

# BALKAN ESCAPE

BY AMY PORTER

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY STEWART LOVE—FPG

Names of towns and other identifying details are omitted from this article in order to protect from German vengeance the courageous underground workers who helped thirty Americans to escape from Nazi-held territory. It is unlikely that any of the thirty will be assigned to the European Theater again. For, if ever they were captured by the Germans, they would not be treated as prisoners of war. On the ground that the Americans had spent over six weeks behind the German lines, they would be dealt with as spies

**T**HIRTEEN nurses and seventeen men of the American Army Air Forces dragged themselves out of their crashed plane—somewhere in Europe, they didn't know where. At first, through the driving rain, they saw no one. Then dozens of people appeared, running down from the hills to gather around them on the muddy little field.

"Where are we?" the pilot asked. "Albania," the fellow with the handlebar mustache replied.

The pilot made a gesture of despair. German-held Albania! They might as well have come down in Berlin. Nothing to do now but wait for the Gestapo to come and herd them all off to a concentration camp. It was a soldier's nightmare come true.

The Albanians drew nearer, and the one who spoke a little English inquired, "English?"

The pilot shook his head. "American," he said.

"American!" It was a shout of joy. The fellow flung his arms around the pilot and kissed him on both cheeks. "It is the invasion!" he cried, and the people took up his cry, "Invasion!" kissing one another and dancing and weeping, there in the rain.

It wasn't the invasion, but it was the beginning of one of the most amazing adventure stories of the war. The thirty Americans spent the next sixty days in a dangerous game of hide-and-seek with the Germans, dodging bullets, ducking behind rocks, running for their lives. They journeyed on foot over 850 mountainous miles—hungry and cold and footsore. Through it all they were protected by the Partisans, the pro-Allied underground party that dares to operate boldly right under the Nazi nose.

We heard the story of those sixty hazardous days from two young nurses, back home now safe and sound in Detroit. Lieutenant Lillian J. Tacina, a red-haired girl, and Lieutenant Eugenie H. Rutkowski, a brunette, both good-looking, poised, intelligent.

This is Lieutenant Rutkowski speaking: "Everybody got kissed; but the copilot, Jim Baggs, more than anybody. They smooched Jim good. That was all fine, but we still wanted to know where the Germans were. They told us in sign language, strutting around with a German goose step and gesturing to show that if we had crossed the next mountain, we'd have run smack into them. They led us in the opposite direction across a mountain to a farmhouse, and explained, again in

sign language, that we must stay hidden because the Germans might come that way at any moment.

"They put us into a room, about 14x14, in a little house made of rough stone, and there we stayed for two nights and two days, all thirty of us, while the men made arrangements with a Partisan official, the head of the district, to get us some mules and a guide who could lead us to a British mission.

"I don't know how many rooms there were in the house—two or three, maybe. We didn't do any wandering around in it. We stayed put. It was about 1:30 P.M. by now and some of us nibbled at our K-rations, but a lot of us skipped lunch because we didn't know how long those rations would have to last. At night, a barefoot woman came to the door with a big loaf of corn bread and a jug of water. It wasn't much like corn bread back home, but we ate every bit of it and we all drank from the jug.

"Sleeping wasn't so good. We took turns lying down on the floor. Not everybody could lie down at once. We had on all our clothes, even gloves and helmets, for it was cold. The fleas began to bite. When it was my turn to sleep, I took off my shoes. That was a mistake, because I was awakened by a chicken pecking at my toes.

"The next night we had a feast—water buffalo. We bought it in the near-by village through the Partisan official, agreeing to divide it with all the families in the neighborhood. I paid for it with my G.I. watch, and that was all right because I had two watches with me. They slaughtered the animal in the back yard, but I

didn't look on. They cooked it and gave us more corn bread to go with the hunks of boiled meat. Tasteless, but meat. And they gave us more water. There is no such thing as a cup of coffee in Albania.

"The sanitary arrangements were something. There was just a hole in the floor of one of the rooms of the house. To reach it you had to go outside and then in again. If you made the trip at night, you kept bumping into sheep—black sheep. You could see the white ones. Once a day we washed our hands out on the back porch. Not in a basin. A woman would pour water from a jug over our hands. They didn't have any soap. We gave them some of our soap, but we didn't see them use it.

## None of the Comforts of Home

"We weren't exactly comfortable, but that doesn't mean the people were inhospitable. They weren't comfortable themselves, or well-fed either. We didn't see a flat stomach in the whole country. Near-starvation makes the belly swell, you know. The way it seems to work in that country, the Germans swoop down on a village and take all food, clothes, fuel—everything. Then they leave until the next stealing expedition, about the time of the next crop, or until they need that village as a base for a drive. Oh, how the Albanians hate the Germans!

"We didn't pay for anything at this farmhouse, or at most of the other places we stayed. Even if we had had Albanian money, the people wouldn't have wanted payment. But they were pleased when we gave them things. The nurses gave away

cologne and towels and silk stockings, and the men gave knives and handkerchiefs and extra clothing. I left my little gasoline stove at that first farmhouse.

"A couple of the boys set fire to our plane, so the Germans couldn't get hold of it. We sneaked out to watch the blaze from a mountaintop.

"On the third day, we loaded our baggage onto six mules the Partisans loaned us, and we set out on foot to the next village. It was raining, as usual, and the mud slowed us up."

The heira of the little band of AAF fugitives had begun at 8:30 on the morning of November 8th when they left their base in Sicily to fly to Bari, Italy—thirteen nurses, thirteen technical sergeants in the medical corps, and the four members of the plane crew. At Bari they were to await assignment to planes bringing the wounded back from the front. Each nurse cares for a planeload of litter cases, and each sergeant cares for a planeload of patients who still can walk. It was all routine to them; they had done it before.

But the plane ran into weather, couldn't land at Bari, flew north, started to land on a strange field.

"That's when the shooting began," said Lieutenant Tacina. "We zoomed up quick and thank goodness it was foggy. The Germans sent planes up after us, but we ducked them. They hit our tail, but that's all."

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They lived to tell it—and smile. Flying nurses Lt. Tacina (left) and Lt. Rutkowski hid from Nazis for 60 days



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Flying so high, the wings were coated with ice; they circled around in search of landing space until their fuel ran low. The radio went dead, and they were lost. Pilot Thrasher finally spotted this little bit of a field between two mountains in Albania. He had crossed the Adriatic Sea without knowing it.

"If it hadn't been muddy, it would have been a perfect landing," said Lieutenant Rutkowski. "Only one of us was injured. A sergeant got some knee and forehead bruises."

The first village-to-village trek took seven hours, four hours to go up one side of a mountain, three hours down the other side. Now a new group of Partisans took them in hand, dividing them up into threes and fours, and assigning them to different houses.

"We were more comfortable this time," Lieutenant Tacina said, "though, of course, we still slept on floors, and we added body lice to the fleas we already had. I'll never forget one of the nurses, Agnes (Lieutenant Agnes Jensen), sitting there picking lice off her sweater—one, two, three, she'd count.

"At the house where I stayed they gave us some kind of stew with a little lamb in it. We sat cross-legged on the floor with the men of the family; the women served and they put this big bowl on a table about a foot high. There were three spoons for about ten of us, so you ate some out of the bowl and then passed your spoon along to the next fellow. Almost everywhere they ate like this, out of one bowl, no knives and forks.

"All cooking was done in fireplaces. Some of us tried our hand at it but we weren't very skillful. To cook bread, the Albanians just push the ashes back in the fireplace, and plunk the molded loaf on the floor. Then they put an iron pot over the loaf and pile hot coals on top of that, and there you are. When you eat the bread, of course, you eat ashes and dirt, too. And to think how particular we nurses used to be about sanitation!"

The travelers always dealt with men, not women. The barefoot women did all the work and kept in the background, while the men, who had shoes, did the fighting and the talking.

"The women get the dirty end of the deal in Albania," said Lieutenant Rutkowski. "If I hadn't seen it, I sure never would believe what they have to put up with."

In the second village, they acquired an interpreter-guide who had been the district's superintendent of schools—an agreeable man, they said. But they didn't have their mules; they had to return them to the first village. To lighten their packs, they discarded more of their belongings, pooled their medicines in one bag, gave away extra blouses.

"And off we went again," continued Lieutenant Tacina. "Up and down mountains, and around and around from village to village, with our shoes wearing out and our feet getting blistered and our stomachs never filled. All we talked about was food—steak, stacks of pancakes a foot high."

## Trained for Survival

In wintry late November, they tackled one of the highest mountains in the country—and were caught in a blizzard.

"We used to kid about that survival course they gave us at Bowman Field," Lieutenant Rutkowski admitted. "We thought it could never happen to us. But it looked as if it was just about to happen. Some of the girls were sleepy and insisted on lying down in the snow. The rest of us slapped their faces and dragged them along. I wiggled my face muscles up and down to keep from freezing. Oh, it was cold!"

All the time the Germans were just around the corner. They'd hear shots in the night, and before dawn, their hosts would urge them to be on their way; the Germans were moving in. The Partisans explained that they shouldn't stay in a village more than one night anyway, because

food was so scarce they couldn't afford to feed them longer.

On one beautiful moonlit night, they had the good luck to ride in trucks for two hours along one weary road. This road was patrolled by Germans, so every time they saw a car or a motorcycle approaching, they'd jump from the trucks and hide in the hills.

"I saw the truck I'd been riding in demolished by German machine guns," Lieutenant Rutkowski said. "One of the flying pieces landed in my lap. But the Germans hadn't seen us and couldn't have found us anyway in the thick underbrush."

Not all the fighting was between Albanians and Germans, Lieutenant Rutkowski says. The Albanians also fought among themselves—the Partisans against the non-Partisans, who are supposed to be Fascist.

"But what went on didn't make sense to me. Once, as we approached a rocky mountain pass, we heard shooting. Our interpreter motioned us to wait. He stepped out in the road and yelled, 'We are friends—Americans.' Pretty soon a fellow who turned out to be a Partisan leader came out from behind a rock and shook hands with our man. They walked on a piece and pretty soon another man came out from the other side of the road. He turned out to be a non-Partisan leader. The three strolled along together.

"It seemed like comic-opera warfare somehow, especially the way the leaders were dressed, with tight-bottomed trousers and flowing short capes and big mustaches. Finally they shook hands all around, and our man came back and explained, 'Everything is safe now. They will go back to the village and arrange a truce, so there'll be no more shooting to spoil your welcome here.' Maybe he bribed them. I don't know."

It was also puzzling when their Partisan guide found sleeping quarters for the Americans in non-Partisan houses.

"I don't understand their politics," Lieutenant Rutkowski went on, "but both sides

seemed friendly to us, and they all seemed to hate the Germans. The non-Partisans apparently have a little more money. As near as we could tell, the non-Partisans are afraid the Partisans will go completely Communist and take their money away from them. A lot of the Partisans wear the Red Star of Russia in their caps and talk about federation with Russia after the war."

Early in December, the footsore travelers arrived at the British mission. It was impossible for a plane to land anywhere near to pick them up, but supplies could be dropped in by plane and parachute.

Their G.I. clothes had stood up very well. "We were the best-dressed people in Albania, no doubt of that." Nurse Rutkowski said, "Our slacks, even after six weeks of rough treatment, still had creases."

Shoes were different. By now everybody's shoes were worn out; one nurse was walking around in her stocking feet, just using her shoe uppers for spats. New shoes arrived by parachute, good G.I. shoes, but all in men's sizes. Lieutenant Tacina put on three pairs of wool socks so her size-8 men's shoes wouldn't flop around too much on her size-5 feet.

The travelers set out, with British Lieutenant Gavin Duffy as guide, this time heading for the coast where a rescue ship was to meet them. It was the same tedious travel by foot through rain and snow, up and down mountains, by night and by day. More than half the group had dysentery, and three were quite ill, two with jaundice, one with pneumonia. But they kept right on walking, getting mules when they could for the sick ones to ride. They used up their last sulfa drugs for the pneumonia patient and had nothing to give the jaundice victims but quinine. But they kept on going.

Then one morning at six o'clock, they were routed out of bed to the sound of dive bombing. The Germans were shelling the town. "We got out just twenty minutes ahead of the Germans," said Lieutenant Tacina. "From the hills we watched their vehicles go into the village."

A Partisan messenger warned them that this raid was a part of a new German drive to the coast, along the very road the Americans had hoped to take. Their escape plan was blocked.

Now, back to the British mission and a new start to a certain landing field where planes were to pick them up. They kept the appointment and so did the planes—but once again the Germans horned in on the party. They saw the planes circle the field—two big transports with a bomber and 36 Lightnings for escort—but they dared not give the prearranged signal to land: three G.I.'s waving flags. Two German tanks were waiting on a hill overlooking the field. The planes hovered about for an anxious fifteen minutes, and

left, strafing a column of German soldiers as they went.

"I busted out crying. I couldn't help it," said Lieutenant Rutkowski.

The next and ultimately successful move was a try for the Adriatic coast by another road. The walking marathon continued.

They spent Christmas in one unusually peaceful village—and managed a Christmas party. "We trimmed our tree with red, white and blue ribbon bows, and they gave us some figs and hard candies," Lieutenant Rutkowski reported. "The men chopped up big leaves of tobacco and rolled their own cigarettes."

"The natives treated us to some swell music with four or five stringed instruments, and we danced. My Albanian partner was a swell waltzer, and so respectful, I didn't dare teach him how to jitterbug. He wanted to know how it was in the States.

"I told him it was wonderful. In the morning you find your milk and newspaper already delivered at your door, I explained; and if you need something and don't want to go out, you just telephone a store and they bring it. He just grinned at me and said, 'Madame, this talk is crazy.'"

#### Little Girl with a Gun

At the party, the nurses met two girl guerrillas. "One was only twelve years old," said Lieutenant Tacina. "She had a little pistol stuck through her belt, and a rag doll in her arms. It was the only doll we saw in Albania. The other girl, a little older, told us 'I love war.' It was better than staying home, she said; she didn't mind the shooting and she got more to eat, and shoes. This girl hoped that some sort of League of Nations would protect Albania's independence after the war. 'If not,' she said, 'we'll have no choice but to join up with Russia.'"

This girl wanted to be a doctor and in between fights she studied the medical books she carried around with her.

One town honored the Americans with a welcome parade, and a photographer there took their pictures. Three days later the Germans moved in. And, said Lieutenant Tacina, "We learned by grapevine that our pictures were nailed up on posts with 'Reward for Capture' signs."

The homestretch was a tough one—a 27-hour forced march, ending with a stumbling descent in pitch darkness down the last snowy mountain to the rocky Adriatic coast. A British officer greeted them with brandy and chocolate bars to sustain them, while a single rowboat took them, a few at a time, out to a waiting launch. It was past midnight when the launch, with muffled motors, headed away from Albania toward Allied-occupied Italy.

THE END