

## **Eyewitness to the Raid on Ploesti**

A pilot's detailed firsthand account describes the mission to bomb Romania's oil refineries in August 1943. - By Lyndon Shubert

*On August 1, 1943, a Consolidated B-24D Liberator bomber named the Vagabond King and its American crew took part in a massive bombing raid on the oil refinery complex at Ploesti, Romania. The B-24s took off from Libya without the benefit of a fighter escort.*

*We know the names and some of the ranks of the 10 men who flew aboard the Vagabond King that day -- 1st Lt. John McCormick, pilot; George Brinton, co-pilot; 1st Lt. Marvin Mosco, bombardier; Marvin Mendelson, navigator; Paul Miller, Alfred Rossi, Gerald Murphy and William Bundai, all of whom were gunners; David Shattles, crew chief; and Martin Van Buren, radioman -- and we know they all survived that mission. But a total of 54 B-24s did not return from Ploesti. Nearly 500 crewmen were either killed, captured or interned in Turkey.*

*The Vagabond King's crew cheated the odds in the August 1943 raid and made it to friendly territory before crash-landing. Many of those same men, however, survived that mission only to lose their lives in subsequent sorties. Following is an excerpt from an account of the August 1, 1943, Ploesti raid written by Vagabond King pilot John McCormick. His report -- a copy of which was apparently later sent to the family of each man who participated in that mission -- paints a vivid portrait of one of the most costly bombing missions in history.*

What I wanted to write to you about was the story of the *Vagabond King's* part in the Romanian oil field raid. The story is out now, so I can give you the particulars.

You've probably heard how we practiced again and again on a full-scale replica of the vital facilities of the refineries laid out on the desert in Libya. We attacked them repeatedly to work out our precise timetable attack and approach through the Carpathian Mountains, and then one day we received our final briefing and got our ships ready for the long hop.

Inasmuch as it was to be the longest mass raid in history, we were prepared for plenty of trouble. We were carefully briefed on how to escape if forced down and how to act as POWs or internees and where to escape to, in an emergency. The target was so important that headquarters deemed it necessary to destroy it, even if we stood to lose 100 percent of the striking force. The losses would still be acceptable. So, without detracting from our chances of totally destroying the target, we worked out defense measures that we hoped would enable the greater part of us to return. We felt that a low-level attack by high-altitude bombers would constitute a combination of surprise and accuracy, sufficient to accomplish both aims. This would be the first time bombers would be used for strafing ground targets.

The well-known importance of the refineries to the Germans was the key to our great efforts to get our new technique and timing down pat ... And the excitement never lagged from repeated practices.

We got up early, the morning of our takeoff, ate, and got out to the ships for a final check-up on our gas, oil, oxygen, bombs, rations and ammunition. We were well

prepared. We signaled thumbs up to Sergeant Frank Chowanski and Pfc Eddings and got off, the last plane in our group.

Nerves were a little on edge because one plane just ahead exploded on takeoff and worried some boys who knew about it.

A small last-minute repair had delayed our takeoff so that my wingman had taken off shortly before I did. That was James, our bad-luck kid since he joined the group back in Texas.

My left wingman lost a carburetor on the runway and had to abort. That was Lighter. He certainly looked sad to be left out of it, and I didn't particularly like losing a damn good wingman for a blank space of enemy sky.

We got into formation and headed across the bluest Mediterranean you can imagine. Things were running smoothly. The air was full, from starboard to port, from top to bottom with the Libs [Liberators]. Everything looked good.

Things never look dangerous when you have so much company. We even felt secure in the rear guard. We called ourselves "Cluster on the Purple Heart Squadron." James' plane was even the "Right Leaf of the Cluster."

Then, out of a blue sky, without warning, the lead plane of another group up front spun sickeningly out of formation and exploded against the sea, burning so as to leave a black tomb marker. The second ship had gone down before we had even touched enemy land.

Immediately, all gunners got itchy, looking for a possible fighter, and the pilots stood by silent radios waiting for a Change Order or explanation. Nothing except the continuous drone of our four giant engines on the wings. We passed through the sickening black smoke, into the blue skies beyond. There were no survivors.

Then another B-24 peeled off, heading home, one engine feathered. That was the hot desert putting in its two cents' worth. We looked to our engines, but they gave no indication of weakening under the heavy load we carried.

Finally, land! Greece, our maps said. Enemy territory. Tension was relieved, a new excitement gripped us now. The enemy was man, and his threat was tangible...and at hand.

We were at 10,000 feet and working up towards our objective, against a little more head wind than anticipated. Clouds were becoming heavier but still no opposition. Then, through gaps in the clouds, we could make out mountains, marking the time for us to turn south for our let-down to the target.

Then an intercom call: "Fighter at 5 o'clock!" It was an antiquated biplane. He couldn't even catch us as we began dropping down the mountainside. Slowly changing our formation from the protective one we traveled in to one designed to allow us good individual runs on the target, we could see the lead plane down the valley in which lay our target. The dialogue on the *Vagabond King* went something like this:

"Good Lord! Mooney, we are too high!"

"Lord Almighty! I can't recognize the refinery stacks!"

"What kind of camouflours are these boys?"

"Mosco, open the bomb bay doors!"

And down we dropped, to silhouette our target against the sky, just like Mosco and I had practiced on the model area, simulating Ploesti, that they had built for us on the desert in Libya.

Then the lead plane, realizing he had turned too soon, worked back in a big "S" to the next valley. "By Jehoshaphat!...if fighters were to hit us now," I told myself. But I stuck to Mooney. James came in close as we turned to the north again, ready to make the final approach and bomb run. I warmed up my fixed nose guns with a loud burst that startled Mosco so much he almost jumped out of the nose.

We were ready for strafing now. For the first time in history B-24s were going to be used on a strafing run. We turned south down the valley. The lead plane was starting his bomb run. Christ! His plane was already burning, and he was carrying 1,000-pound bombs with delayed fuses!

Then it was: "Gunners, keep your eyes open for fighters and ack-ack batteries."

"Don't shoot civilians unless they are throwing bottles at us!"

"OK, Mosco, bomb bay doors open."

"Start the camera, Van."

Bang! What the hell was that? Here we go anyway, down on the carpet. We get right behind and under Stan Podalak's plane, Mooney's left wing. We line up our two chimneys, which will put our bombs right through the windows of the boiler house. We can't drop far behind Mooney's plane because he's carrying 45-second delay fuses, same as we are.

Above us, we could look into Stan's open bomb bay doors. We could see the bombs hanging ready, willing and able. Tracers, red and white, were streaming up at the boys ahead, hitting them too!

Then our cockpit exploded with sparks, noise and concussion. Tracers spit out over my head. Luckily, George and I crouched down, making ourselves as small as possible.

The tracers melted away into the smoke and fire of the refinery. Murphy cut loose in the top gun turret with the twin 50s. I wanted to shoot him --he was ruining our bomb run!

Wham! More bullets through the cockpit! The emergency windows blew open, giving us a 225-mile-per-hour blast of air in the cockpit.

But now we were down to almost ground level, lined up and anxious to go. We came up to the target chimney height and through the smoke, over the other bomb explosions. Then, bombs away! Our plane was suddenly 4,000 pounds lighter.

In front of us, Mooney's bombs had released beautifully, but he was veering off to the right, and we were supposed to hit the same building! [Captain R.C. Mooney's plane, Hitler's Hearse, had taken several direct hits. Mooney himself had been killed instantly by groundfire.]

Through the smoke, down on the deck we scooted. Mooney and Stan and Sparrier were above us, too high. "Come on down, boys," I prayed. "Fighters can't dive on you when you're on the deck." We hang right below them, with ol' Heimie's plane so close, he was sticking his right wing through my waist window.

Then we noticed Bob's engine was feathered, but then he started it windmilling to fool any fighters looking for cripples. Sure enough, there was a Me-110 circling over us. He had already shot down two 24s, but for some reason he didn't close with our tight-flying "Purple Heart Squadron." Neither did any of the other fighters. We knew we'd never be able to re-form with the main group, and we were afraid to break radio silence for fear of drawing fighters, so we followed Bob as he headed home, sticking close together, to protect us against fighters.

Three minutes after "bombs away," the boys told me we had been hit pretty hard and that Van was bleeding badly. An anti-aircraft cannon shell had hit his knee as he was turning the automatic camera. Miller, in the tin-can, tail-turret, called to say that the bombs we dropped had exploded and our target was flattened and burning fiercely.

Finally, Mooney's No. 2 engine was feathered, but his bomb bay doors wouldn't close, so the boys began tossing out everything that wasn't permanently nailed down. They had to get rid of all excess weight in order to keep the big bird flying. They even tossed out most of their .50-caliber machine guns and ammo. It was the only way they could keep flying and save gas. It would be a long haul to any safe haven and they knew it, but at least we were sticking together and that must have cheered them some.

James broke radio silence after about 10 minutes and told me he wouldn't have enough gas to get home so I told him to head for the nearest neutral landing spot. He was afraid to mention places over the radio, so I asked him if he wanted to go to "gobble gobble land." I dropped back and flew on his wing so he could save gas. He was so slowed down that the other three crates were almost out of sight.

While this was going on, navigators on both planes were busy making our courses for Turkey. We realized that Mooney was making for Turkey, too. So I told James to pour on the coal and catch up with them.

This was when James' plane started doing acrobatics. I didn't know what was up, but I followed him and all of a sudden I saw a lot of flak puffs. We were passing over Bucharest inadvertently, and they [the enemy anti-aircraft artillerymen on the ground] had blood in their eyes.

We didn't get hit as we continued our chase after the other three. Van was being cared for with morphine and tourniquets. All he said was, "Here's where I get one medal you guys won't get."

He was right. No one else did get hit except the old Vagabond itself. After about 45 minutes we were back in formation heading for Turkey in a strange procession. Fighters were our huge worry. We expected them every mile of the way, and we had climbed high enough, to about 8,000 feet, to be duck soup. But no fighters came. Finally we hit the Sea of Marmara, and since the country was neutral from then on, we decided it was best to let the others do as they please.

We were going to friendly territory and get Van to a hospital. We turned for Cyprus and the navigator began working in earnest.

We were right in the Turkish Mountains, busy transferring fuel, when all four engines cut out at the same time. I damn near died! We had only about 1,000 feet of clearance, and there wasn't a flat spot within 50 miles big enough to park a [Stinson] L-5 in.

Van couldn't jump, and we weren't about to jump without him. I figured I'd have to put it down somewhere, the best I could, and take our chances. But with a roar and a lurch, those good old Pratt and Whitneys took hold again. Just as we shared a big smile, all four engines died again.

Dave Shattles moved faster than any man I'd ever seen. He jumped down into the bomb bay and switched gas valves to break the air lock in the lines. And this time those wonderful engines roared back to life, as we scooted between peaks and resumed our course to Nicosea Airport on the island of Cyprus, which was still 300 or 400 miles somewhere to the south of us.

Our nerves were sure taking a helluva beating. We'd been in the air for 10 hours already. Now we were all alone, over rough, unfriendly terrain, even if it wasn't the enemy. And now we had to sweat out our gas supply. Mendy called to tell me we had just run off the edge of his last, good Air Corps map. From now on, we would have to figure by time, distance, compass, and dead reckoning.

Nobody bothered us as we flew over Turkey. At least they didn't hit us! So we made it to the seacoast and wondered if we would be able to find Cyprus. It was getting late in the afternoon, haze was forming, and our only map was an old, schoolbook Mercator map.

We finally reached the blue water of the Mediterranean Sea. I looked longingly at the flat sand beaches of the Turkish Coast. I considered plunking her down there, but I wanted to get medical help for Van...and I knew none of us wanted to be interred in Turkey for the length of the war. Anyway, I thought if we failed to find Cyprus, and if we had enough gas, we could come back and find a nice soft beach to set her down on. A big if...as I looked at the needles of the gas gauges hovering near zero.

I headed for Cyprus. Mosco was taking good care of Van. We swung out over the water, squeezing every mile out of every drop of gasoline. We were flying slowly to

save what little gas we had left. But still, it shouldn't have been this long until we saw some solid land out there. Cyprus was a big island, but we couldn't find it!

"Mendy, let's turn in on our E.T.A. Maybe it's just off to our right, in that haze," I said. So we turned and, holy smokes! There it was. Just off our left wing. We made a direct course for Nicosea. Our gas gauges showed we were on our last 100 gallons. Ten precious, gas-eating minutes went by and still no Cyprus! It had suddenly disappeared--10 minutes wasted chasing a mirage. Our "Cyprus" had been nothing but cloud shadows, and now we were really lost to boot.

We listened to our radio, hoping to get in touch with the air base at Nicosea, the only airport on the island. We could hear other planes in distress. One was going down near us, into the sea, but we couldn't help.

We continued on, looking for land--any beach or piece of good solid dirt. A B-24 doesn't "ditch well" if you have to put her down on water. It breaks up, and you don't have much chance of getting out.

I wanted to land at Nicosea Air Base. It was growing dark when I finally saw the airport beacon. There were three other planes milling around the area, trying to find the field and get up enough nerve to go in and land, in their damaged condition.

I gave the tower my call letters with "wounded aboard" and was immediately cleared to land. The gear came down ok. Then the flaps came down without faltering. Props OK. Turbos OK, all controls working fine. It was getting dark, but I could still make out the runway, so I lined up and sailed in.

The damn runway was uphill and almost fooled me, but the tires screeched, and I "stuck" the landing...we were down in one piece! I coasted to the end ...and turned down a little road off the runway, to keep it clear for the other planes trying to land.

No one came out to meet us so we taxied up the road. "Cripes," I thought. "This is sure good camouflage, but that ditch was real enough," so I pulled up onto an embankment and cut the engines.

The silence was deafening. We were back on the ground! We were alive! We were safe!

I unfastened my safety belt. It had been 14 hours and 30 minutes since I'd sat down in the pilot seat and started out in that cold, damp morning, which now seemed so long ago.

As soon as we had cleared the runway, the commanding officer of the 98th Bomb Group, Colonel "Killer" Kane, came in for a landing in his shot-up crate with one engine feathered. He misjudged the uphill runway and didn't have enough power left to pull it up. He washed out his landing gear, nosed up, and smashed up his plane. No one was hurt and Colonel Kane beat us to Tel Aviv, leaving his wrecked plane to be salvaged by us!

Now, finally, safe on the ground, we were the happiest, tireddest, hungriest boys you've ever seen! We all kissed the ground we landed on.

There was a doctor working on Van when I got aft, and soon he was taken to a hospital. He's OK now and back in the States. I haven't seen or heard from him since. We worked on old Vagabond using any scavenged parts we could find and soon had it flyable--barely--but flyable. We lumbered down the bumpy runway, pulled her into the air, and headed back to Libya.

Well, that is the story of my part in the big Ploesti air raid. What others did must remain secret for a while longer. I'll tell you all about it when I get back home.

I know I may have distorted the story to appear like I was the only person on the raid, but I feel the emotions and experiences I went through were so vivid, that I want to pass them along.

I can tell you, there wasn't a man among us who will ever be the same after that 14-hour jaunt to Ploesti. I am happy to be able to tell this story. But, I am sad for the

many who were there, on that mission to Ploesti, who'll never be able to say they were even there.

*The Vagabond King and her crew were later reassigned to England. Although it is unclear what happened to John McCormick and many of the other men later in the war, we do know that 1st Lt. Marvin Mosco was reported missing in action after a mission aboard the same plane three months later. The notification received by Mosco's family reads, in part:*

*"Under date of November 29, 1943, The Adjutant General notified you that your son, First Lieutenant Marvin Mosco, had been reported missing in action ... since November 18, 1943. Further information has been received indicating that Lt. Mosco was a member of a B-24 Liberator bomber which departed from England on November 18, 1943, on a bombardment mission to Norway. Full details are not available, but the report indicates ... our planes encountered enemy aircraft and in an ensuing engagement, your son's Liberator was seen to sustain damage and to fall into the sea*

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