

# 95-Year-Old NYC Man Gets Medal for WWII Rescue

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AP

NEW YORK (Oct. 17) - The U.S. government has recognized the World War II architect of a mission to rescue more than 500 U.S. bomber fliers shot down over Nazi-occupied Serbia - the largest air rescue of Americans behind enemy lines in any war.

George Vujnovich, a 95-year-old New Yorker, is credited with leading the so-called Halyard Mission in what was then Yugoslavia.

On Sunday, he was awarded the U.S. Bronze Star Medal, presented by Rep. Joseph Crowley, D-N.Y., at Manhattan's St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Cathedral. Vujnovich received a standing ovation from a crowd of several hundred church members, supporters, friends and officials.



Diane Bondareff, AP

Rep. Joseph Crowley, D-N.Y., right, presented 95-year-old George Vujnovich, left, with the U.S. Bronze Star Medal at a ceremony in New York City on Sunday. Vujnovich is credited with leading the Halyard Mission to rescue more than 500 U.S. bomber fliers shot down over Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia.

"Better now than never," says Vujnovich, a retired salesman who lives in Queens.

He was an officer of the OSS, the precursor of today's CIA, when about 500 pilots and other airmen were targeted over Serbia in the summer of 1944 while on bombing runs targeting Hitler's oil fields in Romania,

according to U.S. government field station files, stored in the National Archives.

The airmen were hidden in villages by Serbian guerrilla fighter Draza Mihailovich, leader of the Chetniks, whom Yugoslav communist officials considered to be Germany's collaborators.

"This mission would not have succeeded without the great courage of Draza Mihailovich and his brave men," said Vujnovich, a Serbian-American and a Pittsburgh native who was stationed in Bari, Italy.

It was no small feat to convince American officials to allow him to work with Mihailovich on the clandestine mission, dubbed Halyard, meaning a rope used to hoist sails. By then, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had decided to follow British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's lead, abandoning support for Mihailovich in favor of the Yugoslav communists, the strongest grass-roots guerrilla force fighting the invading Nazis and Italian fascists.



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This Dec. 28, 1944 photo shows OSS Capt. George Vujnovich, right, in Bari, Italy with a group of airmen he helped rescue after they were downed over Nazi-occupied Serbia. It was the largest air rescue of Americans behind enemy lines in any war.

Mihailovich had been a prewar military officer who launched the first Balkan resistance to the Nazis in 1941, before also turning against the communists led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito.

"Vujnovich is the one who sold the mission to U.S. officials, he pushed hard," said U.S. Army Lt. Col. Steven Oluic, a former West Point professor who prepared the award submission for the Department of the Army.

On Aug. 2, 1944, three OSS agents strapped with radio transmitters were

airdropped near Mihailovich's headquarters to set up the operation.

Dozens of U.S. military cargo planes flew in over the months to pick up the airmen as they were downed. Serbian villagers had helped them build an airstrip by the village of Pranjani.

"We owe Vujnovich big time," says Charles L. Davis III, 91, of Church Falls, Va., a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel who was rescued.

As a bombardier navigator, he was part of a crew of 10 on a B-24 Liberator plane crippled after losing three of its four engines.

The fliers parachuted into a mountainous region where local farmers brought them to their houses and barns. During the next 66 days, the Americans moved each night to a different location so as not to be captured by the occupying Germans.

Yugoslavia's postwar communist authorities convicted Mihailovich of collaborating with the Nazis in a hasty trial in 1946, and he was executed.

In 1948, U.S. President Harry Truman posthumously bestowed the Legion of Merit on the Serb for the rescue - an honor classified secret by the U.S. State Department for decades, so as not to disrupt the rather friendly U.S. policy toward Yugoslavia.

The secrecy underscores long-lasting divisions in Serbia stemming from World War II; some Serbs still believe Mihailovich was a victim of communist repression, while others view him as a traitor.

The story is told in a 2007 book titled "The Forgotten 500," by Gregory Freeman.

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