

Ploesti History

When the 98th Bombardment Group entered the Middle East Theater of Operation in July 1943, it did so as a Heavy Bombardment Task Force. Many months had been spent in preparation of maps and data on the Group's prospective targets—the Balkan Oil Refineries. Of these targets, the refineries at Ploesti, Roumania were by far the most important. Eight of the worlds largest and most up to date refineries were located in this area. Controlled by the Nazis, the output of these refineries furnished more than one-third of the Reich supply of oil. It had been known since the German offensive in Russia that elimination of this vital target would be a decided factor in not only stopping the German advance but would eventually cause them to begin a long and difficult retreat to defeat.

Due to the emergency in the Middle East at the time the 98th landed in Egypt, all target material on the Balkans was shelved for the future and the task of stopping and defeating Rommel's Afrika Korps by blasting his supply lines through the Mediterranean was undertaken. Behind the 8th Army the Air Force moved across the hot sands of Egypt on the heels of the retreating Axis.

The 98th Group moved to its new home in Libya in February 1943 and from there missions were flown over targets throughout the Mediterranean. The base, a huge dust bowl, was a former Italian airbase and had changed hands so many times that scars of British, American, German and Italian bombs were plainly visible among the jumbled steel of what remained of the hangers and airdrome installations. The base was ironically nicknamed "Benina the Beautiful". Two of the squadrons were based on a new but undeveloped drome just to the west of Benina.

During the first year of operations, oil targets in the Balkans were forgotten and it wasn't until the latter part of July that any hint of future operations in this area were disclosed. Combat missions ceased and practice formation flying at low level began. The men were in the "dark" as to the future plans. Three Liberator Groups had been moved in from the E.T.O and for the first time, the American Air Force had become a potent striking machine. When a replica of the Ploesti Oil Refineries was made in the Libyan Desert, the crews were let in on the big secret. Low level bombing and strafing missions were flown over this target to condition the airmen. It was now definite that an attempt would be made to knock out all of the important refineries at Ploesti by one low level attack, by all bombers available. About two weeks were taken up in the study of models, briefing, and practice low-

level missions. The Group was built up to maximum strength in crews and aircraft. Everyone started to “sweat-out” the big day.

Colonel John Riley “Killer” Kane, Commanding Officer of the Group, was one of the first men out of his “sack” that beautiful morning of August 1st. The sky was clear and the sun was beginning to peep up over the escarpment east of the field. Ground crews had been up hours getting their planes ready for the mission. The loud roar of warming engines filled the morning air as the crews began gathering around the intelligence and operations butts for last minute instructions. Outwardly calm, the crews piled into trucks and were carried across the field to the waiting line of aircraft. A few minutes later the roar of half a hundred four-engine bombers filled the air for miles around. Colonel Kane in “Hail Columbia” was the first to streak down the runway and into the air. As other aircraft followed “the Killer”, the field gradually became overcast with a huge cloud of red “Benina” dust. As the last aircraft took off the first sections of the formation came over the field in a salute to the men left behind. Minutes later the flight was winging its way over the blue Mediterranean on one of the longest combat missions in history.

The story of the attack has been told in countless number of times in newspapers and magazines. One Group in the formation was unable to locate its own target, and rather than return its bombs to base, a small number of planes dropped incendiaries and delayed action bombs on the target assigned to the 98th. This was probably the worst mistake of the entire mission. When the 98th arrived at its initial point the target defenses were alert and part of the target was in flames. When asked about the defenses, Colonel Kane remarked “They threw everything but the kitchen sink at us”.

Exploding bombs of the previous Group also took their toll of the low flying aircraft. Photographs taken during the attack show spectacular scenes of aircraft emerging from smoke and flames so low that one aircraft had to bank around a smokestack. Away from the target, the worst was still yet to come. Swarms of Nazi and Roumanian fighters were ready to pounce on the staggering planes. The battle for survival began in earnest. The terrific firepower of the bombers and the low altitude at which they were flying gave them a definite edge over the attacking fighters. Trying to dive on the formation, many of the planes were unable to pull out and crashed into the ground. Gunners of the Liberator piloted by Lt. Colonel Julian M. Bleyer destroyed nine of the enemy aircraft. A total of thirty-six enemy fighters were knocked from the sky by gunners of the 98th. The battle with enemy

fighters over, the struggle to get shattered bombers back to base began. Many of the aircraft had engine and control cables shot away and were unable to gain enough altitude to get over the mountains of Bulgaria and Greece. Captain Norman M “the Baron” Whalen, Navigator for Colonel Kane, did a superb job of leading his formation through the mountains and across the Aegean Sea to an Allied Airbase.

During the long hours the planes were in the air, the ground crews, cooks, truck drivers, and clerks “sweated” them out. Just as dusk was creeping across the desert, aircraft began appearing on the horizon. Ambulances and trucks were rushed out on the field and the badly battered aircraft began to land. When the final count was made, many of the planes were missing. Among which was “Hail Columbia”. Needless to say, few men on the base got much sleep that night. Late the next day word was received that Colonel Kane had landed on a British Island in the Eastern Mediterranean and that his entire crew was safe. Other aircraft had landed at Allied bases, and some had landed in Turkey. The loss of many crews and aircraft was a staggering blow to the Group and had a decided effect on the morale of the men.

Colonel Kane received the Congressional Medal of Honor, and his Squadron Commanders received the Distinguished Service Cross for their outstanding feats of bravery and achievement. The entire Group was awarded a Presidential Citation. That the mission was successful was proven by reconnaissance reports and from reports from inside Roumania.

The full story of the first Ploesti raid makes a Chapter that sings in American history. It was a battle, not a raid, and it was carried deep into fortress Europe, where the stakes are high, and death comes quickly.

U.S. Raiders Destroy Oil in Rumania

**Force of 175 Bombers Ignites Ploesti Refineries
Makes Key Towns Taken in Sicily**

**Americans Within Two Miles of San Stefano; German
North Flank Probably Turned**

CAIRO, Aug. 1.---An American Liberator bomber force of 175 planes flying a round trip of 2400 miles set tremendous fires in the Ploesti oil fields of Rumania today in the biggest low level mas raid in aviation history.” General Lewis H. Bereton, commander of the Ninth U.S. Air Force, announced tonight.

Attacking from smoke-stack height with delayed action bombs, the big four-engine Liberators hurled 600,000 pounds of explosives on seven huge refineries in a sensational daylight blow both to German’s fuel sources and Rumania’s wavering war morale. General Bereton announced through Brigadier General Victor H. Strahm, his chief-of-staff, that the raid probably “materially affected the course of the war,” and warmly praised the gallantry of the 2000 American airmen who participated.

Longest War Flight

The round trip flight was believed to be the longest ever made in any war zone, and the 300 tons of explosives were hurled on fields which supply one-third of German’s oil for the Italian and Russian fronts.

Long after the first attack great fires still raged in the vital fields 35 miles north of Bucharest, the Rumanian capital.

A special communique said:

“A powerful force of Liberators of the Ninth U.S. Air Force carried out a low-level attack on oil refineries in the Ploesti area of Rumania in daylight today. A great weight of bombs was dropped on the vital target from less than 500 feet.

“Full details are not yet available but initial reports testify to the success of the raid.”

The thrust into Rumania was made even more daring by the fact that the heavy bombers employed light bomber tactics, swooping low over their objectives to machine-gun them, as well as to drop time bombs. Long training and previous experience in attacking Italian cities in that manner produced excellent results, it was said.

“We bombed the refineries, storage tanks, distilleries and crack plants,” said General Strahm. “Between 150 and 200 big Liberators went over their targets and dropped high explosive bombs and wrecked installations with machine-gun fire.”

Fly Over Greece, Bulgaria

The big four-engine bombers flew over Axis-held Greece and Bulgaria to smash the heart of Rumania.

(A Hungarian broadcast reported by U.S. government monitors said that Sofia, Bulgaria, was under an alert from 12:10 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. when “approximately 100 Allied planes” flew over Bulgaria. The planes however flew over central Bulgaria considerably east of Sofia, the broadcast said.”)

“They left Ploesti’s big refineries burning,” General Strahm announced. “Long after the bombers passed, delayed action bombs continued to explode in the region.

“We are satisfied that Ploesti has been seriously damaged. The enemy therefore may have been deprived of the major portion of his refining facilities through which passed one-third of his entire supply of oil products for his planes and mechanized forces on the Italian and Russian fronts.

“It is reasonable to suppose that the gallant action of the Ninth Air Force only a few hours ago has materially affected the course of the war.”

Psychological Blow

The extent of damage was not yet determined, but Strahm said “the Axis may have been deprived of the margin of aviation and other motor fuels it requires to continue effective resistance, certainly in Italy and very possibly in Russia.”

Major General Lewis H. Bereton, head of the Ninth Air Force, directed the attack on Germany’s oil heart after joint planning by combined British and American staffs.

It was a powerful psychological blow to Rumania and the entire Axis-held Balkan area aside from the material damage inflicted on the German war machine.

(Sofia, underwent seven alerts during July when unidentified planes flew over the Bulgarian capital. In the light of today’s raid, those machines apparently were Allied reconnaissance planes gathering information for the smashing blow at Ploesti.)

=====

200 U.S. Planes Fire Rumania Oil Fields

**Ploesti Refineries Blasted as Liberators Deliver Blow
From Low Level**

Damage is Heavy, Great Blazes Rage

General Strahm Sees War's Course Altered: Planes Fly 2,000 Miles

by

The Associated Press

CAIRO, Aug. 1---An American Liberator bomber force of nearly 200 planes, sweeping down for a low-level, accurate attack, set tremendous fires in the Ploesti oil fields of Rumania today in a sensational daylight flow both to Germany's fuel sources and to Rumania's wavering war morale.

Brigadier General Victor H. Strahm, chief of staff of the American Ninth Air Force, based in the Middle East, declared in a broadcast to the United States that the raid probably has "materially affected the course of the war."

The extent of damage was not yet determined, but General Strahm said: "The Axis may have been deprived of the margin of aviation and other motor fuels it requires to continue effective resistance, certainly in Italy and very possibly in Russia."

Flying 2,000 or more miles in the longest round-trip flight from this theater, or perhaps in any war zone, the American airmen rained hundreds of tons of explosives on the fields, which supply one-third of German's oil for the Italian and Russian fronts.

Fires Rage in Fields

Long after the first attack great fires still raged in the oil fields, which are thirty-five miles north of Bucharest, the Rumanian capital, refineries, storage tanks, distilleries and delayed-action bombs continued to explode after the departure of the Liberator flyers, who had wrecked many installations with machine-gun fire, he added.

Two thousand specially trained American airmen using low-level tactics participated in the raid, which had three aims—to knock out Germany’s dwindling oil resources, speed Italy’s collapse and crush what is left of Rumania military spirit. The four-engine bombers flew over Axis-held Greece and Bulgaria to smash at the heart of Rumania.

British Aided in Planning

Major General Lewis H. Bereton, American Middle East commander and head of the Ninth Air Force, directed the attack on Ploesti’s oil region after joint planning by combined British and American staffs.

Text of Announcement

Washington, Aug. 1 (AP)---The complete text of Brigadier General Victor H. Strahm’s announcement from Cairo of the bombing today of the Ploesti Oil Fields, as made public here by the War Department follows:

“Hello, America, I have important news. The Nineth United States Army Air Force late this afternoon successfully attacked the oil refineries at Ploesti, source of one-third of the Axis oil supply in Europe. I have just received word of the raid from Major General Lewis H. Brereton, who is at his headquarters.

“We bombed the refineries, storage tanks, distilleries, and cracking plants in Ploesti, Rumania. Between 150 and 200 big Liberators went over their targets and dropped high explosive bombs and wrecked installations with machine-gun fire.

“It was a dangerous raid and a daring one, but our pilots, gunners, bombardiers and navigators were equal to their assigned tasks.”

May Affect Course of War

“They left Ploesti’s big refineries burning. Long after the bombers passed, delayed-action bombs continued to explode in the region. We are satisfied that Ploesti has been seriously damaged.

“The enemy, therefore, may have been deprived of the major portion of his refining facilities through which passed one-third of his entire supply of oil products for his planes and mechanized ground forces on the Italian and Russian fronts.

“It is reasonable to suppose that the gallant action of the Ninth Air Force only a few hours ago has materially affected the course of the war. If indeed the Ploesti plants have been completely crippled, then the Axis may have been deprived of the margin of aviation and other motor fuels it requires to continue effective resistance, certainly in Italy and very possibly in Russia. The extent of the damage inflicted cannot be accurately gauged at this moment although the fires still burn.”

=====

Ploesti Raid Hero Feted in Tel Aviv

American Red Cross gives Tea Party

TEL AVIV, Monday,---One of the first two American airmen in the Middle East to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, Colonel John Riley (Killer) Kane was feted this afternoon by the American Red Cross at their Officers’ Club at a tea party attended by Tel Aviv notables headed by the Mayor, Mr. Isreal Rokach.

His broad chest, displaying none of the galaxy of ribbons won during the past year, the taciturn hero of the air was obviously embarrassed with the admiration of the guests.

Interviewed by “The Palestine Post,” Colonel Kane said that though the award had been made individually for the Ploesti raid, it was meant to reflect credit upon the whole organization. “IT was a great honor in recognition of the outstanding service that the group did,” the Colonel said. Colonel Kane is one of the most popular of American pilot heroes for the missions, which won him the Silver Star, the D.F.C. and Oak Leaf Cluster, the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, and practically every other American decoration have captured the imagination of the American public.

Silver Star Exploit

The action for which he won the Silver Star last autumn was one of his best-known exploits. Piloting a Liberator, over the Libyan desert, with her guns out of order, the plane was engaged by a pursuit ship, an ME-110, Colonel Kane out maneuvered the German plane until its 4,000 rounds were expended and then brought his plane safely back to base. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross for leading the first raid on Naples.

Colonel Kane does not remember how many medals he has received altogether. He wears the ribbons only at parades where additional medals are awarded.

Tel Aviv Like Home

The hero of Ploesti is more loquacious about Palestine. This is his second visit here since the oil-field raid only three weeks ago.

Most of us regard Palestine as a second home, for Tel Aviv is more like home than any place we have been in.

Colonel Kane has been in the Air Force for the past 12 years. He first studied medicine, but after two years at Washington University in St. Louis, changed his plans. He had previously taken his degree at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas, where he was an outstanding football player. He has a wife and a five-year-old son in Shreveport, Louisiana, whose scrap books of their "hero" have twice been filled.

The Congressional Medal of Honor is awarded for extraordinary heroism over and above the ordinary call of duty with the knowledge that there is practically no hope of survival. Most of the awards are posthumous. Only 12 Congressional Medals have been awarded until the outbreak of the present war.

=====

Roosevelt Tells British King of New Repots on Success in Bombings of Ploesti Refineries

Washington, Aug. 16, 1943 (AP)---President Roosevelt in a message to King George of Great Britain said today that later information disclosed that the American bombing of German-used oil refineries in Roumania did greater damage than had been expected. He said a large number of the refineries "have been put out of commission."

"This attack seems to have been well worthwhile," the President said in acknowledging the King's congratulations to the American Ninth Air Force.

Secretary of War Stimson recently said that about 175 big bombers took part in the raid and that about 20 percent were missing. The War Department reported

yesterday that military analysis showed that the “vast bulk of the operating capacity” of the refineries at Ploesti was destroyed.

The text of the President’s reply to the King follows:

Thank you very much for your telegram of congratulations on the long range bombing of the Ploesti oil refineries.

Later information leads us to believe that the damage to the refineries was greater than we had anticipated and that a large number of them have been put out of commission. This attack seems to have been well worthwhile.”

The King’s message follows:

“I have learned with deepest admiration of the memorable and inspiring achievement of the United States Ninth Air Force in attacks of Roumania oil refineries.

“The bombing of this heavily defended center of Axis production after one of the longest operational flights of the war called for endurance and courage of the highest order as well as for practical skill in navigation and for brilliant organization on the part of those who planned the attack.

“The gallantry with which the crews pressed home their attacks at a very low level was beyond praise and their devotion to duty in spite of heavy losses has stirred the hearts of all who fight with us in the cause of freedom.”

=====

Ploesti Oil Output Reported Cut 75%

**Eaker Holds Our Destruction of Refineries and Balkan
Rails Heavy Blow to Nazia**

Benefit to Russians Seen

**Germans Facing Them in Area Depend on Supply---All
Communications Disrupted**

by

A. C. Sedgwick

By Wireless to The New York Times

NAPLES, May 8---Production of the Rumanian Ploesti refining system said to have been capable of an annual oil output of 9,600,000 tons that were furnishing Germany with more than 30 percent of her war needs, has been reduced to less than one-quarter of its normal production by the heavy Allied bombings, according to a statement by Lieut. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Force.

General Eaker, in a letter to Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, commander of the Fifteenth Air Force, congratulated him on its achievements.

General Eaker's letter said that more than 200,000 tons had been dropped on enemy objectives in the Mediterranean theatre since Nov. 8, 1942.

"Please extend to the Fifteenth United States Air Force and the Royal Air Force my congratulations on their effective operations against the German stronghold in the Balkans during the first week of May," General Eaker wrote.

Considering the extent to which the German Army's mechanization is dependent on Rumanian oil, this extensive damage to the refining facilities in the Ploesti region, which processes more than 90 percent of Rumanian crude oil production, may have an immediate effect on Adolf Hitler's war machine. Presumably the Russians will be the first to profit. Their armies are about 200 miles from Ploesti, and the Germans facing them depend largely if not wholly on Rumanian oil.

Seven important refineries in the Ploesti area are clustered about the marshalling yards system that serves the city. It is believed that the three largest of these refineries are so damaged that they will not be in working order for months to come. A fourth, situation at Campina, nineteen miles from Ploesti, is also reported severely damaged while the other plants have been heavily hit.

The refineries have been included as objectives in the past week's campaign, the main purpose of which has been to destroy the enemy's railway communications. Ploesti is one of the three bottlenecks on the main railroad leading from the west to the Russian front, making it a Number One priority target.

Bucharest, likewise a highly important focal point, and the vast railroad yards and repair facilities in and adjoining the Rumanian capital have been attacked five times in the daylight and three at night in the recent offensive. It is estimated that a thousand units of rolling stock were destroyed or severely damaged in an attack on April 4. Since then further havoc has been wrought on assembly and repair sheds, with much finished war material made useless.

All Communications Disrupted

NAPLES, May 8 (AP)---General Eaker said that Allied air attacks had disrupted all lines of communications to the Russian front. Fourteen thousand tons of bombs have been dropped on Balkan targets in six weeks.

The enemy's position has been "greatly weakened by serious interruption of his rail and river transportation," the General added.