

LIGHTNINGS OVER PLOESTI

THE LITTLE-KNOWN STORY OF HOW LOCKHEED P-38 FIGHTERS DEPLOYED AS DIVE-BOMBERS AND ATTEMPTED TO DESTROY GERMANY'S VITAL OIL REFINERIES - PART ONE
BY STEVE BLAKE

Superb portrait of Lockheed P-38J-15-LO 43-28650 at altitude. The fighter was assigned to the 27th Fighter Squadron on 22 May 1944 and almost certainly flew the Ploesti mission three weeks later, although it is not known by whom. The P-38 was assigned to squadron commander Capt. Thomas F. Rafael but he did not fly the Ploesti mission. Serial 43-28650 was destroyed in a crash on 10 January 1945 that killed pilot Lt. Lavon O. Taylor.

The 82nd FG's CO, Lt. Col. Bill Linton (on the left), 15th AF Commander Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, and Maj. Herb Phillips, CO of the 95th FS, confer at the 82nd's base at Vincenzo during July 1944. Linton had led the group and Phillips his squadron on the 10 June Ploesti dive-bombing mission. Linton was also the overall mission commander. Linton was killed in the crash of an F-86 Sabre during the Korean War.



On the morning of 1 August 1943, 178 USAAF Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers took off from Benghazi, Libya, North Africa, to attack the oil refineries outside Ploiești (spelled Ploesti in English and pronounced plo-yesht), Romania, 700 miles to the north. The mission was called Operation *Tidal Wave*. This was a very unusual (for B-24s) low-level mission, the hope being that they could thereby achieve surprise and do a lot of damage to the refineries before the defenses were fully ready for them.

Twelve hours later, only 124 had landed back at Allied airfields, most of the missing Liberators having fallen victim to those defenses: Numerous anti-aircraft (AA) gun batteries and German and Romanian fighters. Of the

54 lost, 41 were the victims of direct enemy action. Fifty-five of the aircraft that did return had significant damage. Although significant damage had also been done to some of the refineries, the cost in men and aircraft was prohibitive — and full production was resumed within a few weeks.

The refineries had previously been bombed by the Russians in 1941, and on 12 June 1942 the USAAF made another raid on one of the refineries by a dozen B-24s, but *Tidal Wave* was the beginning of its reputation as Fortress Ploesti, reportedly the third most heavily defended aerial target in Europe. (Leon Wolff, first in a TV documentary and then in his book *Low Level Mission*, published in 1957, was the first historian to really shine a

spotlight on this infamous mission.)

Other than the obvious mistake of utilizing lumbering four-engine bombers at low altitude, another lesson learned from *Tidal Wave* was the inherent risk of sending them off to attack such well defended targets without fighter escort. In the case of Ploesti, the USAAF would not make that mistake again. It would be eight months before it made another attack on the refineries — this time from high altitude and with adequate fighter support.

The 13 oil refineries surrounding Ploesti provided Nazi Germany with more than a third of its petroleum needs, including the highest-quality 90-octane aviation fuel in Europe. Hence their importance as targets



Along with this illustration of a 15th AF shoulder patch, we just could not help but include this wonderful patriotic WWII photo of USAAF WACs receiving their new patches. The image captures the infectious spirit of the American fighting man and woman.