



HITTING HITLER'S OIL BARREL

**BY RADIO FROM
FRANK GERVASI**

One out of every three drops of Hitler's oil comes from Ploesti, Rumania. The Ninth Air Force was ordered out to blot it. General Brereton was terribly worried about those Liberators until the lead plane broke radio communication with two words. Then he smiled. And laughed. And began to breathe again

LOUIS HOBBS' voice was mildly casual when he phoned to ask me whether I'd like to fly out to Bomber Command with the general for a week end. He had to twist my arm a little to make me go. I had flown the several hours out to Bomber Command with Major General Lewis Hyde Brereton and Colonel Hobbs, his aide, three or four times before. The journey usually meant losing several Egyptian pounds to one or the other at gin rummy. I wasn't keen about it.

But an hour later, we were in a comfortable DC-3, headed for the Bomber Command. I am glad I went. If I hadn't, I would have missed the biggest air story of the war so far.

Brereton and Hobbs sat on the floor of the plane forward and played a game or two of cribbage. But their hearts weren't in it. It was easy to see that Brereton was preoccupied, and in so far as you could tell from his poker face, he was somewhere between worry and outright anxiety. Hobbs wore his best Latin smile and was charmingly enigmatic. He is black-haired, has a small mustache to match, and the complexion and general air of a lovable bad man. Until he talks, you'd say he was a Mexican. When he does, you know he's a Texan.

Brereton is a small, compact Pennsylvanian known to Hobbs and intimates as "Pops" behind his back and to everyone else as "Hotfoot Looey" when he isn't listening. He doesn't talk much unless he has something pertinent to say. He was silent almost all the way to our destination. Then suddenly: "Well, this is it. This is where the Ninth Air Force makes history—or wishes it had never been born. Hap Arnold has handed us a tough one."

That was all. Twenty-four hours later, I knew what a tough one was.



"P. D." Ent met us at the field on landing. His full name is Uzal G. Ent, but everyone calls him "P. D." for Pennsylvania Dutch, which is what he is. He is also a blond, reticent, soft-spoken one-star general, commanding the Ninth Bomber Command. He was one of America's most famous lighter-than-air experts before he quit balloons and dirigibles for motor-powered wings. P. D.'s first words to Brereton were, "Well, sir. Everything is all set." They walked off together, talking. Beyond them at the edge of the field for almost a mile to the left and right, lay the rotting carcasses of Italian and German bombers, fighters and transport planes which had been cleared from the field we now occupied.

At Command Headquarters, you could feel the rising amperage of preraid emotions. Everything looked the same but wasn't. The Stars and Stripes lazied in the clean-smelling evening wind. Camouflage splotched the hotel, built of sand-watered concrete by grafting Fascist colonial officials in the heyday of their imperial racket. It was ours now, with its surrounding buildings, some of them scarred by fragments of bombs when the Ninth Air Force was helping Montgomery to conquer Libya. We had chiseled out the Fascist emblems from the façade of the main building and left only the Royal Italian shield, which they had flanked.

Within the brown-walled compound of headquarters, jeeps backed and filled, staff cars halted, khaki figures emerged and disappeared into porticoes, car doors slammed, and motors purred. There was extra snap in the MPs' salutes and they directed traffic in and out of the compound with more than usual efficiency.

At mess that night I learned what the target was to be. I was "safe"—now inside the reservation. They could talk freely. The staff officers were all excitedly grave. Lieutenant Colonel Nero, the maintenance chief, a short, stocky, dark-complexioned fellow who loves engines more than life itself, told his superiors that he would have the planes ready to go. They were tuned and waiting for the predawn warm-up. Yes, the bombs had been loaded—big delayed-action bombs. Plenty of incendiaries, too. None of the group commanders were at mess. They with their pilots, navigators, bombardiers and gunners were restricted to their respective areas.

I heard the word "Ploesti" and I realized that I should have known. On the plane out to Bomber Command, one of our passengers was tall, hulky, spectacled Lord Forbes, a sportsman, former journalist and former British air attaché in Bucharest. The Germans gave him the bum's rush in October, 1940, and I remembered vaguely why. He knew the secrets of Ploesti.

Prelude to the Long Raid

In the predawn darkness of the next day, the countryside vibrated to the distant muffled roar of warming engines. By daybreak, jeeps and trucks hurried along roads and desert tracks to parked Liberators with their crews. An hour later, squadrons were in the air, forming up for the thousand-mile flight to their target—the longest mass raid of heavy bombardment in history. At last, all planes were in their assigned positions.

Once only you saw, felt, smelled and heard all this, and then the huge Liber-

P l o e s t i

ators, fighting kings of all heavy bombers, were away, and there was silence. Perhaps only two out of every three would return.

They were quickly away, their voices fading northward. This was the morning of August 1, 1943, and our Liberators were en route to Ploesti, Adolf Hitler's principal single source of oil for Europe and for twenty-nine years the center of desperate Balkan intrigue.

Even in the last war, Ploesti was the epicenter of intrigue. Its installations were dynamited when the region was threatened by the Kaiser's armies.

Queen Marie, as astute as she was beautiful, used Ploesti, Rumania's richest asset, as a blue chip in the postwar poker game wherein Rumania obtained Bessarabia from Russia, Transylvania from Austria-Hungary and enlargement of Dobruja at Bulgaria's expense. Ploesti was the means to the fulfillment of Marie's dream of a Greater Rumania—a dream which was expressed in Marie's dying request that her heart be cut out and buried beneath the battlements of her castle in Dobruja.

In the great interregnum of peace, Ploesti became Rumania's principal source of revenue. British, American, Belgian, French and, later, German capital moved in, built huge refineries, cracking plants, distilleries and storage tanks in an area of 700 square miles. Their combined potential production was a maximum of 10,000,000 tons, although this peak was never reached. Transportation was inadequate for handling such an output.

For one short period in 1939, the Ploesti region, however, did produce at the rate of 7,000,000 tons, including a small percentage of high-octane gasoline. At the moment when our Liberators battered the refineries and other installations, Ploesti represented the source of one third of the Axis oil supply, natural and synthetic.

As war neared in 1939, Germany faced the problem of acquiring the Ploesti fields without fighting Rumania. War in Rumania might have endangered the oil fields for they would then certainly be bombed or sabotaged.

Immediately following the Munich conference, Rumania asked Great Britain and France for a mutual assistance pact. The pact was signed and, in addition, an agreement for joint sabotage of the Ploesti installations in the event that the German armies reached a certain point in Rumania. The agreement was obtained from King Carol at a price. It was a staggering figure. Rumanians drive hard bargains.

And meanwhile, there began an undercover struggle between Great Britain and Germany—Britain aiming to deny to Germany all means of transportation of oil from Ploesti, and Germany seeking to secure Rumania and her precious oil intact. The British bought up the Danube barges and every Rumanian railroad tank car they could lay their hands on. It was a seller's market, and the Rumanians made millions.

The British reportedly evolved a fantastic scheme for blocking the Danube. The plan was to float barges loaded with dynamite into position and explode them. But some of the sailors who manned those barges looked eminently un-Danubian and startlingly British, and the Nazis caught on.

They held British naval officers' prisoners on a certain barge. The British were rescued at gunpoint. If the Germans needed an excuse to hurry their plans to bag Rumania, lock, stock and Ploesti, they had it. They went to work.

They found Quislings for the buying within Rumania. They organized and financed the green-shirted Iron Guard as an armed opposition to King Carol, capitalized on disaffections arising out of Carol's relations with Madame Lupescu, and stirred anti-Semitism. But Rumania remained neutral in favor of the Allies. She didn't dream France would collapse.

But France fell. Aboard the Bordeaux

express from Paris, carrying the French Deuxieme Bureau staff and all their papers, the Gestapo captured, among other dossiers, secret plans for the destruction of the Ploesti plants. The Nazis now held precisely the weapon they needed to bring Rumania to terms.

Russia was demanding Bessarabia, and Berlin ordered Carol to comply. Rumanian opposition would have meant Russian bombardment of Ploesti, destruction of the very object for which Germany was playing her desperate game.

At the moment when Soviet insistence was at its highest and German pressure at its greatest, Georges Bratianu, son of the prime minister, who had brought Rumania in on the Allied side in the first World War, proposed that Carol threaten to press a button which would blow up Ploesti if the Russians entered Bessarabia. This could have been done, and would have checkmated the Nazis. But Carol was frightened. The Russians had attacked Finland, the Germans had taken Norway, and Poland had fallen. Carol turned down Bratianu's proposal.

In a panic, the Rumanian general staff burned the blueprints for sabotage. The next day, Carol received photostatic copies of the plans from the Nazi Gestapo, including a dossier containing the names of all British, French and Rumanian agents involved. Carol denied all knowledge of the plans and personalities.

Bringing a King to His Knees

The Nazis had already used the Iron Guard to force Carol to appoint as premier a convicted bigamist, Ion Antonescu, the bitter enemy of Lupescu. They went to work methodically now to achieve the capitulation of Carol and the wholesale expulsion of the British.

Antonescu, at Berlin's command, ordered an armed demonstration before Carol's palace. The king asked Antonescu what could be done to quiet the mobs. Antonescu told him that the Palace Guard was about to revolt—a deliberate falsehood, as Antonescu knew. The commander of these troops had just assured him that they would obliterate the Iron Guard at a word from the king. Carol, thinking only of the safety of his Lupescu, believed his prime minister. Antonescu suggested that Carol abdicate in favor of Michael, his son, and Carol left. Mother Marie had used Ploesti to build a Greater Rumania. Carol had failed to use it to save Rumania.

The Germans now moved soldiers into the Ploesti area, and began a systematic persecution of Britons. The Nazis were determined to ascertain whether the British had any other plans. Their Iron Guard stooges kidnaped twelve of fifteen members of the British colony and legation staff. These men were beaten, their toenails extracted with pliers, and they were otherwise tortured. None of them talked. When they were turned over to the Rumanian police, the British government obtained their release.

One night, about a score of British oil engineers, including an American named Freeman, were taken from their homes by Iron Guardsmen. They were given the toenail treatment and bound and beaten in fine Gestapo style. What they knew about Ploesti, they never told. Within ten days, they were released and later escaped. Some of these men helped brief our raid.

In October, 1940, the British withdrew their legation from Rumania. The Germans, fearful of the safety of Ploesti, extended their occupation of the Balkans as much to keep potential bombers at a distance as for any other military reason.

From Ploesti, the Nazis extracted oil and oil products which maintained the entire German and Italian fleets, one third of the whole German army, and at least half the German air force in Russia. Around the Ploesti installations, the Ger-

P l o e s t i

mans, fearful of the safety of Ploesti, extended their occupation of the Balkans as much to keep potential bombers at a distance as for any other military reason.

From Ploesti, the Nazis extracted oil and oil products which maintained the entire German and Italian fleets, one third of the whole German army, and at least half the German air force in Russia. Around the Ploesti installations, the Germans had raised a forest of anti-aircraft guns of large and small calibers. They had built blast walls around plants' vital parts and spotted airdromes from which fighters could rise to intercept our bombers.

For a combination of geographic reasons, Ploesti had become the most difficult single target to reach, with the possible exception of Germany's well-dispersed and strongly defended synthetic gasoline plants. Only a low-level mass raid could accomplish the objective—destruction or serious damage to machinery which was supplying Germany with 18,000 tons of refined petroleum daily.

The whole course of the war in Russia and Italy depended on its success. Every man and officer in the Ninth Air Force, which General Arnold assigned to the mission, was cognizant of his responsibility when they set to work weeks before to prepare for the execution of their orders.

In the desert south of Bomber Command headquarters, the Ninth Air Force planners found an escarpment which topographically approximated the vicinity of Ploesti. Engineers blocked out with white-wash and markers the contours of the five principal targets in the vicinity of Ploesti proper and the outlines of the town. These were the Phoenix, Orion and Astra-Romana refineries, owned by British Shell; the Colombia plant, formerly French-owned; Vega-Concordia, built by the Belgians; refineries of the petrol block (German and British respectively) and installations of Romano-Americana, owned by Standard Oil of New Jersey. The boys were urged not to miss this last one for the sake of Anglo-American relations.

On the desert plain five miles south of what represented Ploesti, the engineers laid out the town of Brasov with its Creditul-Minier high-octane plant—the newest and best in the region. In a dry wadi representing a fold in the Carpathians, surveyors located the mock Campina and outlines of the Astra-Romana refinery, which Anglo-Iranian-French money had constructed.

The engineers also erected a few mock smokestacks, but there was no effort made, as reported in some newspapers, to reconstruct an entire Ploesti. A small-scale model was made, however, showing the exact location of the city contours and the colors of the surrounding countryside and the location of vital machinery within the target regions. The model was reconstructed from information those tortured British and American oil engineers had smuggled in their heads from Rumania and from actual prewar photos and blueprints. For more than two weeks, Killer Kane and other squadron commanders raided the phony Ploesti, studied maps, weather charts and the small model.

Rehearsal for Destruction

For days, they also viewed a briefing film, which gave them all the known data on the targets and finally, after two successful low-level "attacks" with dummy bombs on the mock Ploesti, they were ready. Brereton talked to each group and told them the importance of their mission and without heroics outlined to them the difficulties they'd meet. Air Vice-Marshal Tedder, boss of all Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, flew out from Tunis in a Beaufighter to wish the boys Godspeed.

The men knew what they were up against and they knew some of them wouldn't come back. Low-level bombing is to high-level precision bombing what a

P l o e s t i

bayonet charge is to a long-distance artillery exchange. It is infighting and it is deadly for the giver and the receiver. But if a low-level raid was the only way an attack could be carried out—well, that's the way it would be done.

The generals estimated that at least ten high-level raids, each growing successively more dangerous, would be required to accomplish what could be done in one daring, smashing attack at treetop height, despite the lethal cables of barrage balloons, smoke screens, ack-ack batteries estimated to number at least 100 guns and possibly 400, and fighters totaling about 100, in the vicinity. That's the way Hap Arnold saw it. That's the way Hotfoot Looey saw it. That's the way it was done.

Late in the afternoon of August 1st, piled into staff cars and jeeps to watch them come in. The sun had set, and we were in that long twilight that makes the desert a magic land of soft brown earth and deep blue sky.

All ground crews were out scanning the sky and horizon for their own ships. "There's Old Baldy," and "That's Vulgar Virgin coming in now" and "Looka them bomb doors swingin'." There were ships with dead engines and others with holes in wings and fuselages. One ship shot a colored flare—it wanted an ambulance. Wounded on board. One by one they came down, some without enough gas left in their tanks to fill a cigarette lighter.

Colonel Compton, with Ent aboard, landed first, as he had been the first to get away. Ent was grave. His formation had missed its specific target. Major Norman Appold, a tall, thin kid with a large Adam's apple, a boy from Detroit, was close behind Compton. He wasn't happy, either. He had seen one of his closest friends shot down. An ack-ack shell pierced his buddy's plane from nose to tail and set it afire. "But he dropped his bombs okay—he salvoed them right on the target. I saw it go up." And Appold hurried away.

It would be nice to end this story with a classic cliché of communiqués: "All our aircraft returned safely." But we lost twenty planes over the target and perhaps as many more from a combination of mechanical troubles and by enemy action. But a hundred and seventy-five went out. So it was a successful raid.

Specifically, the bombers accomplished at comparatively small loss of life what it would have taken an army of half a million men and billions of dollars' worth of equipment to accomplish. And the lives which will be saved due to the action of the Ninth Air Force against Ploesti can't be calculated.

It was dark, as black as only the desert can be on a moonless night, dark as a sealed sepulcher. Out of the night came sounds of loud voices and hearty laughter. The strain was broken. The raid was over. Intermittently, the black bowl of night was split by the thin blue beam of a searchlight that might guide home stragglers.

(In a forthcoming issue, Frank Gervasi interviews the crew of the Hail Columbia! on their return from Ploesti. Killer Kane, pilot, says he flew so low that flames from burning oil refineries singed the hair on his arms.)

Collier's

OldMagazineArticles.com