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The Forgotten Thousands: The Historiography of World War II Rescues of Allied Airmen in Yugoslavia

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Abstract: During World War II, Allied bombing of German-controlled petroleum refineries in Ploesti, Romania, diminished Axis fuel production but cost the Allies hundreds of planes and thousands of lives. Crews of many damaged planes flew partway back to Italy but were forced to crash-land their craft or bail out over Yugoslavia, where many landed on territory controlled by Partisans or Chetniks. Local Yugoslavs (mainly peasants), as well as both Chetniks and Partisans, welcomed them and gave them shelter. They were then evacuated by Allied transport aircraft (principally C-47s) that landed on makeshift airstrips maintained by Partisans or Chetniks.

The historiography of these rescues may be divided into document-based studies, prepared principally by US military personnel based on official records; and memory-based studies by pro-Mihailović authors based principally on participant memoirs. Whereas memory-based studies uniformly adopted a Serb nationalist viewpoint, document-based studies showed no favoritism and portrayed various factions working in parallel to rescue Allied airmen.

After Milošević fell in 2000, the Foreign Minister of Serbia and Montenegro, Vuk Drašković, in cooperation with the US Embassy, united the movement to valorize downed airmen and local efforts to rehabilitate Mihailović. Whether deliberately or not, US officials thereby undercut human rights activists in Serbia, and non-Serbs throughout the former Yugoslavia, who saw Mihailović as a war criminal, collaborator, and inspiration for war crimes and genocide in the wars of the 1990s.

Key words: Operation Halyard, World War II, Allied Air Rescue Operations, Chetniks, Partisans, Yugoslavia, Pranjani

Many claims in the historiography of the Second World War in Yugoslavia have become weapons in the propaganda arsenals of various national and social movements. This article deals with one such instance, namely the contested historiography of the Allied campaign to rescue downed airmen from Yugoslav territory during World War II, and the abuse of that historiography for political purposes. The rescues of those crew members make up a little known but crucially important campaign of close cooperation and humane

conduct among forces that were simultaneously seeking to destroy one another in a total war for control of Yugoslavia. In the following pages I relate the history of those operations, evaluate the respective contributions of Partisans and Chetniks to the rescues, and present the subsequent abuse of the history of these rescues by Serb nationalists and various US government agencies.

Allied Air Supply and Rescue Operations: An Overview

From November 1942 until May 1945, the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF) and its predecessor organizations dispatched over a million sorties of Allied warplanes over Central and Southeastern Europe.¹ In its many operations, the MAAF made a decisive contribution to the Allied victory, but it suffered many casualties. American army air forces alone reported 36,837 casualties, consisting of 3,863 killed, 4,796 wounded, and a staggering 28,178 missing in action.²

MAAF operations increased in frequency and number in the last year and a half of the war, largely because Italy's surrender in September 1943 cleared the way for more missions against more targets in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. In the aftermath of Italy's surrender to Allies in September 1943, Partisans and Allied troops moved hastily to disarm Italian troops and occupy their facilities. The Allies seized several airfields and the large port of Bari on the Adriatic (eastern) coast of Italy. Warplanes flying from those facilities could reach many additional targets in Southeast Europe and still have enough fuel to return to base. The primary target of MAAF bombers became the huge petroleum refining complex at Ploesti (now spelled Ploeisti), Romania, a facility considered by US military historians to have been "the most important strategic target in Europe".³

Allied bombers flying from Libya attacked the Ploesti facilities once in 1942 and again in 1943, but operational limitations made further attacks from such a long distance impractical. However, Allied commanders assessed that fuel was the weakest link in the German war machine, and the Ploesti refineries produced a third of all fuel consumed by the German armed forces.⁴ In the first of many assaults, American B-24s attacked Ploesti from Italian airfields in November 1943. In March 1944 German reverses led Allied military

¹ Parton, 1945: 418.

² *Ibid.*: 318-319.

³ *Ibid.*: 400.

⁴ US Army, 1945: 2.

leaders to declare Ploesti a target of “primary importance” to the MAAF.⁵ Between April 5 and August 19, 1944, the US Fifteenth Air Force dispatched a total of 5,446 bombers in 20 daylight missions (an average of 272 per mission) to Ploesti, and the British Royal Air Force joined in with four nighttime raids during the same period.⁶ The five months of intense bombing reduced Ploesti’s output capacity by about 90%⁷ and dramatically curtailed the Third Reich’s total petroleum production.

The air war victory over Ploesti was costly in human lives and aircraft. As Allied aircraft approached Ploesti, the attacking bombers were invariably fired upon by anti-aircraft batteries, attacked by Luftwaffe fighter planes, and confronted with dense clouds of smoke that obscured targets and disoriented Allied pilots.⁸ Many Allied aircraft went down on Romanian soil near Ploesti, while other damaged planes limped to the west toward their home bases in Italy. The American Fifteenth Air Force lost 239 bombers, or about 3.8% percent of all sorties,⁹ during the Ploesti raids. Altogether, 3,251 airmen of the Fifteenth Air Force were killed, injured, or missing in action from April to August 19, 1944. And Ploesti was not the only target of Allied bombing raids. The Fifteenth Air Force lost an additional 84 heavy bombers during the same time period in attacks on other targets.

Many air routes from Ploesti to Italy passed over Yugoslavia, so many Allied crew members either crash-landed or parachuted to earth on less populated parts of Yugoslavia under the de facto control of either Chetniks or Partisans. Since most Yugoslav civilians detested the fascist foreign occupiers but esteemed Allied flyers, local peasants typically made contact with the Allied airmen, took them in, provided food, drink (alcoholic and otherwise), hospitality, and in some cases medical care while hastening to put them in touch with the nearest Chetnik or Partisan troops. As an official Air Force history reported, “Invariably, individual airmen or groups of airmen were assisted by the native population in reaching the various assembly points...”¹⁰

With the proximity of recently acquired Italian airfields to major resistance movements in France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece, the Allies were able to conduct landings on makeshift airstrips behind enemy lines in coordination with local resistance forces. Once landed, the planes could take on

⁵ Downey, 1945: v. 1, 362.

⁶ US Army, 1945: 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 108.

⁸ Parton, 1945: 250.

⁹ US Army, 1945: 104.

¹⁰ Downey, 1945: 482.

downed airmen, wounded soldiers, and civilians caught in the crossfire of war and fly them to Allied bases. The landings enabled more accurate delivery of larger quantities of supplies and constituted a substantial improvement over airborne supply drops from low-flying planes.

The hundreds of evaders' forms completed by airmen rescued from both Partisan and Chetnik areas abound with praise for the generous hospitality provided by those of all ethnic, religious, and national groups in Yugoslav territory and surrounding lands.¹¹ The completed questionnaires tell a story of generous, humane deeds toward Allied evaders by civilians and resistance forces who were otherwise locked in an existential battle for survival and control of Yugoslavia. Allied personnel received no verified reports of either Chetniks or Partisans turning crewmen over to the Germans.

The peasant rescuers remained faithful to the long-standing Balkan tradition of welcoming strangers as guests and providing for them even before meeting the needs of their own families. Downed airmen became the beneficiaries of Yugoslavs' affection for Allied soldiers, resentment of German occupiers, and long-standing customary hospitality for strangers. And remarkably, both Partisan and Chetnik resistance fighters protected evaders and escorted them to safety, often taking casualties as they fought off German attacks intended to kill or capture the downed airmen. Even though at war with one another, Partisans and Chetniks cooperated when necessary to move downed Allied airmen closer to locations with usable airstrips.¹²

Consolidating Operations

From September to December 1943, the few months after Italy's surrender but before the Allies began operating out of Italian airbases, 108 evaders and escapees belonging to the American Fifteenth Air Force returned to their bases, almost all by boat or on foot.¹³ The number increased each month during the first half of 1944 through May, when the 176 returnees included 40 who had left Chetnik territory with the last British mission to Mihailović. Senior officers estimated that as of July 1944, at least 1,100 downed Allied airmen were then in various Southeast European countries awaiting rescue.¹⁴ Top generals were particularly concerned to learn that over a hundred downed airmen

¹¹ Evaders Forms, 1944.

¹² Parton 1945: 324.

¹³ The Allies distinguished in nomenclature between "escapees," who had spent time in prison camps, and "evaders" who fell behind enemy lines but had never been imprisoned.

¹⁴ Matteson, 1977: 1; Parton, 1945: 321.

were gathered near General Draža Mihailović's headquarters in Ravna Gora. Successful extractions from Chetnik-controlled territory depended upon the cooperation and good will of Chetniks, something by no means certain after the British withdrew their last mission to Mihailović in May 1944. With the number of downed Allied airmen growing daily, senior officers decided to expedite rescue operations by placing them under a single command and committing additional resources to the rescues.

On July 14, 1944, US General Wilson approved a plan proposed by General Ira Eaker to create the Air Crew Rescue Unit (ACRU), as a single command within the Fifteenth Air Force to expedite the retrieval of evaders from Southeast Europe.¹⁵ The ACRU was to be a "non-diplomatic and non-political" medical and rescue unit¹⁶ consisting of several different landing parties to organize extractions from several countries of Southeast Europe. The MAAF's Director of Operations foresaw that "two... field parties will be needed in the near future; one for operation in Tito held territory, and the other in areas controlled by Mihailović".¹⁷ The dual landing party provisions for ACRU were intended to resolve a sharp disagreement between American and British leaders. The Americans were eager to rescue those airmen (mostly American crewmen) awaiting rescue on Chetnik-controlled territory as soon as possible, while the British were loath to resume relations severed with the Chetniks only two months before.

By creating a single ACRU consisting originally of two landing parties, commanders accommodated British objections while making possible the expeditious rescue of American evaders then being protected by Chetniks. The crews of rescue flights to Chetnik-held land were to follow specific procedures to signal that the Allies remained committed to aiding the Partisans while refraining from awakening Chetnik hopes of once again receiving Allied aid. Pilots were ordered to fly first to Partisan-controlled airstrips and deliver most of their supplies before proceeding to Chetnik-controlled airstrips to pick up Allied airmen.¹⁸ Some airmen extracted from Chetnik territory were outraged to learn that the rescue aircraft had first stopped at Partisan airstrips; their hosts had convinced them that Mihailović was a fearless leader of a huge resistance movement and that Tito was a traitor and coward who was wrongly

¹⁵ Matteson, 1977: 24.

¹⁶ Parton, 1945: 321-322.

¹⁷ Matteson, 1977: 26. Quoting Fifteenth Air Force, "Plan for the Operations of ACRU," 31 July 1944, *Collection of Operations, Plans, Directives, etc., February 1943 – April 1945*, Air Force Historical Research Institute, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama; Parton, 1945: 323.

¹⁸ Matteson, 1977: 25.

receiving aid from the Allies.¹⁹ Those irate rescued airmen were apparently unaware that procedures followed by ACRU Landing Party #1, far from being developed from scratch, owed much to rescue operations that had already been conducted in France and Partisan-controlled areas of Yugoslavia.

Although the Chetniks were prevented by Allied strict guidelines from receiving aid or encouragement, airmen under their protection were the first to be rescued by the newly created ACRU Landing Party #1 in a series of evacuations known collectively as Operation Halyard. Two hundred twenty-five Americans and 38 others were evacuated on the night of 9/10 August, 1944, on 12 C-47 aircraft from an airstrip at Pranjani near Mihailović's headquarters at Ravna Gora.²⁰ The inter-Allied and interagency cooperation employed in this mission established a pattern for future ACRU operations throughout Southeast Europe,²¹ just as prior landings on Partisan territory and in France had pioneered the procedures used to extract evaders from Pranjani.

By the end of the war, ACRU landing parties operating in 15 different countries of Southeast and Central Europe had rescued 6,267 Allied Air Force personnel, of whom the largest number, 2,362, came from Yugoslavia.²² These figures, compiled by a dozen sources, included, by country, the total number of those rescued by the Fifteenth and Twelfth Air Forces.²³ Nonetheless, several authors viewed the count of airmen rescued from Chetnik territory in Yugoslavia as likely quite accurate but emphasized that the exact number of rescues from Partisan territory were much less so. ACRU did not compile the numbers of those rescued as part of routine supply missions to the Partisans. Additionally, an unknown number of airmen escaped from both Chetnik and Partisan territory without being counted, particularly in the chaotic final days of war as some airmen found their own way back to base.

Air Operations over Partisan Territory

Allied air operations over Partisan territory were more extensive in scope, more strategically significant, and more geographically dispersed than those over Chetnik controlled land, largely because the Partisans controlled more territory and were expanding their holdings throughout 1944. Some pro-Mihailović authors, seeking to show that most Allied flyers must have landed

¹⁹ Felman, 1964.

²⁰ Parton, 1945: 325.

²¹ *Ibid.*.

²² *Ibid.*: 340a.

²³ *Ibid.*: 340-340a.

on Chetnik-controlled territory, point out that the shortest route from Ploesti to Bari was over Chetnik land in Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. However, they neglect to mention that Chetniks controlled only small parts of Serbia and a few pockets of territory in Bosnia in 1944 while Partisans controlled much of the rest. Since the Allies had heard rumors, later proven false, that Chetniks had tortured some flyers and turned others over to the Germans, flyers were told in pre-flight briefings to land on Partisan territory if possible.²⁴ Contrary to widespread rumors and articles in the American press, evaders told their debriefers that they were generally well treated by both forces, leading briefers to discontinue those warnings as part of their pre-flight instructions. Evaders' forms show that airmen landed on much of Yugoslavia from Slovenia to Eastern Serbia and even on Bulgaria, so it appears that many damaged aircraft did not follow the shortest route from Ploesti to Bari and that aircraft striking other targets took quite different routes back to Italy.

As their territory grew, the Partisans brought additional landing strips into operation that allowed the Allies to step up both their delivery of supplies and the rescue of downed airmen. By November 1944 the Partisans were operating 17 landing strips, and by April 1945 that number had grown to 36. From August 1944 to April 1945, Russian, British, and American aircraft made over 1,000 landings on Partisan airstrips.²⁵ In contrast, ACRU Landing Party #1 rescued a few over 500 airmen from Chetnik territory in seven missions carried out from three airstrips. After four missions in August and September at the Pranjani airstrip near Ravna Gora, Mihailović and his Chetnik troops abandoned that area in October 1944 under pressure from Partisan and Russian troops and facilitated the final three missions from two airstrips, one each in Serbia and Bosnia.²⁶

In addition to delivering supplies and rescuing airmen, air missions to the Partisans evacuated thousands of their wounded to Allied medical facilities in Bari for treatment and rehabilitation. As they moved about while fighting the Germans, Tito's forces traveled with hundreds of wounded who reduced their units' mobility and increased their vulnerability to enemy attack. Tito communicated the urgency of these evacuations to the Allies, both to save lives and to give his forces greater maneuverability. In August and September 1944 alone, 4,102 wounded Partisans were evacuated in a total of 418 sorties.²⁷

²⁴ Felman, 1964: 8; Pesic, 2002: 17.

²⁵ Matteson, 1977: 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 31; Samardžić: 2009, 40.

²⁷ Craven and Cate 1951: 521.

Allied crewmen were in the greatest danger from the moment they exited their planes until they were safely in the hands of local peasants or under Chetnik or Partisan protection. The descending airmen were hard to miss. German troops often observed airmen's parachutes blossom and deliver their human cargo to the ground. Whenever they were nearby, German soldiers fired on descending airmen, even as local inhabitants sometimes ran toward the probable landing site to whisk the crewmen away.

Airmen rescued by the Partisans observed many firefights between the Partisans and Germans. Many of them occurred because the Partisans battled German patrols seeking to capture airmen they knew had fallen to ground in a particular area. Sometimes downed airmen caught between the two skirmishing forces were extricated by Partisans and retreated with them from the scene. In one instance, airmen landed in a stream and floated into the middle of a German-Partisan firefight. The Germans opened fire on the Americans, but the Partisans fought back, protected and escorted the Americans from the battlefield, and brought them to an airstrip at Sanski Most in Northwestern Bosnia for evacuation to Brindisi.²⁸

Those evaders who had been under Partisan protection were overwhelmingly positive in assessing their treatment and the determination of Partisans to defend them from German attacks. They expressed unstinting praise for their Partisan saviors in hundreds of debriefing questionnaires (each entitled "Evaders Form") that they typically completed on the day they safely reached their home base. The questionnaires attest to a well-organized, highly disciplined Partisan force that picked up airmen near their point of landing, escorted them expeditiously along well-established routes to frequently used airstrips, and saw them safely onto Allied rescue aircraft. The evaders' responses make clear that they believed themselves to have reached safety once they arrived at an airstrip, and most of them identified that airstrip by name. Evacuees most frequently mentioned airstrips at Sanski Most and Tičevo in Bosnia and on the Croatian coastal island of Vis.²⁹ As they saw it, the evacuation flights themselves had become relatively safe and nearly routine.

The total number of airmen rescued from Partisan territory was never known with certainty and never will be. The authors of the official history of the MAAF compiled statistics of rescues they considered to be "as accurate a tabulation as there is on air crew recovery listed according to the

²⁸ Evaders Forms, 1944.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

countries [from] whence they were rescued".³⁰ Of the 2,364 flyers rescued from Yugoslavia, the same statisticians estimated about 2,000 were extracted from Partisan territory and 350 from Chetnik. There is ample reason to consider both figures to be low. Subsequent counts have shown the number of those rescued from Chetnik land to be somewhere between 500 and 600. Additional uncounted rescues no doubt occurred in Partisan territory owing to ACRU's failure to count those extracted in routine supply missions and the sheer size of Partisan-controlled territory upon which pilots could land. One may conservatively assume that at least twice as many airmen were rescued from Partisan as from Chetnik territory. Unfortunately, pro-Chetnik authors have challenged any such numbers, typically without consulting official histories and unit statistics, as part of their effort to diminish the Partisan contributions to the rescue campaign.³¹

Rescuing Airmen from Chetnik Territory: Operation Halyard

British aversion to aiding the Chetniks required that ACRU Landing Party #1 execute rescue operations without reviving Chetnik hopes for further Allied support. These restrictions forced the rescuers to take measures that disappointed the Chetniks aiding the rescues and angered some Allied personnel – particularly OSS officers – charged with carrying them out. (Their anger may be a cause of the ferocious animosity expressed by some OSS officers toward the British, the Partisans, and the leaders of their own government.) In accord with their orders, Allied pilots delivered loads of supplies to Partisan-controlled airstrips before proceeding to Chetnik-held areas in nearly empty planes to evacuate downed airmen. Once on the ground in Chetnik territory, they delivered only enough supplies to sustain the evaders and Allied personnel of the landing parties.

The most memorable and influential first-hand account of bailout, parachuting, landing, and rescue was provided by Lieutenant Richard Felman, pilot of a B-24 bomber that was attacked first by German fighters over Ploesti and then again over Yugoslavia. Felman ordered his crew to bail out when their aircraft succumbed, and all but one made it alive to ground. Twenty years later Felman penned a vivid, detailed description of his ill-fated flight, his

³⁰ Parton, 1945: 340.

³¹ Samardžić, 2009: 45-56.

rescue by local peasants, and his time as a guest of Chetniks and Mihailović himself at the latter's headquarters at Ravna Gora.³²

In his memoir, Felman raved about hospitality extended to him and his crew by local Serbs. He concluded that he had incurred a debt that he would seek to repay for the rest of his life. Chetnik officers assigned to Felman spoke glowingly of Mihailović's merits as a leader and ferocity as a resistance hero. One of them regaled Felman with the claim that Mihailović had raised a mighty resistance force – 300,000 men strong, he claimed,³³ a number many times the 15,000 Chetnik soldiers estimated by Allied intelligence agencies for mid-1944.³⁴

According to Thomas Matteson, who reviewed evaders' forms in preparation for writing a 1977 thesis, "the returned airmen displayed generally restrained enthusiasm toward their Chetnik saviors. Overall, the flyers agreed that their rescue was due in large part to the efforts of the ACRU field team and not, as some believed, to Chetnik loyalty or dedication to the Allied cause".³⁵ My review of the same questionnaires in August 2019 led me to a similar conclusion but also revealed a possible explanation for some Chetnik behavior: the on-going disintegration of their force at the time many rescues took place. Some Chetnik units were in retreat and their ranks thinning owing to desertions by July 1944. According to the reports, some Chetnik soldiers proved more concerned about fleeing to safety than about continuing to fight.

A downed airman from St. Joseph, Michigan, reported that Chetniks he encountered were desperately hoping for US troops to intervene on the ground in Yugoslavia. In abbreviated, staccato written answers on his questionnaire, this evader reported that the Chetniks "wanted pilot to sign ultimatum to German garrison in Brza-Palanka, Donji Milanovac to surrender. Pilot agreed to sign it but never did. Gave only name rank and [Army identification number]".³⁶ Another evader also reported that his Chetnik hosts demanded a signed declaration. They pleaded with him to accompany them to Romania where they hoped to surrender directly to American forces. Other evaders told of remaining in a single location for many days and weeks under Chetnik protection. In one instance, a small group of American evaders reported that they were turned over to the Partisans by Chetniks. In another case, an evader reported that Chetniks had abandoned him and a few colleagues to be picked

³² Felman, 1964.

³³ *Ibid.*: 12.

³⁴ Matteson, 1977: 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 31.

³⁶ Evader Forms, 1944.

up by Partisans the next morning. These accounts point to a military force that had lost its will and probably its capacity to fight and yet wanted to be sure the American evaders they were protecting made it safely back to base.

The evaders' graphic descriptions of Chetniks faltering in resolve and seeking to flee the conflict are in accord with what other historical sources say about the military situation on the ground at that time. Authoritative histories report that Mihailović was reeling from defeats at Partisan hands by autumn 1944. He also faced rising discord among his senior commanders, plummeting morale, soaring desertions, and dread of the Red Army that was advancing on Belgrade.³⁷ On October 21, 1944, Chetniks under Mihailović's direct command began withdrawing from Serbia through the Sandžak on the way to Eastern Bosnia.³⁸

Months later, Mihailović and a handful of followers hid in the mountains of Bosnia, still waiting in vain for an Allied ground invasion that would never come. Meanwhile, the Partisans completed their liberation of Yugoslavia in spring 1945 and began establishing a communist federal state modeled after the Soviet Union. The Chetnik denouement came on March 13, 1946, when the Yugoslav Army captured Mihailović. In June 1946, he and 23 others were tried by the new communist regime for treason and war crimes,³⁹ convicted, and sentenced to death.

The Historiography of Operation Halyard

The specter of the civil war between Partisans and Chetniks overhangs the historiographical debate regarding the rescue of downed airmen. The Allies were obsessed with determining the effectiveness of both Chetniks and Partisans in defeating the Germans and the related question of whether either of their leaders was collaborating with the Germans. But Yugoslavs themselves judged both men and their forces according to many different criteria largely based on their personal experiences. In the eyes of most non-Serbs, and even some progressive-minded Serbs, Mihailović was a diabolical mass murderer for collaborating with the Germans, killing Partisans, committing war crimes against civilians, and fighting for a Great Serbia. Serb nationalists, on the other hand, viewed Mihailović as a great resistance leader and martyr for the Serb people. With time, those memories hardened and those

³⁷ Tomasevich, 1975: 428-43.

³⁸ Nikolić, 1999: v. 1, 303.

³⁹ Tomasevich, 1975: 460-461.

who fondly remembered Mihailović became even more embittered that the Partisans became the sole recipients of Allied aid and eventually won the war.

As a consequence, postwar historiography regarding the rescues reflects the same deep, bitter cleavages that divided the population of Yugoslavia (and Serbia in particular) between backers and detractors of Mihailović. The historiography also bifurcates along the same fault line into two categories of studies that I will call “document-based” and “memory-based.” Document-based studies are represented here by five works either prepared by US military officers or printed in official government publications (Downey, 1945; Great Britain Royal Air Force, 1944; Matteson, 1977; Parton, 1945; and US Army, 1945) as well as one recent academic study (Ford, 1992). I will assess five memory-based works that have appeared in either Serbian, English, or both (Felman, 1964; Pešić, 2002; Pesic, 2004; Samardžić, 2009; and Smith and Jadon, 2017).

Authors of memory-based works appropriately highlighted the heroism of the downed Allied airmen, the local civilians who helped rescue them, and the Chetniks who protected and escorted them. Unfortunately, each author also harbored a more general, uncritical admiration for Mihailović and his legendary deeds. Their unalloyed fealty to the mythical Mihailović turned the works of these authors into political polemics that exacerbated the already deep divide between the two sides in the Yugoslav civil war of 1941–1945. Authors of memory-based studies expressed utter contempt for the Partisans, and some extended their disdain to all Partisan supporters and allies. None of the memory-based books shows evidence of a systematic review of major document collections or even the widely-available secondary scholarly literature on the topics covered. As a result, their works deny or ignore the more numerous rescues in Partisan territory and the broader air crew rescue operations that were indispensable to Operation Halyard’s success.

Memory-based histories drew substantially upon Richard Felman’s memoir. Felman thought of his work not as a history but rather as an “eye-witness, factual, now-it-can-be-told story” (Felman, 1964: 4), but authors of the subsequent memory-based books reviewed here mostly treated it as an infallible historical source. Those authors also relied on secondary works about the OSS and the memoirs of a small coterie of Allied officials, mostly American OSS officers, who were passionate anti-communists and stalwart believers in Mihailović from early in the war. Although they occasionally cite an official document, none of these authors cites or mentions documents in archives of the US government (particularly those of the Army Air Force) and

studies based upon them, which tell a more complete story of the air rescue operations.

Each of the memory-based works gives a fiercely pro-Mihailović account of rescues from Chetnik territory (Project Halyard) with a rare mention of the much larger operation of which Halyard was but a small part. But treating Halyard as an isolated, stand-alone operation, the authors could advance the false claim that the rescues from Chetnik land qualified as the greatest rescue operation of the war.

The most extensive memory-based work is *The Forgotten 500* (Freeman, 2007). This work adopts the viewpoint and the cause of a handful of American OSS officers, mostly of Serbian ethnic origin, who railed in righteous indignation against Mihailović's primary enemies, the Partisans. The author draws heavily upon memoirs and the extensive literature that lionizes the OSS; its leader, Bill Donovan; and its many wartime agents. Most memoirs and accounts portray the OSS officers involved in rescuing airmen as swashbuckling heroes who daily battled the Axis powers, the spies and traitors within their own ranks, and the sclerotic bureaucracies of the Allied armed forces. *The Forgotten 500* devotes somewhat more attention to the Partisans than do other memory-based works, but the Partisans are mentioned mainly to be disparaged or their contributions minimized. The book portrays Tito as a willing agent of Stalin with the singular goal of turning Yugoslavia into a communist dictatorship dominated by the Soviet Union. The book further disparages those who favored supporting the Partisans or participated in delivering aid to them, since they were deluded by Partisan propaganda and blind to the Chetniks' heroic resistance against the Germans. Whether by design or not, Freeman related the story just as Serb nationalists wanted it told.

Regrettably, even the title of Freeman's 2007 book contains misrepresentations. The truly "forgotten" airmen were not only the 539 of whom Freeman wrote, but also the much larger number of Allied evaders who fell on all parts of Yugoslavia. The title of Freeman's book asserts the easily disprovable claim that the rescues from Chetnik territory constituted "the greatest rescue mission of World War II." The claim is particularly galling given that readily available official documents report that the Yugoslav Partisans rescued many more airmen than the Chetniks and that Allied B-17s rescued some 1,274 Allied airmen from Romania in Operation Reunion beginning on August 31, 1944 (Downey, 1945: 482-483).

Most memory-based works include contested claims concerning the number of airmen rescued by the Partisans and the size of Mihailović's Chetnik

force. Following Felman's memoir, several works portray Mihailović's Chetniks as an enormous force. Felman took at face value the claim of his minders that Mihailović had gathered a "guerilla force of over 300,000 men" to fight the Axis (Felman, 1964: 12). It appears that Mihailović's supporters routinely cited that number to impress their guests. Chetniks gave the same estimate to OSS officer George Musulin but told him that the hundreds of thousands of troops were not soldiers in the field but rather stay-at-home reservists. Musulin, in coordination with two other OSS officers, estimated Mihailović's active force at 60,000 – 70,000 troops but explained that Mihailović also had "another army" numbering 200,000 to 300,000, "in their houses cultivating fields... that would, upon the given sign gather together in a short time" (Pesic, 2002: 184). These numbers contrasted sharply with the Allied intelligence estimate of 15,000 Chetniks at the time Operation Halyard began in August 1944. The Chetnik estimates proved wrong. Only six weeks later, Mihailović was forced to flee Serbia to hide in Bosnia with a small force of die-hard followers. Whether they were actively engaged in the field or safely in their own homes, the alleged hundreds of thousands of Chetnik fighters failed to rally to Mihailović's defense just when he needed them most.

In addition to exaggerating the number of Chetniks and overstating their commitment to resistance, authors of memory-based books labored assiduously to disparage Partisans for failing to engage German forces and for allegedly mistreating Allied airmen who landed on their territory. Pesic, at the end of a three-page section subtitled "Lies about Partisan Forces," alleged a sharp contrast between Chetniks and Partisans: "To the Chetniks and Serb people, the Allies were friends, and to the Partisans, Allied prisoners of war!" That binary view contrasts starkly with the conclusion derived from Fifteenth Air Force documents that, with few exceptions, Yugoslavs of all nations and political allegiances rescued the downed airmen, gave them food and shelter, and led them to nearby Partisans or Chetniks who escorted them to airstrips for evacuation to Bari.

Authors of memory-based works sought to minimize the number of airmen rescued by Partisans. Pesic cited second and third-hand sources that reported only a few Partisan rescues. He dismissed an estimate of 2,000 Partisan rescues by attributing it to the Yugoslav Tito-led government, apparently unaware that the number was an estimate made by statisticians of the Fifteenth Air Force and printed in US government publications. In claiming that they had aided the rescue of 2,000 airmen, Tito's government was only repeating a credible

estimate from a highly reliable source. Naturally, Chetniks and their supporters felt resentful, since the Chetniks had rescued a few more than 500 airmen.

What of the historiography of rescue missions on Partisan-controlled territory? Sadly, there is none, or rather none devoted solely to Partisan-assisted rescues. Except for one book (Ford, 1997), the works I have categorized as document-based studies give the integrated history of all rescues from Yugoslavia and the other fourteen countries served by ACRU landing parties. To my knowledge, no separate history of Partisan-protected rescues has been published in book form, and the last history of the broader operation was Matteson's fine 1977 study, available as a typescript at the Air Academy.

The paucity of literature on the Partisan-assisted rescues is a striking instance of historiography that never developed owing to lack of sponsorship. No memorial culture arose to honor the forgotten thousands, and no annual celebration takes place. In 2010 I located one of the many Partisan airstrips near Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and found little remaining. The airstrip on which planes once landed had been divided among several different plots of crops. On the nearest road was a monument, but the plaque that identified the field was missing. A few elderly peasants recalled the field, and one of them remembered helping load planes as a teenager. The fate of the airstrip was no different from the historiography that never developed around it.

The Postwar Campaign to Valorize Mihailović and Memorialize Operation Halyard

Back in the United States in 1945, as the war came to an end, Felman and other airmen rescued by Chetniks were shocked and outraged to learn that Mihailović was about to be tried in Yugoslavia for treason. Their experiences on the ground in Yugoslavia had imbued them with unstinting admiration for Mihailović and profound gratitude to the Serbs of the Pranjani area who rescued and cared for them. To them, the true traitor – Tito – was completing his betrayal by falsely accusing Mihailović of the treason that he himself had committed.

Felman and other surviving like-minded American airmen campaigned to secure high-level American recognition of Mihailović and the Chetniks for rescuing airmen. In response to their campaign, President Truman in 1948 bestowed on Mihailović posthumously the Legion of Merit, the highest honor the US government could give to a foreigner.⁴⁰ Aware that the award would

⁴⁰ "Citation to accompany the Award of the Legion of Merit, Degree of Chief Commander Posthumous, to Dragoljub Mihailović," Truman Library.

anger the Yugoslav communist government and might be controversial at home, Truman decided to keep the award secret.

Unsatisfied with a publicly undisclosed Legion of Merit for their ill-fated hero, Felman and his fellow airmen redirected their efforts to campaigning for permanent, publicly visible memorials such as plaques and statues. They found supporters among ultra-conservative Republicans, who saw Mihailović as a fervent anti-communist and an ideal symbol of their own contempt for Marxist communist regimes. Republican Senators Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina) and Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona) introduced legislation in 1976 and 1977 to erect a statue of Mihailović on grounds of the US Capitol. The bill passed the Senate, but because it failed in the House of Representatives, no statue of Mihailović has been erected on US government land.

In the 1990s, a campaign to honor Mihailović and the Chetniks lost momentum in the US but reawakened and spread rapidly in the former Yugoslavia. In the Republic of Serbia, the Serb nationalist novelist and politician Vuk Drašković founded a Serb nationalist political party, the SPO (*Srpski pokret obnove*), and claimed that he and the party were rightful ideological heirs of Mihailović and the Chetniks. Many Serb soldiers, especially many who fought in paramilitaries that ravaged Bosnian and Croatian cities in the early 1990s, adopted the traditional attire and bearded appearance of Chetniks. Mihailović became a hero and role model to many Serbs fighting in the wars of the 1990s. Pro-Chetnik paramilitaries engaged in widespread ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia, while Croats and Bosniaks were horrified by these developments. Non-Serbs condemned Mihailović and his advisor Stevan Moljević for developing an ideology of Great Serb expansionism that helped inspire Milošević and his followers wage war in the 1990s.

During the wars of the 1990s and in the following decade, Serb nationalists and a few surviving American airmen revitalized their campaign to build enduring public memorials to Chetniks and Mihailović. After reducing the Croatian city of Vukovar to ruins and killing hundreds of its civilian residents in late 1991, Serbs had a statue of Mihailović made in Belgrade and sent to Vukovar. It remained there for six years until the city was about to be returned to Croatia by international agreement in 1997, when the statue appeared in the center of the ethnically mixed Bosnian city of Brčko. Predictably, the statue of Mihailović, though modest in size and of little artistic merit, led embittered Bosniaks and Croats to demand its removal. The American Supervisor of Brčko, Robert Farrand, responded by ordering Serbs to remove the statue. After some time, the statue disappeared overnight without a trace. With this

incident, if not before, US officials became fully cognizant of Mihailović's incendiary effect on non-Serbs in the region.

Milošević's ouster in 2000 created an opening for improved relations between the US and Serbia. The US urged democratic reforms in Serbia and quietly promoted rapprochement with the very country it had bombed only a few years earlier. At that time, the US was hoping that all countries in Southeast Europe would join Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the Council of Europe, NATO, and the European Union. Their efforts included an improbable rapprochement with the incendiary nationalist-turned-pragmatist Serb politician Vuk Drašković, who had again adjusted his views to new circumstances and advocated that Serbia turn to the West. A perennial player in Serbian politics since 1989, Drašković held the position of Foreign Minister of Serbia and Montenegro (the immediate successor to Yugoslavia) between April 2004 and September 2006. Once in that position, he wasted no time in promoting cooperation between Americans hoping to memorialize Mihailović for assisting downed US airmen and the growing number of Serbs seeking Mihailović's political rehabilitation.

Memorial Events and a Shrine at the Pranjani Airstrip

In cooperation with the US Embassy in Belgrade, Foreign Minister Drašković arranged for a group of four US veterans (three evacuees and one OSS officer) of the Chetnik-assisted rescues to visit Pranjani in September 2004, the 60th anniversary of the air evacuations (Tesla Society, 2004). Their visit tethered the Chetnik-assisted rescue memorialization to growing Serb nationalist demands to exonerate and rehabilitate Mihailović. It was a master stroke for the nimble, resourceful Drašković, who personally attended events at Pranjani and appeared in many photos with the Halyard veterans. Roderick Moore, Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy in Belgrade, attended the event to signal US government endorsement of the gathering. The American guests unveiled a plaque that read,

Airfield of Freedom and War Alliance between the United States and the Forces of General Draža Mihailović. Pranjani 2004. American Airmen among the Serbs again.

The plaque confirmed that the US government and the elderly visiting airmen were honoring only the participants in Operation Halyard rather than all airmen who fell on Yugoslavia and ignoring their rescuers as well. They

lionized Serbs, rather than South Slavs, Yugoslavs, or inhabitants of Southeast Europe, as the sole heroes of the rescue operations.

The next memorialization gesture proved to be one of the most incendiary incidents in the post-war history of the former Yugoslavia. On May 8, 2005, the US Embassy in Belgrade stunned the region by announcing that the Ambassador to Serbia would personally deliver the long-languishing Legion of Merit to Mihailović's daughter, who lived in Belgrade (*Oslobodjenje*, May 9, 2005: 2). Serb nationalists were elated by the announcement, while non-Serbs in the former Yugoslav lands, especially Bosniaks and Croats, and many outside observers denounced the planned delivery of the award as posthumously honoring a war criminal, genocidal killer, and collaborator (Hoare, 2005). Apparently stunned at the uproar evoked by their decision to deliver the Legion of Merit, US diplomats cancelled plans for a public ceremony and instead delivered the award to Mihailović's daughter privately in her home.

Despite the howls of protest from Serbia's neighbors to the west, the US government redoubled its efforts to elevate Operation Halyard while obliterating any mention of the Partisans or the far more numerous fallen airmen they helped rescue. On November 9, 2007, US Ambassador to Serbia Cameron Munter visited Pranjani to present a proclamation from Ohio Governor Ted Strickland expressing gratitude to Serbs who helped rescue downed airmen in 1944 (Free Republic, 2007).

In April 2009 the government of Serbia joined the campaign to valorize Chetniks by creating the Commission for Establishing Truth about the Murder of Dragoljub Mihailović. On May 14, 2015, the High Court in Belgrade annulled Mihailović's 1946 conviction for war crimes, thereby officially rehabilitating Mihailović and unofficially reinstating his reputation as a Serbian war hero. But rather than end the agitation, the legally dubious annulment seemed only to spur further efforts to valorize and memorialize the Chetnik general (Sekulović, 2016: 5).

The memorial activities at Pranjani were repeated in subsequent years and eventually became an annual event that furthered the American-Serbian campaign to create a shrine to Mihailović and the Chetniks at Pranjani. In September 2012, Serbs and Americans gathered again in Pranjani for a ribbon cutting to dedicate a school gymnasium partially financed by US government contributions. "The people of Pranjani put themselves in jeopardy because it was the right thing to do," said Ivan Tasic, a local employee of the US Embassy Office of Defense Cooperation (US Army, 2012).

Visiting American officials, probably unaware of the historical misrepresentation they were adopting, showered the Chetniks with adulation that abounded in irony. Ame Stormer, program manager for the US European Command Humanitarian Assistance Program, said the project was especially rewarding, as it enabled the US to express its thanks for Chetnik efforts in World War II. “This was a way to demonstrate to Pranjani that the US doesn’t forget the heroic efforts of its friends,” Stormer proclaimed, inadvertently verifying with those very words that the US had completely forgotten its Partisan friends and thousands of American veterans whose lives they saved. In stating that the program was intended to “bring goodwill and further stability in Eastern Europe,” she was likely unaware that the physical delivery of the Legion of Merit had evoked a furor in neighboring lands and revived memories of Chetnik atrocities in World War II. Her intentions and those of others delivering these donations were noble, and their goals were worthy. Indeed, she noted the dual purposes of these humanitarian deeds: “We are able to help people by providing much needed humanitarian assistance while enabling and supporting US strategic priorities,” said Stormer (Aldridge, 2012). Nonetheless, absent any mention of the Partisans or the thousands of US veterans they rescued, her message amounted to an endorsement of the extreme Serbian nationalist historical narrative that most non-Serbs in the region found toxic and threatening.

Since 2010, the memorial ceremonies at the Pranjani airstrip have expanded to include multinational memorial events and exhibits at other locations in Serbia and the US. In September 2014, representatives of the Serbian Ministry of Defense, the US embassy in Belgrade, and the US-based Halyard Foundation attended the opening of an exhibit in Belgrade dedicated to Chetnik-assisted rescues of 1944. US Deputy Ambassador Gorden Guguid stated that the exhibit demonstrated the close cooperation between the militaries of the two countries, specifically “cooperation with the National Guard of Ohio and the cooperation in the scope of the Partnership for Peace” (Serbian Armed Forces, 2014).

At Pranjani in 2016, US Ambassador Kyle Scott unveiled seven historical markers, with texts in English and Serbian, in commemoration of the 1944 Chetnik-aided rescues. Other wreaths were laid by delegates from the US-based Halyard Foundation, the Serbian Ministry of Defense, the British Embassy in Serbia, and the local Serbian mayor, Dejan Kovačević. The US Air Force Jazz Band prepared a two-hour musical program capped by playing the Serbian and American national anthems. Predictably, the US Embassy

press release repeated the now-routine false claim that Operation Halyard was “the largest rescue operation of downed American and Allied airmen in history.” (US Embassy Belgrade, 2016; US Air Force, 2016; US Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa, 2018).

The commemorative events of 2017 and 2018 grew grander, the guests more numerous, and the band still larger than in previous celebrations at Pranjani. In September 2018, the band of the United States Air Forces in Europe flew in from Ramstein, Germany to play the Serbian and American national anthems. US Brigadier General Richard Moore, Jr. reiterated the military significance of Serbian-American relations. “We’re thrilled with the continued good relations with the Serbian military,” he stated. “As we continue to get closer, we gain a better understanding of each other’s capabilities, and along with that comes not just partnership, but friendship.” And as usual, the official press release of the US Air Forces in Europe repeated the false claim that the Halyard Mission was “the largest rescue of downed airmen ever...” (US Armed Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa, 2018).

The following year, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the evacuations from Pranjani, the decades-long conjoined crusades of pro-Chetnik Americans and Serbian nationalists culminated in a meeting between the President of Serbia and the US Ambassador to Serbia. President Aleksandar Vučić paid homage to the participants in Operation Halyard by calling on US Ambassador Kyle Scott at the embassy (N1, 2019). At the highest level, the ambassador and president both endorsed the historical narrative that rightly honored the Halyard participants but wrongly affirmed Mihailović’s reputation as a resistance hero and martyr. As of this writing, the two governments continue to work together to memorialize and valorize the man many consider a diabolical murderer, war criminal, and icon of extremist Great Serb ideology.

Conclusion

Allied air rescue operations in Yugoslavia were made possible by extraordinary cooperation among Chetniks, Partisans, Yugoslav civilians (almost all peasants), downed airmen, Allied landing teams, and aircraft crews. The rescuers and the rescued came together in a rare display of humanity and mutual compassion amidst a total war and massive loss of human life. After the war, Richard Felman and other evaders rescued from Chetnik territory spoke out loudly and eloquently about their experiences. They were spurred by the capture, trial, and execution of Mihailović in 1946; by the exaggerated claims of their Chetnik minders that Mihailović was a relentless resistance leader; and by the rabid American anti-communism of the late 1940s and 1950s. Both Serbs and Americans found inspiration in Felman’s brief but

powerful account of his own experiences. In the twenty first century, the US government, initially through its embassy in Belgrade, promoted memorialization of Operation Halyard in hopes of improving American-Serbian relations and persuading Serbia to join NATO, the EU, and other Euro-Atlantic organizations. These memorial activities, whether by design or not, promoted the memory-based, one-sided, incomplete Chetnik version of the Halyard rescues and caused the larger, more numerous, and more strategically significant rescues aided by Partisans to vanish from public memory.

Zaboravljene hiljade: Historiografija spašavanja savezničkih zrakoplovaca u Drugom svjetskom ratu u Jugoslaviji

Zaključak

Savezničke vazdušne operacije spašavanja u Jugoslaviji bile su omogućene izvanrednom humanošću i saradnjom među četnicima, partizanima, jugoslavenskim civilima (gotovo svim seljacima), oborenim vazduhoplovcima, kao i savezničkim kopnenim timovima i avionskim posadama koje su ih odvezile natrag u bazu. Spasioci i oni spašeni spajali su se u rijetkim prikazima humanosti i međusobnog saosjećanja usred totalnog rata i masovnog gubitka ljudskih života. Saveznička operacija za spašavanje oborenih zrakoplovaca koju je predvodila Amerika obuhvatila je petnaest zemalja i uspješno vratila hiljade zrakoplovaca u njihove baze. Operacije nad Jugoslavijom spasile su više zrakoplovaca nego nad bilo kojim drugim područjem jugoistočne Evrope (na drugom mjestu je Rumunija), a operacije nad četničkim teritorijem činile su manje od trećine ukupnog broja zrakoplovaca spašenih iz Jugoslavije.

Nakon rata, Richard Felman i drugi zrakoplovci spašeni sa teritorija pod četničkom kontrolom jasno i glasno su govorili o svojim iskustvima. Bili su podstaknuti hapšenjem, suđenjem i pogubljenjem Mihailovića 1946. godine; preuveličanim tvrdnjama njihovih četničkih pazitelja da je Mihailović bio nepokolebljivi vođa otpora; i bijesnim američkim antikomunizmom s kraja 40-ih i 1950-ih. I Srbi i Amerikanci inspiraciju su pronašli u kratkom, ali snažnom prikazu sopstvenih iskustava Richarda Felmana i nekritički su prihvatili njegovo neosnovano omalovažavanje partizana kao tačno. Njegovi memoari postali su temelj historiografije Operacije Halyard utemeljene na sjećanju.

U dvadeset prvom vijeku, vlada SAD-a, u početku preko svoje ambasade u Beogradu, promovisala je memorializaciju operacije Halyard u nadi da će poboljšati američko-srpske odnose i ubijediti Srbiju da se pridruži NATO-u, EU i drugim euroatlantskim organizacijama. Ove memorijalne aktivnosti, bilo dizajnirano ili ne, promovirale su memorijsku, jednostranu, nepotpunu četničku verziju spašavanja u operaciji Halyard, te su prouzrokovale da veća, mnogobrojnija i strateški značajnija spašavanja pomognuta od strane partizana nestanu iz javnog sjećanja. Postavljajući kratkoročne ciljeve američke politike ispred principijelnog prepoznavanja Mihailovićeovog ratnog djelovanja, SAD su potkopale napore srpskih aktivista za ljudska prava i drugih da ohrabre građane svoje zemlje da se suoče sa posebno brutalnim

i katastrofalnim poglavljem u historiji Srbije. Američki i evropski historičari koji se bave temom bivše Jugoslavije trebali bi korigirati historijske zapise i opovrgnuti jednostranu, neistinitu verziju koja iz stranica historije briše izvanrednu humanost spasioca i spašenih iz mnogih naroda i vjera.

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