

98th Bomb Wing Reunion and 99th BGHS Honor Ploesti Veterans, Shreveport Louisiana, October 2011

By Lorraine Henning Kiewiet*

Over a four-day period in October 2011, in a Holiday Inn on the “Other Side of Louisiana,” I continued my journey to hear the stories that my father (James Henning 99BG 416BS, with 4232074 OH! JOSIE photo below) didn’t tell me about being a member of a World War II Army-Air Force B-17 bomber crew. The more I hear, the more I understand why he did not want to talk about it! And the more I want to connect with these wonderful veterans and keepers of America’s captivating WWII history. It’s a miracle that I’m here today based on research I have done. My dad has passed on, but the affinities I share with these others somehow bring me closer to the side of my dad I never knew.



The combined reunion highlights were meeting with the Veterans, the exhibits provided by the Air Force Historical Society, and the trip to Barksdale Air Force Base.

The exhibit in the hotel ballroom was organized by Robert Coalter, a director of the Army Air Corps Library and Museum. You can contact Robert at (214) 957-1393, or rc@armyaircorpsmuseum.org. Visit their website at www.ArmyAirCorpsMuseum.org. The museum accepts donations of uniforms, medals, equipment, personal items, paperwork, books, photos, etc. from the era of the Army Air Corps.



The ballroom exhibit included different uniforms worn by the men, as well as enlarged photographs of the different Ploesti raider groups. There were several scrapbooks of memorabilia—photos and diary pages.

The purpose of the 99th Bomb Group Historical Society (BGHS) is to preserve and spread the history of the 99th BG and the critical role they played in helping to preserve our freedom during WWII.

Under the umbrella of the 99th BGHS (a tax-exempt not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) organization), there is the **Friends of the 99th** to enable members and other parties to more easily make financial and material donations to the 99th BGHS. The Friends of the 99th will provide an acknowledgment of your donation, for tax purposes and as a permanent record of your contribution.

Contact the 99th BGHS for an opportunity to discuss all your options (e.g. pass on to family; donate to a local museum; donate to the Friends of the 99th; etc. and they will work with you to preserve your materials and your history for posterity, and for the 99th BGHS. The website for the 99th Bomb Group Historical Society (BGHS) is www.99BombGroup.org

A souvenir pin I received at the reunion shows the B-17s above and the B-24s flying low. There were many souvenir tee shirts, jackets, caps, etc. available for B-24 group. The web site for the B-24 Ploesti raider group is <http://www.459bg.org/>.

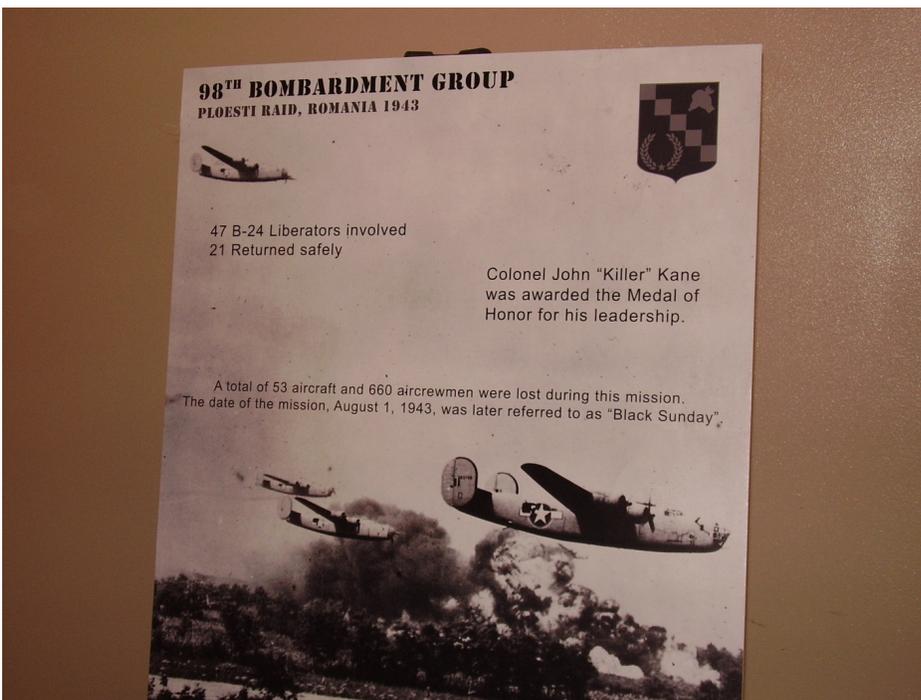
The 99th BGHS also sponsors mini-reunions, and subsidized member prices for various 99th BG memorabilia such as hats, squadron patches, bumper stickers, and the 99th BGHS Historical Calendar. They also are selling for \$50.00, to members only, the last copies available of **"The Diamondbacks - The History of the 99th Bomb Group (H)"**.



Then we gathered in the ballroom for presentations and impromptu sharing of stories from the veterans. After that, a group photo as partially shown above. Only two 99th BGHS veterans were able to be there, Charles Steffens (348BS) and Hal Grant (346BS). In the photo above, Charles is in the top row, third from the left. Charles attended with his daughter. He is pictured in the 99th BGHS book "The Diamondbacks" on page 53.



The Barksdale Air Force Base tour was a windy one! The weather was sunny and bright, but few of us could withstand the high winds for very long to enjoy the up-close look at the B-52 that was available to us. We were offered the opportunity to climb into it, but frankly, most of us just wanted to get in out of the windy weather. There were 57 B-52's lined up or in hangars at Barksdale AFB. They can fly around the globe without refueling, and their young crew is fully trained to carry nuclear weapons. But they also enjoy doing "fly-overs" (unarmed) for sports events. After the B-52 tour, we had lunch in the enlisted men's banquet hall. At each table, young Air Force men and women were welcoming and so happy to meet the vets. For our departing night, Barksdale AFB invited us back for a BBQ at the Officers' hall. Air Force servicemen grilled beautiful steaks to order! Inside, there was the salad bar, adult beverage bar, and such great companionship.



Historical note: Ploesti, Romania was where the commercial refinement of oil began in 1857. Ploesti was the first city in the world to tap into the earth's oil riches. After the first year of WWII, Ploesti refineries were producing nearly a million tons of oil a month—40% of Romania's exports and the highest octane (90) aviation fuel in Europe. This refinery supplied Hitler with anywhere from one third to two-thirds of what was needed to

fuel the Nazi war machine. Hitler had a huge oil refinery and oil reserves. This oil was brought up from Libya and stored here to help Hitler's troops in southern Europe.

A side trip for our group included visiting the music hall where Elvis Presley made his debut, and all of the country western stars of the radio era could be seen live, on-stage, for 25 cents. After that, we had an authentic Cajun lunch.



Hal Grant (99BG 346BS) and his wife Bertgie can be seen seated on the right end of the first table at the left of the photo above.

The Ploesti raiders were charged with departing from their base in Benghazi (the hometown of former Libyan dictator Moamar Khadfi) and flying more than 2,100 miles to take out the Ploesti targets. The objective was to eliminate Hitler's energy supply and stall the Nazi war machine. When the Allies had bases in Italy, the 15th Air Force was based in Foggia, Italy. The 99th BG flew 13 missions from Tortorella Field to Ploesti starting on April 5, 1944 and the final mission was on August 18, 1944. During this period a review of our 99th BGHS database lists seven aircraft lost (4238207, 42107000, 4232035, 42106991, 42106995, 4232028, 4232068) on these missions over Ploesti.

The combined Ploesti raids were first conducted with the 98th Bomb Wing of early B-24 low level flights close to the ground in 1943, and later in 1944 with the B-17s flying at altitude high above. Thus, the early low level flights hoped the Nazi ground defense could be confused as to how to defend the site.

When we watch the movie "The Longest Day" and we watch the Nazi high brass scrambling to find out why the tanks are not being moved around to get to Normandy, the answer is, "they were out of gas!" because of the Ploesti Raiders, because of our B-17s from the 99th Bomb Group.

***99th BGHS Editor's Note: This article has been edited to provide additional information on the 99th BGHS.**