

KILLER KANE



by FILLMORE CALHOUN

JOHN RILEY ("Killer") Kane can fly a fully loaded Liberator bomber with one hand and he can chew tobacco with his oxygen mask on. His nickname comes from the comic strip character in *Buck Rogers*, and was given him in the States before he led the first air echelon across the South Atlantic and the African veldt to the Middle East. Now it is the trademark of his legend.

Sometimes, in profile, the Killer looks like Wallace Beery with the fat removed; at others, like Clark Gable with the flaps trimmed.

Since December 27, 1942, until his recent return to the States, he has been the commanding officer of a famous heavy bombardment group in Lt. General Lewis Brereton's Ninth U.S. Air Force. In one year three different sets of air crews have flown through hell and high altitude with him, have won 2,789 medals and have another 714 awards pending.

On last August 1, a date that air-men and strategists will argue about, relive and recall for years to come, Kane topped all the awards by winning the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was the hero, if one man can be, of the 2,400-mile bombing raid on the Ploesti oil refineries in Rumania. The Killer's pin-point target was the "Astra Romano" refinery, the biggest single petroleum plant in Europe. His group lost many planes, but they hit it.

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The full story of the Ploesti raid makes a chapter that sings in American history. It was a battle, not a raid, and it was carried deep into Fortress Europe, where the stakes are high and death comes quickly. The Killer was convinced that he would never live through the day. Yet he led his giant ships through 12 miles of the most concentrated anti-aircraft and ground fire inside Europe, and straight on at two hundred miles per hour through six flying seconds of flames, smoke and



Kane's B-24

exploding delayed action bombs.

After that came a vicious battle with all the pursuit ships, including the latest Messerschmitts and Junkers, as well as every bi-plane and "obsolete type" that the Germans could get into the air. Some of the bombers dove straight into their targets, others exploded in mid-air and scores were shot out of the skies like wild geese. Somehow the Killer got his ship, the *Hail Columbia*, some eight hundred miles to Cyprus for a crash landing.

His citation reads:

By his gallant courage, brilliant leadership and superior flying skill, he and the formation under his command successfully attacked this vast refinery so essential to our enemies' war effort. Through his conspicuous gallantry in this most hazardous action and by his intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, Colonel Kane personally contributed vitally to the success of

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this daring mission and thereby rendered most distinguished service in the furtherance of the defeat of our enemies.

Kane was also awarded the Legion of Merit for "personal leadership, foresight, keen judgment, expert planning, outstanding ability . . ."

Usually those who live to receive the Congressional Medal receive it from the President, but Kane got his early one morning on a cricket field at the Gezira Sporting Club in Cairo. There were 19 others, including General Brereton and Brigadier General Uzal G. Ent, who received medals at the same ceremony. And there were Distinguished Service Crosses awarded three of the Killer's squadron commanders.

It was a great day for the group and a great day for Killer Kane. When an Egyptian band in white uniforms and red tarbooshes wheezed out *The Star Spangled Banner*, he threw his 210 pounds into a spine-shattering stance. A floppy, go-to-hell Air Force cap shaded his sea-green eyes, ran a shadow across his ski-jump nose and slashed his red leather cheeks. A tree trunk arm came up smartly in salute as he stood before General Brereton.

"I am not going to say anything—you know how I feel about this," Brereton said simply. He then reached up and placed the medals and ribbon around Kane's size 17 and a half neck. The great moment was over, and Killer Kane had the Republic's highest award.

It was plain that he was pleased, even though he joked about the medal's baby blue colored ribbon and tiny white stars. "Mighty funny color scheme for somebody like me," he said. It was. The Killer's colors should be red for blood and black for death. His job is to kill and there is no doubt in his mind about "why."

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"I don't know what in the horrible hell some people think war is about," he says. "To win a war you kill the enemy. That is the only way yet found to do it, and we do it because there are things like freedom and liberty that are going to be kept alive.

"We built up a great country and we didn't do it by sitting on our rears. We fought for it, and we didn't let anybody poke their nose into our affairs. This time we'll teach 'em all to mind their own business." The Killer's formula for this objective is to "kick the hell out of 'em."

Little more than a year ago, the first Liberators in the Middle East were based hastily in Palestine, with complete plans for withdrawal farther east if Marshal Rommel carried his last great push on to Cairo and the Suez. The Libs not only helped chase the Axis out of North Africa, but they plastered the shipping on which Rommel relied for gasoline. Since then the Killer and his air crews have worked their way west along the rim of the Mediterranean, always bombing ahead and moving into new bases, until now they are blasting Europe from Italy.

The Liberators have dropped hundreds of tons of bombs, most effectively at high altitudes, on carefully-plotted pinpoint targets. "Hit 'em, every bomb on the target," the Killer says, "and then get out." As his own added fillip, he has his waist gunners dump incendiary bombs overboard by hand. "Get rid of 'em," he says with the same sort of belligerency with which he delighted his group over Navarino Bay. By a bizarre freak of radio frequency on that trip, the Liberator's radios suddenly began picking up the Germans as they chattered back and forth between pursuit planes. Kane listened for a moment, then bellowed through his throat microphone, "Get the hell off the air." After that there was not a single guttural grunt.

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Kane is far happier in the Libyan Desert than when out of his element among the H.Q. "Cossacks" and "Cairo Commandos." The day he received his Congressional Medal, he kept looking at his watch every hour or so. His boys were "out in the blue" on a mission. And the Killer was "sweating them out," waiting and thinking, "Now they are starting their climb . . . they should just about be over the target by this time . . . the pursuit has probably jumped them coming off . . . ought to be safe out at sea now."

The next day he headed back to his desert camp, which sprawls on a mesa overlooking the Mediterranean and a war-famed city that has changed hands five times since late 1941. Here life is rugged. The Killer and his men live in tents staked into rocky soil, where the red dust blows into the blankets, the food, and even works its way into the pores of the skin.

At one end of the runway there is a vast boneyard of destroyed German-Italian-Allied aircraft. Scattered among the tents are other burned-out frameworks on which the men hang their washing. There are no fresh vegetables and fruits. There is nothing but a 16 mm. movie for relaxation at night, and poker games on payday. Ground crews get little leave, but air crews occasionally make the zigzag run to Tel Aviv in Palestine.

THE KILLER is the only officer in the camp who is saluted, and that isn't strictly enforced. He lives with Lt. Col. Julian Bleyer in a tent exactly like all the rest except that it has a homemade water tank arrangement and a wash basin. Others get their water from a 10-gallon can.

The Killer's office is in the back end of a tin nissen hut. An anti-personnel bomb, which blew off the arm of the man who picked it up, is his ashtray. Two five-gallon gasoline tins are cut up into "In and Out"

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baskets. There are no files around because the Killer "carries them in his pocket." He sounds like an enraged bull when he speaks into a field telephone at his desk, and his wrath with men who snafu a raid is terrible to behold. Where death and fear stalk every raid there is no place for softness.

Some men hate Kane, and they spread the story that he is called the Killer because he has no regard for the lives of his pilots. Others gossip that he isn't as brave as the uncontrovertible evidence of his record shows. The Killer, being a man of action, scarcely realizes this and no one dares repeat the stories to him or to his closest pal, 24-year-old Major Dil Becon, a wildcat from Booneville, Arkansas, who is a terror in the skies. Becon is the Killer's choice to succeed him as commanding officer on that day he does not return. Until then, the Killer will run his group the way he wants to, amid curses at brass hat interference.

No C.O. in the Middle East spends more time studying targets and working over the details of flight speed and tactics than the Killer. When he briefs his crews before a flight, he draws black-board diagrams and talks and acts like a football coach. He believes football has done as much as anything to keep Americans' fighting spirit alive.

Bluntly he tells new crews not to take any personal letters or mementos with them. The night he briefed his crews on the Rome raid, he announced that if any Catholics had scruples about the raid they could be grounded.

Officially, the Killer's group is known as "Force for Freedom," but unofficially they are "The Pyramid-ers." And they have a diploma approved by Washington. This the Killer helped dream up, and he ceremoniously presents it to fliers returning to the States on leave

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after completing the required hours of combat duty. It says, in part:

Time and again he demonstrated his personal courage against the enemy, and he always dealt out more than he received. However, fragments of enemy material received in combat and brought back were many, and for time immemorial are for all to behold in the famous pyramid located on the African desert, 30 miles southeast of Tobruk. For his diligent efforts and untiring devotion in collecting great quantities of enemy scrap iron and contributing worn-out parts of B-24s for erection of the Killer Kane pyramid, receipt is hereby tendered...

The pyramid is, of course, fictitious and was inspired by part of the literature that his enlisted men have written about themselves and their commander. One piece describes how archeologists, a hundred years from now, discover the pyramid. They find it is composed of old anti-aircraft shells and second lieutenants' bars, but are unable to figure out what is contained in a small case marked Spam. Their decision is that the cans either contain a form of food or the embalmed remains of second lieutenants.

Another account of the Killer tells the tale of "Americanites" in a world smitten with plague:

And the oppressed people calleth unto the Americanites saying, "O ye great and mighty people save us lest we perish." . . .

And Roosevelt spake unto Congress saying, "Let not my anger be aroused lest I consume ye who anger me. Give unto Killer Kane one thousand and four men. Send him into the lands of Germany and Italy wherein the plague began." And he did so . . .

And Roosevelt became angered and spake unto the Killer across the waters. And Killer became angered and went among his second lieutenants and others, smiting them with his rod line. And upon every man he smote there grew a pair of wings and Pratt and Whitney engines. And Killer smiteth ordnance commanding them, "Putteth one thousand-pound

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bombs into their pockets.” And they did so . . .

From here on the account of the Killer tells of exploits and reactions and combat colic as the group gradually moved west to Libya until:

. . . the Killer flieth his men over Napoli time after time. Returning always less until his men crieth “pray our master returneth us home for we are tired.” But they crieth in vain . . .

And Roosevelt spake unto Congress and Congress spake unto War Department and War Department spake unto Cairo H.Q. and Cairo H.Q. spake unto Killer saying, “Cut ye off the wings of they who have had required number hours.”

And he did so, weeping and gnashing his teeth. But the men were happy for they were as ground grippers.

Such tales as these have built up the picture of the Killer as a wild bull of the air, a man admired for his guts and flying ability, but hard to understand. Part of that is the loneliness of the desert. But part is a strong man's fear of showing sentiment for boys, usually in their early 20's, who steel themselves to fly at 25 thousand feet with nothing between them and the ground but a thin wing and a prayer.

Actually, the Killer fights like an old hen for his brood. Once he forced through a medal for one of his cooks in the enlisted men's mess for faithful performance “beyond the mere mechanics of his job.”

He believes that after the war the United States must have a year's compulsory military training for all high school graduates, to instill in them a sense of duty and responsibility to the Republic and to bring them to top physical condition. He wants more education for everyone, more air bases for the future, more democracy and more decency in the world. There is about him an honest and outspoken sentimentality for his country and his people, and beneath that a sense of destiny that goes by the name of God.

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Just as the Killer's men gaped when they saw him, months ago, serving tea to visiting British dignitaries (on the suggestion of his general), so were his intelligence officers startled at the "old man's" letter to the parents of one pilot who was killed.

"I hope," wrote the Killer, "when my time comes to die that I face the transition as courageously as Stephen did. I hope that the windows of Heaven open up to receive me as they did Stephen. He perished in the flames, and a bright, shining star rose in the East."

There is much of the Killer's father, the Reverend John Franklin Kane of Shreveport, Louisiana's Southside Baptist Church, in that letter. In other moods, Kane is more like his fiery old grandfather and his great-grandfather, an early Texas pioneer.

The Killer's father has about two-thirds Indian blood, and there is a little Cherokee on his mother's side. Other than that, his ancestry springs vaguely from Scotland and Ireland, with a touch of Dutch for stubbornness.

Kane was born January 5, 1907, at Eagle Springs, Texas, and studied medicine at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and at Washington University in St. Louis. At Baylor he turned out for football, but warmed the bench for three years. Pre-medical laboratory work fascinated him, but after a siege in the clinic, he decided he had chosen the wrong profession. He wanted to get the smell of ether out of his lungs and to breathe again the sage and mesquite of the Texas ranges.

So he went to his grandfather's farm near Eagle Springs to think things over. For a year he ran a tractor and chopped cotton, working, as he always works, with seemingly tireless energy. It was there on the farm, one hot dusty day, that he decided to become an aviator. In Dallas he walked into a Marine

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recruiting office, but was turned down. "You don't want to learn to fly," a sergeant told him. "It ain't no different from drivin' a truck."

The sergeant was wrong about what Kane wanted, and the Marines lost a great flier. An uncle got him into Army flying school at Brooks Field.

After graduation and a year of duty, Kane was retired as a reserve officer in the midst of the depression. "I sponged off my dad for a long time," Kane says, "and then went back to the farm." He was a flier aching to fly, but with no money and no plane. Then on August 15, 1935, he was called up on active duty again. The next year he married Miss Pansy Vinabnett, a music graduate from Louisiana State and Southern Methodist. Their home, until recently (they now live in Boise, Idaho), was in Shreveport, Louisiana, where the Killer's son, John Franklin, celebrated his fifth birthday five days after the raid on Ploesti.

THAT RAID can now be put in perspective and the stray bits tied up into one comparatively full picture. Stories of heroism are still cropping up and will for months to come. Some day a poet will catch its full grandeur and tragedy. Until then, this is what happened to Killer Kane and two thousand other Americans.

Ever since the Russians twice raided the outskirts of Ploesti, and a small group of U. S. Liberators tried it again in 1942, the project of crippling the vital Axis petroleum plants there had been dangling like a ripe peach before the eyes of Air Force strategists. A British expert who worked in Ploesti for 12 years gave the Air Force the information which placed the last cracking plant and every stray boiler. The great decision was whether to bomb it at high level or gamble on one crushing surprise blow at low level. Arguments raged, but the decision

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was made for low-level attack.

Then came the preparation of the crews. A desolate desert was chosen as a practice bomb target, with lines scratched out to guide the planes. It was tough flying in practice, even without any worries over ground defenses. For two weeks the practice flights went on. Bombardiers and pilots memorized a small-scale, table-top replica of the city. General Brereton talked to the crews. So did Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder.

Briefing his squadrons on the last night, the Killer told his men that the target was so vital that if it were demolished, though every plane were lost, it would still be worth the cost because "the war in Europe might then be over by Christmas." That was a hint to the crews of the dangerous mission ahead, but none backed down. Instead, there were volunteers from those who had completed necessary combat hours and could have gone on home.

Kane himself spent three weeks helping to plan the raid. He was convinced that he would never return. He wrote letters to his wife and mother and father, and put all his affairs in order. So did hundreds of others.

That night the Killer's tentmate, Colonel Bleyer, dropped peacefully off to sleep—one of the few who did. Kane slept scarcely a wink. He was reading *Queens Die Proudly* and looked up only occasionally to glare at Bleyer's sleeping figure.

The take-off from fields in the desert was shortly after six a.m. Great billows of red-orange dust shot up to the sun. The planes assembled in formation over the coastline and headed for Corfu. It was hazy over the Mediterranean and heavy cumulus clouds lay over the mountains of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Two groups in the formation became separated in the clouds. The others managed to hang to-



gether until the bright and well-manicured fields of the Rumanian countryside were sliding past below. The boys saw one village festival in full swing as they passed over. The southerners found it "mighty purty country."

Twelve miles north of Ploesti, the groups turned together at their initial point, the spot from which the run was to be made smack into the target. It was here that Kane found they were in for it. The leading groups, which had become separated from the full formation, had arrived earlier, missed their target, gone on to Bucharest and then turned back. They still had their bombs but had to pick out their targets from a different direction. They plastered Ploesti with all they had, setting up huge smoke fires. This first attack, besides obscuring the carefully chosen targets, allowed the German ground defenses a full alert.

But the great ships coming in later did not falter. The only cry was "Let 'em have it." There were 12 miles to go to a blazing target. From hills on either side of the railway line guiding the bombers in, the anti-aircraft opened horizontal cross-fire. Haystacks opened to reveal hidden nests of guns that

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poured their lead into the planes flying in so low that they picked up stalks of corn in bombbay doors.

In the leading position of his group, Kane's plane "shot out" its front guns after six miles. Waist gunners mowed down railroad guards and sent withering fire directly into ground batteries. One bomber was forced to skid down into a successful belly landing, and its crew crawled out, cheering and waving the others on. Groups of peasants waved and shouted. And one old man, asleep under a tree with a hat over his eyes, removed the hat, sat up and looked around; then calmly lay down and placed the hat over his eyes again.

Once past the defenses primed to meet them, bombers roared into their target. Completely enveloped in smoke and flames, planes cut off barrage cables with their wings.

Just before he spotted his target through a hole in the smoke, the Killer's arm was singed by flames that licked in the open window of his cockpit.

One plane crashed straight into a giant smokestack and went down. That was the crew in *Boilermaker Number Two*. *The Cornhusker*, *Lil Joe*, *Number One*, *Semper Felix*, *Old Baldy*, *Air Lobo* and *Vulgar Virgin*—ships that air and ground crews loved like members of their families—snarled into the flames and crashed. Bombardier Ray Stulting in *Lil De-Icer* had an automatic camera set to take one picture every second. Six negatives in a row showed no trace of light on them.

Yet through that hell of smoke and fire, the planes kept coming. And on past the target were fighters waiting to pounce. They picked on stragglers and cripples. They expended themselves recklessly when they ran into the concentrated firepower of bombers still in formation or flying alone like angry hornets above the cornfields and rooftops.

THE KILLER had barely heard

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the cry "Bombs away" when his co-pilot, big John Young of Dallas, Texas, shouted that the number four motor had been hit. "We feathered it," relates Kane, "and increased power on the other three. As soon as we left the target we dropped to tree-top level. We were right in the middle of the group and I could see other ships passing us as we lost speed. Then the Junkers 88s and ME 105s came to work on us. It was a sight I can never forget, seeing B-24s falling like flies on the right and left of us. But we were getting our share of fighters too. It was a rough show."

Bombers still able to fly and fight blasted their way through fighters for three hours. They shook off the last over the Mediterranean, where they were intercepted the final time near Corfu. Colonel Bleyer, still calm and cocky, led the formation in. His top-gun turret was out, but his crew had accounted for nine fighters. After him, at dusk, came Major Herbert Shingler, and straggling behind were the others. The remainder of those who had taken off were either gone, or like the Killer in his *Hail Columbia*, had made emergency landings.

With five other cripples, Kane had headed for the Aegean Sea. There were mountains ahead and the plane was faltering. Besides five hits from 40 mm. guns and one shot-out engine, the main wing spar was broken. Overboard went all heavy flying clothes, guns, hoisting gear, food, water, ammunition and even the stabilizer. For once the Killer had a plane that took more than one hand to fly.

By sheer strength and will power he began lifting its nose up to gain elevation. Finally he shouted at Lieutenant Young, "Help me fly this goddam thing." Together they brought it up to seven thousand feet just before they came to the mountains. Over the "inter-com," the Killer asked his navigator,

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Second Lieutenant Norman (the Baron) Whalen, of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, if the plane could make it. The Baron calmly and quickly took a bearing and said, "Yes, I think so." "You'd better be right," said Kane, "because it's all our lives if you aren't." By too little to think about, the bomber cleared a gap in the hills.

The tension was over. From then on the Killer nursed his plane along, and the Baron navigated beautifully. The Killer brought it into the airport at Cyprus on the exact minute of the estimated time of arrival. Down went the *Hail Columbia* and struck a four-foot embankment. One propeller and the right landing wheel were broken off and rolled together down the field. The plane bounced up one hundred feet into the air and headed nose down. With everything he had, the Killer pulled it out and skidded two hundred feet to a stop.

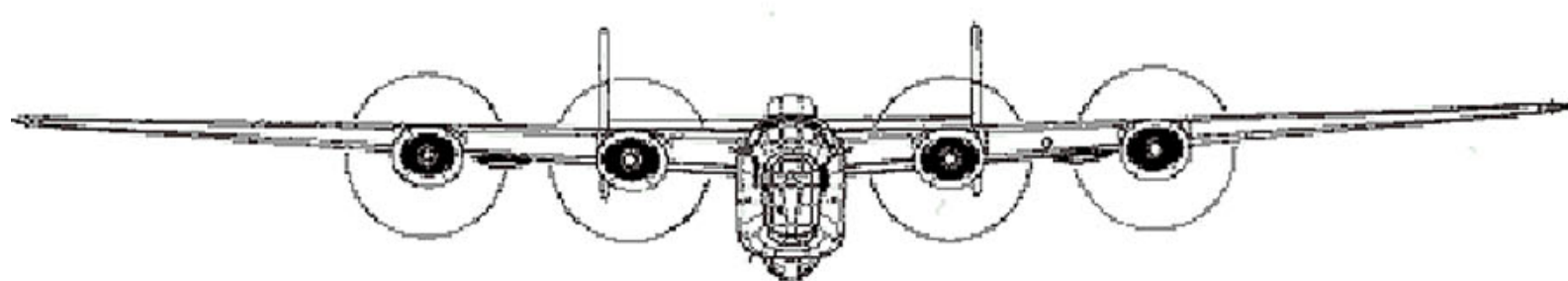
Red flares to warn away other craft led the Killer's crew to believe their own ship was on fire. Co-pilot Young started to scramble out the top turret, then stopped suddenly and said, "Oh yes, after you, Sir." The two waist gunners and the tail gunner were already on the ground. They bowed low and kissed it. Kane's first act was to shake his navigator's hand. "Damn fine navigation, son. You saved our skins and you're the hero of this ship."

For dinner that night, the Killer had pork chops and whatever was drinkable. But he couldn't sleep. It was the same with the others who had made their way back to their original fields. When Captain Jim Merrk's *Lil De-Icer* arrived, his ground crew chief climbed through the bomb bay doors and kissed him. The officers' club was thrown open to all air crew, and stayed open until five in the morning.

Great deeds had been done that day. With better weather and a better break in navigation, the

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target might have been more than 40 per cent knocked out. But deep in the heart of crumbling Europe, two thousand Americans plus Killer Kane had given the answer to whether they are soft. When their breed dies out, the nation can begin worrying about its future.



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