

# PRISONERS' CAMP FROM TIMIȘU DE JOS AND THE HUMANITARIAN TREATMENT APPLIED BY THE ROMANIAN STATE TO AMERICAN AVIATION WAR PRISONERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, AN EXAMPLE OF THE GOOD PRACTICES IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF WAR

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**Abstract:** *The present essay is meant to present a tedious analysis concerning not only the way that the American POW were treated, but also the existing conditions within the camp that accommodated the American and British officers and NCOs captured after the Bucharest bombings and the ones over the refinery situated on Valea Prahovei.*

**Keywords:** *prisoner of war (POW), bombing, Timișu de Jos.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Between June 22, 1941 and May 12, 1945, Romania took part in World War II, fighting both on the Eastern Front with the German army and on the Western Front with the United Nations. During all this time, a number of approximately 125,000 enemy soldiers were interned in the Romanian POW camps.

Prisoners of war captured by the Romanian Army were treated in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Convention of July 27, adopted by Romania on September 15, 1931. The operation and organization of the camps was done according to the provisions of „*Instructions on prisoners of war and interns of 1926*”, but also in accordance with the „*Prisoner Camp Regulations*”.

The Anglo-American bombings mainly targeted the refineries in Ploiești, the factories in Brașov, the port of Drobeta Turnu Severin and the North Railway Station in Bucharest. The capital and the cities of Pitesti and Craiova were also bombed, despite the fact that they did not represent military or economic targets and, being „open cities”, their attack was forbidden. The bombings in Bucharest were overwhelming and the fighter planes of the Royal Romanian Air Force were insufficient. Calls for additional military supplies went unanswered.

A very important detail related to the Second World War is the fact that air supremacy was extremely important in order to take the initiative. Whoever held the air supremacy had a better chance of victory.

Statistically speaking, Romania produced only one military aircraft for every 750 aircraft produced by the United States of America. Of course, the Romanians received hundreds of planes from the Germans, and the Americans did not fight with all the planes in our airspace.

The intense bombing began when American fighter jets were able to transport the bombs to Romania, which meant a distance of more than 1,000 km (these having the base of the 15th Air Force in southern Italy).

*Table 1. The bombings that took place in April*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>
April 4 <sup>th</sup>	Bucharest
April 5 <sup>th</sup>	Ploiești
April 15 <sup>th</sup>	Bucharest and Ploiești
April 15 <sup>th</sup> -16 <sup>th</sup>	Experimental night attacks: Turnu-Severin
April 16 <sup>th</sup>	Brașov and Turnu-Severin
April 21 <sup>st</sup>	Bucharest and Turnu-Severin
April 24 <sup>th</sup>	Bucharest and Ploiești

## **2. OPERATION "TIDAL WAVE" AND THE CAPTURE OF AMERICAN AVIATORS**

Romania has been a major power in the oil industry since the 1800s. It was one of the largest producers in Europe. The oil refineries in Ploiești provided about 30% of all oil production for the Axis powers.

The air raid that took place on August 1, 1943 on Ploiești had an ambitious goal: to shorten the Second World War, eliminating a large part of Germany's oil production in one fell swoop. Called Operation Tidal Wave, the attack by five U.S. Air Force bombers on refineries was well planned and repeated.

The 9th Air Force (Group 98 and Group 376) was responsible for the overall conduct of the raid, and the partially formed 8th Air Force provided three additional groups of bombers. All the bombers engaged in combat were B-24 Liberators.

However, the attack was undermined by an incorrect premise. The United States Army Air Force operated under the illusion that a single attack could cause irreparable damage to a major target. The Americans totally underestimated the power and skill of the German-Romanian resistance. The city of Ploiesti has been surrounded by seven major refineries that have produced about a third of Germany's oil and a third of its aviation fuel. The bombing planners recognized from the outset that they were an extremely difficult target.

The attack was also approved by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt at the January 1943 Casablanca Conference.

Colonel Jacob E. Smart, a trusted adviser to General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, was the one who proposed a mission at a lower altitude, which meant an extraordinary deviation from the precious doctrine of precision bombing at height. The analysis indicated that at least 1,400 heavy bombers were needed to achieve the success of a high-altitude raid, and they were not available. He opted for the only tactic that could work - a low-level surprise attack. He was shot down during the raid and spent 11 months as a prisoner of war. Eventually, he retired as a four-star general. A prisoner of war revealed to the Americans that Ploiesti was strongly defended, but the mission was so important that they themselves confessed that "if no one returns, the results will be worth the cost" [4].

On June 12, 1942, 12 B-24s attacked Ploiești - the first American bombing of an European target. Damage to refineries was minimal, but all 12 bombers landed safely - six in Iraq, two in Syria and four in Turkey, where the planes were confiscated and crews were interned.

Colonel Alfred Gerstenberg, a German officer, commanded the defense of the city. It established a radar interception network together with an efficient signal detection unit in Athens. Then, the route of the "secret mission" was followed shortly after takeoff.

However, for American pilots, things went wrong from the beginning: an aircraft was lost immediately after takeoff, so that only 177 of the 178 planes left safely; a plane began to fly uncontrollably, ending in the sea; an aircraft broke away from the formation to search for survivors, unable to return to the formation and the list goes on.

All these things were aggravated by the inability to regain their cohesion due to the orders to maintain a strict radio silence, not knowing that the Germans had already come to the conclusion that the target was Ploiești. Chaos was raging, and some pilots broke the radio silence to draw attention to navigation errors, which threw these two groups directly into the rain of heavy anti-aircraft artillery fire.

Two aircraft of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Group, led by two future U.S. Air Force leaders, Major George S. Brown (later Chief of Staff) piloting Queenie and Major Ramsay D. Potts piloting the Duchess, attacked the Astra Romana refineries, the Orion Union and Columbia Aquila in the southern part of the city.

The attack by the two Bombing Groups paralleled Gerstenberg's train line, where the camouflage disappeared to reveal a mixture of batteries firing incessantly into the aircraft, covering the sky with smoke. Amid artillery fire and bomb blasts, some damaged planes crashed to the ground, while others, already destroyed by the defensive operation, flew to try to make a forced landing in rural areas. The losses were heavy.

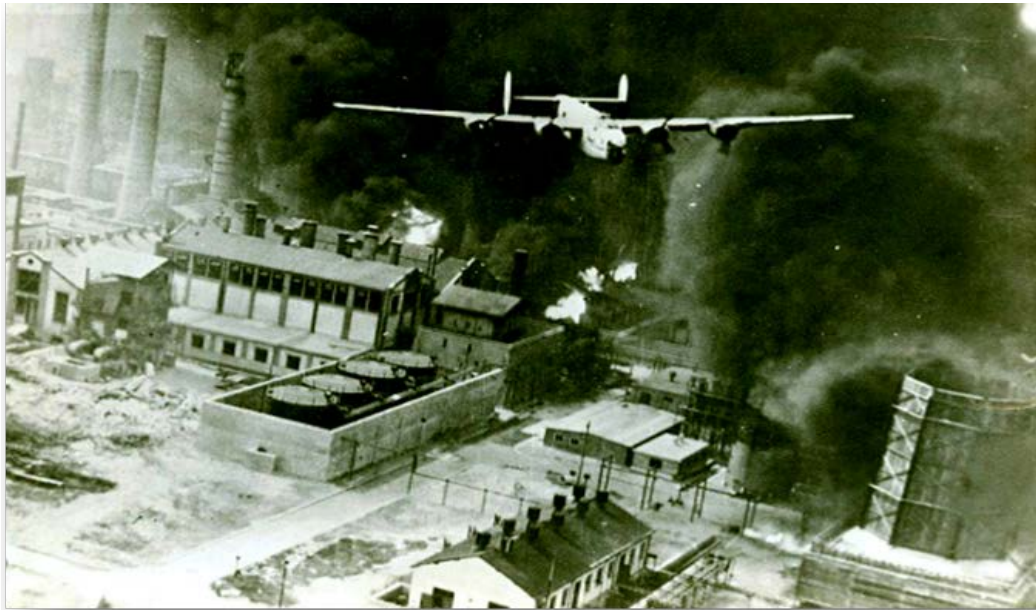
The Steaua Română refinery was so damaged that it did not resume production during the war.

SSgt. Zerrill Steen was a survivor of that battle. After his plane crashed, killing the rest of the crew, Steen remained at his post, firing all the ammunition left in enemy aircraft. Only then did he ascend to safety. He received the "The Distinguished Service Cross" while still in captivity, being a prisoner of war in a romanian POW camp [4].

In total, 30% of the aviators did not arrive home that day. Of the 1,765 aviators who took-off for the raid, 532 were either dead, prisoners, missing or hospitalized: 310 members of the air crew were killed, 108 were captured and hospitalized in Romanian hospitals or imprisoned in POW camps, 78 were interned in Turkey and four were taken by Tito's supporters in Yugoslavia. Three of the five medals of honor (most for any aerial action in history) were awarded posthumously.

While the damage to the refineries was not as severe as expected and the German ability to repair the facilities was underestimated, Gerstenberg used forced labor on the military to quickly restore Ploiești to its entire production. Most of the damage was repaired in a few weeks, after which the net fuel production was higher than before the raid [5].

Given the loss of a large number of aircraft and the limited damage to the targets, Operation Tidal Wave is considered a strategic failure of the US side.



**FIG. 1** The refineries in Ploiești under attack

When the 15th Air Force was established in Italy, the bombing planes returned over Romania starting with April 1944 [6]. Then, however, the oil fields were within range of fighter jets. More than 5,400 heavy bombers, along with almost 4,000 fighter jets, targeted Ploiești, turning it into ash. The missions ceased when the Soviet army moved to the area in August 1944. More than 2,800 airmen were wounded or killed in an effort to stop the Nazi fuel source.

### **3. THE HUMANITARIAN TREATMENT APPLIED BY THE ROMANIAN STATE TO AMERICAN AVIATION WAR PRISONERS**

Following the American raid of August 1, 1943, the captured aviation personnel were interned in the following locations: at the Central Seminary in Bucharest where 41 able-bodied prisoners were interned and at Sinaia, where 69 wounded prisoners were interned. The prisoners of war in Bucharest were transferred to camp no. 14 in Timișul de Jos and housed in two buildings positioned 250 meters apart. The salary received by the prison officers corresponded to the existing ranks in the Romanian army. They also benefited from a separate canteen, the cost of the meal being deducted from the balance. The amount of money they had left was also used to buy irrationalized food. Article 11 of the Geneva Convention did not contain for the granting of balances to non-commissioned officers, but in Romania they were allocated sums of money equal to those of Romanian soldiers in order to purchase food, tobacco, hygiene items, etc. Subsequently, the Romanian government decided to build a dining hall for them and pay their balances, spending 120 lei per day for each prisoner.



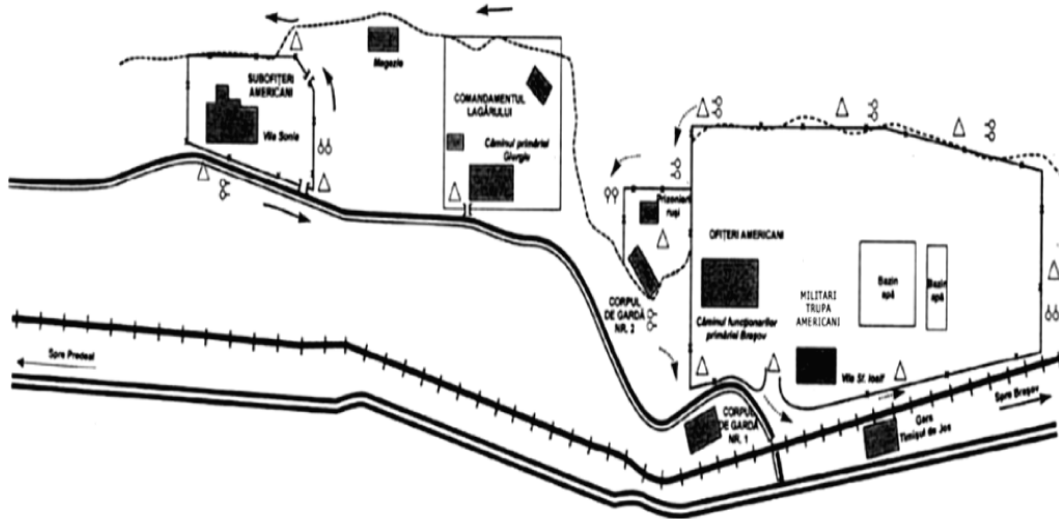


FIG. 2 Disposition of the POW camp in Timișu de Jos

In Fig. 2 you can see how, to the left, were the barracks where the American non-commissioned officers lived, the building in the middle was the camp command, and on the right, close but different in size, were the buildings where the Russian prisoners (small building) and American officers (the big building) lived.

Due to the fact that Timișu de Jos is so close to the city of Brașov, where I studied, I had the opportunity to go to the old prison camp and to see, more closely, the way the buildings were located and their current condition. To present the study done in the field, I will present in the following pages some pictures taken with the drone.

**AMERICAN NCOs**

**AMERICAN OFFICERS**



FIG. 3. The left side of the Timișu de Jos camp seen with a drone. Personal contribution

### AMERICAN OFFICERS



**FIG. 4** The right side of the Timișu de Jos camp seen with a drone

In the following image you can see more closely the building in which the American officers were imprisoned. At that time it was a fairly modern, storey building, with less accommodation than the building where the American non-commissioned officers lived.



**FIG. 5.** The building in which the American officers were imprisoned

The building in which the American NCOs were imprisoned, however, had a grander appearance. The architecture was more special, being designed on several floors.





**FIG. 6** The building where the American non-commissioned officers lived



**FIG. 7** The back of the building where the American non-commissioned officers lived



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**FIG. 8** The landscape that the prisoners of war could enjoy all the time



**FIG. 9** The church near the building where the non-commissioned officers lived



The barracks had individual beds, pillows and mattresses (made of straw for non-commissioned officers and wool for officers), bed linen, etc. In a document of the General Staff were recorded the following things: *"Accommodation is provided in very good condition for the winter, all rooms have terracotta stoves, bathrooms and toilets inside"* [7].

The accommodation conditions in the Timișu de Jos camp were strongly appreciated by the Romanian and International Red Cross delegations. Following a visit, US Major Jaeger said the prisoners were *"satisfied with the way they were treated and accommodated"* and asked for winter equipment. The non-commissioned officers, on the other hand, expressed their dissatisfaction with the food and accommodation, contrary to the fact that the amount of money provided for their food was equivalent to that of a Romanian soldier. The camp program was easy, with the days being spent *"playing bridge and reading various books,"* as Donald R. Falls put it.

In a report of the Superior Sanitary Directorate, the conditions that the prisoners of war had in the Timișu de Jos camp are described:

*"The officers - prisoners of war - live in the former Rest House of officials in Brasov, a very beautiful building, with clean, well-lit rooms. They have a casino room, a games room, a bathroom, a well-equipped kitchen, where food is cooked according to the menu they prepare themselves. The food is bought by the supply officer according to a list given by the officer prisoners. The kitchen is very clean and the food very good, prepared by a captive Russian chef, former chef at restaurants in Moscow. All rooms are clean as well as bed linen.*

*The lower ranks are in a neighboring building. They have a 60 lei daily allowance for food, just like the soldiers in our troop. Prisoners have a sports field where they play Wolley-ball. On Sundays and on Catholic holidays, they are taken to a Catholic church near the camp.*

*As there is a distance of about 10 km between the camp and Brasov, and about 40 km to Sinaia, the sick prisoners who cannot be treated in the camp infirmary, were hospitalized at the Brasov Military Hospital, which is the closest, and at the same time their security should also be ensured"* [8].

In 1944, due to the resumption of raids on Romania and due to bombings, the number of American and British prisoners increased. Following this increase, Camp no. 13 was set up in Bucharest.

After the German bombing of Bucharest, the prisoners asked the Minister of War to be organized in a military unit outside the capital, led by Romanian officers, in order to participate in the battles against German aviation. General Mihail Racoviță approved that 896 prisoners be evacuated to the barracks of the 4th Hunters Regiment, which was on the Bucharest-Alexandria highway.

The following list containing the treatment and conditions of prisoners of war in Romanian camps was drawn up from interrogations of prisoners, the Military Intelligence Service and reports written by International Red Cross delegations:

POWER: 543 aviation officers and non-commissioned officers.

LOCATION: Prisoners of war were held in the following places: Bucharest, Sinaia, Regina Maria Military Hospital in Brașov, Timișul de Jos.

TREATMENT: The treatment was excellent. Some say they are treated more as guests than prisoners. All Americans were taken to Dulag Luft for up to 2 weeks for questioning. After the interrogations, they were brought back to Romania. Marshal Antonescu and the Prime Minister of Romania, accompanied by their wives and a small group of friends, visited the camp in Timișul de Jos. The party did an inspection tour and suggested several improvements.

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Prisoners were asked if they had any complaints or suggestions. The marshal brought gifts, including a box of his specially made cigarettes with his autograph written on it, for each prisoner of war.

**FOOD:** The Romanian ration is completed by packages from the Red Cross and is satisfactory.

**CLOTHING:** Prisoners have enough clothing. They wore, at first, the uniforms they had during the capture, later, the General Staff decided to equip them with Romanian effects, aviation type.

**MEANS OF TRANSPORT (Timișul de Jos):** A van with a driver and a driver's assistant.

**HEALTH:** A Romanian military doctor visits the camp daily, and a civilian dentist visits it twice a week. Prisoners are allowed weekly hot showers. The sanitary facilities in the non-commissioned officer blocks are not satisfactory, but the Swiss delegate addressed the issue with the Romanian authorities.

**RELIGION:** No American chaplain, but Catholics can participate in the services held by Romanian priests once every 2 weeks. However, no Protestant services are organized.

**PERSONAL:**

- Senior American officer: Major William Yaeger;
- The most trusted American: Sgt. Fred Randall;
- Romanian commander (of camp no. 18): Major Cavaropol.

**LETTERS:** Prisoners receive a letter and four greeting cards per month. Letters from America arrive in two and a half months. The letters from the camp arrive in the US in 3 to 4 months.

**RECREATION:** Prisoners are allowed to stay outdoors all day. They play volleyball and table tennis and build their own games, roulette, chess and checkers. They spend a lot of time playing bridge and other card games. A good library is available for them and there are sailing courses in French and German. Prisoners have a recreation room and a radio.

**WORK:** They do not work in the camps at all, although they have asked to be allowed to do so. The Russian prisoners were the ones who took care of the cleaning and the food, being: 10-12 staffs and servants, a cook and an assistant cook and four waiters among them.

**PAYMENTS:** American prisoners were paid in cash until November 1943. Since then, both officers and non-commissioned officers have received salaries according to rank. Expenditure on food and other items is deducted from these appropriations. Officers' credits are at the following rate (old money):

- Major: 18,000 lei per month;
- Captain 13,000 lei per month;
- Lieutenant 11,400 lei per month;
- Second lieutenant 9,400 lei per month.

The camps were generally considered troop corps. At the beginning, in Timișul de Jos, 40 officers and 70 troops were assigned to guard the prisoners and to carry out the activities of the camp.

In June 1943, the camps throughout Romania were staffed with administrative and security forces as follows: 216 officers, 197 non-commissioned officers and 3,797 military troops.



Due to the fact that there were more and more prisoners imprisoned in the camps, the security guards proved to be insufficient and the efficiency of their surveillance weakened, which led to the continuous increase in the number of escapees [9].

The Red Cross in Geneva visited some of the camps in Romania and, after talking to some prisoners, found that the treatment applied to them is good and even exceeds, to some extent, the one provided by the conventions.

Following this control, the delegation also noted the fact that Romanians have a merciful soul, animated by those hit by fate [10].

Major Donald R. Falls concluded: "The humanity of the military institution and the administration of the camp has shown true respect for the adversary. On many occasions, Americans have been treated the same or even better than their recruits." [10]

Even prisoners of war testified that they were treated well, especially in the letters they sent to their families [11]:

- Lieutenant Paul A. Lahr specifies that the Romanian government is doing everything in its power to make their stay as comfortable as possible: "*Everything is splendid*";
- Lieutenant John J. Roades claims the same thing mentioned above, the fact that the government is doing everything possible to make them as comfortable and happy as possible: "*Romanians are really splendid people. I never thought they could be so hospitable to their enemies. They are very human with their prisoners, they feed and dress them well and the world takes us food, cigarettes and sweets. I feel like any American who destroys their beautiful cities, especially now when I hear the terrible losses among civilians. Even if I returned home, I would vigorously refuse to take part in such a thing. This is the misfortune of the war with the airstrikes. It is so impersonal and you cannot realize the disasters done until you see them with your own eyes*" [12];
- Lieutenant James C. Lambardi specifies that they are treated very well, even if they are deprived of some (few) freedoms, which seems completely normal to him due to the fact that they are prisoners;
- Lieutenant W. A. Kine says that the Romanian camp can be compared in all respects with the American one: "*Romanians do everything possible to make us as happy and comfortable as possible. We no longer call our camp a prison because it is not run like a prison. The food was good from the beginning and is becoming more Americanized. They have broad views and try everything we suggest*" [12];
- Lieutenant John Aleins says in a letter to the family that the government treats them better than they treat their own soldiers;
- Lieutenant James W. Stone: "*It's a vacation for our crew*";
- Lieutenant Anthen W. Mack attests that they are treated more like guests.
- James E. Mann: "*The world treats us as if we were theirs*";
- Thomas Falion tells the family that they were allowed to attend the Catholic religious service every Sunday, which meant a lot to them.
- Lieutenant Ros N. Buzzard: "I fell in love with Romania. It is a very beautiful country, with almost everything you want, from forests to rivers" [12];
- Lieutenant Harold W. Brazier: "*I am in a prison camp in Romania and they treat us very well. I do not say this because they tell us so, but because it is a camp like you have not even read in any book or newspaper*" [12];

- Lieutenant Jackson F. Dunn: *“What amazes me the most is that even though we are legally at war with this people, they still don't bother us, or so it seems. Even the gendarme who caught me arrived with an air of business, greeted me and said comrade, shook my hand in a very friendly way and said that he was sorry that he had to search me for a weapon.”* [12];
- Sergeant John V. Szezun: *“Romanians treat us very well and cannot understand why we are bombing their cities”* [12];
- Sergeant Stanley Kochnover: *“If I didn't miss you so much, I wouldn't be sorry to wait for the end of the war, staying in Romania. People here treat us well and over time the treatment will be even better ”*[12];

The crews of the American aviators were well taken care of and the Romanians made sure that they were not taken over by the Nazis. They were fed by Romanian peasants with bread, cheese, milk, eggs and fruit before being taken and imprisoned in Timișu de Jos.

N. Saviou, a teacher and former officer in the prison camps, specified: *“I treated them like princes, because above all I wanted to have good relations with America”*. The 76-year-old recalled how “wagons full of drinks and cigarettes” were transported to the camp that had its own pool and was nicknamed “The Golden Gate” by the Americans. The former officer also recalled that women in society regularly visited American prisoners: *“They liked to see the handsome boys and listen to their stories about their adventures as pilots.”* One of the reasons why American prisoners were treated well is the fact that their air attack spared Romanian houses near the refineries, but another reason would have been the chance meeting between Princess Catherine Caradja of Romania and the American pilot Richard Britt, who landed. accidentally on her estate [13].

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

When we think of history, we can also think of the phrase “collective memory”, because this helps humanity to understand itself. The world usually promotes the expression “carpe diem” as a way of life, but in order to live the present in harmony, I consider it necessary to know history. Without reading about the great wars of the world, we do not realize how bloody they really were, how much harm they did to humanity and how they destroyed and mutilated not only physically, but also mentally, millions of people. Without knowing the situation of prisoners of war we cannot realize the brutality of the human being and the limits that certain people can overcome just to do harm, not understanding how important that person can be for his family, friends, comrades and his homeland.

The Second World War was a black chapter in the history of Romania. Unfortunately, territorial losses cannot be compared to the loss of human lives, both civilian and military. Only one thing was not lost during the war in our country and that was the goodness of the Romanians. Sense of responsibility, discipline and well-being were present especially after the American air raids, in which the Romanians helped as much as they could the American and British soldiers after the hostilities. The damage caused by them did not alter in any way the good treatment they received from the moment of their capture, when they officially became prisoners of war, until the moment they were released.

From the treatment offered by our country to the American prisoners of war and the conditions they had in Romania, I consider that we have a lot to learn. Our ancestors, through the prism of history, taught us how to be human, including with the enemies we



fought against. The way in which not only the Romanian soldiers, but also the civilians behaved towards the American prisoners after the raids in Ploiești and Bucharest, in which in the latter they destroyed houses and killed the civilian population, shows that the Romanians had respect for the uniform the prisoners and for their families and understood the conditions under which they attacked (the fact that they acted on order, not on their own initiative).

Contrary to the fact that the American aviators were prisoners of war in the camps in Romania, they still managed to build a strong connection with the Romanian guards and officers. Through the testimonies of the prisoners interned both in Timișu de Jos camp and in the hospitals in Bucharest and Sinaia, I wanted to prove that the treatment that the Romanians applied to the enemy prisoners was not only comparable to that applied by the great powers of the world, but it surpassed all international standards, being an example of the application of the customs and laws of war and demonstrating once again the high and noble features of the Romanian people and its army.

I believe that this paper offers readers an in-depth picture of the character of this nation, highlighting the humanity shown by Romanians in precarious conditions for them. The strong point of this work is the field research, the images captured with specialized drones bringing an overlap after almost 80 years of what was the camp in Timișul de Jos in 1944 and the degrading state today.

I appreciate that the information and conclusions resulting from the accomplishment of this topic represent a consistent contribution to the deepening of this subject within the didactic activities, but especially in the activities of promoting the Romanian Military Aviation in the national and international environment.

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