

PRISONER IN BUCHAREST

by

Lt. John McCormick

(Lt. John McCormick, 22 years of age, resides at 557 Pierce Street, Gary, Indiana.)

I entered the Air Corps in April, 1942, and received my wings in May, 1943. I received my PRE-FLIGHT training at San Antonio, Texas; PRIMARY at Vernon, Texas; BASIC at Sherman, Texas; and ADVANCE at Lubbock, Texas. I was sent from Lubbock to Tucson, Arizona, to fly in light bombardment. Instead, I was made co-pilot of a B-24. I was co-pilot for a month and got in 60 hours as such and checked out as first pilot. About the last of June I started getting my crew. I got my engineer, assistant engineer, and radio operator. We transferred out of the bomb crew and transferred into another group at Tucson. I was being checked out as first pilot and had 15 hours in as same, but had to start all over again to take all my checks. I got in around 75 to 90 hours at Tucson where I got the rest of my crew. I flew on different missions there. Just before I left there around the first part of September, I got my co-pilot and navigator. They had just left school. We all received a ten-day furlough and the commanding officer told us to make the most of it. From Tucson, we were sent to Burning, Nebraska, and assigned to the 449th Bomb Crew. We stayed here from the latter part of September to November 19th. We then received our plans and were sent to Topeka, Kansas; from there to Florida and left for overseas on November 28, 1943, by the southern route, arriving in Italy December 26, 1943. The 449th

and 450th were the only two groups operating during the month of January. We flew every day and had a pretty good record. It wasn't until February that the rest of the bomb groups came to Italy and we started flying in bigger formations. At that time we were flying from 36 to 60 ships which was our measurement during the month of January. My first bombing mission was January 19th to Purugia, Italy, where I encountered my first flak and where one of my best friends was shot down. We didn't see many fighters during the month of January. There was a lot of cold weather in North Italy; the temperature got as low as 50° below zero. Several gunners froze their feet and were in the hospital a couple of weeks. During the latter part of March and the first of April, we started to fly into southern Germany and Austria and encountered real enemy opposition.

On April 4, we were briefed to go to Bucharest and we were told by intelligence also to expect at least 200 enemy fighters in that area. The flak was pretty heavy around the city. Due to bad weather the take-off time was cancelled for several hours and it was quite late before we actually did get the "go" signal to take off. The weather still had not cleared up. Therefore, we had to form our formations above the overcast. Since this was the first time we had formed above the overcast, there was a lot of confusion and it took quite a long time to find your own lead plane. All of them were up there flying every direction. After a while we found our group. Just before we took off, the boys had a premonition they did not want to take off. The name of the plane was "Born to Lose", which the boys thought to be unlucky, so it was changed to "Hoosier Honey".

We were supposed to rendezvous over a certain point with other formations; and due to the confusion of forming above the overcast, we failed to reach this point at this time; and since the other groups were not in sight, we took off towards the target by ourselves. We ran into considerable bad weather on the way over the Adriatic. After getting above this, it was pretty clear. We thought that we were going to go so far; and if the rest of the group didn't catch up, we would turn around in circles and wait for them to catch up with us. Our group commander continued straight on course. That day we were supposed to have fighter escorts (P-38's). Usually P-38's didn't have the range to escort us to the target. They would get within a half hour of the target and would have to turn home. That day, due to the confusion of take-off time being changed and bad weather, we did not see any escort fighters at all. We were briefed to hit our target which was the Marshalling Yards in Bucharest at about 1350. About 1230 we hit the Danube River and everyone in the plane still had a funny feeling that they were duck soup for the enemy, since we had only 28 planes and no fighter escort. The navigator pointed down to the Danube River and kind of laughed saying. "The old Danube doesn't look so blue to me, just sort of muddy and dirty." The waist gunner called off that there was a big formation of bombing planes way off in the distance. We thought they were fortresses that were going to hit the target that day; but just as soon as we came over the city, the formation turned out to be enemy fighters. Just as soon as the bombardier yelled "Bombs away" and we closed the bomb bay doors, the tail gunner yelled out "Here they come".

They were attacking our low flight of six planes in waves of seven and eight abreast. We could see their 20 mm. shells, that they were going over our wing and exploding up ahead of us. On the first enemy assault on our flight of six planes, they knocked down two of the bombers. Out of the 28 planes, since we were the lowest flight and farthest to the left, we were the most vulnerable to attack and it was evident that they were signalling us out as the ones that they intended to knock down. It was a running fight with these fighters. They were so thick and came in so fast that the gunners didn't have a chance to even rest or let their guns cool. The tail gunner and waist gunner were calling out enemy fighters that were being knocked down. The tail gunner reported four enemy parachutists in the air. That day we were hit by ME-109 and FW-190. The ME-110's carried rockets and after about ten minutes of running fight with the enemy fighters, the ship right directly below us in our flight was shot down. I happened to be looking out of the window at the time and saw it go down in smoke. That left three of us still in formation. On the next attack the plane that was flying on the left wing of our flight was crippled up pretty badly. He had No.2 engine on fire and the plane was riddled up no end. It got out of control and crossed up in front of the flight leader and my plane, causing us to get in his prop wash. We were having quite a time trying to keep from sliding into each other. This plane finally went out of our way and started to go down. The waist gunner started to report eight parachutists leaving this plane. At this time the ball gunner reported that he was out of ammunition, and the tail turret gunner

reported that his hydraulic line was shot away and that his guns were inoperative. A couple of seconds later the e. g. said he was out of ammunition, leaving the two waist gunners and the nose turret the only guns in the ship working. Another wave of fighters came in at us and knocked down the flight leader. He went down in a cloud of smoke. His plane was burning very badly. The tail gunner at this time reported that we were the only ship left in formation, the other five being shot down. I tried to get my plane in another formation for protection. In trying to do so, I nearly crashed into one of the planes in the lead flight and the co-pilot yelled "Move it back out in the open". Just about this time, when we did move it back, two fighters came in from the motion and I yelled to the nose gunner to keep a lookout for these two fighters. One fighter that came in, instead of hitting my plane, headed for the lead flight and was shot down. This left just one. He started to come and then changed his mind, and everyone gave a sigh of relief. This time we thought we were going to actually make it home since the fighters had no longer started to come in from the back of the plane. Besides, we were seeing only very few fighters around our formation. Then this fighter which turned around and started to go away, turned again and came back. This time I could see his wing guns firing at us in sort of an orange flame and my nose turret gunner was starting to shoot his guns. His tracers were hitting all around the plane. This fighter that attempted to come in was a ME-109 and just as soon as he went out of sight of my view, I heard something that sounded like a riveting machine in the bottom of the plane. Dust started to fly around the flight deck. About a

second later the whole front end of the plane was set on fire and it came up between my legs and the co-pilot's legs as we were sitting in the seats. I was more or less dumbfounded at the time. I just could not realize that the plane was actually on fire. However, it didn't take long before I rang the alarm bell and everyone was ordered to leave the plane. The fire got so hot that we actually had to leave our seats. The co-pilot got out of his seat and I got out of mine next and sat down on the flight deck to put on my parachute. At this time I thought the navigator would have the bombay doors open. It was his job as he was the closest to it. When he had started to go down to push the handle and open up the doors, the fire had started underneath the flight deck and it scared him so that he tried to get back on the flight deck. The plane went into a dive at this time and the gravity caused us to be thrown to the floor. The co-pilot, engineer, and myself attempted to push the navigator back into the bombay so one of us could go through the fire and also open up the bombay door. This was impossible as the gravity was so strong that we could hardly lift our hands from the floor of the flight deck. Fire and smoke were so thick that we were having a hard time breathing. The engineer finally was able to get off the floor and opened the top hatch of the plane. We decided to go through the top hatch, anything to get out of the fire, even though some of us had no chutes. When he opened the top hatch, the cold air more or less released the hold the gravity had on us and it lessened the pressure and also cleared a lot of the smoke and fire away from us. The co-pilot by then had gone up between the pilot and the co-pilot's seat and opened the emergency bomb

door release. When I looked around, I saw the bombay doors opening. I couldn't believe it. This time the navigator who was slumped over the side of the flight deck, was surrounded by flames, licking around his legs. He turned around the open bombay door and fell through. The engineer and myself pushed the co-pilot out of the flight deck and then I pushed the engineer out of the flight deck and then I crawled to the edge of the floor myself and crawled to a point where I would fall through. Just as I was hanging in the balance, I noticed that there was a parachute opened and it was hanging in the back end of the bombay door. I couldn't figure out which one had opened up their chute too early. I fell through the plane. As soon as I hit the air, my helmet flew off. I pulled the rip cord and the chute opened with a big jerk. I was so low that I just swung once and hit the ground. At the same time I saw my plane crash about a quarter of a mile away. It sort of made a loud thump as the gas exploded.

My prschute landed right in the outskirts of Tiganesti, which is about 120 miles south of Bucharest. I had aprained my ankle and was unable to walk. When I did get up to my feet, this was my sore discovery. Big crowds of people had come out from town armed with clubs, pitch forks and shotguns. I was so tired from the fire and still choking that I didn't give a darn whether they came up then and there and shot me. It would have been a relief. I started to walk towards them then and they motioned me to lie down. One peasant singled himself out from the rest of the crowd, came up to me and said "Russki?", which means "Are you a Russian?". I shook my head "No". He then

wanted to know whether or not I was English. Again I shook my head. The next question was "Americanski?". This time I shook my head in the affirmative. Right away they began jabbering. This one fellow threw his arms around me and said "Comrade". At this time I had thought that I had gotten in with the underground in Rumania. This peasant wouldn't let anyone near me and yelled for someone to pick up my parachute which had collapsed besides me. He motioned to me to walk and when I could not, he carried me piggy back into the town. The crowd, gathering as I was going into town, got thicker and thicker. We stopped at one of the houses at the edge of town. I took off my heavy equipment and asked for a glass of water (apa) in Rumanian. I drank the water and they wanted to know if I spoke French or German. As I was being carried into town I noticed that the other formations of bombers were just going over town. I felt that if our formation could have done a few 360° turns in the air, I wouldn't be on the ground now. When they started asking me what language I could speak, I said "Se habla espanol?". (Does anyone speak Spanish?) However, my knowledge of Spanish is rather limited and I was just as well pleased that they didn't. They then asked me if I bombed Bucharest ----- I pretended not to know what they were talking about. All of this time the peasant would not let anyone get too close to me. He was around middle age and wore one of those big bee hive hats. While I was sitting there, waiting for them to bring a car around to take me into the city, a lot of the girls in town kept sneaking up and getting a look at me like a monkey in a cage. Instead of a prisoner, I felt more or less like a hero come home. There was no cheering

done but no hard feelings either. They were very cheerful about my being an American.

I was finally brought to a little brick building in the town which looked like a Justice Building, put in a room and all of the time. They finally locked the door; then they peeked in the window. I was there about fifteen minutes by myself. Then my tail gunner came in. This was the first I knew that anyone had gotten out of the plane besides those that were in the flight deck with me; the ones in the flight deck being the co-pilot, engineer, navigator, and myself. He baled out of the back end of the plane. We certainly were very happy to see each other. I asked him a lot of questions about who got out and who didn't get out. He didn't seem to know very much but thought the two waist gunners got out. I was pretty sure at this time that the ball turret gunner was killed because right after the last fighter came in, the ball turret didn't move any more. Furthermore, the whole plane was riddled in the back. He said that the whole back end of the ship caught on fire as well as the front end. When the tail gunner heard the alarm bell go off, he walked to the west window and put his chute on. The plane took a dive, and one of the waist gunners threw him out of the plane. The same waist gunner went to the other window and threw the other boy out. The only way he could get him out was to lean out of the window, pull the rip cord and drag him out of the plane.

We had been in the little brick building for about one-half hour when the door opened and in came my co-pilot and one of the waist gunners. The co-pilot's face was burned and a lot of his hair was singed off where he was burned. The first thing he said

was "The navigator is dead". "How do you know?" I said. He told me that after he was captured, he landed right near the waist gunner and both were walking along when the peasants came up and captured them. The peasants motioned to the ground, and sure enough, it was the navigator although the waist gunner was unable to recognize him. He said the parachute pack was still open but all that was left was about three shroud lines. Right then I knew that it was the navigator's chute hanging in the bombay door just before I left the plane. All of his clothes were burned from him from the waist down. The co-pilot said he couldn't get close to him because the smell from the burning was so terrific. The peasants said two were dead, but I didn't know who the other could be. Of the five who got out of the flight deck, I knew two were prisoners and one was dead. The only one unaccounted for was the engineer and I figured he got away --- at least he wasn't captured so far. The waist gunner said that he was the last one left in the back of the plane when he went out. That left one waist gunner still out that we were sure of. About two hours later the door opened and in walked this waist gunner. He had hurt his ankle and had hidden underneath a bombay door in the countryside, and the next thing he knew a peasant was pounding him on the back telling him to get up. We were kept in this room until about midnight, or about nine hours. They brought us in some eggs and black bread for us and we ate all of it. We tried to sleep on the floor that night. The whole area was guarded by about 50 or 75 Rumanian soldiers. About midnight they motioned for us to leave the room and we followed them out the door. They started loading our equipment on the truck and

just as I was ready to get on the truck, I heard someone inside the truck say "Who's got a match?" Right away I knew there were more Americans inside the truck. When I got into the truck, I found out there were about ten in the truck from two other crews of my squadron. One of them was the operations officer who was the flight leader that day and one was the boy whose plane got out of control and ran into us a couple of times. From one of the boys I found out that my nose gunner was dead, as he had seen his dog tags and also identified one of his pictures from a half burned wallet that was brought in by the Rumanians. Right then we knew that the bombardier never got out of the plane, and we were pretty sure that he was dead. We were positive that four were dead.

They took us to a military garrison close by in the town of Alexandria, and they treated the boys who were wounded. A guard stole my watch that night. The next morning we were put on board a truck and taken into the town of Turmu-margureala. Here we met another crew from our squadron who was shot down; and since there was an air raid alert on, they kept us in the building and told us that we were going to be taken on to Bucharest as soon as the all clear was sounded. On the way into town we saw two Germans, and the Rumanian guards said "Dutch" and showed them in sign language that we were Rumanian prisoners and would not let the Germans get hold of us. We arrived in Bucharest that night after a long truck ride. We were taken to what had been the Royal Guard Garrison in town and here they put us into a dormitory and gave us a nice dinner, some thing similar to champagne, lamb chops, French fried potatoes. We thought it wasn't so bad

being a prisoner after all. In the morning we were moved to another smaller dormitory inside this garrison which was cleaner. A lot of the Rumanian high officials questioned us as to where we were from and where we were going when we were shot down. All we said was that "We came form the United States". They gave us a lot of Rumanian cigarettes and brought in two barbers to shave us. Since we came back to Bucharest which was our bombing mission we found that we had knocked out their water supply and their electric plant. So the people spit at us and called us criminals and gangsters. We found out later on that the Rumanians had a practice alert before the bombers came over. They were just coming out of their air raid shelters when we crossed over the Rumanian territory, and the people just couldn't believe it. There were a bunch of Rumanian women and children around. The Rumanians made no attempt to get them out of that area when we came in to bomb the Marshalling Yards; and, as a result, a lot of the people were killed. For this we thought we were going to be hanged. The Germans had told them that we were paid \$1,000.00 every time we came to bomb their city.

The next day the Major, who had been shot down on the 5th of April, was brought into the camp and he became our new C. O. of the prisoners. We had been using our operations officer who was the captain before. We had 19 prisoners when we came into the camp. About two days later this was jumped to 70. We didn't do much from then on. They asked us what we wanted to eat and we said we would let them give us what they wanted to. They started to interrogate us about a half hour with the Germans and a half hour with the Rumanians. I was being asked questions by

a Rumanian. When he found out I was from Gary, he told me he was born in East Chicago and left the states in 1920 to join the army. They promised to send us up to an American Prison Camp in Brosov where the boys were from the Floesti raid. Those boys were getting swell treatment. They told us we would be there in a couple of weeks; so we waited patiently. We didn't know where or when our air force would come up and drop bombs in another city. Everything went along pretty well until the night of April 12, 1944.

(Lt. McCormick kept a diary in a small black book during the time he was prisoner. The following items show the days and nights of terror, caused by the continued bombings of Bucharest.)

April 12, 1944 Air raid siren went off at 11:00. People were running up and down the street. The all clear sounded about a half an hour later. No bombs were dropped in the city. We didn't appreciate what the siren actually meant.

April 15, 1944 The sky was a complete overcast. The siren went off at 11:00 in the morning and we were told that after the first siren that if another siren sounded that would last a half minute, that the planes would be only five minutes away from town and heading our way. The second alarm sounded very shortly. A few minutes later anti-aircraft guns started shooting. Since it was overcast, the planes would drop their bombs in the middle