



# DANGER, DARING, DECEIT

**Co-op member's firsthand account of Operation Halyard,  
the greatest rescue mission of World War II**

Waves of Consolidated B-24 liberators of the 15th AAF fly over the Concordia Vega Oil refinery, Ploesti, Romania, after dropping their bomb loads in May 1944. The late Dick Sheehy was bombardier of a B-24 crew in one of the raids over Ploesti.'

*Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

**R**ichard “Dick” Sheehy was 21 years old when he took his place as a bombardier in a B-24 bomber on an airstrip in southern Italy, ready to embark on his third, and what would be his final, mission into enemy territory. It was May 18, 1944, and the destination was the city of Ploesti in Romania, home to oil refineries that supplied roughly half the oil for the German war machine.

Most of the 800-mile journey over the Adriatic Sea and the former Yugoslavia into Romania was uneventful—Sheehy would later describe a bombing mission as 80 or 90 percent pure boredom, and 10 to 20 percent pure terror. But the distance between take-off and target left plenty of time to think, and the gravity of the situation had to have been weighing on him.

For starters, pecking order meant the newest crews got the worst positions in the flying formation. That meant Sheehy’s crew, with only two missions under their collective belt, flew Tail-End Charlie that day, a position at the rear that was so vulnerable to fighter attacks it came to be known as the Purple Heart position.

However, no spot was truly safe in a formation headed to Ploesti. The Germans were as determined to defend the Romanian oil fields as the Allies were to destroy them. Every fleet of bombers that left for Ploesti came back missing some planes and people. Some of these young men met their fate in a blast of anti-aircraft fire. Others met their target but had to parachute from a critically damaged plane, their lives depending on where they landed and who found them.

This is the situation Sheehy and his crew were in after successfully reaching their target and dropping their bombs. Their plane took some heavy flak and lost one of its four engines, the entire electrical system, and a significant amount of fuel. Unable to keep up with the fleet formation, Sheehy’s bomber dropped back and

limped along solo across the Danube River and into German-occupied Yugoslavia, over the city of Bor. There, six anti-aircraft guns fired at once at the plane, taking out a second engine and destroying the tail assembly.

About 50 miles inside Yugoslavia, Sheehy and his crewmates strapped on their parachutes and jumped from their slowly dying plane into the unknown, one by one. As he descended, Sheehy noticed white spots in the valley that gradually revealed themselves to be sheep as his parachute got closer to the ground. He knew that where there were sheep, people would likely be nearby, and whether those people were friend or foe was not something he cared to learn the hard way. He tried to flip his chute off to the side to avoid the valley and got hung up in a tree instead.

As he cut himself free and fell to the ground, he saw a young couple with an elderly woman. Reasoning that no one would purposefully bring their elderly mother into a dangerous situation, Sheehy decided it was safe

often shared his riveting story as one of the 500-plus Allied airmen who were shot down in Nazi-occupied territory during bombing campaigns over Romania, given refuge by local Serbian peasants, and finally saved in the greatest rescue mission of World War II, known as Operation Halyard.

After the war Sheehy went on to marry, raise eight children, and serve a long career with Quaker Oats before moving to Washington Island, where he and his wife, Patty, had purchased a farm. They fell in love with the Island after vacationing there in the mid-1960s and made it their permanent home in 1973. Once there, Sheehy launched a successful bird seed company—Havegard Farm, Inc.—that is still operating today under the direction of two of his sons. He and Patty were very involved in Island life, serving on the town, school, and Art and Nature Center boards, and as active members of Washington Island Electric Cooperative.

Among his many Island community



enough to approach cautiously. As he got closer to the trio, the older woman said, “Americanski?” Sheehy nodded. The woman broke into a huge smile, and Sheehy relaxed a bit. He was safe, at least for now.

### **Landing on Washington Island**

Thus began the most defining chapter of Dick Sheehy’s life. Until his death in 2015, this Army Air Corps veteran

activities, Sheehy was always willing to talk about his war experiences when asked, whether it was at a VFW event, a mother/daughter banquet, or in a classroom at Washington Island School.

“He was as personable and as nice a guy as there ever was,” said Robert Cornell, manager of Washington Island Electric Cooperative. “Everyone on the Island knew Dick and Patty.”



Dick Sheehy stands in the back row, far left, with his crew before flying overseas. Although two would be captured by Germans and spend the rest of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp, all would survive the war. *Photo courtesy of the Sheehy family.*

Dick Sheehy shares his story of being shot down over Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia and rescued through Operation Halyard in Steve Waldron's classroom at Washington Island School. Thanks to Waldron for sharing the DVD of this presentation, which was the major source for this story.

Cornell was one of the young Washington Island residents who got to hear Sheehy tell his story, first at a church father/son cookout when Cornell was 6 years old, and later at Washington Island School when Cornell was a student. One such school presentation was recorded, and this account, told in Sheehy's own words, is the source of this article.

**War Within a War** For more than 50 years after the dramatic rescue of Sheehy and the other airmen who were shot down behind enemy lines on bombing raids to Romania, the only way to have heard their story was to have heard it first-hand from one of the rescued airmen, like Cornell did. The story of Operation Halyard is riddled with political intrigue that kept it a secret until the British declassified their wartime reports in 1997. Author Gregory A. Freeman's book "The Forgotten 500," published in 2007, finally brought the full episode to the public; movie rights were acquired in 2017.

The setting of this story is the former Yugoslavia, a region with diverse ethnic and religious cultures that have been frequently at war with each other through history, including in 1944. While fighting the Nazis, Yugoslavians were also fighting each other, with the Serbian nationalist guerrilla force known as the Chetniks and led by Draza Mihailovich on one side, and the Partisan resistance movement led by the communist revolutionary Josip Tito on the other.

Once hailed by the Americans for standing up to Hitler, Mihailovich fell out of favor with the Allies under accusations of collaborating with the Nazis. This view was pushed by the British, and it was influenced by a British agent who, as declassified records proved, was a Soviet mole. Toward the end of the war and for many years after, official American support for Mihailovich disappeared, and with it,

any mention of the heroics he oversaw on behalf of the stranded airmen.

**Protected by the Serbians** Although Mihailovich came to be labeled a collaborator, the fliers who were shot down over Yugoslavia quickly discovered otherwise. Airmen who landed in the mountainous Serbian region were enthusiastically welcomed by the villagers, who risked their own lives to shelter the airmen and shared what little food they had until Chetnik soldiers could escort the men to Pranjane, where General Mihailovich was headquartered.

The shepherd family that Sheehy first encountered sheltered him for a night and then took him 20 or 30 miles to a cabin that had been built to house stranded Allied airmen. There Sheehy met up with five other members of his crew, who also had the good fortune to have been discovered by Serbian villagers. Two others were not so lucky; they were captured by Germans and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp.

Sheehy and his fellow airmen spent a couple of months in that little cabin and then walked 330 miles across Yugoslavia in 11 days to Pranjane. Sheehy told of several close encounters along the way.

He recalled coming across a ditch alongside the road filled with water that looked to be fairly clean. It was a tempting sight to the airmen, who by that point were filthy, "covered with lice and fleas and every bug you could think of." Sheehy joined a couple of others who couldn't resist the opportunity for a quick bath. They took off their uniforms and wadded them up, set them on the side of the ditch over their weapons, and entered the water.

“We weren’t in there for more than two minutes when two German motorcycle troopers came roaring down the road, and they looked at us in there, and they were just as dirty as we were, and they got the same idea,” Sheehy said. “So we wound up with two German motorcycle troopers in the ditch taking a bath with us.”

The Americans had learned enough Serbian to muddle through a greeting that wouldn’t have fooled a Yugoslavian, but the Germans were none the wiser. Still, the airmen made a quick exit, holding their bundled-up clothes as close as possible and running off naked to keep the Germans from recognizing their American uniforms.

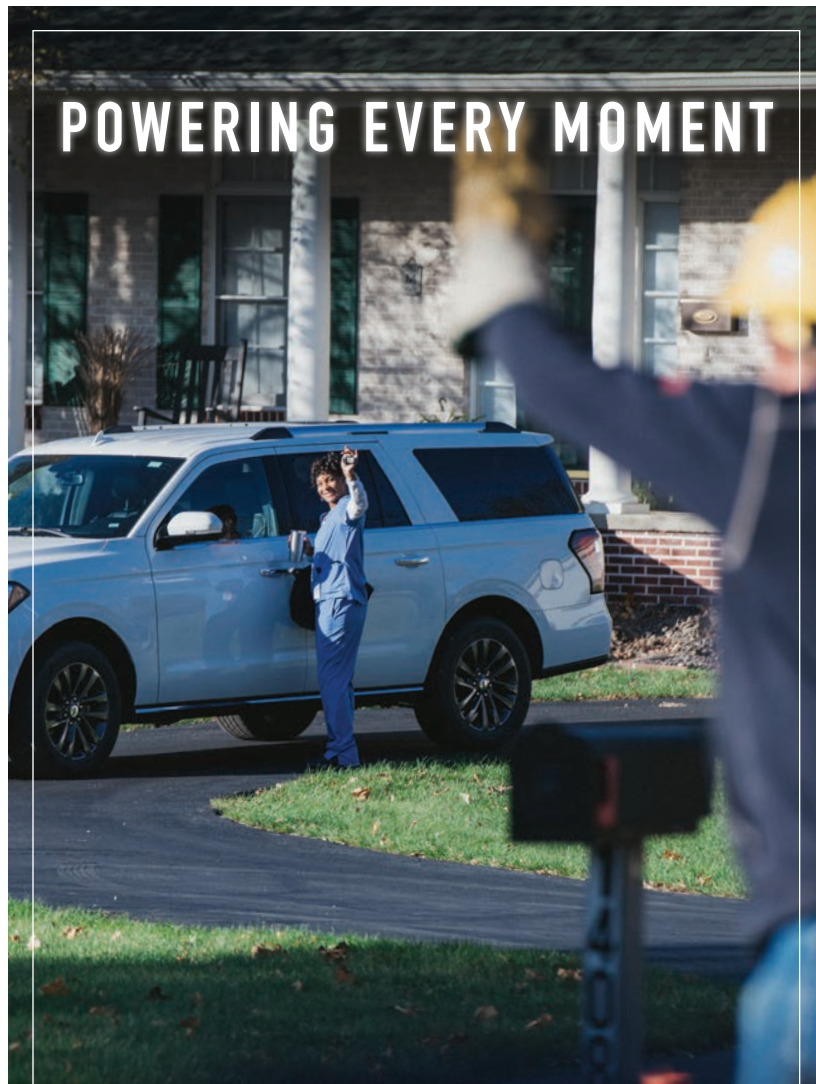
“These two Germans looked at us like we were absolutely insane,” Sheehy said. “They just figured we were a couple of dumb peasants who didn’t know any better.”

**Saved by a Child** In another scary encounter, the airmen, exhausted from days of walking, were happy for the opportunity to hitch a ride on a train. Hunkering down and out of sight in a flatbed car, they rode for about 10 miles when a little Serbian girl, maybe 6 or 8 years old, stepped onto the tracks in front of the train and stood there with her hands up, refusing to move and forcing the train to stop. Word had somehow leaked to the Germans that American airmen were on board that train, and the Germans were evidently waiting at the next station. The little girl had come five miles to catch the train and warn the Americans.

“That little girl—it took a lot of nerve to, number one, walk five miles out in the country following the tracks, and number two, it took a whole lot of nerve to stand there and stop that train, and I think we owe our lives to that little girl,” Sheehy said.

**Risky Rescue** Finally Sheehy and his group arrived at Pranjane, where groups of flyers were brought from wherever they’d been shot down. Here, they learned that they hadn’t been forgotten. A rescue plan was underway, although its success seemed like a very long shot.

The plan took months of preparation, once it was finally begun. Mihailovich’s reports of stranded airmen yielded nothing until finally an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agent, tipped off by rumors his wife had heard while working at the Yugoslavian Assembly back in Washington D.C., intervened and formulated



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a daring plan that called for the airmen to be lifted by C-47 cargo planes from Pranjane.

For this feat to be pulled off, a landing strip would have to be built—on a mountainside—large enough for the cargo planes to land and take off. This would be a Herculean task in the best of circumstances, but the emaciated airmen had to build this airstrip without any tools, and without attracting the Germans' notice.

An OSS group had been dropped behind enemy lines at Pranjane to help set the plan in motion. They devised a code to establish radio contact with the air base in Italy—a risky move because there was always the chance they could tip off their location to the Germans. The Chetnicks helped the airmen build a 600-yard grass landing strip on a narrow plateau halfway up the mountainside using mostly their bare hands. Sheehy described how they'd drag gravel and rocks from the hillsides, pack it down as tight as possible, cover it with sod, and then probe the field with an iron rod to find and fix any soft spots.

Against great odds, on the night of August 9, four C-47 planes successfully landed in the dark at the makeshift airstrip and took off with 72 airmen back to Italy. The next morning, a fleet of fighter planes from the 15th Air Force gave cover to six more C-47s, which picked up the remaining 200 airmen. Sheehy was among those who left in the morning group.

Over the next few months, stranded airmen continued to be led by Serbian villagers and Chetnik soldiers to the handmade airfield at Pranjane, where the airmen were lifted out on C-47s. In all, 512 airmen were rescued through Operation Halyard. No lives were lost in the effort.

**Speaking Out** Despite the astounding success of Operation Halyard, it was kept quiet. Allied leaders had by this time agreed to side with Tito's communist faction, and any ac-

counts that ran counter to the official stance that Mihailovich was a collaborator were forbidden.

As Sheehy was convalescing in a hospital in Italy, he got a visit from a trio of men in three-piece suits, who threatened him under terms of the Logan Act, a federal law that criminalizes negotiation by unauthorized American citizens with foreign governments having a dispute with the United States.

"These three fellows from the State Department read us the riot act and said if you say you were with Mihailovich you are subject to 10 years in jail and a \$10,000 fine," Sheehy said. "That was our welcome home.

"We all said, in short order, 'Drop dead. We will talk to anybody we want,' and we did," Sheehy added. "We didn't pay any attention to them at all, we were so mad."

The United States would finally correct the historical record regarding Mihailovich, awarding him the Legion of Merit posthumously in 1948. However, it was kept secret for decades to avoid upsetting the delicate balance of U.S./Yugoslavian relations. Mihailovich's daughter Gordana was finally presented with her father's Legion of Merit award in 2005.

The Forgotten 500, however, didn't wait for official approval to speak the truth about Mihailovich's loyalty. Like the other Operation Halyard veterans, Sheehy would speak openly about the Chetnik soldiers and the Serbian people to whom he owed his survival, bringing his story from the mountains of Serbia all the way to a classroom on Washington Island.—*Mary Erickson* 📖

*WECN thanks the Sheehy family for allowing us to share Dick Sheehy's story, and for providing photos and other information. We salute all veterans—and those who protected them—for their service.*



Dick Sheehy (middle row, far right) and some of his crewmates pose with some of the Chetnik guerrilla soldiers who protected them until they were rescued in 1944. Photo courtesy of the Sheehy family.



Summer of 1944 in Yugoslavia: This 1944 photo of Dick Sheehy in Yugoslavia shows the result of having eaten little more than twice-daily bowls of watery soup made from dried beans or peas for months. Lack of food—for both the airmen and their Serbian protectors—was pervasive, as the Germans had taken everything. Sheehy weighed 180 pounds when he bailed out of his B-24, and three months later he weighed 113 pounds. "We were skin and bones," he said. Photo courtesy of the Sheehy family.