

# Operation Halyard

George Vujnovich led what has been called "one of the greatest rescue missions of World War II." He passed away of natural causes in New York City on 24 APR at age 96. Vujnovich orchestrated Operation Halyard, also known as the Halyard Mission, which rescued 512 airmen whose B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators had been attacked by Nazi Luftwaffe aircraft during World War II. He served as an agent for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a U.S. intelligence organization that preceded the CIA. Vujnovich orchestrated Operation Halyard in 1944, stealthily rescuing a group of U.S. airmen who were stranded in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia during the final years of World War II. But those who don't know his name can be forgiven, as the story of Vujnovich's greatest triumph was kept under wraps for over 60 years. A book about Operation Halyard, called "The Forgotten 500," was written by Gregory A. Freeman in 2007. In 2010, Vujnovich received a Bronze Star Medal of Honor for his work. Despite these recognitions, there was relatively little public knowledge about this Pittsburgh-born veteran. Now, Vujnovich's death has occasioned new interest in his extraordinary story.



**George Vujnovich**



**Lt. 1944**

Vujnovich was born to Serbian immigrants in 1915. He traveled to Belgrade for university studies, where he met his wife Mirjana. When Germany bombed the city in 1941, Vujnovich witnessed the carnage in person. He and his wife decided to flee Belgrade. On their way to Bulgaria, an outlandish coincidence helped them make their escape. Mirjana did not have a passport, but was helped through customs by none other than Magda Goebbels, the wife of Hitler's minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. Mirjana became airsick while sitting next to Magda, who felt sorry for her ailing seatmate. Upon landing, Magda Goebbels angrily rebuffed the customs officer who asked for Mirjana's documents, enabling her to slip through security. This was an especially strange twist of fate since it was Mirjana who would be the first to alert

her husband to the plight of the U.S. airmen hiding from Nazi forces in Yugoslavia. Vujnovich subsequently joined the army and was recruited into the OSS

After the successful Allied invasion of Sicily, Italy capitulated in the autumn of 1943, the Allies occupied the whole of southern Italy. In late 1943, the 15th Air Force of the United States Army Air Forces was transferred from Tunisia to an airfield near Foggia. This airfield became the largest American air base in southern Italy, and was used for attacking targets in southern and Eastern Europe. The 15th Air Force bombed targets in Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, German occupied Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. From October 1943 to October 1944, the 15th Air Force conducted about 20,000 sorties with fighters and bombers. During this time it lost almost fifty percent of its aircraft but only about ten percent of its personnel. To carry out combat missions, the Fifteenth Air Force had at its disposal 500 heavy bombers (B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators) and about 100 fighter escorts. Some of the most important targets were sources of petroleum and petroleum refineries in Romania. The route aircraft took from southern Italy to the targets in Romania was repeated every day from the spring of 1944. Two-thirds of these flights were carried out against objectives in Bulgaria, Romania and the German-occupied zone of Serbia. The Germans had at their disposal a limited number of fighter aircraft whose most frequent targets were Allied planes that had already been damaged by Axis anti-aircraft defenses in Bulgaria and Romania, planes that because of such damage had to fly slowly at low altitude.

In 1944, U.S. air forces were en route to Romania to bomb the oil refineries around Ploesti, which was a major fuel source for Axis powers. But under Luftwaffe air fire, a number of planes went down causing American aviators to bail out of damaged aircraft, over what is now Serbia, in increasing numbers. Over other countries, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia, they left their planes only as a last resort. Pilots forced to bail out of their aircraft parachuted down into Nazi-occupied territory. Those troops were found and assisted by Yugoslav guerillas under the command of General Draza Mihailovich, a royalist Serb who supported the Allied cause. By 1944, Vujnovich was stationed in Bari, Italy. Mirjana had taken a job at the Yugoslav Embassy in Washington, D.C. At the embassy, Mirjana came across a telegram from Yugoslavia. The message, sent to alert American authorities to the presence of downed Allied airmen, came from General Mihailovich. He and his forces had been helping Allied soldiers hide from the Nazis in barns and farmhouses. Mirjana relayed the information to her husband, and Vujnovich took action. Thus began Operation Halyard, which would rescue hundreds of Allied soldiers from Axis territory. "We didn't lose a single man," said Vujnovich to the New York Times 66 years later. "It's an interesting history. Even in Serbia they don't much know about it."



**U.S. Airmen with Dragoljub Mihalović**

Vujnovich would have gone to Yugoslavia himself, had that idea not been vetoed in a telegram from U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. So it was from Italy that he orchestrated the risky mission, which involved getting Allied agents into Yugoslavia undetected by training them to behave like Serbs. "I taught these agents they had to take all the tags off their clothing," Vujnovich said. "They were carrying Camels and Lucky Strikes cigarettes, and holding U.S. currency. I told them to get rid of it. I had to show them how to tie their shoes and tuck the laces in, like the Serbs did, and how to eat like the Serbs, pushing the food onto their fork with the knife." With the help of Mihailovich on the ground in Yugoslavia, the operation was successful. Using no sophisticated tools or machinery, Allied agents under Vujnovich's command carved a makeshift runway out of mountainous terrain. It was just long enough for Allied C-47 Skytrains to land and lift off. Over the course of six months, Allied planes flew right under Axis noses to quietly rescue 512 airmen.

For years, hardly anyone knew about Operation Halyard. That's because the mission was kept under wraps after the Allies threw their support behind a communist Yugoslav named Josip Broz Tito, a rival to royalist Mihailovich and his Chetnik Detachments. The Allies' allegiance to Tito's communist forces was engineered partly to justify the Soviet Union's heavy troop losses against Nazi Germany. America ceased to support Mihailovich, and the story of his efforts to help U.S. airmen was suppressed. So, too, was the overall story of Operation Halyard; not even Vujnovich discussed it after retiring from the military. "There was a strict rule in the OSS to not talk about these things -- they teach you to compartmentalize them and lock them away," he explained. Mihailovich was executed by Tito's government in 1946. In 1948, President Harry Truman posthumously awarded the Legion of Merit to Draza Mihailovich for his contributions to the Allies' victory in Europe. If the award had been publicized at the time, it would have gone a long way to rehabilitate Mihailovich's reputation, but the State Department insisted that such

recognition would antagonize Tito and damage U.S. relations with his government. Public recognition was suppressed until 2005, when the award was at last presented to the general's granddaughter, Gordana Mihailovich.



Vujnovich's achievements were not fully recognized by the U.S. military until 66 years after Operation Halyard. Mirjana had passed away, and he had been living alone in Jackson Heights, Queens. In October of 2010, Vujnovich was awarded the Bronze Star during a small ceremony behind the red wooden doors of the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Sava, which is on West 26th Street near Broadway in Manhattan. Flanked by bouquets of white flowers, Vujnovich wore a brown suit and glasses as he addressed the small crowd before him. "I am deeply honored to accept the Bronze Star Medal for my work on Operation Halyard," he said. He recounted some details of his 1944 mission, mentioning his wife Mirjana and wishing she had lived to see the ceremony. At the end of his short speech, Vujnovich expressed his undying gratitude for "those who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the cause of freedom." Vujnovich is survived by his brother, daughter, son-in-law, and one granddaughter. His funeral service was held on 28 APR at the St. Sava Serbian Cathedral.

**Following is an account by one of ‘The Forgotten 500’, Clare Musgrove’s experiences and rescue as a result of Operation Halyard:**

On Clare Musgrove’s first mission over Ploesti, Romania, he and the crew of his U.S. Army Air Forces bomber were certain to be shot at. Romania supplied the oil the Nazi war machine desperately needed for its tanks, trucks, and aircraft. While the Germans vowed to protect the flow of oil from Romanian wells at all costs, in 1943 and ’44, the Americans grew just as determined to choke production.

To do it, they sent Consolidated B-24 Liberators of the 15th Air Force, based in Bari, Italy. With a high wing, four engines, and an H-shape tail, a B-24 looks roomy from the outside, but half the crew—the pilots, navigator, bombardier, and radio operator—sit in or near the nose. Then comes the tightly packed bomb bay. “It usually had five 2,000-pound and ten 1,000-pound bombs,” says Musgrove. “It might have even carried some 500-pounds.” A narrow vertigo-inducing aluminum plank links the cockpit with the tail section, which housed two waist gunners, the tail gunner, and the ball-turret gunner, Musgrove’s position.

The ball turret was so cramped the gunner could not wear a parachute plus the head-to-toe leather flightsuit, which was the only protection from frostbite at altitude. So the gunner stowed his chute outside the turret, but within reach. If a bullet or chunk of flak cut a power line, the gunner had to hand-crank the turret to a position from which he could wriggle out of the escape hatch. “It was a very difficult place to remove yourself from, if you didn’t have power,” says Musgrove.

A hollow sphere of aluminum and glass, the ball turret could spin twin .50-caliber machine guns in an arc of 180-plus degrees. The turret hung more or less from the B-24’s belly, and the gunner inside operated it with electric controls mounted on pistol grips. The grips also carried triggers to fire the .50s.

During the summer of ’44, Musgrove, a gunnery instructor, volunteered to fly his 11th mission as a stand-in ball turret gunner. His departure from the 15th’s air base in Italy and flight over the Adriatic and into Yugoslavia were smooth. Over the target—part of Musgrove’s job was to see how well the crew hit it—flak took out two engines. The B-24 started losing altitude, and then a third engine died. Lieutenant Fred Tucker, the pilot, hit the alarm to abandon ship, and from the bomber’s smoky trail, parachutes blossomed.

All except Musgrove’s.

“I had to hand-crank the turret up and get out,” he says. “That took me a while. Then I couldn’t find my parachute, so that made me panic a bit.” The Germans spotted the other parachutes and rounded up all nine airmen. By the time Musgrove finally popped out of the B-24, his parachute opened miles away from the others. The Germans missed him—and they knew it.

**DURING WORLD WAR II**, that story played out on every front—a bomber went down, the enemy rounded up survivors. Often the airmen were attacked by shotgun- and pitchfork-wielding civilian mobs, driven to fury by relentless bombing raids; ironically, the airmen would be rescued by enemy soldiers. Where Musgrove went down in Yugoslavia, the opposite happened.

The Nazis had bombed and invaded the country on April 6, 1941, and the royalist government surrendered 11 days later. In the chaos that followed, two factions emerged: Marshal Josip Tito's communist Partisans and General Draza Mihailovich's royalist Chetniks. Numbering around 10,000, the Chetniks lived in mountainous western Serbia and followed the charismatic Mihailovich. He appeared on the May 25, 1942 cover of *Time*, which considered him one of Europe's greatest guerrilla fighters. The magazine's readers voted Mihailovich Man of the Year, though the editors picked Joseph Stalin. The Allies also went with Stalin instead of Mihailovich: A communist double agent convinced the British to align themselves with Stalin's man, Tito, and the British convinced the Americans to do the same.

By 1944, when flak from Ploesti's anti-aircraft artillery brought down Musgrove's B-24, Tito and Mihailovich were fighting not only the Germans, but each other. The U.S. forces dropped supplies and weapons for Tito's Partisans, while the Chetniks salvaged machine guns and ammunition from crashed B-24s and whatever food they could scrounge from the countryside and from the peasants who backed Mihailovich.

The U.S. Army Air Forces had instructed its airmen that if they had to bail out, they should do it over land controlled by Tito. But air crews in damaged aircraft rarely have a choice about where to jump. When airmen hit the silk over Serbia, "the Germans would jump in their trucks and tanks and chase their parachutes to the mountainside," says Nick Petrovich, who grew up in Serbia and joined the Chetniks when he was 16. "We organized the peasants to pick up the guys, bury the parachute into the ground or into the hay so the Germans would not see it. Then we guerrillas would be taken by the peasants to where they hid those guys."

**WHILE HE FELL** from the sky in 20 to 30 seconds, Musgrove spotted a flock of sheep to his left. "I said, 'If I ever get on the ground, that's where I'm going to head out, because sheep and humans go together,'" he recalls. When he landed, he tucked and rolled as he had learned during jump training. Then he found the two women and two boys herding the sheep. He cautiously revealed himself. Since he didn't understand Serbian and they didn't know English, everyone sat and stared at one another for a long time. Then the women and boys gathered the flock and started toward their village.

"I stood pat and didn't know whether to follow them or not," says Musgrove. "They turned around and motioned for me to follow them, and I did." The peasant women led him to a house, and motioned for him to sit on the porch while villagers gathered around and talked. Then they brought him inside and motioned for him to sit at a table. "They were very generous," he says. "They didn't have much food for themselves, but they were willing to share it."

While they ate, a quick rap came on the door. The man of the house answered and engaged in a deep conversation with the visitor. "He came back to the table, grabbed me by the shoulder, and took me into a bedroom and motioned for me to get under the bed," says Musgrove. "Later that



night another person came into the house, and they had another hefty conversation. He walked around the house. I could only see his boots—they looked like German boots to me—and the man of the house convinced him no one was in the house. He finally left, and I began to breathe somewhat easier.”

The next morning two Chetnik soldiers—neither of whom spoke English—arrived at the house, and they took Musgrove on a walk that lasted days. “I didn’t know anything about where we were going,” he says. “I didn’t know if I had been captured. I was scared to death. I didn’t speak the language. I was at the mercy of whatever person was helping me. Later in the week, we came upon a local man who was a schoolteacher who could speak some English, enough to tell me there was an assembly area where downed airmen were accumulating.”

They walked farther. “The next day I met a man on horseback, and he could speak very good English,” says Musgrove. “He told me he was Captain George Musulin, who was in charge of the [U.S. Office of Strategic Services] group helping the Chetniks gather us to a central base, and they were going to build an airstrip and come in and fly us out.”

**THE CHETNIKS HAD BEGUN** their collection of U.S. airmen when the first one floated out of the sky following a disastrous low-level raid on Ploesti in 1943. A year later, the number of Americans under Chetnik care topped 100, but Army Air Forces officers did not realize there were so many and that they were clustered in Pranjani, a remote village in western Serbia. Air Force leaders figured that men not turned over by Tito’s Partisans had probably been rounded up by the Germans. That all changed after Musulin returned to the OSS station in Bari at the end of May 1944 after spending six months in Serbia gathering intelligence and organizing the Chetniks into resistance groups who could sabotage German targets, including bridges, ammunition depots, and airfields.

Musulin’s boss in Bari, George Vujnovich, had heard unconfirmed reports that the number of Allied airmen who had escaped capture by the Germans in Yugoslavia was substantial. When Musulin confirmed that there were at least 100 men in Chetnik territory, Vujnovich devised a rescue operation code-named Halyard. Vujnovich wanted to send in a three-man team headed by Musulin to supervise the building of an airfield from which U.S. airplanes could evacuate the airmen.

Arthur Jibilian, who had been a U.S. Navy radioman before joining the OSS, would be the team’s radio operator. Jibilian, better known as “Jibby,” was tasked with hauling around the heavy equipment needed to receive, transmit, and encode radio signals. According to Gregory A. Freeman, who wrote about Operation Halyard in his 2007 book, *The Forgotten 500*, Vujnovich felt even more urgency about launching the rescue after finding out that a few of the airmen in

Pranjani had recently been sending encoded radio messages to the 15th Air Force headquarters in Bari asking for help.

In late July, the OSS sent the downed airmen a message to expect Musulin, Mike Rajacich, a Serbian-fluent OSS agent, and Jibby to jump on July 31 or the first clear night after. Under a prior agreement between British and U.S. intelligence services, a British pilot and jumpmaster would fly the OSS team to the jump site in a U.S. aircraft. That night, after taking off from Fugia, Italy, in a C-47 painted black, they ran into anti-aircraft fire and turned back. The next night, the jumpmaster told them to leap into an area where the Halyard team could clearly see a battle raging. “It’s funny, yet it’s so serious it’s not funny,” said Jibby (interviewed for this story a few months before he died last March). Then the jumpmaster told the OSS team to parachute above a lake. According to Jibby, Musulin exploded and demanded—and got—a U.S. pilot and jumpmaster. “That night, we were in Yugoslavia,” said Jibby.

Jibby said he had been afraid during the two-hour flight to the drop zone, but the delays made him eager to jump. They used a static line and jumped at 800 feet with no emergency chute. Jibby hit the ground in 30 seconds. “It looked like I was going to come down into some trees, so I went into ‘tree position,’ ” he remembered. “I crossed my legs and put my elbows to my face.” Fortunately, he landed in a cornfield. “My best landing of all my parachuting,” he said. “Musulin landed on a chicken coop and crushed it all to hell. Mike, our third member, he landed in a tree with feet just barely off the ground and had to be helped out a bit.”

When the Halyard team finally met up with the downed fliers, they learned that the group had ballooned to 250. And they weren’t just showing up randomly. By then the Chetniks had developed precision tactics to rescue them: Once a parachute bloomed, one small guerrilla detachment rushed toward it, while a second larger group set up a perimeter, blocking roads with boulders or trees and placing .50-caliber machine guns at strategic points. “Most of the time the Germans would turn around and retreat,” Petrovich wrote in his 2003 autobiography, *Freedom or Death*, “but sometimes the expedition would include tanks and armored vehicles, and the only thing that we could do was to keep them under fire until the signal was received that the American crew had been evacuated.”

Right after one such mission on Zlatibor Mountain, Petrovich’s group received orders to move to Mihailovich’s headquarters at Ravna Gora. Once there, they were ordered 50 miles north to Pranjani, where the growing collection of U.S. airmen had discovered Galovica meadow. It was situated atop a hill and filled with boulders, but it was relatively flat, and the Halyard team thought it could accommodate C-47s.

“Basically it needed to be plowed flat and strengthened,” says Dik Daso, curator of modern military aircraft at the National Air and Space Museum. At night, with no machines, Allied

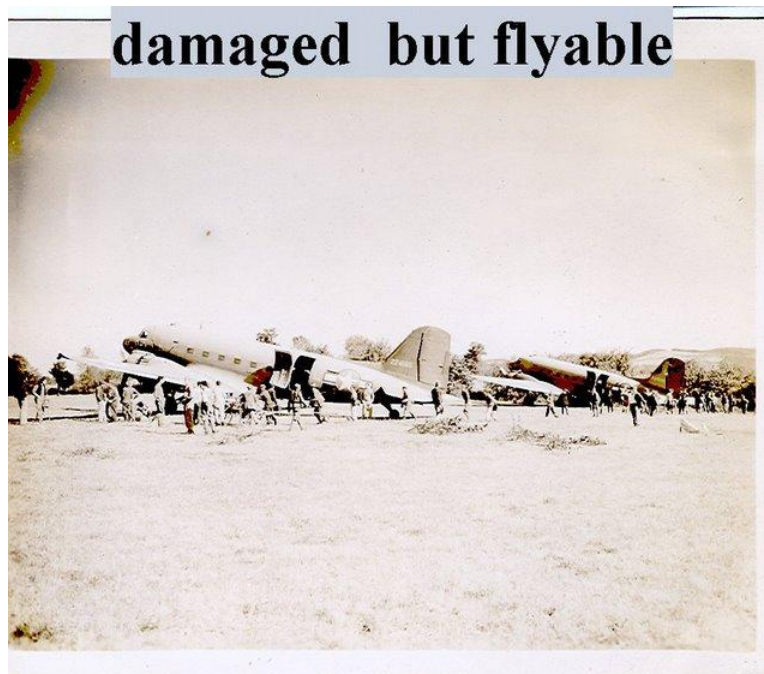


airmen and Serbian peasants cleared boulders and filled in potholes. “Using ox wagons, the peasants would go to the nearby stream bed, get rock and sand, and bring the stuff up the hill to the runway site, in this never-ending daisy chain,” says Daso.

The airmen and Serbs completed the airstrip in nine days. On one end stood a forest, a sheer drop off marked the other, and mountain peaks poked up a mere two miles ahead. The strip measured 150 feet wide and 2,100 feet long. Using that takeoff distance and loaded with enough fuel to return to Italy, a C-47 could haul out up to 25 airmen at a time. The first evacuation was scheduled for the night of August 9.

As the sun set, everyone—the OSS team, the airmen, the Serbs who had taken them in, and the Serbs who had helped build the runway—gathered at the meadow. They lit flares and bonfires to outline the strip. At precisely 10 p.m., the first transport approached, a black C-47 with a white star on its tail. Its landing gear made contact too far down the runway, so the pilot applied power and pulled up. “We thought that was the end of the mission that night,” says Musgrove.

But the second pilot slammed down the gear of his C-47 and held the transport on the ground. The strip’s end approached. “He spun around on a wing, but didn’t damage the wing,” says Musgrove. “He bent it a little bit.” Fortunately, the transport was still airworthy. Three more C-47s landed without incident, including the one that had failed to stop on its first attempt.



**American planes waiting for American airmen to transport to Italy in Kochevo, Serbia. Two of this airplanes are damaged during landing because of a short landing strip.**

The sickest dozen airmen were loaded first onto one of the aircraft. The pilot taxied into position on one engine, fired up the second, and, pressing the brakes, shoved the throttles forward. He released the brakes. Its engines screaming, the C-47 picked up speed. When it reached the end of the strip, it dropped below the hill and disappeared. But then, just like in the movies, it roared upward. Transports two, three, and four departed the same way. Forty-eight men out, more than 200 to go.

Despite the success of the first airlift, Musulin and the other OSS leaders determined that trying to land in mountainous terrain at night was too dangerous. But conducting flight operations during the day had its own risks. Only 20 miles southeast of the Galovica meadow airfield was Cacak, a German garrison. “The Germans there were reduced in number, but they had an airfield and a few fighter planes,” said Jibby. In the end, the Halyard team decided that attacking Germans were the lesser of two evils.

At 8 a.m. the next day, Jibby heard the second round of transports—12 more C-47s—accompanied by the deep, throaty roar of fighters: one group of P-38s and another of P-51s. The -51s had red tails, the markings of the Tuskegee Airmen. “They came in numbers of six and 10, accompanying the guys landing on the mountain,” says Petrovich. “They would have a lot of fun flying around strafing German planes” parked on the ground at Cacak and at two other German garrisons nearby.

Airmen quickly filled the bare benches running the length of the C-47 cargo holds, and transport after transport pulled away. A couple hundred more men—in addition to the 248 who’d already been flown out—were evacuated on flights carried out over August 12, 15, and 18. The farewells between the airmen and the Serbs who had risked their lives helping them often brought tears from both sides, as well as last-minute gestures of goodwill. “The Chetniks and Serbians had very poor clothing and shoes,” says Musgrove. “They wore boots made out of felt, and things like that, so when we got on the plane we kicked our shoes off to them.”

“[The airmen] had these leather suits, and they would give us that to use,” says Petrovich. “The guys would give us their Colt pistols, which we loved very much.” In return, the Serbs gave the airmen homemade rugs, and one guerrilla handed airman Ray Weber his Chetnik cap. Weber was “a souvenir kind of guy,” says his daughter Sue Brown. Right after bailing out, Weber had started collecting mementos, tucking away a scrap of silk from his parachute, plus the ripcord.

Mihailovich asked if he could send two seriously ill Chetniks to Italy for medical attention, and Musulin felt he couldn’t refuse. When the men arrived in Bari, however, they were spotted by Tito’s Partisans, who reported them. “All hell broke loose,” said Jibby. “They were going to court-martial Musulin.” Cooler heads prevailed, but Musulin was ordered out and replaced with Nick Lalich for the rest of the operation.



Operation Halyard was managed by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services' Nick Lalich (front row, third from left) and radio operator Arthur Jibilian (back row, second from left).

Mihailovich told Lalich, the U.S.-born son of Serbian emigrants, that if the Air Force was interested, he could deliver more airmen to Pranjani. Jibby radioed the message back to the 15th's headquarters, and received orders to continue Operation Halyard—with no promises to the Chetniks.

For a few more weeks, as soon as a few flights' worth of airmen collected at Pranjani, Jibby called for more transports. The airstrip in the meadow operated almost like any other military airfield. "We didn't do a couple of evacs because of bad weather," said Jibby, "but I can't say it was ever really a factor." The OSS even flew in a doctor and two assistants to treat burns and flak wounds and set broken bones.

While waiting for their flight home, the airmen hid out and slept anywhere: On the ground near the strip, in villagers' homes, in barns, atop fir needles in the nearby forest. The wounded always took priority, sleeping in beds while their hosts slept on the floor. Always, they were guarded by the Chetniks.

"Sometimes you would eat once a day," said Jibby. "Sometimes twice or three times—sometimes you wouldn't eat at all. You learned that you can overcome hunger. Keep going and after a while the hunger goes away. It hurts, but sooner or later, the host will come to you with a hunk of cheese and black bread with straw in it and you eat. Or chicken broth or beef broth with potatoes. Once in a while there would be a great celebration—they had chicken and lamb and we had a feast. Our stomachs would be shrunken so much we couldn't eat much."

The last flights out of Pranjani were in late August. “I have no knowledge that [the airfield] was used after the war except to graze the cattle,” says Petrovich. Life in the village returned to normal, while the Nazis suffered heavy losses in the east.

“[The Germans in Serbia] were demoralized,” says Petrovich. “They were in a strange country. They didn’t know if they were going to get home. Some would start crying, ‘I didn’t come here on my own volition,’ trying to justify themselves. At the beginning they were killing 100 Serbians for every German soldier killed, but when they became weakened and the garrisons depleted, then the whole game changed.”

At the end of 1944, the Soviets marched into Serbia. Two years later, Tito’s Partisans captured Mihailovich, accused him of collaborating with the Nazis, and executed him. The U.S. government downplayed protests by the rescued airmen in New York City and Washington, D.C. In 1948, the United States secretly and posthumously awarded Mihailovich the Legion of Merit, the highest U.S. commendation for a foreign citizen. “General Mihailovich and his forces,” it read in part, “although lacking adequate supplies and fighting under extreme hardship, contributed materially to the Allied cause, and were instrumental in obtaining a final Allied victory.”

When Mihailovich was captured, Petrovich and the other Chetniks were imprisoned and later forced to join the Partisans, but Petrovich escaped to Athens, Greece. “I was shot only three times and still alive and no airman was killed,” he says. “But the Nazis, Bosnian SS, and Croatian Nazis left their bones in the gorges and river beds.” Petrovich, now 83, lives in Mexico City.

In 2004, the Serbian government held a 60th anniversary reunion at the Pranjani strip to dedicate a plaque; two airmen, Clare Musgrove and Bob Wilson, made it. The next year, Mihailovich’s Legion of Merit was officially presented to his daughter, Gordana Mihailovich. Jibby was one of five Halyard veterans at the presentation. In July 2009, U.S. Congressman Bob Latta of Ohio introduced a bill to award Jibby the Medal of Honor for his actions during Operation Halyard. And last October 17, in a ceremony in New York City, 95-year-old George Vujnovich received the Bronze Star for his role in the rescue.

Souvenir collector Ray Weber left the military and built a tool-and-die business. “On June 11, we would have burnt toast and cottage cheese,” says his daughter Sue Brown. “It was symbolic of the day that he got shot down, and what he ate there most of the time—burnt bread and goat-cheese-something. But cottage cheese was the closest Mom could do to it.”

In 1955, Weber received a letter from one of the Serbian families he’d lived with while he was on the run. It was in Serbian, so Weber had it translated. The writer simply reminded Weber that

he had hid with his family and asked how he was. Weber, who died in 1996, made copies of the letter and sent one to each member of his crew. His daughter doesn't know if any of the men responded. The original letter, written on fading airmail paper, he saved in a box labeled "War Stuff."

George Musulin, who died in 1987, worked with the OSS's successor, the CIA, for a few years after the war. "My dad didn't talk about the mission to his family directly, but we always heard it in conversation when he got together in social circles with our friends," says daughter Joanne Esteban De La Riva. "Certainly I know it was a highlight of my dad's life, that operation."

[Source: Air and Space Magazine Phil Scott and International Business Times Jacey Fortin articles Jan 2011 & 3 May 2012 ++]