



80 YEARS SINCE THE REPATRIATION OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRISONERS FROM ROMANIA

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As Romania joined the Allied Powers (23 August 1944), the fate of American and British prisoners became uncertain, as they were in danger of either being captured by German troops or falling into the hands of the Red Army. As the archive documents show, at that time, there were 1,262 prisoners (1,123 American and 39 British) in Romania, interned in camp no. 13 Bucharest (Pedagogical School on "Sfânta Ecaterina" Street and "Regina Elisabeta" Military Hospital) and camp no. 14 Timișu de Jos¹.

In the rescue operation, with the support of the Romanian authorities, Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn was transported by a plane, piloted by Captain Constantin Bâzu Cantacuzino, in Bari, Italy, where the 15th Air Force Command was located. All American and British prisoners in Romania were transported to Italy during Operation Reunion, organised by the 15th Air Force, on 31 August, 1 September, and 3 September 1944.

Keywords: operation Tidal Wave; allied prisoners; Royal Proclamation; 23 August 1944; operation Reunion;

¹ From Historia (2020), no. 216, Armă, Al., <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/operatiunea-reunion-repatrierea-prizonierilor-568271.html>, retrieved on 22 January 2024.



INTRODUCTION

On 23 August 1944, Romania left the Axis Powers and decided to start armistice negotiations with the Allied Powers. The next day, it was unleashed the German bombardment of the Romanian capital: a Bucharest already in blood and in mourning, as a result of the American-British bombings from April-August of the same year, a capital in the process of being invaded by the Red Army troops. A country with a fragile government, led by a general and patronised by the heads of four parties with divergent ideologies, a country with a starving population after four years of war, intimidated and terrorised by the horrors of the airstrikes to which it had been subjected, and frightened by the danger of Russian occupation. A Romania abandoned and hit from all directions.

Great Britain had been our enemy since 8 December 1941. We had been at war with the United States of America since 5 June 1942, in response to the declaration of war received from Romania six months before. The royal proclamation of 23 August 1944 stipulated that "from now on, the fight and any act of hostility against the Soviet armed forces as well as the state of war with Great Britain and the United States of America cease"², but the truce was still far from being agreed. Our former ally became our enemy.

The American air attack on 1 August 1943, known as Tidal Wave, on the oilfields of the Prahova valley, and especially the bombings of the Anglo-American aviation between 4 April and 19 August 1944, which mainly targeted Bucharest and Ploiești, as well as other cities where industrial sites and infrastructure elements were located, resulted in huge human and material damage. Despite the reaction of Romanian and German aviation and anti-aircraft artillery, human losses amounted to 15,253 people, of which 7,592 dead (including 562 children) and 7,661 wounded (603 children) (Duțu, 2016, p. 290).

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² The Royal family of Romania, <https://www.romaniaregala.ro/jurnal/sala-tronului-dupa-proclamatia-regelui-din-23-august-1944/>, retrieved on 22 January 2024.



In Bucharest alone, there were over 2,000 wounded and about 3,000 dead, buried then in the Calvin Cemetery, called “4 April Cemetery”. It is sad that today they are almost forgotten...

The Anglo-American aviation casualties were estimated at over 2,200 people (dead and prisoners). On 23 August 1944, there were 1,262 prisoners in Romania (1,123 American and 39 British), interned in camp no. 13 Bucharest (Pedagogical School on “Sfânta Ecaterina” Street and “Regina Elisabeta” Military Hospital) and camp no. 14 Timișu de Jos. The first 110 prisoners were Americans captured following the raid on 1 August 1943, who were sorted according to their health status and interned either in the Central Seminary building in Bucharest (41) or in the Inner Zone Hospital in Sinaia (69) for treatment (Armă, 2020). Later, the prisoners from Bucharest were transferred to Timișu de Jos, a beautiful mountainous tourist area, thus Lieutenant (r.) Corneliu Valjan, from the 2nd Intelligence Section of the Great General Staff, participating in the interrogation of the American prisoners, testifying that the members of the *Tidal Wave* crews enjoyed a regime of favour, which they called the “Gilded Cage”, appreciated as “the best prison camp in the world” (Valjan, 2020, pp. 119-120) (photo 1, 2).

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Photo 1: The “Gilded Cage”, Timișu de Jos (Armă, 2023, in “Historia”, <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/prizonierii-americani-in-colivia-de-aur-de-la-2317030.html>)



Photo 2: The American prisoners in the “Gilded Cage” (lb.)

GUNN AND REUNION OPERATIONS – TESTIMONY OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH PRISONERS

The treatment of the American and British prisoners was in compliance with the Geneva Convention and other internationally adopted documents. The proof is their numerous testimonies from the time of detention or after release. There are reports about the attitude of the population and the authorities when they were captured. The fact that they were Americans, not Russians, mattered a lot in the Romanians’ behaviour towards them.

Former war pilot William. J. Fili, taken prisoner on 25 April 1944, author of the memoirs “*Passage to Valhalla*”, dedicated to the sole surviving crew of the B-24-Liberator bomber, dubbed “*Destiny Deb*” (photo 4), confesses how he was found by the Romanian peasants gathered at the place of his parachute landing and how he was treated by them: “*Those farmers stayed a short distance from me until I yelled to them: ‘Alo! Alo!’ and pointing to my chest yelled: ‘Me, American’... One man, timidly, came to me and asked: ‘Ruskie?’ (Russian?), I answered ‘No!’ and again pointing to*

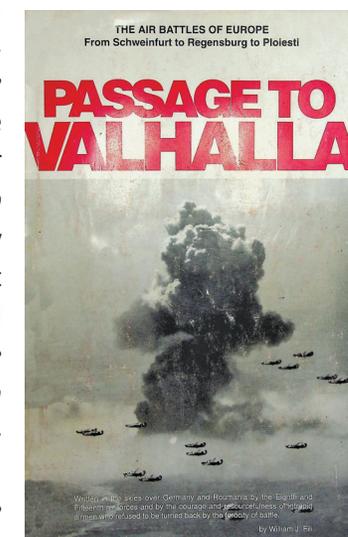


Photo 3: An exceptional memoir about the bombings of Ploiești in 1944



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my chest, «American!». Finally, he understood and called to the others, «American!», and the others, men, woman and children, gathered around me. The first man shook my hand, and not knowing what else to do, I offered him a cigarette, which he took”.



Photo 4: DESTINY DEB crew (bottom: Bob Pop, John Foster, Edward Bell, Glenn Boyle, Lenus Bahti, Dana Varvil, pilot-commander; down: Randy Haney, Paul Swearingen, Paul Swearingen, William Fili – the author of the book, Charles Kourvelas) (from the above-mentioned book)

Then, he was driven to the village, where he met three other teammates and they received tea and bread: “I will never forget this day – writes Fili –, this place and the people who were so kind to me”. (Fili, 1991, p. 131). The wounded prisoners were treated with humanity in hospitals, being cared for like Romanian patients. Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn, the pilot of a seriously injured B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, with numerous burns on his face from the explosion of the plane’s petrol tanks (Valjan, p. 147), was miraculously rescued by Romanian doctors, so he was able to fulfil his honorary mission from the days following 23 August 1944.

William Fili recalls that the pedagogical high school he was staying at was located on a neat and very clean street, the citizens being allowed to walk on the opposite side of it. The barbed wire fence was not an obstacle to a short exchange of words with them. After 47 years since his repatriation, the American aviator cannot

master his emotion: “Indeed, I learned a lesson remembered to this day, that all people are basically alike, they love alike. Laugh alike, cry alike, are all capable of compassion and all share an unshakable hatred of war. Even the average Romanian citizens, who managed a few words with us through that barbed wire fence, were as sincerely sorry to see us confined as we were to have visited our heinous destruction on their homeland”. (Ib., p. 206).

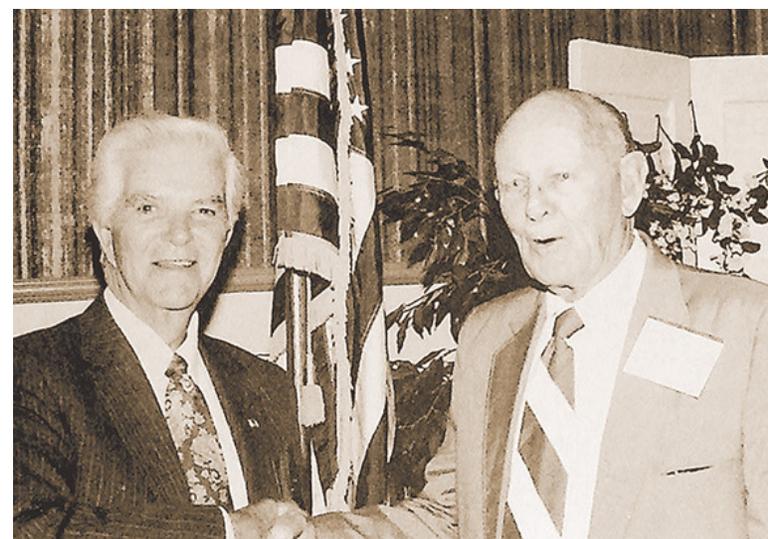


Photo 5: William Fili and James Gunn (Ib.)

The letters that the American and British prisoners sent at home contained numerous appreciations on the humane way in which they were treated in Romania. Thus, Major Donald R. Falls said: “The humanity of the military institution and the administration in the camp have demonstrated a true respect for the opponent. On many occasions, Americans have been treated the same or even better than their recruits”. (Duțu, p. 291).

The royal proclamation of 23 August 1944 also resulted in the opening of the camps of American and British prisoners, so they mingled with the population that fraternised with them, sheltered them and shielded them from the Germans, because the German bombardments had unleashed on the capital. Their fate had become uncertain, and one of them had to take the initiative to repatriate. This was Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn, the highest-ranking prisoner,



ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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On the morning of 25 August, when street battles with German troops were in progress, Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn, encouraged by Dana Varvil and the other American prisoners, managed to contact a senior Romanian officer in charge of the new War Ministry, who helped him reach General Mihail Racoviță, who had been in charge of the War Department for two days.

shot down over Ploiești on 17 August 1944. James A. Gunn, born on 28 May 1912 in California, was enlisted as a war pilot on 1 March 1939, at the 454th Bombardment Group in Squadron 304, and had performed, by the time he was shot down, 32 missions (<https://www.ia80flyagain.org/operatiunea-gunn/>). He was entrusted with this great responsibility, which not everyone could assume. A plane was needed to take him to the 15th Air Force Command in Bari and ask for help to rescue more than a thousand Allied prisoners in Romania. William Fili describes him as a quiet and reserved man, endowed with a deep and analytical mind, a man who had the instinct to know what and how to do it, not hesitating to act even when he put his own life in danger.

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³ Dana V. Varvil (1915-2007) was the pilot-commander of the B-24 Liberator "Destiny Deb" bomber crew of the 720th Bombing Group, shot down over Ploiești on 24 April 1944, crew that survived by falling prisoner for four months in Romania (A.N.).

⁴ Valeriu (Rică) Georgescu (1904-1993, graduate of the University of Birmingham, oil engineer, director of the Romanian-American Petroleum Society of Ploiești, former Intelligence Service agent, the reason why he was arrested by the Antonescu regime and detained between 15 August 1941- 23 August 1944 (A.N.).

Gunn asked Valeriu Georgescu to find him a plane to fly to Foggia, where they could arrange an air strike to end the terrorist bombings of the Germans and implement a plan to relocate all the Allied prisoners of war who were being held captives in Romania.

The next day, 26 August, Valeriu Georgescu accompanied James Gunn to the head of the State Secretariat for Aviation, General Ermil Gheorghiu, where he was told that an air crew was set up to transport him to Italy and was then taken to the Popești-Leordeni airfield, being assured that the flight plan was kept secret for security reasons. The pilot was aware of the dangers and had experience on the air route to Foggia. Gunn was transported to Popești-Leordeni and, at 13.00, the bimotor plane Savoia-Marcheti, piloted by the experienced Lieutenant Commander Constantin Perju, took off. It seems that the American was disturbed by the presence on the plane, on either side of it, of two soldiers with guns in sight and by the fact that no one knew English. To his dismay, after about 20 minutes of flight, the plane made a slow turn of 180 degrees and returned to Popești-Leordeni. Gunn was later informed by an interpreter that an engine had broken down, making it impossible to continue the mission to fly over the Adriatic Sea. Disconcerted by the fact that he had not noticed any malfunctioning of the engines and had not detected any radio conversation, the American pilot was thinking about what he could do next, when someone beat him on the shoulder, addressing him in fluent English: "Colonel, if you will crawl into the belly of a Messerschmitt 109, I will fly you to Italy...". (Fili, p. 262). His name: Captain Constantin Bâzu Cantacuzino!

Descendant of a princely family from Romania, Constantin Bâzu Cantacuzino, born on 11 November 1905, as the son of Mihai Cantacuzino, mayor of Bucharest in 1904-1907, and of Maria Rosetti-Tescani, was already a famous Romanian aviator. Bacculaureate graduate at the state high school in Geneva, student of the universities of Strasbourg and Paris, having a tourism pilot certification since 1933, and then a hunting and public transport one, he stood out as a pilot with exceptional talent, with thorough training and boundless courage, author of large air raids, participant in aviation rallies where the public was enthusiastic about his acrobatic developments at a small height.



Throughout the campaign in the East, Captain Constantin Cantacuzino, promoted in August 1943, was among the pilots with the most air victories. Starting on 6 June 1944, he participated in the 9th aviation hunting group in the first battles he engaged with the American aviation, taking over the command of the group, after the heroic death of Captain Alexandru Șerbănescu.



Photo 6: Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn (left) and Colonel Constantin Băzu Cantacuzino (right) celebrate on completion of the operation (lb.)

At the start of the war, in June 1941, Constantin Băzu Cantacuzino was a pilot-in-chief at LARES. Enrolled voluntarily on the front, he executed combat missions on "Hurricane" aircraft within the 53rd Aircraft Hunting Squadron. In May 1943, he was part of the 3rd Group of the German UDET fighter fleet, flying the Messerschmitt 109 G. Throughout the campaign in the East, Captain Constantin Cantacuzino, promoted in August 1943, was among the pilots with the most air victories. Starting on 6 June 1944, he participated in the 9th aviation hunting group in the first battles he engaged with the American aviation, taking over the command of the group, after the heroic death of Captain Alexandru Șerbănescu.

James Gunn would later find out about the deeds of Constantin Băzu Cantacuzino. For now, as William Fili reports, "Gunn slowly returned and saw an extremely handsome man, a little younger than him, a man who had an attractive appearance willing to take the risk. A kind of adventurous and daring pilot, credited with many air victories, commander of an elite Romanian combat squadron. He seemed to be a well-educated man and one who seemed to be a member of the aristocracy of Romania". The American did not think much and said: "Let us go now!". (lb., p. 263). Captain Cantacuzino proposed to plan

the flight together, but to take off the next morning. He warned his new comrade that he would have to stay crammed into his Messerschmitt's fuselage, enduring cold and lack of oxygen, conditions that Gunn accepted. So they did and rested in the beds in a building of the Popești airfield.



Photo 7: The Messerschmitt 109 G, which brought Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn to Italy (lb.).

On the morning of 27 August, Cantacuzino and Gunn were still studying the maps, when Valeriu Georgescu entered the training room. He asked the former prisoner to accompany him to a meeting with Iuliu Maniu, the minister secretary of state in the government of General Sănătescu. This is what war veteran William Fili writes in his book: "After he arrived at the government headquarters in the center of Bucharest and was presented to Mr. Maniu, Gunn listened to the most passionate request he would ever hear in his life. Mr. Maniu did everything, almost kneeling down, and begged Colonel Gunn that, when he arrived in Italy, make the recommendation on behalf of the Romanian government that his country be occupied by American or British forces. Mr. Maniu continued: <You are an American representative and, since you were here before the Russians, I'm making this plea to save our small country and its people from another form of dictatorship>. Gunn shook his hand, saying: <Mr. Maniu, I will take your message and I will do my best to get it to the competent authorities>".



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(lb.). Gunn was driven back to the airfield to continue the necessary preparations. He found comrade Cantacuzino assisting in painting the sides of his Messerschmitt fuselage in the colours of the American flag with quick-drying paint. They had the meal, together with the aviator Lieutenant Commander Dan Vizanti, former Commander of the 6th Hunting Group and former chief of cabinet of the Head of the State Undersecretariat of Air. The latter signed an article in the aeronautical publication *“Pionniers”* of the French Aeronautical Association *“Les Vieilles Tiges”*, according to which he was an eyewitness to an acrobatic flight demonstration that Bâzu would have done to demonstrate to the American comrade who he was dealing with. Here is what Vizanti wrote: *“...Whatever the resources of my imagination, it is impossible to describe what happened for 25 minutes. All those present at that air show were amazed by the extraordinary developments of that plane. We watched the flight with the breath cut off, but delighted, witnessing something unique. Such a show I had never seen, although almost all of us were aviators hard to impress in this field.”*

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After the 25 minutes of true «suspense», Bâzu, relaxed, decided to land. But how, in what way? At the extreme limit of the aerodrome, at a low height, he began to perform a slow rotation, and then, when he was on his back, to reduce the engine and, in this position, to come on the landing slope. From that moment on, we all held our breath, and the plane continued its descent to the rapidly approaching earth. But at a maximum of two meters from the ground, Bâzu elegantly turned the plane into normal position and, with an artistic gesture, finished the recovery, placing it normally on the ground. The explosion of cheers and excitement, thunder of acclamation and shouts of joy accompanied the plane in its run to the hangar. Indeed, all those who had seen him before on his acrobatic flights appreciated that this time Bâzu had surpassed himself, giving his best in terms of such flight. Undeniable, he was the ace of our aces!” (Tudor, 2000, pp. 188-189).

At 17.20, the Me-109 G took off from the Popești-Leordeni airfield with Bâzu at the handle and Gunn crammed into the fuselage. He was escorted to the Danube by the planes of his comrades Ioan Simionescu and Toni Dușescu. At the indications of his *“navigator”*, the pilot took

the 340-degree heading and landed, at 19.20, on the San Giovanni airfield, 40 km NE from Foggia, where it was the deployment base of bombardment groups 454 and 455 B-24.

After being extracted from the fuselage, Lieutenant Colonel James Gunn telephoned General Nathan Twining, commander of the 15th Air Force at Bari, to inform him of his return and the urgency of rescue measures for the American prisoners in Romania. Since the commander was absent, he called his deputy, General Charles Born, the chief of operations, who decided to immediately organise a conference of strategic interest that very night.

A curious American pilot climbed into the cockpit of Bâzu's Messerschmitt, flew it a few tens of meters, lost control of the direction and went into a *“ground-loop”*, damaging its right *bequille*⁵ and *jambe*⁶. Gunn and Bâzu were brought by car to Bari, were each questioned by the special services and invited to take part in the conference. It was decided to carry out the following activities urgently:

1. Romanian pilot Constantin Cantacuzino to fly a P-51 Mustang aircraft and land at the Popești-Leordeni airfield to pave the way for the advance landing of a 15th Air Force rescue team.
2. Two B-17 Flying Fortress bombers to land at the Popești-Leordeni airfield with the rescue team.
3. The airborne evacuation was to be carried out when the rescue team reported the existence of favourable conditions for the mission.

In fact, this was the plan for the American prisoners rescue operation, later called *Operation Reunion*. It was preceded by an equally important operation, which bore the name of its protagonist – *Operation Gunn*. That same night, Lieutenant Colonel Gunn conveyed Iuliu Maniu's message to General Twining, adding that he himself noted the fear of the Bucharest people that they might fall under Russian occupation. The commander of the 15th Air Force replied that he would forward Mr. Maniu's request to his superiors at the Supreme Allied Headquarters and to General Eisenhower, as it was a political decision.

⁵ Device on which the tail of the plane rests, <https://dexonline.ro/text/tren%20de%20aterizare> (A.N.), in French.

⁶ Each of the two legs of the landing gear to which the airplane's wheels are attached, <https://dexonline.ro/text/tren%20de%20aterizare> (A.N.), in French.



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The detailed plan of the operation was drawn up during the day of 28 August and was materialised the next day when, at 8:00 a.m., four P-51 fighter planes took off from Bari, one of them piloted by Bâzu Cantacuzino, who landed at Popești-Leordeni. He checked the security conditions of the airfield, sent the light signal to the three American teammates that everything was in order and they, in turn, communicated by radio, in Bari, that the bombers with equipment could take off.

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The two B-17s, each escorted by 16 fighter planes, took off and landed at 15.00 at Popești-Leordeni, one of them having on board Colonel George Kraiger, from the Intelligence Service of the American armed forces. The members of the rescue team were met by the Undersecretary of State from the Ministry of Economy, Valeriu Georgescu, who led Colonel Kraiger to the Mayor of the Bucharest, Victor Dombrovski, to make available the buses needed to transport the prisoners to the Popești-Leordeni airfield (Valjan, pp. 177-178).

The radio equipment was installed and, on 30 August, communication with the 15th Air Force headquarters in Bari was successfully established. In the afternoon, at 5:15 p.m., Captain Constantin Bâzu Cantacuzino took off for Bari, to deliver a letter with the necessary information for the Operation Reunion, which was to begin the next day (<https://www.iar80flyagain.org/operatiunea-gunn>). Operation Reunion began on 31 August, when 36 B-17s took off in three waves of 12 at one-hour intervals, with the first wave landing at 10:00 a.m. and returning at 10:45 a.m., when the next wave was approaching the aerodrome from Popești-Leordeni, to land at 11.00. The third wave landed at 12:00. The fortresses were escorted by 217 fighter planes (91 P-38 Lighting and 146 P-52 Mustang). During the mission, they were attacked by German fighter aircraft, two Junkers-52s being destroyed and one Messerschmitt 109 damaged. On this first day, 747 ex-prisoners (722 Americans and 25 British) were evacuated, who were personally met by General Twining at the Bari airfield.

On 1 and 3 September, 19 B-17s, escorted by fighter jets, completed the evacuation of all former Allied prisoners of war from Romania. A total of 1,162 people were evacuated, including 1,127 American,



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31 British, two Dutch naval officers, a French petty officer, and a Romanian with a doubtful US passport. Overall, 59 B-17s, 94 P-38s, 281 P-51s, and 1 C-47 were used in Gunn and Reunion Operations. One P-38 was lost, two Junkers 52s were declared destroyed and one Me-109 damaged.

William Fili, evacuated on the last day, testifies that, upon boarding the bus that took them to the Popești-Leordeni airport, *"everyone stopped, looked around and said goodbye to the people of Bucharest in their own way and expressed <Thank you!>, because they helped us survive"*. (Fili, p. 286). This is how Gunn and Reunion Operations ended, in the initiation of which the Romanian aviator Captain Constantin Bâzu Cantacuzino, a true knight of the air, played a significant role.

The American and British prisoners left their testimonies regarding the humanitarian treatment they received during their stay in Romania. They had a chance and they escaped alive, a chance that the almost 3,000 Romanians, victims of the Allied bombings, were deprived of. Most of their earthly remains are buried in the *"4 April Cemetery"* in the Giulești neighborhood of Bucharest, long forgotten by their compatriots.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

After more than 50 years, some of the former American prisoners visited Romania. Benedict Yedlin, machine gunner in the spherical turret under the fuselage of the B-24 Liberator bomber from the 449th AvB Group, returned to Romania in 1993, eager to revisit the places he had flown over 12 times: *"Ploiești was quite a difficult, formidable target – he testified – very well defended with anti-aircraft artillery and fighter planes. I didn't think there were people down there, I didn't see anyone. I knew there was a city there, buildings and streets, but I didn't think about the consequences of the bombing if I didn't hit the target"*. (<https://www.rador.ro/2021/02/17/1942-1944-anglo-americanii-au-venit-si-ne-au-bombardat-xi/>).

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Photo 8: The disaster of "Columbia" refinery, in the west of Ploiești
(<https://publicnewsfm.ro/2022/07/31/bombardarea-ploiestiului-cea-mai-mare-infrangere-a-aviatiei-americane/>, Damian, 2022).

The former war pilot, William J. Fili, visited the city of Ploiești in 2005 and presented the Prahova Museum of History and Archaeology with a painting of the portrait of Princess Ecaterina Caragea, as a sign of gratitude for her humanitarian and philanthropic activity towards the American prisoners, treated and cared for in Ploiești hospitals. In memory of the 378 USAF pilots and crew members who fell on the Romanian territory in 1943-1944, two monuments have been built: one in the Cișmigiu Park and another in the Kiseleff Park. This is another perpetual proof of Romanian humanitarianism...

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