

Story of Lt Vernon Green-Navigator and

LT Tom Kennedy- Pilot 757 BS

Tom Kennedy and his crew squeaked through one of those narrow escapes on Tuesday, April 4, 1944. The group's assigned target was the marshalling yards and railway facilities in Bucharest, Romania — "a political raid," according to Leo Fletcher, referring to the fact that strikes in this area would ease the fighting for the Russian forces moving in on the Nazis from the east. Major Harrison Christy was the group leader, and the mission was pretty much of a long haul, Bucharest being located east of the 26th line of east longitude. Prior to reaching the target, one 459th plane and crew were lost about 50 miles east of Budapest when Lieutenant Peter Plum dropped out of formation with one of his engines smoking badly. Returning crews reported one parachute, but the actual crash of the plane was not observed; the crew wound up listed as Missing in Action.

Despite this incident and the presence of numerous German fighters in the skies over Romania, Kennedy's navigator, Vernon Green, called the mission a routine flight — until they approached the IP. Green's words describe what happened next:

"...approaching the IP...we were hit head on by about eighteen Me-109s. On their first pass we took a hit on the propeller hub of number two engine. The governor was destroyed and the engine ran away. The increased drag caused us to lose speed and altitude, and we dropped down and back of our formation.

Since we couldn't stay with the formation we turned inside to stay in the general path of the formation. Pete Rebich, the bombardier, picked a target of opportunity, a large anti-aircraft battery inside a stadium. I think every Me-109 that made a pass at the formation took a crack at us. The nose gunner and/or the top turret gunner got credit for shooting down one of them.

Just before we dropped our bombs on the anti-aircraft battery, two Me-109s came in on our tail and nailed us good. They destroyed or partially destroyed the elevator, right rudder, right aileron, tail turret, and God knows what else. Kennedy had just called Sergeant Lawson, the top turret gunner and engineer, down from the top turret as he needed that little screw-driver Lawson always carried to increase the turbo boost. One bullet came through the top turret right where Lawson's head had been, then through the instrument panel between Kennedy and Huettig, the copilot. The same bullet passed through the right side of my flak suit and hit bombardier Rebich in the middle of the back. The force of the bullet knocked him forward, but he got up and continued the bomb run and scored a direct hit on the gun battery. The back of his flak suit looked like a big blossom — splintered steel was sticking up all over. Thank God for flak suits!

Meanwhile, the tail turret gunner, Sergeant Bill Lewis, shot down the first Me-109 (to attack us from the rear), but the second one put several 20mm shells directly into the tail turret at very close range. The concussion inside the turret blew the back of the turret out and blew the turret doors open. Lewis was blown out of the turret, down the catwalk, and into the waist gunner's position — knocked out cold, but otherwise unhurt. During this attack from the rear, the right waist gunner, Sergeant Vader, was wounded in the hand; shortly after I proceeded to the waist compartment, but by the time I got there the wound had sulfa applied and the hand was bandaged.

By this time, we had left the target area and were headed for home. We were almost defenseless. All turrets were shot out, but the waist guns were still operative. A twin-engined Me-110 came up on our left side and kept trying to turn in on us. He was quite a ways out, and accurate fire from the left waist gunner, Sergeant Ruhl, seemed to keep him at bay. Finally there was a flash of fire from his right wing, the wing blew off, and he spun in. Apparently he was carrying rockets and Ruhl scored a hit.

Back to the navigator's compartment. By this time we were sitting ducks, and Tom Kennedy was on the horn trying to get some fighter cover. Then, lo and behold! — three B-24s from another formation dropped down and flew on our wing until we were close to Yugoslavia. I can't remember the bomb group or the names of the pilots, but I heard they deservedly received Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Now we were on our own. Our damaged prop had long since frozen, and our fuel was running low. Tom had us in a gradual descent in order to conserve fuel. When we reached the Adriatic, he had us throw everything loose — and everything we could get loose — overboard to lighten the load. So out went guns, flak suits, ammo, etc.

Tom continued to descend since it was marginal whether we could reach Bari [Italy], the closest field, with the fuel remaining. As we approached Bari, T/Sergeant Beardslee, the radio operator and ball turret gunner, got us an accurate direction finding steer to [the field there]. In sight of Bari, we could not contact the tower with the pilot's command set radio,

so we came in through the barrage balloons protecting the harbor. Our approach was downwind into an oncoming C-47 on final. We knew we had to land as it was doubtful we had enough fuel to go around.

Close to landing, Tom tried to get the gear and flaps down, but to no avail, so we prepared for a wheels-up landing. We all got in crash landing positions and slid in in a cloud of dust. After we came to a stop, we all evacuated through our assigned escape hatches. It seemed to take forever for the guy ahead of you to get out, but observers at the field said it looked like we were tied together!

When we got into the operations building in Bari, we noticed Pete Rebich, the bombardier was limping. He took off his flying boot, and there in the bottom of it was the bullet that hit him in the back. He had a black and blue spot as big as a bowling ball in the middle of his back.

The B-24 we crash landed was a total loss. The frozen prop flew off when we landed. I think Tom feathered the others before we hit the ground. All of our tires had bullet holes in them. The hydraulic lines were shot out — luckily missing the fuel lines. All of the turrets had bullet holes in them or were inoperative. The nose gunner, Sergeant Noah Fryer, had helped man the waist guns after his turret went out. Of course, the tail turret was a complete mess.

...in the inspection following the belly landing, the maintenance people counted 389 holes in various parts of the aircraft. Three were big enough to crawl through. When the gas tanks were drained the total fuel remaining was 24 gallons.

We were back at the 459th at Giulia in a couple of days, but didn't fly again until April 15th. Guess where? Bucharest! At least it wasn't on 4/4/44."