

# DITCHING THE B-24

1. On April 29, 1944, Lieutenant Milt Munson of the 758th Squadron ditched his B-24G, The Stork Club, in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. On a mission to Toulon, France, Munson's Number One and Number Two engines were inadvertently shot out by friendly fire from another plane in the 459th's formation as the group approached the target. Losing altitude at about 250 feet per minute and flying in a 15 degree bank because of the asymmetric thrust developed by having both engines out on the left side of the airplane, Munson cut all power a couple of hundred feet above the water and made the ditching deadstick in relatively calm seas.

The aircraft survived the ditching pretty much intact and stayed afloat about ten minutes. With only two relatively minor injuries, the crew exited the plane and inflated and boarded the two life rafts. All ten men were picked up by Air-Sea Rescue three hours later.

*“a piece the size of a baseball [that] went in just above the nose wheel door, traveling in an upward direction toward the copilot’s or pilot’s position, but it hit an amplidyne unit and was deflected out the other side of the ship.”*

Bob Hill’s diary relates:

*“...nothing unusual happened until we were over the target and [then] all hell broke loose. Evidently they had our range perfect because for three minutes we were plastered with flak. I think they gave us four real close bursts because I felt the surges as they exploded. I heard flak ripping through the skin. The bombs were good and hit right across the dock area. After breaking out over the sea, we had a gas leak in the #3 cell where flak went right through the wing. We headed for Corsica until we found we had enough gas to get home. Feathered #3 engine of course. When we counted them up, we had 32 holes in the ship. If I had been in the nose, I wouldn’t be here to write this as a big piece went up through my area and out the top....Our flight was the only one hit.”*

Lieutenant John Zimmer and his crew of the 758th Squadron were in that flight and the flak really nailed them. With Number Two engine smoking badly, they left the formation and headed for an emergency landing at Naples. Zimmer seemed to have his ship under control, but just as he was about to set it down, fire broke out aboard the plane and it exploded, killing everyone aboard. Said Bob Hill in his

diary that night, “[John Zimmer], A. D. Jones, copilot, Blair, navigator, Chalmers, bombardier, were killed at Naples in a crash landing. I rode mission to Turin [three days earlier] with them. All swell guys! McCormick had a forced landing at Naples [also], but is OK. I’m really scared after today as are most of the boys who flew.” Another of the 459th’s original crew complement was gone, along with more of the group’s aircraft.

Navigator Hill was justifiably frightened that Friday morning over Porto San Stefano, but he would have been much more so had he any inkling of what was in store for him a short 24 hours later. The assignment on Saturday, April 29, was to destroy a munitions works at Toulon, France; Group Operations Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Lively, was leading the 459th. Awakened at 0500 for an 0600 briefing, the air crews were treated to powdered eggs, sausage, and oatmeal for breakfast. Takeoffs began shortly before 0830, and the assembled formation of thirty aircraft left the area of Giulia Field at 0920. It was the 459th’s first raid on a French target, and the longest mission it had yet staged — close to 1,200 miles round-trip, almost all of them over water.

Things went well. The formation was on time and on course as it crossed the Italian peninsula and headed over the Tyrrhenian Sea and across the island of Corsica; it remained so as it crossed the open Mediterranean and eventually approached the French coast. Enemy fighters appeared, but were neither numerous nor aggressive, harassed as they were by a large number of

B-38s escorting the bombers. The entire Toulon area was covered by a smoke screen intended to obscure the bombardiers' view of potential targets. Flak was intense during the bomb run and became very accurate as

well; a number of shrapnel hits were scored on aircraft in the formation. But, neither the flak nor the smoke screen deterred the 459th's airmen — their loads of 1000-pound demolition bombs hit well on the munitions fac-

tory, destroying much of the facility. Following bombs away, the group rallied out of the flak and began the long journey home.

Largely unnoticed in the excitement of the flak and the bomb run was the fact that Milt Munson's 758th Squadron Liberator, The Stork Club, had fallen out of formation. Aboard was navigator Bob Hill who at that moment certainly had more reason than ever to be concerned about his safety. His diary entries tell the frightening details:

## THE AIR BATTLE OF PLOESTI

Most every air power buff knows of the August 1, 1943, Liberator raid on the oil refineries at Ploesti. It was a daring and spectacular action in which five groups of North African-based B-24s flew at extremely low level only to become sitting ducks for German anti-aircraft defenses. Predictably, losses were miserably high and out of all proportion to the damage inflicted (of 164 planes reaching the target, 41 were shot down!). But, the stage was set for the Air Battle of Ploesti which was to follow.

Ploesti's oil fields provided more than a third of Nazi Germany's vital supply of petroleum; thus the production, refining, and storage facilities there became prime targets for Fifteenth Air Force bombers. Prior to the formation of the Fifteenth with its bases in Italy, Ploesti and its environs enjoyed the comfort and security of lying beyond the reach of Allied Air Power, except for the limited effort of the August 1943 raid and one other in which 12 B-24s bombed the area on June 11, 1942. At the end of 1943 when the Fifteenth Air Force was established and made its move to bases in southern Italy, this vital facility was at last exposed to systematic Allied air attack. Recognizing their new vulnerability, the Germans buttressed Ploesti's already impressive defenses with additional and most aggressive fighter protection, a huge number of flak batteries bristling with guns and the most up-to-date fire control equipment, and the use of smoke screens and camouflage to obscure vital targets from the view of American bombardiers.

The Air Battle of Ploesti consisted of twenty daytime missions flown by the Fifteenth Air Force and four night missions flown by Royal Air Force's 205 Group (primarily Australians, New Zealanders, and South Africans). The first of these was

1944 while the war in Europe still raged, the report begins with these two paragraphs:

*"Five miles above the rolling plains of Romania was waged between 5 April and 19 August 1944 one of the decisive battles of World War II — a five-month bitterly-contested fight to eliminate Ploesti, the greatest single source of oil available to the Axis. This was a unique campaign, peculiar to the times and rendered possible by the supreme equipment and productive capacity of the United Nations, and above all by the courage and resourcefulness of a group of intrepid airmen who would not be beaten. The Battle of Ploesti was an air battle, carried on principally by huge fleets of American four-engine bombers penetrating deep inside enemy territory, bringing the attack to the heart of the German war machine and striking hard at its most vital installations.*

*During the campaign the U.S. Fifteenth Air Force based in Italy sent 5,446 bombers against Ploesti in twenty daylight missions, dropped 13,286 tons of bombs, and succeeded long before the Russian occupation of August 1944 in denying Germany a major portion of the fuel without which air forces cannot fly, modern mechanized armies are unable to move, and industry bogs down. Four of the twenty-four attacks on Ploesti were night missions, successfully executed by 229 Wellingtons, Halifaxes, and Liberators of 205 Group, RAF, which with the U.S. Fifteenth Air Force, comprises the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force. These attacks contributed substantially to the overall success of the campaign."*

The American and British attacks seriously reduced the flow of Romanian oil to the Third Reich, and a complete cutoff was

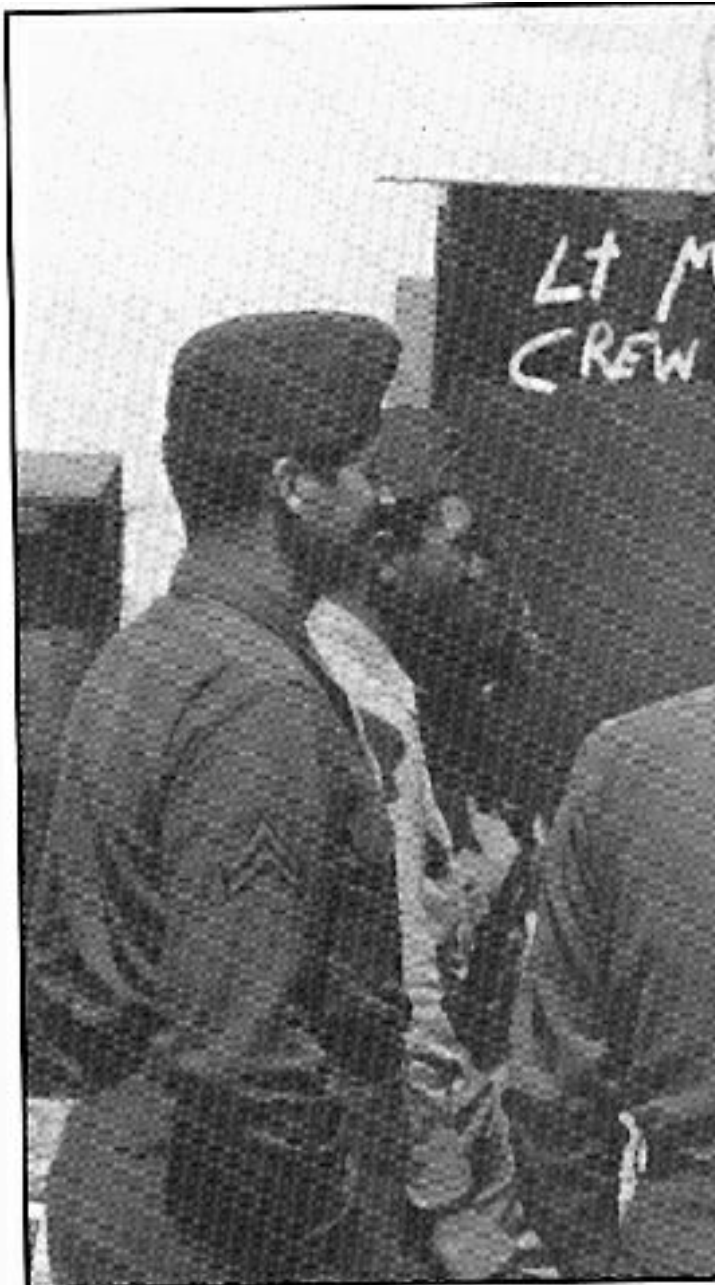
*"Toulon, France, target for today. Just as the IP a runaway gun from ball on Plemmon's ship hit our #1 and #2 engines and knocked them out. We turned and dove to 20,000 feet, then leveled off and Milt tried to hold altitude but couldn't. We knew then we would have to ditch as Corsica was 185 miles away. Harvey called Air-Sea Rescue and contacted them on D-channel VHF. Werner sent our position on Liaison [the aircraft's short wave radio transmitter] while I turned on the IFF emergency switch. We lost altitude at 250 feet a minute and the ship was flying in a 15 degree bank toward the good engines. We threw out all the loose equipment we could find. [Bob doesn't mention it, but the bombardier had salvoed the bombs as well — Munson had been forced to leave the formation prior to reaching the target. When the 50 caliber bullets hit the two engines, they destroyed the prop governors; Munson was able to feather #1, but #2 prop pitch could not be changed, so that propeller was windmilling, adding greatly to the problem of keeping the aircraft under control. Losing altitude at a rate of 200 to 300 feet per minute, Munson and Werner managed to keep their Lib in the air by together standing on their right rudder pedals.] At 800 feet, Milt cut the two engines and we were in a position to ditch. I sat on the couch with my back to the armor plate. Holden sat on my lap and held the escape hatch half open [with one hand] and [held] the life raft handle [with the other].*

*At 1247 we hit with the tail low at 100mph. In not more than two seconds, the ship was at a dead stop with the nose under water. The flight deck was flooded immediately and Holden was washed off my lap. I didn't have much of a breath so headed for the hatch right*

At 1247 we hit with the tail low at 100mph. In not more than two seconds, the ship was at a dead stop with the nose under water. The flight deck was flooded immediately and Holden was washed off my lap. I didn't have much of a breath so headed for the hatch right away. Harvey had washed out of his seat and under the hatch so he was the first one out. Then I got out fast and fell in the water. One by one, Holden, Werner, and Milt got out. All the rest got out the waist window without much trouble. Had to pull the life rafts out and splash water on the gas valves to thaw them out. The ship stayed together pretty well. The nose was pretty well smashed and the pilot's canopy crushed but everyone got out uninjured except for a cut Holden got on his head. Werner sprained a finger too, I guess. The ship floated for ten minutes so we had plenty of time to clear it. We got in the life rafts and paddled clear of the ship when it sank slowly nose first. The ship was a "G" from the 757th Squadron called the Stork Club. Some debris was left floating but the only part of the ship left [afloat] was the nose wheel which was torn out in the crash.

When we hit the water there was a terrible crash, and as the water poured in I had just about given up to the fact that I was going to die. It seemed as if the ship was sinking immediately. The sea was calm with small, gentle swells and also warm water. Harvey, Milt, myself, Whitford, and Phillips were in one raft. I kept my Mercator of the area and if help didn't arrive by morning we planned to set sail for Corsica. As it was, we could see by the sea marker we were drifting, so we used the one parachute we saved as a sea anchor. It worked swell and we sat and talked and waited. In two hours we saw a Catalina on the horizon but it turned away from us at first. When it reappeared we shot parachute flares so it could spot us. It headed straight for us and were we happy!

They circled for thirty minutes and then decided to land. We were surprised to see Army boys flying the Catalina. They were as happy about finding us as we were because it was their first rescue. We sank the rafts and three hours from the time we hit the water we were off for Ajaccio. The pilot's name was Murk, copilot Murphy, and navigator Colvin. When we got to their base, a large crowd was waiting. The OA-1A [Army designation of the PBY Catalina] is an amphibian so we rolled up on a ramp. We were taken to the infirmary where we got showers and have stayed ever since [this was written Saturday night]. Everyone from the Colonel on down came in to talk to us. We were treated like kings. Officers of the First Air-Sea Rescue Unit loaned us clothes and gave us candy, etc. [At] night we went to town with a bunch of the boys and got plenty drunk on a quart of Seagrams Seven Crown. Drinks of wine are very costly here — 90 francs (\$1.80). So ended our first day here."



*This rudimentary communication*



While Milt Munson and his crew were descending into the warm waters of the Mediterranean, the main force of the 459th was winging back to Giulia, licking its wounds all the way. Several 459th Liberators had been hit by the flak at Toulon; a couple of crews were unable to stay with the formation because they had lost one or more engines. One headed for Corsica, encountering a lone enemy fighter that was discouraged by accurate fire from the tail and ball turrets; upon reaching that island, they decided they could make it on to Naples, which they did. The other managed to drag in late to Giulia after sweating out altitude for a couple of hours and skimming over the Apennines.

And what of Munson, Hill, and friends? Well, their delay enroute at Corsica was assuming the proportions of a luxury vacation. After a night's sleep, they arose to look over the aircraft and the installations at the Air-Sea Rescue base. They visited an ancient Corsican estate with exceptional views of the island, and they inspected the mountain-top radio bearing station the British had set up. They enjoyed the food and chatted with the seaplane crews, exchanging ideas and comparing experiences. And in the evenings, they went to movies. One morning, Bob Hill and a couple of others sauntered along the beach, firing their forty-fives as they went. In the course of all this activity, they



*Milt Munson and crew survived friendly fire and sub  
are standing, second and third from left, respective*

opened their escape kits and spent the money contained in them, much of it for keepsakes and souvenirs.

But on Monday, May 1, the fun was halted by a message from 304th Wing Headquarters telling them to travel via a local C-47 to southern Sardinia where a B-24 would pick them up and return them to Giulia. Of the flight back to their home base on Tuesday, May 2, Bob had this to say:

*"We flew down [to Sardinia] and had a steak for lunch and then headed for home. Lt. Col. Lange came along to fly us back in the*

when we hit the water there was no crash, and as the water poured in I had just about given up to the fact that I was going to die. It seemed as if the ship was sinking immediately. The sea was calm with small, gentle swells and also warm water. Harvey, Milt, myself, Whitford, and Phillips were in one raft. I kept my Mercator of the area and if help didn't arrive by morning we planned to set sail for Corsica. As it was, we could see by the sea marker we were drifting, so we used the one parachute we saved as a sea anchor. It worked swell and we sat and talked and waited. In two hours we saw a Catalina on the horizon but it turned away from us at first. When it reappeared we shot parachute flares so it could spot us. It headed straight for us and were we happy!

They circled for thirty minutes and then decided to land. We were surprised to see Army boys flying the Catalina. They were as happy about finding us as we were because it was their first rescue. We sank the rafts and three hours from the time we hit the water we were off for Ajaccio. The pilot's name was Mark, copilot Murphy, and navigator Colvin. When we got to their base, a large crowd was waiting. The OA-1A [Army designation of the PBV Catalina] is an amphibian so we rolled up on a ramp. We were taken to the infirmary where we got showers and have stayed ever since [this was written Saturday night]. Everyone from the Colonel on down came in to talk to us. We were treated like kings. Officers of the First Air-Sea Rescue Unit loaned us clothes and gave us candy, etc. [At] night we went to town with a bunch of the boys and got plenty drunk on a quart of Seagrams Seven Crown. Drinks of wine are very costly here — 90 francs [/\$1.80]. So ended our first day here."

While Milt Munson and his crew were descending into the warm waters of the Mediterranean, the main force of the 459th was winging back to Giulia, licking its wounds all the way. Several 459th Liberators had been hit by the flak at Toulon; a couple of crews were unable to stay with the formation because they had lost one or more engines. One headed for Corsica, encountering a lone enemy fighter that was discouraged by accurate fire from the tail and ball turrets; upon reaching that island, they decided they could make it on to Naples, which they did. The other managed to drag in late to Giulia after sweating out altitude for a couple of hours and skimming over the Apennines.

And what of Munson, Hill, and friends? Well, their delay enroute at Corsica was assuring the proportions of a luxury vacation. After a night's sleep, they arose to look over the aircraft and the installations at the Air-Sea Rescue base. They visited an ancient Corsican estate with exceptional views of the island, and they inspected the mountain-top radio bearing station the British had set up. They enjoyed the food and chatted with the seaplane crews, exchanging ideas and comparing experiences. And in the evenings, they went to movies. One morning, Bob Hill and a couple of others sauntered along the beach, firing their forty-fives as