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Patriots DAY PARADE

BY JOHN MILLIKEN

The year 1943 was not a good one for the U.S. Armed Forces in Europe during World War II. In particular, the Army Air Forces had been rushed into combat in North Africa with young, inexperienced aircrews. Pilots with just a couple of hundred flying hours were flying four-engined bombers against Nazi Germany's highly skilled air defenders.

Ploesti, in Romania was the site of nine oil refineries that fed this strategic material to the Nazi war machine, therefore making it a logical target for American bombers. Operation Tidal Wave consisted of 177 Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers, virtually every one that was available. There was no fighter escort and to increase bombing accuracy the attack had to be carried out at very low altitudes, thus making the attackers extremely vulnerable to enemy artillery, flak and fighters. The price paid was horrific: 53 B-24's were destroyed and another 55 were damaged while 440 American airmen were killed and another 220 were captured or missing.

One of the most dramatic photos of the War shows a B-24 named "Sandman" (pictured) emerging out of dense smoke of the burning refineries. The pilot of this plane, Major Robert W. Sternfels, is now 96 years old and was the 2017 Honored Patriot of the Year for the 51st Annual Laguna Beach Patriots Day parade. And while Major Sternfels was unaware of it at that time, in mid-1943 the USAAF calculated that it was statistically almost impossible for a pilot to survive 25 missions; Major Sternfels actually survived 50 missions before his tour of duty in the War zone ended, a remarkable pairing of luck and skill. After the War, Bob married and settled in Laguna Beach and raised two sons.

Many of his family members had careers working for General Motors.

In early January of this year, I received an email from the SoCal Region of the Cadillac/LaSalle Club, asking if anyone with a 1930s or '40s GM convertible might be interested in driving this hero in their annual parade, to be held on Saturday, March 4th. As I read this email I felt a very kindred spirit toward the World War II flyer, as my father was also a young B-24 pilot during the War, and he also flew his bomber against the Ploesti

Oil refineries, though his mission was later, in 1944. My father was eventually shot down while bombing the hedgerows near Caen, France against Rommel's forces in advance of the Battle of the Bulge. He was captured by the German Army until he escaped in November 1944, just a month before I was born. I, too, was a B-52 Bomber pilot during my second tour in Viet Nam, during the Spring and Summer of 1972. For these reasons I volunteered my parade-ready 1941 Cadillac 62 convertible sedan.

Leslie and I made a very nice weekend out of the event, driving the old Cadillac to Laguna Beach on Friday, staying at the quaint, retro Laguna Beach Inn. We had happy hour cocktails and dinner at a nice restaurant overlooking the ocean just a few blocks away.

Contacted by relatives of Major Sternfels, after dining we were invited to their lovely 1936-era Art Deco home, where many out-of-town relatives had arrived for the parade and, more cocktails. It was a very friendly and very grateful group of people who thanked me for the use of my car.

Like the restaurant, their home was also walking distance from our hotel,

which was fine with us after those drinks. But another spot, just two blocks away, is Woods Cove, a very gorgeous stretch of beach. As with many of you I am a fan of Turner Classic Movies, movie stars from the 1930s, and of course the background scenery and cars from that era. So I was especially taken by the huge house overlooking the Cove that was once the home of Bette Davis. It has a Historical Landmark plaque, dated 1929, and the house looked largely original. Seen here are photos of that home. Notice the large "D" for Davis, on

the chimney. Also are photos of my car on the parade route, and Major Sternfels, who sent, as promised, the book, "Burning Hitler's Black Gold," about that bombing raid and the famous war photo of his plane. I also carried five of his grandchildren in my car.

This Patriots Day Parade encourages all of us to remind ourselves of the huge sacrifice made by American Airmen who flew against Nazi Germany: nearly 34,000 Airmen were killed in action and over 18,000 aircraft were lost. And it was those, too, who were honored that day.

