

Untold WWII Troop Carrier Stories from the Secret War in the Balkans

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Authors Acknowledgement: Very few folks are aware of USAAF Troop Carrier units supporting the Secret War in the Balkans during World War II. The intent of this article is to highlight a few of these missions flown from Italy in 1944. Later this year I hope to publish “Leading the War to Victory – A History of the 60th Troop Carrier Group 1940 – 1945.” This work will provide a more in-depth study of Troop Carrier Operations in the Secret War in the Balkans. I’d also like to thank Mr. Steve Wright of the British Glider Pilot Regiment Society for sharing information on Operation BUNGHOLE. Steve provided the names and pictures of three of the six British Glider Pilot Regiment pilots who flew this mission for this article. However, United States Army Air Forces records refer to a code name of Operation MANHOLE for the same glider-tow mission into Yugoslavia. Enjoy the read.

When the Germans invaded Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece in 1941, they obtained a quick victory; but they could not hold these countries completely in subjection. The waging of small-scale guerilla warfare commenced with very active involvement by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and later the American equivalent Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

In Serbia Drjoljub (Draza) Mihailovic, an officer on the General Staff raised the banner of the Cetnicks, a guerilla group that fought the Turks in the 19th Century. He quickly became a popular and highly visible figure among the Allies. Mihailovic even was on the cover of *Time Magazine* in May 1942! In late 1941 following Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia’s Communist Party joined the resistance. Unlike Mihailovic, the Communist leader Marshal Josip Broz (known as Tito) remained a shadowy figure out of the limelight the next two years. Thus, even the success of Tito’s Partisan fighters the next two years was credited to the Cetnicks.

At first the Cetnicks and the Partisans acted in cooperation against the Nazi invaders, but soon this arrangement broke down. By the end of 1941 the two groups were fighting a civil war that would last until the end of World War II.¹

By late 1943, British disillusionment with the Cetnicks rose to the point that a decision was made to shift support from the Cetnicks to the Partisans. The British determined they were getting no military return on their investment of dropping supplies; in fact those supplies were more likely to be used against the Partisans than the Germans. This shift in Policy was confirmed at the Tehran Conference.² Shortly after the beginning of January 1944, the British ordered their liaison officers to cease contact with Mihailovic’s forces.

Also, at the beginning of 1944, Partisan resistance under Tito in the Balkans stiffened and a “secret war” commenced. In January 1944, Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, newly appointed commander of Mediterranean Allied Air

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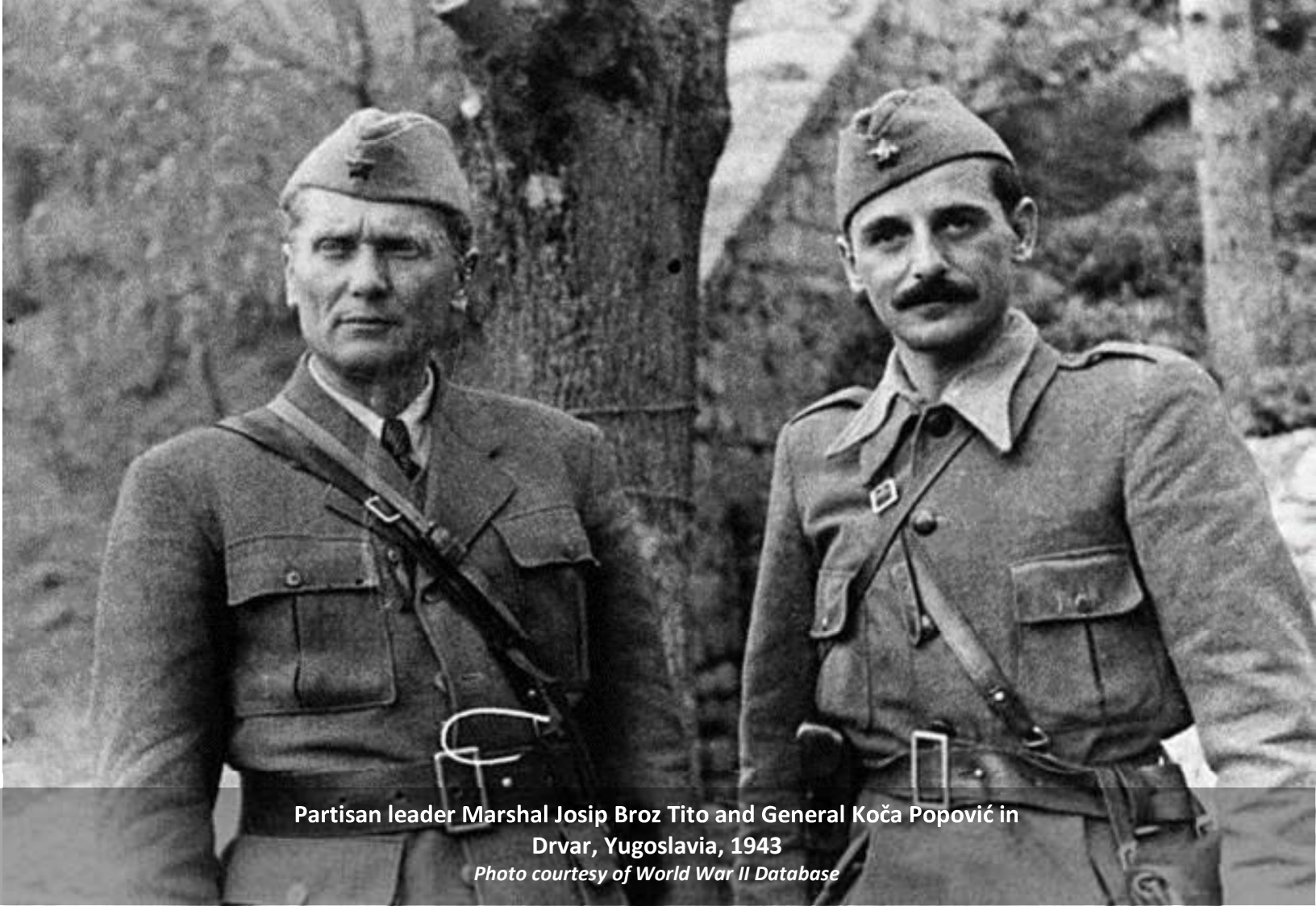
Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at the Tehran Conference Nov 28 – Dec 1, 1943

Photo courtesy of AFHRA

Forces (MAAF) decided that Americans should “get some credit delivering knives, guns and explosives to the Balkan patriots with which to kill Germans.” On February 9, 1944, the 7th Troop Carrier Squadron (TCS) and 51st TCS of the 62nd Troop Carrier Group (TCG) were placed on detached service at Brindisi, Italy with the 334 Wing, RAF to begin USAAF support for this mission. Both of these squadrons would fly some of the very first insertion missions into the Balkans under the code name Operation BUNGHOLE. Late in the

month of February, the 7th TCS received orders to infiltrate a group of American meteorologists and equipment into Yugoslavia. The USAAF wanted better weather data and forecasts to support bombing operations by the Fifteenth Air Force against enemy targets in central and Eastern Europe and improve efficiency and mission success rates of resupply efforts in the Balkans. Soon after the Tehran Conference, OSS recruiters went to Cairo, Egypt to interview meteorologists assigned to the 19th Weather Squadron. Six officers

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Partisan leader Marshal Josip Broz Tito and General Koča Popović in Drvar, Yugoslavia, 1943

Photo courtesy of World War II Database

and fifteen enlisted men volunteered for the hazardous duty, and were given nine days of parachute training with the British at their school in Ramat David, Palestine.

Operation BUNGHOLE got underway on February 23, 1944; two C-47s piloted by 7th TCS Commander Major Paul A. Jones and Capt. John A. Walker flew from Brindisi to OSS Headquarters at Bari, Italy and then flew 60 miles north across the Adriatic where they prepared to drop two, three-man weather teams into Bosnia. The two C-47s were escorted by 24 P-47s. The C-47s made landfall on the Dalmatian coast, just south of Sibenik, then proceeded inland.

Flying through a heavy snowstorm they soon reached the area of the drop zone northeast of the town of Prekaja, near Tito's headquarters at Drvar. Captain Walker could not descend due to heavy cloud cover and returned to Bari. However, Major Jones managed to letdown through the overcast and leveled off at 3,000 feet; he then spotted eleven signal fires in the shape of a "V" - the signal for the drop. Major Jones made four passes dropping the meteorologists and their equipment. The weather team consisting of Capt. Cecil E. Drew (forecaster), Sgt. Joseph A. Conaty, Jr. (observer), and a radio operator made contact with local Partisans who brought them to the OSS mission at Drvar.³

The team soon began making four observations a day, which were coded by two cipher pads and transmitted to Bari. The OSS would eventually deploy six more meteorological teams in Yugoslavia.

That same day, the 51st TCS conducted Operation MANHOLE, a special mission to transport Russian military representatives led by Lieutenant General Nikolai V. Kormeyev and Major General Anatoli P. Gorshkov to Yugoslavia. The mission was driven by the Russian's political desire to reinforce their support for the Partisans. Kormeyev's leg had been badly wounded at Stalingrad, so parachuting in was a no go. The landing zone was in the middle of rough, mountainous terrain, so gliders were the only option. For this daytime mission, three (3) 51st TCS C-47s Led by Lt. Col. William T. Duden, 62nd TCG Operations Officer, pulled three (3) CC-4As piloted by glider pilots from the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade (British) from Bari under escort of twenty-four (24) P-40s and twelve (12) P-47s. In the lead CG-4A "Waco" glider was Capt. Cornelius "Crash" Turner with Sgt. Newman as the co-pilot. The other two gliders were piloted by Staff Sergeant Andrew McCulloch (P), Sgt. Hall (CP), Staff Sergeant Will Morrison (P) and Sgt. Reginald McMillan (CP).⁴ Once crossing landfall, the C-47s towing the gliders had to climb to 7,000 feet to cross mountains. After release at an altitude of 3,000 feet, the gliders landed at Partisan-held, snow-covered Medeno Polje landing zone in Bosnia where they offloaded 23 Soviet and 6 British officers. The landing zone was marked by red flags and 12 smoke fires.⁵ After glider release, the C-47s also dropped

10,500 pounds of equipment for the operation.⁶ Despite near zero visibility, the mission was a total success. Captain Turner and four of the glider pilots returned to Bari, Italy the next month when an RAF C-47 was able to land on the frozen LZ; Sgt. Reginald McMillan stayed behind as a Liaison Officer to work British SOE Force 133.⁷

During the last week of March 1944, USAAF commitment to the Balkans significantly increased when all four squadrons (52 C-47s total) of the 60th TCG relocated to Brindisi, Italy, relieving the 7th TCS and the 51st TCS from the 62nd TCG. By the time the 60th TCG arrived at Brindisi, the number of Yugoslav Partisans numbered 300,000, up from 200,000 six months prior and resupply requests multiplied.⁸

Planning for operations in the Balkans was carried out by the British, and liaison with the various partisan groups was handled by them. The Troop Carrier units involved simply carried out the instructions passed down to them by the 334 Wing, RAF from the SOE and OSS. By arrangement with the British, Lt. Col. Clarence J. Galligan, the 60th TCG C.O. maintained operational control of his Group; he could accept or deny any mission tasked by the British. The 334 Wing operated with a mixed allotment of Halifaxes, Wellingtons and Liberators, and conducted operations as far as Crete, France, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania. A Polish squadron was part of the 334 Wing, RAF as well. However, the great bulk of partisan missions went to Italy, Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece. The

emphasis of the operation was now so predominantly on Yugoslavia that the name Balkan Operations came to be applied to all of these operations performed by the 334 Wing.⁹ These missions were flown under the strictest of secrecy and the men in the 60th TCG were not allowed to write home about their new location or the mission. The western press mentioned nothing of the ground war in the Balkans or the aerial resupply missions to the Yugoslavian Partisans. The 60th TCG was now part of the secret war in the Balkans.

Balkan flying conditions demanded the best of flying skills, and the tenacious German defenses in this troubled region complicated the challenge even more. The missions were flown at night over unfamiliar territory; the drop Zones were amidst towering mountains. The airstrips, on which the C-47s occasionally landed were small, hastily constructed and subject to enemy attack. The C-47s were unarmed and unarmored and enemy night fighters lurked near the secret partisan airstrips. These were dangerous missions to fly. On the average, there were 15 targets per night, but as a rule, one or two of the target areas were given priority and special attention.

Normally, the C-47 carried between 3,000 and 4,000 pounds, including approximately 150 pounds of propaganda leaflets. Normal supplies included guns, food, clothing, medical items, dynamite and ammunition for the partisans. On occasion these items were supplemented by mail, radios, jeeps,



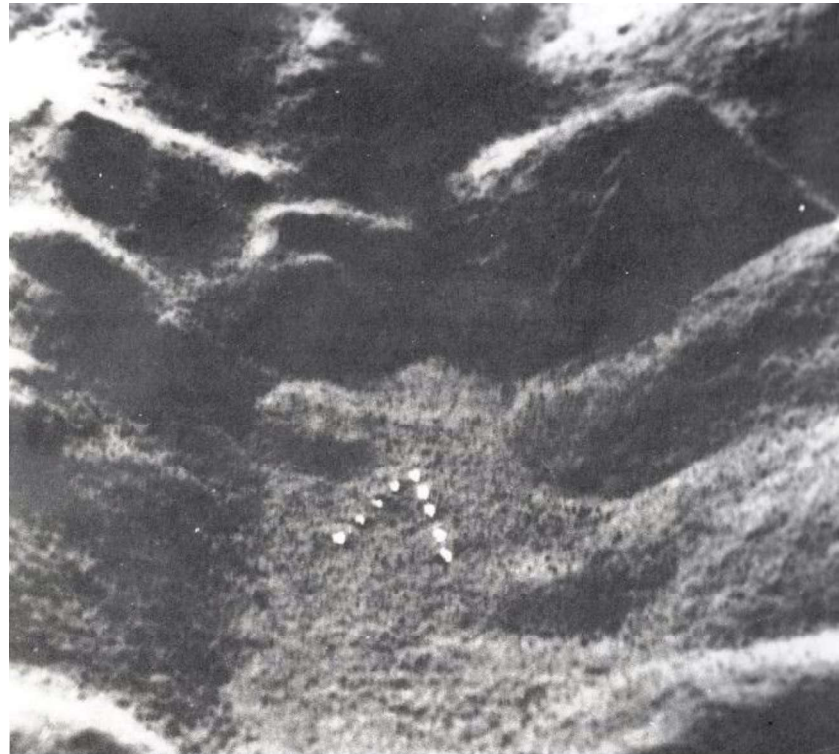
Operation MANHOLE British Glider Pilots
Photo courtesy of British Glider Pilot Regiment Society
Top left Capt. Cornelius "Crash" Turner, top right Sgt. Reginald McMillan, bottom right S/Sgt. Will Morrison; on the bottom left is a typical Partisan

oil and mules! The transportation of mules required special handling. Temporary wooden stalls had to be constructed within the cabin of the C-47, and large quantities of straw were placed on the floor. The mules were loaded from a motor truck which was backed up to the cargo door. On reaching the destination, the crew opened the door and the mules jumped to the ground where mule skinnners took over. The average mission duration was 5 hours long and all aircraft were planned to be back over friendly territory by daylight.

The briefings for these operations called for making landfall on the Balkan coast between 6,000 and 10,000 feet; dead-reckoning (DR) to the target area, circle while at the same time flashing a pre-arranged letter of the day from the aircraft. Upon seeing the letter, the ground forces proceeded to light a set of fires (usually

representing a letter of the alphabet), then flashed a different ground-to-air letter in answer to the aircraft. Thus, three conditions were essential to the drop. More frequently than not, the signal fires on the ground were already lighted when the aircraft approached the target area and thus served as a valuable navigation aide to the C-47 crews. It sometimes happened that the receiving party was surrounded by the enemy or in imminent danger of being detected, so that the fires could not be safely lighted until the aircraft was heard and had identified itself. Not infrequently, the enemy discovered the ground forces just before, during or after the fires were lit, chasing them from the area. In such cases, the missions were necessarily unsuccessful, for although the fires might be properly lighted, and taken over, the ground-to-air letter would not be forthcoming. This factor frequently saved the valuable stores from falling into enemy hands.¹⁰

On the afternoon of July 2, 1944, 1st Lt. Harold E. Donohue, 28th TCS attended his flight briefing for the night's mission; six (6) C-47s would land at an airstrip in a valley code named PICCADILLY LIGHT 106. A single line of nine (9) fires would mark the 1,300 foot long landing strip. Pilots were briefed to land on the north side of the fires, and beware of the 500-foot hill to the south and the mountain to the north. After dark, the C-47s departed Brindisi in two-minute intervals. Lieutenant Donohue headed north over the Adriatic at 11,000 feet. Passing north of Zagreb, he headed towards the airstrip. His crew spotted the line of 9 fires; gunfire was observed to the east and a wrecked, burning aircraft was



Typical Drop Zone with fires lit in Mountains of Yugoslavia
*Photo courtesy of Troop Carrier Operations 1944,
HQ Twelfth Air Force*

spotted to the west. After receiving the correct signal to land, he set up his aircraft for the approach. As soon as the aircraft came to a stop, he was swarmed by Partisans to unload the 4,500 pounds of blankets and ammunition. Gunfire could be heard nearby and the British Liaison officer on the ground told him that he landed in a “sticky situation.” None of the other aircraft had landed and as soon as the aircraft was unloaded, the Partisans were going to abandon the airfield and melt into the hills. The partisans would be unable to take a group of children with them and the Germans would probably kill them. Could he help? “Of course” 1st Lt. Donohue said yes. The children were then led out of the darkness; some had no shoes, others just in nightshirts. None of them complained. Three nurses then arrived carrying babies; the line of children seemed endless. Donohue then made his way back to the

Children evacuated from Yugoslavia
by 1st Lt. Harold E. Donohue, 28th TCS on July 3, 1944
Photo courtesy of AFHRA



cockpit; children were strewn across the aircraft floor and he was careful not to step on them. He did not know how many were on the aircraft, but did not want to know either. Lieutenant Donohue started the twin 1,200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney engines. Holding the steering column close to his stomach, he set half flaps, stepped on the brakes and advanced the throttles. When he could no longer hold the aircraft, he released the brakes and roared down the runway. Passing the fifth fire, Lt. Donohue tried to coax the aircraft off the ground, no joy. Passing the seventh fire and slowly gaining speed the aircraft skipped a little. Reaching the final fire, he jerked the aircraft off of the ground and the propellers' bit into the air. The aircraft shuddered, but managed to clear the hill. After gaining altitude, he leveled off at 11,000 feet and set a course for Bari, Italy. Once at altitude, crew chief Jennings B. Harrell came up and told him he was carrying sixty-nine (69) passengers, three nurses and sixty-six children!¹¹

During the summer of 1944 rescuing downed Airmen became a priority for the 60th TCG. In May the 15th Air Force began a major bombing campaign against the Ploesti oil field located in Romania – the source of more than ¼ of Germany's petroleum. By August 1944, more than 350 bombers were shot down, but many of the aircrews survived. Some came down in Partisan territory, while others found refuge in Serbia with the Cetnicks. Using over 300 workman and 60 oxcarts, the Cetnicks under General Mihailovic, and the downed Airmen lengthened and widened a grass strip on a narrow plateau on the side of a

mountain in Pranjane. [Authors note: Ironically, with a civil war going on in the Balkans, the 60th TCG found themselves working with both Tito's and General Mihailovic's forces who were fighting against each other! Both were fighting the Germans as well.] The field was surrounded by a dense wood on one side and a sheer drop off on the other; a pilot's nightmare. Planned by the British SOE and American OSS agents, Operation HALYARD was the code name given to the mission to rescue Allied Airmen in Yugoslavia.

Later that night, six (6) 60th TCG C-47s departed Brindisi. Two aircraft had to turn back with engine trouble, but the other four landed on the tiny strip. Airmen and Serb villagers rushed the C-47s screaming in celebration and urged the crews to hop out so they could be welcomed to Pranjane. As the four planes were loading, those going home said their good byes to their friends and shouted "See you in Italy." Due to the elevation, night operations and short runway length, the C-47s were restricted to carry out only twelve (12) Airmen each. Many of the men on the first flight of 6 C-47s were wounded. The aircraft departed the grass strip, barley clearing the treetops around midnight and 48 downed Allied Airmen were saved. The aircraft circled over the strip to gain enough altitude to clear the mountains for the trip home. The rescued Airmen were dropped off in Bari, Italy for medical treatment and debriefing. Just after dawn the next morning, six (6) more C-47s all from the 10th TCS, led by their new Squadron Commander Capt. Caleb P. Moberly departed for Pranjane.



60th TCG C-47s on the ground in Pranjane, August 10, 1944

Photo courtesy of Mr. Boris Ciglic of Serbia



60th TCG C-47s on the ground in Pranjane, August 10, 1944

Photo courtesy of Mr. Boris Ciglic of Serbia

Rescued American Airmen enjoy a snack on a C-47s enroute to Bari, Italy from Pranjane, Yugoslavia
Photo courtesy of AFHRA



Rescued American Airmen warm their feet in canvas bags because they gave their shoes to locals before leaving Pranjane, Yugoslavia
Photo courtesy of AFHRA

The C-47s were escorted by twenty-five P-51s and P-38 fighter planes. While the fighters attacked targets in the local area to give the impression that a normal airstrike was in progress, the C-47s landed on the grass strip in broad daylight at 10:47 a.m. The fighters attacked anything German within a 50-mile radius of the airstrip to give the C-47s the needed time on the ground. The scene from the previous night was repeated, but this time there was more of a sense of urgency. The transports picked up and flew out another 117 joyful downed Allied Airmen. An hour later, a second wave of six (6) C-47s from the 12th TCS, led by their C.O. Major Joseph F. Wimsatt and escorted by fighters repeated the process. In all the morning's work, a total of 192 Allied Airmen were rescued.¹² When the 12th TCS C-47s returned to Brindisi, the English controllers in the tower hit the roof! The six C-47s flew in formation fifteen feet over the ground! The flight leader, Major Wimsatt then shot straight up, slow rolled and started his let down. Each plane followed in turn, actually too closely. They landed so closely that four were on the runway at one time with the fifth one touching down.

Three more missions were flown into Pranjane, two in August and one in September, retrieving another 75 Airmen. A total of 512 downed Allied Airmen were rescued during Operation HALYARD. This was the largest and most successful rescue mission in World War II and the 60th

TCG played a major role in it. However, there was no fanfare or publicity; the press was not told about Operation HALYARD. The mission could not be jeopardized because more men would need to be brought out in the future.

October 17, 1944 also brought an end to the 6-months of the 60th TCG's detached service to the 334 Wing, RAF. From April 1 – October 17, 1944 the Group flew 3,307 successful missions, 631 of which were landing missions. The Group dropped or landed 14,246,260 pounds of supplies, evacuated 9,322 personnel, and delivered 728,602 pounds of propaganda leaflets. The cost to the 60th TCG was 10 C-47s lost and 28 Airmen killed in action. This equated to one aircraft lost for every 458 sorties – a remarkable achievement that testified the pilot's skill at evading enemy flak and night fighters while flying at night in dangerous mountainous terrain. In November, the 60th TCG would receive a Presidential Unit Citation for their contribution supporting the Secret War in the Balkans. This meant the men of the 60th TCG could now wear the much - coveted blue ribbon on the right side of their uniforms. On October 12 – 17, 1944, the 60th TCG and the entire 51st TCW also played a major role in Operation MANNA, the invasion of Greece, by airdropping British Paratroopers and airlanding supplies at Megera Airfield, outside of Athens, Greece. This Operation also included another 23 British gliders being towed by the 62nd TCG.



Brigadier Charles Pritchard, Commanding General 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade and Brigadier General Timothy J. Manning, 51st TCW Commander discuss the success of Operation MANNA

Photo courtesy of AFHRA

Even after declassification, Troop Carrier Operations in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations continue to be a mystery today. The reasons for this are many. First, the press was focused on the war in Europe. Thus, many more photographs and documentation of first-hand accounts exist due to the number of embedded reporters and hometown news releases from the European Theater of Operations. Very few historians are aware of the contributions, or write about the achievements, of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing under Twelfth Air Force. I hope to soon change this with the publication of my next book. ■

¹ William M. Leary, *Fueling the Fires of Resistance - AAF Special Operations in the Balkans in World War II*, p. 4.

² *Ibid*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid*, p. 10

⁴ *Operation Bunghole* by David Pasley, courtesy of British Glider Pilot Regiment Society.

⁵ *Operation MANHOLE* AFHRA Reel 2562.

⁶ 51st TCS AFHRA Reel No. A0980.

⁷ *Operation Bunghole* by David Pasley, courtesy of British Glider Pilot Regiment Society.

⁸ William M. Leary, *Fueling the Fires of Resistance - AAF Special Operations in the Balkans in World War II*, p. 16.

⁹ *Troop Carrier Operations 1944*, Headquarters Twelfth Air Force, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 14

¹¹ *Ibid* and William M. Leary, *Fueling the Fires of Resistance – AAF Special Operations in the Balkans during World War II*, p. 20.

¹² 10th TCS MF Reel No. A0968.