

## **“Killer” Kane**

John Riley “Killer” Kane led the 98<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group in the early years of the African and European campaigns as part of the Ninth U.S. Air Force under Lt. General Lewis Brareton.

He got his nickname back in the States as it came from a comic strip character in “Buck Rogers” and stuck with him across the South Atlantic and the African Veldt to the Middle East. It became his trademark.

About August 1942 the first Liberators in the Middle East were hastily based in Palestine, with full plans for retreat farther east to Baghdad if Marshall Rommel was able to complete his thrust to Cairo and the Suez. The Liberators helped chase the Axis out of North Africa and they plastered the shipping carrying Rommel’s fuel.

After that the Killer and his crew worked along the rim of the Mediterranean, bombing and moving into new bases and then blasting Europe from Italy.

The Libs dropped hundreds of tons of bombs at high altitudes with pinpoint accuracy and precision. “Hit ‘em, every bomb on the target”, said the Killer, “and then get out”. He delighted his group with his belligerency toward the enemy as at Navarino Bay. By some freak on that mission, the radios on the Libs picked up Germans talking between pursuit planes; Killer listened for a while, then roared over his throat microphone, “Get the hell off the air!” Not a sound was subsequently heard.

When he briefed his crews for a mission, he drew blackboard diagrams like a football coach. He also told new crews not to take any personal mementos or letters with them.

“Force for Freedom” was the Groups’ official name but unofficially they were known as “The Pyramidiers”, and they had a diploma, which Killer helped dream up approved by Washington. This was ceremoniously presented to fliers after completing their required combat hours and prior to returning to the States on leave.

The idea to blast the Ploesti oil fields had been a plum long yearned after by the Air Force strategists. They had been provided with information by British expert

which gave details in depth. The main decision was whether a high level bombing would be best or one devastating surprise attack at low level. The decision opted for the low-level blow.

Preparation in earnest began with a desolate desert area chosen as a practice bomb target. Even without ground defenses to worry about it was a tough flying mission.

Much has been written about this raid, which in reality was a battle, and it plunged deep into Fortress Europe. The Killer was certain he would not live through that day and he wrote his wife, mother and father and put all his affairs in order, as did hundreds of others.

In his terse fashion, Killer described the Ploesti raid as being “a rough show”. His number four engine was hit just as they finished their bomb run, so they increased power on the other three engines and as they left the target area they dropped to tree-top level. The Junkers 88 and ME-105s came to work on the Liberators. B-24s fell to the right and left. For three hours the bombers blasted their way through fighters. The last were shook off over the Mediterranean. Kane and five other crippled planes, headed for the Aegean Sea and crashed landed on Cyprus after limping and hedge-hopping over hills and mountains for 800 miles and heaving all excess and movable objects overboard to lighten the load and enable the plane to climb high enough to avoid crashing. Colonel Kane received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his action and the citation read:

“By his gallant courage, brilliant leadership and superior flying skill, he and the formation under his command, successfully attacked this vast refinery so essential to our enemies’ war effort. Through his conspicuous gallantry in this most hazardous action and by his intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, Colonel Kane personally contributed vitally to the success of this daring mission and thereby rendered most distinguished service in the furtherance of the defeat of our enemy”.

Colonel Kane also received the Legion of Merit for “personal leadership, foresight, keen judgement, expert planning, outstanding ability . . . .”