



## Tidal Wave Recollections

Digital illustration  
by Mark Riley

James McClain

### “WRONG TURN! BOB! WRONG TURN!”

It was John Tucholski, radio operator on our crew of the 389th Bomb Group (389BG), imitating my frantic shouts to pilot Bob Wright on the bomb run to destroy the Steaua Romana oil refinery at Campina, Romania on August 1, 1943.

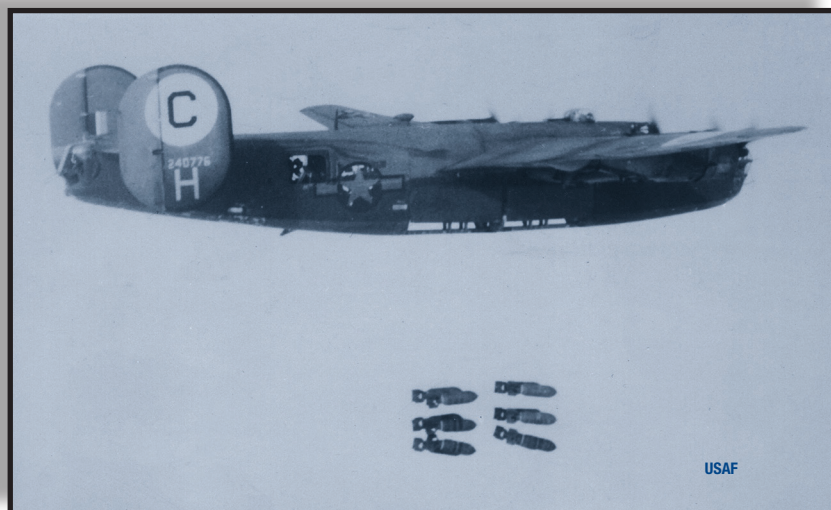
Now almost 54 years later, we were checking in for the 389BG 1997 Reunion. The voice was immediately recognizable, and the incident being recalled was unforgettable: Operation Tidal Wave.

Tidal Wave was the code name for the joint Eighth Air Force/Ninth Air Force mission to destroy Germany's main source of fuel for its military forces, the refinery complex in and around Ploesti, Romania. This raid has been described by many writers as the most daring attack of the war by the Army Air Forces. Five Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded to participants in the raid, three of them posthumously, making it the most highly decorated military mission in U.S. history. I

was a navigator on a combat crew of the 389BG that participated in this undertaking.

The Eighth Air Force, based in England, dispatched its three B-24 BGs—the 44th, 93rd, and 389th—to Bengasi, Libya, on detached service to the Ninth Air Force based in Cairo. The Ninth Air Force put up its two B-24 groups, the 98th and 376th—also based at Bengasi—for Tidal Wave. In total, approximately 180 B-24 Liberator bombers would be available for the operation.

The three Eighth AF Bomber Command Groups sent to the Middle East were designated the 201st Provisional Combat Wing, under the command of Col E.J. “Ted” Timberlake, former 93BG Commanding Officer. The 389BG was the neophyte group of the three, having just begun arriving in mid-June 1943 to its new home, RAF Hethel near Norwich in East Anglia. The air crews had flown over with only a skeleton group of ground personnel as the great bulk of the ground staff were still at sea. Although the 389BG had not yet flown a combat mission, it had already suffered its first casualties, the result of a two-bomber collision while practicing low-level formation flying. (Rumor was we would be doing dam-busting missions, ala the British RAF.)



This photo of *Old Blister Butt* was taken later in 1943, after the Ploesti Raid.

But then, on July 1, we were on our way to Africa. After an overnight stop at Port Reath in southwest England for refueling, briefing, and equipment checking, we departed the next morning for Africa in formation flights of three B-24s. Our Flight was the same three crews that had flown together since February 1943, during First Phase Combat Training at Davis-Monthan Army Air Field, Tucson, Arizona, so we were comfortable doing this. Low cloud conditions required flying at only 1,000 feet or so—not so comfortable in the event of trouble, such as the anti-aircraft fire bursting around us as we passed through the straits of Gibraltar. We ducked even lower and all three B-24s got through okay. We never did determine the source of the flak, but we'd had our first sip of air warfare.



That evening we landed at a French air base at Oran, Algeria. The next morning the weather was bright and clear—and hot and turbulent. Fortunately there was no need to maintain formation. The desert terrain en route was littered with remnants of the recent warfare: burned out tanks and trucks, aircraft, and military debris of all sorts, mile after mile.

We arrived late afternoon on Saturday, July 3 at Berka 4, the piece of the Sahara desert scraped out for the 389th BG. This was to be our home to for the next two months, not the best time of year to visit Libya. Living conditions were primitive at best—tents, which we had to pitch ourselves; folding canvas cots; and two blankets, one to sleep on, one to sleep under on the usually cool nights. Drinking water was trucked in and dispensed from large hanging canvas “Lister” bags, usually warm, and always bitter from purifying agents. For the first several days, our meals were mainly fresh-baked bread (from one of the Ninth AF groups), canned peaches and peanut butter, from large, unlabeled multi-gallon cans. These were soon supplemented with field rations. Some men bartered with the natives for eggs, exchanging cigarettes, which were never in short supply. Our “bathroom facilities” were open air: steel drums sunk into the ground for seated use, or mounted on eight-foot high wood frames for gravity-fed showers with trucked-in water. Pull the rope to wet yourself, let go and soap yourself, pull again to rinse off. Use your steel helmet for a basin to shave regularly, so your oxygen mask fits snugly.

Most days there were sand storms of varying intensity. In their aftermath it was necessary to clean the machine guns, each gunner responsible for his weapon(s). That included bombardier John McSween and myself. Since the nose compartment became a sauna from the sun, we alternated cleaning the nose guns. After a couple weeks we all adapted pretty well. I walked in to Bengasi only once. Having changed hands between Montgomery and Rommel some seven or eight times, it was mostly rubble.

Our group flew three combat missions prior to the August 1 Ploesti Raid. The most notable of these for us was the third one, on Monday, July 12 to Reggio d’Calabria. Our target was the railroad yards, ferry slips, and bridges. This escapade is a story of its own. Two of our engines were shot out, a third was damaged by anti-aircraft fire over our target. Bob Wright, using exceptional skill, was able to execute a controlled-crash downhill landing in southeast Sicily—on only one engine—without serious injury to our crew. The invasion of Sicily had just begun, so amid the crack of rifle fire we managed to be “captured” by a Canadian Infantry Unit which had landed the previous day and who now shared their beach bivouac and rations with the ten of us. Next afternoon I found an RAF Spitfire unit’s pasture/airfield. They sent

a radio message to Ninth AF, Cairo, for me. Two days later a reply came: “LEAVE PLANE. PROCEED TO MALTA.” Courtesy of the Royal Navy, we arrived in Malta midday on Saturday, July 17. Through a series of chance events, we found ourselves flying the 98th BG’s *Daisy Mae* back to their Bengasi base, on Sunday, July 18. From there we were trucked back to Berka 4. Two days later we began training for Operation Tidal Wave, which would be our mission #4.



Berka 4, home base of the 389BG in Libya.

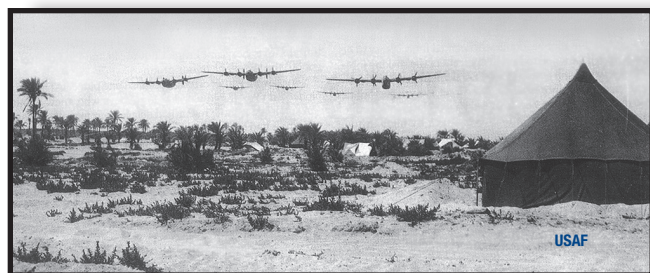
We received exceptionally detailed training for the mission in spite of the limited intelligence data available. Because the refineries lay at such great distance from our bases, reconnaissance planes were not able to photograph the target; the only pictures available were from pre-war postcards and travel brochures. Ground training included movies made by the English using models of the refineries, which were quite realistic in depicting bombing from 250 feet. For its time, it was very high-tech. We heard lectures by men who had worked in these Romanian refineries, some of which were English owned and/or operated before the war. We also diligently studied maps of the route to and from the target and photographs of landmarks we would see.

The ground portion of the training also included indoctrination on measures to take if shot down. About all I remember is, if downed in Yugoslavia, identify yourself as “Zabit Anglais.” We were issued escape kits, which included a variety of emergency medical items, a map of the Balkans, monies to buy help or goods such as water purifying tablets. Most crewmembers added items of their own that could be useful. One pilot hid a steel-cutting blade in a shoe, in case he was imprisoned. I had even packed a cloth bag with toothbrush, soap, razor, and other articles I thought might come in handy should we be forced down in enemy territory. In addition to the ground training, we naturally got considerable air training.



Bob Wright's crew in spring 1943, during final phase of combat training at Lowry Field, Colorado. Author is in front row, far right.

Outlines of each group's target refinery, including the specific target buildings within the refinery, were created in the desert for the practice bombing training. Norden bombsights were replaced with simple ring and post sights, much like sights on shooting gallery rifles in those years. Because our bombardier, John McSween, was hospitalized with malaria, I did all the bombing on the practice missions, expecting to do it if McSween wasn't recovered in time to fly the mission. Practice bombing runs started individually, then in elements, on up



Practice for Operation Tidal Wave near Bengasi, Libya, in July 1943.

through total groups. At the 389BG rehearsal meeting, Group Commander Col Jack W. Wood gave us our after-bombing exit instructions: "After 'bombs away' it's every man for himself! Hit the deck! Forget formation flying! Get the hell out of there!" Then he added, "And, NO nurse-maiding!" (assisting or protecting a crew in trouble). "I want the most bombers back here as possible. The best way to do that is for every crew to be responsible for themselves"

No one in the group knew when the mission was to take place, and tension mounted as we completed our training. For several days prior to the raid, we were briefed every evening on the weather for the following day. We would then go to our beds and try to sleep, expecting to be called in the morning for the actual operation. Practice continued for some days, however, and it was like waiting

for the dentist to call you in to have a tooth filled.

The progressive bombing practices concluded with a five-group rehearsal Saturday, July 31. Some 175 Liberator bombers roared across the desert creating their own sand storms. The results were deemed a "spectacular success." We knew the fateful day was near.

Sunday, August 1, 1943, dawned bright and clear, a perfect day for flying, with lighter winds than usual. We were aroused at 2:30 a.m. for breakfast and final briefing. One might have thought we were very calm because we were so quiet. Actually, we were all wondering whether we would be among those who would return, and no one cared to discuss it.

This mission would be the longest in distance and time aloft that we would fly in our combat tour. All the bombers were fitted with an auxiliary fuel tank in the left forward bomb bay to enable them to make this unusually long mission. Fuel would be transferred from this bomb bay tank to the engines' four fuel tanks periodically as needed. Unlike the wing fuel tanks, tanks in the bomb bay were not self-sealing—posing a threat if struck by enemy bullets or anti-aircraft shells. The 389BG was the last group in the five-bomb group "train" en route to the oil refinery complex in and around Ploesti. Our target was the Steaua Romana refinery at Campina, Romania, some 18 miles northwest of Ploesti. It was assigned to the 389BG because it was the most distant target from our Begasi, Libya base, and ours were the newest B-24s, with somewhat longer range than the other four group's older bombers. Our crew was given the new B-24D *Old Blister Butt*, which had been brought to the 389BG by a replacement crew, our original (no name) airplane having been left at the bottom of a steep hillside, nose down in a grape vineyard near Pachino, Sicily.

Formation assembly went well for the 389th. Our three-plane Element Lead/Pilot was 1st Lt Ed Fowble. Our crew, piloted by Bob Wright, settled into the high-right position off our element leader; Bob's best friend, 1st Lt Lloyd "Pete" Hughes and crew flew in the low-left wing position. Before each mission, Wright and Hughes—fast friends from their months together through all three phases of pilot training—had a ritual coin toss to see which one would fly the favored low-left wing position. The winner that morning was Hughes.

As we headed north across the glistening blue Mediterranean, we noted a perpendicular grey column of smoke rising from a large, dark, roiling oil patch. It was evident a bomber had gone down. (Later we would learn it was a crew from the 376BG, the Mission Lead Group. It fell from the the sky for no apparent reason.)



A 9th AF B-24 flies through the smoke and fire generated by bombs previously dropped by earlier aircraft.

Landfall was made at the very southern boundary of Albania where we altered course to the northeast, over spectacularly scenic mountain terrain dotted with red-roofed houses, towards our Initial Point (IP) for our bomb run, Pitesti, Romania. The trip was going well until we encountered towering cumulus clouds which were causing groups ahead of us to become scattered. The 389th managed to come together quite well once we got over the mountains. The IP was located easily, and we began our curved bomb run to Campina, losing altitude at a predetermined rate at a constant airspeed. I had made a plot of the arched bomb run with notations of what our altitude and time should be at certain intervals along the bomb run. We were right on the mark. The plot was laid out on the navigator's table behind me. As I was turned to check it, I felt a sudden tight steep, hard right turn being made. Instantly I pressed my throat mike, yelling "WRONG TURN, BOB! WRONG TURN!" Apparently the Group lead had mistaken Tragoviste for Campina. We'd been informed that there was a large cement factory at Tragoviste. I'd never observed a cement factory from the air, but there was no mistake here. White dust covered everything—structures, trees, roads—like fresh snow covering the landscape. Perhaps unnecessarily, I pointed out the leader's error and that we should hold our bombs. Fortunately, the Group lead recognized the error and was now making a tight, climbing u-turn to the left, and we followed suit. These right, then left, tight aerial u-turns, with some 30 B-24

bombers, without collisions was a miracle in itself. We could see our target across the rugged hills separating the two valleys. Surely our aerial armada was also seen, and the defenders alerted.

Next another hard right, diving turn had to be executed to get to the briefed 250 feet/200mph combo to ensure accurate results with our simple bombsight, manned by our bombardier. We were being met with a barrage of ground fire. Our target structure had been hit, as briefed, by the lead element—supposedly with 45-minute delay-fused bombs. But the structure exploded in front of us, throwing up fire-laced black smoke and debris higher than our 250 foot altitude. This was not supposed to happen! I was returning fire with our 50-caliber nose guns, firing into the smoke and the flame-hidden source of the tracer shells coming toward us.

Suddenly, out the corner of my eye, I saw an arm-sized stream of fuel exiting through the right waist window of left wingman Lt Hughes' bomber, a gunner framed against the stream, and more fuel pouring from the bomb bay. "PULL UP, PETE! PULL UP! PULL UP!" I screamed, at least in my head. But Pete stayed in formation as we entered the flames and smoke rising from the refinery, his bombs going into the target along with the rest of the element's. As they passed through the smoke and flame of the exploding boiler, the stream of fuel from the punctured tank ignited. The huge



bomber resembled a meteor as flames streamed behind it. Pete slipped under the formation, apparently attempting a wheels-up landing in a narrow, nearly dry, stream bed. He was doing a good job piloting the stricken plane, but in trying to clear a small footbridge, a wing caught a bank of the stream, causing the bomber to cartwheel to its tragic flaming end. We felt that no one could survive the crash, but we learned a year later that two of the gunners lived. Pete could have pulled up as soon as he was hit and possibly have made a successful crash landing. He elected, however, to deliver his bombs to the target. With this decision, Pete lost his life, and Bob Wright lost his best friend. For his uncommon bravery that day, witnessed in its entirety by Wright's crew, Hughes was one of the three men who posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In keeping with Col Wood's instructions, we "hit the deck," lifting up only to go over trees, wires, houses, and other obstacles. One plane came back with corn stalks caught in their bomb bay doors. As we lifted over these obstacles, I could see B-24s by the dozens to the southeast, swarming in confusion in the smoke-filled sky. The groups that attacked Ploesti refineries were not having things as easy as we had at Campina.

As we roared along "on the deck," I had a couple opportunities to do some strafing. A few miles south of the target, I spotted a group of three huge storage tanks with a small shack next to them. Firing with the left 50-caliber nose gun, my aim was a little low, kicking up dust as the tracers "walked" into the nearest tank, igniting the resulting streams shooting from the tank. I vividly recall seeing a fellow dart from the shack, stop abruptly, turn and dash back into the shack—all in a matter of seconds. The gunners and I continued firing only at anything refinery related. At one point I saw moving smoke rising over trees to our left. Surmising it was from a moving train, I alerted the top turret and left waist gunners. As we cleared the trees, we fired in unison. "CEASE FIRE!" yelled Bob Wright. It was a passenger train, loaded down with people, clinging to the sides and tops of the coaches. We'd been strongly admonished to avoid harming civilians.

We continued our very low-level exit all the way to the Danube river. As one would expect in August, many people were sunbathing on the beaches and swimming in the river. Some waved at us as we sped by. A small boy flung a stone at us as we passed over him. We were only a few minutes removed from the havoc we had wrought, but it seemed quite peaceful below us again. Because we were flying so low, these scenes were very clear. We now began a shallow climb to clear the mountains looming in the distance. The "buzzing fun" was over.

Just as we were crossing the highest peaks of the rugged Balkan Mountains, Tailgunner John Ritchie on the intercom reported a 389th B-24 below us at seven o'clock with #4 engine feathered. Although we'd been instructed not to play "nursemaid" to any damaged aircraft, we couldn't bring ourselves to leave a friend in need of protection. Wright canvassed the crew as to whether we disregard the order or not. It was a unanimous "Disregard." We made a wide 360-degree turn, pulling up off the right wing of Frank McLaughlin's *Old Irish* crew. Throttling back to stay with Mac, we watched our scattered groupmates and other B-24s disappear into the southwest. It was a lonely feeling. We were concerned about possible interception by German fighters from Greece and/or Crete. Fortunately we encountered no enemy aircraft, although we did observe some at a distance in the late afternoon, but they did not approach us. When well over the Mediterranean Sea, we waggled our wings and headed for Berka 4, landing some 14 1/2 hours since take off. McLaughlin arrived about ten minutes later. Interrogation followed. Much of it concerned the loss of Hughes' crew, which tempered the satisfaction of returning safely ourselves.

The feeling of joy at again setting foot on solid earth is beyond description. That morning I had wondered if we would see our desert home again. I thanked God, too, for our good fortune in coming through the ordeal without a scratch.

After a meal of cold hamburgers and coffee, we wearily dragged ourselves to our dusty but welcome cots. As I lay there, I could see through my tent opening into Pete Hughes' tent, and I thought about him. I didn't dwell on it long because sleep was soon upon me. It had been a long, busy day. 🌟

*Jim McClain completed 27 missions before returning to the states to take command of a navigation teaching squadron at Hondo, Texas. Although he intended to make the Air Corps his career, his father's strong objection, "You'll be nothing but a flying bum if you don't finish college!" caused him to rethink his career intention, opt out of staying on active duty, and resume his studies at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. He remained in the Reserves until he received his honorable discharge in 1963. McClain was employed in field sales and management in electric housewares and later, personal care products, then as a contract consultant in the latter field until January 2001, two months shy of his 78th birthday.*