

“Bazu” and the Mustang

North American P-51B-15-NA S/N 43-24857

Last year I saw the box art of Eduard’s new Mustang release (kit number 82107) – Piotr Forkasiewicz’s wonderful digital painting was telling a story about a North American P-51B Mustang belonging to the famous “Checkertail Clan” fighter group (325th Fighter Group) having just damaged a Bf-109G-6 of the Royal Romanian Air Force, somewhere, above a formation of B-17G Flying Fortresses. I immediately pre-ordered the kit, but, only now, months later, I decided to look closer at Piotr’s visual story, and try and make sense of it from a historical point of view. What I found out is narrated here, and it is a captivating story about an certain aircraft, a Romanian Prince and fighter ace, about war and destruction, and, above all, it is a story about bravery and sacrifice.



Eduard 82107 model kit’s wonderful box art by Piotr Forkasiewicz: Lt. (later Captain) Robert Merrill “Bob” Barkey in P-51B-15-NA s/n 43-24857 “Dorothy II”, part of 319th Fighter Squadron, 325th Fighter Group (“Checkertail Clan”), left Lesina, Italy for Ukraine on 2nd June 1944 part of the very first “shuttle” mission of Operation Frantic I (“Frantic Joe”); on 6th June 1944 he and the rest of the 325th FG are escorting a wave of 104 USAAF B-17G bombers of the 483rd Bomb Group over Galati, Romania (with 54 (42 from the 325th) Mustangs as escort); that day, he shot down his fifth (and last) aircraft, granting him the Ace status; it is unclear who he shot down, of the 18 Royal Romanian Air Force defenders of the 9th Fighter Group (Grupul 9 Vanatoare), but it is a fact that that Bf 109G-6 was Romanian. This aircraft will later be renamed “Sweet Clara II”, and will be handed over to Lt. Russell Elliott, then it will be used by Capt. Constantin “Bazu” Cantacuzino, the Romanian ace of aces of the 9th Fighter Group, to fly back from San Giovanni airfield, Italy to Popesti-Leordeni airfield, south of Bucharest, Romania, at the start of Operation Reunion (the evacuation of USAAF POWs from Romania to Italy), August 29, 1944.

The USAAF raid over Galati, Romania, 6 June 1944

Mr Forkasiewicz’s depiction of the Mustang is a moment frozen in time, during the destructive USAAF raid over Galati, Romania, on June 6 1944. USAAF heavy bombers had already started flying to Ukraine in the Soviet Union, on 2nd June 1944, part of Operation Frantic I, and its “shuttle missions”. 483rd Bomb Group (equipped with B-17G Flying Fortress) flew from Foggia, Italy to Poltava, Ukraine, via a raid over Debreczen, Hungary, on 2nd June 1944 (see missions log in References), and, on 6 June 1944, they were tasked with bombing the Galati airfield, Romania, with them scheduled to return to Poltava, after the raid. Bomber escort was provided by North American P-51 Mustangs of the 325th Fighter Group (“Checkertail Clan”), based at Lesina, Italy, but

immediately previous to the raid detached to the Soviet airfield at Pyriatyn, Ukraine, on the 2nd June 1944.

The attack on Galati started at 0930am on 6 June 1944; 104 USAAF B-17G Flying Fortress heavy bombers of the 483rd Bomb Group attacked from 25,000 feet, targeting the Galati airfield (and some harbour installations); fighter escort was provided by 54 Mustangs of which 42 of the 325th Fighter Group, with its three Fighter Squadrons: 317th, 318th, and 319th. Since the attackers' altitude was very high, flak was ineffective, so defense was delegated to Royal Romanian Air Force (RRAF) fighter groups. The US bombers hit the airfield's hangars, the Eastern side of the airstrip, and the Lozoveni neighbourhood. Romanian Fighter Groups 6 (Grupul 6 Vanatoare, equipped with Romanian-built IAR-81C fighters), 7 and 9 (both equipped with Romanian-license built German Bf-109G fighters) are involved in defending against the USAAF Fortresses and their Mustang escorts, with the Romanian 9th Fighter Group, based at Tecuci, and commanded by Capt. Alexandru Serbanescu, being the main line of defense; the Group had 42 pilots (captains: Constantin "Bazu" Cantacuzino, lieutenants: Ion Dobran, Tudor Greceanu, Ioan Panaite, M. T. Șenchea, Scordilă, Vasile "Chițu" Gavrilu, Constantin Rozariu, adjutants: Bălan, Ion Mucenica, Constantin Miron and many others). They will lose 6 aircraft out of the 18 sent to battle the Forts and their Mustang escorts, but no Romanian pilots were KIA that day.

According to Romanian records, USAAF lost eight aircraft (16 airmen KIA, and 59 taken prisoner - one captain, 24 second lieutenants, 23 warrant officers, 19 sergeants). Two of those eight aircraft shot down were fighter escort Mustangs (also confirmed by USAAF), the first Mustangs shot down by the RRAF:

- North American P-51C-5-NT Mustang, serial number 42-103369, pilot: Mumford, John D., serial O-811955, of 318th FS, 325th FG, 15AF, KIA, shot down by Capt. Constantin "Bazu" Cantacuzino, Romania's ace of aces, at the time part of 53rd Fighter Squadron, 9th Fighter Group; Mumford gets shot down in the vicinity of Reni, Romania, and he becomes the first Mustang shot down by the RRAF;

- North American P-51C-5-NT Mustang, serial number 42-103432, pilot: Lt. MacDonald, Donald J, serial O-667086, of 318th FS, 325th FG, 15AF, survives crash landing and is taken POW (shot down by a Romanian pilot of 9th Fighter Group, unclear who that was);

Further to the two Mustangs shot down over Romanian territory, one more Mustang is lost on its way back, over Ukraine:

- North American P-51B serial number 42-103519, pilot: 2nd Lt. Davis, Barrie S, serial O-811865 of 317th FS, 325th FG, 15AF. Lt. Davis gets hit by Lt. Av. Ion Dobran of 48th Fighter Squadron, 9th Fighter Group, RRAF, but survives the ordeal (Davis landed at Mirogorod, in Ukraine, his plane too badly damaged, and deemed a write-off, Davis himself being wounded), and, later, after the war, he and Dobran become friends, and, will eventually meet in person in 2010. Dobran is himself shot down in the same air battle, by 1st Lt. Wayne Lowry (11 kills), the CO of 317th FS. Here is what Davis said about the incident:

"Soon after getting my Mustang, numbered 24, I gave it my mother's nickname — Bee. After scoring my first victory over Ploesti, I added "Honey" to the name, because it proved it had a sting. With my crew chief's help and over his objections, I painted garish red stripes from nose to tail down the side of the Mustang. They did not remain long. The next day, ordered came to remove all added decorations except names so that our P-51s looked the same. With the help again of my crew chief and to his great satisfaction, we used paint remover to take off the red stripes. The following day we took part in the first shuttle mission from Italy to the Soviet Union. This aircraft was his original P-51 left behind in Russia due to severe battle damage. The squadron callsign was Mayfair and Barrie's aircraft number was "24". The replacement (42-103519) looked exactly the same but with the addition of Honey to the nose and less checkerboard pattern paint due to a shortage of yellow paint at the time. The original P-51 was hit only once—during the June 6, 1944, mission

flown from the Ukraine. Flying P-51s, we escorted B-17s attacking Galatz, Rumania (sic). The fourth member of our flight, which was led by Wayne Lowry, returned early. Bob Bass was third member. We met 16 enemy fighters (sic – 18 in reality), and a fine battle ensued. I outmanoeuvred a Bf 109 and had him in my sights ready to achieve my first victory when he suddenly dropped wheels and flaps. He seemed to stop. I overshot and found myself in front of the Bf 109 desperately trying to escape. The hunter had become the hunted. As suddenly as it began, the fight was over. I searched the sky for other planes, finally finding my flight leader. I joined him, and we flew line abreast, with me on the right, toward our Russian base. By flying side by side, we could cover each other. Wayne saw a third plane approaching from our right rear. He believed it was Bob Bass rejoining us, until it began firing. The first round evidently hit my canopy, because I remember nothing from the explosion until I found myself flying alone at 23,000 feet. I was very, very cold. My shoes, wet with dew from walking through high grass to the plane in early morning, were frozen. My right wing tip was shredded. After landing, we found the tail was nearly shot off, all four propeller blades had been hit, and an unexploded cannon round was found in the fuel tank that sat behind the seat. The flight surgeon spent nearly an hour picking shell fragments from my head, shoulders, and thighs. Wayne shot down the Bf 109 that had clobbered me (n.n. Ion Dobran), and I received a Purple Heart."

A few more mentions about the air battle, via USAAF records: Lt. Hoffman became the first USAAF pilot to destroy an enemy aircraft while operating from Russian bases, Captain Hogg destroyed two (Luftwaffe) Fw-190s (most probably Romanian IAR-81C of the 6th Fighter Group, easily confused by the Americans with Fw-190s, due to similar shapes and radial engines) , bringing his total to six. Lts. Barkey (later Captain Robert Merrill "Bob" Barkey, in P-51B-15-NA s/n 43-24857, part of 319th FS, 325th FG) and Hoffman each got their fifth, becoming aces - Barkey's was his last kill, before going back to the US on a bond tour, and his only kill in a Mustang (unclear as to who he shot down, but it is certain it was a Bf 109G of the RRAF). Lt. Barrie Davis was wounded and thus became the first man to earn a Purple Heart while operating from Russian bases.

As for the Romanian defenders of the 9th Fighter Group, on 6 June 1944 they flew for the first time against the Americans. The day, as recorded by them: Lt. Av. Dobran was playing bridge with Mucenica, Senchea and Simionescu, when the alarm was raised. They took off hastily and because of the rushed take off, Dobran ended up without a wingman. He saw the USAAF bomber formation and then realized that he was flying alone. Below him were four fighters, and his first thought was they were Romanian Bf-109G's from 56th Fighter Squadron (9th Fighter Group). When he got closer, he correctly identified them as Mustangs. They were flying like they were at an air show - line abreast. Dobran dove and fired at the one on the far right. Smoke started to come out of the aeroplane. The others dispersed. He then went for the bombers, but he fired from too far, because the Mustangs were closing in on himself. He plunged down and managed to shake off two of them after some aerobatics. But the one that stuck to his six, shot him down (ie 1st Lt. Wayne Lowry). Dobran sustained minor injuries while crash landing his Bf-109G ("Yellow 22"), and was back in action in a very short time.

This encounter with USAAF's powerful Mustangs will set a pattern for the next missions the RRAF will fly against the Americans: suffering from inferiority in numbers, and flying less potent fighters, the Romanians will offer the USAAF a stiff opposition, oftentimes shooting down Mustangs and Lightnings, when numerical odds were stacked massively against them.



After keeping in touch over correspondence, Ion Dobran and Barrie Davis finally met each other in Bucharest, in 2010, and this is the poster of the public event. Davis will pass away in 2014, and Dobran, the last surviving Romanian ace for a long time, will join him in 2021. Godspeed, gentlemen!



Lt. (later Captain) Robert Merrill "Bob" Barkey in the cockpit of P-51B Mustang "Dorothy II".

“Sweet Clara II”

Sometime after June 1944, 43-24857 was handed over to Lt. Russell Elliott, preserving her number “90” but changing her nickname (and writing on the nose) to “Sweet Clara II” on both sides of the nose (though it appears that the starboard inscription simply read “Sweet Clara”, without the Roman numeral “II”). It kept flying with the 319th FS, 325th FG, until events of August 1944 entered her in history books yet again, and, again, it had something to do with Romania.

On 23 August 1944 King Michael of Romania staged a *coup d’etat*, turning arms against Nazi Germany, in an attempt to save the country from total destruction at the hands of the Red Army, that had finally broken through into Romania on 21 August 1944. The country, having effectively switched sides, was in turmoil – German forces, still present in large numbers, start a campaign against the freshly-Allied country, while Soviet troops are advancing at a breakneck pace towards Bucharest. Former prisoners of war are now liberated, and among them, there were more than 1,100 American POWs, all of them aviators shot down over Romania in the previous two years, during the Campaign Against Oil. Neither the Americans, nor the newly appointed democratic government of Romania, wanted the Soviets to take over the prisoners and the prison camps, let alone allow the Germans to recapture and deport them towards Germany, so an evacuation plan was hatched – with time being the key element. Bucharest’s two largest airports (Otopeni and Baneasa) were solidly in Germans hands, so evacuation operations, if they were to happen at all, had to be done from elsewhere. Popesti-Leordeni airfield was a small airfield south of Bucharest – this was the place where Operation Reunion eventually took place. James Emmett Thompson’s excellent book titled “Last flight of the Gustav” is a brilliant reference for this event. Capt. Constantin “Bazu” Cantacuzino discussed with Col. James Gunn (the most senior of USAAF’s POWs), and they decided they should fly together to San Giovanni, Cerignola, Italy (at the time, home of the 454th and 455th Bomb Groups), so that Gunn can propose Gen. Twining (commander of 15th Army Air Force) the evacuation plan from Romania. Cantacuzino stuffed Gunn inside the windowless and extremely cramped radio compartment of a Romanian Bf 109G-6 (Werk No 166133. Erla canopy, the newest airframe at the base, with only 7.5 flight hours), garishly adorned with old (pre-1942) American roundels painted on top of the Romanian Michael crosses, and sporting huge US flags painted on either side of the fuselage, and they flew, guided by a map Gunn drew on a piece of cardboard, safely arriving at San Giovanni in the evening of 27 August 1944. It was decided to return to Popesti-Leordeni in the following two days, so that to determine if the airfield was still in friendly hands, to commence the evacuations; Cantacuzino and Gunn flew in a Bf 109 whose DB605 engine was tuned for synthetic, low-octane petrol, and with the Americans using high-octance petrol, the Bf 109 would not be able to be refueled for the flight back; it was decided that “Bazu” will be loaned a Mustang – a plane he both feared and revered, and that he’d always wanted to fly – this time, he’d be at the controls of a Mustang! And what Mustang did “Bazu” get – none other than 43-24857 “Sweet Clara II”! The task of training Cantacuzino on the Mustang was given to Cpt. Walter J. Goehausen, who only taught him the basic controls of the Mustang, and the key speeds. Once in the air for a test flight, “Bazu” began performing some aerobatic maneuvers and landed the aeroplane “as if he had always flown it”.

Cantacuzino was to be escorted by two other Mustangs who were ordered to shoot him down if anything suspicious happened. They were to take off on 29 August and once at Popesti-Leordeni, Cantacuzino was to land and assess the situation on the airfield. Afterwards, he was to signal the escorting P-51s by firing a double yellow-starred flare if the airfield was still in Romanian control, a double red flare if the airfield was not safe, and a single green flare if the escorting fighters should wait a further five minutes. If no signal came within 15 minutes, it was assumed that the area was not safe to land. All proceeded with no hitch, and the rest was, as they say, history! (during

Operation Reunion more than 1,100 American airmen were successfully evacuated from Romania, to Italy, from Popesti-Leordeni airfield, on B-17 Flying Fortresses, in less than a single week!)

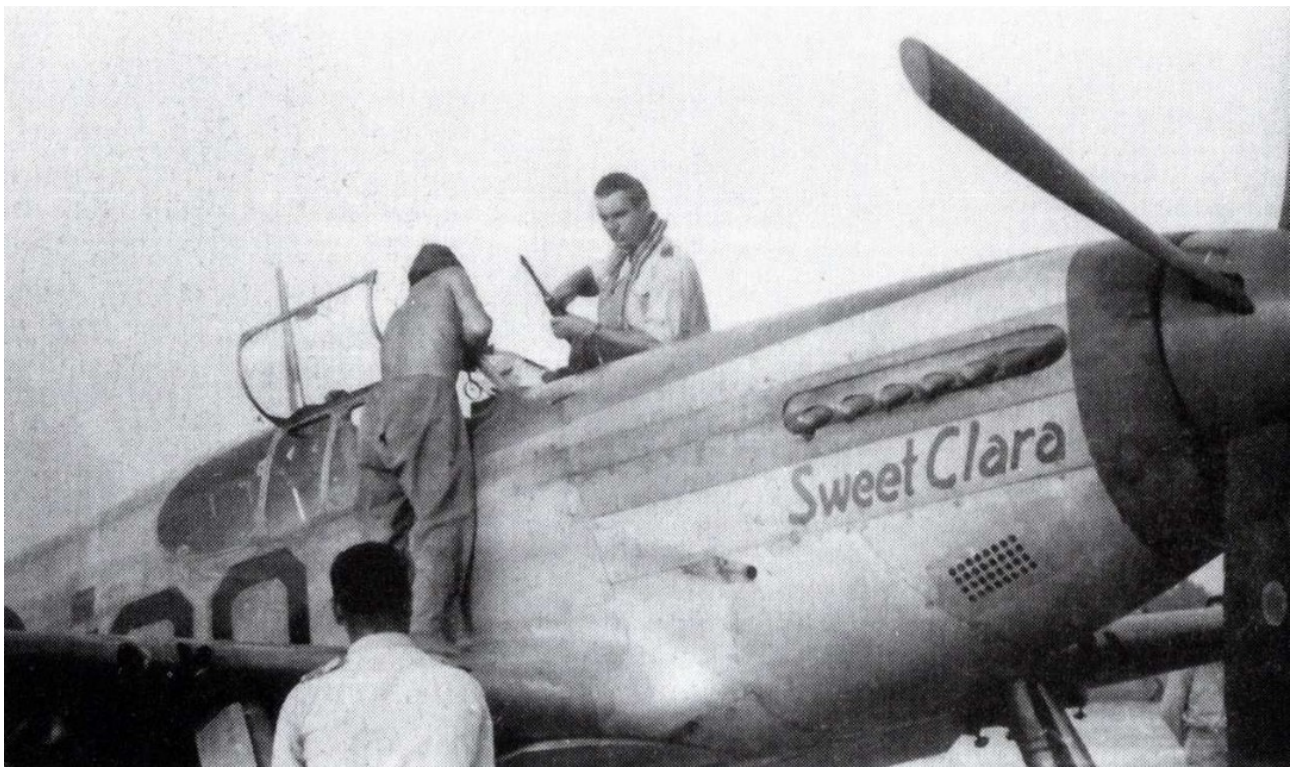


Photo courtesy of mr. Paul Sihvonen-Binder

Constantin “Bazu” Cantacuzino arrives at San Giovanni, Italy, with Col. James Gunn stifed in the Bf 109’s radio compartment, evening of 27 August 1944. The aircraft (Werk No 166133) belonged to Escadrila 48, Grupul 9 Vanatoare (48th Fighter Squadron, 9th Fighter Group, RRAF), but had all her national markings oversprayed, and large US flags and roundels painted over. It was a garishly looking aircraft with a bizarre paintwork!



P-51B Mustang 43-24857 “Sweet Clara II” at Popesti-Leordeni airfield, south of Bucharest, Romania, August 29, 1944, being examined by Romanian ground personnel, after “Bazu” had landed her. A Romanian SET biplane can be seen in the background.



P-51B Mustang 43-24857 "Sweet Clara II" at Popesti-Leordeni airfield.

Operation Gunn: "Bazu" and the Mustangs

Operation Gunn aimed to prepare for the transfer to Italy of Allied prisoners of war, released from Romanian detention camps after 23 August, 1944, and took place between 27 and 30 August 1944.

- 2,500 American and British airmen were lost in the bombing of Romania between August 1, 1943 and August 23, 1944

- 2,290 were lost between April and August 1944

- 867 managed to return to base, mainly through Yugoslavia

- 1,500 – estimated number (USAAF) of prisoners in Romania on August 23, 1944

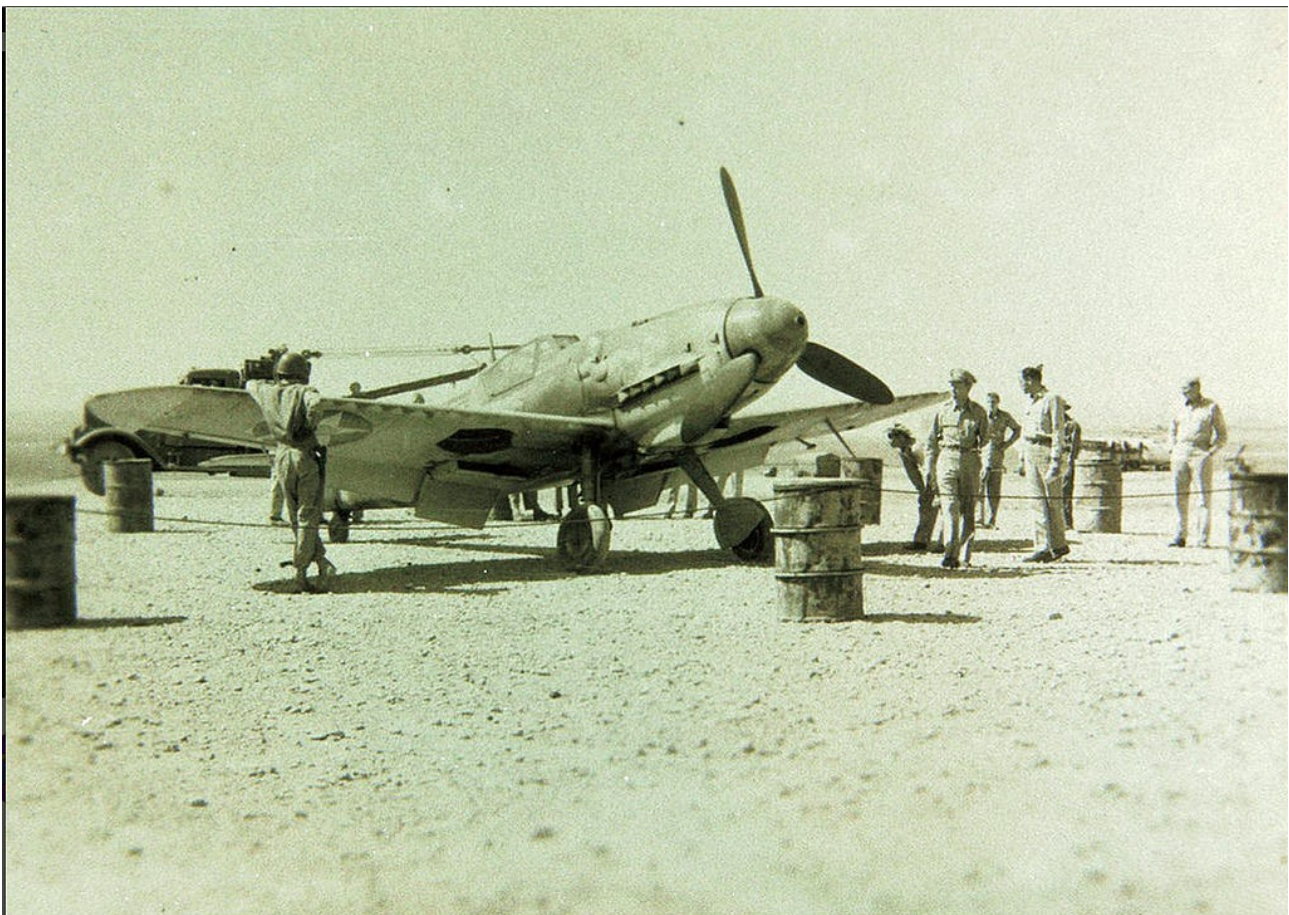
On August 23, 1944, there were 1,123 American prisoners in Romania (465 officers, 649 non-commissioned officers and 9 soldiers) and 39 British interned in Camp No. 13 Bucharest (the Normal School on Sfânta Ecaterina Street, the "Regina Elisabeta" Military Hospital) and in Camp No. 14 Timișul de Jos (the villas of the Brașov and Giurgiu city halls).

The operation was named after Lt. Col. James A. Gunn, the highest-ranking officer among the American prisoners, who played a prominent role in this USAAF action, in cooperation with the Romanian authorities. Lt. Col. James A. Gunn – 454th Bomb Group 304th Wing, born on 05/28/1912, enlisted 03/01/1939, he flew 32 missions before he was shot down on August 17, 1944 – he is taken prisoner after the B-24 "Bright Eyes" 41-28790 plane he was piloting was hit by anti-aircraft fire, the crew jumping out with parachutes, with one exception (MACR 7633). On August 20, 1944 he is transferred from Ploiești to the officers' detention camp in Bucharest, the former Normal School on Sfânta Ecaterina Street (currently the Faculty of Orthodox Theology) where he takes command, being the officer with the highest rank among the prisoners.

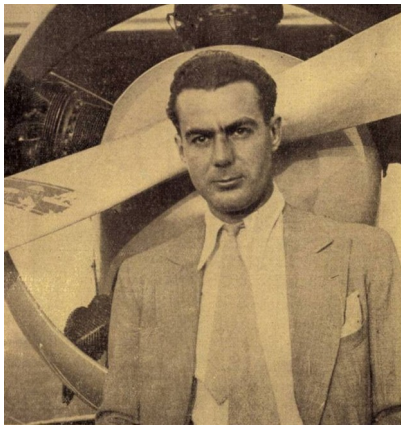
On August 23 1944 - King Michael of Romania staged a *coup d'état*, turning arms against Nazi Germany, in an attempt to save the country from total destruction at the hands of the Red Army, that had finally broken through into Romania on August 21 1944. The country, having effectively switched sides, was in turmoil – German forces, still present in large numbers, start a campaign against the freshly-Allied country, while Soviet troops are advancing at a breakneck pace towards Bucharest. Neither the Americans, nor the newly appointed democratic government of Romania,

wanted the Soviets to take over the prisoners and the prison camps, let alone allow the Germans to deport them towards Germany, so an evacuation plan was hatched – with time being the key element. August 23 – 10:15 PM – Gunn finds out about the dramatic political events in Romania by listening to the radio hidden by prisoners planning an escape. August 24 – 9:40 AM a German bombardment begins and the prisoners are allowed to leave the camp and hide in trenches outside and are given several pistols and 4 automatic rifles. An attempt is made to find a radio transmitter or a means of communication through the Red Cross to organize the evacuation. August 26 – Gunn moves to Popești-Leordeni to fly out to Italy, onboard a IAR JRS-79 (Romanian license built Savoia-Marchetti SM-79), but the arrival of 50 American planes is announced. There are actually 230 bombers accompanied by fighters, which attack the Otopeni and Băneasa airfields, the two largest airfields around Bucharest, and both solidly in German hands. Romanians, now Allied, are also killed during the American raid. Around 13:00 – the JRS-79 takes off, but returns to Popești after 30 minutes, incurring a problem with one of the engines; after landing, Captain Constantin “Băzu” Cantacuzino offers to transport Gunn in a Bf-109. The Minister of Air immediately agrees, deciding to take off the next morning. Gunn, while discussing with “Băzu” Cantacuzino, the plan changes due to lax security, and the fear it’ll get leaked to the Germans.

On August 27 Gunn and “Bazu” fly together to San Giovanni, Cerignola, Italy (at the time, home of the 454th and 455th Bomb Groups), so that Gunn can propose Gen. Twining (commander of 15th Army Air Force) – and in fact, Gen. Born at Bari, since Twining was on leave, the evacuation plan from Romania. Cantacuzino stuffed Gunn inside the windowless and extremely cramped radio compartment of a Romanian Bf 109G-6 (Werk No/Works Number 166133. Erla canopy, the newest airframe at the base, with only 7.5 flight hours), garishly adorned with old (pre-1942) American roundels painted on top of the Romanian Michael crosses, and sporting huge US flags painted on both sides of the fuselage, and they flew, guided by a map Gunn drew on a piece of cardboard, safely arriving at San Giovanni, around 19:20 in the evening of August 27, 1944.



The Bf-109G-6 that Constantin “Bazu” Cantacuzino brought Col. Gunn in the radio compartment.



Constantin "Bazu" Cantacuzino

August 28 – the plan for Operation Gunn is developed with the following purpose: the transport of radio equipment and specialized personnel to establish a radio link between Popești-Leordeni-Bari. The flight to Popești-Leordeni will comprise of 4 P-51 Mustangs, one of which was piloted by Capt. Cantacuzino, to verify whether the airfield was still under Romanian control and was safe for landing. Another flight of 2 B-17s with OSS radio equipment and personnel, escorted by 32 P-51s would follow, if the Romanian airfield was secure.

First flight: P-51 pilot call signs:

- **Capt. Constantin "Bazu" Cantacuzino:** FUNNEL
- **Lt. Col. William A. Daniel** (CO of 31st FG): NORMAL
- **Lt. Walter J. Goehausen:** HOMEMADE
- Lt. Bohn CHEERUP

First flight aircraft specifics:

- **Capt. Cantacuzino:** P-51B-15-NA s/n 43-24857 "Sweet Clara II" ex "Dorothy II", number 90, part of 319th FS, 325th FG ("Checkertail Clan"), 15 AF;
- **Lt. Goehausen:** P-51D-5-NA Mustang, 308th FS, 31st FG, 15 AF "HL-M" s/n 44-13494 "Miss Mimi II";
- **Lt. Col. Daniel:** P-51D-20-NA Mustang, 308th FS, 31st FG, 15 AF "HL-H" s/n 44-63273 "Tempus Fugit" (Latin for "Time Flies");

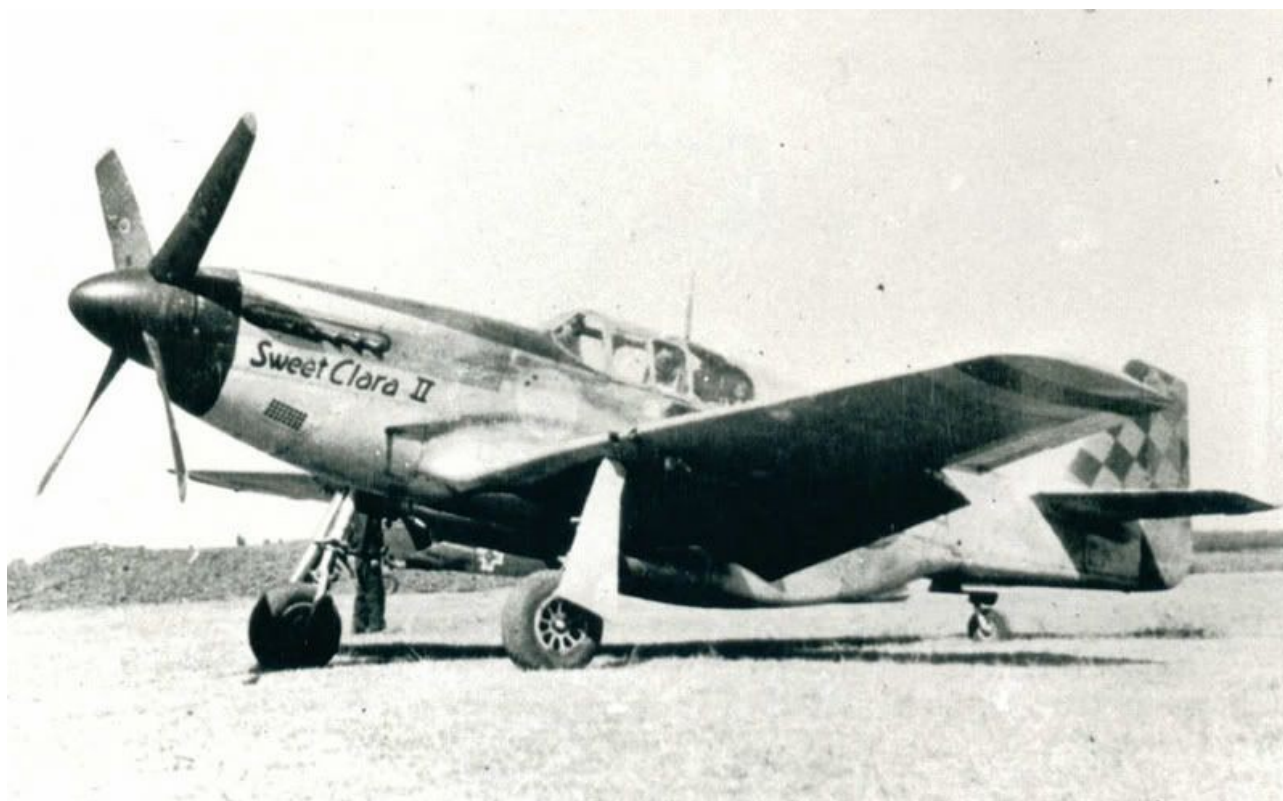


A P-51 Mustang (HL-H) nicknamed "Tempus Fugit" of the 31st Fighter Group, 15th Air Force. Image via R Jones. Handwritten caption on reverse: '308 FS, 31 FG, 15 AF, Col Wm Daniels Group Co.'

Lt. Col. Daniel: P-51D-20-NA Mustang, 308th FS, 31st FG, 15 AF "HL-H" s/n 44-63273 "Tempus Fugit" (Latin for "Time Flies")



Lt. Goehausen: P-51D-5-NA Mustang, 308th FS, 31st FG, 15 AF "HL-M" s/n 44-13494 "Miss Mimi II"



Capt. Cantacuzino: P-51B-15-NA s/n 43-24857 "Sweet Clara II" ex "Dorothy II", number 90, part of 319th FS, 325th FG ("Checkertail Clan"), 15 AF

Lt. Goehausen gave "Bazu" a crash course in flying the Mustang; according to Goehausen, "Bazu" needed very little training, instantly converting the various speeds from miles per hour to the metric system (kilometers per hour) in his head, and, on his first test flight in the Mustang, he landed it as if "he had flown it all his life". Also to note is that Lt. Bohn has not participated in that first flight, not being confirmed by some accounts, including that of Lt. Goehausen.

August 29 – takeoff at 8:00 from Bari towards Bucharest/Popești-Leordeni. Cantacuzino will land at Popești-Leordeni and check the situation at the airfield. The following signals will be given:

- double yellow flare – Romanian-controlled airfield, the two B-17s and their escorts can take off, due course Romania: Popești-Leordeni
- double red flare – American planes cannot land
- single green flare – wait 5 minutes
- no signal 15 minutes – no landing, assume airfield is not secure

After receiving the signal or after 15 minutes, the 2 other P-51s will fly to back Bari and will send the following radio signals:

- I have six zero six gallons of gasoline repeat I have six zero six which means Popești airfield is Romanian-controlled, and secure, the B-17s can take off
- Ceiling and visibility zero zero repeat zero zero means unsafe conditions for the mission

The pilots of the 2 P-51s escorting “Bazu” had strict orders to fire at “Bâzu”’s Mustang if anything suspicious appeared during the mission. According to Lt. Goehausen, “Bazu” flew in perfect formation to Popești, only at one single point, did he break formation, distancing himself by an extra 100 yards or so, test firing his guns with a short burst; Goehausen immediately took position at “Bazu”’s six o’clock, but he immediately came back in formation after test-firing the guns. It’s not known by neither Goehausen nor Daniels why “Bazu” did that, since they’ve not seen him after that flight, they both assumed he wanted to make sure his guns were working, in case he got jumped by German fighters.

As for the B-17s waiting at Bari: starting at 10:00 they will be on alert, ready to take off within 30 minutes after receiving the signal:

- they will fly accompanied by two formations of 16 P 51s each: one en route and one to cover the Popești area– they will land after receiving the light signal from the ground and after the area has been checked by the escort planes
 - the 2 B-17s will unload the radio equipment and personnel, take a maximum of 10 American prisoners each if there are any on the airfield and will take off as quickly as possible
- “Bâzu” landed and sent the agreed light signal for the Romanian-controlled airfield, that triggered a series of events:
- The P-51s transmitted the radio signal which was received by a weather plane over Yugoslavia, which forwarded it to Bari
 - The two B-17s landed at 15:30 with radio equipment and personnel, under the command of Col. George Kraiger (OSS), commander of rescue operations in the Balkans
 - they were greeted by the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Economy Valeriu “Rică” Georgescu
 - the two B-17s took off immediately after unloading their cargo
 - the radio equipment was installed at the headquarters provided for this mission – Alea Modrogan no. 5, building owned by Dumitru Bragadiru.

Start of Operation Reunion: August 30 1944

- Kraiger fails to establish radio contact with Bari
- 17:15 Capt. Cantacuzino takes off with P-51 “Sweet Clara II” again towards Bari, to send a letter with the information necessary for the Operation Reunion which begins the next day (the actual rescue of the American POWs).



“Bazu” (right) and Col. Gunn (left)

End of story

43-24857 was eventually returned to the 325th FG, and it flew combat missions until February 1945, when Lt. Conrad J. Cook damaged her while landing at Lesina, Italy; apparently she was salvaged in September 1945, but her fate is unknown after that date. “Bazu” went on to fight against the Germans in Transylvania, Hungary, then Czechoslovakia, finishing the war with 54 confirmed victories, the top Romanian ace, and one of the overall best pilots of the War, he returned to Romania, now under a communist regime, and flew for the newly established TARS airlines (Transport Aerian Romano-Sovietic/Soviet-Romanian Airlines), but, facing persecution from the regime, for fighting against the Soviet Union, managed to flee, first to Milan, then on to Spain, where he became an aerobatic pilot. He died on 26 May 1958: there are two versions of how he died: one is after an unsuccessful surgery, and the other when his twin engine aircraft caught fire from the smoke candles attached to the wings and crashed, Bazu dying in hospital of his wounds. Col. Gunn stayed in the Air Force, yet only in 2014 was he awarded, posthumously, the Silver Star for Operation Reunion. Romania became a Soviet satellite after 1945, spending the next 45 years behind the Iron Curtain. Now, Romania is a proud NATO member. 325th Fighter Group is now 325th Operations Group, based at Tyndall AFB, and manages operations of F-35 Lightning IIs and F-22A Raptors.

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Ploiesti: 10 June 1944 - a pivotal day for the Royal Romanian Air Force

June 10, 1944 will forever remain a glorious day for the Royal Romanian Air Force (RRAF). However, a good part of the laurels of victory are claimed by the anti-aircraft gunners around Ploiești and the Luftwaffe pilots stationed in Romania. On the other hand, the American 15th Army Air Force accomplished its difficult bombing mission, and the losses suffered were nowhere near as they were recorded at the time, by the Romanians and Germans, so it is worth reopening the archives of the three countries in order to finally answer, as accurately as possible, the question: "Whose was the victory?"

"Shortly after the end of the battle, General Gheorghe Jienescu, the [Romanian] Minister of Air, accompanied by Nicolae Dinischiotu, the [Romanian] Deputy Minister of National Economy, came to congratulate us and brought us 24 bottles of French champagne as a gift for our 24 aerial victories; as for me, I also received 3 bottles of whiskey for the 3 personal victories that had just been added to my tally" confesses fighter ace Dan Vizanty, commander of the 6th Fighter Group, a group flying exclusively with aircraft produced by Romanian factories, such as the IAR-80, and its modernized variant, IAR-81. It was "their finest hour", as Sir W. Churchill would have said.

Also on the same day, the Germans report 11 victories for Jagdgeschwader 77 (JG77), 5 victories for JG53, one for JG301 and 2 for Nachtjagdgeschwader NJG6. As the German claim system was very strict, we are justified in believing that on that day the Luftwaffe had achieved another 19 victories over the American Air Force over Romanian territory. The gunners around Ploiești also requested, in writing, the approval of 7 victories, thus bringing the total of American fighter planes shot down to 50, a catastrophe never seen in any Allied attack carried out up to that date.

However, the reality is different: that evening, only 17 wrecks of the attacking aircraft could be inventoried. How the bubbles of champagne and the adrenaline of victory changed the statistics of the war so much we will find out in the following...

The American attack on June 10, 1944 was unique. Only four days had passed since the Normandy landings, and the tactic of bombing railway junctions – a tactic that had governed every attack on Romania up to that point – was about to change. From now on, the priority was the oil refineries. The bombing that was to take place did not target a city, but a particular refinery. It was the first time that a surgical bombing was planned. 60 years before the first drone attack, the Americans were making the most of the technology they had at their disposal in 1944, and were planning a similar attack. The 82nd Fighter Group of the US 15th Army Air Force was formed by veterans of bomber escorts to attack Ploiești. This time, they were to be the bombers: in the strictest secrecy, their P-38 Lightnings were modified, with a single 1,000lb (445 kg) bomb slung under the left wing, and an additional 300-gallon (1,100 l) fuel tank under the right wing. After dropping the single bomb on the Romanian-American refinery (Rafinaria Romano-Americana), the mini-bombers were to revert to their original fighter aircraft roles.

The plan was bold: flying at the lowest possible altitude, the 82nd Fighter-Bombardment Group was to be escorted from Foggia, Italy, their operational base, to Giurgiu, Romania by the 1st Fighter Group, then it was to gain altitude by flying north to Ploiești, from where it was to dive-bomb, then strafe any target that came their way on the way back. During the entire period of the flight at altitude, the 1st Group was to fly at high speed at low altitude to Ploiești, where it would draw any Romanian or German aircraft into combat, thus allowing the 82nd Group to bomb using the element of surprise. That was the plan, but another enemy, more powerful than the Romanians and Germans combined, was going to wreak havoc among the Americans. This insidious enemy is called "mechanical gremlins."

The dice were cast - at 5:05 a.m. on June 10, 1944, 46 "bombers" (Lockheed P-38J Lightning fighter-bombers) and 48 escort planes took off for Giurgiu, from Foggia. The mechanical gremlins began to strike: one by one, the engines began to malfunction and 17 planes were forced to turn back. Two of them did not even make it back - at 7:05 a.m., Walter Leslie was forced to parachute out of his plane near Tačevac, Serbia, and at 7:20 a.m., William Jefferson was taken prisoner after his plane crashed into the Danube near Calafat, Romania. The remaining 75 aircraft fly at 75-100m altitude on the northern bank of the Danube and, in 30 minutes, reach Giurgiu, from where they take up strike formation. A new "Tidal Wave" is about to happen. But...the 82nd Fighter Group - the "bombers" - misses the turn to the north at the Giurgiu rendezvous point and continues east. 1st Fighter Group - the escort - turns correctly, but, seeing that the "bombers" it was supposed to protect had taken a wrong turn, also to the east, turns right. As if on cue, the 82nd FG realizes its mistake and turns sharply left, entering the wave of aircraft of the 1st FG, thus splitting them in two: the first wave, 71st Fighter Squadron, remains on the right, and the other two squadrons, 27th and 94th, on the left. This separation ensured the "bombers" and the two escort squadrons reach the objective, but sealed the fate of those from the 71st Fighter Squadron, because, by misfortune, they arrive above the Popești-Leordeni airfield at the most unfavorable moment possible...

For about 30 minutes, the Romanian 6th Fighter Group (Grupul 6 Vanatoare) had been on alert and had taken off exemplarily, lifting two complete squadrons and a command cell into the air, that is, 23 IAR-81C fighter aircraft. After the fighter planes took off, it was the turn of the training and utility planes. When these also took off, the Americans were heading towards them. In a terrible moment of the war, a few modest Romanian planes - some biplanes - became ad hoc bait for the powerful American planes. If we stop this moment in time and look at the situation further, we will notice that the American planes - the 71st FS - were themselves bait for the perfectly aligned Romanian fighters - the 6th Fighter Group. Looking even further, the moment reveals that this clash had itself become a trap into which the Romanians fell, because they believed that this was the main American attack (and, as a result, they did not attack other targets). In reality, however, the other 5 American squadrons reached their target, the Romanian-American refinery, unhindered, which they bombed with 33 of the 36 planned bombs.

Returning to the clash at Popești-Leordeni, in just 3 minutes, three IAR-39 biplane observation and light attack and 3 Focke Wulf FW-58 training aircraft are shot down. Adj. av. Ion Opreșan, cpt. av. Dumitrescu Constantin, lt. av. Dinu Marian, lt. av. Roventă Octavian, lt. Mec. Nanculescu Ion and sdt. mec. Păloiu Ion are all killed. In the next 5-7 minutes, the aircraft of the Romanian 6th Fighter Group shoot down 6 American Lightnings of the 71st FS. Vernon Baker, William Potter, Willie Flak Albert Smith, George Johnson and Joseph Jackson die, crashing with their aircraft. Willie Flak dies screaming in panic with his hand clenched on the radio broadcast button. On the Romanian side, Lt. av. Limburg, adj. Giurgiu and adj. av. Mihail Tari fall in the ensuing battle. Of the 14 planes it had entered the battle with, the American 71st FS lost 6 aircraft in a flash. The other 8 also shot down 3 Romanian planes, but some were out of ammunition, and 2 others had engine problems. They regrouped and decided to return home. At that moment, Ralph Hisey called his comrades for help, because he was being attacked, but he found the humor to revoke the request, telling them over the radio: "Never mind, here come 4 of them, I guess I'm toast!" Hisey escaped with his life, executing a belly landing near Orăști. Rudolph Janci, who had a damaged engine, also escaped with his life. He failed to find his colleagues and parachuted near Giurgiu, his plane crashing in the Danube. By now, the remaining 6 aircraft of 71st FS are already flying over Bulgaria, defending Carl Hoenshell who is having serious engine problems. They are attacked by Bulgarian Messerschmitts. Running out of bullets, the Americans perform aggressive maneuvers around the dying plane, but the Bulgarians do not give up and deal the final blow to Hoenshell's plane. The pilot parachutes, but is seriously injured in the fall and will die the next day as a prisoner of war, decorated in absentia with the Distinguished Flying Cross. 71st FS took the brunt of the Royal Romanian Air Force's attack, thus allowing the other 5 attack squadrons - 3 bombing and 2 escort - to attack the target

unhindered. In turn, 82nd FG had lost one aircraft on the way due to engine problems. Raymond Geyman flawlessly landed the plane on its belly in a freshly plowed field, waved to his colleagues, and calmly waited to be taken prisoner.

Bombing the Romano-American Refinery

During the attack, the Romanian-American refinery was badly hit. The two primary oil refining plants were destroyed; one had been put into operation only the day before. The main tank, the loading ramp, 10 tanker railway cars full of gasoline, the mechanical workshops, and much more were also destroyed. The smoke screen used for camouflage was quickly put into operation, but, as instructed, the bombs were dropped into the center of the smoke cloud.

Immediately after the attack began, the anti-aircraft guns began firing. Charles Welch was hit full-on and crashed immediately. Thomas Hodgson was hit in one engine, so he managed to land and jump out. Elwin Henry Jackson also escaped. It is not known exactly what shot down John McMonegal, who had made a forced landing near the refinery: the anti-aircraft gun or the pilots of Jagdgeschwader 77 (JG77), stationed at Mizil? In the case of Charles Laugenour, we can say for certain that it was both. Hit in one of the engines, Laugenour was protected by his colleagues from 1st FG until near Chitila, where German fighters managed to shoot down the cumbersome American plane.

Going back to Italy

The attackers do not linger over Ploiești at all. They have been in the air for 3 and a half hours and are running low on fuel. They will now fly over the Romanian Plains, looking for targets of opportunity. Going a little further south than they had set, the American pilots encounter the airfield at Boteni. German pilots from Jagdgeschwader 53, 301 and Nachtjagdgeschwader 6 also enter the fight. Only two German victories – that of Uffz. Martin Hain and that of Uffz. Johann Twietmeyer – are confirmed by two American crashes: James Joye and Harry Noone. The Americans manage to shoot down, in return, 5 Me 110s – 3 German and 2 Romanian – that were trying to flee the airfield. 2 Ju 52s at the disposal of Marshal Ion Antonescu, another 2 Ju 52s of LARES (Romanian Airlines) and a Savoia Marchetti are destroyed on the ground. Two more American planes crash, but this time due to pilot error, not because of anyone's bravery: August Bishoff attacks a train on the ground at Găești station, but does it so low that he hooks a horse carriage with his tail and crashes in flames. John Cannady also attacks a train on the ground near Curtișoara and has an engine failure at very low altitude. Both attackers die as a result of the attacks they themselves had launched. Finally, the last American plane to crash that day falls in Yugoslavia, shot down by the Germans. The pilot, William McClellan, escapes with his life, is discovered by partisans, and arrives back in Italy before the end of the month. At 1:00 PM, the last fire at the Romanian-American refinery is extinguished.

Balance sheet: the Americans lost 22 aircraft

22 American planes never returned to base. Compared to the number of those that initially departed – 94 – the loss is immense: 25% losses. Compared to the number that entered Romania – 75 – the loss is close to 30%, the record loss recorded on August 1, 1943, during Operation Tidal Wave, but the loss of human life was much lower than then, due to Lightnings being single seater fighters. In this new low-altitude attack, 12 American pilots perished – a little more than the crew of a single Liberator bomber (with two of them having died in accidents).

Statistically, of the 22 aircraft lost by the 15th Air Force on June 10, 1944, 2 were lost in accidents, 3 due to malfunctions, 4 due to AA artillery and only 13 in air combat: 5 shot down by the Luftwaffe and 8 by the Royal Romanian Aviation. Since the Romanians reported 24 victories, and

the Germans 19, we can only conclude that the Romanian-German friendship of arms also had a unique aspect: each "borrowed" from the other's victories.

Epilogue

The balance of power in the Mediterranean and Balkans theatre of operations is clearly in favour of the USAAF, but, the Romanians are still offering stiff resistance, despite being exhausted after three years of war on the Eastern Front. The turning point came in the mid-summer of 1944, with the introduction of the powerful Mustang, and when the US numerical superiority reached untenable limits for the RRAF and Luftwaffe, but until then, and even right there and then, the Royal Romanian Air Force proved to be a worthy adversary to the Yankees.

Addendum: JG77 at Mizil, Romania, summer 1944

July 22, 1944 saw a repeat of the attack of the week before with approximately four hundred and fifty bombers launched. Four B-24s and one HSS were claimed by III./JG 77 as well as two P-38s. 'Pummel' Böttner returned his 16th victory – another Liberator- and 8./JG 77 suffered only minor material losses. That day, at least nine B-24s were lost to the combined actions of the fighter force and the Flak arm. It was during this period that 8./JG 77 was taken over by Lt Wilhelm Mockel. Born in 1918 Mockel had spent a number of years as an instructor in training schools. Sent in mid-1944 to I./JG 53 operating in Romania, he was then posted to III./JG 77, a Gruppe short on officers. Mockel may have volunteered for combat but he had no experience of it - unlike the survivors of the African and Italian campaigns, aces such as Hackler or Böttner.

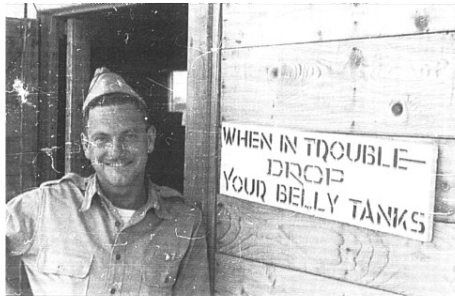
July 28, 1944 saw the 15th USAF mount its fourteenth attack on the Romanian oilfields; some 350 bombers were launched, fully intending in this last phase of the assault to deal the final blow to the defense of the oilfields and refineries. Some twenty four-engine bombers were lost, two of which were attributed to Uffz Böttner. But in the course of the fighting 8./JG 77 lost two pilots, both probably reinforcements having arrived in Romania at the beginning of 1944. On July 31, three hundred and fifty bombers were split between Bucharest and Ploesti. 7./JG 77 was decimated and 8./JG 77 lost three aircraft and one pilot killed. The Kapitän Mockel was wounded and temporarily put out of action (his post would then probably have been taken over by Hackler). Poorly guided from the ground, the Bf 109s were directed towards the escort which was present in much greater numbers, resulting in substantial losses.

On August 6, an internal note from the Luftwaffenmission in Romania stated brutally; Romanian airspace can no longer be defended by aircraft because 1°) the enemy is far superior in number; 2°) the German and Romanian fighter pilots no longer have enough experience. Indeed, apart from a few 'old hands', the ranks of III./JG 77 were largely made up of novices. Attacks could only be mounted when certain of having at least a slight tactical advantage. III./JG 77 had thus become no more than an auxiliary force, the defenders relying mainly on the Flak as well as on the units producing smoke to mask the objectives.

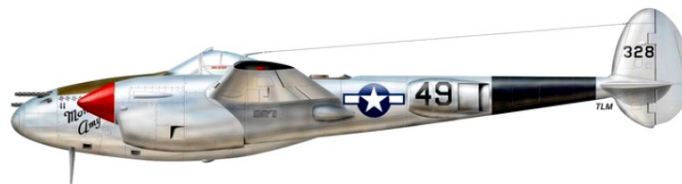
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Fortunate survivor of the 10 June 1944 mission to Ploesti, Lt. Herbert Hatch, 71st FS, 1st Fighter Group.
 Distinguished Service Cross
 World War II Service: United States Army Air Forces
 Rank: First Lieutenant (Air Corps)
 71st Fighter Squadron
 1st Fighter Group
 15th Air Force
 June 10, 1944



Lockheed P-38J Lightning no. 49 "Mon Amy," 71st FS, 1st FG, Lt. Herbert Hatch. (color profile by Teodor Liviu Morosanu, via Dan Melinte)

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to First Lieutenant (Air Corps) Herbert Brooks Hatch, Jr. (ASN: 0-760190), United States Army Air Forces, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Pilot of a P-38 Fighter Airplane in the 71st Fighter Squadron, 1st Fighter Group, FIFTEENTH Air Force, in aerial combat against enemy forces on 10 June 1944, during an air mission over Ploesti, Rumania. As part of the formation of fighter escorts for P-38 fighter bombers attacking a vitally important of refinery in Ploesti, Lieutenant Hatch destroyed five enemy fighters, probably destroyed one and damaged another. In an effort to obtain surprise, the formation had flown at tree-top level but were attacked by a numerically superior force prior to reaching the target. After engaging the enemy in furious combat, and expending all its ammunition, Lieutenant Hatch joined two other P-38's, whose ammunition was also completely exhausted, in a desperate attempt to assist comrades who were in need of help. Despite the lack of ammunition, Lieutenant Hatch returned with the formation through heavy anti-aircraft fire into the combat area and covered the withdrawal of another aircraft which had developed engine trouble. Lieutenant Hatch's gallantry in action, extreme devotion to duty, and outstanding heroism reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.



Capt. Av. Dan Vizanty, commander of the 6th Fighter Group. (Dan Melinte)



For Capt. Av. Dan Valentin Vizanty (9 Feb, 1910, Botosani, Romania - 12 Nov, 1992, Paris, France) and the IAR-81C pilots of Fighter Group 6 (whose Vizanty was the commanding officer), June 10 1944 was their "Day of Glory," but their opponents in the 1st and 82nd Fighter groups would call it the "Blackest Day." The Romanians claimed 24 planes and lost just three—all apparently at the hands of the same pilot, 2nd Lt. Herbert Hatch of the 71st Squadron, 1st Fighter Group.

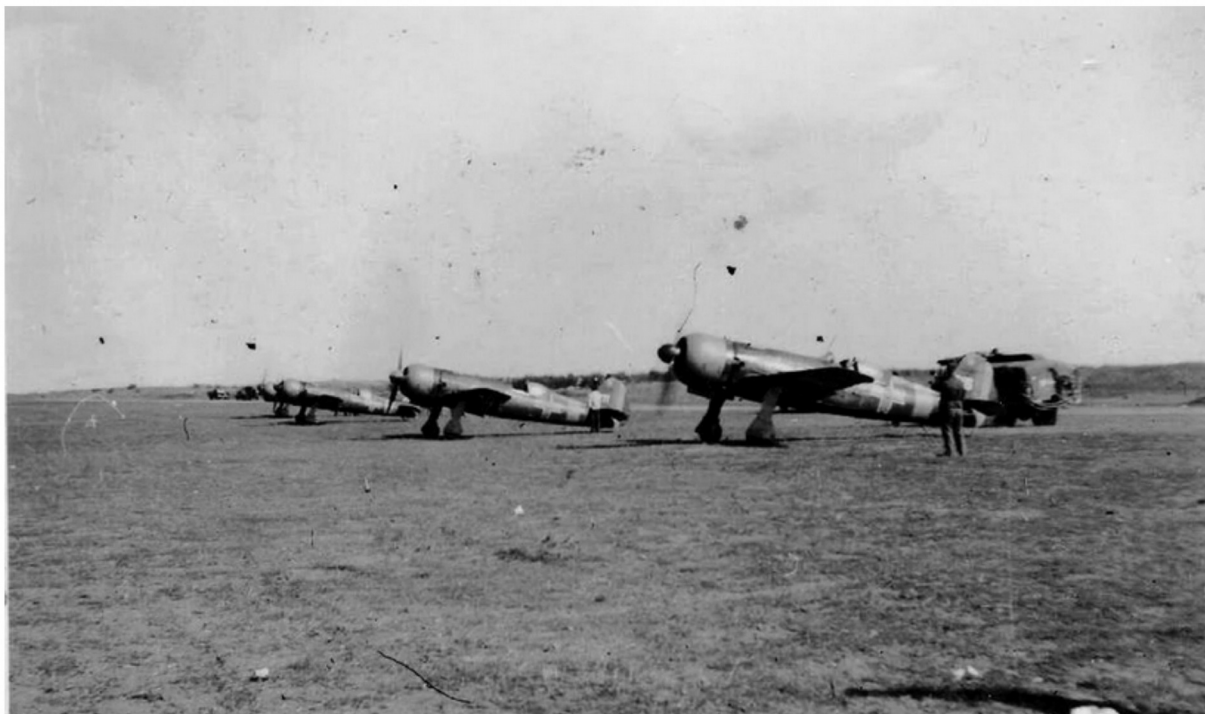
"Stub" Hatch, who was credited with five Focke-Wulf Fw-190s (the Americans often confused the IAR 80/81s with Fw-190s), would mention in his autobiography, *An Ace and His Angel*, the merits of Vizanty's fighter group and the outstanding performance of the IAR 81C. For decades the Fifteenth Air Force believed the 50 percent casualties its Lightning units suffered that day were all at the hands of the Luftwaffe. It was not until the early 1980s that Hatch discovered who his adversaries had really been.



Two of the main characters of June 10th 1944: 1st Lt. Herbert Brooks Hatch, Jr (USAAF), and Capt. av. Dan Valentin Vizanty (RRAF).

→

Next page: Romanian IAR-81C fighters of the 6th Fighter Group, on June 10, 1944.



Pilots of the 6th Fighter Group scramble to their IAR-81C fighters at the sound of the alarm. (Dan Melinte)



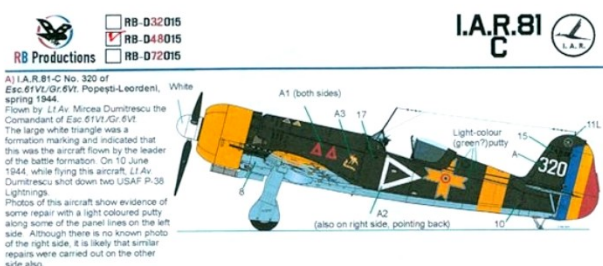
IAR-81C no. 369, flown by Lt Av Limburg Nicolae "General." (Photo Mihai Andrei collection)



From Azur 1/32 IAR-81C box-art depicting IAR-81C no. 320 flown by Sgt. Av. Mircea Dumitrescu, commander of Escadrilla 61/Grupul 6 Vanatoare (61st Fighter Squadron/6th Fighter Group) damaging a 15th AF P-38J on 10 June 1944. Dumitrescu shot down two P-38s that day. I could not find a reference for the Black 3 P-38J on the box, but Black 5 (43-28650) is well documented, a/c belonging to Lt. Philip E. Tovrea, 27th FS, 1st FG, based at Sasola/Foggia, Italy, June 1944.



IBG Models IAR-81C 'Great Air Battles of 1944' box-art depicting IAR-81C no. 320 flown by Sgt. Av. Mircea Dumitrescu, commander of Escadrilla 61/Grupul 6 Vanatoare (61st Fighter Squadron/6th Fighter Group) damaging a 15th AF P-38J on 10 June 1944. Dumitrescu shot down two P-38s that day, and the one on the box-art is P-38J-15-LO "Billy Boy" (43-28778) was a P-38 Lightning aircraft flown by Lt. Col. Ben A. Mason, the deputy commander of the 82nd Fighter Group. This particular aircraft was associated with the 97th Fighter Squadron, 82nd Fighter Group, and 306th Fighter Wing. Col. Mason escaped the encounter, becoming group commander in August 1944. Note that IBG's box-art is incorrect depicting the IAR-81C's white wingtips, they would have been the same dark olive colour, as the rest of the upper surfaces.



Summer Days: Oher USAAF Missions to Romania in 1944

7 May 1944: Lockheed P-38J 42-104107 "JEWBOY" of 49th FS, 14th FG over Romania

On 15 April 1944 2nd Lt. Philip M. Goldstein gets assigned to Lockheed P-38J-15-LO 42-104107 Lightning (Numbered black 47 with small 07 on nose, named "JEWBOY"), on the day of an escort mission to Bucharest (though other listed sources already list Goldstein as the pilot of 42-104107 on 2 April 1944). Then, on 7 May 1944 he and the 14th FG execute a bomber escort mission to Bucharest (15th Air Force's third consecutive bombing raid to Romania, in three days):

- 75 Romanian (1st, 2nd, and 6th Fighter Groups) and 64 German fighters counter 500 B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers, escorted by 200 P-38 and P-51 fighters, of 15th AF;
- targets included Chitila, Grivita, Giulesti, Gara de Nord, also Bucharest city center; Romanian civilian casualties: 411 dead, and 920 wounded, largest number to date;
- Romanian fighter units involved: 1st, 2nd, and 6th Fighter Groups (Grupul 1, 2 and 6 Vanatoare);
- Goldstein claims one victory (Fiat G50 claimed - probably wrong designation, either IAR-80/81 or FW-190); US airmen claim 18 aerial victories, much more than the actual Romanian-German losses - Romanians had a few damaged IAR-80/81 and Germans lost one FW-190 (Richard Grafmueller);
- Earvie T. Cloyd 2nd Lt. 0-750541 of 37th FS, 14th FG gets shot down and taken POW (friend of Goldstein's, freed in September 1944, during Operation Reunion);

Goldstein completed his 50th and last mission on 28 June 1944, and was sent home on 9 July 1944. He finished the war with three victories: a Bf-109 downed on 25 May 1944 over Steyr, Austria, the so-claimed Fiat G50 shot down over Bucharest, Romania on 7 May, and a FW-190 shot down over Piacenza, Italy, on 25 May 1944. On 31 July 1944, at the Group's base at Triolo, Italy, 42-104107 is destroyed by Kenneth R. Warren 2nd Lt. 0-763014, with no injury to pilot. That was a landing accident. 14th FG missions to Romania: total 9 missions between April and July 1944.

- 15 April 1944 - Bucharest - Escort B-24s to Bucharest, Romania
- 21 April 1944 - Bucharest - B-24 & B-17 Target Cover over Bucharest, Romania
- 05 May 1944 - Ploesti - Bomber Escort to Ploesti, Romania
- 07 May 1944 - Bucharest - Escort B-17s - 55th BW & B-24s - 47th, 55th & 304th BWs to Bucharest, Romania
- 15 May 1944 - Bucharest - Bomber escort to Bucharest, Romania
- 18 May 1944 - Ploesti - Escort & Top cover to Ploesti, Romania
- 05 June 1944 - Ploesti - Escort B-24s of the 47th, 49th & 55th BWs to Ploesti, Romania
- 22 June 1944 - Zilistea - Strafing Mission to Zilistea aerodrome, Romania
- 03 July 1944 - Arad - Escort B-17s of the 5th Bombardment Wing to Arad, Romania



2nd Lt. Philip Goldstein and Lockheed P-38J 42-104107 "JEWBOY", of 49th FS, 14th FG

23 June 1944: back to Ploiesti

450 US bombers take off with targets: Ploiesti - Societatea Romano-Americana and Dacia refineries (B-17 Flying Fortresses), and Giurgiu - harbour and oil pipeline installations (B-24 Liberators of multiple groups, including 485th BG). Results were mixed due to poor visibility. Ten USAAF bombers lost over both Ploiesti and Giurgiu. Romanian defenders were 1st, 6th, 7th, and 9th Figyhter Groups, that had to face a USAAF advance party made up of Mustangs, meant to strafe and saw chaos among the Royal Romanian Air Force. 1st Fighter Group lost their commander, Capt. Cdr. Ioan Sandu, shot down by USAAF north of Bucharest (pilot and wreck - IAR-80 serial 170 - found at Stefanesti, Jud. Ilfov). 7th Fighter Group also lost their commander, Capt. Av. Virgil Trandafirescu (Bf-109G), he led 11 Bf-109s off Boteni airfield, with heavy USAAF contact just north of Bucharest; Capt. Trandafirescu being shot down over Magurele, Jud. Ilfov. 31st FG claimed eight victories, one for Voll - his first victory. Possible IAR-80/81 or FW-190F, reference [1] says: "The Fw 190F of 4./SG 2 and II./SG 10 took the hardest punishment. 4./SG 10 lost three pilots (including the Staffelfkapitän and ground-attack veteran, Knights Cross holder Hauptmann Günther Müller, who was killed in the Fw 190 F-8 white 13 on his 900th combat sortie). 4./SG 10 recorded four Fw 190 F-8 shot down with two pilots killed and one wounded. 31FG Lt. John J. Voll, who eventually would become the top scorer in the Fifteenth Air Force, scored his first victory (of 21 by the end of the war) with one of these Fw 190s, Rupert Weninger was shot down and killed by Mustangs on 24 June; four days later, Erich Gehring and Willi Dreyer were shot down and wounded.)" - though, from reference [2] (Luftwaffe records) we know II./SG 10 (moved to

Bobruisk on 23 June 1944, though Hauptmann Muller of 4./SG 2 was indeed shot down over Ploiesti, and buried in Bucharest [3].

28 June 1944: 485th Bombardment Group goes to Bucharest

Target: Romania, Bucharest – Titan-Malaxa oil refinery, Mogosoaia oil depots, and adjacent buildings, railroad junctions, Chitila railroad depot, large number of bombs dropped over the city centre, over civilian neighbourhoods. Among other USAAF bombing groups, 485th BG suffered the worst losses, being escorted by 325th FG (“Checkertail Clan”) with aerial battles S/SW of Bucharest, between USAAF and RRAF and Luftwaffe

Royal Romanian Air Force (RRAF)’s 1st Fighter Group scrambled its 17 IAR-80/81 and intercepted a bomber formation and attacked it, while trying to avoid the escorting Mustangs. Three B-24s and B-17s were claimed shot down by RRAF pilots: one B-24 shot down by Capt. Constantin Georgescu, another by adj. Virgil Anghelescu, with the B-17 being claimed shot down by Slt. Av. Petre Mihailescu. Also, adj. av. Sava Zisu claimed a P-51, which remains probable to this day. This is the only case when a IAR-80 pilot claimed a Mustang (though US records don’t show any loss on that day). USAAF records confirm the loss of three B-24s, all belonging to the 485th BG that (at least one) fell in the vicinity of Vlasca County:

- B-24G 42-78147 “Nudist Kay” of 830th BS of Lt. Ivan Tyler, 7 KIA (crashed in Vlasca County, near Talpa Vlascoveni; two of the three survivors were picked up by av. Nicolae Ianculescu, and were sent to Bucharest, the third one being arrested by the Romanian Gendarmerie, and sent to the Romanian Army General Staff HQ);
- B-24G code BX 42-78122 of 831st BS of Lt. Robert F. Sloan with 2 men seen bailing out, 1 chute opened. w/Lt. E. A. LaMar; Romanian records indicate no survivors, with eight airmen buried in the Epuresti cemetery;
- B-24H code RJ 42-52701 “Miss Yankee Rebel” of 828th BS of Lt. Crouchley – eventually crash landed near Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 1 KIA (Lt. Crouchley), and 9 POW.

The Romanian 1st Fighter Group lost Cpt. Av. Parsifal Stefanescu (IAR-81C tail serial 228) and adj. Av. Gheorge Prasinopol (IAR-81C tail serial 359), both being shot down in a dogfight with 325th FG’s Lts Barrie Davis and Wayne Lowry (who had shot down Lt. Ion Dobran on May 6), both USAAF airmen claiming the victories as Focke Wulf 190s, a common misidentification for the Romanian IAR-80/81.

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