

Albanian Escape

The True Story of U.S. Army Nurses
Behind Enemy Lines



Agnes Jensen Mangerich

As Told To
Evelyn M. Monahan *and* Rosemary L. Neidel

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On November 8, 1943, U.S. Army nurse Agnes Jensen stepped out of a cold rain in Catania, Sicily, into a C-53 transport plane. But she and twelve other nurses never arrived in Bari, Italy, where they were to transport wounded soldiers to hospitals farther from the front lines. A violent storm and pursuit by German Messerschmitts led to a crash landing in a remote part of Albania, leaving the nurses, their team of medics, and the flight crew stranded in Nazi-occupied territory.

What followed was a dangerous nine-week game of hide-and-seek with the enemy, a situation President Roosevelt monitored daily. Albanian partisans aided the stranded Americans in the search for a British Intelligence Mission, and the group began a long and hazardous journey to the Adriatic coast. During the following weeks, they crossed Albania's second highest mountain in a blizzard, were strafed by German planes, managed to flee a town moments before it was bombed, and

watched helplessly as an attempt to airlift them out was foiled by Nazi forces.

Albanian Escape is the suspense-filled story of the only group of Army flight nurses to have spent any length of time in occupied territory during World War II. The nurses and soldiers endured frigid weather, survived on little food, and literally wore out their shoes in 800 miles trekking across the rugged countryside. Thrust into a perilous situation and determined to survive, these women found courage and strength in each other and in the kindnesses of Albanians and guerrillas who hid them from the Germans.

Agnes Jensen Mangerich now lives in La Jolla, California. *Evelyn M. Monahan*, a retired psychologist, lives in Atlanta, Georgia. *Rosemary L. Neidel* works for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Atlanta.

Cover illustration: The last three American nurses and their guides in the Albanian mountains. Courtesy of Lt. Col. Lloyd G. Smith, A.U.S. (Ret.).

"An exciting, suspenseful account. American women's memoirs of their wartime service are rare and one that is about such a remarkable adventure is virtually unique."

—*Edward Coffman*

"Almost without exception, women's war stories from past centuries went to the grave with the generation that witnessed the events. Thanks are due to Mangerich and her collaborators for capturing and preserving this exciting and inspiring episode in twentieth-century women's military history."

—*Linda Grant De Pauw*
president, THE MINERVA CENTER

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF KENTUCKY

ISBN 0-8131-2109-4



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Tavares, Florida 32778

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Dorothy
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Albanian Escape

to Dorothy
a below member of 8:75th
Best Wishes
Jensen

Agnes Jensen Mangerich



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After 5 mo in

Enemy territory -

going home.

Catania

March 1944

1944

60-DAY TREK THROUGH ALBANIA

British 'Chutist Saved 13 U.S. Nurses, 17 Soldiers

By the Associated Press

CAIRO, Feb. 15—A British parachutist described today how he led 13 American Army nurses and 17 Army men on a sixty-day trek through Nazi-occupied Albania after their plane had crashed.

(Two Detroit-area nurses who were in the group have arrived home. They are 2nd Lt. Eugenia Rutkowski, Detroit, and 2nd Lt. Lillian Tacina, Hamtramck. Another Michigan nurse, 2nd Lt. Agnes Jensen, of Stanwood, and two Michigan soldiers, Technicians 3rd Grade Lawrence O. Abbott, of Newyago, and Charles J. Adams, of Niles, also have been previously named as members of the group.)

Lt. Gavan Duffy, a cold-eyed officer with a strong Yorkshire accent, was the man who guided the party to safety.

The plane had been headed for Bari, Italy, when the pilot was forced to make a crash landing in Albania. Duffy said he led the party across three of Albania's highest mountains.

Albanian Partisans took the party to a town, but had hardly

arrived before a German drive forced evacuation.

After walking six to seven hours daily for nine days, sometimes through two feet of snow, the party approached within two days of an evacuation point only to be balked by another Nazi push. The group walked six days more before reaching ground suitable for aircraft landing. Allied headquarters then was asked to send planes.

Just before the planes arrived, German troops moved into the fortified village overlooking the landing ground in the valley.

Duffy hid the party in the hills and waited.

Four transport planes escorted by 36 Lightnings roared in. For 15 minutes the planes circled the field with the fighters strafing the Germans. But Duffy refused to signal for the planes to land.

"My one order from the British Military Mission in Albania was to bring the party through safely," he said.

Christmas was marked by a gay dinner made possible when the men bought chickens from the surrounding villages.

The nurses' shoes and flying suits wore thin. Three finished the trip wearing men's Size 8 shoes. Night after night they slept in lice-ridden villages. Partisans sheltered them throughout the journey. Food sometimes was skimpy, but generally good.

The trip ended with a five-day forced march almost without sleep and the party reached safety just two months after the take-off from Sicily on what was to have been a two-hour flight.



DETROITER SAFE IN ITALY—Five U. S. Army nurses, who were among a party of missing for two months after their plane was forced down in Albania last November, display the sturdy shoes they wore in their hike to the Adriatic coast. Second from the left is Lieut.



Associated Press Wirephoto
LT. AGNES A. JENSEN
Reported in Allied territory

Escapes Nazis



—Associated Press Wirephoto
An Army nurse, Lieut. Gertrude Dawson, of La Grange, Ill., told of the escape of herself, 13 other Army nurses, 13 enlisted men and four crew members when their plane was forced down in the Balkans. She said the party was en route to Italy, but missed the airport at Bari.

1944

Lost Nurses Believed Safe

Plane Is Reported Down in Allied Zone

Thirteen Army nurses, including two from the Detroit area, and 16 Army officers and men, who have been missing since Nov. 8 on a flight from North Africa to Italy, are believed safe in Allied territory, according to a United Press dispatch received today from Allied Headquarters at Algiers.

No further details of their landing were disclosed immediately.

The nurses were members of an air evacuation squadron that was being flown to Italy to accompany air ambulances back to North Africa. The plane, a C-47 transport, was last seen flying into a fog, after taking off for Bari, on the Italian southeast coast.

The two Michigan nurses on the plane were Lieut. Eugenie H. Rutkowski, of 5954 Lucky place, and Lieut. Lillian J. Tacina, 12014 Char-est avenue, Hamtramck.

Other Michigan passengers on the plane were Lieut. Agnes A. Jensen, Army nurse, of Stanwood, and Technicians 3rd Grade Lawrence O. Abbott, of Newaygo, and Charles J. Adams, of Niles.

When he announced that the plane was missing, Brig.-Gen. F. A. Blesse, U. S. surgeon general in the North African theater, said all the nurses were second lieutenants and the 12 enlisted men were technicians third grade. There was also a crew of four officers.

Lieut. Rutkowski is a graduate of Providence Hospital and a former airline hostess on the Trans-continental Western Airlines. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Constantine Rutkowski.

Lieut. Tacina is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Tacina. She is a graduate of Hamtramck High School and of Henry Ford Hospital. She has three brothers in military service.

War Nurses Back After Being Lost

Two Detroit Army nurses who came near to becoming the first woman casualties from this area were safe at home today after be-



Lieut. Tacina

ing missing for weeks in the Nazi-held Balkans.

The nurses are Lieuts. Eugenia Rutkowski, 26 years old, 5954 Lucky Place, and Lillian Tacina, 12014 Char-est avenue.

Both women were aboard a hospital evacuation plane last November when their plane ran into foggy weather somewhere

along their line of flight from North Africa to Bari, on Italy's Adriatic Coast.

When they ran out of gas the plane was forced down behind the German lines in the Balkans. What adventures befell them and 28 others on the plane were clouded in military secrecy. After several weeks they reached the Allied-held territory in Italy.

Lieut. Rutkowski enlisted in the Army Nurses Corps in May, 1943, after her fiance, Charles Pressel, had been reported missing on a ferry flight to England. She is a graduate of Providence hospital and served as an airlines hostess before enlisting.

Lieut. Tacina, a former scholarship student at Wayne University, enlisted in December, 1942. She is a graduate of the Ford Hospital nursing school.

Three others from Michigan who participated in the adventure also returned home today. They are Lieut. Agnes Jensen, of Stanwood, Army nurse, and 3rd Grade Lawrence O. Abbott, of Newaygo and Charles J. Adams, of Niles. All are on leave until March 13.

Nurses Missing on Flight Now Believed Safe

By the United Press

ALLIED HEADQUARTERS, Algiers, Nov. 30—Thirteen United States Army nurses who yesterday were reported missing since Nov. 8 when their C-47 Army transport plane disappeared on a flight from Algiers to Italy are now believed to be safe in Allied territory, it was announced today.

Also aboard the missing plane were 12 Army enlisted men and a crew of four officers. The last report from the plane was a request for the Bari airport to turn on its beam so the transport could come in for a landing. It never arrived.

Among the nurses were 2nd Lt. Eugenia H. Rutkowski, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Rutkowski, of 4954 Lucky Place; 2nd Lt. Lillian J. Tacina, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Tacina, of 12014 Char-est, Hamtramck, and 2nd Lt. Agnes A. Jensen, daughter of Lauritz E. Jensen, of Stanwood, Mich.

The fate of the plane and its male occupants and the basis for the belief that the nurses are safe were not disclosed in the an-

Foiled Nazis



—Associated Press Wirephoto
Home on furlough in Indianola, Ia., is Sergt. Harold Hayes, one of the group of 13 nurses and 17 soldiers who escaped from the Nazis after their plane crashed in Albania. Hayes is shown with his mother.



SIX ARMY AIR CORPS nurses, above, still manage to smile after being lost for two months in enemy occupied Albania. Their plane, enroute to Bari, was forced down in Albania and the girls were listed as missing for two months. Friendly inhabitants gave them the heavy hobnailed army shoes they display in the picture and aided them in their mountainous hike across Albania to the Adriatic Sea, where they were rescued by an Allied launch and taken to Italy. Members of an air evacuation unit, the nurses are, left to right, Lieutenants Lois Watson, Oakland, Ill.; Lillian J. Tacin, Detroit, Mich.; Pauline J. Kanable, Richmond Center, Wis.; Elna Schwant, Winner, S. D.; Ann E. Kopsco, Hammond La.; and Frances Nelson, Marotta, W. Va. As the picture indicates, the nurses didn't suffer from exposure or lack of food. They were well cared for by the natives who, the girls said, showed an eagerness to aid them in their escape from the country.

Add War Adventures

2 Detroit Nurses in Albanian Epic

Taking its place among the great adventure stories of the war, details of the flight of two nurses from Detroit, in a party which included 13 nurses and 17 members of the Army Air Forces, across 850 mountainous miles of Nazi-held Albania to safety, became known today.

The Detroiters were Lieuts. Eugenia Rutkowski, 26 years old, 5961 Lucky Place, and Lieut. Lillian Tacina, 12014 Charest avenue. They were aboard a hospital evacuation plane which ran into a storm on a flight from North Africa to Bari, Italy, last November and was forced down behind the German lines in the Balkans.

DODGE BULLETS

Days and nights of marching through rain and snow, playing hide-and-seek with the enemy, dodging bullets and living in the most primitive conditions followed the plane's forced landing until rescue came two months later, according to the stories told by the nurses to a writer for Collier's Weekly.

When Albanians who assembled hastily around the grounded plane found those on board were Americans "everybody got kissed," Lieut. Rutkowski said. The Albanians spoke no English, but used sign language to indicate that many Germans were just across the next mountain.

"They led us in the opposite direction across a mountain to a farmhouse, and there we stayed for two days and nights while arrangements were made with a Partisan official to get us some mules and a guide who could lead us to a British mission," she said.

"Sleeping wasn't so good. We took turns lying on the floor. Not everybody could lie down at once. When it was my turn I took off my shoes. That was a mistake, because I was awakened by a chicken pecking at my toes."

JOURNEY ON FOOT

Mules were provided and the party set out across the mountains, but later the mules had to be given up, Lieut. Rutkowski related. Taking up the story, Lieut. Tacina told of the renewed journey on foot. They went on "with our shoes wearing out and our feet getting blistered and our stomachs never filled," she said.

In late November a blizzard caught the party on a high mountain and when some of the girls insisted on lying down in the snow "the rest of us slapped their faces and dragged them along," she related.

GI shoes, all in men's sizes were dropped for them by parachute after the travelers reached the British mission in December. German tanks overlooking a landing field prevented their being taken out by plane, and another 27-hour march was necessary before they reached the Adriatic, where passage was provided to Italy.



LIEUT. EUGENIA RUTKOWSKI



LIEUT. LILLIAN TACINA

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