

2Lt. Kenneth A. Hanson's Last Mission  
Ploiesti, Romania 31 May 1944

By Mark R. Terry

I grew up interested in history, especially the American Civil War and World War Two. During my childhood, my mom told me that she had lost two cousins who were killed in the Second World War. I wasn't curious enough about them at the time, and now I'm kicking myself because so much more could have been discovered had I tried to find out earlier.

This is about one of them- Kenneth Anthony Hanson. He was born in Minnesota January 5, 1918, the oldest of three children to a hard-working farmer of Norwegian descent. Kenneth had eight aunts and uncles and seven male cousins of military age. Of those, four enlisted, while his brother Lyndon was declared 4F because of a bad heart and could not serve.

Kenneth enlisted in the Army Air Corps on January 21, 1942. Because his family had moved to Long Beach, California to get jobs in a defense plant, he was sent to Santa Ana Army Air Base AAF Western Flying Training Command, California for some pre-flight training and evaluation, from August to November(?) 1942.

While at that base, he visited his Aunt Mable and Uncle George Vetter's place in Compton, California on August 16, 1942, along with his cousin, both in the Army. He wrote "*Napoleon was a good soldier- and he only needed 4 hours sleep. I'm getting 8.*", signed "Pvt. Kenneth A. Hanson"<sup>1</sup>

From there he was sent to Visalia, CA for primary flight training and then to Gardner Field, CA for basic flight training. For Advanced flight training he went to Marfa, Texas in May, 1943. There he learned to fly multi-engine aircraft. While at Marfa, he sent a letter to his Aunt & Uncle Ole & Wes Cavallin, dated June 29, 1943. After sharing family news, he wrote a little about getting his wings soon, experiences in flight training and his clear preference for bombers over fighters.

*"We're getting ready now to drape those wings over the left shirt pocket the 28<sup>th</sup> of July. We finished all the ground school subjects last week. We're scheduled to finish all our day flying this week & then we'll have two weeks to get in 20 hours of night flying. It's going to be a relief to get the wings alright but just getting wings don't win wars so the work will go on as per usual. We're still wondering what kind of assignments we're going to get. We're all supposed to get heavy bombardment ships but from what happened to the last couple of classes you're apt to find yourself flying just about anything that's got more than one engine in it. I'm still against flying those 400 mph pursuit ships and I'd like to know how they're going to make me.*

*Mostly we haven't had as much fun flying these ships as the others. You've heard about the hot pilot who claimed he could fly the crates they came in. Well these are the crates. They probably fly like a B-17 with 10 tons of bombs in them so the Air Corps thinks its good experience. The only big bang I got was the cross country we took at a maximum altitude of 500 feet. This ships 120 miles per hour looks plenty thrilling when your close enough to the ground to watch each individual sage brush disappear under the wing."*

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<sup>1</sup> Guest book of George and Mable Vetter, in the author's collection.

As Kenny stated, he got his wings on July 28, 1943. Next up was B-17 transition training at Roswell, New Mexico, starting that month and going until October. Then, he was transferred to B-24 training from October through December 1943 at Gowen Field, Idaho.

Finally, in December 1943 he was sent to the AAF Training facility in Harvard, Nebraska, for final training. When it came time to form the crews, Kenny was assigned as co-pilot to the crew of Captain Robert C. Quinlan. Quinlan was an experienced pilot and had a good reputation as a leader. The rest of his crew was Bombardier 2Lt. Charles A. Bell; Navigator 2Lt. Rollin K. Preston; Sgt. Chester A. Nordling, Engineer & top turret gunner; Sgt. Donald W. Peterson, gunner and Assistant Engineer; Joseph J. Canfield, Radio Operator; Joseph W. Keene, gunner; Kenneth Whiat, waist gunner; Wallace W. Smith, ball turret gunner. As in high school, Kenneth hit it off well with his crewmates, especially the navigator, Rollin Preston. Preston was from Bend, Oregon. Kenny sent home a photo of his crew, and each one had a nickname. His was "Little Napoleon"!

At Harvard, Kenneth got to know one of the nurse trainees on the base named Janis Hausen. Janis was from Iowa. They hit it off, fell in love and decided to get married. Rumors must have been flying (pardon the pun) that they were going to be shipped out to a war zone soon, so Kenny and Janis decided to get married. Janis' parents and sister Joan somehow found a way to get to the air base to be there for the wedding which took place on February 1, 1944. Preston served as Kenny's Best Man.

Before they left for the front, their organization became designated as the 484<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, consisting of the 824<sup>th</sup>, 825<sup>th</sup>, 826<sup>th</sup> and 827<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadrons. Quinlan's crew became a part of the 825<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the orders came through. First they transitioned to AAF Lincoln, Nebraska and from there the entire bomb group flew to Italy via Florida, the Caribbean, South America, and across the Atlantic to Africa!

### **The 484<sup>th</sup> Goes into Action**

After arriving in Italy, the 484<sup>th</sup> were set up in Torretta, Italy. The larger organization they belonged to was the 49<sup>th</sup> Combat Wing of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, consisting of the 451<sup>st</sup>, 461<sup>st</sup> and the 484<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups. Records show that the first mission of the 484<sup>th</sup> was to Drnis, Yugoslavia on 29 April 1944. 40 aircraft participated, with no losses. I have not been able to ascertain with certainty how many missions were flown by Kenneth Hanson. Whenever Quinlan was mentioned, my assumption was that Hanson would have been his co-pilot. However, only a handful of Operations Orders (also known as "flimsies") have survived for the time period between that first mission and the Ploesti mission (#22). The only guess we have for Lt. Hanson is "about 17" recorded in the MACR.

### **A New Crew**

To give some flavor to what was happening at the time, on 11 May 1944, Kenneth wrote this V-Mail to his sister and brother-in-law, Donna and Ike Haugland:

*I'm taking a sunbath with my letters. It's warm out and peaceful. We have set up an Officer's mess now and can again place our legs under a table and have good conversation with our meals.*

*Cafeteria style with mess kits on the ground wasn't as satisfying as you'd think. Spring and summer will be coming along soon for you I suppose. We have weather here much like Minnesota so it's nice now. Hope I don't have to spend the winter here. There is a difference in the summers here- we have malaria in a very virulent[?] form to battle with. Have been sticking my neck out lately but have been fortunate enough to draw it back with the chin still up and no scars. It wouldn't hurt if you'd go to church for me once in awhile though.*

It appears to have been normal practice to allow promising co-pilots to rotate into the pilot seat of an existing crew. According to the surviving flimsies mentioned above, Hanson was given command of the crew of 2Lt. Robert W. Willen sometime between the 5/14/44 and the 5/22/44 missions. So far, I have not been able to ascertain whether Willen's crew were replacements, or a crew transferred from another bomb group. Willen took Hanson's place as Quinlan's Co-Pilot. Kenneth's new crew consisted of 2Lt. Stanley A. Kozlowski- Co-Pilot, 2Lt. Charles H. Pfanne-Navigator, 2Lt. George E. Kline-Bombardier, Sgt. John H. Soukup-Nose Gunner, Sgt. Edmund F. LaMunyan-Tail Gunner, Sgt. Calvin Kerr Rapson-Ball Turret Gunner, Sgt. Wayne H. Bradford-Radio Op./Top Turret Gunner, Sgt. Kenneth E. Bower-Waist Gunner and S/Sgt. John J. Szczur-Engineer/Waist Gunner.

### **May 31, 1944 Mission to Ploiesti**

Having just returned from a mission to Wels, Austria, on May 30th, Hanson's crew steeled themselves for a big mission the next day- the 484<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group's first bombing mission to Ploiesti, Romania. Ploiesti was one of main sources of oil for Hitler's Third Reich. In 1940 58% of their total oil imports came from the oil refineries in the city.<sup>2</sup> As such, it became a major target for the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. This mission was planned as a "maximum effort". All five refineries would be targeted, with bombers going up from each of the five bomb wings. Given the importance of Ploiesti, it was defended by 280 88mm and 128mm AA guns ringing the city, making it one of the most heavily defended cities in Europe<sup>3</sup>.

Hanson's crew were assigned B-24H 42-94734, Sq. #37, with an olive drab paint scheme, one of the original aircraft flown over from the States in March<sup>4</sup>. The 825<sup>th</sup> provided seven B-24s and were designated the "Able" and "Charlie" flights within the formation. Hanson's crew would be Charlie 23.<sup>5</sup>

The target for the 49<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing was the Concordia Vega Refinery, at the north edge of the city. The plan was for the 461<sup>st</sup> BG to lead the wing at 20,000 feet altitude, followed by the 484<sup>th</sup> BG at 21,000 feet with the 451<sup>st</sup> BG at 22,000 feet. After the target was hit, they were to rally to the right.<sup>6</sup>

As the formation approached the city to begin their bombing run, a fury of anti-aircraft fire met them. Immediately after "bombs away", flak found their mark. Lt. Hanson's B-24 was hit in the

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<sup>2</sup> Gadea, James, "Ulei Română" During World War II and Beyond: Development of the Romanian Oil Industry" <http://yris.yira.org/essays/1474>

<sup>3</sup> Tillman, Barrett, "Ploesti- The Rest of the Story" <https://www.historynet.com/ploesti-the-rest-of-the-story.htm>

<sup>4</sup> There is confusion over the name given to this Liberator. There is no known photograph of 42-94734.

<sup>5</sup> So far, no "flimsies" have been found for the 484<sup>th</sup> for this mission, so I had to cull information from the MACR and compare them to previous "flimsies" for what was probably the squadron strength for that day.

<sup>6</sup> Operations Order Number 61, 49<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing dated 30 May 1944 for the mission on 31 May 1944.

right wing, inboard of the #3 engine. This damaged the engine and set fire to the bomb bay area. The B-24 abruptly swung upwards and to the right, flipping out and over the formation, then downwards in about a 40-degree dive, going in the opposite direction of the formation. It was clear they were in trouble. After dropping down several thousand feet, at about 9,000 feet they began to level off. Sadly, it was then that their ship exploded. One witness said it broke into four pieces. Witnesses saw no chutes. Kenny's best friend, Rollin Preston, watched it all from Quinlan's B-24, which had been flying next to Hanson's ship as Charlie 21. When they returned to base, he wrote a letter to Janis Hanson, Kenneth's wife and told her what happened. He wrote that "no one could have lived through the explosion".

### **Miracle Survival**

The amazing thing is, two crewmen did live to tell what took place inside 42-94734. S/Sgt. John Szczur was the engineer/waist gunner. He said "the fella on the other side [Sgt. Kenneth Bower, waist gunner] said "look". I looked out there and he showed me there's a three-inch hole in the wing, and I looked to see where it was at, and it was in the gas tank."<sup>7</sup> As the damage took hold and the pilots struggled to regain control of the ship, 2Lt. George E. Kline, the bombardier, was doing his best to deal with the situation. Because the interphone had been damaged, there was no communication within the aircraft. Kline helped the nose gunner, Sgt. John H. Soukup, out of the nose turret so Soukup could get his parachute on. Moving towards the rear of the nose compartment, Kline came across 2Lt. Charles Pfanne, the navigator. He was sitting on the flight deck stunned, frozen as if in shock. Kline crawled past him to the entrance of the bomb bay to see if he could do something to put out the fire, but a blast of fire flash-burned his face and hair. Finally, seeing that co-pilot Kozlowski was getting out of his seat to put on his parachute, Kline said he "took it as my cue" and bailed out. He couldn't have waited a moment longer, since five seconds later, the plane blew up, killing Hanson, Kozlowski, Soukup, Pfanne and Sgt. Raymond Bradford, the top turret gunner.

All this time, Sgt. Calvin Rapson, Bower and Szczur had been standing together in the waist section of the B-24, holding on, but for some reason, only Szczur had put on his chute. When the explosion took place, it tore the fuselage in two just aft of the bomb bay. No one was injured there in the waist, but now the fuselage was tumbling and spinning downwards and all that Rapson and Bower could do was hold onto the ball turret strut to keep from being tossed about. I sometimes wonder what Rapson, Bower and Szczur were thinking as they stood looking at one another, one wearing a parachute, the other two without. Even with a parachute on, Szczur felt like he was trapped and had just about given up when he was thrown out of the plane. Sgt. Edmund LaMunyan, the tail gunner, never left his position. He, Rapson and Bower died when that part of the B-24 hit the ground.<sup>8</sup> It is not known at this time where the wreckage of their bomber came down, but those who died, including Hanson, were buried in Strejnic, an area near Ploiesti to the southwest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See "John Szczur Interview" in Sources.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the section describing what took place inside the aircraft is from the MACR, but supplemented by the newspaper article from the Harrisburg Telegraph. According to Hanson's IDPF, the remains of the crew were buried in Strejnic, very close to Ploiesti. Perhaps that was near the crash site.

<sup>9</sup> IDPF. When the bodies were exhumed for transport to Holland, the dead of the Hanson crew were combined with those of two other crews who died in the 5 May 1944 Ploiesti mission. They were eventually transported to the U.S. and interred at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, MO in 1950.

## **Aftermath**

Both Kline and Szczur's parachutes opened and they landed safely. Kline said "I landed right in the middle of a cement street in Ploesti, and as luck might have it, just rolled over, got up and started to run. I did reach the outskirts of town and was cutting across a field when two German sentries in a foxhole grabbed me."<sup>10</sup> Szczur, on the other hand, "landed in a cemetery and stayed there overnight." Eventually he was captured and they both spent several months in a POW camp in Romania.

## Sources:

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Harrisburg Telegraph, Wednesday, October 4, 1944, pg. 5

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<sup>10</sup> Harrisburg Telegraph, Wednesday, October 4, 1944, pg. 5