

## Lieut. Harold (Harry) Korger's Experience



When I was selected in early July 1943 by Colonel John R. Kane, then 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Commander, to be his bombardier in the lead B-24 for the upcoming attack on the Ploesti oil refineries, I was nearing the end of my required 300 hours combat tour.

It was all veery ultra-secret, of course, with only a relatively few people actually being in on any of the details. It was impossible to withhold the fact that a really “big” mission was in the mill and that it would involve a low altitude bomb run approach, release and withdrawal. After all, three additional bomb groups, all B-24s, had been brought from the Eighth Air Force in England (the 93<sup>rd</sup>, the 44<sup>th</sup>, and the 389<sup>th</sup>) which was a clear indication of bigger things to come; and, when almost daily practice commenced on low altitude navigation and bombing techniques, it did not require an especially astute person to come up with the probable answer.

Ploesti appeared to be the obvious target of concern and it came as no real surprise when this fact was revealed to all crew members and others with a need to know at the briefing on the day before the mission. As I said earlier, only a relatively few of us who had a genuine need for prior knowledge (key bombardiers, navigators, planners, etc.) had known the actual target designations before they were revealed in the general briefing. However, common intelligence was hardly an unknown factor among the other crew members and most ground personnel, and there was little, if any, true surprise felt within the assemblage, although actually seeing the mission outlined on the big wall charts with the objective so clearly discernible still came as somewhat of a shock – even to those of us who had known about it for weeks and had practiced so assiduously on the low altitude simulations and participated in long hours of target study.

I need not delve too deeply on the mission itself; it has been so well documented that, historically, there is little that I could add at this time. However, I would like to set the record straight on one point, i.e., our radio operator, Lt. Raymond B. Hubbard, has been identified as the bombardier in almost every book and magazine article I have read on the Ploesti raid. For example, commencing on the bottom of page 176 and continuing on the top of page 177 of Dugan's and Stuart's "Ploesti", Hubbard is identified as the bombardier (I am correctly identified in the appendix; unfortunately, this list is not included in the paperback version of the book). Similar errors exist in Leon Wolff's "Low Level Mission" and all of the magazine and newspaper articles I was able to research following my return from prison camp at the end of World War II. I can only speculate that, following my being shot down a few weeks subsequent to the Ploesti mission, someone in the 98<sup>th</sup> staff decided to delete my name from all publicity releases lest such information should fall into the hands of my German captors and be used, possibly, against me. If such is the case, however, no one ever bothered to set the record straight at the cessation of hostilities and history will apparently continue to record another man as the "Killer's" bombardier. I do find it strange that no account of Kane's exploits at Ploesti includes any mention of the actual bombing results (believe me, they were excellent – we hit what we intended to hit).

Shortly after the Ploesti mission, it was decided to send a composite Ploesti crew back to the states on a morale building tour, with Lt. Royden LeBrecht as the aircraft commander (the B-24 chosen was "The Squaw"). I was asked to fill the role of bombardier; however, this request imposed a dilemma upon me. I had only

two more missions to fly to complete my original objective of a full combat tour and, I wanted to complete my combat missions. In retrospect, the decision was a stupid one and I have no one else to blame for the subsequent disastrous results but myself. At any rate, I returned to my old crew of the 344<sup>th</sup> Squadron, commanded by Lt. Hoover Edwards of Philadelphia, Mississippi (he had originally been our co-pilot but was elevated to first pilot after our original pilot, Lt. Bob Ingle, of Corvallis, Oregon, was stricken with a recurrence of rheumatic fever and was permanently grounded). We successfully flew one fairly rough mission against Wiener-Neustadt and then made preparations for our grand finale – a “milk run”, according to Intelligence, against a relatively unimportant railroad marshalling yard at Sulmona, Italy. Our crew had been raising a dozen or so chickens, traded for cigarettes and other goodies from local Arabs, and planned to have a grand chicken feast right after returning from Sulmona to celebrate our triumphant combat tour conclusion; and we had several quarts of the “better stuff” stashed away to help wash down the chicken. Alas, we were to sample neither one.

- Sept. 3, 1943 -

“No fighters, no flak”, said S-2 (Intelligence) at the pre-takeoff briefing. “No flak”, possibly – we never got close enough to the target to find out. But “No fighters”? We begged to differ.

Ten minutes out from the Italian coast and twenty minutes from the Initial Point, the horizon suddenly became dotted with what, in normal times, might have been mistaken for a flock of geese. But no geese, these. The burst of rockets near and inside our formation immediately made us acutely aware of the significance of that oft-garbled line from our national anthem. After the ME-110s had delivered their deadly load of rockets (they got one of our seven B-24s – all we could muster for a minor 98<sup>th</sup> effort after the calamitous Ploesti venture the previous month, even with the many replacements we had quickly received from stateside – and crippled another one or two, plus some minor damage to our own aircraft), the ME-109s closed in for the kill. Their yellow noses left no doubt in our minds that these were Goering’s own select outfit – and professionals they were in every respect. We later figured some seventy fighters were up against us that day and they systematically cut us down, each and every one of us. Three stragglers got it first, all well to sea; then they turned on our formation of four. I had never had much of a chance to fire the nose guns before this day; frontal attacks were so rare as to have been nearly non-existent. But not today. Our navigator, Lt. John Fontenrose,

and I fired and fired until the guns turned blazing hot, with the only respite coming when we paused to change ammunition cans. John, I'm sure, got at least a piece of one of them, but there were too many of them and too few of us.

We survivors from all 7 bombers, later were to count eleven kills among us, including two by our tail gunner, T/Sgt. Dale Petty. The end was inevitable, and I can only be grateful that when our turn came we were no longer over the sea. A series of dull thuds, the smell of dense smoke, the feeling of intense heat, the scream of the injured and wounded over the interphone, the sickening yell from Petty that his tail guns had been shot out, the all too visible burning port engines and the subsequent violent lurch of the aircraft to the opposite side and downward, all combined to make it sickeningly obvious that it was time to split (the word hadn't been coined yet, but it's a good one to describe our exit in retrospect). Although we hadn't heard a bailout command or the bailout alarm, neither did we hear anything else over the interphone and we had no doubt between us that the wiring had been shot out. We made up our minds (it was an intelligent decision as we looked back upon it) and John yanked open the nose hatch. We snapped on our chest packs but somehow John's pack opened inside the airplane, and there was suddenly a nose full of silk all about us. There was no time to look for a spare as even now the aircraft was beginning to assume a near vertical attitude and in another moment the G forces would be too intense to allow escape. John calmly gathered the silk into his arms and rolled into space, I close on his tail. As he later stated, he felt such a profound sense of relief or just being alive (it was almost miraculous that he didn't become entangled in the airplane's understructure) that the back pain seemed a small price to pay. As for me, I tried to delay the jump as long as possible (we were at 15,000 feet when we hit the silk, so we had plenty of time to delay), but after counting to ten – rapidly – the suspense became too great for me and I pulled the ripcord. At first, all was calm as I peacefully floated in space. After I gathered my wits about me, my initial reaction was one of disgust – at myself, for having been so stupid as to have allowed myself for getting into this position. “Korger, you stupid son-of-a-bitch, what are you doing here? You should be in New York this very minute selling bonds.” After allowing myself a moment of self-depreciation, I tried to figure out where I was and what I would do after landing. I could see I was over very rough terrain, not too unlike the badlands of South Dakota, or so it seemed at the time.

The sound of a single-engine fighter airplane brought me out of my reverie and I spotted a 109 a mile or so in the distance at my altitude, initiating a pass toward me! For the first time since this whole impossible thing began did I feel true terror and panic. I guess I had been too busy up till then to realize the danger that was all around us. I had reason to panic, as there had existed between the Luftwaffe fighter pilots and our gunners a smallish, but deadly serious, feud. Someone from their side – or ours had once fired upon one of their – or – our parachutists from a crippled plane – a violation of an unwritten rule of combat. We started it will never be known, I'm sure, but since it had been burning upon our minds – delay your opening as long as possible if there is any possibility of an enemy fighter being near – you might become a prime target. Now I remembered! I had to do something, but what! Ah, yes – play possum. So, I did. I hung as limply from the shroud lines as I could, simulating a dead or unconscious parachutist. Only when the 109 whizzed by me so close that I knew that he could no longer fire did I open my eyes. I got a glimpse of the pilot waving at me in a genuinely friendly manner. Incredibly, I disclosed my game and waved back! Now I was sure the German pilot would return and finish me off, but no – he merely seemed interested in playing a little and probably was relaying my position (and that of the several other parachuting figures I could see in the distance) to the Italian ground troops. Looking back, I'm sure this pilot was the one who had administered the coup de grace to our aircraft and, since we were the last to go, there was no further serious business for him to attend to, and he just wanted to have a look-see.

By now, I was down to about six or seven thousand feet and I could see, almost directly below me, a burning B-24 (identifiable by its still reasonably intact twin tails) and the wreckage of a farm house into which it had apparently crashed. I could hear the repeated sounds of ammunition “cooking-off” in the inferno and an occasional whine of a 50 caliber round cook-off. I didn't worry too much about being hit by a stray round (although the thought did cross my mind) but I was concerned about the bombs – had I salvoed them before jumping out or were they still with the airplane (I was sure this one was our B-24, and it probably was, all things considered)? For the life of me I couldn't remember and to this day I'm still not sure. One does strange things during moments of extreme stress. There were several explosions, which could have been the 500 pounders detonating, or they could have been from the aircraft itself. At any rate, I drifted some distance from the wreckage and began to concern myself about the landing which must occur within the next few seconds. I could see I was going to hit on the side of a steep

and rocky hill and nothing I could do to the parachute lines would alter this inevitable conclusion. I hit hard and kept falling for some distance down the steep incline. Finally, I came to the bottom, managed to pull the parachute lines under control and took a quick survey of my physical condition. I didn't feel too badly, but I couldn't get up. In my mind, I was sure I had broken my back and was paralyzed (I hadn't and wasn't). A curious peasant stalked up and I tried to bribe him with an Italian bill hastily pulled off my "Short Snorter" (didn't want to dig into my escape money just yet). The farmer took the bill but made no move to help me. A minute or two later relief came my way in the form of Pilot Officer "Red" Smith, whose ship had "got it" a moment or two before us. Smitty had seen me come down, saw that I was in trouble and left his hiding place in a nearby gulch to come to my assistance. He helped me to my feet, and we struggled together back to his sanctuary. We quickly decided to remain there until nightfall (it was now about 3:30 pm on a very warm Italian day).

Too many eyes had seen us, however, and about fifteen or twenty minutes later a small mob of Italian civilians descended upon us. Although armed with sticks, clubs, and pitchforks, they seemed friendly enough and probably brought their weapons along for protection against what might well have been, in their minds, an invasion from outer space. We might still have made a getaway, had the civilians not been so friendly – we simply could not leave! A smiling, self-appointed "doctor" insisted on looking at my back – he cured nothing, but when his "examination" was completed, I discovered, to my extreme discomfort, someone had made off with my leather flight jacket and khaki shirt, leaving me only my "T" shirt – and a smile. Then, while we were trying to communicate our desire to initiate an invasion, a small detachment of Italian soldiers marched up and took us into custody (this was shortly before the Italian surrender and this particular body was apparently still loyal to the Axis cause).

What followed could fill a book, and maybe someday I'll write one myself. Suffice to say, some twenty survivors of the 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group's would be Sulmona "Milk Run" were gathered up into the tiny town jail located in the heart of beautiful downtown Atessa. Friendlier natives one could never hope to encounter, but the Germans quickly took over and for us the war was over. Hoover Edwards managed to escape, however, cutting his way out of the box car that was transporting us across the Brenner Pass enroute to Deutchland and walking back to southern Italy, where he merged with the 8<sup>th</sup> British Army. (The information on

Hoover's experiences subsequent to his escape from the box car was provided me by another 98<sup>th</sup> crew member who was shot down later and ended up in the same prison came with us.)

As for me, I spent the next 20 months in various prison camps in Austria, Alsace-Lorraine, Poland and finally, at Stalag Luft I in Germany ("Beautiful Barth on the Baltic"). My intended rendezvous in New York with my young and beautiful bride was unavoidably delayed and that is what bothered me the most about my decision to volunteer for just two more missions. I learned my lesson, I'm sure, though it didn't seem to do me much good.

After a year on the "outside", I developed a strong resurgence of yearning for my second love, flying, took advantage of an offer for a regular Air Force commission, and remained on for a full thirty years (I retired December 1, 1971). My initial bailout experience was not to be my last, as I again saved my hide on February 16, 1956, jettisoning downward from a flaming B-52 (from 38,000 feet, at that time the highest anyone had bailed out of a bomber in emergency conditions). Four of us made it out of the pane that day, but another four did not, one of them being my aircraft commander of some seven years in B-29s, B-50s, B-47s, and, finally, B-52s, Lt. Col. Ed Stefanski, of Pottstown, Pennsylvania. I uncured a number of other "brushes" during my 6,000 plus flying hours, too, but none can quite compare with my Sulmona "Milk Run" experience of September 3, 1943.