

*Book Review*

# The Desert Rats

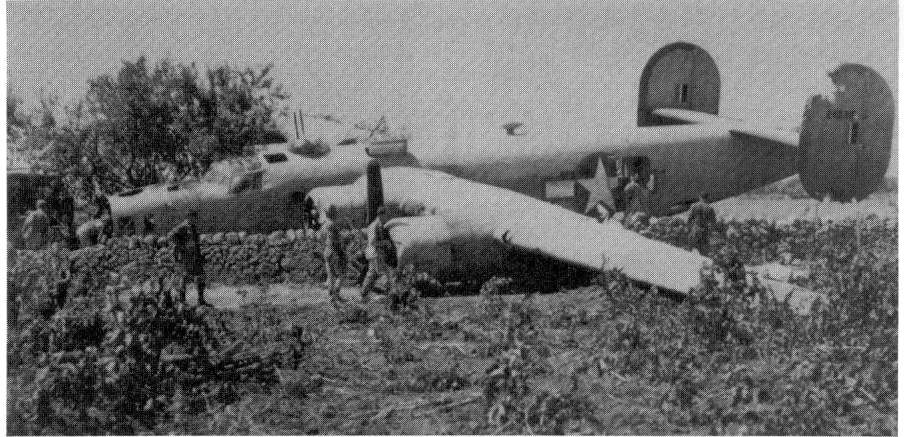
"98th Bomb Group and the August  
1943 Ploesti Raid"

*By Michael J Hill*

Pictorial Histories Publishing Co,  
Missoula, MT

Michael J Hill has put together a powerful history of the 98th Bomb Group's participation in the first low level mission of August 1, 1943. Combing through many sources he transports us back to those pre 15th Air Force days when the 9th Air Force was operating first from Ramat David in Palestine and ending up in Benina Main near Benghazi, North Africa. It was a most inhospitable place to stage a 2000 mile mission. The dust storms, the heat, and sand that seemed to get into everything as there was but meager shelter in the form of looseflapped tents. The sands were most brutal on the aircraft, especially the engines even with desert filters 60 hours was just about the maximum time one could expect before the engine had to be exchanged. There was no engine buildup facilities that existed in clean aired England with the 8th Air Force, instead bare engines were shipped 15th Air Force style. Chow didn't even come up to watery C rations reviled by so many of the 461st & 484th Bomb Groups crews at Torretta. At least the flight crews could get some relief from the oppressive weather, by flying a mission in the cold air of altitude, but the ground crews had to suffer through the whole time the 98th was based in North Africa.

In 1943 it was still true that an army moves on its stomach, but much of WWII armies also moved on petroleum as well. It



*Snake Eyes bent and battered, but safe in Sicily.*

was believed that if Ploesti refineries could be knocked out of action, the war could be shortened by six months. As a result of the Casablanca meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill the destruction of Ploesti was assigned to the 9th Air Force. After considering conventional daylight bombing from high altitude, the mission planners realized that it would take 1370 bomber sorties to insure that every structure was hit at least twice, and would take from four to six weeks to accomplish. Even if it was possible to assemble a large force, time was not on the side of the Allies. The most planes that could be mustered was about 200. The low level mission was proposed for several reasons, wastage of misdirected bombs would be reduced, German defenses could be defeated by flying under the radar screen, fuel burn out would be less, which was important for such a long range mission where flight time could reach 15 hours. A 400 gallon bomb bay tank brought the tankage up 3150 gallons. The plane selected for the mission was the B-24D, most were the light weight model (no ball turret) as it had the greatest range of American aircraft.

Hill's book is written in a tight 'you are there' style that brings the reader into the action that has been reconstructed in great detail as shown below from one excerpt.

"The second wave stared at the on-rushing complex. Ted Helin's Boilermaker II, on the far right, was in deep trouble. They had been hit and were on fire. Raymond Hubbard delivered the bombs into a cracking plant. Helin pulled the nose of Boilermaker II up just in time to miss a chimney. Ray Walaska threw his incendiaries into the smoke, and remembered it as a "wild ride." Harry Opp climbed down from the turret to yell into the pilot's ear. It was the only way

he could communicate with them since the intercom had been shot out. "We were hit bad. The bomb bay was full of smoke, then I saw fire come out of the wing tanks, #3 on fire and another vibrating like heck. I knew we weren't going to make it. If we stayed in the air we would have lost a wing."

Helin and co-pilot Charles Smith were literally flying for life. Boilermaker II had one good engine, no nosewheel, and little aileron control. They were still burning, but no longer carried the lethal tanks in the bomb bay. Harry Opp recalled what happened next. "We were about six or seven miles from the target. Happened to get a big enough cornfield and he (Helin) did a hell of a job sitting her down, just like a crate of eggs." Boilermaker II slid to a stop with her tail high in the air. The crew scrambled out. Ray Walaska dropped from the rear escape hatch and sprained his ankle. He remembered thinking, "I won't be playing much ball anymore." All who had watched the last few moments of Boilermaker's flight agreed that it would be a miracle if anyone got out alive. Pilot Ted Helin and Charles Smith had produced exactly that, a miracle. The entire crew escaped with minor injuries. They split up, the men in the nose going one way, the men from the tail going another. Just as they had agreed before take-off, it was every man for himself.

The air campaign against the oil fields including Ploesti cost the Air Force 286 aircraft lost, and 2829 crewmen killed or wounded. The low level mission of August 1, 1943 was the most cost effective in terms of destruction for the number of planes in the attack force.

Air Force veterans of World War Two will find much to identify with in this book.

The End