

TWELVE DAYS TO GO!

Early in those twelve days we didn't really know the reason for our removal from combat status. Sicily was now secured. Was our job down here completed and it was time to return to our home base in England? The abortion rate was high. Would we do some maintenance work and then return to combat in preparation for the invasion of Italy? Regardless of what the future held, the present reality was that we were restricted to base. What's more, the command structure seemed to be more vigilant about who was around the facility.

The maintenance rumor was a good possibility. Almost immediately after we were placed on stand down, the engines on the *Old Crow* were declared unfit for future use.

In the desert conditions, with limited equipment and engine mechanics, an engine change was a major undertaking. The manpower shortage was overcome by "volunteering" the combat crews to assist. Crew chiefs found themselves directing Lts., stupid radio operators, and gunners. The combat engineers and assistant engineers were just a little bit less stupid. Nonetheless, they got the job done and the aircraft once again started to fly.

While working on the engines, McAtee took off his shirt. By going shirtless, he may have been trying to avoid washing his shirt. On this base there were either very good or very poor laundry facilities. It all depended on how you looked at it.

Local natives could not be trusted to return your clothing. Thus, they could not fill the role that the farm wives played in England.

Water was in short supply. Aviation gasoline was not. Therefore, if you didn't mind the odor and you didn't immediately try to wear the clothing, gasoline would cut body and other oils. It would also do a fair job of cleaning the red desert dust out of the cloth.

While we were working on the engines, gasoline also served another function. The locust were everywhere. Some relief from their crawling could be found by throwing pails of gasoline around the area. Those that were touched by the petroleum did not survive.

Speaking of gasoline, it was about this time that each of our

aircraft had bomb bay gasoline tanks installed. In addition, there were modifications made in the wing tanks so that our total gas load could be increased to 3,100 gallons. This was about 14 hours of flying time.

The early rumors proved to be correct. When we did start to fly it was at low level. What's more, the Norden bomb sight, that we used at high level, was removed from the *Old Crow*. A cheap bomb sight that was used on A-26's was placed in our ship at the bombardier's position. Joe Young started to attend classes on how to use it.

Many of the ships, when not flying, were receiving further modifications. Twin 50-caliber guns were installed in some ships at both the waist windows and in the nose.

Some of the crews started to make modifications to the ships on their own. A few of the officers and enlisted men of *Earthquake* made a couple of visits into the desert. They were looking for German aircraft. When they found one that had armor plating, they removed it and took it back for installation on their ship.

One afternoon we were briefed on security. I don't know how we could breach security! We were eighteen miles from nowhere, no telephones, we couldn't go to town, and they weren't even allowing the Arab man who brought us eggs to wander around the base. Maybe it was the locusts that they were worried about.

At first individual aircraft flew alone. This time the flying was lower than we were flying in England. This time there were no buildings, power lines or trees to avoid. Only an occasional Arab tent forced us to pull up. This time, in the afternoon, the hot desert floor created atmospheric conditions that resulted in a constant pounding as we raced across it. All of the other B-24 groups, that were clustered nearby, were also flying close to the ground across the desert.

Then there was a change and groups of aircraft started to fly together. There were five in our flight. Flying with us were aircraft from the 68th Squadron. We charged across the desert in line abreast. The officers seemed to know something that we didn't know. They were looking for something on the desert floor, but couldn't find it. They tried again in the afternoon without success.

One morning they found their target and practice bombs were dropped. Eventually, there were five groups flying in the formation (44th, 93rd and 389th from the Eighth Air Force and the 98th and 376th from the Ninth Air Force).

On one of these training missions, Colonel Johnson was flying with Slough. Suddenly the #4 engine quit. Just as suddenly, the wing on that side dropped and seemed to drag forever on the desert floor. In reality it was only a matter of seconds and Slough had it under control once again. Johnson has never forgotten that day.

It was about this time that we were told to report for a briefing. We thought for certain that this was it. Tomorrow we go! After the briefing, we were glad that it wasn't tomorrow! From then on, we only flew in the morning. Afternoons and evenings were spent in meetings.

The briefed raid had been in development for a long time. What we didn't know then was that it had been briefly mentioned and agreed to by our heads of state at the Casablanca Conference in early 1943. The Rumanian oil fields at Ploesti would be bombed. These fields provided one third of the oil needs of the German military and almost all of the high octane gasoline for the Russian front.

We were told that if we destroyed the oil refineries the German aircraft and tanks would grind to a halt. The Russians would be able to then make advances into the Balkans. Also, within a few weeks, American troops would be making landings on the Italian mainland at Salerno. With reduced enemy firepower the lives of thousands of American infantrymen would be saved.

One night we were told that it would take ground troops several months with very heavy losses to accomplish what we were going to do in one day. The target was so important that if we lost all of the attacking force, but destroyed the refineries, it would be worth it. Fifty percent losses were expected. This one raid could shorten the war by as much as six months.

During the briefings, it became obvious that the proposed raid had been in the planning stage for a long time. The briefings were the most complete that I had ever heard of. There were models on sand tables. One moving picture simulated an approach on the city of Ploesti and our targets as it would look to a pilot flying at ground level.

I remember one slide in particular. It was looking down on the Creditul Minier oil refinery at Brazi, our assigned target. There were chimneys and storage tanks. The picture was taken at a low altitude from an aircraft. The aircraft was flying in formation with other military aircraft. I marveled at what good intelligence we had.

For his part, Mark Morris believes:

For the Ploesti raid, August 1, 1943, we had the most thorough briefings that I can recall. In the course of this, the ever present, but seldom mentioned dangers of any air raid were emphasized. Other briefings were often broken at some point and enlisted men and officers were given separate briefings covering only those specifics needed to do their job. This mission was approached differently. I was impressed with the amount of information given to all as a team. The briefing included an offer that anyone not wishing to go could make it known and be relieved of going. During the briefing conducted a day before the mission, additional hazards of this low-level attack were emphasized. All was presented in a manner which left no doubt of the importance placed on the success of this raid.

Also explained and of interest at the time to me at least, was possible actions for evasion if forced down. There seemed to be an undertone of the possibility of reprisals to crewmen due to the nature of this deep penetration bombing. Occupied Rumania's real allegiance was vague. Further realization of the low level aspect, and concern for loss of men, was prompted by the decision to dispense with carrying hatch gunners on this mission.

In the intelligence briefings, we were told that there would be some Rumanian antiaircraft guns in the area. However, they might not be manned since the attack would fall on a Sunday. This day is considered as a holiday by the Rumanians.

Mark Morris also remembers that the intelligence officers:

Informed us in the event we were forced down and if we were able to make our way to the border, we could join up with the Yugoslavian forces of Tito or Mikhailovich. Although these were rival factions, either would take us and later try to get us to the coast for eventual pickup by small craft. We were briefed on where and when to meet

and given escape kits containing, among other things, silk maps of the area.

The author recalls Mikhailovich was to move into an oxbow loop of the Danube river. He would hold that loop for one week. If we were able to reach that area, we were to approach farmers or peasants working in the fields either alone or in groups of not more than two. We were to say to them, "Anglic Zabit, Mikhailovich, Cetniks". This is roughly, "I am an English Officer. Take me to Mikhailovich and his Cetniks" We were not to display or let it be known that we were carrying a gold British Sovereign with our escape kit. This coin was worth one-pound sterling.

During one of the briefings we were told that if an aircraft was able to make it to the target they were expected to go. However, if the aircraft was unable to make it to the target it was acceptable to abort.

At the same time, the crewmen were told that those persons with 15 or more missions who did not wish to go, should drop into Colonel Johnson's tent and he would excuse them. If there were others who were exceedingly apprehensive, especially pilots, they too would be excused. There would be no entry made in the records. The Colonel did not have any takers.

The final practice flight involved all five groups flying in column formation. When the simulated Initial Point was reached they turned and charged across the desert floor on a simulated Ploesti constructed out of wood and canvas. Each ship in the formation had a specific building or portion of a building into which they were to slam their bombs. Today, in addition to the practice bombs, some of the ships carried 500-lb. bombs. The simulated Ploesti went up in a shower of dust.

That night Norm Kiefer and many others wrote their letters of "good-bye" to their wives and Mothers. I had never done this before. For the first time, I did not expect to return. My letter was left with Charley Loftus to be sent when it was established that I was down. Charley would not be going to Ploesti. At ground level you do not need a hatch gunner.

Mark Morris undoubtedly also did some last minute writing that night. He also did some thinking about how this mission would be different from the high-altitude raids we were used to flying. This time he would not have to put up with heavy

clothes and long periods on oxygen:

On this mission I would be relieved of such restrictions and distractions. To divert thoughts of less pleasant circumstances, I planned my wardrobe. Flight crewman's pride and joy were flight jackets, officially A-2 jackets, made of soft horsehide leather. Mine was one size too small as that was all they had when mine was issued. I would wear it for this low level ride. My light flying suit, normally worn under the heavy gear, would instead be worn overall. I would, in fact, wear my best suntan uniform, I would be slightly out of uniform, however; no tie. I reasoned also that a steel helmet might look nice in view of the expected ground fire. I decided to wear my leather Natal (Brazil) boots, only 1/2 size too small, which I inherited from a less fortunate crewman. I spit polished them. If we did go down I would walk out and join the Cetniks for a while.

Donald Chase wrote about this period as follows:

All ten crewmen of *Heaven Can Wait* willingly readied for the assault. But orders called for a crew of only nine, not the usual ten. The tunnel gun position was to be unmanned because of weight restrictions for the 2,500-mile flight and because our low attack altitude and 200-mile per-hour ground speed would cancel the effectiveness of a single, belly fired, hand held 50-caliber gun.

The four mid and rear section gunners drew straws to determine which would remain on the desert on P-day. Young gunner Ralph Knox drew the "unlucky" straw. He complained and cursed and, feeling abandoned, withdrew from the rest of the crew, not to speak until just before takeoff, when, woefully he wished us luck. Ralph was dejected by this fracture in the brotherhood of battle.

There wasn't much reason to stash aboard beer or extra water for the Ploesti run; we wouldn't fly high enough to chill it. But one of the ground men fastened a canteen in the already crammed bomb bay. "Just for luck, okay?" He punctuated his words with the universal, jabbing thumbs up salute.

The feeling of dejection that Ralph Knox felt was shared by Charley Loftus and others that were selected to stay behind. Some volunteered to be on standby. They would fill in for any gunner that might be ill or otherwise could not go.

The code name adopted for this operation was TIDAL WAVE. The keys to the success of the mission are surprise and speed. Surprise the Germans! Don't let them know your intent until you are in the target area! Speed into the target area! Speedily select the buildings you are to simultaneously strike! Speed in getting out!

The general plan calls for the five groups to assemble in column formation. The battle column is to be led by the 376th, the *Liberandos*. Their lead and deputy lead crews have had longer and more detailed briefings than any of the rest.

The *Liberandos* will be followed in order of flight by the 93rd, the *Traveling Circus*; the 98th, the *Pyramiders*; the 44th, the *Flying Eightballs*; and the 389th, the *Sky Scorpions*. Each of these planes will have a specific building or portion of a building that they must hit. Each of these planes will carry 3,000 pounds of bombs (either six 500-pound or three 1,000-pound). The men in the back of most of these ships will have two boxes of incendiary bombs to throw out the windows on to the refineries below.

The battle formation will leave the African Coast and fly almost due north across the Mediterranean until they reach the island of Corfu. Corfu lies just off the coast of Europe where the borders of Greece and Albania join. Intelligence believes that the German radar defense is weakest at this point.

At Corfu the formation will turn on to a northeasterly course and climb to 15,000 feet. They will pass over the Pindus Mountains in Greece and Albania, The Balkan Mountains in Yugoslavia and at the tip of Bulgaria. They will follow the contour of the declining mountain range with the Danube River flowing through its foothills. Here, they should be about 3,000 foot above the ground. On the other side of the Danube lay the plains of Rumania.

They will still have one and a half hours before they reach their first checkpoint, the little town of Pitesti. At Pitesti they should be at about 1,500 feet.

It is here that the 389th Group will leave the formation and start toward their target at Campina, a few miles north of Ploesti. The main attacking force is to continue on course to the second checkpoint at the town of Targoviste. From there it will be but a short distance to the initial point at Floresti, just twelve miles north of Ploesti. Floresti will

be identified by the ridge of mountains that lay behind it. The mountains will have a sprinkling of oil derricks. The oil derricks will range down to the plain and on to Ploesti. There will be a railroad track running from Floresti to Ploesti. The formation will be continuing to lose altitude.

After the three leading groups pass Floresti, all aircraft will make a 90 degree turn to the right and descend to tree top level. This will place them in a frontal formation skimming across the ground. The 98th will be on the left hand side of the railroad. Further to their left will be the 93rd and beyond them, the 376th. The 44th will be on the right hand side of the railroad.

At this point, 21 ships of the 44th, now flying furthest to the right in the formation, will take up a course of 137 degrees and head for their target, code name Blue. It is the Creditul Minier refinery at Brazi. This is five miles south of Ploesti on the road to Bucharest. All other attacking aircraft will be going into the town of Ploesti.

The remaining sixteen 44th ships will continue down the railroad tracks to their target, code name White Five. This is the Colombia Aquila complex. The 98th will go to their target, code name White Four on the other side of the railroad tracks. This is the largest target, the Astro Romana refinery. The 93rd will go in a straight line to code name White Two, Standard Petrol Block, and code name White Three, Unirea Sperantza. Simultaneously the 376th will be dropping their bombs on code name White One, the Romana Americana complex.

After dropping their bombs, all aircraft will make a right turn away from the target areas and retrace their course up over the mountains and down to Corfu. Then across the Mediterranean to their African bases.

Ten ships from the 506th will make the trip to Ploesti. They will join nine ships from the 68th Squadron and one ship from the 67th Squadron to make up one of the two 44th formations. Lt. Shelby L. Irby, from the 66th Squadron, will fill in at the back of our formation as a spare. The attacking formation will be led by Col. Posey. Their target will be the Creditul Minier refinery at Brazi, the Blue target.

The attacking formation will be four flights of five aircraft. Each flight will appear from above as a loose letter M.

Taking off that morning will be A/C #172, Bar N, Lynn Bari II, Piloted by Anderson; A/C #778, T, Southern Comfort, piloted by Austin; A/C #234, Bar U, Mr. Five By Five, piloted by Beam; A/C #235, Bar C, Earthquake McGoon, piloted by Bunker; A/C #606, X, Timb-A-A-Ah, piloted by Larson; A/C #283, Z, Old Crow, piloted by McAtee; A/C #282, Bar Y, Ruth Less, piloted by Slough; A/C 013, D, Trouble, piloted by Stevens; A/C #201, Bar O, Baldy and His Brood, piloted by Strong and A/C #370, V, Heaven Can Wait, piloted by Whitlock.

The following ships from the 68th Squadron will fly with the 506th: A/C #225, T, Flak Alley, flown by Alexander; A/C #813, V, Victory Ship, flown by Diehl; A/C #211, U, Wing and a Prayer, flown by Holmes; A/C #995, C, flown by Houston; A/C #788, D, Avenger, flown by W. D. Hughes; A/C #071, C, Margaret Ann, flown by Jansen; A/C #731, N, Hag Mag, The Mothball Queen, flown by Martin; A/C #699, P, Lemon Drop flown by Phillips; and A/C #373, Z, Natchez Belle flown by Shannon. Finally, A/C #371, Q, G. I. Gal, will be flown by Reinhart of the 67th Squadron.

This formation will be led by Colonel Posey. He will fly with Diehl on Victory Ship. They will be the left hand point of the letter M. On his left wing and forming the left hand leg of the letter M will be Alexander. On his right wing and forming the middle point of the letter M will be Shannon. On Shannon's right wing and flying the right hand point of the letter M will be Holmes. On Holmes right wing and forming the right leg of the letter M will be Houston. In the second flight from left to right will be Hughes, Phillips, Jansen, Bunker and Martin. In the third flight will be Larson, Anderson, Stevens, Strong and Austin. In the fourth flight will be Reinhart, Beam, Whitlock, McAtee and Slough.

Individual targets for the right most eight ships (Diel, Alexander, Phillips, Hughes, Anderson, Larson, Beam and Reinhart) will be in the Dubbs Plant. That target area is 180 foot wide.

Individual targets for the left most four ships (Houston, Martin, Austin, and Slough) will be the Pipe Still facility. Their target area is 180 foot wide.

The middle eight ships (Holmes, Shannon, Bunker, Jansen, Strong, Stevens, McAtee and Whitlock) will be a mixture of the cracking plant at Pipe still and the boiler and power house that services the entire area. The boiler house/power house target is 120 foot wide.

Early in the morning of that last day, many of the personnel, including combat, came down with dysentery. However, the members of the *Old Crow* were not among them.