

Dan Valentyn Vizanty - In his own Words

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"MON CHER" PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE DOGFIGHT BETWEEN ROYAL ROMANIAN AIR FORCE IAR 80/81 FIGHTERS AND THE 15TH AIR FORCE P-38 LIGHTNINGS ON JUNE 10, 1944



The first raid on Ploesti

"On Sunday, 1 August 1943, a formation of approx. 180-200 American "Liberator" bombers take off from Benghazi, Africa, with the mission to destroy the Ploesti oil field. This mission was a failure, only approx. 60 planes returned to base. The reasons for this failure were: the long distance from Benghazi to Ploesti and, in particular, the overflight of the Mediterranean and the option for a low-altitude attack, allowing the Romanian anti-aircraft defenses to shoot down the American planes. Immediately after this raid, General Gheorghe Jienescu, the Minister of Air, taking into account the possibility of further attacks, decided to restructure the Romanian fighter aviation. On this occasion, I was appointed commander of the 6th Fighter Group, intended to defend the capital and the Ploesti oil area. The 6th Fighter Group consisted of IAR 80 and IAR 81 aircraft, which, were sometimes confused by the Americans with the German FockeWulf 190 fighter aircraft. From 4 April 1944, the American Command in Italy began a massive bombardment of the oilfield from 22 airfields in Foggia. The resources deployed were considerable, as the Allied Command had 1000 aircraft, of which approx. 600 Liberator and Fortress bombers and 400 Mustang and Lightning fighters. In general, the attacks were carried out in waves of bombers staggered between 8000 m and 4000 m altitude, framed by fighter formations equipped with aircraft having a long flight range and a speed and performance superior to any known at that time in Europe. Given this tremendous numerical and performance superiority, the results that the IAR 80-equipped units achieved, unfortunately at the cost of significant losses, were exceptional".

Saturday, June 10, 1944.

"Popești-Leordeni military airfield (20 km from Bucharest) A splendid summer morning, the bright sun shines on the airfield with its warm rays. The vast field allows several squadrons to take off simultaneously in patrols of four. Thick clouds of beautiful weather, of immaculate white are present in the sky, small and yet immense, contributing to perfect visibility. The purity of the atmosphere, the transparency of the air, and the clarity of the shapes allowed the eye to almost completely take in the Bărăganului plain. As usual, the group reports back at 7 am. The daily ceremonial takes place. All the personnel are present: crew, technical personnel, mechanics, armorers, servants, radio operators, the band, drivers, etc., grouped in squadrons, in the barracks, all with smiles on their faces, aware of the importance of each one in the smooth running of the unit. At the same time, they all realize the inequality of the forces in combat. The disparity was accentuated by the fact that in 1944, the performance of the American Mustang and Lightning fighter planes, which had just arrived in Europe, far exceeded the European planes in terms of both speed and range; Inequality also existed in terms of weaponry, as the Liberator bomber formations were also protected by Flying Fortresses, each equipped with 31 machine guns. The gravity of the situation, the permanent state of alarm in which we lived, gave these morning reports a dimension, a solemnity, an emotional density from which sprang, almost palpably, a feeling of brotherhood of arms. So everyone knew that a fierce and unequal battle could break out at any moment. I looked with pride and excitement at these young men I commanded, full of talent and experience, and in their eyes I saw that need, that thirst for self-improvement, to try the impossible with me. They each had a family, a love, a friend, and a loved one, which gave them a reason to live, a boost in the struggle, a refuge for the soul, and strength in the face of adversity.

This observer's position, this vision of the world and of beings, gives the fighter pilot a special psychological reflex, a particular sensitivity, and a different approach to existence. We must bear in mind that this position of observer implies a great deal of solitude and special nervous qualities, linked to the complexity of the apparatus that he must master. His reflexes are constantly in demand, without anyone's help, master and at the same time slave of this powerful machine, the pilot must constantly watch over his orientation, navigation, and handling of his weapons and their use with maximum efficiency, the radio links with both his base and his teammates enabling him to organize and conduct his combat. The extent of his responsibilities, the free choice of initiatives, the rapidity of the decisions he has to take at any moment, without dead time, again and again... make the fighter pilot a man sui generis; I would even say that a kernel of madness gives the pilot that stature, that certainty, that optimism, that pluralism of feelings which lead him most surely and most easily to victory, but also to death. It has been a great honor for me (I have had the chance to be a unit commander since I reached the rank of lieutenant) to instill, to propagate, to nurture in all the pilots under my command the feeling that leads to no effort being spared, the energy that allows man to surpass himself, bringing to the individual and to the group the satisfaction of transcending his condition. This is how I managed, in the critical situation I was in, to maintain the morale of the units under my command, to obtain, against an adversary far superior in numbers and technical equipment, results that will remain forever inscribed in the Golden Book of Romanian Aviation.

Let's go back to that morning of June 10, 1944, during the morning report. As the flag was raised, my gaze passed from one squadron to another, noting the absence of those who had left us, the absence of those figures, those personalities, still dearer and closer now precisely because of their absence. I could not and I will never forget the charming smile and the gentle voice of Constantin Dimache, the one who, in the evening, at a "pahar" sang to us, accompanied by his guitar: "Costica, Costica, make the lamp smaller!" The heavy losses of pilots and airplanes we had suffered were deeply painful. If the planes returned from combat riddled with bullets, they could be repaired right on the airfield, in most cases, thanks to the experience and tireless will of the technical staff, however, besides the intolerable pain caused by the loss of each of our comrades, the terrible truth was that we had no other pilots capable of replacing their great ability and exceptional talent. After the report was completed, at about 7.30 a.m., the Group Staff proceeded as usual to Headquarters. That morning I was accompanied by Major Trandafirescu, Chief of the Technical Service, Major Traian Gavrilu, Chief of the Operations Office, and the three squadron commanders: Captains Petre Constantinescu, Mircea Dumitrescu, and Gheorghe Postecă. On the way they were discussing the most serious problem of the day: in case of an alarm we only had two patrols from each squadron immediately available, that is 24 planes, not counting my command cell, so a total of 26 planes. Master Păduroiu, the head of the technical service, had promised us that after 10 a.m., each squadron would have one more patrol available, i.e. 12 more aircraft. We could thus be ready with 38 aircraft at the usual time of the American raids. Having provisionally solved this problem, I reviewed in my mind the orders I had given, while all around me everyone went about his business and responsibilities: warming up the engines, checking the armament and radio equipment, making repairs, and putting the planes in order. All the tasks were done in an atmosphere of trust, hope, and good cheer. 8 o'clock in the morning. The Command Post of the Balkan Air Command (codename "Tiger"), located at Otopeni and commanded by German Colonel Eduard Neumann, one of the greatest and most distinguished personalities of German fighter aviation, is equipped with a large screen on which the movements of American aircraft appear, thanks to the "Freja" and "Wurtzburg" (the ancestors of radar). In order for the American formations, which left Foggia and flew over the Adriatic Sea and Yugoslavia, to be recorded and appear on the screen of the Command Post "Tiger", it was necessary for their flight to take place at a certain altitude. As soon as a movement appeared on the screen, the officer on guard had to press the alarm button, thus putting the entire fighter and anti-aircraft defense system (the entire DCA) on alarm. As the American air raids on Romania had never taken place before 10 a.m., the officers on duty at the probable times of the raids were chosen from among the senior officers. So at 8 am, an unlikely time for a raid, there were junior officers on duty. An unbelievable, miraculous event happened that morning (and not the only one on that memorable day, which proves that sometimes events happen that have no normal explanation, no logical justification). So, at 8 o'clock, the duty officer, as a result of an oversight left the screen unattended for an indefinite time. Returning, startled, with an aviator's reflex, he unhesitatingly sets off the alarm throughout the territory.

On the airfield, I had just gone into the office to go through my mail, when... alarm?... 8 o'clock?!?! Surprised for a moment by the unusual hour, I grab my alarm pistol, quickly exit and fire the green rocket giving my units the order for immediate take-off. Then, jumping behind the wheel of my little Ford Taunus, I make a mad dash for my plane and that of my teammate in the control room. One minute and 36 seconds later, the first patrol takes off, followed without interruption by the rest of the formation. Already suited up and settled in the plane, I look at my teammate for a moment, a smile, a brief hello, a nod of understanding and we take off. For this type of situation, I had long established a battle plan: the squadrons that were lined up after take-off had to make a tight turn after gaining altitude, making a half-turn that at an altitude of 1500 m brought them to the vertical of the airfield. My wingman and I took off immediately after the last patrol and, cutting the trajectory of the formation, we were at the head of it, continuing to gain altitude and heading for a sector determined in advance (sector S.N. at 100 km N.W. of Bucharest), which we reached, in general, at 10000 m altitude. This maneuver, repeated so many times, was well known to us. Usually, while we were getting up, we received by radio from the "Tiger" Command Post at Otopeni, information about the American raid: direction, flight height of each wave of bombers, their approximate number, etc. That day, while I was at 1500 m altitude at the head of the formation, I heard in my headset, coded: "Attention Paris, attention Paris, Indians over the nest". I immediately recognized the voice of Traian Gavrilu, the head of the Operations Office of the Popești-Leordeni airfield, who informed me that the American fighters (Indians with two feathers) were heading towards the airfield (nest). Then, looking overhead, I see wave after wave, at very low altitude, formations of Lightnings (American double-hulled fighters) heading, coming from the east (when they usually came from the west) directly towards our airfield. Immediately and without hesitation I order over the radio, "Paris to Paris 1, 2, 3 (my squadrons), attack, follow me!" and in a fraction of a second, the situation is radically turned upside down because God wanted otherwise. Instead of the surprise that the Americans had prepared for us by coming at an unusual hour and from an unexpected direction, arriving in from Foggia across the Adriatic and Yugoslavia, along the Danube to Oltenița, hoping thus to escape the "radar" of the "Tiger" checkpoint, they are the ones who fall into the trap, before having launched their first attack. Our lightning offensive was a total surprise. Indeed, all of us, as one man, in a dizzying plunge, pounced on the Lightnings who, at that moment, were at the beltline of the capital and preparing to destroy us on the ground. The sky was literally and figuratively falling on them. Admittedly, our first attack was decisive and we were fortunate, right from the start, to shoot down the commander of the formation who, incidentally, was the only survivor of the American pilots participating in the raid. Our attack was so fast that not one of the 100 American planes could fire a single round at our planes on the ground. In this air battle, the protagonists were easily distinguishable, on one side were the Lightning twin-engined aircraft, and on the other the IAR 80s. The great difficulty of this battle was due to the low altitude at which it took place, since most of the action took place between the ground and 200 m above sea level, and the whole thing was in total confusion, which was terrible given the large number of aircraft involved. After the first attack, in the ensuing melee, our main concern was to avoid collisions in this maelstrom in which we were facing each other at every moment, crossing each other at relatively astonishing speeds, sometimes exceeding 1000 km/hour. Taken by surprise and losing their commander from the start, almost half of the American planes tried to disengage and managed to leave the field by the defensive circle technique, returning back to Foggia. With my nerves on edge, my senses alive and my senses sharp, I recorded at a glance the whole spectacle, the exhilarating ensemble of this aerial battlefield. In those moments I looked once again with pride at my "boys" and at the IAR 80s which, thanks to their extraordinary maneuverability, dominated the battle. I remember in my mind their crazy dives, fast attacks flips and turns, maneuvers accompanied by short bursts of machine gun fire, an impressive spectacle, hard to describe, but at the same time dramatic for the Lightnings, who seemed too big birds, embarrassed by their own strength and the low altitude at which they were forced to fight.

The ground staff, surprised by the speed of the attack, was stunned. The peasants in the fields, the workers at the Apretura factory near the airfield, were all spectators and witnesses of that bloody battle, in the blinding summer sunlight, in the noise of the explosions, in the deafening roar of the machine guns, in the fantastic roar of the engines, while everywhere the smoke of the downed planes was billowing into the sky. Then, suddenly, there was silence, only the sound of the engines slowing down, as the sky and the earth still vibrated with their unleashing. This impressive aerial battle lasted 12 minutes, 12 minutes chillingly long for some, and incredibly short for others. The American planes that had escaped the battle retreated at high speed and we tried to find our formations and come in for a landing. Thus ended one of the most important air battles of World War II, at least in this region of southeastern Europe. It should be noted that 24 downed American planes were found in the immediate vicinity of Popești-Leordeni airfield; unfortunately, as mentioned above, only one American pilot survived, the formation commander, who had managed to get out of the plane before it exploded after his forced landing. After our landing, after the triumphal welcome and the first moments of euphoria, after the hugs and tears of joy and emotion, we were saddened to find that three of our comrades were missing: Lt. Nicolae Limburg, nicknamed "The General", who had collided with Adj. Tari as well as WO2. Giurgiu was shot down by the Americans. We also found that our planes had suffered numerous damages. However, to our surprise, although riddled with bullets, they all returned to base in good condition. I myself was astonished to find that my IAR 81, number 344, had received a 13.2 mm projectile among many others, which had entered through the windshield and passed through the cockpit. Normally, the trajectory of the projectile would have passed through my head and we were all unable to explain by what miracle we had escaped alive. Thus, one more fact added, for me, to the other extraordinary and providential events of this memorable day, which began with an erroneous yet miraculous alarm. Shortly after the end of the battle, General Gheorghe Jienescu, Minister of Air, accompanied by Nicolae Dinischiotu, Deputy Minister of National Economy, came to congratulate us and brought us 24 bottles of French champagne for our 24 victories; as for me, I also received 3 bottles of whisky for the 3 personal victories that had just been added to my record. Indeed, at that time, I already had 9 bombers and 3 American fighters shot down to my credit. By the end of the war, my score on American bombers alone had risen to 12 (not counting my victories over Soviet planes). That brings me to the end of this story. I wrote this one for:

-to restore the truth about the role of the IAR 80 planes and the Romanian fighter pilots, thus rectifying the information provided by certain authors, insufficiently documented on the course of the air conflict in this part of the world;

-to bring the IAR 80 and the prestigious Romanian Aeronautical Industry out of oblivion;

-to try to sketch the portrait of a fighter pilot;

-to bear witness to one of the most important and extraordinary air battles, important for the number of planes involved, extraordinary for its impressive course;

-to recall with pride, respect, emotion, and affection the role played by all my comrades, living and dead, paying a living tribute to the memory of all those who took part in the battle.

If I succeeded, so much the better!

In any case, it was an opportunity to share my point of view, recount my memories, to express my thoughts, this exercise awakened in me a taste for reminiscence, although initially, it was an impulse due primarily to feelings of honor and duty".