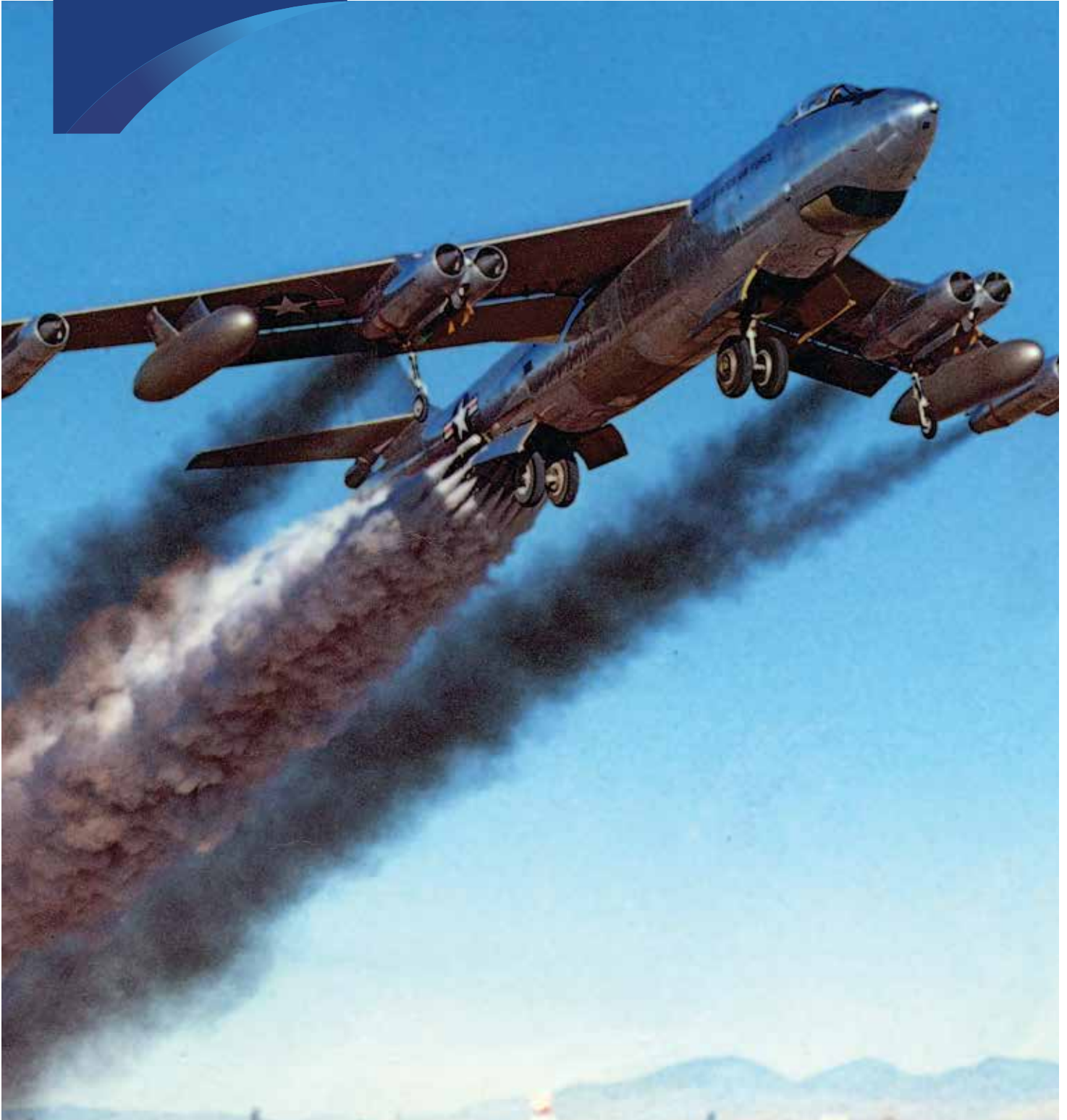


# Friends Journal

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# Downed in Yugoslavia

BY COL TOM THACKER, USAF (RET)

Most stories involving “Mustang” pilots in World War II report on aerial victories or other significant accomplishments. However, on some days, the credits were offset by significant losses, especially when the targets were mainly on the ground. Strafing the enemy was exciting but highly dangerous.

September 3, 1944, was one of those days for the 52nd Fighter Group, a component of the Fifteenth Air Force, operating out of Italy. All three squadrons participated in an extended sweep across a part of Yugoslavia still held by the Germans in that highly confused area where

friend and foe were often merely minutes apart.

There were no aerial victories on this raid but the list of destruction was extensive, including many locomotives, railway cars, trucks, passenger cars, and enemy soldiers. But the price was heavy with six of our planes failing to return. Most were hit by ground fire, though three of the pilots eventually returned to their group.

One of the pilots, Joe M. Randerson, had strafed several trucks and trains and, at about fifteen feet altitude, fired into the firebox of another

locomotive when his engine quit. He pulled higher to gain altitude to restart his engine, bail out, or find a level place for an emergency landing. His engine failed to start.

Here is his story in his own words. “I saw a river bed to land in. At no time was I high enough to jump, so I had to ride my P-51D down. As I tried to gain altitude I secured my safety harness so that my head would not hit the gun sight when I crash landed. I also jettisoned the canopy. I was sure that I was safe as I hit the ground but, landing in sand, the plane stopped short and my head did hit the gun sight. The impact cut my forehead and must have knocked me unconscious for a short time.

“I remember landing and then the next thing I remember was that I was on fire and had to get out of the plane. At first I could not find the release for the safety harness. I remember telling myself to lay my hands on my knees and start over. This time I had no trouble getting the harness released.

“I fell out of the cockpit and walked to the end of the wing where two old Serbian farmers were standing. They said, ‘Americana?’ I said ‘Yes.’ They then pointed to the sky and said, ‘German?’ I said, ‘No, American.’ Then they said, ‘You German?’ and I said ‘No.’ Finally they understood that we were all Americans, flying together.”

Randerson was fortunate to have landed in an area that was more or less free from control by the



*Partially borrowed by permission from The American Beagle Squadron compiled and edited by Lawrence G. Burke and Robert C. Curtis.*

Germans who occupied much of the country.

"My flight leader, Captain R. D. Schween, returned to try to find some place to land and pick me up. I am sure the Lord was looking after me, because there was no place for him to land. I was burned from my helmet to my chest, including both arms and from my shoes to my thighs. So I felt that I would not have lived through a flight back to the base with him sitting on my lap.

"The two old farmers then grabbed my arms and forced me to wave at the planes above. This action pulled the skin off both of my arms. At this point my hands and arms had swelled until my gloves and identification bracelet had to be cut off. I hurt so badly every place that my clothes touched! I took off my shirt and on the back of my right shoulder was a blister at least eight inches in diameter. As I turned, the water in it sloshed back and forth."

"I was loaded into a two-wheeled cart pulled by oxen. Then I was covered with corn stalks, and we started off for points unknown. I was transported to an old barn and hoisted to the loft where I lay

for fourteen days. I remember that I dreamed that a tree had grown over and around me so that I could not get my arms out to get the tree off me. I am sure this was because I was down between the rafters on an old straw mattress."

During this period when he was semi-conscious, his care was assumed by a local nurse named Nada Vidasava Mihailovich whose husband was the nephew of Draza Mihailovich, leader of one of the two competing resistance forces in Yugoslavia. When they were not fighting the Germans, they were fighting each other. Later, he was executed by Tito who headed the communist forces that eventually gained control.

To continue his story: "The fourteen days, I thought, was only one night but later found that I was wrong. During this time the only thing I wanted was to be able to see. Every time Nada came in I asked to have my eyes open, but to no avail. Nada had a young boy fanning me all day to keep the flies off. When one would get on me all I could do was grunt and he would begin to fan more.

"Nada took care of me day and night. She would not allow anyone else to feed or care for me. She refused any food from others because she could not trust them. They could want to kill me.

"My burns had to be dressed three times a day, with no medication and few bandage materials. It was not an easy task. Nada had two sets of bandages. She would remove one set and put on the other. Then she would take the dirty ones and wash them for the next time.

"We found that I could not stand the pain of having the bandages removed, my arms cleaned and the bandages changed. She, therefore, poured whiskey down me until my toes felt like someone was sticking pins in them. Then I could not feel the pain. I had never smoked or had a drink of anything, because we were taught at home that this was not right and that what mom and dad said was always right.

"Nada was a graduate of Belgrade University and could speak eleven languages but English was not one of them. We talked using a 25 cent pocket English to Serbian and reverse dictionary. It was funny



Public Domain

trying to get our thoughts across, but we did. Nada always said I had to learn her language but I always said, 'You learn mine.'

"After fourteen days Nada opened my left eye so that I could see, but then I hurt everywhere. About this time, because I hurt so bad, I requested that they kill me. I was sure that I would never make it. But Nada went right on taking good care of me, night and day. How she did it I shall never know, except by the grace of God.

"All of this time the Germans were looking for me, but to no avail. One night, Nada came in, bundled me up and put me in a little Fiat auto and we left for points unknown. We ended up at Glavinci, Serbia, where I was put in a real bed in a home. This felt good. After we arrived I was very sick. I must have taken pneumonia because, again, I do not remember much of the next few days."

Finally, he began to recover and had some hope of survival. He learned that Nada had two children, Vera age six and Dan, age five. They would visit him twice daily to wish him good morning and good night.

◀ Miss Helen, a P-51D in its wartime markings as flown by Capt. Raymond H. Littge of the 487 FS, 352 FG, on aerial display in 2007: It is the last original 352 FG P-51 known to exist.

In some way, Nada found the time to teach her two children each day.

He began having visitors, including some Serbian senior military personnel, two of whom could speak English. Some visitors, including several young ladies, brought him fruits. His situation began to improve.

"I remember, in particular, one little old man who walked seventy-five kilometers to present a gift to 'The American Pilot.' He was crippled, had only one eye and both hands had fingers missing. His gift was a small chicken. Nada brought him in. He bowed and scraped and presented the little chicken to me. I did not have the heart to take it.

"I asked Nada to explain to him that I really did appreciate it, but since I was so sick I could not eat it and he needed it more than I did. I shook hands with him and, as he started to leave, there were tears in our eyes. This was the most precious gift that anyone gave me, other than what Nada, with God's help, gave me — my life."

For about two months he recovered, slowly. His greatest desire was to get up, but his heels hurt so badly that he could not do so for many weeks. During one attempt, he ended on the floor. Finally, he sat up in bed and eventually became mobile.

During this time, he learned more about Nada, her husband who was away fighting in the war, her honeymoon in Switzerland and her education at Belgrade University. She represented herself as 49 years of age which did not seem to fit the events of her life. Finally, she admitted to being about 20 years younger. She used this change of the facts as a possible protection from the German or Russian armies in the area.

A couple of weeks later the Russians arrived and began taking everything that the Germans had not already claimed. They thought

mainly of food and strong drink. They had to live off the land. As Randerson stated, "They were dirty and boisterous and they drank whiskey like you and I drink water. To them, a glass was only ten large swallows; therefore, they would pick up the bottle and drink from it."

"A Russian general came to see me and told Nada that I had to go with them, and they would get me a home, food, clothing, money, and would get me to good doctors. I went with them but, after three days of sitting in a room, I decided they were not going to do anything for me, so I went back to Nada.

"They did not miss me for two days but finally came back after me. They asked me where I wanted to go. I told them that I wanted to go to Italy, but they told me that the US forces were still in Africa and holding. I tried to convince them that I flew out of Italy and that the Americans were way above Rome. At no time could I convince them that we had left Africa a long time ago.

"They were so indoctrinated that when they saw a truck with USA on the back they would only admit that it was made in the USA if it was broken down; otherwise, it was Russian made. The Russians moved through the country with wagons pulled by horses or oxen, 'Model A' Fords, and new trucks from the USA. Not once do I remember seeing a single motor vehicle made in Russia. (Editor's note: Museum Research staff advises that Soviets actually built licensed copies of Ford "Model As" called GAZ-A and GAZ-AA)

"They told me that the only way for me to get back to America was to go to Moscow. This I refused to do. I told them I would stay with the Serbians. Again, the Lord had to have his hand on me, for they never came back. I am certain it was because I was burned so badly."

He and Nada made their way to Belgrade where he visited the

American consulate. The people there were friendly but wanted him to sign a document telling how good the Russians had been to him and how they had helped him to return to his outfit. When he would not agree, they gave him chocolate bars, a carton of cigarettes and a few American dollars and urged him to leave.

He and Nada found an airfield where, after midnight, he could catch an old C-47 aircraft for Bari, Italy. He gave Nada the candy bars and cigarettes, and a dollar bill with his home address on it. Late that night, he caught the plane for Italy. He believes that the flight was arranged by General Mihailovich who was later killed by the Communists, without any rescue attempt by the Americans despite the many American military personnel that he aided.

"The flight was on November 7, 1944, and we flew at 11,000 feet. I was so cold, since I had only a shirt and no coat, that I went to the cockpit and asked the British pilot if I could stay there to get warm, but he said 'No.' So all I could do was to try my best to stay warm.

"We landed at Bari, Italy, sometime after 2:00 a.m., and I ran from the plane to a fire that I saw with American soldiers around it. We talked briefly and then started off for the general hospital where, they told me, I could get clothes and food.

"By the time we arrived there, I was warm, and it felt so good. But they put me in a tent without much heat. I wondered why I was not let into the building. I found out next morning that I had to be deloused before being admitted."

After examination, he was hospitalized for nearly two months. Finally, he was told that he would be sent home. At this point, he pleaded with them to let him return to his squadron and continue to fly combat missions. Finally, he was given his choice provided he would

sign a statement saying that this was his decision.

He hitchhiked to the 52nd Fighter Group, about a hundred miles away, arriving there on December 24th. He spent the next several hours being thoroughly debriefed. During this process, he was called about a visitor at the control tower who had just arrived by air. He felt that it had to be a mistake, but found the visitor was his brother "Bud," an army colonel stationed in France. Bud had known he was reported "Missing in Action" and arranged a visit to investigate.

With the Randerson's help, Nada was eventually able, with her children, to emigrate to the U.S. Over time she and her children, Vera and Dan, became citizens. She obtained employment and eventually remarried. American in every way, she passed away in 2003.

Joe Randerson returned to the University of Texas to pick up his studies he had put on hold to serve. He completed his degree in mechanical engineering. He played semi-pro baseball while working as an engineer following graduation.



He was allowed to remain with his squadron and continued flying missions until the war's end, completing a total of 49. He finally arrived home on June 19, 1945, just a few hours after his brother. He was met with mixed emotions, as his parents were most happy to see him but sad about the extent of his burns.

Randerson spent the next two years attempting to contact Nada, who seemed to have experienced difficulties after his departure. Finally, he learned that she had fled Yugoslavia to Italy after her husband was killed near the war's end. She managed to be joined by her children. An English officer finally announced contact and the Randersons were able, through him, to send American dollars for her assistance.

He was offered a chance to play for the St. Louis Cardinals but chose to stick with his profession, which he did through retirement. He passed away July 8, 2017 at age 95. 🇺🇸

*Author Thomas L. Thacker spent three years overseas as a supply officer in the 52nd Fighter Group during World War II. This Group flew Spitfires and Mustangs in Great Britain, North Africa, Sicily, Corsica and Italy as members of the 8th, 12th and 15th Air Forces. He remained in the Air Force until retirement in 1968. He became a real estate broker for the next 32 years and volunteered at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. He passed away Sept. 27, 2012. He was 94.*