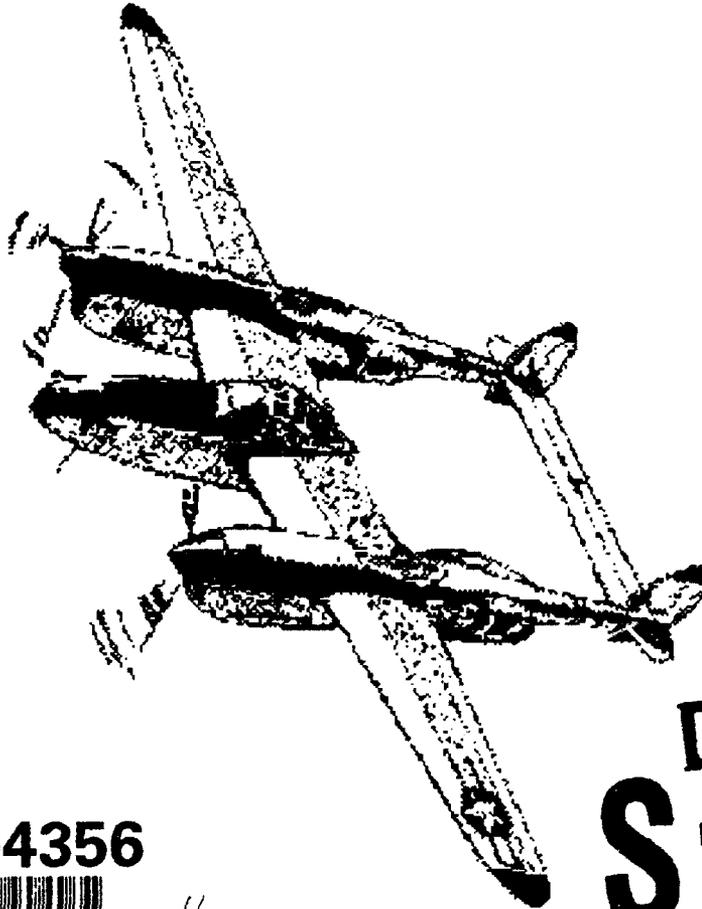


**World War II
Special Commemorative Speech**

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Bravest of the Brave



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Bravest of the Brave

America is a nation of heroes. For those who doubt it, look at our history. John Paul Jones, Nathan Hale, Andrew Jackson, Robert E. Lee: these are the leaders of men. Among the men being led are men cut from the same cloth.

The men of the Alamo. The waves of men, in the Civil War, who charged unquestioningly into the face of death, as did those at San Juan Hill and in the skies over Verdun. Heroes are of every type and from every cultural and economic status. From a financially secure family came Theodore Roosevelt Jr., Medal of Honor; and from a stony Tennessee farm came Alvin York, Medal of Honor.

What, exactly, makes a hero? They might tell you — circumstances. Having the right tools at the right place for the right action at the right time.

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Many of the right ingredients for heroics came to the airmen of World War I, World War II, the Korean War, in Southeast Asia -- but not all.

Their equipment and training lost lives that, today, would not be lost.

Look at what happened in the Iraqi skies over Baghdad. America was properly armed and prepared for Desert Storm -- and we all know the results of that.

There have been other times and other places when we were not so well prepared and when only American grit made the difference.

Many of us here today did not take part in World War II. Today, the best involvement we can have with World War II is the preservation of the memory of those who fought and died in that war. It was their duty to halt the onslaught of governments intent on subjugating democracy.

This is a story of but a few heroes from the many.

One title of honor for pilots is that of "Ace," which is earned for having destroyed five or more enemy aircraft during combat. During World War II, 690 Aces accounted for many of the 15,000 enemy aircraft shot down, as well as many of the 25,000 planes destroyed on the ground by Army Air Force fighters.

Our top two Aces of World War II, both of whom fought in the war's Pacific Theater, were Majors Richard I. "Dick" Bong and Thomas B. McGuire, Jr.

Both flew P-38s; Bong downed 40 enemy planes while McGuire is credited with 38 enemy kills.

Another identifier of heroes, the one held in highest esteem and almost revered by military members is one I mentioned earlier -- the Medal of Honor. America's highest military decoration is reserved for the bravest of the brave -- those who serve "far beyond ordinary bravery to include conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

Dick Bong and Tom McGuire also earned this coveted decoration; Bong for having shot down eight enemy planes over Borneo in 1944 and McGuire for action over Luzon on Dec. 25 and 26, 1944 -- he shot down three Japanese fighters on Christmas Day. Sadly, McGuire was awarded his nation's highest honor posthumously in 1945.

To date, the award first given on March 25, 1863, to honor extraordinary heroism by Union Army members has been awarded to but 58 airmen and 38 of those were airmen of World War II. Twenty-four of them were awarded posthumously.

It is my duty as an Air Force member to help preserve the memory of those great fighters.

For this reason, today I want to tell you of an event that involved one very special group of World War II flyers. The event that, to today's Air Force, is like the Battle of the Bulge is to the Army, the Battle of the Coral Sea to the Navy and Guadalcanal to the Marine Corps.

Today I want to tell you what happened in a small area of Romania called Ploesti -- a mission some people call the "hero maker."

On August 1, 1943, a mission to stem the flow of oil to the German war machine saw 55 B-24 Liberators with 540 of their crew members lost.

Of the airmen who courageously flew on the Ploesti, Romania, mission that tragic day, five were awarded the Medal of Honor -- the most ever awarded resulting from a single mission on a single day. Eventually, Ploesti would give us four more Medal of Honor heroes.

"Pure hell!" was how one crew member modestly described that Ploesti raid. And pure hell it was for the skilled, tenacious and courageous airmen who flew into destiny that day.

Although there isn't time to tell all 540 stories of horror that day, I would like to share what we know happened to the bravest of the brave -- a soul-stirring story of courage.

As early as 1942 U.S. war strategists believed that to end the war in Europe, the Allies had to be able to bomb strategic targets well inside Germany, then invade Europe -- and both of these called for Allied air superiority. However, one big problem stood in their way -- Germany had air supremacy over Europe.

Allied planners developed three ways to neutralize the German air force. One was to hit the German aircraft industry; the second was to devastate key transportation systems; and the last was to attack their source of fuel production.

The Allies calculated that 60 percent of the oil used to run Hitler's war machine came from facilities near Ploesti, in south central Romania. Ploesti's oil fields became high priority in the three-prong strategy to gain European air superiority.

The Ninth Air Force B-24 Liberators were to strike from Benghazi, Libya. Without a fighter escort, they were to fly north across the Mediterranean Sea, over Albania and Yugoslavia to Romania -- and, hopefully, return to Libya.

Several obstacles faced the dauntless flyers. Foremost was that the high-flying Liberators were not designed for low-level bombing, nor were their pilots and navigators trained for it. A second disadvantage was that the available American P-40s and British Hurricanes and Spitfires had too little range to help the bombers ward off any German fighters that might come after them.

Finally, to gain the element of surprise, the Liberators had to keep radio silence and strike from a level so low that if a bomber was hit, it would already be too low for its crew to bail out.

The first problem was eased when, after a short period of low-level training exercises in the Libyan desert, the crews felt they were ready for the task.

Finally, at dawn on Sunday, August 1, 1943, 178 Liberators, each carrying 311 tons of bombs, left their windswept, sandy airfields in Libya and roared north on the first leg of what they hoped would be a 2,700-mile round trip.

Auxiliary fuel tanks had been added for extra range and additional armor plating installed -- added weight from both would slow air speed somewhat on the long trip.

Disaster struck early when the mission's lead B-24, which carried the mission navigator, developed a mechanical problem, wobbled and plunged nose first into the Mediterranean Sea. Hours later, this would have a disastrous impact when the largest force of bombers ever assembled neared its target area.

While maintaining radio silence, the air armada came apart when it encountered unexpected heavy clouds over Greece's Pindus mountains.

The scattered groups, unable to communicate, pressed on across Yugoslavia and Bulgaria and into Romania.

There, some of the aircraft took a wrong turn and headed north too early. Due to their navigational mistake, instead of seeing the smokestacks of Ploesti, the lost pilots saw the church spires of Bucharest.

That navigational error made those bombers strike from the west instead of the south, as planned, which complicated the job of the bombardiers to find and hit their assigned targets.

More importantly, the element of surprise was gone. The Germans were preparing a bloody welcome.

As the first B-24s neared the oil fields at full throttle and but a few feet above the ground, their crews watched as haystacks and railroad cars became German 88mm anti-aircraft gun positions -- firing point blank into the Liberators.

Also, to their surprise, lumbering barrage balloons floated high over the targets, their anchoring steel cables ready to chew away the wings of the attacking Liberators.

After the first wave of bombers found their targets, trailing B-24s had to fly through billowing flames and intense black smoke.

Although he had completed more than the required number of combat missions, and knowing the danger of this mission, Maj. John Louis Jerstad volunteered to lead a formation into attack.

Three miles short of the target, his plane was already badly damaged by flak and enemy fighters, and was on fire.

Although over a field suitable for landing, the Racine, Wisconsin, native held his lead Liberator on course so its bombs could be released on target. Minutes later flames engulfed the aircraft and caused it to plunge to earth, killing all aboard.

Another of the first bomber groups to hit the target area was led by Lt. Col. Addison Earl Baker. As his plane neared the target, it, too, was set afire by anti-aircraft fire. Like Major Jerstad, he could have made an emergency landing in nearby fields but chose to go after his target, which he bombed with devastating effect.

Only then did he leave formation, dodging other aircraft with superb airmanship. The Chicago, Illinois, native then made a valiant attempt to gain enough altitude for his crew to bail out -- but the heavily damaged Liberator would not respond. The flaming Liberator slowly turned away from the formation then rolled to earth killing Colonel Baker and his crew.

By now the groups that had gotten separated from the others over the mountains charged down on Ploesti from the west -- on a collision course with those already striking from the south.

After his formation became separated from the main force in the clouds, Col. Leon William Johnson, of Columbia, Missouri, went on to Ploesti.

When he got there, Colonel Johnson saw that the targets assigned to his group had already been attacked. Although any form of surprise had been lost, Colonel Johnson pressed the attack while dodging other B-24s that came roaring through the smoke and fires -- from the south.

Col. John Riley Kane, a pilot from McGregor, Texas, despite heavy flak from the ground, unbelievable pounding from exploding delayed-action bombs dropped earlier, relentless harassment by fighters, and being blinded by intense oil fire smoke, gallantly inflicted severe losses to enemy oil resources.

By this time utter pandemonium had broken out.

Amid the smoke, flames, flak, and fighter attacks, swarms of low-flying Liberators tried to dodge each other while attacking the enemy.

Although met with intensive anti-aircraft fire and attacking enemy fighter planes, Colonel Kane continued the mission against the oil fields.

Surrounded by fierce explosions from delayed-action bombs dropped earlier, Colonel Kane skillfully maneuvered his Liberator, attacking untouched targets.

Piloting a B-24 in the last formation, 2nd Lt. Lloyd Herbert Hughes's Liberator arrived in the target area well after the initial attacks and in the middle of all the pandemonium.

As Hughes approached the target zone through intense fire, his plane was repeatedly jarred by direct hits from large- and small-caliber anti-aircraft fire. He could see sheets of gasoline streaming from the left wing and could smell it running out the of the aircraft's open bomb bay.

Although Hughes saw grain fields suitable for a forced landing, and knowing the hazards of entering a blazing target area with gasoline sloshing from his crippled aircraft, the Alexandria, Louisiana, native courageously flew to the target area.

As quickly as they had flown into the hell-like flames and smoke, Lieutenant Hughes and his crew emerged as a ball of fire. Their aircraft exploded, killing all aboard.

At mission's end, of the 178 Liberators that began the perilous attack, only 164 reached Ploesti -- 41 had been downed during the attack and another 14 lost to various causes while traveling to and from Ploesti.

Sadly, although 40 percent of their targets were successfully found and destroyed, 540 brave crew members gave their lives during that day of hell over Ploesti.

The mission's fury was evidenced by the fact that on returning to home base in Libya, only 30 of the B-24s, after 30 days of repair, were able to fly.

Although the Liberator force was decimated over Ploesti that August day in 1943, other B-24s, with skilled, tenacious and courageous flyers, returned time and time again until the flow of oil to the Third Reich was little more than a trickle.

The unyielding efforts of those 540 brave airmen who fell on August 1, 1943, ultimately helped bring the war in Europe to an end and at a cost of fewer casualties.

The bravery of those men that day, and not Ploesti, was truly the "Hero Maker."

Today, unlike during World War II, American airmen no longer have to sacrifice lives because they don't have the proper arms for modern war. We have learned what the outcome will be when we put a well-trained pilot in the cockpit of a "tomorrow" aircraft.

Desert Storm was the first war won primarily from the air. It was also the war with the least American casualties. Why?

We had the right tools at the right place for the right action at the right time -- and, as I said before, we also had American grit.

Our defenses are being cut back, and there is nothing wrong with that -- IF -- we cut away only the fat and not the muscle and bone.

We should ensure the United States never allows its defenses to go backward as it did before and after World War II and again in the late 1970s.

If it does, when our military forces are called to fight, the nation won't pay in American dollars, but in American blood -- like at Ploesti.

Thank you.