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WEEKEND JULY 23, 2023 LEADER & TIMES

From Plains to Ploesti A HERO COMES HOME 80 years after battling Nazi Germany

This B24 Liberator known as "The Sandman" was photographed after dropping its payload of bombs on the oil fields of Ploesti, Romania, on Aug. 1, 1943 during Operation Tidal Wave. Another B24 in that raid, The Delfino, was one of 53 Liberators that were destroyed in the raid, and among the 310 aircrew killed was Plains native Sgt. Robert Elliott. His remains were recently identified and are being returned to finally rest in the cemetery in Plains. Courtesy photo



Elliott to reach final resting place after making the ultimate sacrifice for freedom 80 years ago

Operation Tidal Wave was designed to turn the tide of World War II Aug. 1, 1943, when 177 B-24 Liberators headed to Ploesti, Romania, to bomb the oil refineries that were fueling Adolf Hitler's war in Europe.

Fifty-three of those Liberators never made it home, and many of the 310 airmen lost that day were first listed as missing in action and eventually as killed in action.

One of the missing airmen was Staff Sergeant Robert C. Elliott who had already tempted fate by surviving 15 air missions.

According to Mid-America Air Museum Director Bob Immel, most planes only lasted eight missions.

"They didn't anticipate any of the crew members to survive 15 missions before they were killed in action, crashed or captured as a POW," Immel said. "That is what they anticipated — A lot of hardship."

From the heights of the flight with temperatures well below zero to skimming the top of the ocean to avoid radar detection, the B-24s made their way from Libya to Romania Aug. 1, 1943.

The 24-year-old Elliott was in his third year of service to his country in 1943 after being trained for combat in Louisiana. Elliott came from the flat lands of Western Kansas where he grew up with his family in Plains before enlisting in the military and taking to the skies over Europe.

Operation Tidal Wave was the name given to the massive attack in 1943, and unlike many sorties flown at high altitude, this devastating blow came from planes hovering just above the smokestacks of the refineries, making themselves vulnerable to anti-aircraft attacks.

The overall effectiveness of Tidal Wave was mixed. While heavy damage was inflicted on the refineries, fuel continued to flow to Germany's war machines,

◆ See ELLIOTT/Page 3

By **EARL WATT**
• Leader & Times



This B24 Liberator Damfino, also known as "Four Eyes," was crewed by Navigator, William R. DeBusk, Robert C. Elliott (front row right corner), Gunner Zelwood A. Gravlin, Pilot Lawrence J. Hadcock, Engineer James B. Hale, Gunner Ralph D. Kolb, Co-Pilot John E. Kraft, Gunner Eugene J. O'Mara, Radio Operator Lawrence E. Reitz and Bombardier Peter A. Timpo. Courtesy photo

A DECORATED PATRIOT Honors earned by Sgt. Elliott

Distinguished
Flying Cross



Air
Medal

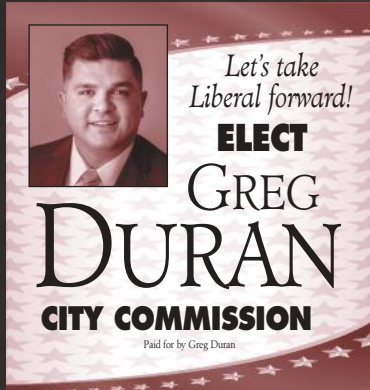


Purple
Heart



HOMEcoming

10 a.m. Tuesday, Aug. 1
Plains Cemetery



Staff Sergeant Robert C. Elliott was 24 years old when he lost his life during a bombing raid over Ploesti, Romania, Aug. 1, 1943. He and the 10-man crew were lost to history until a recent DNA test identified his remains, and 80 years after making the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, Elliott is coming home. Courtesy photo



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AUTO • HOME • LIFE



Operation Tidal Wave most costly attack in World War II

ELLY GRIMM
• Leader & Times

World War II was filled with many battles throughout the entire world, with many injuries and casualties being recorded.

A particular battle that helped turn the tide of the war was the Ploesti Raid in 1943, also known as Operation Tidal Wave.

"The great oil refineries in Ploesti, Romania were never far from the thoughts of the men who planned the American bombing campaign. Producing one-third of the Germans' fuel, the Romanian city seemed to the American planners the perfect place to throw a monkey wrench into Hitler's war machine," a reference pamphlet noted. "Ploesti had been the target of the first U.S. strategic raid on Europe in June of 1942. Although the dozen B-24s did little harm to the refineries, they at least had the range to reach them. This lesson was not lost on the Germans. They set out to turn Ploesti into the most heavily defended city in all of Europe. By Aug. 1, 1943, as many fires still smoldered within the city of Hamburg, the stage was set for one of the classic battles of WWII. A powerful, well-trained American striking force, equipped with a daring plan of attack, was poised on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Almost 1,200 miles away, the skillful, well-trained defenders of Ploesti were in a high state of readiness."

As the reference pamphlet tells it, plans for the raid had been in the works for a long time.

"Planning for the Ploesti raid, code-named Operation Tidal Wave, began in early 1943. It would have to be launched from somewhere in the Mediterranean area, for the refineries were beyond the reach of bombers flying from England," the reference pamphlet noted. "When the Germans were finally thrown out North Africa that spring, air bases became available at Benghazi, in the part of Libya bulging out into the Mediterranean Sea almost due south of Ploesti. Half the route from Benghazi lay over water, the other half over the lightly defended Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Getting to the target, it was thought, should not be difficult."

Still, however, there were many factors to take into account, the pamphlet noted.

"More than nine tons of gasoline were needed by each Liberator to deliver two tons of bombs to



This painting immortalizes Operation Tidal Wave on Aug. 1, 1943, when 177 B-24s bombed the Nazi-controlled oil refinery in Ploesti, Romania. One of the lost airmen was Robert Elliott who was recently identified and will return to Plains for burial. Courtesy artwork

Ploesti and return. Since fewer than 200 B-24s were available, it was unlikely the usual high-altitude approach could place enough of the limited bomb load on the refineries to wipe them out," the reference pamphlet noted. "Finally, 1,150 miles was a long way to fly without detection; swarms of fighters would surely be waiting at the target."

With all of that in mind, there was much to be planned.

"The operation's chief planner, Col. Jacob Smart, came up with an ingenious solution – the B-24s would attack Ploesti at treetop level. At this height, individual refineries, even the key installations within them, could be hit with the utmost precision; every bomb would have to count," the reference pamphlet noted. "The bombers could elude the German warning radar. Enemy flak gunners would be caught by surprise and subjected to the fire of the Liberators' gunners."

Shortly after, there was much training done and many meetings in order to prepare for the offensive. Training included extensive review of detailed sand table models, practice raids over a mock-up of the target in the Libyan desert and practical exercises over a number of secondary targets in July to prove the viability of such a low-level strike.

The raid itself ultimately took place Aug. 1, 1943.

"An American strike force of 177 unescorted B-24s left the base in Benghazi for the 1,200-mile flight to their targets in Ploesti," a Wikipedia article noted. "The

formation reached the Adriatic Sea without further incident; however aircraft No. 28, *Wongo Wongo*, belonging to the 376th Bombardment Group (the lead group, about 40 B-24s) and piloted by Lt. Brian Flavelle began to fly erratically before plunging into the sea due to unknown causes. Lt. Guy Iovine descended from the formation in order to look for survivors, narrowly missing aircraft *Brewery Wagon* piloted by Lt. John Palm. No survivors were seen, and due to the additional weight of fuel, Iovine was unable to regain altitude to rejoin the formation and resume course to Ploesti. The resulting confusion was compounded by the inability to regain cohesion due to orders to maintain strict radio silence. Ten other aircrews returned to friendly air fields after the incident, and the remaining aircraft faced the 9,000 foot climb over the Pindus mountains, which were shrouded in cloud cover. Although all five groups made the climb around 11,000 feet (3,400 m), the 376th and 93rd, using high power settings, pulled ahead of the trailing formations, causing variations in speed and time which disrupted the synchronization of the group attacks deemed so important by Smart. Mission leaders deemed these concerns to be less important than maintaining security through radio silence."

The American leaders were unaware that the Germans knew of their presence, though not of their target, the Wikipedia article noted.

"Although the Americans' orders would have allowed them to break radio silence to rebuild their forma-

tions, the strike proceeded without correction, and this proved costly. Although now well strung out on approach to Pitești, all five groups made the navigational check point 65 mi from Ploesti," the Wikipedia article noted. "At Cămpina, the 389th Bomb Group departed as planned for its separate, synchronized approach to the mission target. Continuing from Pitești, Col. Keith K. Compton and Gen. Ent made a costly navigational error. At Târgoviște, halfway to the next check point at Florești, Compton followed the incorrect railway line for his turn toward Ploesti, setting his group and Lt. Col. Addison Baker's 93rd Bomb Group on a course for Bucharest. In the process, Ent and Compton went against the advice of their airplane's navigator and the Halverson Project (HALPRO) veteran Cpt. Harold Wicklund. Now facing disaster, many crews chose to break radio silence and draw attention to the navigational error."

"The 24 aircraft force from the 93rd Bombardment Group bombed the Columbia Aquila Refinery on the southwest side of the city. The 12 aircraft force bombed the Astra-Romano Refinery/Orion Refinery, on the southwest side. These were the targets assigned to the 44th and 98th groups and when they bombed them some 20 minutes later, they found themselves ablaze," a historical narrative of the 93rd Bombardment Group noted. "The Middle East Interpretation Unit interpreted reconnaissance photographs taken two days after

the mission. Their report reads 'Columbia-Aquila Refinery – Damage to the plant is so intense that almost complete rebuilding would be necessary before resuming operations. Astra Română/Orion group of refineries – damage to this group of refineries is considerable, but although production will be curtailed, it is not sufficient to cause complete stoppage after the few weeks necessary for essential repairs.' The appraisal by Col. W.L. Forster, Royal Air Force Technical Advisor to the Ninth Air Force, describes vital damage to Columbia-Aquila as follows – 'At a conservative estimate, no less than six months would be required to bring this refinery back to operating condition, and it can be taken as likely that the enemy will not attempt to repair it, on account of the immense damage done.' He describes vital damage to the Astra Română and believes the refinery,

as a whole, is, however, likely to be able to start working again fairly soon at about 50 percent of its former capacity."

The raid became so well known that in 1993, there was an exhibit shown at the Mid-America Air Museum (then called the Liberal Air Museum) to commemorate the raid's 50th anniversary. The dedication also featured an appearance from airman Dick Byers from Bella Vista, Ark.

After all the different parts of the attack, the operation was one of the costliest for the USAAF in the European Theater, with 53 aircraft and 660 air crewmen lost. It was proportionally the most costly major Allied air raid of the war, and its date was later referred to as "Black Sunday." Five Medals of Honor and 56 Distinguished Service Crosses along with numerous others awards went to Operation Tidal Wave crew members.

Elliott ...

❖ Continued from Page 1

But the sacrifice of those lost on that day was an indication and willingness of the Allies to put themselves in harm's way to bring an end to Hitler's maniacal hold on Europe.

Knowing the odds were against them didn't deter the 10-man crews to board their planes and head into the hell Hitler had created.

"I can't imagine what it would take to do that," Immel said. "They also knew if they didn't, the world wasn't going to be a nice place to live. We were going to win no matter the cost. That's what they believed, and that's what they did. Whatever it took to win, they were going to do it."

For those like Elliott who made the ultimate sacrifice, it came down to a simple choice.

"It was either kill or be killed," Immel said. "You went about it to kill them before they killed you."

Germany surrendered May 7, 1945, but many of those who made the ultimate sacrifice at Ploesti remained lost or unidentified.

But in February, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency

confirmed the remains of Elliott in the cemetery of Bolova, Romania, and at 10 a.m., Aug. 1, 1943, exactly 80 years after giving his life in the defense of freedom, Elliott will come to rest at the Plains Cemetery.

Perhaps it would have been just as easy to leave the soldiers lost to history, but the DPAA used anthropological analysis and mitochondrial DNA to make the identification in Romania, confirm the remains to be those of Elliott, and then to bring him home.

"It's amazing that they cared enough to do that," Immel said. "It's an incredibly expensive process."

But to the Romanians below, who Immel said were reported to

be waving to the American bombers making their way so close to the ground as to see those being held in the fist of Hitler, the Liberators were more than just B-24 planes. They were American soldiers fighting to free the Romanian people, and it would have been fitting for Elliott and his crew, who flew into the jaws of the most well defended spot in Europe, to have seen the desperate pleas of those seeking freedom before paying the ultimate price so they would one day be free.

Elliott's journey from Plains to Ploesti may have only taken a few years, but his return has taken eight decades to the day.

Instead of a B-24 facing enemy

fire, Elliott's trip home will be received as a hero's welcome at 10 a.m. Aug. 1 at the cemetery just a short distance from where Elliott spent his short life living in the freedom provided on the farmland of Western Kansas.



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