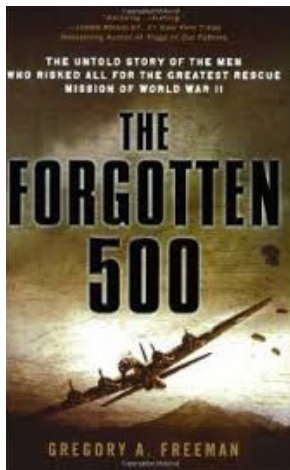


Book Review – The Forgotten 500 – The Untold Story of the Men Who Risked All for the Greatest Rescue Mission of World War II
by Gregory Freeman

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI



Last month I looked at a little-known period of aviation during World War I. This month I have a book about a little-known event of World War II, and how the errors made at the time affected Europe and the United States for the following seventy years. This book was published in 2007, and I am continually surprised by how much is still being revealed about that war, seventy years later.

Gregory Freeman's story begins with the B-17 and B-24 bombing raids over Ploesti Romania. Like a lot of targets of the time, this was a city that was probably totally unknown to most of the aircrews six months earlier. But all who flew the missions would come to know this city and the surrounding area with a new familiarity. Around the city of Ploesti resided some of the largest petroleum refineries of the Third Reich. The Allied High Command wanted them eliminated. The German Command wanted them preserved at all cost. And the result was one of the deadliest set of missions for those pilots who flew them. On the first day of the raids, one third of the aircraft that departed from their bases in Southern Italy did not return. And another third returned, but were so damaged that they never flew again. And similar raids continued on throughout the war.

Yugoslavia, south of Romania, has two attributes that made it extremely hazardous to the aircrews who bailed out of their crippled aircraft on their way home. In the 1940s, as in the hundreds of years earlier, and even to this day, that area known as the Balkan Peninsula is populated by numerous ethnic groups who do not mix well. And the area is mountainous and impassible.

This story is not so much about the flights to and from Ploesti, as it is about the crew members who fortunate enough to fly to the target and begin their return, but not fortunate enough to make it home. By the end of the war, over 500 airmen were gathered together and returned to their bases in Italy. To do so, each of them had to be safely shepherded through the German-held territory, and brought to staging locations. And because there was no means to travel through the mountains, someone needed to build a runway on the side of the mountain, through the forest, and someone needed to land a C-47 on that runway, at night, with no lights. And someone needed to do that over and over again.

But there was one more major complication. Politics. Rescue decisions were colored by the turf wars between the US State Department and OSS, and

between the intelligence services of the United States and England. Additionally, two major ethnic groups of the area were battling one another to determine who would rule Yugoslavia after the war – the Chetniks, led by General Drazo Mihailovich and the partisans, led by General Josip Tito.

While the airmen were being saved by the Chetniks, the Partisans were more successful in gaining the ear of Winston Churchill and FDR. Although FDR did not live to realize the fact, Winston Churchill admitted in 1946 that siding with General Tito was his biggest mistake of the war. Because of this Allied decision, General Tito was able to hand the country of Yugoslavia to Russian Premier Stalin after the war, one of the acts that led Churchill to state "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent."

Although Churchill knew that he had been duped, it was not until the late 1990's that the reasons were fully understood. Through the war years, and into the 1950s, the British intelligence community was rife with Soviet spies. The most notable were the Cambridge Five - Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, Donald Maclean and John Cairncross. All five were high-ranking members of the British government, and all were dedicated to ensuring the success of world-wide communism.

Gregory Freeman weaves a great story of aviators, pilots, navigators, gunners, along with a story of intrigue and politics that is still relevant today. This book is worth your time.

Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order

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And here are more favorites: www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com/books/books.html