

OPERATION REUNION AND THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

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On August 23, 1944, Rumania switched sides in World War II, abandoning its alliance with Nazi Germany and joining the Allies. At the same time, the country's leaders released the Allied prisoners they and their German allies had held in captivity. The Red Army of the Soviet Union was entering the country from the east, and German troops retreated toward the west. It appeared that Rumania would soon be occupied by Russian troops.ⁱ

Most of the former Allied prisoners were American airmen of the Fifteenth Air Force. They were shot down in a series of 24 raids on the Ploesti oil fields between April 5 and August 19, 1944. During those raids, the Fifteenth Air Force lost 230 bombers and 48 fighters. More than 1,000 of the Americans in Rumania were bomber crewmen and fighter pilots from these airplanes.ⁱⁱ

German warplanes still stationed at a base north of the capital, Bucharest, began bombing the city, in and around which American prisoners of war had been kept. Rumanian leaders were anxious to get Allied support to end the German bombing of Bucharest. They also hoped to entice British and American forces from Italy to enter Rumania so that their country would not be occupied only by the Russians. They turned to the leader of the Americans for a solution.

That leader was Colonel John A. Gunn, former commander of the 454th Bombardment Group. Gunn had been shot down during a raid on the oil refineries around Ploesti, from which the German war machine had obtained a high percentage of its fuel and lubricants. Gunn met with the Rumanian leaders, who agreed to arrange to fly him to Italy. They wanted him to ask the American and British military leaders there for raids on the German air base from which

Bucharest was suffering attacks, and they also wanted him to ask for American and British troops to enter Rumania, because they preferred western occupation to that of the Soviet army. Gunn was more interested in arranging for an airlift of Americans like himself from Rumania to Italy. If they stayed around Bucharest much longer, they would not only be vulnerable to continued German air raids, but also subject to falling into the control of the Red Army. Although the Soviet Union was an ally, airlift of the former prisoners of war to Italy would accelerate their repatriation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gunn flew from Rumania to Italy in the cramped fuselage of a German Me-109 fighter aircraft, flown by a Rumanian air force officer named Captain Constantin Cantazuzino. They had the German fighter painted with a large American flag on both sides, hoping it would not be shot down by either American or British forces in Italy. The plan succeeded. Allied forces recognized the former enemy airplane as friendly and allowed it to land at an American bomber base. Gunn climbed out of the cramped fuselage and found transportation to Bari to meet with Fifteenth Air Force officials.^{iv}

The Fifteenth Air Force was eager to respond. Its leaders authorized the conversion of almost forty of the B-17s of the Fifth Bombardment Wing into temporary troop transports. Most of the bombers were reconfigured and equipped temporarily to hold as many as twenty passengers in their bomb bays, but a few of them were modified to hold up to ten litter patients who needed more medical attention. Crews for the bombers were reduced from the normal nine or ten to only six, to make room for more personnel.^v

Despite the humanitarian mission, the bombers still needed fighter escorts, since they were to fly over territory still under enemy control. German fighters still attempted to shoot down American B-17s, expecting them to be on a bombing mission. Even if the German pilots

or gunners had known the B-17s were flying only to airlift former prisoners of war home to Italy, they had an interest in destroying the bombers, which would inevitably resume their raids as soon as the airlift was over. Moreover, the Germans would have had an interest in destroying the prisoners as well, because they might rejoin their units.

Operation Reunion took place between August 31 and September 3, 1944. On August 31, thirty-eight of the B-17s, all from groups of the Fifth Bombardment Wing, flew empty from their bases on the Foggia Plain along the Adriatic Sea in east central Italy to Popesti Airdrome near Bucharest, returning filled to the brim with Americans. Three waves of twelve B-17s each were followed by one wave of only two. The B-17s were escorted by no less than six of the Fifteenth Air Force's fighter escort groups, including the 1st, 14th, and 82nd Fighter Groups, which flew P-38 Lightnings, and the 31st, 325th, and 332nd Fighter Groups, which flew P-51 Mustangs. Many of the bombers of World War II were escorted by fewer numbers of fighters, but not this time. The thirty-eight bombers were escorted this time by 195 fighters. Thirty-six of the bombers carried 20 patients each, and two others carried 10 litter patients each. The first day was very successful, the modified bombers discharging 740 evacuees at Bari on the southeastern Italian coast.^{vi}

On September 1, sixteen of the modified B-17s returned to Popesti for more Americans. This time they were escorted by only one fighter group, the 332nd, the Tuskegee Airmen. Like the 31st and 325th Fighter Groups that had flown escort the previous day, the 332nd flew P-51 Mustangs, sixty-two of them. Fifteen of the escorted bombers carried 20 passengers each, but the sixteenth bomber carried 10 litter patients. The number of former prisoners evacuated that day was 310.^{vii}

After skipping a day, Operation Reunion resumed on September 3. Three B-17s from the 5th Bombardment Wing and a C-47 transport plane flew from Italy to Popesti Airdrome to pick up the final passengers to be airlifted from Rumania. This time the 31st Fighter Group, flying twenty P-51 Mustangs, provided the escort. The mission was accomplished without enemy air opposition.^{viii}

The entire multi-day Operation Reunion concluded on September 3 without serious enemy opposition. The Fifteenth Air Force airlifted a total of 1,166 former prisoners of war from Rumania to the relative safety of Italy. 1,135 of them were Americans, and all but 75 of the Americans belonged to the Fifteenth Air Force. Fifty-five B-17 Flying Fortresses took part in the operation, escorted by 277 fighters.^{ix}

This was not the first time that the Tuskegee Airmen evacuated Americans by air to freedom. On August 22, about a week earlier, the 332nd Fighter Group had escorted six C-47s from Italy to Yugoslavia and then escorted the loaded transports back to Italy. That time they were not flying as the only fighter escorts. Eighteen P-51s took part in the mission, not only from the 332nd Fighter Group but also from the 31st, 52nd, and 325th. The Mustangs rendezvoused with the C-47s over Brindisi, escorted them to a designated Yugoslavian airfield to load the personnel, and then escorted the transports safely to Italian airspace.

The Tuskegee Airmen are most remembered for escorting bombers to and from their targets, but they should also be remembered for their other World War II missions, including the repatriation of Americans from both Yugoslavia and Rumania to Italy. In more than one sense, they were instruments of liberation.

Sources: Fifteenth Air Force mission folders for August 22 and 31, 1944, and September 1, 1944.

ⁱ Fifteenth Air Force History, 1 June-30 September 1944, AFHRA call number 670.01-3C.

ⁱⁱ Fifteenth Air Force History, 1 June-30 September 1944, AFHRA call number 670.01-3C.

ⁱⁱⁱ Col. John A. Gunn, "Escape from Rumania," *Aerospace Historian*, vol. XIII, number 3 (Autumn, 1966), pp. 115-118.

^{iv} Col. John A. Gunn, "Escape from Rumania," *Aerospace Historian*, vol. XIII, number 3 (Autumn 1966), pp. 118-120.

^v Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for August 31, 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, with date.

^{vi} Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for August 31, 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, with date.

^{vii} Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for September 1, 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, with date.

^{viii} Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for September 3, 1944, AFHRA call number 670.332, with date.

^{ix} Fifteenth Air Force History, 1 June-30 September 1944, AFHRA call number 670.01-3C.