

The High Cost of Freedom By Tom Saluzzo

On August 1st, 1943 the United States Army Air Force embarked upon one of the most famous, most ambitious and most disastrous missions undertaken during the Second World War. The target for "Operation Tidal Wave" was the oil refineries in Ploesti, Rumania (present day Romania). The Allied leaders had determined that one of the best ways to help stop the Axis war machine was to deny them the oil so badly needed for modern warfare. Thus a plan was devised to extend the range of B-24 heavy bombers to enable them to fly from bases in Libya to strike the targets in Rumania, a mission of almost 2000 miles round trip.

The aircraft for this mission would be the Consolidated Aircraft B-24 Liberator. Although not as famous today as Boeings counterpart the B-17, the Liberator was actually produced in larger numbers. In addition to this, it was able to carry a heavier bomb load, higher and further than the B-17. Where the B-24 seemed to fall short was how much damage it could sustain and still come home. That said, over eighteen thousand of the four engine bombers were built. In addition to being used as bombers they were converted into cargo, passenger and fuel carrying variants. As a bomber they could carry a maximum bomb load of 12,800 lbs and were defended by up to ten fifty caliber machine guns. The aircraft used on the Ploesti mission were equipped with extra 400 gallon fuel tanks in the forward bomb bay. This would give each bomber a capacity of 3100 gallons and the range needed for the mission.

As August 1st dawned, everyone knew this would be "the big one". The general consensus was that the enemy would be surprised and that the mission would be "one to write home about". As crews were being assembled at the 409th Bombardment Squadron, a gunner was pulled from his crew for disciplinary action. The airplane was "Euroclydon The Storm" piloted by Lieutenant Enoch Porter. Another Lieutenant, Howard Dickson, a gunnery instructor and observer volunteered to go. His position would be in the top turret, manning a pair of .50 caliber Browning M-2 machine guns. This would set forth the events that would make a little four year old girl, an orphan.

Initially Operation Tidal Wave started off fairly well. Of the 178 bombers committed to the mission, only one was lost on takeoff. Unfortunately two

things happened. First, the enemy knew almost immediately that a large force was taking off and heading towards South Eastern Europe. In short order the list of probable targets were narrowed down and the defenses around Ploesti put on alert. The strength of these defenses had been grossly underestimated by the mission planners. Ploesti was the most heavily defended target outside of the Third Reich, being defended by no less than 75 anti-aircraft batteries and over 50 fighter aircraft.

Secondly, the allied bombers started having formation and navigation issues. Air division leaders decided radio silence was more important than trying to wrangle the planes back into proper position. This would lead to an uncoordinated attack and thus the stage was now set for an American blood bath. As the bombers approached an alerted target, aircraft after aircraft were shot down or badly damaged on their bomb runs. LT Dicksons airplane was hit by two devastating anti-aircraft rounds. One hit the fuel tank in the forward bomb bay causing an immediate fire, the other hit the nose of the aircraft causing it to blow open. In an attempt to save some of the crew, the pilots managed to climb to 300 feet. Three of the rear occupants of the plane were able to bail out with parachutes before the aircraft completely broke apart midair and crashed into a pile of burning wreckage.

LT Howard Dicksons body was never recovered.

Six months later at Wright Field Ohio, a stoic little girl appeared in an auditorium. Smartly dressed and holding a Shirley Temple doll, Geraldine Dickson stood tall, escorted by Army Captain H.F. Vallely. Geraldine had lost her mother almost immediately after she was born and now she had lost her father in the name of freedom. Today she was here to receive her fathers medals. A Purple Heart for his loss, and a Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroism. Colonel Raymond Culbertson, the base commander, bent down over the small four year old girl as he handed her, her daddy's medals. An honor guard stood by, rifles by their sides. One must wonder what thoughts went through their minds as they watched a little girl pay the price for freedom. Geraldine would be adopted by a close family friend and go on to a career in education. She passed away in 2017, still a resident in the Dayton Ohio area.

The aftermath of Operation Tidal Wave was as bad in reality as it was on paper. All total 53 heavy bombers were lost along with 310 men missing or

dead. Another 190 men were either captured or interned after their damaged aircraft landed in neutral countries. In addition another 55 aircraft were damaged, some badly enough they never flew again. Proportionally it was the costliest large scale mission of the Second World War. As to the Rumanian oil production the lightly damaged refineries were back on line and producing more oil in less than a month.

The success or lack thereof does nothing to negate the bravery, tenacity and dedication of the average American crew member who took part in the mission. Nor does it make the loss suffered by a little girl any less. As we approach Memorial Day weekend we should all take some time to reflect on all the little girls and boys, the wives and the mothers, the fathers and husbands who have endured the suffering of loss in the name of freedom.

This Memorial Day, please, Remember them all.

Tom Saluzzo is a local Military Historian and Pawnbroker. If you like Military History stop by Pawn World on Northern Ave and check out some of the pieces of history on display.



