

Attacking Oil Installations In Italy **by Stan Hutchins, 824 Sq.**

The San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center was in full operation by late spring of 1943 as I entered the classification and preflight phases of pilot training.

My flying was taught in six months, in 220 hours in the air, which was hardly enough to cause Herman Goring to miss a nap.

At last, just after the Normandy invasion, I boarded the USS Santa Maria bound for Oran and Naples, along with some 50 equally new air crewmen.

Our bomb group, the 484th (Pathfinder at that time), had been very busy and was late in picking us up at the Gioia, Italy, replacement center. My squadron, the 824th, was located at Torretta, near the former German air base at Foggia. In pre war time, Foggia was where the Italian Airforce trained long before the German occupation.

Our mission was to strike oil targets from Germany to the Black Sea. The biggest oil field/refinery complex was the Romanian field at Ploesti so it was there we struck 29 raids and my introduction to combat.

When the Russians overran Ploesti in late September 1944, we moved our priority to the synthetic oil plants scattered all over central Europe.

The winter of 1944 was bitter cold. The Battle of the Bulge underscored the Germans' ability to increase the price of Allied victory. It was during this time, after seven months of bombing missions, that our crew found it necessary to "drop in" to Yugoslavia while returning from a raid on the oil storage facilities at Floresdorf, Vienna.

Coming off the target, one of our four engines quit, and the aileron controls were damaged by flak. The flight engineer reported a devastating loss of fuel from the wing tanks. Then a second engine quit.

Still over the Alps, we lost our ability to hold altitude and fell below our group.

Now it was a question of ditching in the Adriatic, making it to our "secret" base in Yugoslavia under the noses of the Germans, or, just maybe, gliding into the closest U.S. fighter strip near Rimini.

The last two engines were under strain and threatened to quit. The fuel gauges showed zero and the airplane wallowed from damaged flight controls just as Vis came into view.

There was no time for formalities. We shot red flares and started a deep descent to the 4,000 foot strip neatly placed between the sea cliff and a small mountain. With less than 100 yards to go both remaining engines quit and we flopped onto the undersized runway with a load screech.

Our status was changed from Missing to Delayed with a minimum of paperwork.

I continued flying missions until VE Day and flew home in June 1945. I was scheduled for B-29 training and the Pacific War when the atomic bomb put an end to the suicidal commitment of the Japanese people.

After the war I attended the University of Texas, started a securities business in Alamo Heights and later became a staff officer in the Air Force.)

Between two five year tours in the Pentagon, I was assigned

to Headquarters U.S. Air Forces, Europe, in Weisbaden, Germany. There I ran into a charming German real estate agent whose job it was to locate suitable housing for American families. As we drove, I discovered that my agent was none other than Albrecht (Abby) Goring, nephew of Herman, and a Focke-Wulf squadron leader during the "the late unpleasantness."

As we recounted our experiences, it became obvious that we had been involved in the same battle for Hitler's oil, but on different sides.

By that time Abby was talking with both hands, so we decided to stop at a little wine restaurant where we would be in less danger of crashing his Mercedes. This was when we discussed the events of Aug. 22, 1944, which was our very noisy first meeting.

Our group was the last in a formation of several hundred B-24s under heavy fighter escort to attack the oil facilities at Lobau, Vienna. Some 30 minutes before the target, we saw a huge dogfight in front of us. Focke Wulfs and ME-109s were dashing in and out of our formation. With immense speed and daring. our fighters jumped into the string, causing the Germans to explode, filling the air with parachutes, flaming wrecks, last-second misses and some non misses.

The ME-109s were just a ploy; serious numbers of Focke Wulfs were gaining on us from the rear and their rockets zipped past us on both sides. Our left wingman blew up right in formation just as our right wingman pulled to the right and disintegrated. No chutes.

Our tail gunner caught one FW-190 just as the pilot launched his rockets and put hits on two others. We were alone. Successive rows of FWs took their best shots and then disappeared with a roll.

The B-24 moaned and shook as our turrets' guns filled the cabin with cordite. (You could smell it right through the oxygen masks!) Then, a rocket blasted a 3-foot hole under our tail, just aft the ball-turret. One man was badly cut by flying metal, which turned his face and arms into a mess; still he rearmed his single .50 and blasted everything coming in on his side.

Our own group had disappeared into the smoke ahead. Now it was time to get out of German airspace without delay.

The engines were ragged, two turbos were out, the wings were streaming gas. But we held as much altitude as we could so that it would be possible to join another home-bound formation. Besides, we still had to cross the Alps. Staggering out of Vienna was a sorry looking bunch of B-24s. To our amazement, large hunks of these airplanes seemed to be falling off, yet they flew on. I could see these ragged, molting birds begin to make a "box," and I joined gratefully.

Somehow we landed at Foggia Main, which was close to a general hospital where our injured crewmen could get the best care. We returned to our squadron late and a little shook by that first meeting with Abby Goring.

My 1961 meeting with Abby also made me late and my bride of June, 1944 found the reasons only marginally adequate. German "champagne" is called sekt and this was Abby's way of saying he was glad I made it.