

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 August 23, 1944, and took place between August 27 and 30, 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 Savoia Marchetti JRS-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 in the evening of August 27, 1944.

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. Cantacuzino: FUNNEL
- Lt. Col. William A. Daniels: NORMAL
- Lt. Walter J. Goehausen: HOMEMADE
- Lt. Bohn CHEERUP (not confirmed by some accounts, including that of Lt. Goehausen)

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

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 – Aleea Modrogan no. 5, building owned by Dumitru Bragadiru

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).