

Aircraft Has Crashed

by

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Starigrad, Yugoslavia

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(This true story was originally written in 1949 in the Croatian language by a Yugoslav youth, Vinko Pakusic, at the age of 18. He was 14 at the time of the incident. It was translated to English on January 25, 1990 by Vahid Sandijarevic and Mary Bink.)

Miserable and hungry days were going on. The new year, 1945, has come covered in darkness. It was dark in the dark. The city was deserted. Everything that could move went into hiding. Only the young were fighting on the rocks and in the mountains of Yugoslavia. Our army, which we are eagerly expecting, has gone to Vis. Rumors are that the Germans are coming — the presence of fear was flowing through everyone's veins and hearts were beating. Day and night became one covered in the fog of fear.

I lost everyone, my friends, children have gone and I felt loneliness without happiness and life. Everything has been taken from me. I am left in that almost deserted city, in that grave without happiness and life. I have no control over my destiny, and I would be happy to be over there, far away with the other children, but it will never happen. My destiny was in the hands of my father.

I'm fourteen, and besides being a child nothing good happened to me. The war robbed me of my youth, my world, and my home.

It could be January 31, 1945. Dawn met me far away from town, on the sea, in a little fishing boat, owned by Ante Bojanic (Pastrovica). There were five of us: me, (Vinko Pakusic), my father, Kurma Kovacevic, Mice Polkepovic (the man who was married here and lived here) and Bojanic Antun. All, in my opinion, elderly people. Kurma could hardly move his feet when walking on the beach, and Mice would walk slowly, with difficulty. But, they had to, as well as myself, we had to, because we had to do something for our stomachs and those who were waiting for us.

Before daylight we had to cast out our nets. As early as seven in the morning German reconnaissance planes would watch over the sea, and machine guns would shoot anything that moved. A couple of days ago, exactly on January 7, they shot the little boat of Mice Kovacevica. During this time they wounded three people from Starigrad. We were in Lucisce, that long and broad bay, that monster of sharp rocks. I had to grab the rocks and hold on to them as if they were gold. If I would lose my balance or if the rope would break, I would end up in the abyss and no one would find my bones. No one would know how much my hands were bleeding, cramped from the cold, and how my stomach was singing sadly hungry songs. Everything was going on it's way. People were working and dying at the same time.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon, we left to go across the channel to the other side of the coast, to Plazice, to load some wood from the remaining soldier barracks. It seems that the weather wanted to help us.



Bonaca* which would be wanted, was saving what little energy we had left. We had to push dry oars and give to them our last atoms of power, running in front of the aircraft. Risk? Yes, but you have to count on it. By the way, Germans would show up exactly at seven in the morning and 3:30 in the afternoon. But the truth is, sometimes they happened to be late or early, but we had to count on them to be prompt.

I was holding the boat and the elderly were loading it. The loading was going with difficulty. The coast was terribly crossed with layers of sharp rocks. And suddenly my ears caught the sound of aircraft engines. The sound was coming from far off, high above the clouds. I didn't call the attention of the others, because I knew very well that that was a big group of American Liberator Bombers which flew somewhere far this morning and now are coming back. And this was just routine, and many things, in this damn war have been learned. I was looking at the clouds that were very low over the sea. In any case, I saw a place to hide if I needed it. Over there, just a few steps away, it was a big hole but not too deep. One jump and I am safe.

And, the time I was thinking, holding the boat, not to break on the rocks, I saw a metal bird flying from the clouds. My heart got frozen. What is going to happen? Why is this one separating from the flock?

I didn't need to say: airplane. All my group was hiding. The giant bird was circling as if it was drunk, in big circles, coming closer and getting bigger. The sound of engines was irregular, sputtering like the sound of a rifle. And, once when it was on the other side, six to seven km far away, something started to fall out. I shouted, "Bombs, they are firing the bombs", but no one was

*Bonaca - is a mild pleasant wind on the Adriatic Sea coming from a certain direction.

answering. My group was also seeing what was happening.

Those, my bombs, after a couple of seconds became big umbrellas. I never saw something like this before, but I understood that those were parachutes. That is how it is possible to jump from the airplane and remain alive. So, now I am seeing this, the first of all kids in my town. I know that I'm going to have a nice story to tell once when I'm going to be with my friends.

I was counting, losing count, and counting. I wasn't sure if it was nine or ten of them. I was sure that I was wrong. Because the event became very interesting to me.

The umbrellas were falling and disappearing over the mountains. The airplane made one more circle, and then, at the same place, one more jumped out. It could be very well seen how he plunged into the sea. The airplane made one more circle. Now it was so close to me, so big, I thought I could touch it. And then it came to the barrier, crashed over Cistog dols, about 300 meters far from the beach.

There was a frightening explosion followed by flames and smoke. We were waiting, waiting, quietly. I don't know if that was courage or inexperience, but I was first: "Let us go over there! Let us pick up the man from the sea!" No answer. I know, all of them were thinking, all of them had seen what had happened. I know that they had live experience and that they will not take any steps without agreement. And already it was three in the afternoon, the critical time when the reconnaissance planes are on duty. They already took over Korcula and it could be expected any day to have them over here.

"Vinko! Be quiet! It is not for you to make decision!" were my father's first words. I looked at the rocks on the ground, and I couldn't accept that anything could happen except what I had said.

Not far from me, as I am not present, my group was discussing. I took a couple of minutes. I see that they do not agree, gesturing, mentioning God and Mary, and over there the man was drowning and who knows if he's still alive.

"Let's go," said Antun and stepped toward the boat. The others were following him. In the eyes of my father I saw anger. Why?

I was happy, really happy. The time when they were thinking about danger, I was thinking about some American, about the giant airplane, and I thought what we were going to do is big. That was the child's curiosity. I was happy with my part in the story of the airplane and that kids are going to stop me, once the war is over, and ask me about the airplane, and I'll tell them everything, everything, even that what didn't happen.

It seems to me that our little boat, even if we would have an engine, wouldn't go so fast. The men have hidden energy which comes out when he really needs it. We were sweating and the oars were squeaking. One of us always was free to exchange with the other. We had four oars. The channel was about three miles long and that is about 45 minutes of rowing. There were different words between us, some of them in agreement, some of them contradicting, but one was important, we were going to save! We didn't know if we were going to need help.

About 100 meters ahead of us we saw something in the sea. Suddenly a low flying plane was over our heads. "We are done!" Kuzma screamed and jumped on the floor. "They are going to kill us," said my father, without

showing any emotion. I guess because he understood there is no way out. Once before it happened to my father to be on the boat when it was bombed. He saved his life by jumping into the sea. I guess that is why he wasn't as nervous as the others.

I put my head on the oar and closed my eyes. Everything stopped in my body except my heart which was beating like it was going to go out of my chest. I didn't think about anything. I know we were very close to our goal and that now we have to fight for our lives. Seconds were deciding about his and our lives. The airplane came back once again. This time it was on our right side and it was so close that it made huge waves. It came and disappeared. We were saved but in shock. It never happened that the airplane would leave without punishing the area. Heavy weight fell out from our chests. With one breath, we got up, looked at each other and grabbed the oars and started to row. The sea around us was green. I never learned if the man in the sea marked the water to be noticed by the airplane or the airplane put the color to mark the victim in the sea.

We stopped the boat near the drowning man. From the sea, only a little part of the face could be seen. We started to raise him up. It was very difficult. The American was exhausted and he couldn't help us. I wanted to help but on the little boat there wasn't space for everyone to help. I was standing on the bow of the boat and watching.

We brought him out. He was long, heavy, clothes full of water. He could hardly fit into the space of the little boat. We put him over the barrel which we were using for the fish, to pump out water from his body. I was watching that half dead body, thinking about human life building a picture of myself, about him, about the war with less about tomorrow. All of this was mixed up in my head looking at the body which had found itself in our boat, and only a few hours ago his bombs were falling over cities and people. In the war all of us are criminals including those who are otherwise good people because they have to fight and kill. Yes, yes, many things that are happening to the people are difficult to understand. Everything has certain meanings and must have some explanation.

I took the oars, each of them were three times longer than me, and slowly as a snail, I brought the boat to the beach. That was "Valiki Zmajin Bok" cliff which was about seventy meters long, a cliff which would everytime chill my blood because it was impassable close to the shore, and because of the fear of the Germans, we could cast out our nets only at night.

I heard someone calling. I took a look. On the top of the hill, there was a man, and after I waved to him he waved back. That was one of his friends. Who knows where they were down? In any case, they were on dry land, and Brusje is not far.

I see my group is looking at the man in the boat like he is a monster. They were asking themselves how would they strip him. He was tied in many ropes, knots, zippers, and they didn't know where to begin. And we had to do this quickly because the man could die from the cold. Antun took the straight razor which every fisherman carries as basic equipment, and all of these that couldn't be

*The airplane was a British Spitfire fighter plane patrolling the area. He was attracted by the sea dye marker released by the airman after he landed in the water.

unbuttoned were ripped or out. American was scared, his jaw was quivering and he didn't say a word. He was just frozen. It was still daylight and it wasn't so cold as usual for this part of the year. Finally the guest on our boat was completely nude. The pieces of clothing were scattered all over the boat. "If I could have such clothes." I was thinking because I never had something nice and now I always had to wear something worn out and these, my people, tore everything off him and scattered them around. But I was quiet. I felt ashamed to think about these little things when we are fighting for his life.

I took off my socks and gave them to him and then my pants. I still had a pair of shorts on me. And then the dressing started, slowly and carefully. It looked to me like a mother dressing her baby. He was decorated in all colors and all the rags. His own family wouldn't recognize him. He was looking like a piece of art.

I was laughing sincerely from my heart, not because we have done such good work, we save one man, because of his appearance. How it would be nice if a photographer were around.

I was rowing the Albanian way, that means in sitting position with my face looking at the stern of the boat, looking at the American who was sitting sadly behind the nets. How to describe this man to you? He was around twenty, sitting teased up from the cold and fear. Who would know what he was thinking at that moment. What sad thoughts were in his mind? If I could only ask him. He didn't move or make a sound. He couldn't know who we are. He couldn't know where we were taking him. He couldn't know if we were going to take him or not to the Germans. He had to think about all of this and none of us could speak a single English word to console him. It wasn't easy for him but it wasn't easy for me either. My bare legs were blue but I didn't feel the cold. I was in a better position, I knew his dilemma and what was bothering him. But one thing was true, he had his meal and I am starving. Freedom was waiting for him and fear for me.

We were drifting near the shore and we came to the cliff where the airplane had crashed. The fire was still burning. For the first time our guest moved. He raised his head up, he opened his mouth and said "Okay." This was his first word and his first communication with us. Now, encouraged the conversation by hands started. We were laughing and he would also part his lips. It could be seen that he came to life and that he was in control. I guess he understood we were going in the direction away from the shooting. He was nodding his head as if he understood us. We would say "Germans", gesturing left and right, and this was supposed to mean that the Germans were not in the town. We believed that he understood us.

It was getting dark over the sea and the shore and the faces on the boat couldn't be recognized. The sea looked deserted. Deserted around us. Deserted in our stomachs. Today I didn't have anything to eat. This morning, before I left home, I had half a liter of milk and five dry figs. That was all. It was like that everyday. In the evening we would cook fish. We didn't have bread and for a long time I hadn't seen any. Oh, how I wanted something to eat. I was happy if I could find someone in the town to give me a kilogram of corn for two kilograms of fish. That was a golden deal.

Those times had made imprints on our lives and bodies. Life had no value and was empty. Only what we

had was fear, fear for every moment of existence. Tomorrow it could only be worse.

My thoughts were interrupted by the voice of old Kuzma: "Parim! Where shall we go! Shall we go across?" Straight to the Baba was the order of the owner. He was also rowing. Once, when you come to Gracisca, Baba is not too far. That is what we are doing when we have Bonaca, when we don't have waves and wind in front of us. Otherwise, the experience of the old fishermen is telling us that is better to drift close to the shore, because waves and wind die there, they lose the power, and they don't bother us.

When you are rowing you don't talk. Everyone was hungry, tired, and sleepy and it seemed we forgot our guest.

Part of the crescent moon could be seen between the clouds, over pines of Lantjema, and the breeze was brushing our faces and finger tips. On the open sea, even in the summertime, it is chilly and we were in the middle of January.

Toward our direction, the other boat was approaching. I heard the sound of the engine. The engine at that time? That was suspicious. But we couldn't do anything.

We were ordered to stop. Two Partisans in uniform stood up on the boat. "Where is the pilot?" One of them was asking because it was difficult to recognize him among us. We were speechless. As if by command, we turned toward the stern of the boat. There was no talking and no questions. We helped him to move to the other boat and they left.

Why didn't they tow us? Even today when I recall this I'm asking myself the same question. Here it was always a custom but this time??? It is true they would lose ten minutes but they would save us suffering of at least a half hour of rowing. They disappeared in the fog of the night and we had to row in anger. The elders were swearing not because they took the American, but because they left us in such rude fashion.

About seven in the evening finally we came to our bay. From the shore they were asking us to dock at the house of Berca. The city command post was located over there, and a couple of soldiers who didn't go to Vis. Two Partisans armed with pistols entered our boat. They started overturning everything on the boat. They were searching for something. What for, I learned later.

The American whom we saved was a pilot. That day they were over Germany. On the return flight, he was short of fuel. The pilot had fifty dollars in his clothes and he was looking for it to give to us as a present. He couldn't find it. And how could they be suspicious of us? We were in shock. How could they get this idea? What an injustice in my life they did to me! Terrible!

If it was true that he had the money, it was possible it had disappeared when the pilot was fighting for his life in the water or it disappeared when his clothes were cut into pieces and torn away. Instead, of giving us praise, we were insulted.

That evening flew by just as the other and in the morning the new day was waiting for us and I had to once again go fishing. That evening the owner of the boat was questioned. He got a knife as a present from the American. That was the only thing he had with him. When we met in the morning on the boat, he told us the whole story.

For me as a child, that wasn't as interesting as chocolate, which I was told was in the airplane. I'm not sure if that was the truth or if the owner of the boat told that because of me. What I know is that I couldn't forget the chocolate. This is not funny because I was wanting for everything. All I really had was the sun, sea and air. After some time I forgot the American, that day, and everything was overshadowed by chocolate. I was licking my lips and I was thinking how to reach the airplane. I was hoping everything didn't burn. The airplane crashed far from the shore in thick impassable brush. But even so, I was waiting for my moment. After a couple of days, I was trying to get there. I was climbing like a cat going through the thick brush, scratched and bleeding, and finally I lost hope of reaching there. So, I had to turn around and go back. That damn chocolate was occupying my thoughts for a long time after.

The morning of the following day we were casting our nets close to Baba. Around ten in the morning, a fighting boat entered the port. We thought it came to pick him up.

The monster was running like lightning. I couldn't imagine that something could run so fast on the sea. On the way back we saw many people on the fighting boat. One among them was the man whom we saved yesterday. They were waving to us. It was the whole crew from the airplane.

The fighting boat disappeared over the horizon, leaving behind Stari Grad forever and this even from yesterday. In the turmoil of the war, everything changes quickly.

Our American had to think at that moment, "if I'm going to survive — maybe —" and I was thinking about the airplane and about chocolate. This morning my stomach was also growling with hunger.

It was a war and I was a child

The American Airman rescued by these courageous Yugoslav fishermen was Pilot Don Jandernoa, 454th Bomb Group, 15th Air Force, based near Foggia, Italy. They had bombed Vienna that day. Flak had pierced their gas tanks and the loss of fuel resulted in the crew of eleven bailing out just 15 miles short of an emergency landing field on the Isle of Vis. Ten crewmen landed on the Isle of Hvar. All eleven crewmen survived and were back over the unfriendly skies of the Third Reich within five days.

Today (1990) Don and Pat Jandernoa, their five children and twelve grandchildren live in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Vinko, his wife, Slavica, daughter, Jasminka, and son, Andro, live in Starigrad, Isle of Hvar, where Vinko grew up. Vinko is a school principal. Slavica and Jasminka are teachers. All four are coming to visit America as guests of the Jandernoa family in September, 1990.

THE REST OF THE STORY: For 44 years Don Jandernoa thought that the Yugoslav fishermen who saved his life on January 31, 1945 had been fishing in the vicinity, picked up their nets, and rowed and rowed and rowed until they reached Don just seconds before he expected to slip beneath the surface. Don never dreamed that the Yugoslavs were risking their lives to save his. The German occupation troops were located about 60 miles north. It never occurred to Don that the German patrol planes would strafe the defenseless boats of these poor fishermen. (Such are the inhumanities of war.)

After swimming and praying in the chilling water for an hour Don was still a quarter mile from shore. Hypothermia immobilized his arms and legs. Fortunately the water was nearly calm — protected by 600 foot cliffs on three sides. The life jacket was inadequate and the weight of his water soaked clothing pulled him downward so that just his forehead, eyes and nose were above water. It became obvious that this was Don's last day on earth. The conversation with the Lord was easy — no regrets — a good childhood as a member of a large midwestern farm family; grade school and high school in small town America (Pewamo, Michigan) and then the thrills of pilot training in the U.S. Army Air Corps followed by the opportunity to fight against the Nazis in the war for freedom. Who could ask for more.

At two minutes to drown time a small British Spitfire fighter plane appeared. (At this point, the Yugoslav fishing boat is only 100 yards away but Don is not aware of it.) The Spitfire dives toward Don and pulls up just short of the water. (The Yugoslavs think the plane is German and they drop to the bottom of their boat.) As the British Spitfire "buzzes" a second time Don mentally empathizes with the pilot — "Too bad — you could have been a hero — but you can't land on water and you are too late to get anyone to help me."

The Spitfire disappears. Don is resigned to death. Suddenly, one of the Yugoslav fishermen grabs Don by the collar of his flight coverall and they struggle to pull him into the 25 foot long wooden fishing vessel.

The rest of the story takes hours to tell. Suffice it to say that the Yugoslavs were gracious and caring. They were literally starving. Yet they shared the very best of what little they had.

More than 500 American Airmen bailed out or crash landed in Yugoslavia during WW II. Many owe their lives to the hardy friendly Yugoslavs who never capitulated to the Nazis. No greater love can a man have than that he risk his life to save another — especially if the other is a total stranger.