

How Former War Prisoners left Rumania by Plane, Told

(Reprinted from the Stars and Stripe)
Submitted by Joe Bryant 765 sq

Note by Joe Bryant: I know the Clay Caroland, and Arnold Hepler who went through Ploesti and Bucharest POW camps. I went thru Bucharest later, from Yugoslavia.

St/Sgt Clay R Caroland Jr, waist gunner on a 15th Air Force Flying Fortress that was forced to land while on a mission to Ploesti on July 22 was evacuated by air following Rumania's capitulation. Sgt Caroland was one of 1126 American airmen held prisoner there in stockades in and near Bucharest who were technically "freed."

That is, the doors to their military cages were thrown open. The ex-prisoners, officers and enlisted men alike, were told they could do as they pleased.

They "pleased to" return to their home bases in Italy. To do that seemed immediately impossible. There were hundreds of miles of enemy territory to cross. Revengeful and stubborn German forces were still active in the vicinity. Rumanians and Germans clashed in Bucharest, the very city where most of the Americans stood" liberated. "

The next day August 24, 1944 the Germans Luftwaffe still powerful in local actions, loosed an infuriated bombing attack on Bucharest which lasted almost continuously for 72 hours. One American ex prisoner was killed in it.

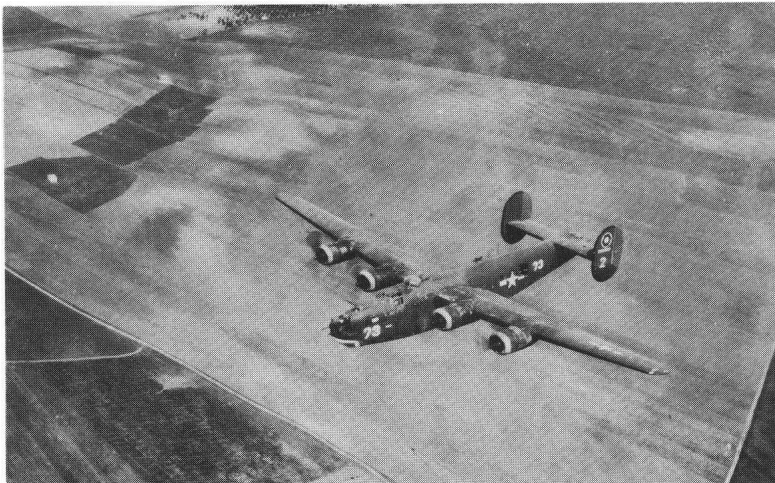
Each of the newly freed prisoners had already partaken of more than his share of war. Beginning with the famous low-level attack by American heavy bombers of Rumanian targets, principally Ploesti installations, they had parachuted to enemy territory at or near the the toughest target in the world.

Their numbers steadily increased particularly after April 4, when Ploesti became a

top priority target for the 15th Air Force. Some 1,052 of the prisoners were 15th Air Force airmen. 78 were 8th and 9th Air Force personnel in addition to some RAF fliers.

These airmen had not only gone through the unenviable experience of being shot down as hot targets, but also as prisoners that had sweated out terrific bombings from their brother airmen. At last free, they were caught between the Rumanians and the Germans in furious ground and air actions.

American resourcefulness, determination, humaneness and team spirit went into the rescue effort. Most of the prisoners had been held in two places: the capital city of Bucharest and Timis, a small town south of Brasov. At Bucharest the cantonment was in two parts, one for enlisted



Simon P Fahrety photo 767 Sq

men and hospital cases, at the hospital on the north side of town, and the other for officers, in a schoolhouse on the south side. These prisoners were mostly 15th Air Force men captured since April 4, 1944. The prisoners at Timis were mostly those from the 8th and 9th AAF low-level attack of August 1943.

It was Lt/Col James A Gunn of Kelseyville, California, whose plane was shot from under him at Ploesti shortly before the Rumanian capitulation, who joined the prison membership and offered the unorthodox solution to the men's problem.

" Why not have the 15th Air Force fly us out ?" he asked. Many of the men were

skeptical, but willing to help Col Gunn who confidently started to make arrangements.

" I started asking for someone to see, and was finally taken to the new government to see the minister of war, "Gunn states. "I asked to be allowed to fly to Italy to make known our situation. The minister agreed to help me."

The Rumanians gave Col Gunn the use of a pilot and a "beaten up Savoia-Marchetti plane" for the trip. A half hour out, the plane developed engine trouble and was forced back to the airfield. That was August 25, 1944. The next day, Capt. Carl Cantacuzino, top Rumanian fighter pilot offered to fly Col.Gunn to Italy in a ME-109, and arrangements were made. On August 28th they took off for Italy.

Two days later, the evacuation, the largest of its kind ever undertaken, began. Ex-prisoners had been moved to the field and were segregated in little plane-load groups. On schedule formations of escorted Flying Fortresses landed, picked up the missing in action airmen and flew them to Italy and actual freedom. More than 700 airmen were flown to Italy that first day. The remainder were flown out the following day, September 1. Most of the returned airmen have been sent home. The 15th Air Force returned to its business of bombing enemy targets.

The erstwhile prisoners had varied stories to tell. They agreed however that they were not treated badly at their prison camps. They were not required to work. The food was not too bad, the Rumanians were rather friendly. Medical treatment was furnished, and the men were allowed to send and receive mail and packages through the Red Cross. A paper was printed by hand and a radio smuggled in, furnished the news. It was the waiting and unpredictable future and indefinite separation from home ties that depressed many of the men.

The End.