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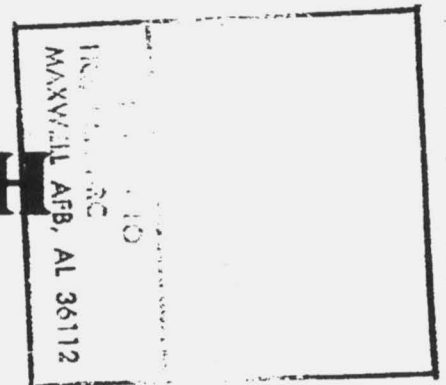
*Mr. EASTMAN*



## *Air War College*

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES  
SURROUNDING THE RESCUE AND EVACUATION OF  
ALLIED AIRCREWMEN FROM YUGOSLAVIA, 1941-1945

# RESEARCH REPORT



No. 128 By Thomas T. Matteson

AIR WAR COLLEGE  
AIR UNIVERSITY  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE  
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT SUMMARY  
No. 128

**TITLE:** An Analysis of the Circumstances Surrounding the Rescue and Evacuation of Allied Aircrewmembers from Yugoslavia, 1941-1945

**AUTHOR:** Thomas T. Matteson, Commander, USCG

The establishment of the Air Force's first Air Crew Rescue Unit and its unparalleled operations in occupied Yugoslavia are discussed in the light of Allied policy toward Yugoslav resistance groups. A background for the creation of the Rescue Unit is provided by describing the conditions surrounding Yugoslavia's entry into World War II and the evolution of Partisan and Chetnik resistance movements. To complete the background, Allied policy toward the two resistance groups is traced from 1941-1944. The realization of the Rescue Unit, its Yugoslav operations, and the author's views regarding specific factors which influenced Yugoslavia's future conclude this historical narrative.



## Biographical Sketch

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In July, 1944, General Sir Henry M. Wilson, Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean (SACMED), received a letter from Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, Air Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (CinC, MAAF), requesting approval for the following plans.

a. Make up a unit of twelve to twenty officers and men, to include a Flight Surgeon and medical personnel, to expedite the assembly and passage from the Balkans, principally Yugoslavia, of Strategic Air Force crews now in Balkan territory. It is estimated that at least 1100 crewmen of the Strategic Air Force have parachuted from disabled aircraft and are now in the Balkan areas. The great majority of these men are believed to be in Yugoslavia. Reports indicate that many of them are in need of medical assistance. I am convinced it will greatly facilitate the earlier return of these crewmen if a specially selected American unit is given the responsibility of collecting these individuals, giving them medical attention, and expediting their assembly and return.

b. It is clearly understood that the activities of this American unit will be non-diplomatic and non-military. It will be devoted entirely to rescue purposes; its activities will be coordinated with the Balkan Air Force. I have discussed the subject with the Balkan Air Force Commander, with General Devers and Mr. Murphy, all of whom agree with me that the project is feasible and necessary.<sup>1</sup>

General Wilson wrote "Approved in principle" on Eaker's letter and sent it back with this endorsement.

1. All arrangements incident to the operations of this unit will be closely coordinated

with Balkan Air Force, Special Operations Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Force 399, and Brigadier Maclean (head of British Mission with Tito, now available at Caserta). In particular, the movements of the members of this unit must be communicated through Balkan Air Force, Force 399, and Brigadier Maclean to British sub-missions within the area of operations.

2. The unit will be organized as a medical and rescue unit.<sup>2</sup>

This letter and SACMED's endorsement thereto provided official sanction for the establishment of the first flying unit created solely for the purpose of extricating downed Allied airmen from enemy-occupied territory. By the end of the war, the Fifteenth Air Force Air Crew Rescue Unit (ACRU) had recovered over 5700 American airmen--all told, nearly 21% of all Army Air Force (AAF) personnel reported missing throughout the Mediterranean air campaign.<sup>3</sup>

ACRU's wartime operations involved evacuation of airmen from 15 European nations including Russian-occupied Poland, Germany, Austria, and Hungary. The largest number of personnel, over 2300, were recovered from Axis-occupied and civil-war-torn Yugoslavia. The circumstances surrounding the establishment of ACRU and its unparalleled operations in Yugoslavia provide appropriate impetus for this historical narrative. Specifically, this paper discusses the formation of ACRU and its unique Yugoslavia operations in the light of Allied policy toward the two

major Yugoslav resistance groups, the Partisans and the Chetniks.

The following chapter discusses Yugoslavia's entry into World War II and the growth of organized resistance against the occupying forces of Germany and Italy. Chapter III traces the development, from 1941 through 1944, of Allied policy towards both Partisan and Chetnik resistance groups. Chapter IV is devoted to the establishment of ACRU, while Chapter V describes ACRU rescue operations in Yugoslavia. Finally, Chapter VI provides several generalizations and evaluations derived from the overall scenario and specific events described in the preceding chapters.

## CHAPTER II

### YUGOSLAVIA: OCCUPATION AND RESISTANCE

In 1938, Germany annexed Austria; in 1939, Italy invaded Albania; and in 1940, Italy attacked Greece from occupied Albanian territory. Suddenly, Yugoslavia found itself a neighbor of Nazi Germany and Italy. In short order, Germany forced two of Yugoslavia's neighbors, Hungary and Romania, to join the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Tripartite Pact of September 27, 1940.

During the next six months, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union exerted tremendous diplomatic pressure on the Yugoslav regency, headed by Prince Paul, to dissuade it from joining the Tripartite Pact. President Roosevelt, for example, sent Colonel William J. Donovan, later the head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), on a special mission to Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Yugoslavia to ascertain the situation in each country. Donovan was authorized to offer ". . . every possible assistance short of war to countries willing to fight for their independence."<sup>1</sup>

Britain, already at war with both Germany and Italy, was convinced that the Greeks would continue their fight. Plans were developed for British forces to arrive in Greece in early March. On March 7, 1941, the first

British troops landed in Greece; on March 10, Prime Minister Churchill sent a telegram to Roosevelt informing him of the British operation and stating: "At this juncture the action of Yugoslavia is cardinal. No country ever had such a military chance. If they will fall on the Italian rear in Albania there is no measuring what might happen in a few weeks."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Yugoslavia did not follow Churchill's desired course of action. In fact, Prince Paul moved inexorably toward inclusion in the Tripartite Pact which, by now, included a third neighbor, Bulgaria. On March 25, 1941, the Yugoslav government, yielding to German diplomatic persuasion and the threat of German invasion, joined the Tripartite Pact. This action proved to be the catalyst for a military takeover, which had been in various stages of preparation for several months. On March 27, a coup d'etat against Prince Paul and the regency was successfully undertaken by Serbian officers of the Yugoslav General Staff. The son of Prince Paul's predecessor, King Alexander (assassinated in 1934 by a Croat separatist), was elevated to the throne as King Peter II.

Even though the new government had not renounced its participation in the Tripartite Pact, Hitler viewed the military coup as a complete reversal of political direction and loyalty by the Yugoslav government. He considered

The rightest group was led by Serbian Draza Mihailovic, a colonel of the Yugoslav General Staff. Although his followers were referred to as Chetniks<sup>5</sup>, they were distinct from the official organization of that name which was linked with Hitler's puppet Prime Minister of Serbia, General Milan Nedic. Patriotic, loyal to the monarchy and, therefore, the established order, Mihailovic (like nearly all Serbs) detested the Croats and hated the Communists. Like King Peter, Mihailovic believed that open resistance to the superior occupation forces was criminal folly from which would follow ". . . calamitous retribution on the civilian population."<sup>6</sup> The correct tactics were to avoid confrontations and to build up resources until the Allies landed. Then, the combined forces of Allied and resistance units would overcome the occupiers and restore the constitutional monarchy to its rightful position of power. Unfortunately, as shall be seen, the Allies, especially the British, were in no mood to accept a policy of benign neglect with regard to the occupying German and Italian troops.

The leftist resistance group, called Partisans, was led by a Soviet-educated Croatian named Joseph Broz, better known as Tito. The Partisans were violently opposed to a Serbian-dominated government and dedicated to the



eventual creation of an ethnically representative form of national rule.

The vanguard of Tito's Partisans was the outlawed Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), whose members had for twenty years thrived in the fight for survival and learned their trade, alongside Tito, fighting with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. For the first several months of the war, the Partisans ". . . tended merely to form armed, mountain village communities, geared to self-protection and local raiding rather than a unified struggle for Yugoslavia."<sup>7</sup> After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June, 1941, Tito, as Commander-in-Chief of the communist forces of national liberation, responded to Comintern instructions and mobilized the CPY. Calling upon nearly 10,000 members, Tito admonished them to rise against the invaders, thereby striking a major blow ". . . toward liberation from Fascist oppression."<sup>8</sup>

In 1941, both resistance groups were headquartered in the mountains of western Serbia, the Chetniks at Ravna Gora, halfway between the villages of Valjevo and Cacak, and the Partisans in the mountains just outside Valjevo. At first, both groups fought together in Serbia against occupying German troops. After about six months, however, the relationship between the two movements had completely

polarized, because both Tito and Mihailovic were individually committed to opposing ideologies, political allegiances, and concepts of resistance. In the end, the concept of resistance was to be the prevailing factor in determining which group would receive Allied support. Ultimately, this support resulted in a national triumph for Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

### CHAPTER III

#### ALLIED POLICY TOWARD WARTIME RESISTANCE IN YUGOSLAVIA

With a view toward setting the political stage surrounding the establishment of the Air Crew Rescue Unit, this chapter sketches the development of US, British, and Soviet policies toward the two resistance groups. Initially, each of these Allied powers officially backed both the Government-In-Exile and the resistance movement of Draza Mihailovic. However, late in 1943, Allied support of the Chetniks was withdrawn and, from that point until the conclusion of the war, Tito's Partisans were the sole recipients of Allied recognition and material support.

#### The Beginning: 1941-42

For several months after the capitulation of Yugoslavia and its dismemberment by Axis powers, very little information reached the West concerning conditions inside the country. It soon became apparent from reports in the Axis and neutral press that the armies of occupation were encountering a certain degree of organized resistance. In July, 1941, the first direct communication between the resistance and the Allies was made when Mihailovic's force established radio contact with a British navy monitoring station. By the end of the month, through this

radio link, the British learned that an organized resistance movement comprised of elements of the Yugoslav Royal Army was offering vigorous military opposition to the enemy.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, the British decided to send an exploratory mission into Yugoslavia to investigate the situation and lay the groundwork for providing ". . . cohesion, support, and direction from outside."<sup>2</sup>

The first British liaison officer, Captain (later Colonel) D. T. Hudson, landed at Petrovac on the Adriatic Sea on September 20. After a long journey, which included a two day stay at Tito's headquarters, he arrived at Mihailovic's Ravna Gora camp on October 25, 1941. During the next several months, partially as a result of observing at least two conferences between Mihailovic and Tito, Hudson convinced the British that Allied assistance should be provided to Mihailovic. Unfortunately, Hudson had no way of fully comprehending the irreconcilable differences in policy and ideology between the two forces. Tito remained convinced that constant active resistance, regardless of the consequences (i.e., retribution taken by German troops against Yugoslav civilians) was the only way to achieve national liberation. Contrastingly, Mihailovic enthusiastically embraced King Peter's policy of passive resistance. By doing so, his Chetniks supposedly

gained more time to fully organize and equip themselves while shielding the civilian populace from enemy reprisals.

During the later days of October, Churchill and King Peter arrived at an understanding regarding British support of Mihailovic, the outgrowth of which was the commencement of regular supply drops to the Chetniks. British support of Mihailovic's people, begun in November, 1941, was not to end officially until the last days of May, 1944. During the intervening years, British attitude toward Mihailovic and the Chetniks ran the gamut from respect and admiration for a heroic resistance movement to disdain and utter contempt for an indecisive bunch of opportunists and collaborators.

Even though Moscow had a secret (in terms of Allied awareness) radio link with the CPY, the Soviet government's attitude toward the events in Yugoslavia remained fluid and non-committal. For example, despite the Comintern communique of June 22, 1941, calling for European communist parties to begin all-out attacks on German forces, the Soviet government literally ignored Tito's resultant request for military aid and supplies. This total lack of assistance coupled with the Soviet declaration that preservation of Communist power in Russia took precedence over a national revolution, albeit

communist, was to haunt Soviet-Partisan relationships for the duration of the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

In 1941 and early 1942, the Soviet Union apparently believed that Mihailovic could turn out to be the ultimate leader of the national resistance. In fact, Tito and his Partisans might prove to be an embarrassment if they selfishly pursued the aims of social revolution to the exclusion of the international struggle against the Axis powers.<sup>4</sup> During the next three years, the Soviet policy toward Yugoslav resistance was predominantly one of ignoring the requests of both factions. Even though its sympathies rested first with Tito's communist-led Partisans, the Soviet Union was, for the majority of the time in question, preoccupied with the survival of its own nation. The difficulties of other peoples, regardless of their ideological ties, were necessarily made subservient to the Soviet's own struggle for survival.

During 1942, Britain and the Soviet Union continued to encourage resistance within Yugoslavia, but only the British sent arms, material, and liaison officers and, moreover, solely to the Chetniks. Nevertheless, both Allied nations were vitally concerned; sustained guerilla warfare in Yugoslavia tied up German forces which, otherwise, could be deployed not only to Africa but also to the eastern front.

### The Turning Point: 1943

In early 1943, the Germans and Italians launched a full-scale, anti-rebel offensive against the resistance forces in southern Yugoslavia. Coincidentally, the Partisans had initiated a major military move to wrest control of the Montenegro area from the Italians and Chetniks. The ensuing battles were, to say the least, bloody and greatly confused. Germans fought Chetniks, Italians fought Chetniks, and all three fought the Partisans. In the end, however, the outnumbered Partisans had neutralized the Germans, badly beaten the Italians and Chetniks, and gained firm control of the Montenegrin countryside. The Partisan-Chetnik fight for Montenegro marked the first large-scale, prolonged battle between the two movements. The defeat administered by the Partisans, a military blow from which the Chetniks never recovered, solidified the Partisan movement and foreshadowed the future political structure of Yugoslavia.

Allied policy towards the Partisans changed considerably in the late spring of 1943. In May, the British established the first Allied liaison mission with Tito. By June, three British officers were operating with Partisan forces. In July, British air drops of military supplies were begun. Meanwhile, the British government continued its public support of King Peter and Mihailovic's

Chetniks, but clearly the die had been cast. Henceforth, Britain would provide Mihailovic with supplies only in Serbia, and all Chetnik operations would be confined to the region east of the Ifar River. This sphere-of-influence arrangement was now a diplomatic as well as a military fact and, most importantly, had Churchill's blessing.<sup>5</sup>

Until now, official US interest in the Yugoslav situation had been confined to diplomatic recognition of King Peter's exiled government. By mid-1943, however, the military and strategic importance of the Balkans was more readily apparent, and the value of an active, organized resistance group was recognized. Not entirely convinced that the British were correct in their assessment of Chetnik versus Partisan activity against the Germans, President Roosevelt authorized the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to send intelligence missions to each resistance group. By November, five American officers, three with Mihailovic and two with Tito, were operating in Yugoslavia.

Mihailovic's ability to continue as a major resistance force was dependent upon two critical factors: first, that the Chetniks coexist or tactically collaborate with the Italians against the Partisans; second, that the Allies continue to provide them with significant amounts of



military supplies and money. The capitulation of Italy in September, 1943, removed one of those factors and, accordingly, had a decisive influence on Yugoslav affairs. The surrender of Italy opened the door for Tito; in short order, his Partisans disarmed nearly 300,000 Italians in occupied Yugoslavia and secured command of Slovenia, Montenegro, and Dalmatia.

On October 29, 1943, fresh from their latest triumphs, Tito, the leaders of his movement, and 142 delegates held the second session of AVNOJ (the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia) at Jajce in Bosnia. The conference established the National Committee of Liberation of Yugoslavia as a provisional government and proclaimed Tito (newly appointed Marshal of Yugoslavia) as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense.

By the end of 1943, Allied powers were making a concentrated effort to induce the Government-In-Exile to come to terms with Tito. Their position regarding Tito and the Partisans was reaffirmed at the Tehran Conference by a secret "military conclusion" which stressed ". . . that the Partisans in Yugoslavia should be supported by supplies and equipment to the greatest possible extent. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Thus, as the year ended, so, too, did Allied support for Mihailovic's Chetniks.

The AVNOJ Congress at Jajce firmly established the communist credentials of Marshal Tito. In spite of this

fact and its obvious corollary that Yugoslavia would fall into Soviet orbit if and when Tito assumed power, Allied leaders decided at Tehran to provide maximum support to the Partisans. Much has been written concerning the reasons behind that decision. However, the most straightforward explanation was that put forth by Churchill in a discussion with Brigadier Maclean shortly after the Tehran Conference. Maclean, recently returned from assignment as head of the British Mission at Tito's headquarters, opined that Yugoslavia under Tito would inevitably be established along Soviet lines. Churchill thereupon asked, "Do you intend to make Yugoslavia your home after the war?" "No, Sir," Maclean replied. "Neither do I," Churchill said, "and, that being the case, the less you and I worry about the form of Government they set up, the better. That is for them to decide. What interests us is which of them [Mihailovic or Tito] is doing the most harm to the Germans?"<sup>7</sup>

Mihailovic Abandoned: 1944

In January, the British government announced the cessation of supplies to Mihailovic and the withdrawal of all its liaison officers from Chetnik territory. In the House of Commons Churchill declared: "The reason why we have ceased to supply Mihailovic with arms and support is a simple one. He has not been fighting the enemy, and, moreover, some of his subordinates have made accommodations with the enemy. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

An interesting side note which illustrates the complexities of the situation is the fact that while the British were deserting Mihailovic, the Russians were seriously contemplating the assignment of a military liaison officer to his headquarters. More than one historian believes that the Soviets were, even then, gravely concerned about Tito's obvious signs of national independence. If Mihailovic should somehow manage to regain power after the Germans left, he could be quite useful as a rival leader to play off against Tito.<sup>9</sup>

The Russians did not send an officer to Mihailovic; instead, a Soviet mission to Tito's headquarters was established on February 24, 1944, and eventually consisted of over 60 people, including two generals, several colonels, and at least one member of the NKVD. As a means of supplying this liaison group, the Russians were permitted to base eight transport aircraft at Bari, Italy, under the functional control of MAAF. These aircraft later played a crucial role in the evacuation of Allied airmen from Partisan-controlled Yugoslavia.

US policy in early 1944 was to continue to recognize King Peter, yet the American government, in a State Department memorandum, declared its intention ". . . to give military aid where it will do the most good, thus helping Tito in the military sense without political relations with him."<sup>10</sup> US actions in early 1944 were

marked by the return to Cairo of the OSS intelligence officers assigned to Mihailovic. Functioning under the command of the British mission, Lt. George Musulin, the last American representative, departed with the final British mission from Chetnik territory on May 31, 1944.

By mid-summer of 1944, Allied support of the Yugoslav resistance movement was directed entirely to the Partisans. On August 26, King Peter formed a new Government-In-Exile, recognized Marshal Tito as the sole military leader of all Yugoslav forces of resistance, and broadcast an appeal to his people to rally behind Tito and his Army of National Liberation.

Mihailovic and several thousand of his followers, still in control of large portions of German-occupied Serbia, had no intention of allowing themselves to be swallowed up and/or annihilated by Tito's Army of National Liberation. Falsely encouraged by his misinterpretation of Allied intentions, Mihailovic continued to believe that an Allied landing in the Balkans would defeat both the Germans and the Partisans who, according to Mihailovic, would resist such an offensive. Tito and his Partisans would then be revealed as Red puppets, securely attached to the Soviet hegemony, and Mihailovic would emerge as the true defender of Yugoslavia.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ACRU

By the summer of 1944, Mihailovic's forces numbered less than 15,000, most of whom were confined to the forest and hills in central and eastern Serbia. Smaller, ineffective Chetnik groups, loyal to Mihailovic, were scattered throughout Bosnia, Dalmatia, and Slovenia. The Partisans numbered over 200,000 and, with the exception of certain "islands" under Chetnik influence in Serbia, Tito's Army of National Liberation controlled nearly all of Yugoslavia's rural countryside and coastal regions. Industrial centers and most urban areas were still under the heel of nearly 185,000 German occupation troops. From these locations, the Germans continued to carry out a full scale campaign against the Partisans.

Into this hotly contested territorial and political battleground fell several thousand Allied aircrewmen. The successful evacuation of these airmen from both Partisan and Chetnik held territory was the mission of the Air Crew Rescue Unit located at Bari, Italy. This chapter discusses the circumstances surrounding the establishment of this unit in July, 1944.

### The Need for a Rescue Unit

On June 13, 1944, a conference was held at Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters in Bari, Italy. The participants were Major General N. F. Twining, CG of the Fifteenth Air Force, and two British officers, Majors Greenwood and Greenless, who had recently returned from liaison duty with Chetnik forces in Serbia. The purpose of the conference was to ascertain Mihailovic's attitude toward the US and to discuss appropriate methods of rescuing downed American airmen recovered by the Chetniks.

Until now, the rescue of Allied airmen in Yugoslavia had been carried out through three clandestine organizations operating with both Partisans and Chetniks. The chief group was a British unit known as "A" Force, originally formed in 1940 to rescue troops from Greece. By 1944, this group had expanded to include rescue operations in the Balkans, Sicily, and Italy. The other two agencies cooperating in escape efforts were a second British unit, Force 399, attached to Special Operations Mediterranean, and a handful of US personnel from Company B, 2766th Regiment (PROV), OSS. All of these groups did yeoman service, but none of them was specifically responsible for collecting and evacuating downed airmen to the exclusion of everything else. In fact, their job as Allied missions to the resistance was "... to assist and

supply guerillas operating against the Germans and NOT to rescue airmen."<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the priority placed on the rescue of downed airmen, the entire situation was brought to a head in May, 1944, when the last British mission left Chetnik territory accompanied by Lt. Musulin and some forty American airmen who had bailed out over Serbia. With the arrival of these airmen in Bari, the total number of missing flyers returning from Yugoslavia in that month reached 176. In January, only one flyer evaded capture and returned to the Fifteenth Air Force; in February there were 11; in March, 32; in April, 86. Now, in May, 176 airmen came back to American jurisdiction. It had become quite obvious that the previous arrangements were inadequate to meet current as well as anticipated recovery requirements.<sup>2</sup>

General Twining knew that in the coming months a continued and, in all probability, an increased bombing offensive would be carried out in the Balkans and southern Europe. The responsibility for the bulk of this task would fall on the shoulders of Bomb Wings from the Fifteenth Air Force. Without a doubt, several hundred--perhaps even a thousand--Americans would, during the course of these missions, be forced to parachute or crash-land into both Chetnik and Partisan domains. Since

numerous Allied missions were still operative in Partisan regions, the problem of evacuation was considered most acute with regard to the Chetniks. The withdrawal of the last British mission in May had shortcircuited Mihailovic's primary means of advising US authorities that American airmen were awaiting evacuation.

Recognizing the criticality of the situation, Twining had called the aforementioned conference with Greenwood and Greenless, both of whom had been in Serbia for over a year and were members of the final British mission to leave Chetnik territory. Obviously well-informed regarding Mihailovic's attitude toward Americans, they made the following points to Twining.

1. Mihailovic is extremely friendly to the US and his people are most hospitable to American airmen.
2. The Chetniks offer little resistance to the Germans; their first enemies are the Partisans.
3. Since Mihailovic has been denied Allied support, he has been inclined to retain American airmen and display them to his people as representatives of the Allies to the Mihailovic resistance.
4. Mihailovic would be unwilling to turn downed airmen over to Partisan groups for evacuation. He would, however, welcome a non-political US representative at his headquarters for the expressed purpose of collecting, aiding, and evacuating American airmen.

On June 19, 1944, General Twining initiated a memorandum to General Eaker recommending that steps be taken to



". . . immediately establish a non-political AAF representation at Mihailovic's headquarters for the sole purpose of collecting, aiding, and arranging air evacuation of distressed Allied airmen."<sup>4</sup> On July 13, 1944, Eaker sent a memorandum to SACMED, General Wilson, requesting approval for the establishment of a rescue unit; on July 14, General Wilson approved Eaker's plan. (See Introduction.)

#### ACRU Becomes a Reality

The actual plan was not immediately forthcoming for several reasons. First, the British were quite disturbed that the Americans would undertake an operation which would cut directly across their lines of responsibility. Notwithstanding the fact that British missions had been officially withdrawn from Mihailovic territory, "A" Force still had the functional responsibility for all rescue operations in the Balkans. (Their proposed alternative to ACRU was to supplement "A" Force with US personnel, 23 officers and 43 enlisted men, thereby allaying the US's obvious lack of confidence in "A" Force's ability to handle the downed airmen problem). Second, there was great concern on the part of State Department representatives that the arrival of a rescue unit in Chetnik territory would be interpreted by Mihailovic—and Tito—as official recognition of the Chetnik political

movement. The diplomatic implications of the US picking up the slack with Mihailovic, within two months of Britain's withdrawal, could bode severe problems for US-British relations.

Within several weeks, these organizational and diplomatic problems were overcome; ACRU was created purely as a rescue unit and its operations were, by direction, ". . . non-political and non-military."<sup>5</sup> To placate the British, all ACRU operations were to be coordinated with both "A" Force and Force 399. To relieve the State Department of its fears, ACRU was directed to dispatch field parties not only to Mihailovic but also to Tito.

Establishment of ACRU was ordered by General Eaker on July 24, and the Plan for the Operation of ACRU, published on July 31, 1944, stated:

Initially, operation of ACRU will consist of calling upon transport aircraft of the 60th Troop Carrier Group at BRINDISI to land at strips in Yugoslavia where air crew personnel have been assembled and are awaiting air evacuation. These operations are to be conducted at night in conjunction with supply dropping and other normal functions of the troop carrier unit.

With a view to increasing the scale and efficiency of these operations, it is envisaged that personnel, equipment and supplies therefore available to ACRU will be flown to Partisan held airstrips where direct or indirect communication with ACRU Headquarters in BARI will be opened. These personnel, dispatched into Yugoslavia, will be known as ACRU Field Parties and their primary function will be

the operation of the air strip to include additional activities as personnel and equipment can be made available as follows:

- a. Flying Control.
- b. Signal communication to appropriate headquarters.
- c. Quartering and messing of evacuees.
- d. First aid for injured evacuees.

It is contemplated two such field parties will be needed in the near future; one for operation in Tito held territory, and the other in areas controlled by Mihailovic. After these two parties have been established, their force is to be augmented by detachments equipped to travel from established strips into areas where air crews have been reported to assist their movement to air strips. These detachments may also be needed to establish new air strips from which evacuation can be performed.<sup>6</sup>

A week after the publication of this Plan, ACRU was activated under the command of Colonel George Kraigher. Handpicked by General Eaker, Kraigher was a Yugoslav born American citizen. He had begun his flying career in World War I as a pilot in the Serbian Air Force. Between wars, he worked for Pan American Airways and, when World War II began, was sent to Africa to help build up Pan American's airline across that continent. When the MAAF was formed, General Eaker requisitioned Kraigher to serve as his liaison with Marshal Tito's headquarters. In fact, Kraigher was at Tito's mountain base when it was attacked by German troops in May, 1944, and barely escaped to Bari with Tito in a C-47 piloted by a Russian crew.

Less than ten days after Kraigher declared the unit operational, ACRU had accomplished the first rescue from Chetnik territory. The story of this effort as well as other ACRU operations in Yugoslavia is covered in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### ACRU OPERATIONS IN YUGOSLAVIA

The abridged narratives of several rescue operations and eyewitness accounts of airmen rescued by Chetniks and Partisans discussed in this chapter serve a dual purpose. First, they provide an overall picture of ACRU operations in Yugoslavia from August, 1944, until the end of the war and second, they supply a barometer to differentiate more accurately between Chetnik and Partisan assistance to American airmen.

#### The First Rescue

Late in July, before the operational plan for ACRU had been promulgated, more than 100 American airmen plus sundry Russian, French, and British fugitives had congregated at Mirovsce in Chetnik territory, where, on July 25, Lt. T. K. Oliver made a radio communication with Allied forces in Bari. Oliver, a downed American pilot, used familiar nicknames, serial numbers, and other similar references known only to himself and members of his squadron to tell Bari where the party was located and how many men were on hand. This ingenious message, received by a puzzled British radio operator, read:

150 Yanks are in Yugo, some sick shoot us  
work horses, ask British about job. Our

challenge first letter by bombardier name of Bob (Banana Nose Cenig Scarf) your verification first letter of Chief Mug's name, color of fist on club wall, must refer to Shark Squadron 459 Bomb Group for decoding. TKO callsign. 025888 Flat Rate Five. Lug order. . . .

[Translated, this apparent gibberish meant:]

150 Americans are in Yugoslavia, some sick; shoot us C-47s, ask British about job. Our challenge letter is "G" and color is white. Your verification letter is "N"; your color is white, too. Refer to 75 Squadron, 459 Bomb Group for decoding. (TKO callsign refers to Lt. T. K. Oliver, pilot of airplane.) All five who live in my tent are O.K.<sup>1</sup>

In response to Oliver's message, the first ACRU field team was dropped on the night of August 2 into Chetnik territory approximately 50 miles southwest of Belgrade. Heading the three man group, code name Halyard Team, was Lt. George Musulin, who just two months before had left Mihailovic's headquarters. By the time ACRU could get set, the Halyard Team, with the full cooperation of Mihailovic, had collected nearly 230 Allied airmen at the Pranjani airstrip. (Ironically, this was the very landing field from which the last British mission had departed in May.) On the night of August 9/10 twelve C-47s, escorted by fighters from the Fifteenth Air Force, evacuated 263 people from Pranjani to Bari. Of these, 225 were Americans and six were British.

This rescue mission set the pattern for future ACRU operations in Yugoslavia, as explained by General Eaker to General Arnold.

Information passes from special organizations within the Balkans to the Balkan and Bari, Italy, establishments of OSS Co. B, 2766 Regt (Prov). This company informs the Air Crew Rescue Unit and the Fifteenth Air Force that airmen have been found and may be rescued. The Fifteenth Air Force and the Air Crew Rescue Unit devise a means of providing the required transportation and arrange . . . to have air crews cared for and assembled for rescue at appropriate localities in the Balkans . . . . The operation of rescue aircraft is planned by Fifteenth Air Force and the Air Crew Rescue Unit. When the plan has been established and appropriate personnel in Yugoslavia have been notified, the rescue is effected under the operational control of Fifteenth Air Force.<sup>2</sup>

#### ACRU Operations with Mihailovic's Chetniks

Beginning with the Halyard Team on August 2, ACRU maintained a field unit with Mihailovic's forces until December 27, 1944. During this five month period, ACRU aircraft flew seven evacuation missions from three Chetnik landing strips in Serbia and Bosnia. Of the 417 people extricated, 351 were American and British airmen; the remaining 66 persons were non-combatant civilians, most of whom had escaped from German slave labor camps on the eastern borders of Serbia. A summary of these ACRU flights (Operation Halyard) is contained in Table 1, page 31.<sup>3</sup>

Although thankful for the protection provided by Mihailovic's people, the returned airmen displayed a

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. In fact, there is indisputable evidence that Mihailovic concealed some airmen from the ACRU field party in order to exhibit them as "American representatives" to the Chetnik cause. For example, an American pilot who parachuted into Serbia on July 3, 1944, was kept by the Chetniks until October 4, 1944, when he escaped to the Partisans and was eventually evacuated on October 17.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1, Operation Halyard Summary

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Personnel Recovered</u>		
		<u>US Airmen</u>	<u>British Airmen</u>	<u>Other</u>
August 9/10	Pranjani	225	6	31
August 26/27	Pranjani	15		
August 27/28	Pranjani	43	2	16
September 5/6	Pranjani	17		6
September 17	Kocevljevo	20		2
November 1	Bunar	3		
December 27	Bunar	<u>20</u>	<u>—</u>	<u>11</u>
Total		343	8	66



During the fall of 1944, frequent reports of Chetniks turning American airmen over to German forces were contained in the American press.<sup>5</sup> This writer's thorough review of several hundred individual interrogation statements revealed no eyewitness accounts of Chetniks actually presenting German troops with captured American airmen. The only information of this nature was a report made by an airman who had been told by a Partisan major that ". . . the Chetniks were turning over enlisted allied crewmen to the Allied mission, but eleven flying officers had recently been handed over to the Germans."<sup>6</sup>

The Halyard Team's rescue mission in Chetnik territory was terminated in late December primarily because of diplomatic difficulties between the US and Britain. Since the Allies had recognized Marshal Tito as sole leader of the resistance forces, it was acutely important to Britain that all Allied governments totally disassociate themselves from Mihailovic. Churchill reminded Roosevelt of this political reality in a sharply-worded message dated September 1, 1944. On September 19, Ambassador Murphy sent a communique to General Eaker issuing ". . . orders for the withdrawal from the Mihailovic area of our intelligence units including air rescue parties. . . . at the direction of the President on objection from [the] British."<sup>7</sup>

By the end of 1944, the Partisans controlled all but a few small parts of western Serbia and eastern Bosnia, so American airmen now found it easier and safer to parachute into Tito's territory. In fact, flyers were specifically told to make every attempt to avoid coming down in Chetnik areas. Consequently, the Halyard Team's departure did not impede the rescue of American airmen. In 1945, a few Americans did land on Chetnik soil, but all of them managed to escape to Partisan territory.

#### ACRU Operations with Tito's Partisans

The special duty ACRU flights to Mihailovic's three landing strips were solely for the purpose of aircrew rescue. The only supplies ferried in were items necessary to sustain the field party. The exact opposite situation prevailed in Partisan territory, where a vastly different operation was executed on a much larger scale. There, the 60th Troop Carrier Group carried out evacuees on return flights to Bari or Brindisi after having delivered supplies to the Partisans, who had, by April, 1945, increased the number of landing sites in their control to 36 (19 more than in November) and drop zones to 322.<sup>8</sup> From August, 1944, to April, 1945, the delivery of military matériel to the Partisans was a round-the-clock operation involving over 1000 landings by Russian, British, and American aircraft. Many of these flights

returned to Bari with Allied airmen plus wounded Partisans. In fact, mass evacuation of Tito's injured personnel, more than 6000 in nine months, figured prominently in Partisan success. Because of the reprisals by German and quisling Ustachi soldiers, the Partisans never left their wounded behind. Members of the resistance who fell into German hands almost invariably suffered torture and death for their "treasonable" acts in fighting the invaders. Tito contended that ". . . the evacuation of their wounded released four other Partisans for battle."<sup>9</sup>

Just as the frequency of supply operations minimized the need for rescue-dedicated ACRU flights, so, too, did the large number of Allied missions with the Partisans practically eliminate the requirement for an ACRU field unit in Partisan territory. From mid-1944 until the end of hostilities, over 125 officers and enlisted men, assigned to at least ten Allied missions, were working in all areas of Partisan territory. Allied airmen who parachuted into these areas were, in many cases, rescued from the Germans, taken directly to a nearby airstrip, and evacuated to Italy within several days of bailing out.<sup>10</sup>

A thorough review of several hundred escape interrogation reports revealed neither eyewitness accounts of nor accusations concerning Tito's men turning Allied

airmen over to occupation forces. Indeed, frequently mentioned by flyers was the valor shown by their Partisan protectors. For example, one crew had to parachute directly into the middle of a gun battle between Partisans and Germans. The Germans killed two crew members in the air, but the Partisans managed to rescue the rest of the Americans and held off the Germans until other Partisans aided them in escaping to the nearby hills.<sup>11</sup> A pilot stated, "The Partisans are extremely anxious to assist Allied airmen and . . . they would be happy to have saved me at the expense of ten of their lives had that been necessary."<sup>12</sup>

Having begun operations in August, 1944, ACRU flew its last mission on April 8, 1945, when an L-5 evacuated a wounded American from the Partisan airstrip at Kladusa. During the Air Crew Rescue Unit's nine-month existence, Colonel Kraigher's aircraft and field units rescued 5718 Fifteenth Air Force personnel from Yugoslavia and other countries. The final accounting as contained in MAAF records is shown in Table 2, page 36.<sup>13</sup>

Exact figures regarding specific evacuations from Partisan territory were not compiled, because so many of those evacuations, although coordinated and controlled by ACRU personnel, were carried out as an integral part

of scheduled supply missions. Suffice it to say that of the 2350 airmen rescued from Yugoslavia, 343 came from Chetnik territory and over 2000 from areas under Partisan control.

Table 2, ACRU Evacuation Summary

<u>Country</u>	<u>Persons Rescued</u>
Romania	1309
Bulgaria	305
Switzerland	332
Yugoslavia	2350
Albania	16
France	60
Czechoslovakia	64
Northern Italy	241
Greece	76
Turkey	50
Spain	18
Russian-occupied Poland	215
Russian-occupied Germany	25
Russian-occupied Austria	6
Russian-occupied Hungary	<u>651</u>
Total	5718

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research effort has been to review the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Fifteenth Air Force ACRU and, then, to examine its operations in Yugoslavia with a view toward determining what political influence it may have had on Yugoslav history. In order to properly treat the question of why ACRU was formed, it was necessary to trace the development of the two Yugoslav resistance movements and Allied policy toward each of them. My review of Chetnik and Partisan history resulted in several personal observations which, although not necessarily new in terms of historical significance, are, in my judgement, worthy of comment in this paper.

Mihailovic's movement appealed exclusively to those individuals who regarded themselves as Serbs in favor of a Serbian-dominated government. Quite the opposite was true regarding the Partisans, whose nationalist movement welcomed members from all ethnic backgrounds, including the Serbs.

The highly-disciplined, centrally-directed organization of the CPY was successfully superimposed on the structure of the Army of National Liberation, thereby giving Tito absolute control over all military elements

of the Partisan movement. Chetnik coordination, on the other hand, was quite frequently non-existent and Mihailovic's influence over Chetnik units outside his immediate geographic location was tenuous, at best. Partisan leaders were zealots completely dedicated to the revival of Yugoslavia on a new political base, while the Chetniks were, in many cases, led by a group of fraternally-organized officers who traded the comfort of the Officers' Club for the security of the hills.

B. H. Liddell Hart, renowned military strategist, says that guerilla warfare must be ". . . dynamic and must maintain momentum . . . and it . . . can attain its end only when collectively backed by the sympathy of the masses. Static intervals are . . . detrimental to its success as they . . . tend to dampen the impulse of the population to join or help the guerillas."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, neither the Government-In-Exile nor Mihailovic understood this fundamental concept of guerilla warfare. The result of their passive resistance strategy becomes obvious when viewed in the light of British war policy, which was firmly based on the tenet of active guerilla warfare as the most effective counter weapon available in occupied countries. Thus, Mihailovic's methodology of postponing aggressive resistance and constraining anti-Axis actions

until the "Allied invasion" of Yugoslavia represented fatal flaws in the Chetnik movement.

Given all the facts, it seems quite reasonable to surmise that if the Chetniks had actively fought the Germans, ACRU might never have been established. Indeed, had British and American liaison officers continued to operate in Chetnik territory, thereby maintaining an Allied link with Mihailovic, ACRU would probably never have been necessary. The requirement for ACRU grew out of the knowledge that large numbers of American airmen would, in all likelihood, have to bail out or crash-land in Chetnik territory and, given the withdrawal of Allied liaison officers, these downed airmen would have no reliable means of contacting MAAF.

Some historians have pictured ACRU as a kind of knee-jerk response to Mihailovic's notification to Washington on July 12, 1944, (via Ambassador Fotic) that his Chetniks were taking care of some 100 American airmen in Serbia and that ". . . with Allied co-operation [sic] it might be possible to evacuate them."<sup>2</sup> As the facts illustrate, ACRU's establishment was tied directly to General Twining's concern for American airmen downed in Mihailovic territory, a concern he passed on to General Eaker in a memorandum dated June 19, 1944, some 23 days prior to Mihailovic's telegram to Washington. It



therefore seems appropriate to conclude that ACRU was, in fact, established primarily to fill the void created in late May when the British mission left Mihailovic and not, as some have written, after a significant number of crewmen were known to be held in Chetnik territory.

To some, it may be difficult to understand how the Chetniks could rescue American airmen from the Germans, as they did in at least one instance, and, at the same time, collaborate with these very same forces. The answer rests in the Chetniks' perception of who was really the enemy. The Chetniks considered the Partisan communist movement a far greater threat to Yugoslavia than the German occupation forces. Renewed American support was Mihailovic's only means of reversing the Partisan takeover. There was absolutely nothing to be gained by turning American airmen over to the Germans. In fact, evacuated Americans were a significant source of first rate public relations on behalf of the Chetniks. In late 1944, only the Americans displayed any outward concern for what might happen to the Chetniks when the Partisans gained control. To do anything except rescue and protect American airmen would mean the loss of their last source of support and salvation.

Aside from the influence gained from media accounts of evacuated pro-Chetnik or pro-Partisan flyers (depending

upon which group assisted them), ACRU operations alone had near zero impact on the politics of Yugoslavia. Admittedly, ACRU field parties in Mihailovic territory were a short-term irritant to Churchill, but beyond that, US relations with Mihailovic were of minor consequence to Allied governments. The greatest external factor effecting the future political direction of Yugoslavia was, in my opinion, the massive aid received by the Partisans from the US, Britain, and the Soviet Union. In the last 18 months of the war, over 18,000 short tons of material were flown into Partisan drop zones and landing fields.<sup>3</sup> This continual replenishment of supplies coupled with the evacuation of the wounded virtually assured the Partisans of ultimate victory over all their adversaries.

Except as mentioned earlier, ACRU, as a non-political, non-military rescue unit, had very little direct impact on the political makeup of postwar Yugoslavia. The keys to Tito's ultimate triumph--military aid, supplies, and diplomatic recognition--were handed over long before the establishment of ACRU and its Yugoslav rescue operation.

A closing note concerning Mihailovic and the rescue of Allied airmen from Chetnik territory is appropriate. In 1946, several American officers who had been attached to Mihailovic and a large number of American airmen rescued by his Chetniks requested permission to testify in

his behalf at his trial in Yugoslavia. The request was denied by the Yugoslav government. Mihailovic was executed for treason on July 17, 1946. President Truman, on March 29, 1948, posthumously awarded Mihailovic the Legion of Merit in recognition of the help of his troops in evacuating American airmen from Yugoslavia and for his contribution to the Allied victory. The decoration was held secret until 1967, when Illinois' Congressman Edward J. Zerwinski made it public.<sup>4</sup>

NOTES ON CHAPTER I

1. Lt. Colonel James Parton, The History of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, Vol. II 1 September 1944-9 May 1945, Caserta, Italy, 1945, p. 321.

2. Ibid., p. 321.

3. Ibid., p. 340a.

NOTES ON CHAPTER II

1. Walter R. Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, 1941-1945, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1973, p. 12.

2. Ibid., p. 13, as quoted from Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War, Volume III, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1948, p. 110.

3. Roberts, p. 15.

4. Roberts, p. 5.

5. Jozo Tomasevich, The Chetniks, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1975, p. 115. In The Chetniks, the author states: "The term Chetnik derives from the word ceta, a company of soldiers or a group of men engaged in guerilla warfare, and simply means a guerilla fighter."

6. Roberts, pp. 18-19.

7. Kenneth Macksey, The Partisans of Europe in the Second World War, New York, Stein and Day, 1975, p. 60.

8. Roberts, p. 23, as quoted from Vladimer Dedijer, Josip Broz Tito-Prilozi za Biografiju, Belgrade, Kultura, 1953, p. 274.

### NOTES ON CHAPTER III

1. S. W. Bailey, "British Policy Towards General Draza Mihailovic," British Policy Towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece, Phyllis Auty and Richard Clogg, Eds., London, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975, p. 60.
2. Roberts, p. 27.
3. Roberts, p. 23.
4. H. C. Darby, R. W. Seton-Watson, Phyllis Auty, R. G. D. Laffan and Stephen Clissold, A Short History of Yugoslavia, London, Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 223.
5. Matteo J. Milazzo, The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1975, p. 154.
6. Roberts, p. 172, as quoted from Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1941, Cairo and Tehran, p. 574.
7. Roberts, p. 174, as quoted from Fitzroy Maclean, Eastern Approaches, London, Faber, 1947, pp. 402f.
8. Darby et al., p. 229, as quoted from H. Seton Watson, The East European Revolution, London, 1947, p. 129.
9. Darby et al., p. 229.
10. Roberts, p. 209.

NOTES ON CHAPTER IV

1. Fifteenth Air Force Escape Intelligence, December 1943-May 1944, Escape Bulletin No. 27, 2 March 1944.
2. Parton, p. 319.
3. Lt. Colonel James Parton, The History of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, Vol. XXIV, Caserta, Italy, May 1945.
4. Fifteenth Air Force, Air Crew Rescue Unit Documents, June 1943-April 1945.
5. Memorandum from General Eaker to Major General I. H. Edwards, Deputy Commander for Administration, AAF/MTO, July 24, 1944.
6. Fifteenth Air Force, "Plan for the Operation of ACRU," dated 31 July 1944, Collection of Operations, Plans, Directives, etc., February 1943-April 1945.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER V

1. Parton, Vol. II, p. 325.
2. Ibid., pp. 325-326.
3. Fifteenth Air Force, Air Crew Rescue Unit Documents, June 1943-April 1945.
4. Fifteenth Air Force, Escape, Evasion, and Repatriation, October-November, 1944, Statement of Lt. Bernard Zeldin.
5. David Martin, Ally Betrayed, New York, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1946, p. 256.
6. Fifteenth Air Force, Escape, Evasion, and Repatriation, August 1944-1945, Statement of Lt. Sterling T. Zimmerman.
7. Headquarters, Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, Correspondence and Messages - Romania, Yugoslavia, and Russia, 1944, Message dated September 19, 1944 from US State Department to SACMED, Caserta, Italy, for delivery to General Eaker.
8. Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theater, March, 1948, p. 12.
9. Twelfth Air Force, Troop Carrier Operations, 1944, p. 27.
10. Fifteenth Air Force, Escape, Evasion, and Repatriation, October-November, 1944, Statement of TSGT Victor M. LaFonte.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., Statement of Lt. Louis Frank III, shot down in Dalmation Island area on December 2, 1943 and returned to Bari on December 12, 1943.
13. Parton, Vol. II, p. 340a.



NOTES ON CHAPTER VI

1. B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1967, pp. 376-379.

2. Martin, p. 245.

3. W. F. Craven and J. L. Cate, Eds., The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol. III, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 514.

4. Tomasevich, p. 470.

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