



Smoke billows from the Ploiesti oil refineries of Romania during a bombing run by Allied Forces in May 1944. (Public domain photo)



In late April 1944, *Exercise Tiger* took place along the shoreline in southwestern England. The eight-day exercise was designed as a dress rehearsal to prepare U.S. Army forces for landing at Utah Beach in France. (Public domain photo)



Morgantown resident Arthur Brown served on the USS *Enterprise* for 28 months, from late 1942 through early '45. He worked mostly in damage control. (Public domain photo)



Japanese ships anchored in Truk Lagoon are bombed by U.S. Navy aircraft in February 1944. Allied forces returned in April for the final blow. (Public domain photo)

# April 1944: World War II at 80

By Ronald P. May  
MCC Contributor

The tempo of the war intensified at the start of the second quarter of 1944.

April saw a return of bombing missions over the Ploiesti oil fields in Romania. A major source of oil for the German forces, the oil fields in Ploiesti produced 60 percent of the crude oil used by the German military.

Ploiesti's oil fields were first attacked by 172 allied aircraft flying from Libya, Africa, on Aug. 1, 1943.

While the attacks significantly damaged the oil refineries, the Germans anti-aircraft guns and fighter aircraft brought down 52 of the bombers. Only 88 returned safely to Libya. More than 310 aviation crew members were killed or missing.

By April 1944, odds had shifted slightly in the Allies' favor. The Army Air Force bombers could reach Ploiesti from captured airfields on the southern Italian peninsula, cutting the earlier distance of 1,200 miles from Libya to a more manageable 600 miles.

The April 5 raid was conducted by the new 15th Air Force, which was headquartered in Italy and now boasted new P-51 Mustang fighters to escort the bombers to Romania and defend them from air attack.

While the Germans again stubbornly defended the refineries and shot down many bombers, they began losing the war of attrition. They were unable to replace their planes and pilots lost in defending Ploiesti.

The oil refineries and supply network were significantly damaged, denying the Germans the full amount of oil needed to sustain their war machines. That meant a reduced number of planes flying, tanks moving, and trucks transporting.

Eighteen more bombing attacks on Ploiesti's oil refineries took place between April 6 and Aug. 19, 1944. The price of the raids was the steep loss of 223 bombers and fighters. But the cost to the Germans was even steeper. As a result of the



Arthur Brown (Arthur Brown courtesy photo)

raids, oil production was reduced by 80 percent. That meant a reduced number of German planes flying, tanks moving, and trucks driving.

## Disaster along the English Coast

Meanwhile, Allied forces amassing in England were beginning their final preparations for the amphibious landing on France in June.

In late April, *Exercise Tiger* took place along the Slapton shoreline in southwestern England. The eight-day exercise was designed as a dress rehearsal to prepare U.S. Army forces for landing at Utah Beach in France.

Several German S-boats (fast torpedo boats), tipped off by German intelligence via reconnaissance planes, snuck undetected into the coastal waters where Allied ships were waiting to unload troops on the shore. The German vessels fired upon U.S. LST's (Tank Landing Ships), sinking two of them. Up to 700 soldiers and sailors were killed during the attack by drowning, hypothermia, burns or injury.

The tragedy was kept a military secret to protect U.S. public morale and to ensure that Germany would not know the significance of damage or loss of life from their attack.

It was an ominous reminder of the danger that lurked ahead for the Allies who would soon be hitting the beaches of France and stepping into heavy German defenses.

**Navy raids in the Pacific**  
On the other side of the world, the Navy continued with their island

raids in the Pacific. On April 29-30, the island of Truk came under attack.

Located in the Caroline Island chain in the Central Pacific, Truk Island (today known as Chuuck Island), an atoll, had been occupied and used as a launching point for Japanese expansion.

The Japanese built five airfields on the island and parked 500 aircraft. The island's deep-water lagoon was even more impressive and widely thought to be the most formidable of Japan's Naval assets. It moored 1,000 ships that were ready to deploy when needed.

In February 1944, the U.S. Navy attacked the island by surprise with battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines. The operation — codenamed "*Hailstone*" — was successful in delivering a major punch to the Japanese assets on the island.

Navy ships and Army Air Force bombers returned April 27-30 for the knockout blow, which resulted in 70 Japanese ships sunk and 400 aircraft destroyed.

Arthur Brown got a prime view of the devastating February and April attacks on Truk Island. An Iowa native and a later resident of Morgantown, Ind., Brown was a ship fitter sailor on board the USS *Enterprise* aircraft carrier that participated in both raids.

Brown watched Japanese ships get hit by the U.S. planes as they tried to escape from the base.

"When the Jap ships came out of there (the base), we would detach our battleships or cruisers," he recalled. "I could see them shooting at those ships over there. I could see 'em smoking to beat the band and, just like you took a knife and cut it, sunk them. I could see it, just like watching television off the ship."

Brown served on the *Enterprise* for 28 months, from late 1942 through early '45. He worked mostly in damage control.

"We put the fires out," Brown said. "Any plumbing went to heck or something down in the galley had to be fixed or down

there where the doctors operate and everything ... We had to go down there and plug stuff. We worked all over the ship."

Brown and the other crew members assigned to damage control got plenty of opportunity to hone their skills in putting out fires, plugging holes in the hull and

making critical repairs.

The *Enterprise* was under frequent attack from Japanese planes, ships and submarines and was hit on numerous occasions. She was kept afloat only through the efforts of her dedicated crew.

Such dedication from all the branches of service in April ensured that

progress continued on the path to victory.

Next time: May 1944.

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldp.com> or contact him at [ron@ronaldp.com](mailto:ron@ronaldp.com). View his videos on his YouTube channel: *World War II History & Stories with Ron May*.

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