered the guards to take us back to the sidewalks for sun bathing. The Germans got very upset but did nothing. We played the Rumanian guards against the Germans every chance we got.

"We were moved to an abandoned secure school house converted into a POW camp which was farther from the oil targets. From this, we got a warm shower, clean clothes and a better facility with no Germans. It was the same

food but better prepared. The officers occupied one side of the camp, the enlisted men the other. Some British airmen were brought in as well as American flyers. The camp soon became crowded as day and night bombing increased against Ploesti, Brasov and Bucharest with more downed airmen. Outside recreational activities increased, even basketball play. An International Red Cross official came to check on us but didn't promise any improvements nor were there any. At times, the Rumanians would give us funds when we did not receive our Red Cross packages, permitting us to buy a few necessities from the canteen. We were permitted to write one Red Cross card each week or ten days.

"With the camp filling with POW's, we were moved to a hospital which was only 600 yards from the Bucharest marshalling yards, an important target to the Allies. Prior to the move, the food rations were decreased with bread cut out of the diet, leaving nothing but weak soup and beans with very little meat. The stepped-up bombing of the marshalling yards continually kept us on the alert and in the basement. Bombs dropped all around the building and a large fire started in a big apartment building across the street. Numerous other fires were visible.

"POW's from the 1 August 1943 low level Ploesti raid joined us 3 August 1944. They smuggled in a radio which we set up each evening and tuned in to the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). When not in use, it was taken apart in five or six pieces and each piece given to a POW. When the radio was to be used, these individuals dropped their piece off in a room, the radio reassembled and first-hand news from BBC was received. Battle front information was posted on a large wall map. It became evident our information was more accurate than the Rumanians' and our status map really 'bugged' the Rumanian officers, especially the Colonel.

"As the oil facilities were destroyed and the Russians were getting closer to the area, the food and treatment improved and we were under just the control of the Rumanians. Letters from home arrived more frequently and more Red Cross parcels were received. On 11 August, the Rumanian Premier reportedly offered his resignation to King Michael. The Rumanians started gaining control of the city from the Germans on 23 August 1944. We raised Rumanian, American and Russian flags as the POW choir sang the Star Spangled Banner. Although the gates were unlocked, we were ordered to stay in camp because of street fighting with the Germans. Several POW's attempted to leave the city but found it surrounded by Germans.

"The Germans did not give up easily. During the night of 25 August, we had eight bombing raids by them and most of the next day. The bombing of their airfield by the 15th Air Force stopped this. We were soon to be back in Italy."

Rumanian Doctors Saved POW's Life

Victor McWilliams, first pilot of the 741st Squadron provided this account of a mission he and his crew flew over Ploesti on 5 May 1944: "The takeoff and flight to Ploesti was uneventful. This was our third trip there and the only thing different was the amount of flak. It was much worse this time; the puffs of smoke from the exploding shells were so close together it looked like there was no way through them. We took an almost direct hit on the right wing,

knocking out numbers three and four engines. The plane pulled to the right and started a spiral downward. I reduced power on numbers one and two engines to about one-third to straighten out the plane and salvoed the bombs. My waist gunner, Harry McDowell, reported the airplane was on fire. I ordered him and others to get the ball and tail turret gunners out and bail out! One member in the forward section of the airplane was reluctant to leave but a little nudge convinced him.

"I was preparing to leave but I knew I had been hit in my left wrist and leg with shrapnel. At about 12,000 feet, a Me-109 pulled alongside and the pilot motioned for me to get the hell out of there. I thought it was decent of him. When I stood up, I knew my leg was practically severed between my knee and ankle. I nevertheless left the airplane and landed in a tree; I had problems getting down from it. A little old lady was standing there crying and wringing her hands. A man in uniform arrived and pointed a pistol at my head until he discovered I was seriously injured and he left for help. Two others soon arrived and put me in a car. About five miles down the road, it had a flat tire. Soon a crowd of people arrived and peered inside to see a downed American flyer. Another car arrived and took me to the Bucharest hospital.

"There were two Rumanian officers and two doctors in the operating room where they took me. They questioned me about the empty 50 caliber shell I had for storing morphine shots for in-flight use. I had trouble convincing them it was not an explosive. I was asked if I needed a shot and responded that since they had given me one I would be all right. I gave them my name, rank and serial number and passed out. My left leg was amputated by the Rumanian doctors about two and one-half inches below the knee.

"I awakened the next morning in a room with another American. I said something to him and he looked surprised and said, 'You are supposed to be dead. They brought you in here last night and said you would be dead before morning!' I had lost a lot of blood and the Rumanians said they had none for a transfusion.

"I miraculously survived and saw many more bombing raids except this time, on the receiving end. The hospital took a direct hit and they later moved us to another location. To show there is humor in all things, the dust was so thick one couldn't see anything and someone down the hall shouted, 'Open the doors and windows and let this dust out!' There were no doors or windows left in the bay. I was moved to a school house and it was there that I saw the rest of my crew, and was overjoyed that they all survived."

Air Rescue of Our POW's

Bringing the POW's back from Rumania would by itself make a book of most interesting reading. The Royal Family of Rumania abhorred the German's occupying their country but were fortunate they were permitted some freedom to move about during the occupation. King Michael and Queen Mother Helena tried to improve conditions for the POW's but they were generally blocked by the prison commandant. They were permitted to visit the POW camps and bring personal items from special requests. For example, Queen Helena brought a map of Europe, paper and colored pencils for use by the prisoners to maintain a status board of the war. Princess Catherine Caradja of the Royal Family was a humanitarian and supported a

school for orphans, and by war's end had more than 3,000 in her care. She was permitted to make frequent visits to the POW camps and worked diligently through the Red Cross to make conditions more bearable for the prisoners. In doing this, she made many long-lasting friends and to this day, she visits former POW's in the United States and attends the reunions of the Association of Former Prisoners of War in Rumania. Many 455th crewmen belong to this Association and have fond memories of Princess Catherine. The Royal Family exerted all the influence they had to set the POW's free and get them back to Italy as the Germans withdrew.

At about midnight on 23 August 1944, General Gerstenberg of the German Army met with General Stanescu, the new Prime Minister of Rumania, and agreed to peacefully withdraw all German troops to the north and east. However, the Germans had no intention of giving up without a battle. They moved about 10,000 troops to the Baneasa and Otompeni airports and the surrounding woods just north of Bucharest. They started blitzing the city of Bucharest every ten minutes from these positions as they were only ten kilometers away making it impossible to develop a program to get our POW's out. The bombings had to be stopped.

When the Germans occupied Rumania, a Mr. V.C. Georgescu, Managing Director of the Rumania American Oil Refinery, was placed under arrest by Premier Antonescu as he believed him to be pro-American. Although in confinement, he managed to get bits and pieces of radio equipment from downed airplanes to build a transmitter for communications with the Allies. He sent a radio message of the German bombing and the 15th Air Force sent a bombing strike against the two airfields on 26 August. The strike was very successful, destroying most of the German aircraft and killing up to 10,000 soldiers. This opened the way to start a program to rescue the POW's. The 455th was part of the bombing force.

On 17 August 1944, Lt. Col. James A. Gunn III of the 454th Bomb Group was shot down over Ploesti and became a POW. When the prisoners were free to leave the POW camps, Col. Gunn worked through various levels of the Rumanian military command and government to get the POW's back to Italy. His plan was to fly a Rumanian airplane to Italy to arrange to have the POW's flown out. After an abortive attempt in an ancient Italian twin engine Savoy-Marchetti, Col. Gunn was flown to San Giovanni (his home base and the home of the 455th) in the cramped luggage compartment of a Me-109 piloted by Prince Cantacuzene, a captain in the Rumanian Air Force. The Prince was the top Rumanian Ace against Allied aircraft. An American flag was painted on the fuselage and a plan devised where they would fly at 19,000 feet and start a rapid descent over the Adriatic into San Giovanni to avoid detection by the Allied air defenses. Col. Gunn sketched a map on a piece of cardboard of the Italian coast and the area in and around San Giovanni for pilotage and was then stuffed into the luggage compartment without parachute or oxygen with the door locked from the outside. They landed without incident. Col. Gunn convinced General Twining to send B-17 bombers to Bucharest to pick up the POW's and return them to Italy.

A reconnaissance mission was sent to Popesti airport at Bucharest to determine whether it was clear to rescue the POW's. This was led by Prince Cantacuzene flying a P-51 and escorted

by two of our P-51's. His Me-109 could not be used as its type of fuel was not readily available. There was concern whether the Prince could be trusted as he had opposed Allied aircraft in the air just a few days prior and our scouts were ordered to shoot him down if he violated that trust. The mission succeeded and the scouts reported that the airport seemed secure, although there were German aircraft still in the area.

A small flight of B-17's under heavy fighter escort flew to Bucharest with a liaison party, including medical officers, to round up the men and prepare history's first large-scale air evacuation from a point 550 miles inside enemy lines. At Foggia, Italy, ground crews fitted 50 B-17's with bomb bay seats and litters to accommodate at least 20 men in each plane. They carried a minimum of ammunition, only five crewmen and no parachutes to keep the weight down. The B-17's flew in at 12,000 feet, escorted by P-51's and P-38's and brought back 1,274 of our men to Foggia. They were deloused, given showers, clean clothing and a hearty meal. It was indeed a happy day for everyone!

Our 100th Mission Celebration

A jubilee celebration commemorating our 100th combat mission over enemy territory was held by the Group on 25 August 1944. We had special permission to stand down for the festive occasion. The main drag of the selected spot for the gala event had a long row of arches draped with evergreens and decorated with the flags of Allied nations. There were various designated spots for picking up a really delicious Bar-B-Q beef sandwich while beer flowed freely. Various competitive inter-squadron sports, including baseball, tug-of-war across the creek and donkey races were held. Each squadron had their own side





show which vied with others for first place with their daring and risqué performances by the ladies. The most impressive part of the program was when the men stood at attention as the band played the Star Spangled Banner

and the heavy anti-aircraft guns of the English boomed for a salute to the men, our friends and buddies, of the Group who were killed in action or failed to return from combat missions.

The party continued far into the night at the Squadron and Group Headquarters club rooms. It was truly a memorable day. We were honored by several staff officers as well and enlisted men from the Wing Headquarters and the commanding officers from the other groups in the area stopped by to pay their respect.

Some POW's Escaped Over Land

There are accounts of individuals hiding from the Germans by day and traveling at night to escape and reach friendly forces. Perhaps the most brazen escape is told by Hugh Graff, the Group Deputy Commanding Officer. Here is his story: "On the evening of the 100th Mission Party, David 'Rock' Thayer, 743th Squadron Commander, asked me to take his place on a mission the following day to bomb the German barracks at Bucharest. (This was the mission where up to 10,000 German troops were killed and many aircraft destroyed which paved the way for the air lift and escape of our POW's from Rumania.) This was to the area that had always brought some shudder to anyone scheduled to go there. Col. Cool had overheard the conversation and insisted it was his turn to go. We dealt a hand of poker to see who would go and I won. The mission was a 'milk run' until on the way back, the Group went over a flak battery and our B-24 took a direct hit in the bomb bay or close to it. The rubber fuel lines in the bomb bay and flight deck were ruptured and burst into flames. Fanned by the wind coming through the opening that had been blown out, the fire was a problem for anyone on the flight deck to escape. There was no chance to fly the 'wounded bird' as the flight controls were gone. I punched the alarm button for bail out and hit the #2 engine feathering switch and told the co-pilot, Lt. Vandergrift, to leave. The noise from the fire and the wind prevented any communications so it was every man for himself. I forced my way through the pilot's window and was blown over the top of the wing. I struck the tail and thought about whether I had buckled my parachute on. I had, and I pulled the rip cord, swung three times and hit the ground with a thud, injuring my feet and ankles. One odd note in the episode was that Vandergrift had started out between the seats into the fire when he saw I was trying to go out the window. He turned to try going through his window when he noticed that his side of the airplane had a hole big enough to get through without any effort so he left that way.

"I was apprehended by German soldiers and taken to a hospital in Skoplje under Bulgarian control, but is now a part of Yugoslavia. Three members of my crew, Ned Paul, Vandergrift and Reese shared a room with me and one other American who had been shot down earlier and was shot and wounded after he landed. The treatment was bad and we were told on the fifth day that all ambulatory prisoners would be taken to a camp in eastern Bulgaria and those who could not walk would be sent to Germany for treatment. Although my ankles were still bad and painful, I received assistance from my crew members to walk out of the hospital. There was no way I was going to Germany if I could avoid it. We were taken to a military compound where we met other 455th crew members who had been shot down by fighters the

same day. We were then taken to Sofia, Yugoslavia in a large truck with soldiers sitting in the rear pointing guns at us for the entire trip. When we arrived, we were confined to a large prison which held political and Jewish prisoners as well as downed flyers. The next evening, the American prisoners were taken by train to the POW camp at Shumen, Bulgaria which is approximately 50 miles from the Black Sea. The camp, on a small mountain, had one large building surrounded by rolls of barbed wire. A small building 14' x 14' was in the compound for the commandant's office. Other 455th POW's were there with Major Walter Smith the ranking officer in charge of the Americans. Additionally, Squadron Leader Cyril Clark was the ranking RAF Officer and beyond that we had Dutch, New Zealanders, Polish, Australians, south Africans, Canadians and Yugoslavians as POW's. I was the ranking officer and was placed in charge so I appointed Major Smith as my deputy.

"After settling into the camp routine, I began to make a few discoveries. Squadron Leader Clark informed me in strict confidence that he was a British Intelligence Agent and had been parachuted into Greece early in the war to organize resistance movements and had been running from the Gestapo ever since. He was on the verge of being captured when he put on a RAF uniform and claimed he was a flyer that had been shot down. They were skeptical but since he was in uniform they did not shoot him. We started hearing rumors of the approaching Russians and the Bulgarians were concerned about what would happen to them in their hands. They started negotiating for their surrender. The Germans were leaving in the west and pulling out of Greece and parts of Yugoslavia. We were asked to send one officer to Sofia, Bulgaria to help arrange for our transfer there. I sent Major Smith.

"With this developing, Squadron Leader Clark suggested that it might be better if we got out before the Russians liberated us and took us to Russia. The main gate was not visible from the commandant's office and Clark proposed that just before dark at lock-up time when all POW's were confined to the large building, we would wait until the last man was inside and then walk from the direction of the commandant's office through the main gate as though we had permission from him to leave. I had had enough bad food and prison life, so I was ready to try anything. There were three of us: Clark; B-24 pilot Ivan Korsha who could speak five languages and acted as our interpreter; and myself. A change of guard shift was occurring and we were never challenged. We made our way down the mountain into the town of Shumen. We headed straight for the garrison and were stopped for the first time by a guard. Korsha told him we wanted to see the commandant immediately. We were ushered into his office where Squadron Leader Clark began a tirade about the poor conditions at the POW camp and what we would tell the Russians when they arrived. Korsha translated and Clark told me to repeat what he had said and make it as strong as I liked. I pounded the desk as Clark had and again Korsha translated what I had said. The commandant looked at us for a long time and finally reached in the drawer of his desk and took out a bottle of wine and some cheese, and offered us a drink. He promised to put the prisoners and us on a train that night and send all to Sofia where prison conditions would be better. Trucks would be sent for the 350 POW's to

leave at midnight. We then had some wine and cheese. The commandant asked me to write a letter telling the Russians that he had been most cooperative with us in getting out of prison. I told him that I would as soon as I arrived in Sofia.

"At 12 o'clock that night we, all 350, were on the train heading for Sofia. The train conductor led Clark, Korsha and me to a compartment occupied by a Maria Popov. This was 19 September 1944. We agreed that we should not go to the unknown in Sofia. Our first stop was early morning at a town called Turnova. Clark suggested we try our same routine on the station master and by the middle of the morning, all were on the way south headed for the Black Sea and Turkey. We passed through several towns and Major Smith caught up with us at Svelengrad. It seemed the people in control of POW's were as anxious to get rid of them as we were to leave.

"Before crossing the border, we changed trains and the U.S. Military Attaché from Ankara met us as we entered Turkey. Accommodations progressively improved. We traveled along the Greek border and at one town, we were serenaded by the local citizens by singing the Star Spangled Banner. We arrived in Istanbul where we stayed for several nights on a ship and got most welcome hot showers. I had my first decent meal since starting on the fateful mission in August. We then boarded a deluxe train bound for Allepo, Syria. From there, the Air Transport Command flew us to Cairo where we were dusted for lice and again had most welcome hot showers. We were placed in virtual detention for screening for foreigners. I convinced the camp commander that he should give the men some money and a little freedom to avoid problems of unrest. He gave everyone a $25 advance on their back pay and some time off the base to the delight of the men. The following day, Smith, Clark and one other officer were driven to a British Intelligence base near Alexandria to be debriefed. Everyone was delighted to see that Clark had survived from his long British agent activities.

"About three or four days later, the 15th Air Force sent a flight of B-24's and flew us to Bari, Italy. We were home on 25 September 1944, just 30 days after flying that fateful mission. General Twining and 455th people met us with a hearty welcome. Major Al Coons of our Group was extremely surprised to see me as I had not been heard from since the day of the mission. My next move was to return to the Group, pick up my booze and clothing and head for home, the good-ole USA. I accomplished one more act, that of celebration with the booze Col. Cool rescued for me the day I did not return. During the course of the evening, I distinguished myself by blowing up the underground grain storage pits with gasoline which threw debris throughout the area. Everyone believed we were under an air attack. I didn't have many clothes but enough to get me to Naples and on a ship before Cool learned who had done the awful deed."

It is this author's (Asch) view that Hugh Graff was like the Pied Piper leading 350 men to safety, a feat they will always remember. You 455th Group readers now know who the person was that blew up the centuries-old underground grain storage bins which frightened the hell out of everyone.

Air-Sea Rescue

Our hats were off to the crews who risked their lives to save downed airmen. They operated over enemy territo-

ry in their rescue efforts using unarmed C-47 transport and other airplanes to land on makeshift airfields, principally in Yugoslavia, to pick up downed flyers who had evaded capture and bring them home. They often flew into these fields at night with no lighting and the Partisans would light a bonfire to show where the field was located. Their rescue efforts included picking up downed airmen at sea as well. They operated with Navy PBY flying boats and various types of surface craft. They would go after downed airmen at sea at great risk to themselves from both the enemy, rough seas and bad weather. Although the Germans had extreme shortages for fighting the war, they nevertheless maintained an air-sea rescue capability. Like the Allies, the Germans rescued enemy crews as well as their own.

The B-24 was notoriously bad for ditching in the high seas. The low slung fuselage and high wing placed all the shock of hitting the water on the fuselage, with little shock taken by the wings, the strongest part of the airplane. We knew we should always ditch with the wheels in the up position. The fuselage most often broke in two just to the rear of the wings and quickly filled with water. Furthermore, the top gun turret above the flight deck which weighed more than 1,000 pounds most always came down during a crash, killing anyone below it. An actual test was made during 1943 on the lower Potomac River in the Washington, D.C. area by a seasoned combat pilot from the 8th Air Force and it was concluded that crews should avoid ditching if at all possible. There was no training material to give to the crews which covered ditching procedures except as many men as possible go to the rear of the airplane and hit the water in a normal landing position just above stalling speed. Some felt it best to try to hit the water on the top of a swell along the horizontal plane. In doing this, however, one would be in a cross wind to the swell. If one landed into the wind in high swells and hit the bottom of one, it was almost like slamming into a hill and the airplane would be engulfed in water. There were two five-man inflatable life rafts (dinghys), one on each side of the fuselage on the top side of the wing. The crew would eject them just prior to leaving the downed B-24, leave the airplane, inflate their life vests (mae west) and then deploy the dinghys by pulling a string to inflate them and at least one person would get inside before cutting loose from the the airplane. All would then get inside the dinghys and wait for sea rescue. There were several life saving items stowed in the dinghys: canned water and food, knife, patching kit and hand-operated air pump, fishing gear, first aid kit and, most importantly, a radio that had to be cranked manually to give it power to send a distress signal which could be used for homing by an air rescue airplane or boat. All equipment was colored a bright yellowish color to make it easier for rescue teams to see.

Several of our crews were forced to ditch, primarily in the Adriatic Sea. Tom Ramey of the 743rd Squadron gives his experience: "The mission was to the Zahnrad-Fabric Works in Friedrichshafen, Germany on 3 August 1944. This was the Group's 88th mission and my crew was close to completing its required combat tour. We were one of 34 B-24's loaded with 500# general purpose bombs. The flak was light but very accurate. I was flying deputy lead that day and was checking out new crew members. I pointed out the smoke from the flak bursts and remarked, 'One of those could hit us!' We then got

hit and lost two engines on one side. We struggled to complete our bomb run but started falling behind the formation as we were leaving the target and heading home. The last contact I had with the Group as it faded in the distance was by radio from Captain Bechtold, the 743rd Squadron Operations Officer, whose famous last words were: 'Ramey, get your ass back up here in formation.' But when one has an engine feathered, one burning, one propeller running away and out over the Adriatic Sea, there are not many options for survival. Trying to land in the water and survive was the only option.

"There were always discussions about ditching, most of which occurred at the Officer's Club bar over a glass of warm Italian cognac. I remember someone talking about a British procedure where one flew into the water in normal tail-low landing attitude, then popping the nose downward the last moment and flying the plane flat into the water. That is what I did in that last moment of decision.

"While my intent was to place nine men in the back in normal ditching position, co-pilot Jack Carpenter refused to leave his seat, insisting he help with the landing. I was thankful for it as he was tremendous in helping me fly the crippled airplane and making a successful ditching. We opened all the hatches for escape and made everything ready the best we could. The plane kissed the water in a nose-high position followed by my popping the nose downward at the last moment. It skidded a ways and came to rest in the water. Immediately after hitting the water, the cockpit was engulfed in water but the airplane floated long enough for the crew to deploy the two dinghys. Up front, we struggled to unfasten our seat belts then we floated out of the water-filled nose section. The aerial engineer and radio operator assisted us to get on top of the wing and into a dinghy. The remainder of the crew was floating away in the other dinghy. We were soon picked up by a German patrol boat and made prisoners of war for the duration which is another story."

This was a feat extremely well done by Tom and his crew. Neither he nor any of his crew members received official recognition for this extraordinary achievement. The crew stayed with the airplane to ditch over the Adriatic, hoping they would be rescued by Allied Air-Sea Rescue Services. Tom and his crew survived the rigors of the German prison camp.

Another ditching was made by John P. Brashear of the 741st Squadron on 24 May 1944 following a raid on the Munchendorf Airdrome in Austria. The bomb load for the day was fragmentation clusters. These bombs cannot be safely jettisoned, sometimes referred to as salvoed, as they tend to hit each other at release and will sometimes explode and do damage to the airplane or even knock it from the sky. The Air Force historical records gives this account: "The Silver Star was awarded to Lt. John P. Brashear for gallantry in action as pilot of a B-24 while on an important mission to bomb an enemy airdrome in Austria during daylight hours. Lt. Brashear's plane was severely damaged by intense anti-aircraft fire. Because of weather, bombs were jettisoned over water. One bomb, however, exploded just below the aircraft and the stricken plane plunged toward the sea. Although the bomber was crippled, Lt. Brashear skillfully landed it in the waters of the Adriatic. All ten men safely made their way from the plane."

The co-pilot, Gordon C. Muth, received a Distinguished Flying Cross

for his assistance in landing the B-24. Another Distinguished Flying Cross was awarded to Robert A. Regnier, the navigator, for extraordinary achievement with this account: "A fragment severely wounded the aerial engineer. Lt. Regnier administered first aid to him and then made his way to the rear of the ship where he directed the men to their stations in preparation for ditching. During the time he spent in the water, he rendered valuable physical assistance and moral encouragement which were important factors in their battle against exposure and fatigue."

The Air-Sea Rescue Service picked up the crew within five and one-half hours but it was too late for some as four of the crew members died of shock and exposure. Also, four were seriously wounded from the ditching, including the pilot, Lt. Brashear, who suffered a broken leg.

Tom and John proved the experts wrong – one could ditch a B-24, even with its being in a crippled condition, and survive.

Our Aircrews Took Care of Each Other

The closeness that developed among our aircrews is indescribable. They assisted each other during combat, many times at the risk of their own lives. A good example of this is the citation received by Wesley A. Poore of the 743rd Squadron for the award of the Distinguished Service Cross: "For extraordinary heroism in action as navigator of a B-24 type aircraft over vital strategic enemy installations on 18 May 1944. Prior to reaching the target, intense enemy fighter action and accurate anti-aircraft fire rendered one of the engines of his aircraft useless, thus forcing it to drop from the protection of the formation. Despite the crippled condition of his aircraft, he skillfully guided the pilot to the target for a successful lone bombing run. Immediately upon releasing the bombs, severe damage from aggressive fighter action forced the aircraft to lose altitude rapidly. When the order to abandon aircraft was given, Lieutenant Poore observed one of the crew members with a damaged parachute. With characteristic selflessness, Lieutenant Poore exchanged his own parachute for the damaged one. After being assured that all members had parachuted to safety, Lieutenant Poore strapped the damaged parachute to his harness and jumped from the plane. By manipulating the shrouds with his hands, he was able to safely descend to the ground. Lieutenant Poore's exemplary actions have upheld the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States of America."

Wesley gave us a little different version but nevertheless does not change his concern for a fellow crew member. He indicated that Sgt. Nelson's parachute was not damaged but rather it would not fit his harness. Wesley's parachute fit so he clamped it on Nelson's harness and he bailed out. In doing this, Wesley did not know whether Nelson's parachute would fit his harness. Through a make-shift arrangement, he was able to attach the parachute to his harness at his hips, most improper for a chest pack. Also, the pilot, Lt. Thomas Markham, was the last to leave the stricken airplane. All crew members were captured by the Bulgarians that same day except Markham. He was captured later and executed by the Bulgarians. The crew returned safely to Italy in September 1944 with the group that escaped through Turkey led by Hugh Graff.

Some Fought to the End

The fighting spirit of our crews is legend. Some may call it just plain "guts!" The gunners rode in the back of the open B-24, many times in sub-zero weather, without question and never flinched at the incoming fighters. Some blazed away at the enemy fighters until the end. This is an account from the Air Force Historical War Diary of the 741st Squadron: "Lt. Keogh's airplane was rammed head-on by an enemy fighter over Moosebierbaum, Austria on 26 June 1944. Despite the loss of one engine sheared off and a second afire, this gallant crew, well-disciplined, exemplified their devotion to duty by continuing to defend their aircraft and enabled it to make a bombing run in which excellent hits were observed on oil storage tanks, power plant, communications and other installations. One of the crew, S/Sgt. Alfred Puslat, tail turret gunner, was singled out for praise by returning airmen. His guns kept blazing until the last, even as the plane flamed and dropped into an heroic oblivion." The Silver Star was awarded to the next of kins for Lt. Keogh and his crew listed as missing in action: 2nd Lts. Harry F. McCracken and Howard O. Vralsted; T/Sgts. Fred L. Dendy, Jr. and Frederick Q. Huggins; and S/Sgts. William G. Logue, Jr., Stanley W. Lundquist, Alfred Puslat and Harold L. Watson.

It is believed the German fighter pilot was out of control from damage from our guns or he miscalculated his attack. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for the most skilled German fighter pilots to dive through the formation, coming dangerously close to the bombers with their guns blazing to disburse them. This was especially the case to hit the formation prior to reaching the target to try and disburse it. Some German pilots would roll their airplanes on their backs and go through our formation flying upside down. The determination of our crews kept the formation together. There is no single case where our bomber forces turned away from the target because of enemy opposition.

Some Crews Ran Short of Fuel

The fuel system of the B-24 was progressively improved on later models. In the early models, the pilots had no direct control over fuel transfer from the flight deck. The aerial engineer had to crawl above the bomb bay just to the rear of the flight deck, use a rubber "U" hose and manually couple it to the rubber hose receptacles to transfer fuel from tanks in one wing to those in the other. One could experience fuel leaks on one side from enemy fire and not the other. Although the tanks had self-sealing features, there was always gasoline lost before the sealing process closed the puncture or the hole was too large. It was not unusual for a pilot to have fuel starvation of engines on one side of the airplane and not the other. It was always of concern to manually make the fuel transfer with the "U" tubes in the air as it presented a fire hazard if there was a leak of the volatile 100 octane fuel. This was corrected in later models which permitted the pilots to switch fuel tanks from the flight deck.

The fuel lines were made from flexible rubber hoses and ran through the bomb bay so that fuel transfer could be accomplished from the tanks of one wing to the other. A hit in the bomb bay by an exploding 20mm shell from a fighter or from flak often times punctured a line and the fuel caught fire. The bomb bay would become a flaming inferno, making it almost impossible for the crews to parachute through the

open doors, the preferred way to leave a crippled B-24. The fuel tank sight gauge system was sometimes a fire hazard in combat. They were vertical glass tubes connected directly to the fuel tanks and filled with gasoline for sight reading. They were gravity-fed and their location was behind the pilot's seat on the flight deck. A rupture from enemy action could cause a gasoline fire, a major hazard for that critical part of the airplane. There are accounts of airmen bailing out of burning B-24's and being on fire from burning gasoline. Some parachutes would open and burn, leaving the airman tumbling to the earth and his death.

Some later B-24 models had differences in the fuel system, depending on the company which produced them. For example, the models from some companies had extra fuel tanks in the wing tips. The crews had to couple the "U" hose above the flight deck to have access to that fuel. Winfield "Win" S. Bowers of the 741st Squadron gave this account of using the fuel transfer system after being shot up over Ploesti: "This was our last mission over Ploesti where we took numerous hits from flak. We could only pray that the Lib we had this day was as faithful as our former aircraft, 'PIN DOWN GIRL.' It had been forced down in Corsica on an earlier mission while being flown by another crew. In a replacement B-24, 'SQUAT AND DROP,' we took close flak bursts while on the bomb run. I had the propellers in high RPM (2,500) to give us enough power to climb the last 1,000 feet to reach our assigned bombing altitude and stay with the formation. The most damage from flak was that it severed the bundle of wires just forward of the propeller control switches, causing them to be fixed at the high RPM setting. This resulted in an alarming fuel consumption rate. We also had number four engine out and feathered from flak damage, and our aerial engineer firing the top turret was badly wounded from flak. Our navigator was giving the engineer first aid and after some distance from the target, we started running short of fuel from the main tanks and would not get back to home base. I sent the co-pilot to the bomb bay to transfer fuel from the wing tip tanks. As he was entering the bomb bay, the engines began surging from lack of fuel in the main tanks. The fuel transfer station for this particular model B-24, unlike that of PIN DOWN GIRL, was not on the flight deck but rather, in the rear of the fuselage over the wing. Complete loss of power on engine #3 caused that side to drop as the aircraft began a turn into the dead engines. When a wing dipped, the engines on the low wing would pick up a little fuel about the time the engines on the other (high wing) started losing power and the airplane would start a turn in the opposite direction, always with the propellers stuck in the high RPM position and surging as if to 'run-away.'

The fuel transfer system consisted of "U" tubes, two of which had to be unplugged from one set of receptacles and plugged into a different set. Meanwhile, the bombardier came up to sit in the co-pilot's seat to help me hold either right or left rudder, depending on the need. In spite of all the rolling and gyrating the aircraft was doing, the co-pilot somehow managed to start the fuel flowing from the wing tip tanks. The fuel transfer was made just in time to get the three good engines running before crash landing at a site I had already selected along a Yugoslavian mountain stream. During all this, the gunners remained at their gun positions to ward off enemy fighters.

"Determination, making good use of my training and some luck, got us back to our home base but not before feathering #2 engine to avoid a fire or explosion from leaking fuel at the engine. We successfully landed with only two good engines and taxied to the hardstand."

The crew was indeed fortunate that they understood the fuel system which was different from their regular airplane. Furthermore, the co-pilot was obviously trained in the system and took over the job normally done by the aerial engineer. It is this author's observation that the crews that knew most about their airplanes were high survivors. Bower's son, Ned, a pilot for Pan American Airways paid the pilots of WW II flying B-24's a high compliment, as follows:

"I have over 10,000 flying hours, most of which has been in Boeing jets. When I first saw the B-24 flight deck I was amazed. It is difficult for me to imagine the young pilots of WW II flying the B-24's with their 13 additional people and the baggage/equipment stored in the bomb bay containers across the south Atlantic Ocean, transferring fuel by "U" tubes. I continue to be amazed reading and hearing about the challenges and conditions, both on the ground and in the air coping with battle damage, dead or wounded crew members, landing without brakes, or ditching in the Adriatic Sea. My respect for the skills and valor of these men knows no bounds!"

As a matter of interest, Ned is a pilot for the Collings Foundation which has restored a B-24 to flying condition. He does this just for "kicks." The B-24 is shown at air shows and aviation gatherings across the country where it brings nostalgia to old WW II flyers and ground crews who flew and maintained the B-24.

Rest and Recuperation

Battle fatigue and anxiety were problems for some crew members, particularly following rough missions and the loss of good friends and buddies. There was some disagreement among the flight surgeons and doctors whether or not a break during a crew's combat tour would be beneficial. There were some that believed a break gave a crewman too much time to think about the perils of war and it would be best to rush them through the tour and get it over with. Some crewmen elected to do this while others were sent to rest and recuperation (R&R) camps.

In the beginning, we were sent to the rocky Isle of Capri in the Bay of Naples just off the west coast of Italy. The crews that had finished about 25 missions were taken by truck to Naples or flown to a B-25 base at Pompeii to catch a boat to Capri. The Army arranged all transportation and took over the hotels on Capri. The food and lodging were quite good as well as the weather and the Italians kept the island well-maintained and clean. The local people were pleasant and helpful. One could take pleasure boat trips and see the sights of the island, especially the famous Blue Grotto. Indeed it was a most useful respite from the rigors and horrors of war.

After our ground forces moved north of Rome, R&R was arranged there by the Army taking over hotels and providing both decent rooms and food for the Allies. Rome was not damaged from the war and indeed it was spectacular and of great interest to visit. Pope Pius XII held daily audiences for the Allied troops and would pass through the crowd and give his blessing. It brought tears to the eyes of many and gave them hope and spiritual well-being. Tours of the city were arranged by the

Army for the men to see the historical sights of the Roman Coliseum, Vatican and other sights. The crews returning from Rome were elated and it seemed to help give them the courage to finish their combat tours.

With the retaking of France, the Army opened up the French Riviera, the famous resort region along the Mediterranean coast, extending from Marseilles in southeast France to La Spezia in northwest Italy. Reports from the French rest camps at Nice and Cannes were glowing. Nice, the enlisted men's camp, was off limits to officers and the officer's camp at Cannes was off limits to the enlisted men, a wise policy. The women were said to be all that the French women could be. The scenery was beautiful and the food good, and there were ample recreational facilities to suit all tastes. The GI's had invaded the playground of the rich and found it a pleasant place to forget the Army life and combat. French perfume, although expensive, was plentiful and most men bought some to send home. The rate of exchange was 50 francs for a dollar. Some were fortunate enough to visit Cairo where they saw the sights of the Pyramids, Sphinx, museums and other historical sights.

There can be no doubt that the R&R was beneficial to air crewmen to help them through the rigors of war and to the ground personnel to take them away from the long and tedious hours supporting the combat operations.

The Unsung Heroes

The Group and Squadron Executive Officers and Adjutants had the sorrowful job of collecting the personal belongings and shipping them home for those killed or missing in action. It was also their responsibility to assist the group and squadron commanders to write letters of condolence to the parents and dependents. This was in addition to the official notification by the War Department.

The Flight Surgeons were outstanding in maintaining the medical and psychological well-being of the combat crews under very trying conditions as it was difficult for the men to lose their buddies and friends. It was the medical and firefighting personnel who rushed to crashed airplanes, some of them burning, to rescue trapped crewmen. Here are some accounts of bravery of these people who had a total disregard for their own safety. The first is Captain Harold F. Schuknecht, the fine Flight Surgeon for the 741st Squadron who received the Soldier's Medal for saving the life of a pilot from a crashed airplane at the risk of his own. This occurred on 20 April 1944 when one of our B-24's crashed and burst into flames upon landing. Captain Schuknecht hurried to the scene and noted that all crew members were safely out of the ship except the pilot. With complete disregard for his own safety, he successfully extricated the pilot from the wreckage amid intense heat and exploding ammunition. His citation for this is a matter of record.

Another award of Soldier's Medals was for Staff Sergeant Stanley J. Pascavage and Sergeant Harold F. Schroeder, both of the 741st Squadron: "On 22 June 1944, observing a B-24 crash and explode on takeoff, these courageous men immediately rushed to the scene of the accident. Heedless of the intense heat and imminent danger of further explosion, with complete disregard for their personal safety, they made their way through the flaming debris to rescue an injured crew member and carry him to safety. All attempts at further rescue were frus-

trated when the aircraft became completely engulfed in flames. They reflected great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces in risking their lives to save the life of another."

The Soldier's Medal was also awarded to Captain Robert L. Blackmun and Staff Sergeant Robert R. Ramirez of the Medical Section of the 742nd Squadron for risking their lives in the removal of crewmen from a burning plane.

Aircraft Maintenance and Flying Safety

Our aircraft maintenance men received basic airplane mechanics training prior to reporting to the Group. Some were selected from the schools to attend factory training at one of the B-24 production facilities. These men were generally selected to become line and crew chiefs. The maintenance engineering sections of the squadrons consisted of an engineering officer, one line chief and as many crew chiefs as there were airplanes assigned to the squadron. Each crew chief was in charge of a small group to maintain his airplane. In addition, each squadron had specialists in maintaining the special equipment such as radio, armament and ordnance. The maintenance crews became a very close-knit unit and there was friendly competition among them for keeping their airplanes in commission and ready to fly.

Each squadron was permitted to establish its own maintenance standards for releasing airplanes for training or combat flying. However, it was general policy that after any major work on an airplane to test fly it prior to its going on a mission. This was especially the case after an engine change where a pilot crew and crew chief for the airplane would "slow fly" it for an hour or two to break in the new engine. (Sometimes the maintenance engineering officer went along.) This meant that minimum power would be used on the new engine in all flight activity until the end of the period. There were sometimes accidents, some fatal. Master Sergeant Loranza D. McCoy, Jr. was a flight chief with the 741st Squadron and he reminds us that the first maintenance person to lose his life during flight testing was Lt. Elmer E. Watters, maintenance engineering officer of the 741st. The crew was slow flying an airplane after an engine change. The cause of the accident is unknown.

We didn't have empirical experience about the life of engines and other parts that wore out during combat operations. Some aircraft were taxed harder than others during missions, especially those at the end of the formations where excessive power had to be applied for long periods of time to keep its position in the flight. This was difficult to take into consideration in determining the wear and tear on the engines for possible change. The engines seldom reached 500 hours of flying time before requiring removal and overhaul. This compared unfavorably with later peacetime experience by the Air Force where over 1,000 hours were expected from similar type engines before requiring overhaul. There were some engine failures at critical times and the pilots would have difficulty keeping up with the formation even with applying full power on the three good ones. It was not uncommon for a crew to lose another engine either from its being over-taxed or from flak. The enemy fighters would then pounce on and destroy the straggler. On targets where there was no fighter opposition, returning on three engines before going over the target with intense flak may have been the better part of valor to

save the crew and airplane to fight another day. Having metal filings in the oil screens was not uncommon and it was a matter of judgment by maintenance engineering when engines should be changed. We had 275 aborts through August 1944, flying 106 missions, because of mechanical problems. The maintenance engineering people were under constant pressure to have the airplanes ready for the next day's mission. How many times did we hear the term: "Maximum Effort?"

There was not enough time spent on flying safety nor were there enough meetings for reviewing emergency procedures and the causes of non-combat crashes to avoid recurrence. There were far too many non-operational accidents, many of them fatal. We can make only this excuse. We were all young, inexperienced, with out first pilots having about 300 hours of flying experience when they first arrived, most of it in trainer aircraft from flying school, and the co-pilots having even less. Further, we were preoccupied with our flying combat missions.

Our Crew Losses for the First 100 Missions

Table 1 shows the crew losses from combat for the first 100 missions, including mission number, date, name of pilot and squadron. Note that all were listed as MIA (missing in action) except two crews, Lts. Lundwall and Pidcock, listed as KIA (killed in action). These crews were lost from a mid-air collision over the Adriatic on the return of the mission flown and no one was seen to survive the tragedy. Many of the crews listed as MIA became POW's and were returned from the Bucharest area by the B-17's and from Bulgaria over land led by Hugh Graff during September 1944. Others were POW's in

Table 1
CREW LOSSES
FIRST 100 MISSIONS

Name of Pilot	Mission	Date
740th		
Lt. Cleland MIA	4	2/25/44
Lt. Lundwall KIA	11	3/19/44
Lt. Pidcock KIA		
Lt. Powers MIA	18	4/2/44
Lt. Cheesman MIA		
Lt. Wallick MIA	28	4/21/44
Lt. Moore MIA		
Lt. Jones MIA	47	5/24/44
Lt. Lobsock MIA	68	6/26/44
Lt. Johnson MIA	78	7/15/44
Lt. Russell MIA	83	7/22/44
Lt. Kiernan MIA	100	8/22/44
Total: 12 Crews		
741st		
Capt. Norgard MIA	28	4/21/44
Lt. Stater MIA	32	4/28/44
Lt. Callan MIA		
Lt. McWilliams MIA	36	5/5/44
Lt. Brashear MIA	47	5/24/44
Lt. Fetty MIA	54	5/30/44
Lt. Snider MIA	64	6/16/44
Lt. Wurtz MIA		
Lt. McCarthy MIA	68	6/26/44
Lt. Jordan MIA		
Lt. Keogh MIA		
Lt. Chadwick MIA	74	7/7/44
Maj. Lanford MIA	82	7/21/44
Lt. Hanssard MIA	83	7/22/44
Lt. Gates MIA	85	7/24/44
Total: 15 Crews		
742nd		
Lt. Pardee MIA	18	4/2/44
Lt. Sampson MIA	27	4/20/44
Lt. Jones MIA	28	4/21/44
Lt. Beck MIA	37	5/6/44
Lt. J. Montgomery MIA	68	6/26/44
Lt. R. Montgomery MIA		
Lt. Archibald MIA		

Name of Pilot	Mission	Date
Lt. Brown MIA	68	6/26/44
Lt. Jackson MIA		
Lt. Sensenbrenner MIA		
Lt. Bush MIA	78	7/15/44
Lt. Brimage MIA	80	7/17/44
Lt. Dunekak MIA	85	7/24/44
Lt. Parish MIA		
Lt. Ditchett MIA	96	8/17/44
Lt. Stengl MIA		
Total: 16 Crews		
743rd		
Lt. Brunson MIA	18	4/2/44
Lt. Turner MIA	43	5/18/44
Lt. Markham MIA		
Lt. Rawls MIA		
Lt. Catlin MIA	60	6/9/44
Lt. Brawninger MIA	62	6/11/44
F/O Massey MIA	63	6/13/44
Lt. Gulbranson MIA	85	7/24/44
Lt. Potucek MIA		
Lt. Ramey MIA	88	8/3/44
Total: 10 Crews		
Group Total: 53 Crews (Number of men per crew: four officers, six enlisted men)		

a German prison camp until war's end. A total account could not be found on those who survived and those who lost their lives. This is the only place in this history where crew losses appear as the Air Force historical records do not consistently include this type of information for our Group beyond the first 100 mission.

The Group Entered Into Its Second 100 Missions

Despite heavy losses, the Group was in good shape for flying the next 100 missions. Many of the original crews had finished or were finishing their combat tours and heading home to the USA and their replacements had received some combat experience. The operational and administrative procedures were in place and shaken down. Facilities and living conditions had improved and our maintenance engineering staffs were becoming well-trained in the maintenance of the B-24, including its armament, ordnance and pathfinder equipment. Finally the Allied Air Forces had broken the back of the Luftwaffe.

There was a change of command from Col. Cool to Lt. Col. William L. Snowden of Oakland, California, a graduate of Texas University, Austin, Texas. He enlisted in the Army 12 August 1919 and received his commission in 1933. He spent some time as a civilian as a bonds and insurance broker in Los Angeles, California. There was some overlap with Col. Cool before his transfer to the 304th Wing Headquarters as Operations Officer. This permitted Col. Snowden to get some combat seasoning prior to Col. Cool going to the Wing. The transition went smoothly. All Group personnel benefited from his leadership as we had from Col. Cool.

