

Meet 'Killer' Kane!

The Flying Colonel From Texas Who Led Ploesti Raid Is Hard and Mean but His Men Respect His Ability

Lieut. Col. Robert H. Parham, in
Plane Talk magazine

THEY said it all through the squadron. "The 'Killer's' a great guy, but tough—mean. Don't ever cross him. You get on his list and you're through."

The major, the Killer's best friend, learned that the hard way. He was operations officer under Col. John R. (Killer) Kane when our group moved overseas, and looked on Kane as his best friend.

The missions on Bengasi and Tobruk and attacks on enemy shipping from the air were not too tough, and the major flew often. As staff offi-



cer, he didn't have to go—he just flew for the hell of it.

Then he got himself a stuka, abandoned by the Nazis south of Tobruk. It was only a couple of days until he had it purring like a kitten.

"You're going to kill yourself in that firetrap, Bob," Kane warned him several times. Then, sure enough, he had a crash landing, got a broken nose, and was parked for a while in the hospital.

With that, Kane grounded him—no more such flying. Kane didn't want to lose a useful staff officer in useless sorties. The major took it without comment, and stood his grounding for six months. Then, when there was fighting over Naples, he yielded to temptation and went along. A message was handed to him as soon as he returned. "Report to the commanding officer immediately."

"You're familiar with the orders of this group, major," Kane barked. "You're through. Either you stand court-martial or I'll relieve you

from this command and recommend you be reduced to your original rank. Take your choice."

A week after the major told me this story he was a captain again, looking for an assignment.

Few people know much about Col. Kane. He apparently had a gentle upbringing as son of a Texas Baptist preacher. Today he is a tobacco chewing, bull-like man, with a neck so big that they had to get a special new ribbon for the congressional medal they hung on him.

I once flew with Kane in the lead ship on a mission against shipping in Navarino bay, on the western tip of the Peloponnese. I've never seen a big plane handled as Kane maneuvered his Liberator when the fighters jumped us. When they'd start coming in, he'd bow his tree stump arms and twist, turn, push and haul the control gear as a sergeant drives a jeep. The fighters never did get a decent shot at us, and we shot down four of the enemy. Because it was a successful mission, and spectacular, with seven American war correspondents participating in it, several high decorations were awarded. But Kane, leader and star of the show, flatly refused to recommend any of his crew for awards, and declined to permit a recommendation for himself.

"It was routine," he said. "Be-

sides, we got lost coming back to base and damn near cracked into a mountain by stumbling around."

* * *

After Navarino it was easy enough for me to believe the story of Kane's encounter with the Messerschmitt 110 over Bengasi. To understand it, you must remember that one of the cardinal principles of heavy bombardment is to fly in tight formation and never leave the protecting gunfire of the ships flying with you, for a straggler is easy prey to enemy fighters. This day Kane was leading his formation, as usual. His bombardier muffed the bomb run and failed to get the high explosives away. Disgusted, Kane pulled out of the formation, headed back, and made a second run to drop his bombs.

The 110 jumped him immediately, then chased him nearly 200 miles. Time after time the enemy fighter would make a pass at Kane's Liberator, and every time he'd get set Kane would throw his big ship into a tight turn into the oncoming fighter, and the fighter would break away. In alternating dives Kane brought the Liberator from 20,000 feet down to deck level, fighting that Messerschmitt with maneuvers until it had expended its last ammunition in the pursuit. Then immediately Kane turned about and chased the fighter in an effort to turn the tables and bring him down.

Kane was awarded the silver star.

"It was a damn fool stunt," he says today.

* * *

If Killer Kane is a man of two faces, the officers and men who serve under him in his "Pyramidiers" heavy bombardment group have seen only one of them. It is a face compounding the cruel urge he showed in his scorched earth policy, the arrogant belief he holds that no other man can fly as skillfully as he, and the adamant will he expresses in permitting no difference of opinion in a subordinate. In the stress of combat he is ill tempered, obstinate, completely unapproachable. These qualities do not make him the crusty "old man" with a heart of gold to those who serve him.

Whether Kane's leadership has saved the lives of numbers of his bomber crews cannot be determined. But the records of efficiency of his group in combat are among the best established in this war.

When plans were drawn for the historic bombing of the Rumanian oil refineries at Ploesti, Kane's

voice was raised the loudest of all against attacking at low level. The method meant certainty of heavy casualties. But once the decision was made, over his protest, Kane ordered all his available crews, including those which had finished their prescribed tours of duty, to participate. And Kane led the attack himself.

The Ploesti attack won three congressional medals of honor for its participants—the first time in history more than one such award has been made for a single action. Kane received one of the awards, Col. Leon W. Johnson another, and third went posthumously to Maj. John L. Jerstad of Racine, Wis. The rest of the story of the mission, tremendously successful despite losses of 55 Liberators out of 177 that flew, is now legend: How Kane and Johnson and Jerstad led their formations into the blazing inferno of their already bombed targets; how they averted enemy defenses at housetop level and wrecked the greatest source of Nazi fuel; how Kane's "Pyramidiers" suffered the heaviest losses among the five groups which took part; how Kane held together

his battered Liberator, "Hail Columbia," with sheer will power, and brought it safely back on two engines, in what experts said was an "unflyable condition," to a landing on the isle of Cyprus.

The heavy losses suffered at Ploesti, running to more than 40% of the ships and men, occasioned the nearest approach to sentiment I have ever heard from Kane.



→ "It was awful," he said, "to see those big Liberators falling around the target like swatted flies."

In the first flush of the great victory, Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton ordered promotions for a large portion of the participants.

First Lieut. Royden L. Lebrecht of Denison, Tex., who had been promoted only shortly before the raid and who flew one of the wing ships to Kane, finished his tour of combat duty nearly a month later and was ordered to return with plane and crew to the United States. He wanted a captaincy before he was routed home. He reported to 9th air force headquarters at Cairo and inquired whether the promotion policy for Ploesti veterans still held. He was told that it did not and that he had no chance.

Kane was in Cairo at the same time and Lebrecht's request was reported to him. "What the hell does the kid want?" the Killer exploded. "He was promoted only a few weeks ago." That ended the conversation. But later in the day Kane was seen to enter Gen. Brereton's office for a conference. The following morning Lebrecht got his captain's bars.

"I used to think I'd never understand Col. Kane," Lebrecht told me later. "Most of the fliers are afraid of him and they know he'd court-martial his own brother if the guy disobeyed his orders. What they don't know is what I didn't know, either, until just the other day, when I was ready to leave."

"So now I'm wondering. I think maybe he hates to see those kids go out when he knows some of them aren't coming back. So he gets sore tough as hell—and toughest of all when he's sending them out. Maybe that's why his gang of kids take off so sore that they're hell bent to destroy anything they see."

"Now if he can do the things he does to guys he loves, you can imagine how he'd treat somebody he hates. By God, he'd kill them. And he does."

'Killer' Kane Saw No Japs, So Son Frets

Miami, Beach, Fla.—(AP)—Col. John R. (Killer) Kane, who won the congressional medal of honor for his part in the Ploesti oilfield air raid, is worried about the effect of the war on his 5 year old son.

The kids of America don't realize that war is a deadly serious business, the hero of 25 bombing missions said Tuesday at the army air forces redistribution station here, where he is awaiting a new assignment.

"When I got home the boy kept pointing his finger and yelling 'ack-ack-ack' at everything in the house," the husky flier declared. "He couldn't understand that when you shoot a gun you kill somebody."

"He wanted to know how many Japs I had knocked down. He was disappointed when I told him I'd never even seen one."



Col. John Kane at ease and (upper left) in action

De bladzijden 16, 17 en 18 zijn grotendeels gewijd aan krantenartikelen m.b.t. het onderwerp "Ploesti"....Waarom zult u zeggen, waarom nu? Het heeft weer te maken met de landelijke bijeenkomst, die we op 20 mei in Soesterberg hadden bij onze Amerikaanse vrienden. Tijdens het filprogramma konden we o.a. een uitgebreide documentaire zien over de aanvallen op de olievelden door de Amerikaanse luchtmacht. Deze krantenartikelen, menen we, sluiten hier mooi op aan/red.

MEDALS FOR 43 BADGER FLIERS

All Took Part in Raid
on Ploesti

WASHINGTON, Nov. 16—(AP)—Award of decorations to 43 Wisconsin fliers who took part in the low level bombardment attack on the Ploesti oil refineries in Rumania on Aug. 1 was announced

today by the war department.

In all, 1,548 officers and enlisted men were honored for the mission which covered more than 2,000 miles and destroyed 42 per cent of the total Rumanian refining capacity in a devastating blow at Axis war economy.

The congressional medal of honor went to Maj. Jack L. Jerstad of Racine missing in action since the sortie, and will be presented Sunday to his father, A. H. Jerstad in Holy Communion church in Racine.

Milwaukee area men with their citations:

THOMAS A. HOFF, staff ser-

UIT: Milwaukee Sentinel Woensdag 17-12-1943.

← UIT: Milwaukee Journal
dinsdag 21 december 1943.

geant, 1426 N. 11th St., Milwaukee. As tail gunner on a B-24, Staff Sgt. Hoff acquitted himself with great skill as his aircraft flew through one of the most heavily defended areas in Europe. When the plane on which he served was severely damaged and gasoline was streaming from one of its fuel tanks, Staff Sgt. Hoff, with heroic calm and unflinching loyalty, remained steadfast by his guns and continued on, in the face of almost insurmountable odds, over the blazing target. His heroic devotion to duty brings honor both to himself and to the forces in which he so bravely served. (Reported prisoner of war.)

BRONZE OAK LEAF CLUSTER TO DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

Edmund F. Janic, first lieutenant, 3757 S. Kansas Av., Milwaukee.

Bernard E. Leimbach, first lieutenant, 4233 W. Spaulding Pl., Milwaukee. (Reported missing in action).

Michael J. Trick, staff sergeant, Hales Corners. (Reported missing in action).

DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

Raymond J. Nathe, first lieutenant, 1530 S. 22nd St., Milwaukee.

Leroy E. Zaruba, first lieutenant, West Allis.

Boyden Supiano, second lieutenant, Racine.

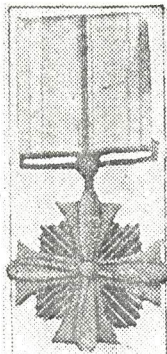
Warren H. Ware, second lieutenant, 2750 N. Cramer St., Milwaukee.

Harry J. Machos, technical sergeant, 932 E. Center St., Milwaukee.

Robert R. Driver, staff sergeant, Racine.

Arthur W. Peterleus, staff sergeant, 2671A N. 7th Lane, Milwaukee.

Bernard G. Traudt, staff sergeant, 2007 N. 6th St., Milwaukee. (Reported missing in action).



D. F. CROSS



PETERLEUS



JANIC



LEIMBACH



ZARUBA



TRICK

HONORED Five Milwaukee county men who won the distinguished flying cross or bronze oak leaf clusters for that medal for their part in the sensational low level bombardment of the Ploesti oil fields in Rumania Aug. 1 are pictured above.

Nazi Backer Is Killed

Madrid, Spain-(P)-German newspapers Wednesday announced the death of Karl Henkell, 55, a champagne maker who was one of the first Germans to finance the Nazi party movement, from injuries suffered in a recent Allied bombing of Wiesbaden.

Score Is 713 to 146

Admiral Halsey's Headquarters, South Pacific-(UP)-An official compilation Thursday showed that the south Pacific air force definitely destroyed 713 Japanese planes from Dec. 17 to Feb. 13 in the campaign to neutralize Rabaul, against the loss of 146 Allied planes—a ratio of 4.9 to 1.



—Acme Telephoto

Blinded by wounds, Sgt. Forrest Vosler, Livonia, N. Y., radio operator on Jersey Bounce, Flying Fortress, asked to be tossed out to lighten the plane's load so it could get back to its base. His comrades refused and the plane went down in the English channel. Rescuers soon came because Vosler had managed to signal "SOS." He has been recommended for the congressional medal of honor.

Gen. Wedemeyer Hopes to Be in Tokyo in '46

Chungking, China-(P)-Lt. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, United States commander in China, received a flag Friday in appreciation of his services. Bishop Paul Yupin, senior Catholic dignitary in China, made the presentation with the assurance that the Chinese people would give him a similar flag in Tokyo. "I hope you can do that one year from now," Wedemeyer responded.

UIT: Milwaukee Journal van Vrijdag 16-2-1945.

Gable Sued for \$29,770 for Injuries in Crash

Los Angeles, Calif.-(P)-Capt. Clark Gable, former motion picture star now in the army air forces, was sued Wednesday for \$29,770 as the result of an automobile collision.

Jane Courtois demanded \$25,670, declaring in her complaint that she suffered brain concussion, cuts and bruises when Gable halted his automobile suddenly at a boulevard stop sign last Jan. 7 and the car in which she was riding collided with his.

Russell S. Drone, driver of the rear car, sued for \$4,100, asserting he received a broken ankle, cuts and bruises.

UIT: Milwaukee Sentinel van Donderdag 17-2-1944.

Bovenstaande 3 stukjes uit Milwaukee Sentinel van Donderdag 17 februari 1944

Stockholm, Sweden-(P)-Crewmen of the Swedish steamship Granada, sunk at Bremen in an American air attack Dec. 16, said Thursday that the northwest German port "is a new Hamburg." Six large boats and many smaller craft were sunk by the attacks of 300 to 400 planes Dec. 13 and 16, the seamen said at Malmoe. Some of the boats were loaded with sections of prefabricated wooden houses from Sweden and Finland which Germany had ordered to house residents bombed in previous attacks.

UIT: Milwaukee Sentinel van Donderdag 23-12-'43.