

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Valor, Dedication, and Miracles

William Cameron's distinguished combat career was unique in its combination of personal and providential intercession.

MANY "Valor" stories have been about extraordinary heroism in a single combat engagement, but valor also has other faces. Not the least of them is prolonged dedication to the mission against increasingly unfavorable odds. On both counts, retired Col. William R. Cameron's World War II career is remarkable, embracing both an element of luck and some incidents uncanny enough to appear miraculous.

As a lieutenant, Cameron was a member of the 44th Bomb Group, one of the two B-24 Liberator groups in the European theater during the early days of AAF participation in World War II. The 44th BG arrived at Shipdham, UK, in October 1942. The other early arrival, the 93d Bomb Group, had been in the UK less than a month; hence there was little background of combat experience with B-24s in Europe. Their operational characteristics were not entirely compatible with the B-17, the glamor aircraft of Eighth Air Force bombers.

Lieutenant Cameron, assigned to the 67th Bomb Squadron, launched his combat career as a copilot during the terrible winter months of 1943. The 44th BG soon came to be known as a hard-luck outfit, the "Flying Eightballs." By March, the 67th Bomb Squadron had lost five of its original nine crews and two weeks later had been further reduced to three aircraft and crews. Promised replacements had not arrived. Along with other experienced copilots, Bill Cameron was made an aircraft commander, a new crew was scraped together, and he was assigned a B-24 that he named *Buzzin' Bear*.

While Cameron was on a three-day pass to celebrate his new job and the forming of a new crew, the group was sent against the heavily defended Krupp Submarine Works at

Kiel, Germany. The decimated 67th Bomb Squadron could muster only three aircraft for that May 14 mission. All were lost, leaving Bill Cameron the only remaining pilot originally assigned to the squadron. Fate had spared him during five months of vicious combat, but how long could its blessing last?

In June, the 44th Bomb Group was deployed to North Africa for an important but undisclosed mission, which turned out to be the low-level attack on oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania. As a warm-up for the still-mysterious mission, the group flew strikes against targets in Italy to support the invasion of Sicily. On one of these missions, Cameron's crew shot down five enemy fighters but took hits that forced their pilot to shut down an engine for the very first time and make refueling landings at Sicily and Malta.

On return to the group's base at Benina Main in Libya, Cameron, now a captain, was assigned to lead the group against a target at Rome, Italy. It was his twenty-sixth mission and the completion of a combat tour during which he had witnessed the loss of so many squadron mates. He was eligible to return to the States but instead volunteered to fly what soon was revealed as the Ploesti mission. The group would be led by its commander, Col. Leon W. Johnson, with Bill Cameron as deputy leader.

Many readers know the story of the August 1, 1943, attack on Ploesti. The intricate mission plan was disrupted by unanticipated weather en route and faulty navigation by one of the leading groups. When Colonel Johnson made a correct turn for his target, the Columbia Aquila Refinery, it already had been hit in error by another group. Nevertheless, Johnson led his B-24s at an altitude of 250 feet into a maelstrom of smoke, flame, exploding bombs, and ground fire to complete destruction of the target. Only two of Colonel Johnson's aircraft—his and Cameron's *Buzzin' Bear*—made it back to Benina Main that day. Leon Johnson, later a four-star general, was awarded the Medal of Honor and Bill



Cameron the Distinguished Service Cross. General Johnson later called Cameron "the finest combat pilot I have ever known."

After Ploesti, newly promoted Major Cameron was named commander of the 67th Bomb Squadron. On August 16, the group was ordered to hit an airfield at Foggia, Italy. Opposition was expected to be light, so Cameron used the mission to give combat experience to some of his new crews, one of which would fly *Buzzin' Bear*, while he continued preparation for the squadron's return to the UK. Unknown to the Americans, the Luftwaffe had moved a large number of fighters into the area. Five of the squadron's seven aircraft, including *Buzzin' Bear* and its crew, were lost. Up to that time, no crewman of an aircraft that Bill Cameron had flown as copilot or aircraft commander had been a casualty. Again, fate had been kind to Cameron, if not to his crews. With his luck stretched gossamer-thin, Major Cameron volunteered for a second tour and continued to fly missions until his war ended.

After the war, Colonel Cameron flew B-47s, commanded 7th Air Force Advanced at Guam, and served in several staff assignments. He was always an unassuming gentleman with a keen sense of humor and determination to do what was right. Now living in Carmel, Calif., he retired in November 1969, ending an Air Force career seldom matched in dedication and sustained valor by other bomber pilots of World War II. ■