

THE Pilot, THE Prince, AND THE Rescue

A U.S. airman teamed with a Romanian royal to save 1,161 Americans during World War II

BY DUANE SCHULTZ

Lieutenant Colonel James A. Gunn III was on his hands and knees, stuffed into a cramped, dark, and cold compartment on an Me-109G-6. The space had been designed to hold radio equipment, not a large man in a bulky flight jacket, but he had squeezed in through an 18-inch-square metal door. That door was his only way out, and there was no latch on the inside. Though the plane was flying at 19,000 feet over the Adriatic Sea, Gunn had no parachute, no oxygen equipment. His fate lay largely in the hands of the pilot, a Romanian ace—a prince, no less—credited with shooting down dozens of Allied planes, including an American B-24. Enemies only weeks before, the two men had now conspired to steal the



James Gunn hid in the belly of a German plane—the start of a mission to rescue U.S. airmen.



A group from the Fifteenth Army Air Force welcomes back two airmen who had been held as POWs in Romania. They were released as part of a risky mission involving hundreds of planes and lots of intrigue.

Me-109 from an airfield in Bucharest.

How a U.S. pilot came to be flying in a stolen German plane with a Romanian royal is one of World War II's wildest tales. The story would end with the rescue of more than 1,100 American airmen once held as POWs. But it started with the 32-year-old Gunn, commanding officer of the U.S. Army Air Force's 454th Bombardment Group, and the gamble he took to save his men.

Ten days earlier, on August 17, 1944, Gunn had led a squadron of B-24s in an attack by 224 U.S. bombers on Romania's oil refineries at Ploesti, which were fueling Germany's war machine. This was the 23rd mission against Ploesti, and more than 280 American bombers had already been lost, along with 2,829 airmen captured or killed. Gunn's plane was brought down, and he was captured and taken to a large POW compound in Bucharest.



Bucharest residents cheer the end of German occupation and the Red Army's arrival.

Within a few days, Gunn and the other prisoners found themselves caught in the middle of a firefight—this time between Romania and Germany. Romania's longtime fascist dictator, General Ion Antonescu, had backed Adolf Hitler in the war, supplying more troops for the Eastern Front than all of Germany's other allies combined. But the country's ruler, King Michael, a teenager at the war's start, had made frequent pleas for peace and won allies in his country's military and government. By late August 1944, with Germany reeling and Soviet forces advancing on Romania, the king confronted Antonescu and demanded his resignation.

"What—and leave the country in the hands of a child?" Antonescu replied. The king had the general arrested, a provisional government was formed, and Romania threw its support to the Allies.

The American prisoners, assuming they would soon be free, were ecstatic when they heard the news. But they quickly real-

ized there were new dangers. What if the Germans moved them to other POW camps? Or executed them on the spot? When the Russians arrived in Bucharest, a fight with the remaining Germans would be inevitable, with the Americans caught in between. As if that were not enough, German aircraft launched bombing raids on Bucharest.

Some of the airmen were now held in a ski resort in the Transylvanian Alps. To keep these men safe from German reprisals, Romanian soldiers moved them to a remote nearby village, Pietrosita, where they joined the locals in a raucous celebration of Romania's changing fortunes. Several of the men had formed a jazz band in prison and offered to play. They started with the hit song "Flat Foot Floogie," a jazz tune even the Romanians knew, and many young women from the village jumped up to dance. "The party went on until the early morning hours," Lieutenant Richard Britt remembered. "American-Romanian relations were firmly cemented that night."

There were no parties for the POWs in Bucharest. The Romanian guards returned to the Americans their guns but cautioned against wandering around town. That did not stop two lieutenants, Henry Lasco and Martin Roth. They left the compound one night despite hearing rifle shots, commands barked in German, and pounding footfalls. In the dark, Lasco banged his head against something, only to discover it was the boot of a German soldier who had been hanged from a lamppost.

As the two men passed one doorway, they were grabbed and dragged inside by a group of Romanians who hugged and kissed them. "The Americans are with us!" they shouted. The young officers decided they would be safer back at the POW camp.

German He-111s continued bombing the city, spreading chaos. The compound was hit several times, killing at least five Americans and wounding several dozen more. Four prisoners were killed by a German soldier who walked into a crowded restaurant and opened fire. Many POWs were stricken with dysentery but could not find medical help. Staff Sergeant Harry Fritz, who had been a tail gunner, was so sick he could barely move. "I was ready to break physically and emotionally," he said. Other POWs fled into the city. Some received food and shelter from townspeople, but others roamed the streets, not knowing where to go or what to do.

As the senior officer at the POW compound, James Gunn was responsible for the men there. Determined to get them someplace safe, he contacted Romania's minister of war and asked permission to fly to one of the American bases in Italy "to make known our situation." The Romanians agreed, and on the morning of August 26, only nine days after he had been shot down, Gunn was driven to Popesti airfield, 15 miles south of

Bucharest. The aircraft waiting for him was an old, run-down tri-motor SM-79 bomber. It didn't look as if it would make it off the grass runway. Nor did the pilot inspire confidence. He did not speak English and acted afraid of Gunn—and of flying the plane to Italy. They took off, but within 20 minutes the pilot turned back, claiming there was engine trouble, though all three sounded fine to Gunn.

Back on the ground, Gunn was puzzling over what to do next when a handsome, rakish Romanian air force pilot walked up and made an astonishing offer. "Colonel," the man said in flawless English, "if you will crawl into the belly of a Messerschmitt 109, I will fly you to Italy."

The pilot was 39-year-old Captain Constantin Cantacuzino, Romania's leading ace. Born into a wealthy and titled family with ties to the rulers of the Byzantine Empire, Bazu ("Buzz"), as he was nicknamed, had demonstrated early in life a keen ability to work hard and excel at just about anything. He was an adventurer and a playboy, yet he carried himself with great class. The prince played sports, often paying handsomely for training and equipment. He won motorcycle competitions and even set a world record in a Paris-to-Bucharest race, riding for



When King Michael (left) ousted the dictator Ion Antonescu, Romania turned on Germany and joined the Allied effort.

44 hours. He excelled at tennis and captained the Romanian ice hockey team at the 1933 world championships.

But his primary love, aside from women, was flying. He had won aerobatic contests in his biplane, a Bü-133 Jungmeister. In



B-24 Liberators bomb the oil refineries and storage facilities at Ploesti. Thousands of U.S. airmen were killed or captured in this long campaign.

RIA, NOVOSTIANG-IMAGES; OPPOSITE: TOP-LEFT: © DIZ MUEKCHEN GMBH, SUEDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTOALAMY; RIGHT: © INTERFOTOALAMY; BOTTOM: U.S. AIR FORCE/ATIONAL ARCHIVES

the late 1930s and early 1940s, Cantacuzino flew throughout Europe, first as pilot for the president of the International Aviation Federation and then as the chief pilot of Romania's air transport company, LARES. He joined the Romanian air force in 1941 and flew more than 600 combat missions, with at least 43 confirmed kills. Now, talking with Gunn, he outlined a bold gambit: Though he didn't even have a map, he would fly the Me-109 over German territory and land at an American air base in



A Fifteenth Air Force officer tries out the compartment in which Gunn escaped from Romania.

Italy. The last few miles would be very dangerous: With the plane's radio removed to make room for Gunn, Cantacuzino could not tell the Americans that the approaching German aircraft was a friendly.

Despite the obvious risks, Gunn jumped at the offer. He sketched on a piece of cardboard the route to the U.S. airfield at San Giovanni, some 700 miles away in southern Italy, marking the position of anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons when he flew his Ploesti mission. Large American flags were painted on the Me-109's fuselage, and airfield workers spent much of August 27 servicing the plane for a departure on the morning of the 28th.

As preparations continued, Cantacuzino grew worried that word of their scheme had spread. German fighters might be waiting at takeoff. The Romanian proposed that they continue

to talk as though leaving on the 28th, but instead depart as soon as the plane was ready.

The two put on quite a show to keep their new plan a secret. Late on the afternoon of August 27, Gunn put on a thick leather flight jacket and climbed inside the radio compartment, pretending he was checking to make sure he could fit in the tight space. As soon as he was settled, Cantacuzino closed the panel door, tightened the fasteners, and jumped into the cockpit.

Revvng the engines, he taxied down the grass field and soared off, leaving onlookers confused.

For the next few hours, Gunn huddled inside the dark and noisy compartment. It vibrated constantly and often violently. As the plane reached 19,000 feet, the lack of oxygen brought on hypoxia; Gunn grew dizzy, his thinking became sluggish, and he had trouble breathing. The higher altitude also exposed him to intense cold. "It wasn't a pleasant flight," he said later.

With no window in his compartment, Gunn also was disoriented; he could not even tell if they were flying over land or water. Feeling around the compartment, he discovered a small, hinged metal plate on the fuselage. When he moved the plate, it revealed a peephole to the outside and the world below. Before long, he felt the plane lose altitude as Cantacuzino began a long, slow descent. They had crossed German territory and entered airspace over Allied-held lands. Now

came the flight's most dangerous moment: Would U.S. anti-aircraft gunners open fire on the familiar, distinctive shape of the Me-109?

Before taking off, Gunn had told Cantacuzino how to approach the airfield. The Romanian followed those instructions, lowering the flaps and landing gear, reducing speed, and wagging the wings from side to side. The American guns remained silent as the Me-109 touched down, but each was trained on the plane all the way down.

Cantacuzino brought the plane to a stop, opened the cockpit canopy, and stepped out smiling. Heavily armed MPs surrounded him, along with a crowd of curious spectators. He grinned and raised his hands in the air.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have a wonderful gift for you. Will someone get me a screwdriver?"

A mechanic handed him the tool. He loosened the fasteners and opened the door to the radio compartment, revealing a pair

Going Over—and Under—the Wire

Operation Gunn was one of history's biggest POW rescues. Here are other dramatic escapes.

A Rogue's Rescue 1596

The border reivers were Scottish and English brigands who roamed the lawless region of the Anglo-Scottish border in the 16th and 17th centuries. One of the most notorious, William "Kinmont Willie" Armstrong, ran amok until 1596, when a deputy of the English lord Thomas Scrope captured him on a truce day, defying a law that guaranteed the bandit safe conduct. Walter Scott of Buccleuch, a reiver and Scottish nobleman who owned the lands where Armstrong was arrested, demanded his release. When Scrope refused, Buccleuch led a rescue party that under cover of terrible weather dug beneath a small door in the side of Carlisle Castle, where Armstrong was being held, and spirited the bandit back to Scotland.

Rat Hell 1864

A Richmond, Virginia, warehouse served as the home of Libby Prison, the infamous Confederate facility for Union officers. When a rat infestation closed the basement kitchen, the Yankees seized an opportunity. Opening a passage into "Rat Hell," they worked for 17 days to dig a 180-foot tunnel that reached outside the prison grounds. On the night of February 9–10, 109 Union men slipped into the tunnel and emerged in a neighboring warehouse. Although 48 were apprehended and two drowned in the nearby James River, 59 found their way to Union lines.

Fleeing Milwaukee Bill 1918

Holzminden, a German POW camp for British officers, was run by the brutal Captain Karl Niemeyer, known to the men as "Milwaukee Bill" to the men because he had once lived in that American city. Allies considered this camp one of the worst; guards occasionally bayoneted prisoners. Over nine months, hatred of Niemeyer driving them, the prisoners dug a tunnel out, with 29 escaping and 10 ultimately returning to Britain.

Two Little Dutchmen? 1941

In September 1940, Luftwaffe pilot First Lieutenant Harry Wappler was downed when his He-111 struck a barrage balloon above Wales. Wappler and fellow pilot Heinz Schnabel escaped from prison and disguised themselves as Dutch airmen with the Royal Air Force. On November 24, 1941, they stole a Miles Magister training aircraft from an RAF air base, flying brazenly right off the field. Their glorious adventure ended when the plane ran out of fuel. The British quickly recaptured the pair, then sent them to Canada to squelch chances of a second escape.

Bataan Revenge 1943

On April 4, Marine Lieutenant Jack Hawkins led an escape with



The Germans discovered the tunnel leading out of the dreaded Holzminden prison camp only after 29 British officers escaped.

nine other Americans—some of whom had survived the Bataan Death March—and two Filipinos out of a Japanese work camp on the Philippine island of Mindanao. They evaded capture and joined a Filipino resistance group. A U.S. submarine ferried seven of the men to Australia, while the others stayed on with the Filipino guerrillas. Hawkins later helped organize and train the military force of anti-Castro Cuban exiles that tried to retake Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961.

"The Great Escape" 1944

Allied airmen imprisoned in German Stalag Luft III made perhaps the most daring escape of World War II. A group led by British squadron leader Roger Bushell decided to dig three tunnels—named Tom, Dick, and Harry—out of camp. Prisoners took turns digging, then surreptitiously discarded excavated sand and dirt as they strolled the grounds. There were unforeseen problems; guards discovered Tom, and the Germans rendered Dick useless when they expanded the camp's boundaries. With Harry offering their only escape route, 76 men fled on the bitterly cold night of March 24–25. Just three made their way to freedom; the Germans caught 73 of the prisoners again, executing 50, including Bushell.

Marc De Santis

of regulation U.S. Army Air Force boots. Gunn slowly backed out of the space. As he stretched and stood up, a few people recognized him and broke into applause. It was 7:40 in the evening of August 27. Colonel James Gunn was safe.

Two days later, at 8 a.m., Cantacuzino pushed forward the throttle of an American P-51B Mustang fighter, which he had learned to fly in a matter of hours. He was going back to Romania in formation with three other P-51s flown by crack U.S. pilots who had orders to shoot him down if he made any suspicious move. Arriving at Popesti, while the other fighters circled overhead, Cantacuzino landed, then fired a yellow flare to signal that the field was still under Romanian control. Word was passed to San Giovanni, and just past noon, two B-17s escorted by 32 fighters left for Romania.

A mission dubbed Operation Gunn was under way. Aboard



Gunn toasts Cantacuzino (right) after the mission. Not a single man was lost.

the bombers was a 12-man Office of Strategic Services (OSS) team. They were to round up the POWs spread around Bucharest and the nearby countryside, then take them to the Popesti airfield. The team was equipped with food and medical personnel and supplies; Romania's secretary of state promised help, including trucks, buses, and cars to transport the POWs.

News of the pending rescue spread quietly by word of mouth: "Tomorrow morning. Be at Popesti Airdrome. We're leaving." Any public announcement would have alerted the Germans.

In Italy, 38 more B-17s were being readied for the rescue mission and carrying large numbers of POWs. Crews stripped the planes of nonessentials, including most of the guns and ammunition. Plywood was laid over the inside of the bomb bay doors. Each plane would carry a crew of six, rather than the usual 10, as there were no bombs to drop and few guns to fire.

The first dozen B-17s left Italy at 8 a.m. on August 31, with the others to follow each hour in groups of 12. More than 250 P-38 and P-51 fighter planes accompanied the flight.

At Popesti, the POWs gathered on the runway in groups of 20, with precisely 150 feet separating each. Tail gunner Fritz remembered they looked like a "ragtag bunch: some in dirty, faded uniforms; some in bits of civilian clothing; some wearing enemy helmets and carrying souvenirs; some in possession of more bottles of wine than it appeared they could carry."

As each bomber landed, it taxied to the head of a group, cut its engines, and took the 20 passengers into the bomb bay. The pilots immediately restarted their engines and took off. The men were silent as the planes roared down the field. They had no parachutes. They were about to fly over enemy territory with no way out of the plane, memories of being shot down at Ploesti still fresh.

"We were all nervous," Lieutenant Richard Britt said. "It was the first time we had been close to a plane since [the] raid. We all remembered our last flight ended in a crash." Any unusual air turbulence or odd sounds from the engines set their nerves jangling.

All the planes were loaded and airborne again in approximately 30 minutes. More than 700 Americans were ferried to safety that first day. The mission continued until September 3, when all 1,161 Americans were evacuated, some riding with the famed Tuskegee Airmen. The operation was carried out with incredible precision; not a single man was lost. Thanks to a dashing playboy prince and a determined American pilot, Operation Gunn rates as one of history's greatest military rescues.

The postwar lives of the two heroes of this story took very different paths. James Gunn remained in the Air Force until his retirement in 1967 and went on to a successful career in real estate in San Antonio, Texas. He died in 1999.

In Romania, meanwhile, Constantin Cantacuzino fell on hard times. The Soviet-backed communists who came to power after the war confiscated his property. In 1947 he managed to leave the country for Italy, where his wife at the time (he had had many) was filming a movie. He later went to France and earned some fame performing in air shows. By 1950, bankrupt, he began flying old American biplanes as a crop duster. Though he made enough money to buy his own acrobatic plane and perform in air shows again, he died in May 26, 1958, following unsuccessful surgery for an ulcer. He was 53.

Sadly, Cantacuzino had tried for many years to obtain a U.S. visa but was repeatedly denied. Somehow the man who had helped saved hundreds of American lives was not allowed to come to the country for which he had risked so much. **MHQ**

DUANE SCHULTZ (www.duaneschultz.com) has written more than a dozen books of military history, including *Into the Fire: Ploesti, The Most Fateful Mission of World War II*. He wrote about the aftermath of Gettysburg in the Summer 2013 issue.