

Adriatic Island Base Succors Allied Airmen



THE ISLAND OF VIS, OFF THE YUGOSLAVIAN COAST BECAME "RESCUE ISLE" TO MANY 15 AF CREWS. SHOT UP IN MISSIONS OVER EUROPE, UNABLE TO MAKE IT BACK TO ITALIAN BASES, MANY B-24S MADE FORCED LANDINGS HERE AND WERE FERRIED BACK IN C-47S. SOME B-24S WERE PATCHED UP HERE BY THE AF SERVICE SQ., OTHERS WERE SCRAPPED.

PHOTO BY JIM VAN NOSTRAND, 765 SQ.

On one of the Dalmatian islands off the coast of Yugoslavia is a landing strip which nestles among stubby, stonecovered grey hills. This airfield is an emergency installation for 15th AAF fighters and bombers and a refueling point for RAF planes of the Balkan Air Force. The field is served by a handful of grimy, grizzled aircraft repair specialists of the Fifteenth Air Force Service Command.

Once a top secret and extremely valuable base right on the enemy doorstep, it has snatched to safety many Allied planes and crews which otherwise would have been lost. Captain S.R. Keator of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, who is in charge has been an aircraft engineering officer through the campaign in North Africa and Italy. In June, 1944, he was sent to the island with a handful of picked men, most of who are non-coms., highly skilled in their work. Their original task was to repair bombers which had been forced to land on a dirt strip used by the RAF fighters, but they stayed to put the island on a paying basis.

Since they first pitched their tents among the grapevines which surround the field they have repaired several hundred bombers and fighters which have landed on the runway, and have cared for numerous pilots and combat crewmen. Some 30 planes have been hauled into the fields to be scrapped.

Life on the island is far from dull, although there are no movies, no USO shows, no Red Cross.

"We've had as many as 37 planes come in for help in one day," says Captain Keator. "Some of them are only out of gasoline, but some of them are

badly shot up."

While there are seven enlisted men who are trained fire-fighters and rescue workers, there isn't a man in the Service command unit who has not performed some feat of daring in rescue work. Such activity is not limited to the Americans, RAF mechanics, Yugoslav ground crew workers, off-duty English ack-ack men. Partisan soldiers and civilians also perform their heroic tasks.

First-Lieutenant William Rice, of Marlin, Texas, assistant for Captain Keator, states he has seen half a hundred Yugoslav women raising an overturned fighter plane. Of course, they are likely to wreck a plane by pulling and hauling at it, but the important thing is to get the plane over as quickly as possible to find out whether the pilot is injured.

When the big bombers crash in landing, the clearance problem is more difficult, for muscles cannot clear a bulk from the runway in time for another ship to land. That is where GI trucks, wrecking cranes and other field equipment play an important part. Speed is the top consideration when a plane crash-lands, even if it is not followed by another plane, for at any moment another ship may wing over the hills for an emergency landing.

Occasionally GI's work all night clearing away wreckage, feeding and finding bed space for the flyers and caring for casualties.

Even on quiet days there is a thrill just being on the island. Across the water, within easy sight is the mainland of Yugoslavia, only a few weeks ago in German control. Closer are other Dalmation islands. They too

have only been recently cleared of the Nazis who infested them.

Invariably arriving combat crews are hungry, and they wolf down rations passed out by Master-Sergeant Jack B. Reichmuth, of Victoria, Texas, and Sergeant Robert H. Bullen, of Somerville, Massachusetts.

"You can't beat this place for atmosphere, boast Lieutenant Rice. "Partisans everywhere and most of them armed. Even the women soldiers." He indicates a chubby Partisan girl who stands nearby with her Partisan hat perched jauntily on top of blonde hair braided in long pigtails and her booted feet imbedded in the ever-present mud. She isn't armed, and she is healthily pretty in her lease-lend British battledress.

Working conditions are primitive. There are no shops, no hangars, no cemented taxi-ways nor parking stands for aircraft under repair. All the work is done in the mud under the open sky.

One side of the field is devoted to a salvage heap and operational planes being flown by Yugoslave pilots attached to the RAF. The other side is for American and English planes under repair. Here and there are a few British huts and American tents.

Headquarters for the islanders is in a farmhouse backed up against a low hill "Headquarters" is actually just a room decorated with Partisan posters and scantily furnished with two quartermaster folding tables, two medical cots, two chairs, a big cabinet, and electric light socket. There is no file cabinet and no typewriter. None is needed because "office" work is cut to a minimum.