

I

Lawrence of Yugoslavia: An Allied Awakening inside a Civil War

Together we were close to each other in body and soul
But did the mountains divide us
Or the rivers?
As David saith, ye mountains of Gilboa
Let there be no dew, neither let there be rain,
For Saul you did not save, nor Jonathon,
O the mercifulness of David
O ye kings, O hear
Is it Saul you are bewailing, O Founder?
For I found, saith the Lord,
A man after my own heart.

—*HOMAGE TO LOVE*, SERBIAN SACRED POETRY,
PRINCE STEFAN LAZAREVIĆ TO HIS BROTHER
PRINCE VUK LAZAREVIĆ, THIRTEENTH CENTURY

In the autumn of 1943, a tall, gallant officer from the American wartime intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), crisscrossed the mountains of Partisan-held Serbia and Bosnia on horseback and on foot in search of lost and wounded American airmen who, en route from Allied air bases in Italy to the Axis-coveted oil fields at

Ploesti, in Romania, had been shot down by German air patrols. The thirty-two-year-old, Minnesota-born-and-bred major Linn M. "Slim" Farish was a multitalented engineer who specialized in the building of aerodromes and had previously worked all over the world as an oil geologist, but he was known in the OSS as "Lawrence of Yugoslavia," for his epic-worthy stoic heroism in that broken land and his passionate concern for its political and democratic future.

Farish would hardly have described himself in such romantic terms, but others did. His "ability, integrity, loyalty, unselfish devotion to duty and great love for his fellow men caused him to be held in the highest respect, admiration, and affection by Americans, British and Yugoslavs," one OSS report commented on the charismatic leader of the rescue mission.¹ He was so impatient for action that he enlisted in the Canadian army before America's entry into the war in order to get onto the battlefields of World War II as quickly as possible. Farish's daring alarmed even his future boss, OSS director William J. Donovan, who was also known for his enthusiastic pursuit of heroic missions. Donovan warned Farish that if he did not stop his search for the downed airmen, the young adventurer would collapse from exhaustion. "Major Farish refused to listen to our protests," wrote one OSS officer in a memo summarizing Donovan's plea, "because he knew that American airmen (some of them wounded) were in hourly peril and he was confident he could bring them out safely."² The stubborn Farish ignored the appeals of the willful Donovan, and into the summer of 1944 he continued to comb the mountains of Serbia in hopes of finding his missing comrades.

For over two and a half years before Farish's arrival, Yugoslavia had been embroiled in a violent civil war within the larger World War II southeast-Balkan theater. This civil war pitted the Partisan-Communist forces of that country and the royalist-nationalist Chetniks against each other; both of these groups fought against the Axis-controlled terror of the Croatian Ustaše, whose main target, in turn, was the Serbian population in general. Farish, Stanford University-educated and a former Olympic star, had been named the OSS's senior American officer in the Anglo-American Mission to Tito's Yugoslav National Liberation Army, made up that autumn of around 300,000 men organized across eleven corps and numerous divisions, brigades, and squadrons. Farish arrived on that mission by parachute on September 16, 1943, with British brigadier

Fitzroy Maclean, serving under the aristocratic Scotsman's command, while himself serving as commanding officer of a sub-mission to locate downed airmen and organize their evacuation from Yugoslavia. Traveling thousands of miles over mountainous terrain through enemy territory, Farish located and developed the first evacuation landing strips in Yugoslavia within remote, hard-won pockets of anti-Axis resistance. His intelligence gathering would serve as the basis for the Anglo-American supply program to the Partisans. He was "a large rugged man like a bear, with an amiable grin," wrote Maclean of his American mission partner in his memoir *Eastern Approaches*. "Call me 'Slim,'" said Farish to his equally passionate British counterpart, and thus began what Maclean described as an excellent friendship and working partnership between the two men—although one, it will be seen, quietly rife with Anglo-American rivalry.³

The extraordinary distances Farish crossed in the Balkans resulted in his aiding in the rescue of around a hundred American and Allied airmen with the help of fellow mission members and the Partisans themselves. Farish would undertake three missions to Yugoslavia, including additional briefing missions to OSS headquarters in Cairo and to OSS chief Donovan in Washington, D.C., between September 1943 and the early summer of 1944, with one final visit in August 1944. The missions included Farish's arrival at Tito's then headquarters at Jajce, in western Bosnia, during September and October 1943 to locate landing grounds for the future evacuation of downed airmen, and again in January and March 1944, when Farish and fellow officer Lieutenant Eli Popovich met with Tito personally to ask for the Partisan leader's aid in helping the organization of those rescues. Farish would return once again in April through June 1944, this time to Macedonia as part of the OSS's Columbia mission with Popovich and wireless transmission operator Arthur Jibilian. Despite the constant menace of Axis forces, Farish's operations in Yugoslavia were successful across the board, owing, as he saw it, to the well-organized Partisans, whom he admired greatly and whom he found, as a resistance movement, to be "comparable with the American revolutionary war."⁴

The first American flyer to be evacuated from Yugoslavia was a P-47 pilot, Lieutenant Gerald Johnson, who, in January 1944, had been rescued from the Yugoslav mainland by the Partisans and later evacuated from the

Adriatic island of Vis, Tito's Partisan headquarters as of November 1943, under Farish's direction. When Lieutenant Johnson mentioned that he had not been adequately briefed prior to his mission regarding the free areas in Yugoslavia, Farish obtained some maps and outlined those areas of Yugoslavia where Axis forces had no immediate presence. These became the first accurate escape maps developed for the use of the U.S. Army Air Corps in Yugoslavia.

Farish's success in evacuating the airmen was largely the result of the OSS decision to enhance its mission presence and its military aid to the Partisans in early 1944, following the general exploration of Partisan territory that Farish undertook in the autumn of 1943 under Brigadier Maclean's command. Farish was still attached to Maclean's mission when he returned to Yugoslavia for the third time, on a mission to Macedonia formally under the command of British major John Henniker-Major, on April 16, 1944. Accompanied once again by the American lieutenant Eli Popovich and Arthur Jibilian, Farish parachuted into German-held territory in Macedonia in Vranje, near the border of Bulgaria. Their immediate assignment was to locate areas in enemy territory suitable for use as landing fields that would make it possible to rescue downed American and Allied airmen, whose numbers were starting to reach into the hundreds.

The first four airmen the three encountered were the survivors of an attempted air raid on the Ploesti fields, who had landed near Skopje and were brought to Major Farish by the Macedonian Partisan leader General Mihailo Apostolski, who would accompany Farish, Jibilian, and Popovich during the time they were in Macedonia. When the Partisans around Vranje suddenly came under attack by Bulgarian and Chetnik forces, the party ended up marching six days and five nights "almost entirely without sleep" and under fire for most of that time. After crossing the main Skopje-Nis (Serbia) railway line on April 23, 1944, they passed again through enemy lines at Leskovac, located in southern Serbia on the direct route to Salonika, "in the full light" of Axis searchlights used to protect the entrance to the city, once one of Serbia's most flourishing.⁵

Confronted with what would become an ongoing threat from Axis forces, the men left Leskovac, crossing enemy lines near the area of Topliča, in the southeastern corner of Serbia, near the Macedonian border and surrounded by the wild Kopaonik Mountains. At Topliča, Farish's

party established a makeshift headquarters in the Radan Mountains, one of the largest mountain ranges in southern Serbia. Ever on the move from hostile Bulgarian troops, the men later passed under a rain of rifle fire through the enemy lines to the Macedonian mountain chain known as the Bela Kamen, where the Serbians and their French and British allies had fought decisive battles at the Salonika Front in 1917 and 1918. Over the course of several miserable weeks in this Macedonian outback, and directing themselves toward the Serbia-Kosovo border, Farish finally found a site he considered suitable for use as a landing field for evacuations: Lipovica, a prominent village with a nearby airfield, located near where the borders of Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia meet.

Farish's first rescue was of two American airmen who had been wounded in a parachute descent and trapped near a Bulgarian garrison. Farish rounded up horses from the Macedonian Partisans, and he and his small party entered a village near Lipovica where the men were thought to have fallen. Only the sight of modest, beautiful Serbian monasteries typical of Serbia's "old South" softened the grim poverty of the area. Yet such beauty was obscured by the unexpected and unsightly presence of a large Bulgarian garrison only a few miles away. In an effort to avoid enemy detection, Farish and his team hid themselves in the obscurity of the Bela Kamen Mountains to set up radio contact with OSS headquarters in Bari, Italy, where the U.S. Fifteenth Air Force was stationed, to arrange for Allied transport planes to be sent over. On the way back to their base, Farish and his men found five more airmen who had bailed out of an aircraft in the Topliča valley and who had been escorted by Partisans to Farish's headquarters. Though Farish and his party were successful in finding downed airmen and reassured by Partisan cooperation, they hardly ever felt a moment's worth of calm. For the next ten days the area around their mountain base would be bombed and strafed every afternoon by twenty to thirty German ME-109s.

In spite of the hardships that Farish and his team endured, they were not insensitive to the beauty of the terrain around them or to the spirit of camaraderie that tended to pervade these missions, whether assigned to Partisans or, elsewhere, to their monarchist rivals, the Chetniks. Dobrica Ćosić, in his beautifully written memoir of Partisan life, *Far Away Is the Sun*, wrote of the mountains of the Morava valley in the evening as seen by his otherwise emotionally detached protagonist, describing "the

beauty of the night . . . a beauty made purer and sterner by the sharp frost . . . as though the moonlight was drinking up all his anxieties and fears, all his ceaseless, prolonged and tormenting pre-occupation with the company and the struggle.”⁶ Farish, like his OSS and SOE colleagues in Yugoslavia and the American airmen awaiting rescue, lived such Balkan nights with a sense of relief, sleeping under the stars with hay as a blanket, silently enjoying, if only for a few hours, this eerie and mysterious land that also knew how to pause on occasion from the devastation of war.

But those pauses were indeed brief. The Germans and the Bulgarians had learned about Farish, and Axis forces kept a constant lookout for him through patrols and police; seldom could he move about freely. In addition to being under almost constant attack from small-arms fire, he was subjected to heavy machine-gun fire as well as artillery shelling. He also faced the burning of villages and underbrush near where he hid at times. On at least seven occasions Farish passed through heavy concentrations of German and Bulgarian forces, and yet “[t]he high morale of Major Farish and his party was contagious especially among the natives who joined him in the face of knowledge that they would be tortured to death if discovered by the enemy,” reported one OSS memo on Farish’s exploits.⁷

About a month before the men were able to organize any rescues, they had made their way from Macedonia to Serbian Partisan headquarters, where they met the Partisan commander, Petar Stambolić (who would become prime minister of Yugoslavia in the 1960s), to ask for Partisan cooperation in saving downed Allied airmen. Stambolić “gave every possible aid,” placing at Farish’s disposal the Yugoslav Air Force personnel who knew the territory.⁸ With the aid of these officers, three airfields were located (two of which were subsequently lost to the Axis). Yet still more attacks were to come. On May 18, 1944, an American heavy bomber was shot down. Axis gunfire prevented Farish and his men from reaching the three wounded American airmen left stranded where the bomber crashed, and ten days passed before Farish received word that the three were still alive.

On May 31 Farish’s group tried to get through enemy lines once more. Taking a circuitous route, they spent three nights and four days on the move under constant Bulgarian attack until crossing enemy lines on June 3. They located the three men around the village of Lipovica, all of them wounded, one very seriously. The next morning, Farish and his party managed to escape with the wounded men on an ox-drawn cart, while

Bulgarian forces heavily attacked the village. A day or so later, Farish and Jibilian set out to return to Partisan headquarters in order to make contact with Allied forces in Bari, Italy, to let them know that planes would be needed for evacuation—once the men could remain in place at a landing strip for at least one day, that is.

This would be their most arduous trip yet. Traveling for nearly forty-eight hours without rest or sleep, they arrived at the base of the Radan Mountains, where they were once again involved in an attack on another village, “barely escaping by running their horses under fire from mortar and machine guns,” according to one OSS report on the mission.⁹ In the meantime, Popovich stayed behind to take care of the wounded, and he managed to do the impossible by leading them through enemy lines. He, Farish, and Jibilian all ended up at Partisan headquarters in Serbia at the same time around June 7, only to find that the wounded airmen had wandered off in the direction of Lipovica, where three of the men had been picked up and where there was an airstrip; the men were somehow under the impression that an evacuation plane was to arrive that night.

However exhausted Farish and Jibilian were, they set out once more to find the men who were headed to Lipovica. As it happened, Axis bombing of villages in the area started up almost immediately, with the Germans eventually occupying the airfield. Farish, Jibilian, and one of the airmen in good condition withdrew to the Bela Kamen Mountains—where, it will be recalled, Farish’s team had picked up two wounded American airmen earlier—to figure out another evacuation alternative. Farish decided on one of the other landing strips he had discovered at the beginning of his mission, in the Jastrebac Mountains, in south-central Serbia. Popovich, meanwhile, was dispatched to round up the wounded airmen. Farish thus went to work on the landing strip’s preparation. Jibilian, who had sent out a total of 259 wire messages to Bari over the course of his journeys and ordeals, made arrangements for evacuation planes to retrieve the thirteen men, whom Popovich, “with innumerable hardships and difficulties,” would eventually find and bring back to Avidlovac on June 14.¹⁰ The planes arrived on June 16 in poor weather conditions, until a last-minute, sudden clearing of the weather allowed a successful rescue effort of the thirteen men, while a large enemy garrison loomed some five miles away.

Farish and Popovich then continued to scout out advanced landing fields in Croatia, while Jibilian was recalled to Bari. Farish came into contact with other American officers, notably Captain Conrad G. Selvig and later Lieutenant Nels J. Benson, who were working with the Partisans in Croatia, both attached to Farish's general mission to the Partisans. Selvig had first dropped into Bosnia on April 6, 1944, and proceeded by foot to Partisan Croatian headquarters at Lika. At this time, the landing ground at Bunic, a village near Lika, was open and available for landing operations, with an airstrip equipped with an Italian electric flare path and a generator pulled by a tractor. With many airmen bailing out over the area and encountering no Axis interference at first, Selvig's optimism was frustrated when, for the rest of April and into early May, despite the many signals sent out from downed airmen, no rescue planes landed at the strip. A German offensive on May 10 in the surrounding area of Krbovsko Polje, an area resonant with the memory of one of Croatia's bloodiest historical battles, forced the mission to move north, and there Selvig discovered an old auxiliary landing field of the Yugoslav Air Force at Gajevi, directly south of Zagreb, right on the south-central border with Bosnia. Here members of the Partisan Fourth Corps, some 23,000 men strong, were scattered throughout the area to patrol the airstrip.

During Selvig's mission, he collected twenty-four airmen and four British prisoners of war who had escaped their captors. The first aircraft arrived on the night of June 8 without prior notice, while Selvig had been "eight hours" away from the landing ground. The American airmen dug the aircraft out of the mud in which it was stuck, and the plane had to be pulled out by fifty oxen. On the night of June 9 the plane left with the twenty-four American airmen, the four British POWs, and five Partisans. Such was the first Allied air contact with Croatia.¹¹

The British and the Americans allowed wounded Partisans to be transported back and forth, and the Partisans took good advantage of such generosity. In early July 1944, sixty-two American- and British-operated DC-3s landed at the Gajevi airstrip, which Farish, Popovich, and Lieutenant Benson (taking over from Captain Selvig) had constructed with Partisan help. Twelve Russian-operated American planes landed as well, with fifty tons of supplies brought for the Partisans, who in turn presented to Farish a diverse group of evacuees to be taken to Bari. These included, in addition to 164 American airmen, a total of 957 Partisan wounded; 177 Partisan

couriers, officials, and students; 38 Jewish refugees; and 680 more civilians. Several wounded Italian soldiers, veterans of the Garibaldi Division then fighting with Tito, were also present, as well as 821 Partisan orphans among whom were 69 babies in one plane who had been “collected under the very noses of the Germans and . . . taken to a hidden airport.”¹² (“The best passengers I have ever had,” reported the pilot to the *Los Angeles Times* correspondent at the OSS base in Bari.)¹³ Later that month, another hundred Jewish Yugoslavs appeared on the Gajevi strip with Partisan papers stating that they were to be evacuated. After an exchange of hurried signals with Bari, Lieutenant Benson finally received his okay, and the evacuation of those Yugoslav Jews began.¹⁴

Some Partisans had set up a makeshift evacuation hospital near the airstrip to alleviate the problem of transporting the wounded back and forth. When air force rescue planes did not come through one evening because of bad weather, Farish had over eighty ox-drawn wagons loaded up with wounded on the airstrip to take them to the Partisans’ makeshift hospital. “Those poor armless and legless guys made a five hour trip in a cruelly bouncing wagon with rain steaming down all for nothing,” wrote Farish in his report back to the OSS that autumn. “Three cases died that night. Despite my urgent appeals for stretchers and blankets, by far the greatest majority of the wounded were sent out almost naked and lying on the bare floor of the planes.”¹⁵

Just before being summoned to help coordinate this diverse group of evacuees, Benson had parachuted into Croatia on the night of June 10, 1944, as part of the Altmark mission, to take over the landing-strip operations at Gajevi from Captain Selvig. His own exploits would have qualified him for the “Lawrence of Yugoslavia” title as well. Over the course of this mission, the twenty-four-year-old Benson would help to rescue 164 American airmen in the process, and not without a good dose of drama, to boot. Though well assisted by members of the Partisan Fourth Corps, Benson had given no thought to the possibility of enemy action against his activities. But, sure enough, in late June, the first Dornier 17 flew overhead, making one strafing run on some laborers on the field and then flying away. From that point on, Benson had a reconnaissance plane circling overhead almost every day. The attacks continued until early July. Then on July 4 another Dornier 17 came whizzing overhead, dropping 1,100 kite bombs onto the airfield. There were no direct hits to the strip

itself, but the attacks left two bomb craters twelve feet across and ten feet deep just fifty yards apart on either edge of the approach end of the airstrip's flare path. Even so, that evening eight rescue aircraft managed to land between the two bomb craters without mishap.

But only then did the enemy air strikes begin in earnest. Lieutenant Benson and his men had learned to expect enemy air attacks early in the morning, and so on July 26 they were not surprised to suddenly find three CR-42s attacking them at dawn; for the first time their own quarters were damaged. For forty-five minutes the planes made low strafing runs on the three small buildings Benson and his men occupied, dropping three bombs on them. The men moved to a local house, yet the attacks began again in the late afternoon with four planes this time, catching Farish taking a short rest inside. Benson managed to get only twenty yards from the house when the first strafing run pinned him down. He hid in a one-foot-high cornfield that felt "as big as the Empire State Building" with the gunfire missing him by half an inch. The angle of one of the bullets was such that when it exploded, its force went away from Benson, stinging him sharply in the leg, but giving a Partisan soldier who was hiding in the field with him severe face wounds and resulting in the loss of his left eye.¹⁶ The raid lasted for an hour and forty-five minutes and resulted in five casualties. The damage to the buildings made them uninhabitable. On the evening of June 26, Benson, Farish, and the men moved to a house in the hills south of the air base, as the daily strafing of all buildings near the airstrip continued.

As the Germans began to close in, the evacuation team abandoned Gajevi, and it became necessary to start looking for yet another landing strip. Soon they found one: a long, well-drained plain about a mile and a quarter west of the village of Glina, in a remote corner of northwestern Croatia. In early August the first landing operation took place at Glina, and soon the landing ground operations fell into a well-organized pattern, with supplies coming regularly to help clean up the wounded.

It was at Glina that Benson first encountered the unreliability of Russian aircraft (alternating with Anglo-American or American-operated landings), coming in at staggered intervals. Several planned rescue missions of wounded airmen were missed owing to the pilots of these planes either misunderstanding the prearranged landing times or misreading the flares shot up by Benson.

Meanwhile, a constant stream of Allied visitors, including everyone from Major Randolph Churchill, Winston's personal emissary to Tito, to weeklong inspection tours by Farish, passed through Glina. This reassuring spirit of comradeship, however, did little to make matters less complicated. When one Lieutenant Egone Bessiggio arrived at Glina on July 22, with thirteen Americans, nine British, sixteen French, and "five other escapees" in tow, the Partisans, immediately suspecting an Italian spy, arrested Bessiggio and refused to let the others leave. Despite the insistence of two of the newly arrived Americans, who vouched for him as an SI (Special Intelligence) man from Bari—of Italian origin, perhaps, but a man fully in the Allied camp, they argued—the Partisans would hear none of it. Bessiggio and the men languished in prison as Benson undertook a quasi-diplomatic mission to persuade the Fourth Corps to release them. The Partisans refused, insisting on obtaining a clearance from Tito, which came a month later, all the while Benson was unable to visit them "or bring them tobacco."¹⁷

Not too long after that, Benson was with the Partisan Fourth Corps when a clash with Croatian Ustaše forces broke out on September 13 at Cazin, in northwestern Bosnia on the border with Croatia. The Partisans killed 130 Ustaše members and took 180 as prisoners. The violence and death became etched in the memory of the lieutenant, as he recalled in his later report the "white bodies gleaming in the sun" of Ustaše dead stripped of their clothing, which "were still there when the Partisans were forced to retreat five days later."¹⁸

Despite the extraordinary events unfolding before his eyes, Benson helped to oversee sixty-two Anglo-American landings at Gajevo, thirty-nine American-operated landings at Glina, and twelve Russian-operated landings at Glina during his four-month stay in Croatia. On September 24 Benson was summoned back to Bari, but poor weather delayed his trip until October 10. After releasing his radio to Randolph Churchill ("to help him with his mission"), Benson left Partisan territory for good, with perhaps the most diverse record, shared with Farish, of rescues behind him: over 150 Allied airmen, nearly 1,000 wounded Partisans, nearly 1,000 orphaned children, and over three dozen Jews were flown to safety at Bari.

Such stories highlighted Farish's favorable reports on the Partisans, both after his first mission to those forces in September 1943 and in subsequent reports in March and July 1944. Farish's affection for the Partisans was boundless, seeing few of them as Communist ideologues

but as enthusiastic, modest, dedicated civilians wanting to liberate their country from foreign occupation. The first report had been provided to President Franklin Roosevelt before the Tehran Conference in November 1943, thus encouraging the president to adopt the British pro-Tito stance for which, among other things, that conference became most known. (Ironically, at that conference, Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov had suggested to his British counterpart, Anthony Eden, that the Soviets might provide a liaison to General Draža Mihailović's Chetniks, "in order to get better information," an idea that never materialized.)¹⁹

While Farish was critical of the Chetniks overall, he believed Mihailović's Chetniks to be an exception, and that the field reports on them from his liaison officers "should be taken into consideration."²⁰ But his heart was first and foremost with the Partisan cause, and in his March 1944 report he urged the United States to get more involved. "As matters stand we are running a poor third in our relations with the Partisans," he wrote, "which I feel is out of proportion to our interest in them and the actual aid we are giving them. The Russian mission is completely staffed and commanded by high-ranking officers. Brigadier Maclean is a direct link between the prime minister and Marshal Tito."²¹

In a later report submitted to the OSS, Farish expressed disappointment that the Partisans and the Chetniks could not be reconciled. He feared the escalating violence and brutality that would stem from a full-scale civil war in Yugoslavia—a war that would be fought with weapons Farish had helped to provide. In September 1944 Farish was killed in an airplane crash in Greece, en route to a rescue mission in that country when the motors of his transport plane failed for an undetermined reason. A posthumous OSS award of the Distinguished Service Cross to Farish in 1945 cited his "extraordinary heroism" and "his resolute conduct in the face of great peril."²² It was Farish's basic love for the Yugoslavs, however, that perhaps made his character most memorable: "A normal, peasant type group of people, unwilling to submit passively to oppression, have brought this atmosphere of freedom into being," he wrote in a March 9, 1944, report for the OSS on his activities. "It is these common people who have served so well and suffered so gravely, that we must consider. Nothing that we can do for them will be out of proportion to their contribution to the common cause."²³

Around the time that Farish's mission had regrouped to look for Allied soldiers stranded in Partisan-held territory, another group of Americans had made emergency parachute landings in Serbia, only this time falling into the Chetnik-controlled areas of central Serbia. Late one afternoon in January 1944, the airmen had parachuted into the deep snows of the Zlatibor Mountains of southwestern Serbia, which provided a soft, if bracing, cushion for the ten of them, who now found themselves stranded in the dark Balkan wilderness. The three engines of their B-17, en route from Bari, Italy, to survey oil fields in Ploesti, Romania, had been hit by German fighter planes, separating them from what had been the team's one-hundred-plane mission to Romania. In addition to facing Germany's dominance of Yugoslav airspace, flying conditions in the Balkans were among the most challenging in Europe, and it was not long before hundreds of American pilots, once coasting the heavens just above Yugoslavia's intimidating mountain peaks, came suddenly tumbling down from the skies like modern-day sons of Icarus, aspiring heroes shot down by greater forces.

The uninjured men moved blindly in the forest-dense darkness of the mountains as the winter evening closed down upon them, knowing German patrols could spring upon them at any moment. The leader of the crew, the twenty-year-old Texan Gus Brown, after orienting himself, decided to walk with his men across the mountain range through to Montenegro and on to the Adriatic Sea in hopes of reaching Allied transport there, perhaps unaware that such a plan was eerily similar to an epic chapter of Serbian history just thirty years prior. Except Brown and his men would not make history by undertaking a journey by foot to the Adriatic, but, as fate would have it, by simply staying where they were. For theirs would be a year of outstanding joint Chetnik Serbian–American heroism, and they were to be among the first in a series of rescue missions of Allied airmen by the Chetniks against what would become nearly impossible political and logistical odds. Brown and his airmen became the first American crew to be rescued by Serbian Chetniks, and Brown himself was the first American airman to meet General Mihailović.

The airmen had been moving silently through the mountain woods when a sudden explosion of gunshot tore through the still night air. A violent chorus of dogs barking aggressively followed the explosions, while a tense murmur of human voices echoed from all directions. A

trail of lanterns appeared, heading down the mountain in the direction of the airmen, casting lambent shadows on the dense blocks of trees. The young Americans hid under their parachutes, camouflaging themselves in the snow as the light from the lanterns came within thirty feet of where the airmen sought cover. Then the lanterns abruptly turned and began to trail off in another direction. As the wind-bitten, subzero temperatures of the Balkan winter continued to wear down the motionless young airmen, they began, in their panic, to holler, fearing more the possibility of being left to freeze to death in the ice and snow than the risk of being discovered and taken prisoner or shot by Germans.²⁴

Someone answered from afar, and the Americans waited a good half hour until they saw a figure standing right at the back of their parachutes. "American," said one of the airmen cautiously, and he and his comrades stood and threw up their hands. Suddenly, a group of Serbian Chetniks came pouring down the mountainside, greeting the men warmly and kissing them in the traditional manner on both cheeks. Cigarettes were offered—that most appreciated of soldier-to-soldier peace gestures—and the Chetniks accompanied the men off the mountain and out of the forest, on what would become a six-week journey by foot to the headquarters of the Serbian Chetnik leader Mihailović.

What Brown and his men did not realize then is that they were the first American crew to land in territory controlled by Mihailović and his men. About six months later the Halyard Mission, a rescue described by the OSS as "one of the most glamorous events of the war," would take place in the same territory.²⁵ Brown and his American men were, however, extremely cautious: like all American crews en route through Yugoslavia from the Allied bases at Bari, Lecce, or Foggia, Italy, where they were originally stationed, they had been warned to avoid the Serbian Chetniks at all costs and to trust only Tito's Partisans, whom they would recognize by their caps with red stars. Yet the unexpectedly warm reception offered to the young men almost at once alleviated any anxieties they had about the Chetniks, and without a moment's hesitation they proceeded to follow their Serbian guides to a small house in the mountain woods.

En route, shooting started anew in the distance as another group of Chetniks began to fight off an encroaching German patrol unit. Once at the Chetnik village house, the Chetnik guards took out Serbian plum brandy—the legendary *slivovitz*—and the American airmen started

drinking toasts to the Allied cause. The next day thirty Chetniks and some horses for the men were organized to accompany the men to a village near the ever-shifting headquarters of Mihailović, which was at the time fifteen miles from the southwestern town of Pranjani.

Their month-and-a-half-long journey involved a series of deft hide-and-seek maneuvers through valleys, mountain paths, rivers, highways, railroads, and railroad stations that often boasted the formidable presence of a massive, armored German train resting imperially on the tracks, a symbol of Germany's universal sense of supremacy reaching deep into the Balkan backwoods. The thirty or so Chetniks leading the American crew members stayed with the men the entire way, sharing everything with them, even giving the Americans half of their own rations.²⁶ Six of the Americans made the journey without shoes; the Chetniks themselves were mostly without shoes, walking in snow two feet deep with rags wrapped around their feet for the journey. The group traveled carefully around the heavily monitored Serbian cities of Užice and Požega, at one point forced to camp out at a schoolhouse for a few days while German patrols lurked nearby. As soon as their courage could spur them to action, the men would be on the run again, traversing streams, stones, mountain clearings, and mud-choked highways, frequently pursued by the lone German patrol car or two, but ever energized by the rush of escaping from one danger to embrace another.

By the end of February, the airmen finally arrived at Mihailović's headquarters. There, they were told, was an American officer who had been in Serbia since mid-October 1943. This was Captain George Musulin. The twenty-five-year-old former Pittsburgh Panthers (of the University of Pittsburgh) football star—and quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1938—was now an OSS officer. Of Serbian parentage, he had first landed near the city of Čačak on October 16, 1943, in one of the first American liaison missions to General Mihailović. Musulin was responsible for the Repartee mission, assigned to gather intelligence on German operations in the Chetnik leader's territories and to report on any German-Chetnik acts of collaboration.

Over the course of this mission, Musulin's first to Serbia, he and the Chetniks rescued thirteen airmen who had been shot down over Chetnik territory (not one of whom, testifying after the war to an American commission at the trial of Mihailović, said that they had witnessed any acts of

collaboration with the Germans on the part of Mihailović or his Chetniks). In February 1944, Musulin was the last of the initial group of American OSS men who had served as liaison officers to Mihailović to depart from Serbia. Their departure had been on order (and insistence) of the British, who by that time had halted all supplies to Mihailović and the Chetniks. Nonetheless, thanks to the maverick stubbornness of these OSS airmen, and with the support of their staunch ally, OSS chief William Donovan, on August 2, 1944, Musulin, with three other OSS liaison officers as well as Colonel Robert McDowell in a small, separate SI detachment, would return again to lead the Halyard mission, the fabled rescue of hundreds of stranded airmen in those Chetnik-dominated territories.

But if that mission was indeed the stuff of fairy tales, the reality it would leave behind in the host country where it took place would prove anything but a happy ending. A somewhat heartbreaking omen of this fate greeted Lieutenant Brown, the leader of the ten downed airmen in the Zlatibor Mountains, as he arrived solemnly at Pranjani on horseback with Chetnik escorts in late February 1944 to meet Mihailović. The young airman saluted the now fifty-one-year-old Serbian general upon being introduced. But Mihailović deplored any such formalities. "All I want out of the war," he told Brown upon their meeting, "is a little bit of America in Yugoslavia." He sought no personal gain, he explained (nor did he receive any financial compensation). "I want a scrap of the Atlantic Charter and a bit of America."²⁷ He was unaware that only a few months earlier, London and Washington had officially decided to abandon him for good.