

1941 to fight the Nazi's. "

Rudy stayed with us for the next few days to handle our language problems and before we left him in Zara, I gave him my 45 caliber U.S. Army pistol that I had carried in a shoulder holster under my left arm. I hope he was able to put it to good use. All the extra ammo that I carried were two loaded clips that I rigged to carry under my right shoulder.

Before the truck arrived with the rest of the crew that had bailed out, I remember that we toasted Roosevelt, Stalin, and Tito, with what I understood to be straight vodka. These toasts went on over and over until I could feel no pain. No sooner would your glass be partly empty, someone would fill it again. It seemed always to be full. The only food that I remembered during these toasts were plates of fried fish that were crisp and looked like minnows with big round eyes. It was dark when the truck arrived with Eddie's body wrapped in his chute. They placed the body in a small shed and the next morning I remembered that the pilot, Ruben Kaiser, told Charles Shanklin to remove the parachute harness. Eddie Yurochko was the youngest member of our crew, having his 19th birthday the month of November. Some time later, Charles Shanklin said that removing the chute harness was the hardest thing he could remember ever having to do.

The 15th AAF Escape and Evasion Report stated: On 11 December, 1944 10 crew members were on a mission to Vienna. The plane, a B-24, was piloted by 2nd Lt. R.J. Kaiser. On the way to the target, engines nos. 1 and 3 were running rough and had to be put on Automatic rich. The IP (initial point) was reached and owing to too sharp a turn caused the formation to split up. After regrouping, the formation went on to the alternative target Graz which was bombed successfully.

Our ship remained with the formation for an hour, when owing to a fuel shortage, we left to take the shortest route home. We did not have sufficient gas to reach the Italian mainland, so Lt. Kaiser headed for Vis. Over Yugoslavia no. 3 engine started cutting out and fuel pressure fluctuated. At 11,000 feet all four engines cut out over the Benkovac area (44 03N 15 36E) owing to lack of fuel.

Lt. Kaiser saw what appeared to be a piece of smooth white terrain and circled around to land. At 3,500 feet, he was able to see that the ground was not level so ordered the crew to bail out. Seven of the crew bailed out, but as I the radio operator had left my chute in the waist and had not time to fetch it, the pilot and the co-pilot stayed with me in the plane to land it. The hydraulic system being out, Kaiser made a good belly landing and the three of us left in the plane were not injured.

Capt. J.G.K. Kennedy who was our interrogator debriefed us in the 15th AAF Headquarters in Bari, Italy. We were considered as MIA (Missing in Action.) On 11 Dec 1944 and in the report, it seemed important to tell that the crew was never in the hands of the enemy. Not once did he report that we were shot down or that the cause for having to bail out and or crash land could have been caused by heavy flak accuracy. Kennedy continued in his report; after destroying secret equipment, the pilot, co-pilot, and the radio operator (me) left the plane and were at once contacted by Partisans, who took them to Partisan Headquarters in Benkovac.

The radio operator was supposed to destroy the IFF radio (Identification Friend or Foe radio) before leaving the crashed plane in enemy territory. When the noise and dust of the grinding off of the lower half of the fuselage ended, my concern, when I realized I was still alive, was to get out of the plane as quickly as possible. It

might have been less than five minutes earlier that I stopped sending distress messages to the home base on the liaison radio and felt the open bomb bays behind me. I could see parachutes opening and knew I was in trouble. Instead of landing on flat land, when the pilot had signaled for the bail out, I hadn't heard the signal. Turning to the pilot, I told him I had to go to the waist for my chute and I took off to get it. I walked through the bomb bay focusing on the cat walk and trying not to look at the earth sliding underneath. I found my chute and hooked it in place ready to step off into space out of the rear hatch, but there was no space. The earth was close enough to be touched. The pilot had somehow gotten the plane to clear the top ridge of some mountain range and then we slammed down. I tried to get to the bulkhead but landed behind the housing to the ball turret and then the grinding of metal on rocks began and we literally slid down the face of a sloping mountain.

When the noise stopped and I tried to move, I found that the aluminum had been curled under the ball turret and around me. I expected the plane would blow up or catch fire and was afraid that I couldn't get out of my metal cage. I was able to get to the left waist window and jump out. As I circled the left wing, I could see the pilots were leaving the upper hatch, and looking back up the slope could see an aluminum trail that may have been a quarter of mile long.

Standing at the end of the left wing, what surprised me first, was seeing the pilots showing up through the upper hatch when I thought that they had bailed out. The second and most surprising thing that happened was an awareness that I was inhaling deeply on a cigarette. I had been smoking for several months. A pack of cigarettes might last a week, but it was not a habit yet. 45 years later in 1990, the habit was put aside.

The next item in the Escape Statement, the crew members who had bailed out had landed in an area of about two square miles, five miles east of Benkovac. All were picked up in small groups by Partisans and within 2 1/2 hours had joined the Pilot, copilot, and me in Benkovac.

One member of the crew who had bailed out (Cpl.E.Yurochko) landed in a pit, and was instantly killed by hitting his head on the side. How Eddie Yurochko died can only be guessed at. Ralph said, that he and Lt. McKone got to him first and that he was dead. When Charles Shanklin unwrapped the body from the shroud of the chute on the morning prior to burial, it was the last time I saw Eddie. His eyes were closed and blood showed at his nostrils and the corner of his mouth. He probably died very quickly.

At the Partisans Hq., we were well treated. Partisans gave us continuous bulletins until all crew members had arrived, they then carried all baggage and spare clothing from the plane to their Hq. After spending the night in the house of the Mayor of Benkovac where we were well cared for, all attended the funeral of Cpl. Yurochko at St. Gospa Church in the town, two Catholic Priests officiating. He was then interred in the Catholic Cemetery one mile East of the town and the grave was marked.

Eddie Yurochko was Roman Catholic and the St. Gospa was Greek Orthodox Catholic. The grave site belonged to the Mayor. One of Eddie's dog tags was placed with the body and the other marked the head of the grave. The crypt where Eddie was placed was loaned by the Mayor. It was a horizontal burial crypt in the side of an embankment with other burials below and to the side.

On the afternoon of 12 December, 1944, We were all taken in a bus to Zara (44.06N 15.15E) a three hour journey. The road although narrow was hard, and one temporary bridge was crossed