

30 August 1944

ESCAPE STATEMENT

Lt. Col. James A. Gunn III, O-385405, 454th Bomb Group, 304th Wing.

1. Personal History

Born - 28/5/1912

Enlisted - 1/3/1939

Home Address - Kelseyville, California

Peacetime Profession - Pullman Cor.

MIA - 17/8/44

RTD - 27/8/44

Duty - Wing Leader, flying deputy lead as Radar U.S.

Missions -32

2. Source's plane was flying deputy lead when it was hit by flak, the order was given to bale out when the plane was approximately 15 miles southeast of Floesti.

Source landed in an open field, as he came down he saw many people running towards the field so unharnessed himself and ran off into a cornfield. Source had injured himself slightly on landing so was unable to run more than 300 yards before he heard others coming towards him from his front. Source ran into the next field which had been harvested and hid inside a wheatsheaf.

When the population realized he was not in the wheatfield they began a systematic search of the surrounding area poking sticks into any likely hiding places so that it was not long before source was discovered.

The search party consisted of 2 armed Rumanian soldiers and about 75 civilians, when source was discovered there was no hostile move in fact they all appeared friendly. Source was asked if he was armed, he replied "no" but was searched.

The whole group moved off south to the village of Cornurile where source was taken to the local military Hq., while source was in this building there was a crowd of about 300 people around but they all appeared quite friendly and appeared there purely out of curiosity.

In this Hq. source was again searched and all his papers and belongings except his lighter, watch and ring were taken away and receipts given.

A message was sent from here but source has no idea of the destination, however after about an hour, during which source was fed and given a place to lie down, he was loaded into a hay cart and taken to the station about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from town.

At the station a lady, who source thinks was a Marquisa as the others showed great respect for her, gave him food and cigarettes. The party waited for about 1½ hours at the station, but no train came, during this period many people brought food and no attempt was made to stop him taking it.

After about 1½ hours wait a car came along so the Rumanian guards asked for a lift to Floesti. They set off and on the way picked up a lady who appeared extremely friendly and gave source sweets and cigarettes.

They all rode to a small town about 12 Km from Floesti where they left the car, in this town the party encountered some German guards who passed remarks about source but made no attempt to take him out of the custody of the Rumanian soldiers.

The escort stopped another car which took source and his guards into Floesti where source was taken to the Army Hq and Barracks. In this building source was taken into an office where he was to see a Rumanian Lt. Col. on the way to this office he saw his bombardier and navigator. While source was held in this building other members of his crew were brought in until 8 were present, the Rumanians also brought in a S/Sgt from another plane who was badly burned, he was given first aid on the spot then was taken to hospital.

After a preliminary examination and a few questions source was taken across the road to another enclosure where he was registered then taken to a room where a full Colonel of the Rumanian Army questioned source, it was not an interrogation but the trend of the conversation was an attempt to get information, however source gave no answers and after about 2 hours he was taken out to a wooden hut where, after some soldiers were kicked out, he was told he would live.

This hut was extremely dirty and insect ridden but the American Airmen had no alternative but to sleep there.

At about 2130 the air raid alarm went and all the airmen were put in a truck and taken about 8 miles out of town, there were also soldiers and civilians on the truck so source planned to escape when they all got off. When the truck stopped however the PW's were not allowed off, the guards surrounded it thereby making escape impossible.

The raid was by the RAF on the oil refineries but source has no knowledge of the damage done.

After about 2 hours here source and his companions were taken back into town and into the same hut.

The following morning (18/8/44) the PW's were given a thin vegetable soup and black bread for breakfast at about 0800 hours. At 1000 hours the air raid alarm again went so the PW's were once more loaded in the lorry and taken out of town, this time it was an American raid which lasted about 2 hours. Source could not see the results as there was a lot of smoke over the town.

The PW's were taken back to the enclosure and given lunch which consisted of once more soup and black bread.

In the enclosure the PW's were given complete freedom of the yard but were not allowed too close to the gate or to the fence across the back which was constructed of wood. The PW's began joking with the guards to gain their confidence so that they could get close enough to examine the gate and the fence. The gate was strong enough but the fence was found to be quite rotten in places.

Source after finding this out decided that the best thing he could do would be to wait for his leg to get really well then make an attempt to escape via the fence.

That night the air raid alarm again sent them out into the fields for about 2 hours, they returned and went to sleep in the hut with the guards inside the room. Source woke at about 0400 hours and found that the guards were all asleep, it was too late to attempt to get away then as dawn was breaking.

On the following morning source spoke with an EM and found that he had left his hut during the night without being challenged so he decided to make an attempt himself that night.

On the morning of 19/8/44 there was another raid and once again the PW's were taken out into the open country, this time source noticed that the guards were becoming very lax so decided that the following night would be a good time for him to make his attempt.

An American air gunner from this raid was brought into the camp but not allowed to live with the rest of the PW's. It was heard afterwards that a number of Rumanian civilians had been killed by the raid and this man was held as he was thought to be a bombardier. After questioning he was allowed to join the main group of PW's.

During the day of 19th source got as much sleep as possible to be ready for his night attempt.

That night he woke at 0100 hours and got up, the guards were asleep but one was right by the door, however source decided to make his attempt. He tried the door but found it locked, while he was fiddling with the latch the guard woke so source asked if he could go to the latrines which were outside. The guard agreed but went with him and accompanied him back to the hut.

The following morning (20/8/44) an NCO told source that the PW's would be going to Bucharest that day. The PW's were given no breakfast and at 0900 hours they were put on a truck and driven away.

The truck also had a load of grapes and about 6 casual passengers besides the 12 Americans. They were driven through the center of the town then taken to the NW section where they were put in the school which is used as an officers PW camp.

They were put in a small yard next to the building where all their possessions were again checked, the PW's were each given a note stating that they were to be allowed to keep their uniforms, lights and watches, etc.

While in this compound source was approached by a Rumanian NCO who whispered that he had a note for source and brought it along, the note said source should hide his money as it would be possible to use it later, source did so.

After awhile the airmen were all taken further out to the NW suburbs to a stockade near the marshalling yards where all personnel who had not yet been interrogated were held, from this stockade it was possible to see the EM's cage and the PW hospital.

The PW's were told that they would be interrogated so source went round warning everyone not to talk or give any information other than name, rank and number.

Conditions in this camp were not good, there were not enough blankets for 1 each and the food consisted of thin soup, black bread and bad coffee and milk.

On the afternoon of 21/8/44 a Rumanian Captain arrived, this man spoke fluent English as he had lived in the USA. He was to interrogate the Airmen and started by taking them in order of rank and by crews, source saw that by this means the number of planes involved would be disclosed so he insisted that each PW be called by name. After a man was interrogated he was not returned to the same room but sent off to the main part of the camp.

When source went in to the Captain he was given a form with a lot of questions and told that if he did not answer the questions it would be impossible to notify the International Red Cross of his capture.

Source refused to answer any of the questions asked. The Rumanian asked if it was personal dislike that made source take that attitude, source replied no, it was the Geneva convention that said he need not.

The Rumanian Captain in sources opinion was definitely a trained interrogator but the camp was not an interrogation centre.

After some time here the source was returned to the Senior officers section of the camp where he met other airmen including an RAF officer, the room to which he was allocated was fairly comfortable but the mattresses were very lousy.

The Americans were allowed to run their own mess and the internal administration of the camp was in their hands under the supervision of Major Timmish, USAAF.

During the evening of the 21st, source was told that there was a radio receiver hidden in the camp and also that there was an escape specialist. That night source listened to the news in Rumanian which was translated into English by the escape specialist. The same evening source was introduced to another man described as an escape specialist.

On the evening of 22nd source was told by Major Jaeger that there was an escape plan in operation which consisted of a tunnel dug by the officers. Four teams were working on it with lookouts posted to watch for guards.

On 23rd, source went with other officers and Rumanian officials to the Railway station to take delivery of the first Red X parcels to arrive in the camp. They were all in good condition and taken straight to the P/W Camp.

During the afternoon, a talk was given by a Rumanian lady (thought to be a Princess) in which she stressed the horrors of the Russian regime. She was an extremely able speaker and made quite an impression on some of the officers.

At 1600 hours, Red X representatives arrived with Rumanian officials to supervise the distribution of the parcels, these parcels being distributed absolutely untouched.

That night at 2215 hours, source heard of the Rumanian Government's decision to aid the Allies, nothing was said to the rest of the camp as the possession of the wireless set was still a secret, a meeting of the senior officers was held to form a plan of action as the Germans were known to be in Bucharest. It was decided that the Camp Commandant should be asked for arms and should be asked for permission to mount an officer with every Rumanian guard.

After the meeting the remainder of the officers were informed of the situation and told to sleep in their clothes and be ready for instant action.

The request for arms was refused as the Camp Commandant pleaded he could do nothing without the permission of higher authority, however, a phone call was made and shortly afterwards a full Colonel arrived. He told the P/Ws how glad the Rumanians were to be on the Allied side and gave orders that the guards were to be trebled and patrols sent out into the streets to guard against a German attack on the P/W camp.

Firing was heard in the streets so the P/W were allowed to have whatever arms were available - these turned out to be a small number of pistols and about 4-5 MAs. The Rumanian guards were kept on duty the whole time.

Nothing happened that night so the following morning (24/8/44), source got in touch with the EMS camp and was told that the situation was well in hand.

At 0940 hours, the air raid alarm went so the gates were opened and the P/Ws were allowed to go to slit trenches outside the camp. Bombs fell near the camp but there were no casualties. The bombing became frequent so that many of the P/Ws became nervous and wanted to leave, they were told that the city was surrounded but nevertheless some did go.

With the bombing the fighting inside the city became more intense so ~~Col.~~ Jaeger set off into town to try and find a wireless set with which to contact Cairo or possibly Fifteenth Air Force.

Colonel Snaith set off at the same time in an attempt to contact the International Red X with a view to evacuating the P/Ws, the last source heard of Col. Snaith was that he was in hiding somewhere in Bucharest.

Next morning (25/8/44) an English speaking Rumanian Lt. arrived to discuss the position of the P/Ws, at the same time wireless contact was made with Cairo but without much success. Source heard that there were weak spots in the circling Germans so he decided on an attempt to get the men out of town. He contacted the Rumanian Lt and asked to be taken to the Ministry of War where he put the plan for evacuation before the War Minister who agreed that an attempt should be made.

On the 25th, bombs fell on the EMs camp, killing 1 American airman so the Rumanian authorities decided to move the camp away from the railway.

The Rumanian Lt was sent off with a part of American officers and men to make a recce of the SW corner of the town where it was believed there was a gap in the German lines.

At the same time source asked to be allowed to fly to Italy to arrange help, this plan was put before the Rumanian C/S who readily agreed. Source had to promise to return as the plan was looked on with some suspicion and the whole plan had to go before the Air Minister.

The recce party returned after about an hour and reported that the SW area of the town was quite free from Germans except where they were holding out in isolated buildings, as a result of this report it was felt that with the Germans cleared from the town the best thing for the P/Ws was to stay in the city.

During the evening ^{was} Col. Jaeger returned with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and told source that he, source, was to be sent to Italy via Turkey, that night. When source heard this he went to the Air Minister and asked to be allowed to fly that night. He was told that the night was impossible but he could leave next morning.

Source suggested then that an intelligent officer should accompany him to explain the situation fully when they arrived in Italy. Source spent the evening with the Foreign Secretary and next morning (26/8/44) went to the plane which was an old Savoia Maccheti. The crew were fully briefed on the route to take, source then returned to the Air Minister where he was told that 50 U.S. planes were on their way and would land in the area.

Then the Secretary of State for Air arrived with the news that 250 planes were due, bombers did in fact arrive and bombed enemy troops concentrations in the area. During this raid a number of Rumanians were killed which shook the morale of the population so source decided that he should take off as soon as possible.

The plane took off at 1300 hours, flew for 1/2 hour then had to turn back with engine trouble. When they arrived at the field a Rumanian pilot came forward and offered to fly source to Italy in the fuselage of an ME 109. This plan was put to the Air Minister who readily agreed and plans were made to leave at first light next day.

Source went out to dinner that night and discovered that everyone knew about the plan. When he discovered this, he returned to the aerodrome with the pilot and between them they decided the best thing they could do would be to leave during the afternoon.

The morning of the following day was spent in preparing the plane. The W/T set was removed and new markings were painted on.

Immediately the plane was ready, source and the Rumanian pilot climbed aboard and took off. They took off at 1720 hours, 27 August, 1944 and landed at San Giovanni at 1920 approximately the same evening. They encountered no trouble during the trip except slight engine misfiring when crossing the Adriatic.