

# Reunion To Reunite Surviving Ploesti Raiders

By John Andrew Prime • jprime@gannett.com • February 5, 2011

A reunion of men who took part in World War II's most celebrated raids will take place this fall at Barksdale Air Force Base.

Technically, it will be a reunion of the 98th Bomb Group, known as The Pyramidiers, one of several B-24 groups that formed and trained at Barksdale during the war, and which gained fame as a bloodied and battered participant in the historic Aug. 1, 1943 low-level, long-range attack on vital oil refineries in Nazi-controlled Romania

"World War II Ploesti raiders from all units are welcome, regardless of their level of participation — aviators, ground crew, etc.," said Lt. Col. Steven R. Smith, with the 917th Operations Group, part of the 307th Bomb Wing with the Air Force Reserve at Barksdale.

The reunion will be Oct. 17-21 with headquarters at the Holiday Inn Downtown, 102 Lake St., Shreveport.

Barksdale's Air Force Reserve 307th Bomb Wing is home to the reactivated 343rd Bomb Squadron, best known for its part in the most famous Ploesti raid. That almost-suicidal 1943 mission saw nearly 200 B-24 bombers fly a low-level attack from bases in north Africa across the Mediterranean Sea.

The attack heavily damaged several refineries, but the ensuing action resulted in heavy losses of aircraft and crews. About a third of the

airplanes and crews that took part were lost and few of the airplanes that survived were in any condition to fly again after the attack. The 98th Bomb Group, led by Shreveporter Col. John Riley "Killer" Kane, suffered heavy losses, as did the 343rd Bomb Squadron, which lost half its B-24 bombers.

In all, there were five Medals of Honor awarded for heroism in that raid, the most ever earned in one action. At least three of the fliers who earned the medal — Kane, then-Col. Leon Johnson and Major John Jerstad — were associated with Barksdale. Kane and Johnson survived the raid, with Johnson later achieving four-star rank. But Jerstad and the other two Medal of Honor recipients, Capt. Lloyd R. Hughes of Texas and Lt. Col. Addison E. Baker, died in the attack.

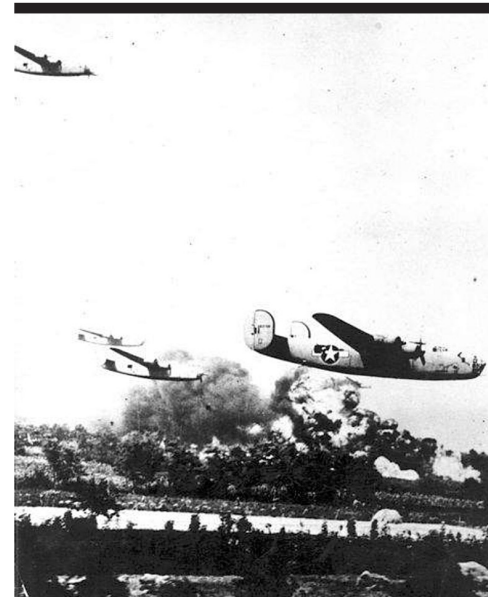
"We think we'll have 25 to 30 guys who were intimately involved with the raids, probably mostly ground crew members," said Bill Seals, president of the 98th Bomb Group Association and former B-47 flier who was with the unit from 1955 to 1959. He said there would be at least one notable flight crew member from the historic Aug. 1 low-level mission, pilot Robert Sternfels. Sternfels flew the B-24 named "The Sandman," the bomber seen flying through oily smoke over a Ploesti refinery's smokestacks in one of the most famous action photographs of the war.

"But we're interested in anybody who was assigned to any of the units that flew Ploesti missions, including the 19 high-level raids that were flown in 1944," Seals said. "Even if they were on KP that day, to us they're a Ploesti raider."

The reunion also is open to survivors of people in the units that flew the missions, who are welcome to bring memorabilia and have a chance to talk with people who served and fought with their relatives, Seals said.

The program for the reunion, including its banquet keynote speaker, is still being put together, Seals said.

One key researcher who will be on hand is Robert Coalter, executive director of the Dallas-based U.S. Army Air Corps Museum.



Consolidated B-24s fly just over treetop level on their way to bomb Nazi-controlled oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, on Aug. 1, 1943. (Special to THE TIMES)

Coalter said he is still putting together his presentation, but said he plans to bring a lot for people to see and hear.

"I'll be bringing a fairly large amount of memorabilia for a display, stuff ranging from uniforms to pictures," he said. "That will include raw footage of missions, including training for the low-level mission."

The importance of getting this out to reunions that include participants and survivors is that people in photos and films who have been lost to history can be identified by their friends and loved ones, restoring them to their place in history.

"When we have someone who can identify a face in a photo, that's gold for us," Coalter said.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Reunion Coordinator Dennis Posey at (770) 509-7734 or dennis\_posey@att.net; event secretary-treasurer Suzanne Mioduszewski at (734) 678-3838 or suzannes@me.com; or 98th Bomb Group Association President Bill Seals at (281) 395-3005 or colbillyseals@hotmail.com.