



Against the Odds

Escapes and Evasions by Allied Airmen,
World War II.

Edited by Murray Adams



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THE ROYAL AIR FORCES ESCAPING SOCIETY

The Society was formed by Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Portal, in 1945 to provide an organisation which would enable the 700 airmen who escaped from captivity, or evaded capture in enemy territory, to band together to show appreciation to the courageous men and women in Occupied Countries who risked their lives to help them, and to assist the relatives of those helpers who did not survive.

The aims of the Society are:

‘To give financial assistance to the widows and orphans of men who lost their lives as a result of assisting members of the Royal Air Force and Allied Air Forces.

To make donations to charitable institutions in the countries concerned, as an expression of appreciation.

To encourage reciprocal visits between members and their helpers.

To, above all, remember those who helped members in their hour of need.’

Full members of the Society are former airmen of the Royal Air Force, and of Allied Air Forces, who came down behind enemy lines and either evaded capture or, if taken prisoner, escaped and returned to Allied territory.

Honorary members are patriots who aided airmen to escape, and are referred to as helpers. Friends of the Society are widows of former members, and men and women who have given outstanding service to the Society. Active branches of the Society exist in Britain, Canada and Australia.

EDITOR'S NOTES

The stories contained in this collection are mostly first person accounts of the writers' evasions or escapes. Some are simple tales of unaided walking through the enemy's lines during the confusion of battle, while others are narratives of well-planned and clever deceptions which led to freedom. Without exception the participants showed strong obedience to 'the duty to escape' obligation and, in many cases, admirable fortitude, endurance and courage and, often, considerable ingenuity.

Most of the escapes were made possible by the unselfish efforts of helpers; from the skilled men in POW camps who made civilian clothes and forged travel documents to those patriots, both men and women, in the occupied countries of Europe who gave shelter and guidance to hundreds of airmen 'on the loose'. They gave this help unselfishly and in the knowledge that if betrayed, or caught in the act, they would face either a firing squad or torture and a one way ticket to a concentration camp. Every escaper or evader was conscious of a tremendous debt to these modest civilians, whose courage was no less than that displayed by highly decorated servicemen trained in the profession of arms.

This book contains only a few of the escape stories of mainly Australian airmen during World War II—the ones that were readily available. Thanks are offered to the authors of these first hand accounts of their experiences in the exciting days of war, half a century ago, which comprise this modest volume.

Some editorial licence has been exercised in preparing manuscripts for publication, but in all essential respects they are the narratives of the respective escapers and evaders.

Murray Adams
Brisbane, October 1995

FOREWORD

Air Commodore The Honourable Sir Walter Campbell AC QC

I am delighted to write a foreword to this book, which is a collection of some 31 individual stories of airmen who escaped from captivity after being taken prisoners of war or evaded capture while in enemy territory during World War II. The decision to have these tales published was made by the Australian Branch of the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society, an organisation which was formed in 1945.

The Editor of the work is Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams of Brisbane. It would be idle of me, and there would be little point in my doing so in this foreword, to single out for comment any one of these episodes, other than to mention that the Editor himself evaded capture after he was forced to belly-land his Tomahawk aircraft in the North African desert after it had been damaged in an attack by a Messerschmitt 109.

The volume contains information about the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society, and there is also a short introductory note by the Editor. There were 700 Allied airmen who escaped from captivity, or evaded capture in enemy territory during World War II, and this book, as the Editor tells us, contains only a few of those stories. The Royal Air Forces Escaping Society was formed to show appreciation to the courageous men and women in occupied countries who risked their lives to help these air crew men who were endeavouring to avoid being caught, and also to give financial assistance to the widows and orphans of those who lost their lives as a result of assisting members of the Allied air forces.

I commend the Society for causing this volume to be published and in obtaining the capable services of Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams as Editor. I congratulate Murray Adams for his research and for his perseverance; he has obtained written material from the several airmen involved and has personally interviewed a number of them. In his brief introduction he points out that some editorial licence has been used in preparing material for publication, but ‘in all essential respects they are the narratives of the respective escapers or evaders’.

To say that the reader will find these stories thrilling is an understatement. They are tales of courageous men determined to perform their ‘duty to escape’, and they cover many different countries—the Middle East, with its vast expanses of sand, its heat and cold and its continental climate, the dank and seemingly impenetrable jungles and the mountainous terrain of the islands to the north of Australia, the snows and ravines of Italy, the enemy occupied populous countries of Germany, France, Belgium and Holland.

The reader is swept up into the lonely world of air crew keenly watched by the foe, often coned by searchlights, hunted by ground defences as well as by enemy aircraft, while the reader also appreciates the need for often split-second decisions in order to survive, and will be greatly impressed by the ways in which so many air crew were helped and sheltered by ordinary civilians, members of the resistance groups and by partisans, all of whom took incalculable risks in so giving such assistance.

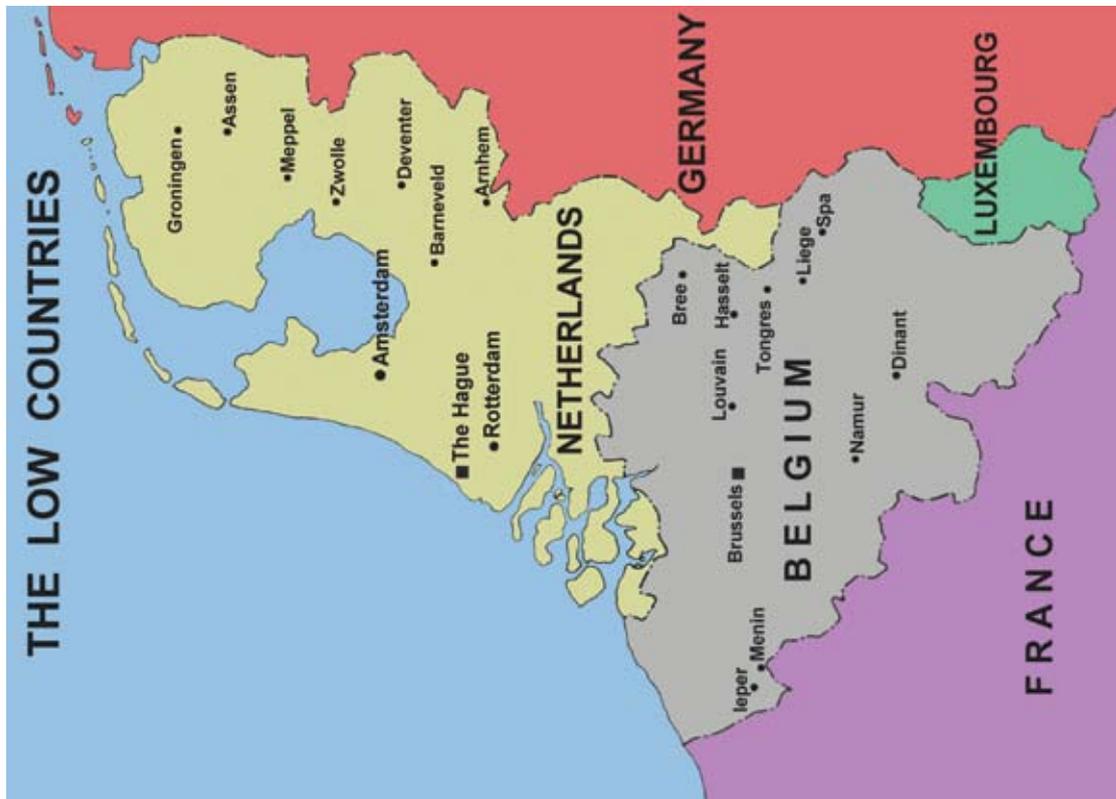
Over 50 years have elapsed since these experiences occurred and now is certainly time to have them recorded. With this publication there comes a permanent record of these events, it is a valuable addition to the histories of the Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force, and it will be of considerable interest to all members of air crew—especially Australians—and to their relatives and families.

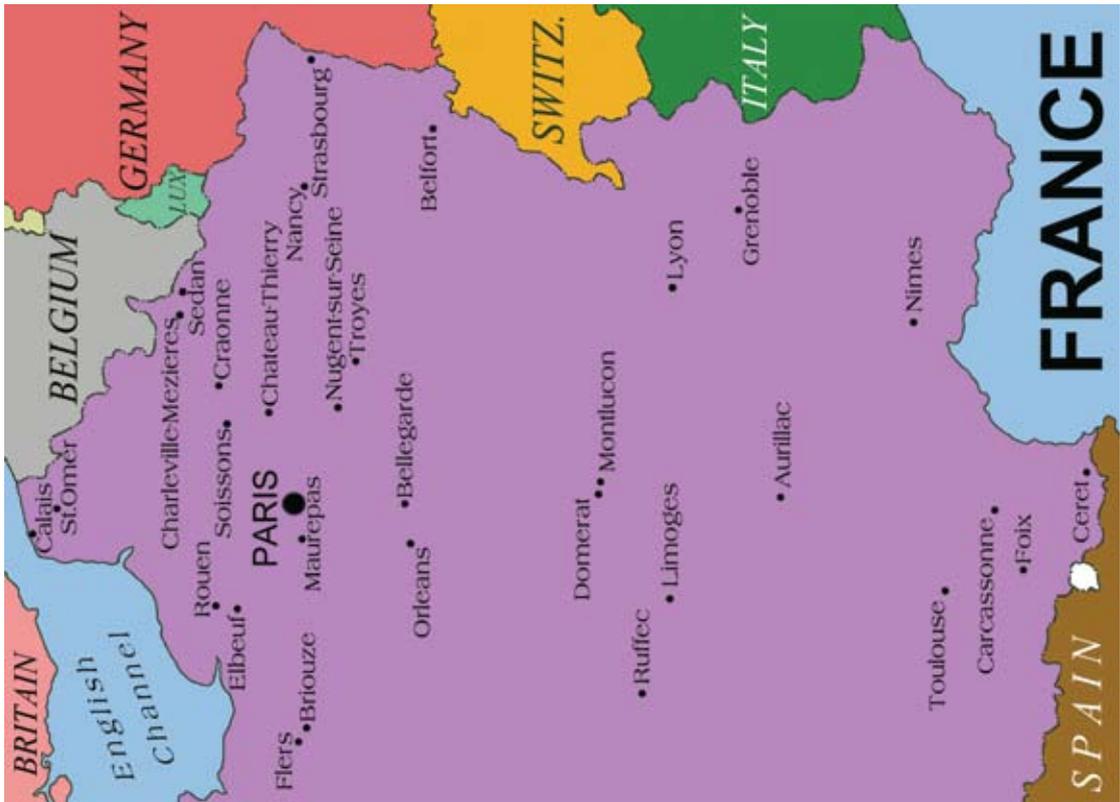
In short, this work makes it clear how these men, among Australia's finest, displayed such bravery and competence in those uncertain and dangerous times, and did so much for their Country.

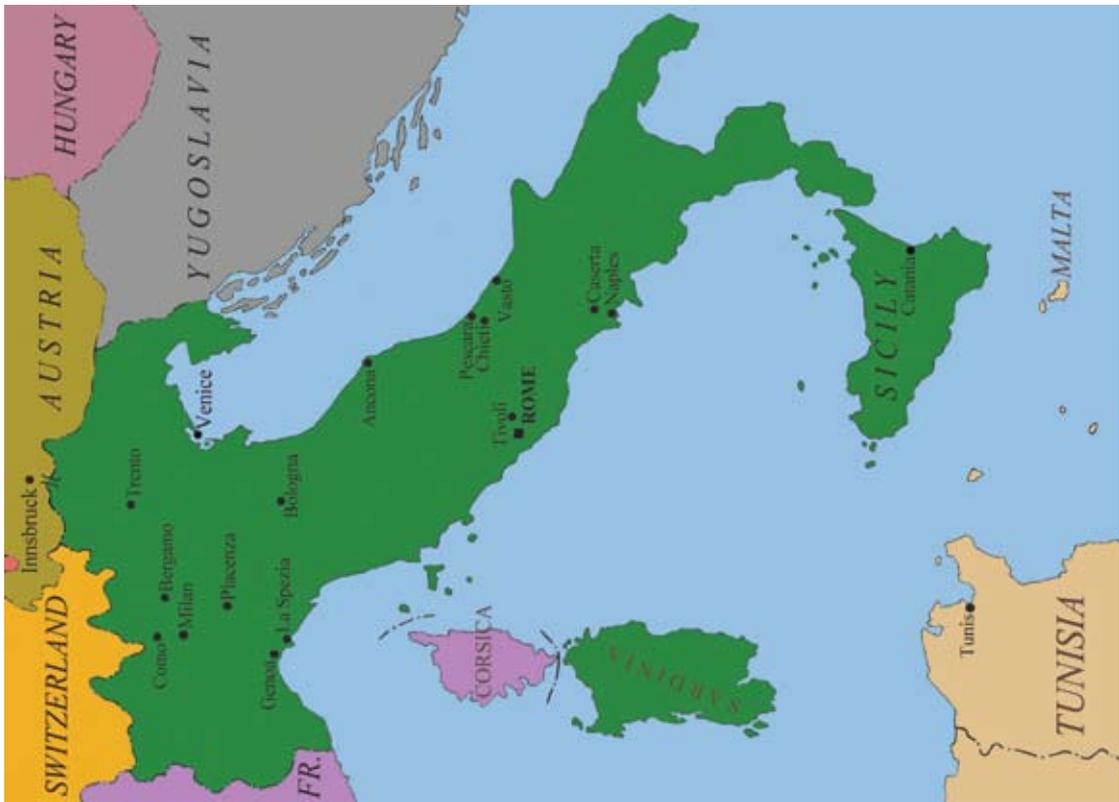
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MAPS









1

ESCAPE FROM BATTLE

Squadron Leader John Forde Hobler

I was Squadron Leader (Flying) in 142 Squadron RAF (Fairey Battles), and stationed at Berry au Bac, France, when the 'Hot' War commenced.

On 14 May 1940, half the Squadron, in sections of two, was attacking the bridges over the Meuse near Sedan when, as we approached the target, the Messerschmitt 109s struck. This was the usual thing for the Battles because we were sitting ducks for the Me. 109s, and were losing aircraft and crews at an appalling rate. In an effort to improve our defence we had fitted a Vickers GO gun in the bomb aimer's position so that by turning it upside down he could fire at an attacker coming from underneath or behind. The navigator/bomb aimer was a Sergeant Kitto who was a good man at his job, and it was arranged that he would immediately use that gun when we were attacked, and I would jink according to his instructions. The rear gunner was also in the plan.

From the beginning the mass of lead hurled at us affected the aircraft controls, but the two gunners kept up a strong fire and shot down one enemy aircraft and damaged another. Only the armour plating in our aircraft saved our lives and enabled me to retain some degree of control.

We were so low that the advancing German land forces we passed over all had a go at us, and every vehicle seemed to have guns on it and I could see tracer coming from all over the place. By this time it was all I could do to hold the nose up and we were too low to bail out. Suddenly, my instrument panel was shot from bottom to top—a perfect bit of deflection shooting by a ground gunner. Had the shot been slightly further back I would have been cut down in the same way. I saw a wood coming up and was just able to trim the aircraft to pass between two tall trees, which tore off the wings, and the fuselage slithered to a stop a little further on.

Hot glycol from a punctured coolant tank had been pouring over me for some time so that I was pretty badly burned and, under the circumstances, it was incredible luck that I got the aircraft on to the ground without injury to myself or the crew. The two crew members were quickly on the ground and got me out. We set fire to the already smouldering aircraft, and had to be quick about the job as the Germans were racing towards us. However, before they arrived we were able to run like hell and reach the large wood that happened to be nearby.

Once inside the wood we wasted no time in heading in the general direction away from the enemy advance. We were able to judge where to go because we could hear the slow motion 'pop...pop' of the French guns on one side, and the ultra rapid note of the German guns on the other side. In other words, we were walking right along the front line.

The skin was peeling off my burned face, but my crew was attentive and most effective in helping me so we kept on going as hard as we could. After some time we came to a clearing on the other side of the wood where we ran into a French patrol, who, mistaking our RAF blue grey for German field grey were all very keen to shoot us. However, once we convinced them we were not the enemy they gave me some eau de vie and showed us the way back to their front line HQ.

Eventually we arrived back at the French HQ where General Georges was planning a counter attack with his most impressive but, in the event, not very effective great big tanks. I was taken over by the medical officer in their MRS who, after he finished hacking a man's leg off, came and bandaged my face and hands; an action that undoubtedly saved me a lot of medical trouble later on. It was here that I lost touch with my crew, who had been taken care of by the French and sent back in their transport.

Eventually, I was released by the doctor and put on a vehicle heading west, where I had the saddening experience of joining the long stream of refugees with their remaining worldly goods on carts, or on their backs; all heading away from the fighting. Stukas periodically dropped bombs on cross roads, just to make life more difficult. I arrived back at base and was immediately shunted into the Medical Line of Command, and two days later saw me in the Burns Unit of the Park Prewett Hospital in England.

2

ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Sergeant Alexander Cyffin Roberts

After the adrenalin-rushing excitement of the dogfight it was quiet and almost peaceful floating down under a parachute, with just an occasional burst of distant gunfire as a reminder that the war was still going on. Two other parachutes drifted down silently nearby, and I wondered whether the men swinging beneath them were friend or foe.

It was 11 July 1941, and our 452 Squadron was on a sweep of the Dunkirk, St Omer, Calais area. One hundred and eight Spitfires from nine squadrons were taking part in the operation, with the purpose of drawing German fighters while a low level bombing attack was being made on the Lille railway yards. We had taken off from West Mailing in Kent at 0900 hours, and the plan seemed to be working because we were getting plenty of attention from Messerschmitt 109s.

One got a burst of cannon fire into the tail of my aircraft, causing it to shudder and go into a dizzy spiral dive. With no control and speed building up I baled out at 22,000 feet, in the vicinity of St Omer, and the 'chute opened with a gut wrenching jolt. When I got lower I saw a Me. 109 going in to land at an aerodrome, which was so well camouflaged that I had failed to notice it before, and I seemed to be heading straight for it. Of all places to parachute into, I had picked a Jerry 'drome! I was not in a hurry to get down because I could see a welcoming party of six German guards positioning themselves for my arrival. However, by spilling air out of one side of my 'chute, and with the aid of a light breeze, I came down outside the man proof fence, in the middle of a wheat field.

The guards had to double back to the main gate to get out and this gave me time to quickly release my parachute, and discard my Mae West and helmet. I was immediately surrounded by a group of excited children, and a man who ordered them to stay around my gear and pointed to a farmhouse in a clump of trees on the other side of the wheat field, saying: 'Vite, vite'. I did not know at that stage that it meant 'quickly, quickly', but there was urgency in his voice and, with the Germans advancing in the distance, I did one of my best 400 metre dashes and burst in through the back door, almost colliding with an elderly woman. She pointed to an assortment of clothes hanging on the wall.

I tore off my tunic and grabbed a black jacket, which fitted fairly well, and a beret. I had been wearing a civvy shirt because the regulation one chafed my neck; I kept my dark blue uniform trousers. The woman took my new flying boots and pushed a pair of elastic sided shoes at me, and in my new outfit I looked a fair facsimile of a Frenchman.

In about two minutes I was bounding out the front door onto what turned out to be the road from the village to the aerodrome, and everybody in the neighbourhood seemed to be streaming along it towards my discarded parachute. I went with them, rather than look conspicuous by heading in the opposite direction. German soldiers arrived in vehicles and appeared to believe that I must be hiding in the waist high wheat. The officer in charge ordered everybody to form a line across the field and comb it from one end to the other. I had no option but to take part in the search for myself!

After a few trips up and down the field I noticed that a few civilians were wandering off without being challenged, so when I reached the far end I climbed through the fence and walked slowly in the direction of a distant house, trying to give the impression that I lived there. Walking along the dirt track leading to the house, a man driving a horse in a cart approached. 'Bon jour', I said in my school French, as a passing greeting but he pulled up and beckoned me over. He handed me two raw eggs, and his gestures urged me to get going from the house as fast as I could, so I set off in a westerly direction with the intention to avoid houses and roads. For two hours I walked, hoping that I was heading for the coast, and formulating a plan to wait until dark, steal a boat and row across the English Channel. I took a rest, made a meal sucking the two raw eggs I had been given, and soon afterwards came to a canal, which I imagined would run to the coast. But in which direction?

I threw a stick into it and went the way it drifted. Luckily the tide was running out at the time! I followed the canal until dark, and then it began to rain so I looked for shelter and found it in a joinery works. This was appropriate because I was a joiner in civvy street. I climbed into a timber rack which seemed to be a safe dry place to hide, but had just settled down to sleep when a party started up in the office, and from the voices there appeared to be a couple of Germans and some French women. After a while one of the Germans came out and pissed so close to me I could have touched him. It was lucky I was not asleep and snoring.

At 0300 hours I crawled out of my hiding place and followed the canal again, and calculated I had covered about 48 kilometres from where I had landed when I came to a main road on the outskirts of Calais. Here the canal went under a bridge that was guarded by a German soldier in a sentry box, and to get into Calais I would have to pass him. I decided to play the role of farm labourer and pulled weeds in a potato field while I watched how he handled people. I noticed that those on foot were allowed to pass without being challenged, but those on bicycles, or other forms of transport were stopped and made to produce identification papers. I decided to chance it, so I dusted the dirt off my hands in view of the German, left the field and joined the people moving along the road to work in town. I walked into Calais without being challenged in any way. When I found the docks, where I hoped to steal a boat, I was devastated to find the whole area barricaded with barbed wire and guards everywhere. That ended my idea of getting a boat to row across the Channel and, bitterly disappointed, I went back into the main part of Calais.

Suddenly, I felt extremely tired so sat down on a seat in a small park and went to sleep. I do not know how long it was before I was roughly shaken awake, opened my eyes and was looking into the face of a German soldier. I jumped to my feet and he pointed to his bicycle, which had a flat tyre, and by his gestures it appeared that he wanted to know where to get it mended. I shrugged my shoulders and walked off. Apparently speechless at such cheek, he did not say a word.

After wandering the streets wondering what to do, I was thirsty enough to risk going into a small tavern. 'Bier' was another French word I knew. I sat at a table and the waiter brought me a foaming glass, which tasted so good that I had three or four, and was starting to feel a warm glow when I noticed the place was filling up with German soldiers. It was time to leave so, fortified by the beer, I went into a cafe for a meal, sat at a table and a waitress came, looking decidedly ill at ease. She reached behind me and turned up the collar of my coat, saying: 'Shh, shh'. It turned out that the parachute cords had burnt my neck, and the mark was a sure give away. Without asking what I wanted she left and returned with a plateful of steaming food which she placed in front of me, without a word. Even when I paid with some of the French money from my escape kit she said nothing, but the change she put in my hand was more than I had given her.

I walked the streets until it was time for another meal, when I went back to the friendly cafe. When the waitress saw me enter she hurried up, and indicating the back of the cafe, said in English: 'Quickly, you must go through that door and up the stairs.' I climbed the rickety stairs and found a small flat consisting of a living room, bedroom, toilet and bath. I had been there for some time when the waitress came in with a meal on a tray, and as I ate she told me I was to stay in the room overnight. She said there would be no one else there because the building was evacuated every night. Apparently, Allied pilots had a habit of dropping any left over bombs on the docks when returning to England from their nightly missions.

Early next morning there was a knock on the door, and I opened it to a pretty young French girl who told me, in English, that I was to move to another house and she was to be my guide. I was to walk on the other side of the street and give no indication I was with her, and if I were caught she would deny knowing me. For a mile, or so, I kept her in view and saw that she entered a house. I kept walking and later doubled back and entered the house. Inside was my young guide and an elderly woman she introduced as her mother. She told me she would make contact with the Underground and they would handle my escape from there on. I stayed at this house for five days, during which time I was visited by a Frenchman who questioned me at length to make sure I was not a German 'plant'. Later this man returned and told me that my story tallied with investigations made at St Omer, and that I was cleared for further assistance by the Underground.

He also told me something that distressed me greatly. The French woman who provided me with the clothes was dead. She had kept my flying boots because they were new and

too good to throw into the cess pit with my other gear. The Germans had found them in a search of the house and the woman had been shot. I grieved for her and pondered why these people would take such terrible risks to help us.

During my stay at the house I was photographed and given a false identity card which said that I was mute—a wise precaution in view of my ignorance of the French language. Came the day to leave, and I was given a bicycle and rode out of town following my guide. We rode all day and must have covered about 40 kilometres, and passed a couple of checkpoints without incident. The word ‘mute’ on my identity card seemed to prevent questions. Eventually, we arrived at a farmhouse where I was told to wait for another escapee. I spent five days there and spent my time fishing in a nearby stream where I caught mainly small fish, like mud gudgeons, which were fed to the ducks. The main excitement was Friday bath night. A large tin bath was brought into the kitchen, filled with hot water and I, as guest, was invited to take first bath while the whole family, male and female, watched.

On the fifth day the Underground brought the other escapee, a Polish pilot who spoke English. I found his name unpronounceable and he had trouble understanding my Australian accent. ‘You must speak like Mister Winston Churchill for me to understand you’, he used to say. Both of us left the farmhouse on bicycles, and rode for a week in the direction of the Swiss border, staying at houses arranged by the Underground. When we got behind the militarised zone we dispensed with bikes and travelled by train. At one place we waited for a train that did not come, it had been strafed and a replacement would not arrive until the next day. We had to spend a bitterly cold night on the railway station, and on the seat near me was a German soldier so well rugged that he was not wearing his greatcoat. Acting my part as a mute, I asked by gestures whether I could use it. Perhaps it was sympathy for my affliction but he handed it over with a friendly smile, and I was warmed as much by putting one over the enemy as by the greatcoat itself!

Near the demarcation line between occupied and unoccupied France we took to walking, led by a guide provided by the Underground, and because the area was well guarded we proceeded with caution. The guide led us into a quarry and told us to wait for another guide who would lead us into the unoccupied territory. Time went on, and then our original guide returned and said something had gone wrong. The Pole asked when we would get across the border and he replied: ‘Neuf heures’. My heart sank, I thought he said ‘nevair’, meaning ‘never’. Some time after 2100 hours, the guide arrived and motioned us to follow him. We crossed the demarcation line without incident and, on the outskirts of Lyon, the guide hailed a bus and the three of us travelled in silence. Then the Pole, who had been looking out the window, turned to us with a frown on his face. ‘There is something wrong’, he said. ‘We are heading in the wrong direction, into the city of Lyon instead of away from it.’ The guide argued but, ‘I know this area’, the Pole insisted, and at the next stop he left the bus and we followed. We were, indeed, in the suburbs of Lyon.

The guide left us in a small cafe to have a meal while he went to make a 'phone call'. He had not returned when the meal arrived so the Pole and I began eating, in silence. Something told us to look up, and we saw that we were surrounded by a cordon of French police. They dragged us to our feet, roughly, and handcuffed us. We had been betrayed!

Handcuffed and flanked by the police, we were marched through the streets of Lyon to the police station. After being searched, we were taken downstairs to a cell, containing two wooden beds, two blankets and a bucket; more like a dungeon for the condemned. That evening when two gendarmes brought our evening meal, the Pole launched into an angry outburst, demanding better treatment and that we be told what was going on. They told him that we were being held as suspected spies and were to face a court martial at 1000 hours next morning. I did not sleep that night.

A few minutes before the appointed time we were handcuffed and led upstairs to the main police station, and there we were separated. I was marched down the street a short distance to what looked like a courthouse, and shown into a large room where two German officers sat at a huge desk. I was made to stand in front of the desk, the guards left, and the trial began. The senior officer spoke in English: 'Do you understand English?' I just nodded and, seeing that he held my forged identity card which described me as mute, decided to stay dumb. The officer then read out the charge, with all the details of where, when, and how I had been arrested, and accused me of being a British spy. In wartime enemy spies were shot he said. Then he told me that he knew I was not a mute and that I would have to answer all questions truthfully, or there would be no future for me. I decided to find my tongue.

'What is your correct name?' he asked. 'Alex Roberts', I replied. With this he became very angry, drew his pistol, and placed it on the desk, as if he would carry out the shooting himself if I did not stick to the truth. It appeared he could not imagine anyone using their correct name on a forged identity card. Then he warned me that the facts I was not wearing a uniform, and carrying false papers were enough to have me dealt with as a spy.

'We will try again', he said. 'What is your name?' I said: 'Sir, I am a pilot in the Australian Air Force. These pants I am wearing are part of my uniform, and my name really is, Alex Roberts.' The two officers had a brief conversation in German, and I had a feeling it was about my Australian accent. I was then asked my service number, squadron, type of aircraft I was flying, and where shot down. I gave the correct answers to all questions, except the last. I did not want them asking questions around Calais. Apparently satisfied that I was not a spy the officer ordered me taken back to the cell. There I was joined later by my Polish friend, who was also given prisoner of war status. We were then sent to a prisoner of war camp to the south.

Escape from this camp had to be approved by a man on the outside—and what a man!

Born in Belgium and christened, Albert Marie Edmond Guerisse, he served as a medical officer in a Belgian cavalry regiment during its 18-day campaign. He managed to get away to Britain and talked his way into an active commission in the Royal Navy—he did not tell the British he was a medico because he wanted a fighting role. On 25 April 1941, he was arrested by a gendarme when he swam ashore after the skiff, in which he had landed two agents near the eastern end of the Pyrenees, capsized as he was paddling back to his ship. He told his captors he was Patrick Albert O’Leary, a French Canadian airman, and they imprisoned him at St Hippolyte du Font, near Nimes. He escaped and was recruited by the London based MI 9. In Marseilles, as the head of a network of secret agents, under the code name PAO, after his adopted initials, he was to start the escape route known as the ‘Pat Line’, which in one year was to move 600 people—airmen, soldiers, Belgian and Free French volunteers—out of the country. This was the man to whom our plans for escape were taken by officers who were sometimes allowed to leave the camp on trust.

If O’Leary approved the plan the escape was on, and his organisation would give assistance. Implements like hacksaws were smuggled into the camp. My first step was to get moved from the officer’s quarters, where the Germans had mistakenly put me, because the escape plan, for an RAF sergeant pilot named Hicks and two Australian soldiers and myself, hinged on eating in the general mess. A wall of the long brick mess hall, where I was now allowed to eat, formed part of the boundary of the camp. The plan was to hide in the hall after the evening meal, break out through a window, and drop outside. The practice was for the guards to have a roll call before we filed in for meals, then search it after we left and lock it until the next meal.

There were some spare tables at one end of the mess hall and we planned to hide behind them. We were lucky because the guards left without bothering to search there. We used a hacksaw to cut through the 18 millimetre vertical steel rods and the flat horizontal pieces that barred the window. Then we climbed onto the windowsill and were able to bend the bars enough to squeeze through. We had arranged for the two army blokes to go last and straighten the rods to their original shape. Hicks and I got through, dropped to the ground and found ourselves in the backyard of a police station. It was 0200 hours, dark, and the yard was scattered with coke for their fuel stoves. Every step crunched coke and it sounded loud enough to wake the dead, let alone the sleeping police; but again we were lucky.

Hicks and I had instructions to make our way to a railway tunnel some distance away and hide in a recess within it. We were to stay there for two days, until the search for us had died down, and then travel by night to Nimes, about 60 kilometres away. We stayed there for two long days and then for two nights walked on those never ending sleepers between the rail tracks. We had directions to a safe house in Nimes, and when we found it were greeted by an elderly French woman. She and other members of the

Underground looked after us for two weeks, until we had regained our strength for the arduous journey across the Pyrenees to Spain. When it was time to start who should arrive to escort us but none other than Patrick O'Leary himself, dressed as a French officer.

O'Leary, with incredible cheek, marched Hicks, three other Allied servicemen and myself up to the railway station. He told the guards we were English pigs who had the pox and he was taking us to a VD hospital. He bought us train tickets and everybody gave us a wide berth. They would not touch the tickets; nor did they ask to see our papers. O'Leary stayed with us as far as Perpignan, not far from the Franco-Spanish border. We were each given a bag containing bread, a little chocolate and a bottle of water, and that night, accompanied by a guide we set off over the mountains. The 80-kilometre walk into Spain took three days, travelling at night and resting during the day, to avoid patrolling German soldiers with dogs. Although our guide assured us every hill was the last one, we thought we would never come to the end of them. After the arduous walk over the mountains we did the next stage the easy way: by train to Barcelona. Our rough clothes made us look like Spanish labourers and the Germans on the tram ignored us. The British consulate at Barcelona welcomed us and arranged for bus travel to La Linea, at the start of the causeway to Gibraltar. It was three days before we were allowed to leave La Linea, and then only after the guards had been paid two bags of flour each to let us cross the causeway. In Gibraltar we were on British soil again, and it was three months since I had been shot down.

After a week at Gibraltar we boarded the Royal Navy cruiser, Sheffield, for Glasgow. On the way the Sheffield sank a German supply ship, adding a bit of naval action to my experience. My reception at Glasgow was surprising in that I was treated with great suspicion, taken to London under escort in a special railway carriage, and straight to MI 9. There I was locked up under guard and told I would be interrogated at 1000 hours next morning. I asked the guard on my door to go to a shop and buy me a toothbrush and some toothpaste. After some hesitation, he said I could go myself if I promised to come straight back. As soon as I got out of the place I headed for the bar in Piccadilly where we Australian airmen used to drink. I caused something of a sensation when I walked in, dressed in my dilapidated French gear. 'Bluey' Truscott, Paddy Finucane and the rest of them were there, and they had thought I was dead! Truscott swore off the grog and kept telling people next day: 'That's it! I could have sworn I saw Alex Roberts last night.'

At my interrogation next morning I was able to convince them I was not a spy, and they let me go back to my Squadron.

3

PERSISTENCE REWARDED

Pilot Officer Allan Frank McSweyn

Allan Francis McSweyn had qualities of keenness, determination and persistence in the face of formidable odds, to an exceptional degree. On completion of his training as a pilot in Australia, Canada and Scotland he was posted to 115 Squadron, RAF Bomber Command, equipped with Wellingtons.

When Pilot Officer McSweyn set off from England, on his 14th operational trip, at 2300 hours on 29 October 1941, he would have had no inkling that this short hop across the North Sea to drop a load of bombs on Bremen was to take him two years and three months. Approaching the target he was coned by searchlights, took evasive action, but his starboard engine was hit by flak and commenced to overheat. In the best traditions of Bomber Command, he continued on with one good engine and bombed the target from 10,000 feet. As he turned for home he was again caught by the searchlights but this time there was no flak, which meant night fighters were operating. Then a burst of gunfire came from the rear hitting the radio set and smashing windows in the cockpit. About this time the damaged starboard engine burst into flames. The rear gunner, Sergeant Gill, returned the enemy fire and reported a single engined fighter (almost certainly a Messerschmitt 109) going down in flames. By now both gun turrets were out of action, but more excitement was in store; the second 'dickie', Pilot Officer Wild, shouted that a twin engined Messerschmitt 110 was coming in to attack from below. In this onslaught Gill was wounded in the shoulder and Wild in the hip and now the engine was burning so fiercely that the flames had set alight the fabric on the tailplane. McSweyn managed to hold the aircraft steady while all crew members baled out, after which he made his way to the escape hatch. Then he observed that all the fabric had been burnt off the starboard wing and the metal was melting; he heard a loud explosion as the wing fell off, and remembered no more until he made a soft landing in a paddock near a farmhouse at Bremervorde.

The injured Sergeant Gill got hooked up in a nearby tree, and unaccountably struck his parachute release button, fell 40 feet and broke his back. The crew stayed with him until a doctor arrived, but they learned afterwards that he died next day.

McSweyn recalls: 'While [we were] waiting in the farmyard a German came on a bicycle and went inside. I waited for about 45 minutes and then got on his bike and cycled for the rest of the night in a southerly direction [without boots, which he had lost in baling out], and during the day I hid up and then began again as soon as it was dark.'

‘As I passed Bremen I saw a German fighter station with many Messerschmitt 110s on the field. [That was after cycling for three nights.] I spent the day in hiding, watching the aircraft, and noticed an isolated one near the boundary fence. Close to it was a mechanic’s hut, with a sentry on guard. When it was dark I made my way towards this lone aircraft and climbed in, but despite doing all that I thought were the right things I could not get the engines to start. The continual trying brought one of the mechanics out from the hut, He walked under the aircraft and towards the port engine and called out something to me, so I tried again and in doing so nearly knocked his head off with the prop. To say the least, he wasn’t very pleased and came around to find out what I was playing at. As soon as he saw me, of course, the game was up and he called the sentry over, and my first escape attempt was over. I was allowed a bath and a shave and given a very comfortable pair of boots plus, of course, food and drink. I was then asked if I would like to meet the German pilots. I was not too keen, as it was likely that one of them had shot me down, but they insisted so I was taken to the officers’ mess. I found it very similar to a RAF mess, the same age of men—all keen on flying. They asked why I had left Australia to fight for the British. The unanimous opinion was that Germany, with Britain, should be fighting the Russians, and not each other.’

He was sent to Dulag Luft at Frankfurt where: ‘I was put in a cold cell, first having been stripped while my clothes were searched. They did not exactly interrogate me, but more had a chat in which they hoped I would reveal details of my Squadron and operations. There were stool pigeons in the camp, dressed as sergeants, who tended to be there one day and gone the next.

‘Later, in a compound, I saw three of my crew. The usual thing was to ignore each other, but they were so pleased and surprised to see me that they shouted: “Hello, Skipper. Thought you had bought it!” Of course, the Germans then knew when (and where) I had been shot down, as the three had been picked up in the area of the crash.

‘On 9 July I was sent off, by bus, to Oflag IX at Spangenberg. This was an old castle built in 1315, near Kassel. It was surrounded by a dry moat, in which the Germans had put wild boar as a deterrent to attempting to escape. While I was there I did make one attempt to escape with a New Zealander, Squadron Leader Svendson. We ran a rope from a gate on the castle wall that we climbed over to the side of the drawbridge. This we crawled along, crossing over the moat. Although we had chosen a rainy night a German sentry came out of his box, for one reason or another, and saw Svendson. I was also caught, but managed to break away and get back to my bed without being identified. Svendson was given seven days in the cells. And so escape number two had also failed.’

At the beginning of October he was transferred to Oflag VIB, situated in the small town of Dossel, three miles from the railway station at Warburg. There were many Army officers in this camp and conditions were bad and, not surprisingly, McSweyn was involved in another escape attempt, in April 1942. He remembered: ‘The idea

was headed by a Major Stallard of the Durham Light Infantry, and success depended on being able to put out the perimeter lights and the sentry searchlights. Most of this work on the electricity side was taken on by Lieutenant Searle, Royal Engineers, and Lieutenants Frank Weldon and Lister of the Royal Artillery. The lights would have to be out for 30 minutes to enable it to work and the men to get away.

‘To get over the wire, ladders 11 feet long were made, under the wing of Captain Steve Russell of the Black Watch, Lieutenant Cruickshank, Gordon Highlanders, and Majors Parker and Wylie of the Royal Engineers. These would be placed against the wire; while attached to the top was a duckboard which was to be launched across the space between the two fences by means of two three foot handles. The duckboard itself was eight feet long.

‘Three teams of ten and one of 11 were organised. Diversions were set up by Major Cousins, DLI. The date of the “go” was 30 August, at 2230 hours, when the lights in the camp would be shut off. All the teams were blacked up and carried rations. All went reasonably well—three teams managed to get their ladders up but one failed. I was in one of the back-up teams and not one of the first over and was picked up after two hours [of freedom]. Some were away for two or three days; while three, Major Arkwright and Captains Coombe-Tennant and Fuller made it back to UK, where they arrived on 7 November 1942.’ They succeeded in reaching Holland and managed to make contact with the Comete Line, and so down to Gibraltar.

‘In all, at this camp, I was involved in five tunnel schemes. One started in winter, so we did not bother to shore up as the ground was so hard, but when spring came it began to cave in, including some under the huts which took the foundations with them.’

In September 1942, McSweyn was among 800 moved from this camp to Oflag XXIB, at Schubin (Polish Szubin) near a small market town in German occupied Poland. The camp was situated in the grounds of a girls’ school. ‘Here we began a tunnel which was completed in five months, but the Germans became suspicious, set up extra floodlights and doubled the guards, besides adding mines between the wire and the huts. In the end, the Senior British Officer, Wing Commander Harry “Wings” Day, forbade the scheme to use the tunnel because of the possible loss of life it would involve.’

Another attempt using ladders over the wire was planned to be implemented after first fusing the lights. A party of 20 was involved, and they managed to get to the hut nearest the wire on a windy, stormy night. McSweyn remembers: ‘We were all set to go, and at the appointed time the people with the ladders rushed the fence and began to throw lines over the wires to fuse them. All went well but one important factor had not been considered—the searchlights in the towers were on a different circuit to the lights around the camp. So when the lights went out the searchlights stayed on and they (the guards) could see exactly what we were doing. A mad scramble was then on to get back to the barrack block. This was managed, but when the Germans came they made

us stand outside from 2200 hours until 0800 hours in the morning, while they searched every room and block in the camp. ‘Another tunnel I was involved in was with Oliver Hedley and Christopher Cheshire, the brother of Leonard Cheshire VC, but this was discovered when there was only 12 feet to go.

‘In April 1943 the camp broke up, but before it had I changed identity with a Private John McDiarmid of the Seaforth Highlanders. We managed to get false ID cards and put our fingerprints on them, and swapped with each other. This we did while on the train to Sagan, Stalag Luft III. For three months I worked as an orderly, doing every job one could imagine. Then, I would throw down my tools and refuse to work. In this way I built up a reputation as a troublemaker, a pain in the neck for the Germans. The Senior British Officer, Group Captain Kellett, knew my plan and suggested to the Germans (that) I be transferred to another camp. This took three months in all.

‘And so, in July 1943, I was posted to Stalag VIII B, at Lamsdorf, which was mainly an army camp with, on average, about 10,000 men. The rule was that if you were a private soldier you could be made to work, [but] if you were a NCO you could volunteer to work, and select where. If you were a RAF NCO you were not even allowed out of the camp, let alone work outside. This went back to the fact [that] the German Luftwaffe was the cream of the German forces. All the educated men were in the Luftwaffe and the Germans thought [that] in England it worked the same way, and so the RAF POW were thought to be more valuable than the army. It was thought, too, that they could [certainly, later in the war when the writing was on the wall] be used as valuable hostages.

‘So with all this on my mind, I promoted myself to corporal before I reached the camp, and told them my papers for this promotion had not as yet come through. For the first week I volunteered to go out with a party digging potatoes on a farm, 30 to 40 miles north of Breslau. There were very few guards and one day I just walked away from the farm. The next day I contacted some Polish workers who gave me a bike and I rode nearly all the way to Danzig, but the latter part I walked. It took me five days, sleeping during the day and riding at night.

‘At Danzig I made my way to the quay and got on a small Swedish boat, hiding in the coal bunker. Having got in with a French party of workers on the quay they also got me some papers. The ship moved off and I thought I was safe, but after ten minutes at sea a launch came alongside and three or four Germans, with dogs, came aboard. They started to search the ship calling out in English for me to come out, but I stayed where I was thinking that they were just making a random search and would soon go away, but they didn’t. Instead, they threw tear gas bombs into the bunker and I had no option but to come out as my eyes were now streaming with the gas. They manhandled me in rather a rough manner, and when I arrived back at Lamsdorf I was given ten days solitary confinement on a bread and water diet.

‘At Lamsdorf there were two Canadian soldiers, who had been captured at Dieppe, Sergeant Major McLean and Sergeant Larry Pals. I contacted them and we started an escape committee, and I told them of my identity change and the reason. We were joined by a Czech Jew, Private Lowenstein. The two Canadians had completed a tunnel, which was already 20 to 30 feet outside the camp (fence); it just needed someone to use it.

‘I decided to give it a go, travelling as a Frenchman unfit for further work in Germany, but I needed someone who spoke German, and so chose a driver, Geoff Williamson, who spoke fluent German and knew the railway system in Germany having been [there] pre-War. He was, in fact, from England but had lived in New Zealand for about ten years and had been captured in Crete. With the help of Lowenstein, I forged a medical certificate which said I was suffering from TB of the larynx, and was being sent back. We entered the tunnel on 19 September, a Sunday, at 1300 hours. The Canadians organised a football match inside the camp, which turned out to be a free for all; which amused the guards so much they completely devoted their attention to what was happening in the camp and not to what was happening beyond the wire.

‘I was wearing a pair of brown slacks, brown double breasted coat and carried a small attache case, while Williamson had a pair of plusfours, a black coat and also had a small case. We each had 400 reichmarks and chocolate for the journey.

‘When we were walking outside the wire a sentry shouted to get a move on, for as “civilians” we were in a restricted area. We were heading for the station at Lamsdorf, but to get there we had to walk through the guards’ living area, but we were not stopped. At the station we bought our tickets and, eventually, we were on the express train to Berlin. En route there were several Gestapo checks but we got through.

‘When we reached Berlin we found there were no more trains until the morning so we booked into a small hotel, where each day the register was checked at 0800 hours so we left at 0600 to avoid this.’

At 1000 hours they were on a train, travelling via Frankfurt, which arrived Mannheim at 2200 hours. The station was badly damaged and the town was a shambles, as the result of a bombing raid two weeks earlier. They then proceeded to Saarbrücken where they stayed for four days and discovered a French work camp which was pro-Allies, and whose leader, Pierre, welcomed them. On one occasion he took them to a local cafe where there were as many Germans as Frenchmen, and where one man in his cups tried to tell the Germans that they were hiding two POW. Fortunately the Germans did not take him seriously.

On 24 September, they were taken by Georges, one of the Frenchmen who was returning home on leave, to the frontier town of Auboué. They walked the last six miles as they negotiated the frontier, consisting of a series of three barbed wire fences with sentry boxes at intervals. They were in single file with Georges in the lead when, suddenly, a

guard, who was unseen behind a tree, called, 'halt'. McSweyn reports: '...so I sneaked up behind him and hit him with a rabbit punch on the neck, and then grabbed him around the throat until he passed out'. That night they stayed in a small hotel but were woken early by Georges to advise that the Germans were searching; doubtless because of the contretemps with the guard the previous evening.

McSweyn continues: 'We caught a bus to Longwy, but got off earlier. Georges had taken us back into Germany, but he rose to the occasion and took us to the railway station and hid us. He then went off and, later, took us to the marshalling end of the station and said he had made arrangements with his contacts for a train that was going back into France to be shunted down to us. It arrived and we scrambled on board. We were welcomed by the driver who then drove the train up alongside a carriage and we were put aboard; missing all the checks by the German Field Police that were going on outside. The train went straight down to Luneville. There we left the station and Georges went off to make his contact, and then came back with a Pierre Bonsay who had been a colonel in the French Army during World War I.

'He took us to his home and gave us a meal and a bed. The next day a lady arrived and took us into the town, and to the police station. The gendarme was the local Resistance leader, and he took all our papers and gave us new, authentic ones. He then called up two gendarmes who promptly handcuffed us and took us to the local railway station and, under escort, we were taken to Lyon. Here our contact was one of Pierre's relations. We were given a wonderful meal and at 2100 hours a young man of about 19 turned up.' He was Maurice de Milleville who, with his mother the Comtesse de Milleville, had helped other RAF evaders. She was the Mary Lindell of the Marie-Claire Line, and known as Marie.

'The following day we set off with Maurice and a young helper named Ginette on a train to Ruffec, where we stayed in the Hotel de France. Here Mary Lindell kept her organisation's headquarters. We stayed there for three or four days and were joined by two Polish sergeants in the RAF, Bakalarski and Raginis, who had escaped from Lamsdorf some six months before and got into Poland where they worked with the Resistance. After another three or four days, during which time Maurice and Ginette had been down south arranging for us to get across the Pyrenees, we were then taken by truck to Limoges. There we boarded a train to Toulouse, and then on to the Spanish border. The idea was to get into Andorra so we travelled down to Foix.

'In Foix we were to make contact with a man named Jose who would get us across. He met us at the station with the news that there was a flap on and the Germans were looking for escapers, so we returned to Ruffec. Three or four days later an attempt was to be made with Geoff and the two Polish sergeants as their knowledge of German was so good they had a better chance. After they had gone another group turned up [consisting of] Captain Bat Palm, a South African, Len Martin and Harry Smith, both Canadians, and another South African, Mike Cooper, serving in the RAF on Spitfires.'

Altogether McSweyn spent about six weeks at Ruffec, during which time he was in touch with British Intelligence and working with the French Resistance.

‘[Eventually] we again set out for Limoges by truck but on the way the axle broke [so] Marie persuaded a farmer to lend us his truck, in return for a few extra gallons of petrol. But when we arrived we had missed the train so spent the night in a hotel. There we went down to dinner with Marie, in her British Red Cross uniform complete with British decorations, and speaking madly in English only yards from five German officers who were also dining there. She had no regard at all for the Germans and thought they were idiots.

‘The next day we caught the train and met up with our contact, Jose. He had arranged for two Basque guides to get us across the Pyrenees. Later, we met them and said goodbye to Marie, who had done a marvellous job to get us this far. That night we left for what was supposed to be a six-hour crossing of the Pyrenees, but after four hours it began to snow and was bitterly cold. Our clothes were not really suitable for this sort of weather, and we had to halt for the night as Harry Smith had chest pains. We stayed until morning in a cowshed, which had a roof but no sides. At 0800 hours we set out again and walked all that day through very heavy snow and a blizzard. That night we found a small hut and decided to lie up for the night as Mike Cooper was very, very tired and cold; as was one of the guides. We set off the next day and had to crawl, on hands and knees, across a small gap of about 18 inches with a drop of about 300 feet on either side.

‘Both Mike and the guide were becoming ill again and, whereas, we kept Mike going the guide suddenly became unconscious and seemed to be frozen stiff. We tried to warm and revive him but it was hopeless and he seemed to be dead. We wrapped him up as best we could and placed him in some form of shelter and, with great reluctance, had to leave him. From here Martin and Palm went on ahead to find shelter, and we came behind helping Mike. They had found a hut and had broken in and started a fire, which meant we could get our wet clothes off and warm up.

‘About 0800 hours we set off again, and by following a stream came to a road and a sentry post with five Spanish soldiers. We were so weak we had no option other than to surrender. They gave us a hot drink and bread and then escorted us to Utaroz, a village some three miles away, and handed us over to the local police who stuck us in a filthy cell. They let our remaining guide, who was known to them, go to a local inn. After a little bribery, we were allowed to join the guide at the inn, but still under guard. The guide told us he had posted a letter to the British Consul for us.

‘The next day a Mr Frost arrived in a station wagon from San Sebastian. He was able to bail us out and, after six days, we were taken on a two-day drive to Madrid. We stayed with the Australian First Secretary at the Embassy and then, after three days, were taken

to Gibraltar. It was here that I met Airey Neave who told me the two Poles had made it, but that Geoff Williamson had died in a blizzard.

‘From the reports that Bakalarski and Raginis made on their return, the fate of Geoff Williamson was confirmed. They had run into a blizzard and heavy snow and Geoff ended up being carried, but at 1300 hours on 26 October he got so tired he could not even walk downhill on his own. Between 1800 and 1900 hours he died and they left him in the mountains, somewhere near Pic de Rudlo, in the shelter of some rocks. He had come from his adopted New Zealand, to Crete and then Germany only to die in the French Pyrenees.

‘The two Poles, on their return to the UK, were awarded DCMs. I was flown home, in a Dakota, from Gibraltar to Whitchurch, Bristol. On landing we ground looped and the aircraft was written off, but with no injury to the 20 passengers and crew I am glad to say.’

THE MAJOR TO THE RESCUE

Flight Sergeant Murray Adams

It was 29 October 1941 when I joined 250 Squadron RAF at L.G. 013 (south of Mersa Matruh, Egypt). The Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader E.F. (Teddy) Morris, a South African in the RAF, and I was allotted to A Flight led by an Australian, Flight Lieutenant Clive Caldwell. Pilot Officer John Waddy and I arrived on the same day as much needed reinforcements to the under-strength squadron, after having been flown by Empire Airways flying boat from Khartoum to Cairo four days earlier, and then by truck to the Western Desert. We had just completed a short course at 71 OTU, which in my case consisted of seven hours on Hurricanes and six on Tomahawks, with which my new squadron was equipped. There were a number of other Australians on the squadron already, including Sergeants Bob Whittle, 'Charlie' Coward, Dick Nitschke and Mick Ryan.

Shortly afterwards, on 14 November, Operation *Crusader*, the great offensive to sweep Rommel from the Desert, was launched and in preparation for this momentous campaign we had moved to a forward base known as L.G. 123, at Fort Maddalena. This was just inside the Libyan boundary which was always referred to as 'The Wire' because it was actually a massive, 240 kilometre long, barbed wire fence that Mussolini had constructed from the Siwa Oasis to the Mediterranean coast, to prevent the Senussi tribes from fleeing into Egypt to escape punitive raids by Italian forces.

It was from this field that the Squadron took off, on 1 December, for an offensive sweep over the area south of Tobruk. I was flying number two behind Flying Officer Bruce Cole, at 14,000 feet, when we were jumped by Messerschmitt 109s that were escorting Messerschmitt 110s and Junkers 88s.

In the melee that quickly ensued I became the victim of the proverbial 'Hun in the sun', which I had failed to see until it was too late. When I did look over my shoulder I had a close up view of the front end of a Messerschmitt 109 with guns blazing, and



Murray Adams, Late Arrivals Club

heard something hit the aircraft just behind my head. My evasive action was more the result of impulse than sound tactics, and was so violent that I found myself in a spin. In defence of my clumsy response to a situation that had not been faced previously, I submit that at the time I was grossly under trained and sadly lacking in skill. I had 17 hours operational flying behind me, 34 hours experience on Tomahawks and a total of only 126 hours solo flying time on all types.

Tomahawks did not respond well to normal corrective action for spin recovery and the more I tried the tighter the spin seemed to become, and warm oil swirling around the cockpit did not help matters. Then I took the obvious decision to leave the uncontrollable aircraft and join the Caterpillar Club but, alas, the canopy would not slide open nor yield to the limited brute force I could apply to it in a spinning cockpit. The film of oil covering the inside of the perspex prevented me from seeing how much of the 14,000 feet I had lost during these urgent efforts, but I did have a fleeting thought that before long there was likely to be a loud bang when my aircraft collided violently with the unyielding surface of the planet, and that I would not hear it. Just when all hope appeared to have gone the engine seized up, due to the oil being mainly in the cockpit, and almost immediately the aircraft came out of the spin. As the oil drained off the perspex I could see the surface of the desert no more than 200 feet below and there was no time for anything other than a straight-ahead belly landing, which proved to be smooth and painless.

Once on the ground, with harness unfastened, I was able to apply my shoulder to the reluctant canopy and force it off. The reason for its intransigence proved to be a bullet hole through the rail on which it slid. So there I was, alone and ill equipped, in the Libyan desert somewhere on the southern flank of the Sidi Rezegh tank battle, which had been raging to and fro for the best part of a week. It was mid-morning and there was a distance of, probably, 150 kilometres between me and my base, with unknown German and Allied forces in between. My survival chances were not favourable because I had no water or food, but the first priority was to put distance between the aircraft and myself, so I waited only long enough to unscrew the aircraft clock to use as a compass, in conjunction with the sun shining out of the cloudless sky.

I set off in a north-easterly direction and as it was winter time, and the temperature moderate, the lack of water was not of immediate concern. Geographically, I was in enemy-held territory but the thrusting and counter thrusting of the opposing forces meant that the situation could best be described as fluid and subject to rapid change, according to the fluctuating fortunes of the battle. My survival depended on meeting up with a vehicle with water, and my freedom on finding a British one.

Some time later, when my aircraft was long lost to sight in the shimmering haze behind me, a plume of dust heralded the approach of vehicles across this trackless desert. I went to ground, lying very flat behind the ridiculously inadequate cover of a clump of camel thorn about 15 centimetres high but my khaki battledress, by then oil soaked and

caked with dust, provided good camouflage. They passed some distance to the north but close enough for me to see that they bore black crosses and were not the kind I was looking for. Fortunately, they showed no signs of being aware of my presence.

I plodded on, holding my north-easterly course, and by mid-afternoon was beginning to feel the torment of thirst when the dust of what appeared to be a single vehicle appeared on the horizon. It was heading straight for my position and any attempt to hide would have been futile but some distance off, to my intense relief, I recognised the flat silhouette of a British Morris 15 cwt truck. When it came to a stop beside me I greeted a Major of the Northumberland Hussars and his driver and, with all the nonchalance the circumstances and my parched throat would allow, requested that they give me a lift. At the same time I noted with satisfaction that the rear of the vehicle was well stocked with water, bully beef and additional fuel in two-gallon cans. I was somewhat taken aback when the Major threw doubt on the value of such assistance because, as he put it: 'We're lorst!'.

It transpired that he had neither compass nor desert training and was amazed that I could find my way with a clock and the sun, as Baden-Powell had taught me in 'Scouting for Boys'. He was impressed and took me on as navigator, and so we proceeded for the remainder of the afternoon, but when the sun reached the horizon I called for a halt. I had no competence as a night navigator because I had not bothered to learn from the great B-P how to navigate by the stars in the Northern Hemisphere; never imagining that I would ever have a need for it. So, we made an evening meal of bully beef and 'dog' biscuits washed down with water, because we did not wish to advertise our position by lighting a fire in this uncertain territory.

Next morning, after an uncomfortable sleep on the ground, we set course again and towards midday sighted a collection of tents floating on the haze dead ahead. I calculated that the distance that we had covered made it reasonably certain that they must be British—unless the battle had gone horribly wrong in our absence. The encampment proved to be the British Army Advanced Field Headquarters, and as we drove up a Lysander touched down and disgorged a general. We had arrived at the historic moment when General Ritchie had come to hand General Cunningham his dismissal notice and to take over command, with immediate effect. The following day I arranged lifts in Army vehicles back to L.G. 123, which I had left two days earlier. Because I had last been seen spinning too close to the ground for safety I had been posted 'missing believed killed' but, fortunately, there was time to intercept the signal in Cairo before it could cause unnecessary anguish to my parents in Australia.

My fellow pilots pretended not to welcome my return to the fold because, as was the custom in the Desert, they had already divided up my few possessions and felt they had been cheated when I insisted on having them back. Their view was that if you were dead the decent thing to do was to stay dead.

One result of this episode was that we now knew that it was necessary to pull the throttle right off to get a Tomahawk out of a tight spin. Another was that I was awarded a Flying Boot, the unofficial emblem, initiated by Official RAF War Correspondents in the Desert, to recognise those aircrew members who were forced to leave their aircraft in hostile territory, as the result of 'unfriendly action by the enemy', and arrived back at their bases long after their estimated times of arrival.

5

YOU'VE GOT TO BE LUCKY

Flight Lieutenant Frederic Felix Henriques Eggleston

Squadron Leader 'Woof' Arthur led 3 Squadron's Tomahawks from El Adem, Libya, at 1530 hours on 12 December 1941, for what was intended to be a strafing strike on the Derna road. I was leading Blue Flight, in aircraft AN 335, with Robin Gray on my left and 'Nick' Barr on the right.

Soon we were climbing into the sun at 10,000 feet when we saw a number of Messerschmitt 109s taking off from the Luftwaffe base at Tmimi, directly below. Suddenly, my aircraft lurched and I saw that Robin Gray had drifted towards me and his propeller was chewing off my wingtip. With the extra drag from the damaged wingtip I lost speed and fell behind.

Soon, I found three Tomahawks of 112 Squadron and joined them as they chased after five Me.109s, which were climbing to attack my Squadron. With my height advantage I dived down and came up to make an attack from below one of the enemy aircraft. The range was a bit long but it broke up the formation. They turned to do battle and a good old-fashioned dogfight ensued. I made three further attacks on aircraft that came into view but, with the damaged wingtip and trouble with jamming guns, was unable to achieve decisive results. During my last attack tracer seemed to be streaming from my wings, but I remembered we did not have tracer; it was coming from another Messerschmitt which had sneaked in behind me. I flicked into a steep turn and got away from him but by this time I had lost height and the friendly Tomahawks had vanished.

Now, I was at 1500 feet with three Messerschmitts circling above for the kill. One made a head-on attack and as I faced him, looking at the hole in his airscrew boss through which his cannon was pointing at me, my .5 inch guns jammed again, but for some unknown reason he did not fire either. I pushed the stick forward and slid under him, with what seemed like inches to spare. The net result was that I was now down to 1000 feet and, while I was clearing my guns, could still see two of the enemy above me. Just then there was a 'plop' under my feet; an explosive shell in the oil cooler and I was flying east with my aircraft on fire and with a thick trail of black smoke behind me.

I undid my safety belt, disconnected the oxygen tube, slid back the canopy, pushed the stick forward and floated into the slipstream. The radio cord, which I had forgotten to pull out, came adrift and I hit the tail fin, but luckily the parachute pack absorbed most of the blow. I could see my aircraft with its smoke trail fading into the distance, with the Messerschmitt still close behind. My parachute descent was short and I landed on a

flat stretch of ground free of stone outcrops. By a miracle, I had not been wounded nor suffered any obvious injury from either the collision with the tail plane, or the rather hairy parachute landing with a stiff westerly breeze behind me.

Very soon the Me.109 returned at low level from the east and, seeing my parachute, went into a steep left hand turn to get into position to strafe me. At least that was my interpretation of his intentions, so I sprinted a hundred yards in very fast time to take cover behind some rocks. He made a run without opening fire and as soon as he passed I moved a few yards to the protection of some bushes but he did not return. I was now completely on my own and, unlike the air, in an environment in which I had not been trained to fight, or survive. The feeling of detached calm in the face of deadly danger a few minutes before had deserted me and now, at 1630 hours on this fateful day, I was scared and anything but confident as I contemplated my situation.

To the north, beyond the undulating landscape, I could hear aircraft engines at Tmimi and, to the south, motor transport on the east-west Trig Capuzzo. From my map I fixed my position at 60 miles west-north-west of El Adem and at least 50 miles inside enemy territory. I was wearing battle dress over a shirt and shorts with long socks and a pair of battered suede desert boots. My water bottle was full but I had no emergency rations save, by chance, two dozen malted milk tablets in my pocket. I also had a shirt stud compass, which proved invaluable for night navigation. My plan was to lie low during the day and walk eastwards during the hours of darkness. I walked for three nights, but was captured south-west of Gazala, near the front line. Thence, via transit camps at Barce and Tarhuna, I was transferred by ship to Naples and Italian POW camps at Capua, Padula, Sulmona, and finally Bologna where my escape saga began in September 1943.

The news filtering through to us gave cause for hope. Montgomery, from the east, and the Americans from the west, had pushed the Axis forces out of Africa and the Allies had landed in Sicily at the beginning of July. Following a massive air raid on Rome on 17 July, Mussolini had been forced to resign and it was the end of the Fascist junta. There were rumours of a separate peace between Italy and the Allies, but we realised that Germany could not afford to lose this strategic territory and would fight hard to retain it. Our morale was uplifted further, during the month of August, by the sight of American Flying Fortresses bombing Bologna in daylight.

We began to prepare ourselves for likely possibilities by sorting our possessions into three categories. One, if we moved to another camp in an orderly manner and two, a pack that could be easily carried if we had to move hurriedly to an uncertain destination. The third pack was bare essentials only for escape opportunities.

Our Senior British Officer, Brigadier Mountain, demanded of the Italian Commandant that we be set free in the event of a separate peace being signed between Italy and the Allies, and threatened that his name would be in the Black Book if he did not agree.

He was unwilling to commit himself, and we discovered later that the local German Commander had told him that they would shell the Camp if it was not handed over to them. Things came to a head on Wednesday, 8 September, and on returning from the canteen that evening I saw a large crowd around the cage gate near the front entrance of the Camp. It transpired that Italy had signed an armistice with the Allies on 3 September, to come into effect when a suitable moment arrived. Our local situation was not rosy; there were 30,000 German troops in the district and the Italian Area Commandant had turned down our request for defence of the Camp. The best he would agree to was to cut the wire and open the rear gates if the Germans threatened the Camp.

At 0300 hours on Thursday, 9 September, we were awakened by the Italian orderly officer screaming: 'I Tedeschi sono qui!' (The Germans are here!) We were up in a trice and rushed onto the parade ground where the orderly officer directed us to the cage gate, but we were soon looking down the barrels of German machine guns inside the main entrance and were ordered back to our barracks. Meanwhile, some officers had slipped out the back gate that had been left open, conveniently, by the Italians. The Germans quickly began rounding up the escapers and recaptured all but about 16 of them. That this was accomplished with the loss of only one life indicated the good discipline of the German unit, under the command of a 22-year-old junior officer.

Early on Saturday, 11 September, we were told to be ready to leave at one hour's notice and that we could take only what we could carry. At 1430 hours we were loaded, 30 per lorry, to be driven about 40 kilometres to Modena railway station. As we drove through the streets of Bologna the populace showed its feelings by smiling, waving and blowing kisses, and we realised that they would help us if we could get away from our guards. It was becoming clear that our destination was Germany. We were loaded into rail box cars, 30 to each, for the night. Next morning we were allowed out to stretch our legs and several officers got away out of the station yard. One, Ted Paul, grabbed a case of fruit from an Italian vendor, walked slowly to the fence, vaulted over it and disappeared. We had time to notice that the walls of some box cars were of steel and others, such as the one I was in, were of timber and that between every five or six was a flat car bristling with machine-guns. Our box car had two sliding doors on the side and the latch looked negotiable, providing it was not to be padlocked or wired up.

After this interlude we were herded back into the cars and issued with Red Cross parcels, as rations for the journey. The doors were left open while we waited for departure and I was able to use my reasonable fluency in German on the boyish looking guard, by taunting him with a prediction that the Allies would soon invade La Spezia naval base in northern Italy and that he would not be able to return to Germany because the Brenner Pass would be blocked by Allied bombing. I desisted when I saw his trigger finger trembling as he clutched his automatic weapon.

The doors were finally shut and we departed Modena at 1300 hours, destined for Mantova, Verona and then the Brenner Pass into Austria. We left Mantova at dusk.

It was a fine night with a full moon and the train reached Verona about midnight and backed into a siding, so we promptly fell asleep. I awoke at 0300 hours to find the train speeding along in the bright moonlight, and through a small ventilator I was able to read the name Rovereto on a station so realised that we would have to act soon if we were to find friendly Italians when we got out. Tracey Rowley was at work cutting out a board near the latch, but leaving a paper-thin outer skin to be broken out at the appropriate time.

Numbered slips of paper were drawn out of a hat and Tracey got number one and Jack Kroger, Barney Grogan, Lex Lamb, Robbie, Johnny Hall, Sandy Mair, Bob Jones and Bob Donnan all drew low numbers. I drew number ten, Mort Edwards eleven and Geoff Chinchin twelve. While we were getting ready to leave I began to think aloud: 'We would be crazy to jump. We could lose all our possessions and end up getting shot!' 'To hell with that', said Robbie, nursing his gammy knee, 'I'm going!' Ashamed, I quelled my doubts and determined to go too.

When the time came to jump Tracey decided not to go! Jack Kroger and Barney Grogan did not hesitate although the train was moving at a cracking pace. Lex and Robbie went and then there was a pause while someone was collecting his gear. 'Out you go Eggie', I heard somebody shout, and out I went! They threw out my small knapsack, which I retrieved. The train had been travelling very slowly up an incline and I found myself unhurt in a shallow cutting and tried to make myself invisible by lying down on the gravel, but the moonlight was brighter than I would have liked and the gravel was white quartz. Our boxcar was near the rear of the train, and I did not have to contend with one of those flat cars bristling with machine-guns but I could see a German with a 'tommy' gun on the rear platform of the guardsvan, as the train drew slowly away. He was distracted and failed to notice me; otherwise I would have been a dead duck.

With the train now out of sight, I crawled through the fence on the east side of the track and found myself in a vineyard. I went through the vines as fast as I could on hands and knees to get clear of the railway line before the break of day. It was 0430 hours and I had jumped near the village of Lavis, eight kilometres north of the city of Trento. It was Monday, 13 September 1943, and so far so good!

As dawn broke, I was concerned to find that I was close to a busy road, and to add to my worries, a German motorised unit stopped outside the fence for breakfast. I kept my head down, but the vines provided only moderate cover and I was scared that one of the Germans might come into the vineyard to pick grapes or to relieve himself, and discover me. They left after 45 minutes and I was still free! There were steady streams of traffic along both the road and rail line throughout the day, and I did not move one inch—except to pick a bunch of grapes above my head. About mid-morning a farmer brought a ladder and picked fruit from a tree just a few yards away. I could clearly see him and am sure he must have seen me but he did not bat an eyelid, although the tiny boy with him was muttering, in an Austrian dialect, about all the footprints in the

vineyard. I was aware that this region had formerly been under Austrian influence, and the boy's dialect worried me.

Throughout the day, German reconnaissance aircraft flew up and down the valley, and at dusk there were sounds of 'tommy' gun fire, shouts of 'Heraus' and the barking of dogs. The hunt for escapers was on! At 1800 hours it was getting dark and I was delighted to see Bob Jones and Sandy Mair crawling towards me. They had been hiding just a few yards away.

We had a snack from my kit and decided we must get clear of the road and rail track before approaching peasants for help. Occasional shouts and bursts of gunfire could be heard in the distance, so we waited until midnight when things were quieter. We went southwards in the shadows thrown by the trees. We went always through fields and heard nothing except an occasional distant shout of 'heraus' and the barking of some dogs. The moon was very bright and in the strange light, as we approached the edge of an open field, we were convinced that we could see Germans creeping towards us from the woods on the opposite side, until we realised there was nothing there. Towards dawn we reached a wide stone wall along the north bank of a river, which looked too difficult to cross, so we retreated and took cover in a field of corn. It was 0500 hours on Tuesday, 14 September, and we reckoned we had travelled two kilometres from our hiding place in the vineyard.

With dawn came occasional distant sounds of gunfire and more shouts of 'heraus'. These did not disturb us, but then we became aware of bursts of a high pitched sound which Sandy thought might be a flamethrower. This gave us visions of being burned out of our hiding place in the corn. Then all hell broke loose; the deafening roar of army tanks on the move, but the noise receded as they went down the road away from us. We then surmised that the high-pitched sound heard earlier was caused by cleaning tracks with compressed air.

After that bit of excitement we settled down again, but at 1000 hours some peasants discovered us. They were friendly and went off to fetch the local priest who would advise us what to do, but returned at 1400 hours to report that he was absent. However, they brought us civilian clothes and two bottles of chianti, and said we should try to reach Switzerland which was 'just over the hills'. We put on their clothes and left ours with them, but kept our own boots for the long walk ahead, which we knew was more than 'just over the hills'. There was a risk that our army boots could give us away so smeared them with mud and manure to make us look more like peasants. Sandy Mair really looked the part, with his neat pointed moustache and freckled face set off by a smart blue and yellow check shirt and dark grey striped trousers. I had a cream shirt and light grey golf jacket, and Bob Jones wore a light shirt with black trousers.

Our Italian friends had not brought food but we finished one of the bottles of chianti and set off to walk through Lavis at 1530 hours. We had to go through the village as there

was no other route over the rail line leading to the bridge over the river Adige, which we had to cross. The Italians remained behind in the cornfield.

I was in the lead with the bottle of chianti in my right hand when we reached the village and, walking in single file, we made our way along a narrow footpath on the right hand side of the road, past a row of small houses. I could see a number of the dreaded SS soldiers walking towards us, in the course of searching houses for escaped prisoners. I held my breath and brushed past them, trying to look downtrodden. Our cover held against the Germans, though some of the smiling Italian girls on the other side of the road left us in no doubt that they knew we were escaped prisoners.

The road came to a level crossing, and as we went over the rail line a woman in black came over to me and said in Italian: 'You are English aren't you?' I said: 'Si' and she said: 'There is a German guard on that bridge—take my hand and he will think you are my son.' I did this convinced I had never seen such a brave act. Undoubtedly that woman would have been shot if our identity had been discovered. I dared not look back but I learned later that Sandy and Bob each had taken the hand of one of her children. That brave woman could have looked at us and turned away but, instead, she chose to become involved, even at the risk of her life and, perhaps, the lives of her children.

Our party soon reached the bridge and got across without being challenged. About a hundred metres further on we parted from the brave woman and her children and continued towards the steep mountain slope on the western side of the valley. Soon, we approached the village of Zampana, at the foot of the mountain. Suddenly, we became aware of a stocky German soldier, in black riding breeches, standing in the middle of our path with his hands on his hips, and staring at us as we came near. There was nothing we could do but continue on our way. He turned as we passed and stared after us, but did not challenge us. Providence was still on our side! We reached the bushes at the base of the mountain in a few moments and, as we entered the track to go up, I looked back to see the German soldier still staring at us. We streaked up the mountain to put as much distance as possible between us and that valley, but about half way up I was overcome by a dreadful weakness and realised it was due to a blood sugar imbalance following the chianti I had drunk with the peasants in the corn field. I was so weak I had to sit down and eat my entire emergency chocolate ration before I was in a fit state to continue. I emptied out the other bottle I was carrying to ensure we would not fall into that trap again.

After an 800 metre climb to the top of the mountain, we reached the village of Fai Della Paganella (1000 metres above sea level) at 1830 hours. People were friendly, leaning over their balconies to greet us. We were joined by a young Italian corporal who said he was on his way to Mezzolombardo, where he would stay until the war was over. He invited us to come with him, which we did for a few moments until we realised the idea was risky. We then went on our previously chosen direction towards Molveno. We reached Andalo (1050 metres) at 2000 hours, in pitch darkness, and decided to

seek shelter for the night. We had got away from the Germans and covered about 15 kilometres from Lavis.

In the dark, we were discussing what to do when a voice called to us in Italian and offered us shelter in a barn for the night. The owner of the voice said that some of our companions had passed through already and were making their way over the mountains. After a sound sleep in the friendly barn, our host gave us some breakfast and pointed the way to a mountain path, which he assured us was the best route to Switzerland.

We started at 0900 hours and climbed without a stop to reach a place called Malga Spora (1815 metres) at 1145 hours. After a rest and a wash, we continued, crossing the Brenta Pass (2731 metres) at 1430 hours. We caught up with the 'companions' we had been told about, at a place called Tucket (2656 metres), at 1530 hours. They proved to be Don McDonald, Bob Donnan, Gordon Reneau, Pop Sharp and his son Keith. We went on slowly until we reached a chalet in the forest above San Antonio. The beautiful mountains we had come through comprised the Gruppo di Brenta, a part of the Dolomites featuring huge monoliths towering up to 3150 metres above sea level. The chalet was a private one, Rifugio Valsinella (1513 metres) and there was only a caretaker there. He agreed to give us shelter for the night but said he had no food and was going down to the village after dark to steal a few potatoes from someone's garden. We were not sure we could trust him so slept with the windows open in case a hasty exit became necessary. We had covered 20 kilometres from Andalo.

Our host came back in the early hours of the morning, without any Germans, so we dozed off again. Later we asked the way to Switzerland and he produced a tourist map, from which I copied our intended route in pencil on a sheet of paper. A thing that impressed me at the time was an arrow from our intended border crossing point with the words 'Five hours to St Moritz'.

It was now Thursday, 15 September, the weather was perfect and we set out at 0900 hours. We decided to split up during the day as a big group could attract the attention of any Germans in the area, and could frighten would-be helpers. We appreciated the wisdom of this decision when an open half-track army vehicle with a German officer in the back came up the road. He stared directly at us but did not stop.

Sandy, Bob and I reached San Antonio (1122 metres) at 1000 hours and had some food at a friendly inn. We then continued toward Pinzolo but lost sight of the others, and spent about four hours walking up and down the hillsides looking for them. Meanwhile, we were given some potatoes by a kind woman and some advice. We were told that it would be suicidal to attempt the mountain passes, and were on the road to Madonna di Campiglio when we got word that the others had left for Val Genova a few minutes earlier. We guessed they must be on to something good so hot footed after them, but missed their tracks at a sawmill near Pinzolo (765 metres) and wandered into the town. Eventually, at 1630 hours, someone put us on the track for Mount Mandrone and we

caught up with the others one and a half hours later, just before we reached the mountain lodge, Fontana Buona (1099 metres). We were made welcome there by Rozario and Ottilia Frizzi who put us up for the night. Again, we had covered about 20 kilometres for the day, but probably walked about twice that distance. There was no shortage of accommodation at the lodge—it being the off-season—and we were given rooms on the first floor. The WC was on the balcony and consisted of a hole in the floor, connected by a vertical pipe to a can at ground level.

During the afternoon we had met up with a pixilated lady who claimed to have sung in opera at London's Covent Garden. She took a liking to Sandy and insisted on holding his hand, as we walked along.

Eight of us stayed at Fontana Buona on the night of Thursday, 16 September. The oldest was 'Pop', Lieutenant Frank Sharp, born at Newcastle, New South Wales, on 6 April 1895, a veteran of World War I and a hotelkeeper in civilian life. The youngest was his son, Keith, Gunner K.W. Sharp, born 17 October 1920. Both were members of the 2/3 Anti-Tank Regiment and were captured near Mechili, Libya, in April 1941, during the withdrawal after the Wavell offensive of that year. The father was worldly, had learned all the tricks and knew all the answers, and we admired his guts and determination in the face of difficult conditions. He and his son worked as a team and it was a relief to us that Keith supported his father when the mountain going got tough.

I was the oldest of the others (28.6.1914), and although I had never aspired to be 'a leader of men' my companions seemed to accept my plans. But not so, 'Pop'! He and Keith were to leave us two days later and find their own way into Switzerland. My idea was to avoid the risk of meeting Germans or Italian Fascists by travelling the mountain passes, rather than the major roads. Our disguises were more suited to the mountain tracks, allowing free movement during the day, and the route was shorter. We had been warned that the passes were dangerous; we carried no rations and if the weather broke we could perish in our inadequate clothes. On the other hand, our hosts gave us a good chance of achieving our goal, provided the fine weather continued.

After a breakfast consisting solely of ersatz coffee, we left Fontana Buona (1099 metres) at 0400 hours on Friday, 17 September, and continued up the gently rising Val Genova, between steep mountain slopes, and reached Rifugio Medole (1641 metres) by 0645 hours. The view was awesome, surrounded by magnificent towering mountains, with sheer, bald, rocky slopes almost down to our feet.

We went straight on and the track became steeper as we made our way to Rifugio Mandrone (2449 metres), arriving at 1115 hours and resting until 1245 hours. There we met a woman and her daughter who were collecting barbed wire from the World War I battle frontier between Italy and Austria to sell as scrap. The so-called wire was really 5mm by 5mm square steel rod with horrible barbs attached. She had some polenta (maize pudding) for their lunch and gave us each a slice. She apologised that she had no

sauce to go with it, offering coarse salt instead. We were very grateful. It was the first food we had tasted that day. I asked her if she thought the Germans would abandon Italy and she said: 'They'll never give in!' We said farewell and commenced an even steeper climb to Passo Maro Caro (2975 metres), while the women went downhill with their heavy loads. Pop was lagging behind and Keith stayed with him. We reached the pass at 1400 hours and stopped for a few minutes to survey the glacier we had to cross. There was some worry about the crevasses but at least, after the fine weather we had enjoyed, they were not concealed by soft snow to make them hazardous. There was no track and we had to pick our own way. It was not difficult; the one kilometre crossing taking little more than an hour. We reached Tre Laghetti (Three Little Lakes) (2583 metres) at 1530 hours, and Passo Paradiso (2573 metres) at 1600 hours.

The view from here was impressive and we looked down on a busy road running east from Ponte di Legno (1258 metres), through Passo Tonale (1883 metres) 690 metres below us. Ponte di Legno was not visible but we could plainly see German military lorries climbing towards Passo Tonale. To the north, on the far side of the road, in the direction we had to go were high mountains away into the distance. Gordon Reneau was so fascinated by the view he slipped and nearly fell over the cliff beneath us. We needed to get down and find shelter for the night, but care was needed with the German traffic below. The slopes down to the road were steep and bare, with some patches of scrub toward the bottom. It took us about an hour to reach the cover of the scrub.

Just before we reached it we saw a person running up to meet us; the others hid while 'Eggie' went forward to meet him. It was a boy of 14 years with a message from his father who owned one of the dairies on the other side of the road. He said there were Germans in Ponte di Legno and along the road and that we should remain concealed until after dark, when we would be welcome to spend the night in his barn. The farmer had seen us as we came over the pass and guessed who we were. I thanked the boy and gratefully accepted the offer. Good luck, once more! After dark, one by one, we crossed the road and made for the barn and the warmth of its hay. Soon, our good host came with some polenta—this time with warm milk. We had found our lunch sustaining and were glad to have some more of this food, which we had not seen previously in Italy. The farmer told us Ponte di Legno was full of Germans, but that his son would lead us along a forest track which by-passed the town and led to the alpine road we would follow for the next stage of our journey, and that we should leave well before first light.

We slept the sleep of the just and left at 0500 hours on Saturday, 18 September, with the boy in the lead. It was obvious he was enjoying the adventure and he took us through forests, up and down slopes, over streams and then steadily up the mountain side until, at 0700 hours, we reached Pezzo (1565 metres), a village three and a half kilometres north of Ponte di Legno on the alpine road to Passo di Gavia (2618 metres), which was our next hurdle. Thanking our brave little guide, we commenced the steady climb to the pass, and at 0800 hours we were overtaken by four of our POW friends from Bologna;

Guy Greville, Dick Dennis, Roger Phillips and Derry McDowall. Meanwhile Pop was getting tired and lagged behind, supported by his son Keith.

We reached the pass at noon, by which time there was a cold wind from the north and it had commenced to rain. When we arrived at the lovely alpine village of Santa Caterina Valfurva (1737 metres), along the banks of the bubbling Torrenta Frodolfo, it was 1600 hours and we were wet and cold. Shelter was imperative to avoid the risk of pneumonia so we knocked at the door of the Albergo Compagnoni and were invited in. Our host proved to be Tenente Colonello Compagnoni, formerly of the famous Bersaglieri Division, and he made us welcome for the night with meals and beds, but made it plain that he was risking his family by doing so, and insisted that we leave well before dawn. He gave general approval to our planned route but recommended that we make a detour around the large town of Bormia because it was bound to harbour Fascists and Germans, being on the Passo della Stelvio (2758 metres) route from Italy to Austria. We did our best to dry our clothes, waiting for the Sharps to arrive, and then sat down to a splendid meal of pheasant, accompanying delicacies, and wine followed by dessert and coffee. Pop was so exhausted that he was unable to keep it down, and we were only marginally less tired after having covered 38 kilometres for the day.

True to our host's instructions, we set out at 0300 hours on Sunday, 19 September, and reached the outskirts of Bormio (1225 metres) three hours later. Pop and Keith left us at this point, taking a higher path through the trees and parallel to the road. We did not see them again on Italian soil, but learned afterwards that they crossed the frontier at Passo Val Viola (2432 metres).

We skirted Bormio, with its gentle clanging of church bells and shadowy figures in the half light on their way to mass, turned north and came to Bagni Nuovi (New Baths) (1332 metres) by 0700 hours. From there we took the road westward toward Isolaccia (1345 metres), and our destination for this daily stage, Livigno (1816 metres). This road was too much of a highway for our liking so we branched off shortly to take a lesser one on the northern slope of the valley. This route took us via Pedenosso, to Pradaccia (1640 metres) where, at 0830 hours, we saw an 'old' (to us) man in his Sunday best, sitting on a bench outside a log cabin, smoking a cigar in the morning sun. We asked him the way to Livigno and he invited us to breakfast, having already guessed we were escaped prisoners of war.

He said his name was Cesare and as his wife, dressed in black like all Italian women, prepared the food she tearfully told us that their son was a POW on the Russian front and she hoped someone was being kind to him, just as they were being kind to us. We certainly hoped so. While we ate our breakfast of rye bread and cheese, Cesare chewed his cigar and spat on the earth floor; he was such a kind, gentle man that this breach of etiquette gave us no offence.

Cesare took us along a track over the mountains, and bade us farewell at 1100 hours with the welcome news that there was a dairy where we might refresh ourselves on the way to Livigno. We reached the Bocche di Trela (2349 metres) at midday, and an hour later the dairy farm mentioned by Cesare where we rested and drank some milk. By 1700 hours we were on the slopes 400 metres above Livigno and sat down on the grass, to eat the food we carried and admire the panorama, which included the sun sinking between 3000 metre Swiss mountain peaks in the distance. Those peaks represented freedom, but to get there we still had to cross the frontier on a high mountain pass.

I tried to open conversation with some local people, also passing the time of day on this slope, but they suspected that we were Germans in disguise trying to catch them helping escaped POW. We were speaking in Italian and one of them said: 'Say something in German' and I obliged. Immediately, he said: 'Yes. You are German!'. Normally I would have been flattered by this compliment to my ability in the German tongue, but things were getting out of hand. Fortunately, a young Italian soldier joined the group and, after speaking with us for a minute or two, he announced: 'They are not Germans! They are genuine Allied escaped prisoners of war!'

We welcomed this newfound ally and told him of our need for a guide to get us across the frontier. He grasped the situation immediately and advised that he could get guides but they would have to be paid, and our problem was that we had no money. We offered him our six watches, which he took off to the town to try and sell, telling us to keep out of sight as there were Fascist Militia in Livigno. This young man, Ermenegildo Foroni, was back in two hours with the news that he had sold our watches for a total of 6000 lire, which would be sufficient to pay the two guides he had procured. He told us to wait until it was really dark, and then to go down to a log hut at the foot of the slope from where we would be picked up and taken to the guides' cabin, on the other side of town. We had no option other than to trust him but, at the same time, were aware of the unpleasant things that could happen to us if he turned out to be a rogue.

It was 2300 hours when we reached the log cabin in the valley and we were picked up soon after midnight, crept around the town, and eventually arrived at the mountain cabin where our guides were waiting for us. They were stocky, cheerful types and said they were contrabandieri (smugglers)—the main items of contraband being saccharine and condoms. They sat back and insisted we tell them our whole story; probably to satisfy themselves that we were genuine and, also, they were playing for time because the weather had deteriorated and it was too dark to be sure of following the track to the pass, 1000 metres above. They punctuated their listening with exclamations of, 'povere genti!' (poor people!) as each phase of our tale unfolded. We were impatient to get going because of a nagging fear of betrayal.

Our party comprising Bob Donnan, Fred Eggleston, Bob Jones, Don McDonald, John Mair, Gordon Reneau and the two guides whose names we did not know, started the climb at 0300 hours on Monday, 20 September 1943. We could hear the wind howling

in the peaks above, light rain was falling, it was pitch dark and very cold. Our ragged clothes were inadequate for such conditions and Bob Jones, in particular, had only a thin shirt and no jacket. We cut head and arm holes in a corn sack for him to wear but his arms were exposed. It was not so bad while we were climbing but, every so often our guides, in their heavy jackets and breeches, would rest and, when the cold became unbearable, we had to urge them on.

In some places there was no track and we went straight up inclines so steep that we had to pull ourselves upward by grabbing tufts of grass. In others, we were traversing slippery slopes, or moving gingerly along a narrow path with a sheer drop below. All rather unnerving in the dark but, after a couple of hours, the visibility improved as the pre-dawn light filtered through, and the climbing became easier as we came up to a wide saddle. It was with a sense of great relief and excitement we realised that this was the frontier pass—at last!

It was at 0600 hours, in the grey light of dawn, that we reached the crest of the pass at the southern end, to be met by a bitter wind blowing sleet in our faces. Our guides led us to the northern part on the Swiss side, where we were able to shelter in a blockhouse used by frontier patrols. There was nobody there but we were able to light a fire to thaw out our frozen limbs. We paid off the guides with the 6000 lire we had from the sale of our watches. They seemed happy and wished us good luck.

Below the block house there was a steep slope of about 500 metres covered with moraine debris and, through the rain, we ploughed our way down bringing rafts of small stones with us. Then we picked our way along a zigzag, rocky path for a further 500 metres before the path became well defined and led to a flat area known as Alp Trupchun (2040 metres). Later we learned that the pass we crossed was Fuorcla Trupchun (2782 metres) and that now we were walking through a Swiss national park.

After Alp Trupchun, the path entered wooded country above a bubbling stream. Suddenly, we saw a group of soldiers in steel helmets and wearing grey uniforms coming towards us through the trees. The helmets were so like German ones they gave us a start! Of course, they were Swiss and we were mighty glad to meet them. One of them asked who we were and, mistakenly, seeking to avoid internment I replied in German that we were Italian civilians seeking refuge. I was horrified when he said: 'That is a pity, we have to put civilians back across the border.' So I hastily admitted, what was patently obvious to them, that we were British.

[By international convention, escaped prisoners of war in neutral countries are not interned, but free to move about so long as they keep the police informed of their movements. We did not know this at the time.]

Our new 'captors' hurried us along so that we would not get cold in the rain which was now falling heavily. After a while the valley opened out and the path improved until

we arrived at the village of S-chanf, at 0930 hours Swiss time. Without delay we were ushered into a hotel where an army of Swiss girls materialised from nowhere, rubbed our backs with hot towels and gave us brandy. It was a wonderful welcome. They spoke English with a delightful accent, and told us that we were the first British men they had seen since the beginning of the war.

After half an hour of this pleasant treatment we were told that the Mayor of Zuoz was collecting warm clothes for us, so we ran the few kilometres in about 20 minutes, in order to keep warm. There, in another hotel, we were given food and a complete change of clothes. They had thought of everything—even long johns. At 1500 hours we left by motor lorry for a collection compound at Samedan. Mr F.K. Naegeli, the British Vice Consul at St Moritz called on us there and asked if we had any urgent needs. We lodged for the night at the hospital in Samedan and had no trouble sleeping after our hard 25 kilometre walk from Livigno and lack of rest the previous night. The Samedan Hospital Collection Point was full of refugees—Italians, Poles, Free French, Cypriots, Serbs, Black South Africans, British and Jugoslavs.

Mr Naegeli and his daughter, Mrs Gartmann, came with gifts of cigarettes and an advance of 10 Swiss francs each to see us off at the railway station, at 1300 hours the next day. We arrived at Chur four hours later and stayed the night in a hotel, tasted our first beer for a long time and had dinner with a very pleasant Swiss Army Warrant Officer, Pierre Tuon, who introduced us to his English wife. The following day, Wednesday, 22 September, we travelled by train via Sargans, Buchs, Altstraetten, St Margarethen, Rorschach and St Gallen, arriving at Wil, the collection centre for evaders of British Commonwealth nationality, at 1730 hours. Here we met many other ex-POW officers, including former members of our party Lieutenant Frank Sharp and his son Keith, so there was much talking and comparing of experiences.

We were issued with British battle dress and advised that we would get a subsistence allowance of 36 francs per week plus a living allowance of 20 francs per day. Full accommodation at the Hotel Bahnhof, where we were staying was 10.50 francs per day. On Tuesday, 12 October, we travelled by train via Zurich to the British Legation at Berne where we collected our clothing allowances of 650 francs and purchased good warm clothes. We also attended a cocktail party at the home of the Air Attache, Air Commodore 'Freddy' West VC. Following this visit to the capital we returned to Chur and went on to spend the next six months at Arosa, where we lived at the Hotels Rothorn and Beau Rivage, rock climbing and skiing on the slopes of this delightful resort.

RETROSPECT

I have learned since that altogether 102 officers escaped from our train, which made the Germans exceedingly annoyed. Some were picked up and found themselves in German camps, but many succeeded in getting into Switzerland. The train stopped soon after I got out, and before my friend Geoff Chinchin could jump but he and Athol Hunter

made their escape from Fort Bismark, Strasbourg and eventually, with the help of the French Resistance, succeeded in joining us in Switzerland.

To me, our eight days adventure from Monday, 13 September, at Lavis in Italy to Monday, 20 September, at Zuoz in the Swiss Engadine was exhilarating. We walked 190 kilometres through some of the most beautiful mountain country in Europe. We crossed four high passes, each of the order of 3000 metres above sea level and all of our party got through to Switzerland. This success was thanks to the courage, compassion and generosity of the Italians who helped us along the way. We depended entirely on them for shelter, food and guidance as to the paths to follow. The unusually fine weather for the time of the year was another vital factor in our favour. We had beautiful clear days, except when we came near to Santa Catarina, crossing Passo di Gavia and as we made our last climb to Trupchun Pass.

At the same time of the year, September 1976, when I made the comparatively easy climb from the Swiss side to Trupchun Pass, the sheer slope was covered with a sheet of hard snow. The climb was risky; one slip would have resulted in a headlong plunge to the rocks, 300 metres below. The snow on the Pass itself was three metres deep and, to the east, the Italian high country we had come through was deep in snow. We could never have succeeded in such conditions. Good fortune had smiled on us!

On this return visit, 33 years later, my Swiss mountain-born wife, Heidi, expressed surprise that we had selected such a difficult route for our escape. The factors in its favour at the time were the reduced risk of being apprehended by Germans or Italian Fascists in remote mountain areas, and my love of the high country and its people, which had its roots in my pre-war skiing days in Australia. It had been an inspiration to meet these mountain people of Italy, who have survived in this harsh environment, through industry and sheer strength of character, for generation after generation. Like all the mountain people of Europe, they are God-fearing, compassionate and with a balance of humility and pride. It makes me feel truly humble to reflect on their willingness to risk death to help us escape from our German captors—a matter of great importance to us but one in which they had no personal interest, or prospect of gain.

6

A NIGHT WALK IN THE LIBYAN DESERT

Flight Sergeant Robert James Clarendon Whittle

The date was 19 December 1941, and the incident which I am about to describe occurred during a period of rapid advance by the Allied forces against Rommel's Afrika Korps. The forward movement had been so swift that my squadron, No 250 RAF, had been based successively at L.G. 123 Oust (inside the Libyan border near Maddalena) from 20 November to 2 December, L.G. 122 (on the Egyptian side) from 2–5 December, L.G. 123 again from 5–12 December, then E1 Gubbi, Tobruk for seven days until transferring to the recently vacated former Luftwaffe base at Gazala, on the afternoon before this adventure.

The tide had turned and our task was to take advantage of the situation and inflict as much damage as possible on the retreating German ground forces. And so it was that I took off early in the morning of that day in a section of Tomahawks to strafe enemy motorised forces, including armoured personnel carriers, holding a rearguard position at Fort Mechili, about 55 miles to the west. The Afrika Korps could be relied on to fight back and on this occasion they put up a spirited defence in the face of the concentrated fire of our .5 and .30 machine guns.

My Tomahawk, AN415, was hit in a number of vital places including the oil cooler, engine sump, the landing gear and the spinner on the propeller. The aircraft was clearly disabled and my instinctive reaction was to gain as much distance as possible in the direction of base, with the limited life left in the rapidly overheating engine. The end came with a wheels-up landing in a cloud of dust, smoke, and burning oil about 15 miles further east. Rather than 'landing' it would probably be more accurate to say 'arrival' because, blinded with a cockpit full of smoke, it was impossible to aim for any particular point. I emerged from the cockpit uninjured and had water and emergency rations for the 40 mile walk back to Gazala. I guessed that an enemy patrol would very likely find the aircraft and look for me so I ran into the desert to try to make myself scarce, but before doing so decided to hide my shiny metal water container because it could reflect the sun and give my position away. I buried it in the biggest clump of camel thorn I could find, for later retrieval. My plan was to rest up until evening before attempting the journey home under cover of darkness. Patrols were active in the area and one illogical fear I had, as I lay as inconspicuously as possible between the clumps of camel thorn, was of being run over by a half-track or other vehicle which failed to see me. I saw several vehicles during the morning but all was quiet by about 1400 hours so I sneaked back to the aircraft and unscrewed the compass and the clock to assist me in navigating back to base. I had a map of the area and, as mentioned earlier, emergency

rations but, alas, despite diligent searching I was unable to find the water can that I had so carefully hidden in a clump of camel thorn. There were hundreds of clumps and they all looked very much alike.

So I set out, confident of finding my way over the 40 miles which separated me from my base at Gazala, but with the real danger that lack of water could be my undoing. I walked on and just about dusk I saw a fighting unit two or three miles away but avoided it because of the risk that it belonged to the enemy. I evaded others for the same reason as I trudged on through that bitterly cold night; a feature of deserts in winter which is not generally appreciated. By daybreak, with a dry mouth and swollen tongue due to thirst, I was ready to throw myself on the mercy of any party I could find and, as luck would have it, there was an army unit not far away so I headed in that direction. As I got closer I could see a sentry but I was puzzled because the uniform was not British, nor was it any I could identify. When I had approached to within speaking range I yelled out: 'Australian' and raised my hands above my head with the aircraft compass in one and the clock in the other. At first the sentry was startled and shook all over but when he recovered from the shock he picked up a rifle, with bayonet fixed, and rushed at me in a menacing manner, turned me around with the weapon and marched me off to his superior officer.

I was in the hands of a Polish unit which had broken out of Tobruk and when the language problem was overcome, with the help of an English speaking officer, the reception became very friendly. I gave them the disposition of the German rearguard in the vicinity of Fort Mechili, which they were eager to engage, and they cured my thirst problem with water and lashings of Italian chianti before driving me, about 18 miles, back to my base at Gazala.



And, so ended an episode which earned me a Flying Boot but could easily have had a less favourable result. At that stage of the war the Germans seemed to think our strafing of their ground forces was, somehow, not cricket and tended to be less than gentle with Allied pilots caught in the act!

R Whittle 1941

TWO EVASIONS AND AN ESCAPE

Flying Officer Andrew William (Nicky) Barr

FIRST INCIDENT

At the beginning of 1942, No 3 Squadron, RAAF, and its Kittyhawks were based at Antelat, south of Benghazi in Libya. On 11 January I was part of the fighter escort for a bombing raid on El Agheila when we were attacked by a combined force of Fiat G 50s and Me. 109s and I shot down one G 50. I then saw Flying Officer R. Jones make a forced landing on the desert and shot down the Me. 109 which had got him, and then decided to land and attempt to pick him up, as had been done previously in a few celebrated cases. Coming in with wheels and flaps down I was attacked by two more Me. 109s and, at a disadvantage with wheels partly up, managed to shoot down one of my assailants but the other one scored a hit which forced me down and then he strafed me on the ground.

Although suffering leg wounds I walked in the direction of the coast, evading first an Italian patrol and then a German one before finding a Senussi group camped in a wadi. (Col Gadaffi came from this area and this tribe). These people tenderly cared for my wounds, dressed me in Arab clothing and took me with them northwards to where some skirmishing was taking place. We travelled as a family group of seven adults and three children which would not excite suspicion as these nomadic people were often in transit searching for better grazing for their camels and goats. For three and a half days, mostly on a camel with three others, I moved slowly forward.

The front line was fluid at that time but our starting point had been about 23 miles from Allied forward posts. On the journey I was able to observe a heavy build up of Axis men and materials for the counter-attack which later forced our retreat back to Egypt. Twice our party was stopped and questioned but each time we were allowed to continue. The only shooting we encountered were warning shots from the British scouting party which took charge and escorted us to the Allied Army Forward HQ, where we were individually debriefed by Intelligence. A small ceremony then took place at which the Senussi were officially thanked and rewarded with food and blankets before they set off back to their campsite. Surprisingly, they chose mainly canned herrings, which were known as 'gold fish' and generally disliked by our troops.

I was transported some 45 miles back to my squadron at Antelat where I was treated in the Sick Bay before dispatch to the Scottish General Hospital in Cairo where two operations were performed on my legs. My arrival back at the squadron on 12 February

was a particularly happy occasion for three reasons viz., Allied Intelligence indicated that they had valued the information I had given them, two Me. 109s and one G 50 had been confirmed in my name after the combats of 11 January and I had received an immediate award of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

SECOND INCIDENT

It was 30 May 1942 when I was leading No 3 Squadron in an air battle in the Knightsbridge area south of Tobruk, during the so-called 'Battle of the Cauldron'. I was hit and set on fire but managed to crash land in no-man's-land, in a mined area in front of the Axis forces. I laid low and waited for about an hour and was about to be gathered up by an Afrika Korps motorised unit when the 7th Hussars and the Royal Gloucester Regiments counter attacked. After some hours of what seemed incredibly noisy and intense fighting I was reached by a mine-delousing tank from the Gloucesters. Their medical officer found that I had bled from the nose and ears and was concussed so I spent that night in the Tobruk Hospital before being cleared next morning to return to the squadron, and fly again on operations that day.

In my view this was more a Royal Gloucester rescue story rather than an escape or evasion incident, however, for being obliged to abandon my aircraft due to 'unfriendly action by the enemy' and returning to my squadron long after my 'estimated time of arrival' I was awarded a second Flying Boot.

THIRD INCIDENT

It was in the last stages of the Allied retreat to El Alamein and a period of feverish activity in which I had completed 29 operational sorties in 19 days, including six on the day of 16 June. On 26 June I was on my third trip before noon escorting Boston bombers when engine difficulties on the return forced me to lag behind the formation. Me. 109s attacked and set my aircraft on fire and I baled out, wounded in an arm and both legs and suffering from burns to arms and legs. I was picked up by Italian Alpineri troops and taken to a German Casualty Clearing Station south-west of Mersa Matruh, Egypt. My wounds and burns were dressed and my leg put in plaster, after which I was left in the open for two days. Then, with others, I was transported in a tray-bodied truck to Tobruk Hospital. Two of the prisoners who died during the journey were cremated by the roadside.

The next move was to the Caserta POW Hospital in Italy by the hospital ship *Citta di Tragini*.

My condition should not have become serious but did so due entirely to neglect and malnutrition. Then I was transported by train to the Bergamo POW Hospital in northern Italy where, due to skilled treatment, by Allied medical officers and staff captured in Tobruk, my condition improved miraculously. In the late Autumn of 1942 I got away

from Bergamo and set off for Switzerland but was recaptured three days later near Como and court-martialled for hitting a border guard. This resulted in my being sent to Gavi Prison (in Novi Legure, north of Genoa) which was a concentration camp for dangerous officers, political criminals and religious prisoners and from which no one escaped. While there I served three separate periods of 30 days solitary confinement.

Following the Allied landing in Sicily the German SS took over Gavi and commenced the movement of 187 prisoners to Germany by truck and train. I broke away near Piacenza but two months later was betrayed near Pontromoli, in the vicinity of La Spezia, and was packed off to a POW transit prison in the Innsbruck and Obsteig area of Austria. I escaped after four days and elected to try Italy again, in preference to internment in Switzerland. I proceeded down the Brenner Pass corridor and eventually reached the Abruzzi region where I joined up with the remnants of an SAO group that was operating behind the lines in the Pescara and Chieti areas. I worked with them for three and a half months before contracting malaria (the Roman sickness). I then used one of the Group's escape routes to infiltrate the German lines near Campo di Giove. Severe snow conditions during this 1943–44 winter made travel difficult and dangerous.

Following debriefing near Vasto I spent some time in the Indian General Hospital before returning to No 3 Squadron, then at Cutella on the Adriatic coast; 20 months after being shot down in the Desert.

NOTES

Fascist soldiers subjected me to brutal beatings after my recapture near Como, resulting in five or six days in a POW hospital in Milan. SS guards at a lockup near Verona gave me the rifle butt, pistol whipping and boots treatment after the Pontromoli recapture and left me feeling miserable for a week or so. At a wonderfully happy little function in the RAF Officers' Mess at Brandesburton Hall, near Catfoss, in July 1944, my third Flying Boot was presented; a delightful, low-key affair about a useless piece of metal! To say 'I' escaped from here or there is an over simplification of events. None would have been successful without the warmth, courage and cooperation of many people who were involved in my exploits. For instance, a religious nursing sister performing a voluntary round of the ward in Bergamo POW Hospital, at 0230, found me in a coma haemorrhaging badly and saved my life.

8

MAXIMUM EFFORT

Pilot Officer Robert M Horsley

The sun rose over Skellingthorpe, Lincolnshire, on 30 May 1942, to reveal a clear blue sky and an awesome stillness in the air. It was the home of 50 (Bomber) Squadron, 5 Group, Royal Air Force, equipped with Manchesters.

I greeted with delight the breakfast rumour that there was to be a Maximum Effort that night, because that would be my 30th trip, the completion of my first tour of operations, and the beginning of a rest period as an instructor at the Wigsley Conversion Unit. I checked with my new skipper, Pilot Officer Leslie Manser, and learned that we were to be ferried over to Conningsby, in a Lancaster crewed by Pilot Officer John Atkinson and my good friend Pilot Officer Johnnie Tytherleigh, to pick up another aircraft and to carry out a night flying test on it during the return trip. Manchester ZN-D (No. 7401) showed signs of wear and tear, with many patches over flak holes, the mid-upper turret removed and had a generally shoddy appearance. Although all equipment was serviceable the aircraft's performance matched its appearance, particularly in poor climbing ability. I commented to Manser that I did not like the chances of the crew which had to take it on the operation that night. He laughed and said: 'Don't worry but we'll most likely be that crew.'

Sure enough, when the list went up at noon, the crew for Manchester ZN-D was:

Captain: Pilot Officer Leslie Manser
Co-Pilot: Sergeant Leslie Baveystock
Nav: Pilot Officer Richard Barnes
W/Op: Pilot Officer Robert Horsley
2nd W/Op: Sergeant Stanley King
Front Gun: Sergeant Alan Mills
Rear Gun: Sergeant Ben Naylor

They were all 'freshmen', with the exceptions of Barnes and myself, but Manser and I were the youngest, both being just 21.

After lunch, trying to snatch some sleep before the briefing, I started to get a premonition that I would not be returning that night and made preparations accordingly. I checked my personal effects, destroyed all letters from girl friends to prevent strangers from intruding on such personal matters; took out my spare escape kit, escape rations and escape money (a mixed bag of European currency). All these had been retained from

my previous trip and were now carefully stowed in the inner pockets of my battle dress jacket. (An interesting coincidence is that, two years later, my brother occupied this same room, was shot down close to where I came to grief and also evaded.)

I just 'knew' that I would not be killed and, as I had often said to Johnnie Tytherleigh, 'provided Jerry is not waiting for me with fixed bayonets I'll get back'. I recalled vividly an Escape and Evasion lecture, by Flight Lieutenant Rennie M.C., at Operational Training Unit (OTU) and, anyhow, I had been a damn good Boy Scout, learning how to live off the land, so why should I worry?

There was great excitement at briefing when it was revealed that the target was Cologne and that there would be 1000 bombers, concentrated in time and space to swamp the enemy defences. The 'Boffins' rated the chances of collision negligible because of height separation between Halifaxes, Stirlings and Lancasters at 20,000 feet and our Manchesters at 14,000 and the natural altimeter variations between aircraft within these groups. However, the possibility of bombs from the higher aircraft raining down on the lower ones seemed not to have been considered. The route out was via Den Helder, on the Dutch coast, and then direct to target and a final instruction was that should our aiming point be already burning to choose another nearby area. I thought, finally we are removing the kid gloves, taking a leaf out of Jerry's book and hitting him hard. Real air warfare at last! After briefing, and back to the mess for the delicious aircrew supper of bacon and eggs, there was a hum of excitement over the awesome prospect of 1000 bombers over the target for the first time. It was too fantastic for words.

We would be carrying full bomb and fuel loads and, as already mentioned, our mid upper turret had been removed which would reduce all up weight and compensate a little for the lack of power noted earlier. As we went out to the aircraft, at about 2100 hours, I said to my friend Johnnie Tytherleigh: 'I won't be back tonight as I am taking my end of tour holidays in Europe so I'll see you in about three months.' He laughed and answered: 'I'll see you at debriefing in the morning.' (Johnnie was killed in action 18 months later while flying with 617 Squadron.)

We lined up on the runway at 2250 hours; Les opened up the throttles to full power and we trundled down the strip and staggered into the night sky. Despite over heating problems and a below normal climbing rate he coaxed the aircraft to 7000 feet and we wallowed onwards. My radio seemed OK and I had the luxury of a heating system to make me comfortable in my battledress and harness. We crossed the Dutch coast without being fired on, despite our low altitude, and headed on towards Cologne. Soon the navigator warned that we were approaching the 'searchlight and flak belt' established across the flight path to major German targets but, strangely, not a shot was fired at us. I glanced out of the window and saw the Rhine reflecting the moonlight and, from previous experience of flying to Cologne, everything seemed to be in the right place. Our navigator was not called 'Bang-On' Barnes for nothing; he had a reputation for always being 'bang-on' track and 'bang-on' target.

As we neared the target, at an uncomfortably low 6000–7000 feet, the city was clearly visible in the light of the moon and blockbusters (4000 lb bombs) of the early arrivals were exploding and soon the area was lit up by burning incendiaries. I saw a Wellington, not much higher than ourselves, coned in searchlights and being shot at by light flak. Now it was our turn to go in and Barnes was in the bomb aimer's position in the nose, calling over the intercom: 'Target sighted ... bomb doors open ... bombs fused ... left, left ... steady, steady ... right ... steady ... bombs gone ... hold for photograph ... steady.' The aircraft seemed to heave a sigh of relief when relieved of its bomb load but 'bombs gone' seemed to be the signal for the ground defences to spring into action. The searchlights coned us and flak burst all around with deafening thuds, soon filling the aircraft with the smell of high explosive. Manser dived the aircraft to port, down to the rooftops; the searchlights went out and the flak ceased. He levelled off and called for damage reports. The rear gunner was wounded and I reported smoke from the port air vent and a few moments later the port engine burst into flames. Manser quickly feathered the propeller and used the extinguisher system to put out the flames and asked for a course to Manston, the nearest British airfield. He ordered us to jettison everything possible.

I instructed the 2nd W/Op to go aft, get Naylor out of his turret and dress his wounds but the poor chap was paralysed with shock so I went to Naylor's help myself, to make sure that if we had to bale out that he would make it too. I got Naylor out and placed him on the floor near the rear door. He had been hit on the bridge of the nose, in the left shoulder and the left foot, and there was blood everywhere. I gave him a shot of morphine and put a shell dressing on his shoulder wound.

I had just finished when Manser came through the intercom in a very calm voice, almost as if it was a practice drill: 'Put on parachutes' then: 'I can't hold this aircraft any longer—we are only 800 feet—JUMP, JUMP, JUMP.' I ordered Naylor and King out but they insisted I go first, and there was no time to be lost. Although the manual said to dive out the rear door, I considered the low set tailplane made this risky so sat on the step and rolled out. At 800 feet there was no counting to ten, so as soon as I saw the tail plane pass over my head I pulled the cord. There was a sudden jerk and I remembered: 'Ankles together, knees slightly bent.' In a matter of seconds—splosh—I had landed on some wet, marshy ground and, as I undid my harness and rolled up the chute, I heard the aircraft crash. In the absence of a hiding place I just trampled the chute into the soggy ground and looking up saw the North Star and set course in a south-westerly direction. The silence was only broken by the croak of frogs and the drone of aircraft returning to the UK. I mentally wished them 'good luck'. I kept moving as I wanted to put as much distance as possible between myself and the track of the aircraft before dawn.

I thought that I was in Germany and would have to find a hiding place before daylight, mentally attune myself to this new situation and, if possible, find out where I was. Thank goodness I had my own escape kit because, in the confusion, the navigator had failed to hand out those he had drawn from 'Ops' before leaving. There were no 'Jerries

waiting for me with fixed bayonets' so my luck was holding. After struggling through the marshy area I finally made it to higher ground, and then to a towpath beside a canal which appeared to be heading in the right direction.

Dawn, 31 May 1942, was starting to break and still no hiding place when, suddenly, around a bend came a young lady riding a bicycle. Here I was in full view, dressed in RAF battledress. There was no time to bolt so, as she passed, I gave a smart Nazi salute and said: 'Heil Hitler' which startled her and she sped on her way. As soon as she was out of sight I ran across some fields to a small wood and then, consulting my compass, set off in a westerly direction. I came to a narrow lane which I followed cautiously, ever ready to dive into the woods, but it was still very early, and being Sunday I did not think there would be many people about at this hour. Shortly, I came to an asphalt road and, at the corner, a fingerboard that pointed to Bree. Back in the woods again to consult my silk escape map, and tracing a track from Cologne to Manston I soon found Bree, and could not believe my luck. It was just on the Belgian side of the Dutch border, and my spirits soared. Now I was confident that I would be back in England before the end of the year, but little did I realise how far I would have to travel to get there.

The sky was becoming overcast and threatening rain. When checking the fingerboard I had noticed a small house on the outskirts of a village. It was still very early and there was no sign of movement so I concealed myself near the house to watch for activity and was rewarded, at 0530 hours, when an elderly lady emerged and started feeding her fowls. I decided to take a chance and approach her, after she had gone inside, so went to the back door and knocked. When she opened it I pointed to my uniform and said: 'Je suis Royal Air Force, RAF.' At RAF her face lit up and she took me in, seated me at the kitchen table and served me milk and black bread. She spoke quietly and said: 'Mon fils—il est le gendarme—il dort—s'il vous plait, silence.' I had just finished eating when her sleepy son appeared, still in his nightshirt. He appeared friendly enough, so I asked him the way to the coast, and he confirmed my position on the map and warned me to keep off the roads as there was frequent German traffic. He also mentioned that the flak and searchlight units which had been in the area for some time had gone a few days ago. He was going to give me some civilian clothes to hide my uniform but his mother appeared scared, so he changed his mind.

I left the house at about 0700 hours and, as soon as out of sight, changed course 90 degrees to the left, as a safety precaution. I crossed a canal by footbridge and across some fields into a copse. Then I came across an old farm cottage, with a barn next to it, which I decided would be a refuge from the constant rain and a place to sleep for a while. But on entering, I was confronted by an old hag wielding a broomstick. She looked like a witch, screeched like a witch and I did not wait to discover more; but ran back to the copse. Perhaps, the Belgians were not all friendly towards the British and I would have to proceed with more caution. I continued my way westward and hearing church bells in the distance realised again that it was Sunday.

Still it rained. I rested at the base of a tree, checked my escape rations and sampled a delicious meat tablet. My appetite seemed to be appeased, and on that basis they should keep me going for a week. I was now soaked to the skin and had to keep on the move and seek shelter. The woods lacked undergrowth to provide cover. Proceeding on my west to south-west course, at about 1130 hours I came to a track which veered to the left, and which I followed. Then, to a tarred secondary road bearing right. Soon I came to a small hamlet, which I observed from cover but there was no sign of movement. I was wet and cold so chose the cottage in the middle as my target but, still wary after my recent experience, twice I went to the front door to knock and twice changed my mind. Finally, I decided: 'Why not? If they are hostile I can get the hell out of it. I was the champion distance runner at school and they would have to be bloody good to catch me. Anyway, a sharp run would warm me up. So, I strode up to the door and knocked. A young girl opened the door and I pointed to my uniform and said: 'Je suis RAF.' Again, that startled look and then looking over my shoulder, she smiled, grabbed my arm and pulled me into the house.

I entered the warmth of a typical European farm labourer's cottage, with everything in one room. She woke up her mother, and father and brothers appeared from nowhere and my wet clothes were removed and put to dry by the blazing fire. I was given a mug of black coffee and we were able to converse in a mixture of broken French, German and English. Soon, feeling warm again, my spirits soared. I had found friends at last—or had I? Still cautious, I placed myself where I could observe the front path and decided if there was any sign of a German I was going to dive through the rear window and run like hell, clothes or no clothes! Soon I was given to understand that they knew 'a lady' who could help me get away from the area and, even, possibly arrange for an aircraft to pick me up. They also told me that one of my crew had died in the crash and one, who was injured and could not walk, had been handed over to the Germans by a 'Rexist'. (I understood this to be the Belgian equivalent of 'Quisling'.) Immediately I thought that this was most likely to be Naylor. Apparently, no one else had been found, although the Germans were still looking.

More hot coffee, black bread and raw bacon and eventually it was decided that one of the boys should go and make arrangements with 'the lady' for me to be moved. I saw the son ride off on his bicycle and thought that if he returns on his own all will be well, but any sign of Jerry and I would be through that back window like a shot. As a precaution, I insisted on getting back into my, still wet, clothes, despite their protests. I waited, with eyes not moving from that front window, until he returned in about 45 minutes and without any Germans, much to my relief. I was told that 'the lady' had agreed to help me and that we should go there immediately. There was an emotional farewell as they gave me an old brown coat to cover my battledress, a black beret to hide my blond hair and bade me 'bonne chance'. I rode pillion on the bicycle, side-saddle according to the local custom, as we set out to meet the mysterious lady.

It was still raining lightly as we wended our way through back lanes. My apprehension regarding German motor cycle patrols made the journey seem long, but it was only about ten minutes before we dismounted near a large house set in about two acres of land. I was left to hide in a shrubbery and soon he returned with a very charming lady, in her late thirties, and her 16-year-old daughter. Madame Titta Groenen and daughter, Merese, both spoke beautiful English and I learned, later, that Titta was of English/Celanese background and the wife of the Belgian doctor for Tongerlo. I was overjoyed when she told me that she already had Mills and Naylor hidden in her home and had arranged for them to be moved that night. The lack of escorts made it possible to move only two at a time but she would arrange for me to go the following night. I could not enter her home, because her husband had forbidden her to become involved with any more evaders, but offered me the barn to which I was guided by Merese. She left me and returned about 20 minutes later with sandwiches and milk, and promised to see me first thing in the morning. I found warmth in the straw and quickly fell into a dreamless slumber.

When I awoke at 0445, 1 June 1942, I was cold and cramped and walked about inside the barn to restore circulation. Merese arrived at about 0600 hours with sandwiches and the good news that Mills and Naylor were safely on their way. The bad news was that the Germans were still searching the area and that I would have to go and hide in the woods. My instructions were to return at 1700 hours, if all was well, when her mother would introduce me to my escort for the next stage of my journey homewards. I scoured the woods for a suitable hiding place but there was no undergrowth so I settled on a long slender tree, with enough dense foliage on its lofty branches to conceal me, in the centre of a small copse. Its lower limbs were out of reach but, again, Boy Scout training came in useful and I went up it like a monkey up a stick. I was not visible from the ground, the sun was generous in its warmth out of an eight eighths blue sky and I had a splendid view of the doctor's house and the surrounding fields. The cuckoos and the thrush were constantly calling their mates, with occasional interruptions from the harsh notes of the crows, when suddenly; there was an eerie silence followed by the sound of voices shouting to each other. Then I saw a grey line of German troops advancing line abreast across the meadow towards my copse. They entered the copse, making plenty of noise, and passed right under my tree. It was with great relief that, finally, I saw them disappear, but not before a detachment had searched the doctor's house and grounds. While wiling the time away in my perch I realised that it was an oak tree I was hiding in and that a few days before had been the anniversary of the episode when King Charles I, on 29 May 1651, hid in an oak tree to evade the Roundheads. It had worked for him and now it had for me, and at that moment I felt like a king!

At 1630 hours I saw Merese leave the garden and walk towards my copse, and when she got to the edge of it she called my name but I did not respond until she had got to the far side, and I was certain she was not being followed. I quickly joined Merese and apologised for my caution. She reported that all had gone well and how relieved she was that I had not been picked up by the search party. She said that my guide was due

to arrive at 1700 hours and confirmed that no one else had been caught and that I would meet two more members of my crew that evening. Madame Groenen was waiting for me at the garden gate with a packet of sandwiches and a drink. It was then I realised how hungry I was and devoured them with relish while we awaited the arrival of the guide.

Punctually at 1700 hours my guide arrived with two bicycles and a pair of old black trousers to pull over my own. So, with these and my black beret and brown coat I looked like a local farm worker. It was necessary to retain the uniform underneath because, in the event of being caught, the Germans would not be able to treat me as a spy and torture me to reveal names of helpers. I bid a hasty farewell, with profuse thanks, to the two brave ladies. After the war I learned from British Intelligence that Dr. Groenen was, at that time, working for them and that his wife's work in helping the sudden influx of RAF evaders was an embarrassment to him and could have jeopardised his cover. Unbeknown to him, she continued to help but never again hid anyone in their home.

My guide, Jean Bruels, was a man of about 25 years and I followed about 20 yards behind his bicycle as we rode along minor roads and narrow lanes for about five miles. Then briefly on a fairly major road before turning down a cart track into a farmyard. As we went to the back of the house Jean cautioned me that if the servants saw me and suspected that I was RAF they may tell the Germans. We went through the door into a dark and dingy cobbled hallway and then I was ushered through a cupboard door under the stairs where, in the candlelight, I saw huddled together my crewmembers Les Baveystock and Stanley King. There was a very excited, but whispered, reunion and, after a welcome repast of black coffee, black bread and sausage, we were told that we would be moving on again as soon as it was dark, as we had a long way to travel before dawn. Although I was curious to know the names of my helpers it was safer for these courageous people for me not to have names to reveal under torture. Most of the names mentioned have been obtained by post-war research, with the help of Les Baveystock who did a 're-run' of the route in 1967.

We had been hiding in the farmhouse of people named Nijskens and when night fell we whispered our thanks and farewells and set off again on bicycles, with an escort. We were to follow about 100 yards behind two other bicycles ridden by Jean Bruels and Antoinette Verheyden who posed as a courting couple. Should they run into a patrol they would stop and kiss and hide their rear lights as a signal for us to dismount and divert around the danger zone. Our escort was to take us across fields to rejoin the track further on. We soon joined the towpath of the Albert Canal, heading in a south to south-westerly direction. I think we used the diversion technique four times, with complete success. After about four hours we left the towpath and turned almost due west toward Hasselt, then suddenly south for about five miles until we went down a lane and came to an old mill. Inside, by the light of a few lanterns, we were greeted by our hostess for the next few hours. She was a dear old lady who spoke good English and was slim, erect and very alert. The mill was at a place called Dilsen (or Bilsen on my escape map).

Here we were briefed that at dawn we would leave and catch a street tram to Tongres, a military town on the way to Liege. We were told that the town would be full of German soldiers, but not to worry because it would be market day and there would also be many workers and shoppers too. From Tongres we were to travel by train to Liege and all we had to do was to obey instructions but, if in doubt, just follow our guide at a discreet distance. 'One last thing,' our hostess said, 'when you get back to England ask the BBC to broadcast this message: "Message for the Queen of Liraburg. The three pigeons have returned to roost. Then I shall know that you have returned home safely."' This message was duly transmitted and I hope she received it because it also implied our sincere thanks for her help.

While in the mill we met a Dutch Jew named Armand Leviticus who had fled Holland and was making his way to England, and then on to USA where he had a brother. He gave Les and me a new suit each, which he said he would reclaim when he got to England. He was short and portly so his beautiful grey suit was stretched to its limits on my larger frame. The waistband of the trousers had to be worn below my belly to make the legs look long enough and the sleeves were very short. I was assured that it was not unusual to see young men in suits they had grown out of, because of the shortage of materials. I still retained the beret to cover my military style haircut and blond hair, which made me look like a Jerry.

Dawn, 2 June 1942, was beginning to break as we moved out of the mill. I had been briefed to get on the tram with Stan King, purchase two tickets to Tongres and follow Gertrude Moors. Imagine my surprise at the first view of this Belgian tram; it was like a miniature train, with a small steam locomotive pulling a dozen or so tiny coaches, and the track ran along the side of the road. When the ticket collector came along and handing him some Belgian francs from my escape money I said: 'Deux a Tongres, s'il vous plait.' He responded by muttering something in Flemish which I guessed would be asking where we got on, so I replied, 'Dilsen' and we got our two tickets. The tram was crowded with workers, even at this early hour, and I was tensely alert and I kept a watchful eye on Gertrude, standing further up the coach near Les. Soon a young man joined her and they chatted for a while and then, with a smile and a nod from Gertrude, he sidled up to Stan and me, shook our hands, greeted us in Flemish and whispered that we were to follow him when we got off the tram. This we did in the main square of Tongres and followed closely on his heels through streets packed with people—and German soldiers. Gertrude had departed with Les and I never saw her again, but learned that she was arrested by the Gestapo in May 1943 and died later in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp.

Our guide, whose name I never knew, escorted us to Tongres railway station proper and explained that after taking the train to Liege he would hand us over to our next guide, but if we got lost to go to the cathedral and 'pray'. The journey was without incident but on leaving the station Stan grabbed my arm and in a panic stricken voice said: 'We have been seen, we had better give ourselves up!' There were two SS soldiers, in their

dark blue uniforms with red piping at the seams, talking and walking towards us. I held Stan firmly by the arm and, with a smile on my face, murmured: 'Everything is alright and if you dare make any panic move I'll kill you before the SS boys can get to you.' We resumed walking, and the SS soldiers ignored us. Next, we took a tram (a real one this time) to the impressive Liege cathedral where our guide told us to kneel and pray. Then he left us, this nameless hero of the Underground.

Minutes ticked by and then, out of the darkness, came a priest who told us to follow him at ten metre intervals and, if we ran into trouble to run for it and try to find our way back to the cathedral. The priest was very fit and led us quickly through back streets and alleys where there were few people about. Our route took us ever higher until, after about half an hour we arrived at a large terrace house from where we could look down on the town. After a quick look around, to make sure the coast was clear, he led us straight through this house into the backyard and then over the fence into a neighbour's yard, on the right hand side. In that house, the priest handed us over to two charming old ladies and bade us farewell. We were to stay there for a few days until they could contact London for instructions. There was even a suggestion that an aircraft might be sent over to pick us up, but it was unreal to expect that an aircraft would be risked for a pilot officer and two sergeants. Shortly after our arrival Les joined us, and we were treated like royalty.

The owner of the house, whom we met briefly soon after our arrival, the Prefecteur of Police, Sector VII, Liege, was a tall, quietly spoken gentleman who did much to assist the Allies and, tragically, was later arrested and shot by the Germans.

I was confident now that I would be returning to England and so discarded most of my uniform, and was given a shirt and a tie to go with my grey suit. However, I was instructed to wear the beret in public to hide my blond locks, and to keep my mouth shut because I spoke French like a German!

Two days later, it was announced that we would have to take the long route, through France and Spain, to Gibraltar. We were confined to the house but the priest visited us and passed on the latest news. We learned that there had been two more 1000 bomber raids, which were judged to have been successful. During this interlude we had been very well looked after with good wine, plenty of cigarettes and food, which must have cost the Prefecteur dearly on the black market.

Photographs were taken for ID cards and travel papers but my Germanic looks were causing some concern, and measures had to be taken to ensure my safe passage through German check points. Particularly, I had to eliminate my military bearing: learn to slouch when I walked, preferably with hands in pockets and cigarette drooping from mouth.

On 5 June, two young Belgians came to take Les and me on the next stage of our journey; by train to Louvin and thence by tram to Bruxelles where we were greeted by more young men and the party split up, with one of them escorting me. We went a few stops on a tram, walked for ten minutes through winding streets, confusing my sense of direction, finally walking up the footpath of a very wide street and the only sign I saw was 'rue Ernest Allarde'. We stopped at a double wooden gate in the sandstone wall, at No 36. My guide rang the bell and a pair of eyes inspected us through a shutter before the gates were opened. We entered a basement apartment to be greeted by M. and Mdme. Evrard and their beautiful 16-year-old daughter, Gisele. I just could not take my eyes off this young girl with her long brown hair and her dark brown eyes. She was gorgeous!

Shortly afterwards Les Baveystock arrived with his guide, a young man named Pierre Vansteenbeck. The apartment was under one of the government buildings taken over by the Germans for their Ministry of Information, and the whole block was opposite the Palace de Justice. The apartment was very large, with four bedrooms and a large lounge, modern and nicely furnished. M. and Mdme. Everard kept me playing bridge morning, afternoon and night, possibly, to divert my attention from their pretty young daughter. On the second night we were taken to visit their friends, the Vansteenbecks, for supper. At about 1900 hours we left our apartment and half way up a flight of stairs we went through a door and found ourselves among archives, with stacks of files everywhere. Then we left through another door and up a flight of stairs to our destination. Pierre greeted us and introduced us to his mother and father, but in the lounge sat Stan King, Ben Naylor and Alan Mills. Wow! What a reunion we had. Ben's wounds had healed well; he had a bright new scar on his nose but claimed to be otherwise none the worse for wear. We spent a delightful evening, with plenty of good food and good wine. (In May 1943, M. Vansteenbeck was shot by the Gestapo in these same archives and left to bleed to death, in spite of the pleas of his family to be allowed to attend to his wounds.) I spent the next few days playing bridge, and learning to blow smoke rings, much to the amusement of Gisele. Photographs were taken, passport and travel documents were prepared and I was given a new identity.

By 9 June all was ready for our journey to Paris, and in the afternoon a young girl named Dede Dumont collected Les and me. She was 18 years old, but looked about 14, and spoke little English. We travelled back to Leuvin by tram to catch the night train to Paris. The reason for this diversion was that passenger-boarding checks at Leuvin were less stringent than at Bruxelles. The train originated in Germany and was to pass through Bruxelles, en route to Paris. When the train arrived we entered the last carriage but, to our dismay, it was full of German soldiers and we had to make our way through them to get to a forward carriage reserved for civilians. On the way Les bumped a soldier who grabbed him and yelled at him in German but, luckily, his mumbled apology seemed to be accepted and we were allowed to proceed.

We settled in a third class compartment—very primitive with wooden slatted seats—and our companions were thoroughly disreputable looking people. We had instructions not to converse with strangers; Dede would do the talking for us. So I pretended to doze and was fast ‘asleep’ during our half-hour stay at Bruxelles Central Station where there were no checks, as Dede had predicted.

It was just starting to get dark as we left Bruxelles and immediately the compartment became a hive of activity. Two men climbed onto the luggage racks and started unscrewing the battens which held the ply-wood ceiling while their female companions handed up numerous packages which were stowed in the recess, the ply was replaced and the screw heads dulled to hide the fact that they had been interfered with. I learned later that they were only smuggling flour to the Paris black market.

At about 0100 hours the train stopped at a customs and passport control checkpoint on the Belgian/French border. Amid much shouting and screaming Les and I followed Dede into the customs hall where all baggage and passports were checked. I noticed that there was also a random body check and remembered, with horror, that I still had some items of my escape kit in my pockets so hastily hid them between some crates which were standing nearby and felt greatly relieved. Dede did all the talking for us as we followed her through the check and we thanked the general noise and confusion for helping to conceal our identities. Dede was marvellous and led us back onto the train, but dared not take us back to the same compartment. Instead she took us up forward to a crowded first class corridor where we were bothered, only once, by a ticket collector



Left to right — Flight Lieutenant Leslie Baveystock DSO DFC DFM, Dede Dumont-Antoine (Comet Escape Line who took R.M. Horsely from Brussels to Paris in 1942), Gisele Evrard-Saltpetier (Comet Escape Line whose family hid Baveystock and Horsely in Brussels for two weeks in 1942), Wing Commander R.M. Horsely DFC* AFM. Photo taken circa 1980.*

and Dede had to pay extra for the privilege of sitting on the floor of a first class corridor. Les and I sat next to each other and communicated in Morse code, a long squeeze on the arm for a dash and a short one for a dot. As dawn broke the French countryside looked beautiful and suddenly a message from Les which read, 'Paris ahead—Eiffel Tower on port bow', and there it was in all its glory.

The train pulled into the Gare du Nord at 0600 hours, there was no check and we obeyed our instructions to follow Dede but not to talk to her and we arrived at a cafe across the street. Dede joined four or five people seated at a table and soon beckoned us over to meet Andree de Jongh, the head of the Comet Line escape route. Andree was to take us over and see us safely into Spain. We were treated to a hearty breakfast, in spite of rationing, and I noticed that when Les finished he placed his knife and fork together vertically, English style, so nudged him and placed mine horizontally, in the French manner and he soon corrected this slip which could have given us away. Even though my back was to the door, it was obvious by the reaction of the people—the slight lowering of voices and the looks of dislike—that a German had entered the cafe. Our hosts seemed unperturbed by the presence of the Germans, and when we had finished our meal Les and I left with Dede. She took us to the Metro (Paris underground rail system) and we travelled to St Denis. During the journey there were two beautiful Luftwaffe girls standing in the corridor and I started to 'eye them up' and, afterwards, Dede reprimanded me severely for my stupidity. She made it clear that my Germanic looks were bad enough, because the authorities were always on the lookout for German deserters, for whom the penalty was death!

We walked from St Denis station to a nearby basement apartment where Dede bade us farewell and bon voyage, and instructed us not to answer the door or the telephone. After she left we explored this flat and felt trapped because being in the basement there were no windows, nor other means of escape. (Dede Dumont, together with her parents, was arrested six months later. The Germans thought they had captured Andree de Jongh, who also used the code name Dede, and she was kept in a Bruxelles prison for 12 months and interrogated daily. Although sentenced to an extermination camp, she survived the war, but her mother died and her father were burnt alive by the retreating Germans.)

Unknown to us, there was intense activity in the flat above where Andree de Jongh and a friend were forging new passports and travel documents for the next stage of our journey, which was to commence that night. At about 1600 hours, Andree came with the documents for our new identities and briefed us. (Now, years later, I cannot recall what my new name was.) We boarded the night train from St Denis, without incident, and were booked to St Jean de Luz, on the south-west coast close to the Spanish border. On the train we were joined by Sergeant Hal de Mone, Royal Canadian Air Force and Jean Depraetre, escaping to England to join the Free Belgian Air Force. In the far corner of the compartment sat a Frenchman who, unusually for his race, did not attempt

conversation for the whole 12 hours of the journey. (It was years later that I discovered he was armed and there to give us a little protection should we need it.)

The rear portion of the train was full of unruly Spanish soldiers of the Blue Brigade returning home on leave from the Russian front, where they had been fighting under German command. We were in a couchette compartment, so there were only six of us and we could put our feet up on the opposite side and nap. I slept very soundly and awoke at daybreak, by which time the Frenchman had gone and we were able to talk among ourselves.

At about 0600 hours, 11 June 1942, the train pulled into Bayonne, and Les and I were instructed to stay put, while Andree left with Hal and Jean. When they failed to return by the time the train left Bayonne we suspected the worst, and started to discuss how we would get into Spain with the aid of only my silk map. Our fears were relieved when Andree returned, accompanied by two ladies; the elder code-named 'Tante Go' and the younger her daughter, Jannine. Tante Go said there was an intensive search taking place at St Jean de Luz station and, because of my German appearance, it would be too risky for me to go through the checkpoint and that she had devised another plan to get around this difficulty. I was to go straight into the pissoire on the platform, exit through the back door and go across the marshalling yard, where I would see a man with an Alsatian dog. I was to follow him at a distance.

When I stepped onto the platform there was great confusion, mainly due to the raucous behaviour of the Spanish soldiers and the screaming of French passengers, and I was pleased that this would divert attention from me. I had never been in a French pissoire before and was disconcerted to find that it was open except for a wall just above waist height and, while urinating, one could greet the rest of the world with a hearty 'bon jour'. However, in accordance with instructions, I sauntered out the back door towards the gate to the marshalling yard half expecting to hear a shout of alarm behind me, and determined that should that occur I would break all long distance running records across those tracks. There was no trouble and I acknowledged a 'bon jour' from a passing railway worker and proceeded to the gate where my man was waiting with his dog. He gave me a nod and set off but was in no particular hurry, stopping frequently to allow his dog to sniff and cock its leg to leave a visiting card.

I followed him through almost deserted alleys and streets for about 15 minutes until he turned, nodded and vanished through a doorway. After a few moments, I entered and he took me up two flights of stairs to his flat where he shook my hand warmly and gave me a hug. I could not understand his Basque dialect but it was obvious that I was most welcome and he soon brewed up some coffee and produced black bread and cheese. Les and Andree arrived about 45 minutes later and were pleased that my escape from the station had gone so well. Andree said that Hal and Jean were cycling from Bayonne and should arrive the next day; meanwhile she had to go over the Pyrennees to arrange our reception in Spain and expected to be away three or four days. We were to stay with our

host, who lived alone, kept his old fashioned apartment spotlessly clean and cooked a first class paella and sundry other examples of his culinary art. Les and I shared a double bed with what would have been an excellent feather mattress, if it had not also been the home of the biggest and hungriest fleas we had ever had the misfortune to meet. Our host changed the blood spotted sheets each morning, but there was no defence against these voracious vermin.

The word was out among the Resistance that I was a RAF officer, and this brought visits from the leader of the local group who gave me a thorough briefing on the German coastal defences from the Spanish border to north of Bayonne. At the end of which he produced a map showing locations of installations and presented it to me with the words: 'God save King George and good luck!' I decided that such valuable information had to be taken back to England, and as I had already rid myself of all uniform and, if caught, would probably be shot as a spy, I really had nothing to lose. Les had not been in on the briefing so I did not have to worry him about this decision.

Three days after our arrival at St Jean de Luz, 14 June 1942, Andree de Jongh returned. She had made two crossings of the Pyrenees and spent a day arranging our reception so it was now time for us to move. That afternoon Les, Hal, Jean and I, escorted by Andree and a young man, set off to walk to the small hamlet of Urrugne, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. It was a lovely June day as we walked along lanes and through fields, and so very quiet. There was a carefree atmosphere, with Andree ever cheerful and always chattering, and eventually we reached the farm of Francoise Usandizga. (Later, he was arrested and died in Ravensbruck.) We rested until nightfall for the next stage of 22 miles through rugged country, higher in the mountains where it rained every night.

Our Basque guide, Florentino, was a huge man, about six feet seven inches tall and had shoulders like an ox. We were briefed to say to any Spaniards that we might meet that we were Belgians escaping from the Germans. Florentino carried our hand baggage with ease and we followed him in single file through the darkness and, despite the no talking rule, Andree kept up a continuous whispered chatter. Otherwise, the silence was eerie but broken occasionally by the croaking of frogs and internal explosions from our guide. Andree used to giggle and say: 'It wasn't me but just follow the smell!' Florentino's diet of cheap red wine and goats' cheese seemed to be the reason for his flatulence. The night got blacker and the clouds thickened as we went higher, stumbling after our leader who was setting a fast pace, but stopping occasionally to listen and change course. The drizzle changed to continuous rain, as Andree had predicted, and I thought: 'Good, any patrols will seek cover and their tracker dogs will not be able to pick up our scent.'

After about six hours we came to a river which was the Spanish border. Florentino told us to hide in the bushes and maintain absolute silence while he checked the area for patrols. A while later I smelt cigarettes, heard some chatter and two lights glowed in the total darkness and moved along the path between our hide-out and the river. It seemed

like eons before they eventually disappeared, but then Florentino returned and warned us not to rush the river but to wade slowly behind him in single file. Then, with my heart pounding, we entered this swift, icy cold, waist deep stream and waded, stumbling occasionally on the stony bottom. On the Spanish side the bank rose steeply to almost 1000 feet and, in complete silence, we followed our guide upward and the exertion was warming us so that soon we did not notice the cold, or the wet clothes clinging to our bodies. It took about 20 minutes to reach the top but there was still a long way to go, and no time for rest. The Spanish were always on the look out for smugglers and reputed to be 'trigger happy' so silence was still the order.

If the Spaniards had caught us near the border they would probably have made a friendly gesture by handing us back to the Germans even though, under the Geneva Convention, as escaping prisoners of war, we could claim repatriation. Alternatively, they could have let us rot for months in their dreaded Miranda Internment Camp while the British Government tried to negotiate our release. With these thoughts in mind, I plodded on through the darkness and the rain, stopping only occasionally for a sip of red wine and a bite of bread and cheese. We arrived at a farmhouse at Rentaria, just as dawn was breaking, to be greeted by some Basque friends of Florentino. We had no common language and Andree had told them that we were Flemish speaking Belgians, escaping to join the Belgian Freedom Fighters in England. One of them tried conversing with me in a mixture of Spanish and French, and in reply to a question which I judged to be my birthplace I replied: 'Tongerloo' (near Bree) and this seemed to satisfy him.

The next day, 15 June, Andree, Les and I, after a hearty breakfast of ham and eggs, went off in a car on a two-hour journey over winding mountainous roads to San Sebastian. The sea looked beautiful, and there was a smell of freedom in the air, although we would not be safe until we reached Gibraltar, many miles to the south. We spent two days and nights in a beautiful apartment overlooking the promenade with a charming couple who spoke excellent English. He was an aristocratic Spaniard, in his mid forties, who was the British Vice-Consul in San Sebastian. Everything was so clean and tidy compared to France and, although confined to the apartment, we found the stay all too short. Andree called, on the second day, to inform us that at seven the next morning we were to leave the apartment, and walk along the promenade with the sea on our right.

We bid a grateful farewell to Andree and asked her to again thank Florentino for his help. (Florentino and Andree were captured in the mountains a year later. He was wounded in the legs by machine gun fire, taken to Bayonne hospital from where he was rescued by Tante Go, and later continued the good work and survived the War. Andree was interrogated, sent to Paris and then despatched to a death camp. Fortunately, the Resistance intercepted the message from Paris to the camp so that when she arrived no one knew what crime she had committed or what was to be done with her. She survived the War, trained as a nurse, remained single and joined Albert Schwitzer at his leper hospital in the Belgian Congo. She was honoured by the Allied governments but had

to wait until 15 October 1985 for recognition by her own government. On that date she became the Comtesse Andree de Jongh.

We rose early the next morning, said farewell to the Vice Consul and his charming wife and, as previously instructed, strolled casually down the boulevard carrying our few articles of hand luggage. Not many people were around at that hour and about 200 yards further on, just as we were enjoying this taste of freedom, a Jaguar car with diplomatic plates stopped, the driver greeted us and we got in. A few hundred yards more and we picked up Hal de Mone and Jean Depraetre and then set course for Madrid. Our driver, the Assistant Military Attache, gave me his diplomatic ID card and other papers to Les, Hal and Jean. He explained there would be checkpoints on the way and the CD plates would get us through but if asked just flash the papers and he would do the talking. There were no incidents and the Attache's call of 'Diplomatico' got us through the checkpoints. On the journey I was amazed to see so many ravages of Civil War, particularly on the outskirts of Madrid.

On arrival at the British Embassy compound we were shown to a large barrack room, converted from old stables, with beds in neat lines. The roughly 20 inmates; French, Belgian, Polish, Australian and British; were mostly evaders, but a few had escaped from captivity. The next days were spent being debriefed by the Assistant Military Attache. He showed pleasant surprise when I handed him the map of the German defences in the St Jean de Luz/Bayonne area, but reminded me what my fate would have been had I been captured with it. We were given army identities because of German pressure on the Spanish authorities to delay the repatriation of RAF flying personnel. We had to look forward to a stay of about four weeks while authority was obtained for safe conduct to Gibraltar. During this time I got the impression that the Embassy staff, from the Ambassador down, regarded us as a dreadful nuisance and that we should have avoided getting ourselves into this predicament.

I found Corporal Parker, a Queenslander, a likeable companion and we agreed that the first one to reach Gibraltar would send a telegram to the other's parents. He preceded me by two weeks and his cable caused great excitement in my family because the previous message, from Air Ministry, stated that I was 'missing believed killed'.

A week after arriving in Madrid I was informed that the other members of my crew would be arriving shortly and that we would be repatriated together. It would have more impact at home and, perhaps, help to get more funds for MI 9s work of assisting underground organisations. To have all the surviving members of a crew returned from Belgium, via Gibraltar, in only a few weeks would show the effectiveness of their operations. By 27 June we were all reunited at the Embassy: Les Baveystock, Stan King, Alan Mills, Ben Naylor and myself. Our meals were cooked in a hut in the compound by Rosita, a rotund Spanish matron who sang continually and was unfailingly jovial, and we spent our time playing bridge and discussing what we would do on our return. I said I wanted to convert to pilot and go back on operations with 5 Group.

At dawn on 30 June the five of us, together with Jean Depraetre and Hal de Mone, boarded a two-tonne soft-top lorry for Gibraltar. Our escort, a non-English speaking plain-clothes policeman, sat in the front with the Embassy driver who acted as interpreter. I had been given the identity of Captain Robert Charles Robinson of the Kings Royal Rifles, but without the pay and privileges of the promotion. The countryside was a sunburnt brown and the journey uneventful. We stayed one night en route at one of the new Franco motels, and were impressed by its comfort and cleanliness, and the standard of the food. The next day we passed through La Linea and then the border checkpoint, where the escort bade us farewell. A short walk across 'no man's land' took us into the Gibraltar reception area and freedom at last! But not quite, because we were confined for the remainder of the day for debriefing by Donald Darling of MI 9. The main purpose of which was to emphasise the vital importance of not telling anyone names and addresses of helpers or routes taken, until after the War. At a party that night I recall a tall Black Watch officer, kilt and all, trying to quiz a not very tactful Ben Naylor about his escape and being told to 'get stuffed', for his inquisitiveness.

On 4 July, our basking in the Gibraltar sun came to an end and we set sail in HM Troopship, Narkunda, bound for Gourock, Scotland. Donald Darling had asked me to keep a keen eye on a 'Belgian priest' and try to ensure that he did not talk to escapers. He was a known German agent and the plan was to allow him to get to England so that he could be followed to his contacts. Six months later MI 5 rounded up about 20 of them. Luckily, the 'Belgian priest' was a bridge player and we teamed up to make a formidable partnership until we tied up at Gourock on 10 July.

There, the RAF Service Police took charge and locked us in a first class compartment on a southbound train, to avoid outside contacts prior to two days of debriefing at MI 9 in London. Then we were issued with travel vouchers to our homes; four weeks leave passes and a magnificent sum of ten pounds each for travel expenses. I decided that a night on the town was appropriate after my adventures and so delayed my departure home to accommodate this indulgence.

At 1400 hours on 14 July 1942, I was reunited with my parents as I walked through the barrier at York station; only seven weeks after taking off on that bombing trip to Cologne.

EPILOGUE

War is an expensive business, but the cost of delivering a load of bombs to Cologne in Manchester ZN-D, on the night of 30 May 1942, was particularly high and, but for the heroism and ingenuity of a few subjects of countries no longer in the War, would have been much higher. As it was, His Majesty's Government lost one Manchester aircraft, Pilot Officer Manser's family lost a son in the prime of life and the Royal Air Force lost the services of some of its personnel for varying periods. But, on the credit side

two members of the crew returned to operations and inflicted significant damage on the enemy during the final two years of the War.

Les Baveystock transferred to Coastal Command where he was remarkably successful in sinking enemy shipping and capturing two U-boats. At the end of the War he was Flight Lieutenant Leslie Baveystock DSO DFC* DFM.

I retrained as a pilot in Canada and then joined 617 (Dambusters) Squadron for a second tour of operations. My crew claimed direct hits on the German battleship Lutzow, U-boat pens at Farge and various other targets. On this tour I received a bar to my DFC.

The decorations awarded to our crew after the ill-fated sortie on 30 May 1942 were:

Pilot Officer Leslie Manser VC (Posthumous)

Sergeant Leslie Baveystock DFM

Pilot Officer Robert Horsley DFC

Pilot Officer Richard Barnes DFC

Sergeant Alan Mills DFM

Sergeant Ben Naylor DFM

Needless to say, I have ever remembered the unselfishness and the unquestionable bravery of the men, women and teenagers who helped during my evasion, of capture by the Germans in 1942. This memory has always inspired me whenever I have been depressed, and in times of adversity.

MARCH TO FREEDOM

Warrant Officer Trevor Sidney Scales

I was shot down on 10 June 1942 while strafing shipping in the English Channel, in a Hurricane of 601 Squadron, based at Manston. After rescue by the Germans I settled down, none too happily, to life in prisoner of war camps in Germany. After twice getting away from working parties while at Stalag VIII at Lamsdorf, and tasting freedom for a few days each time until I was recaptured, I was still determined to try again when opportunity offered.

On 7 April 1945 we, the inmates of POW Camp 357 near the town of Follingbostel in northern Germany, were awoken early and ordered to be ready to march at two hours notice, to an unknown destination. A mixed bunch of RAF, RAAF, RNZAF and American aircrew were herded into the forward compound, and given our rations of one loaf of bread, peas, barley and some contents of Red Cross parcels per man. We were told that we would be billeted in farm outhouses, and issued with further rations en route.

We were marched four abreast with either Wehrmacht (German Army) or Volksturm (Home Guard) guards on either side of us, with motor vehicles front and rear of the column. The first two nights we camped in the forest and, being early April, it was very cold so the guards allowed us to light fires for warmth and to cook food. The third night we spent in a barn and ate well, having pinched eggs, 'spuds' and a fowl, and this life style continued for another eight days, along country lanes and secondary roads in a north-westerly direction until we reached the outskirts of Luneberg.

Rumours were rife that we were to be marched back towards the Elbe with retreating German troops, so after days of marching, sleeping in barns, and gathering firewood for cooking, Arthur Benson and I decided to make a break, and try to make contact with advancing Allied forces. Accordingly, just after daylight on 15 April, when gathering firewood, we sauntered into the forest while keeping an eye on the guards, who appeared to have become very relaxed. There was no reaction from the guards nor any rifle shots so we felt that our departure had not been noticed, and quickly distanced ourselves (ran like hell!) from the area. We went in the direction of a workers' camp we had seen the day before, hoping to get help because we had no food or spare clothing. After watching the workers' compound to make sure it was not guarded, we entered and found mixed nationalities: Dutch, French, Belgian and Russian. Having a smattering of German I explained our position and they gave us food and drink, but only the Russians were willing to exchange coats and caps with us. They told us that British troops had captured

Soltau, about 50 kilometres away. They advised us to walk alongside the railway track, as slave labourers travelled from town to town in this manner. There was little activity by way of rail traffic and we reckoned we had covered about 20 kilometres by the end of the day. It was getting dark and we heard rifle shots on ahead so we decided to have something to eat and camp for the night in the forest. Snow had fallen and it was bitterly cold so we had a sleepless night and had to keep moving to generate warmth, as we dared not light a fire.

Starting at daylight we continued down the railway line and suddenly were confronted by German soldiers, ordered to halt, questioned and had our food sack searched. We explained we were Russian civilian workers directed to work in Soltau, and were allowed to continue on our way. We made good progress during the day, and saw a column of German soldiers straggling in retreat towards Luneberg. We were stopped a number of times by soldiers and questioned, but on each occasion managed to bluff our way through. We must have presented a scruffy sight, being unshaven, unbathed for some weeks, and dressed in Russian quilted service jackets and caps. This appearance, together with our gauntness, meant that we did not arouse suspicion.

One German officer ordered us to leave the railway line and to walk on the road. Then a soldier appeared with a horse and dray, heading towards Soltau, so we fell in behind the dray. Approaching the town the area was teeming with German soldiers; setting up anti-tank positions, setting mortars and machine gun posts, and we realised this was a rear defensive line we had stumbled into. Ahead there was a guarded bridge over a large stream and we realised that we would not be able to cross it, so we went off behind some bushes to consider our options. A German soldier with a small bore rifle came upon us, so we made conversation and he told us that British troops were only a few kilometres to the south-west, and were expected to attack during the night. He seemed pleased that the war for him would soon be over.

The weather had turned cold again and we decided to approach a nearby farmhouse, try to pass ourselves off as Russian workers and seek overnight shelter in the barn. When we spoke to the farmer he immediately produced a hand gun and marched us to the house where women, children and soldiers were billeted. After he spoke to the soldiers, they brought forth a Russian worker who spoke to us in his native tongue. With our bluff called we had no choice but to admit that we were escaped Allied airmen. They gave us food and water while waiting for an escort to take us to the German Military Headquarters in Soltau. It was an old brick cavalry barracks in the centre of town, and we were put in the basement.

In the early hours of the morning British tanks, light armoured vehicles and infantry entered the town and some hours of street fighting left 200 Germans dead. These troops were elements of the 15th Scottish Division. Soon we were asked by the German Oberst (Colonel) commanding HQ to accept his surrender and to advise the British troops accordingly. Meanwhile, German soldiers were coming into the basement and

discarding their weapons in a vacant room while awaiting the formal surrender. We made our way slowly along a corridor as British troops were on the floor above and we met them on the landing, with their Sten guns and rifles at the ready. With hands above our heads, my heartfelt greeting was: 'God! Are we glad to see you!'

I explained the situation and then the Germans were marched onto the parade ground, lined up and searched. The officers looking dejected in defeat, and the soldiers appeared to be relieved that, for them, the war was over. The parade ground was littered with the bodies of Germans, covered with ground sheets, awaiting burial. There were also a young British officer and two British soldiers, killed while trying to get to us the night before: hit by a 'panzer faust' (German equivalent of the 'bazooka').

Fighting was still going on around the outskirts of the town when we went with some Brits to look for something to take us westwards, and eventually found a serviceable German vehicle. In this we made our way, through Osnabruck, to Rheine airfield (then in RAF hands) where we showered and were given new army battledress. Thence by RAF transport to Brussels where we were interrogated, and after debriefing, flown back to England.

POSTSCRIPT

Some time later we heard of a terrible tragedy that occurred at the village of Gresse, after we left the column of march. Six RAF Typhoons, mistaking them for German troops, strafed the POW column, killing upwards of 60 prisoners and guards and wounding a similar number. Just a few days before the end of the War, and the promise of freedom!

BRICKED IN TO BREAK OUT

Flight Lieutenant Geoffrey Talbot Chinchen

Roderic Owen's authoritative history, *The Desert Air Force* says of the period around 1 June 1942: 'In the "Cauldron" (south of Tobruk), the region where some of our troops had broken through, friend and foe seemed so inextricably intertwined that there was no hope of separating the one from the other, nor of knowing what might happen next.' It was a time when each side was using numbers of vehicles captured from the other so that identification from the air was extremely difficult. (It was also at this time that the gallant Free French garrison, under severe siege at Bir Hakim, sent the memorable signal: 'Bravo, merci pour la RAF'.)

It was during this period of confusion, with the Desert Air Force almost totally engaged in providing close Army support, that Geoff Chinchen, on 14 June, led a flight of 3 Squadron RAAF Kittyhawks to investigate an area that was causing concern. He left five aircraft aloft as cover while he went down to try to identify a congregation of vehicles and men, and still unable to be sure went down even lower when as he described it, 'all hell broke loose' and he was fired on from all directions. His aircraft was hit, and on fire, and he had wounds to his legs and one arm so he pulled his stricken craft up as high as it would go and baled out.

No sooner had he landed than he was surrounded by Afrika Korps soldiers, and became an immediate prisoner of war. He was placed in the custody of the Meteorological Officer because everyone else was too busy fighting the battle. Before long the unit was visited by Field Marshal Rommel who, on learning that they had captured an Australian pilot asked to meet him. In Geoff's words: 'He was a very pleasant gentleman, and he asked me a lot of questions but, of course, I couldn't tell him anything. He then said: "For you the war is over", to which I replied: "I don't know about that", and he laughed. I saw him several times afterwards and on each occasion he spoke to me for a few minutes.'

Eventually, Geoff was sent back to an Italian POW camp in Tripoli which he recalls 'was a far cry from my time with the German officers, even though they were the enemy and living under battle conditions'. From there he was transported to Bari, and then on to Sulmona in the Abruzzi province of central Italy where he was to remain for about 14 months. At Sulmona he found his good friends from 3 Squadron, Fred Eggleston and Bob Jones, who had been shot down and captured in the desert some months earlier. It was also at Sulmona that he had been involved in a tunnelling project, which was unfinished when they were moved from the camp.

The move was to a POW camp at Bologna, and it was there that it became known that Italy was about to sign an armistice with the Allies, and the guards had indicated that the prisoners would be freed. The armistice was signed by King Umberto on 10 September 1943, but the Germans forestalled any break out by taking charge of the camp very early on the morning of the 9th. A few officers did manage to slip out of a side gate conveniently left open by the Italians, but German soldiers quickly blocked this escape route and one Allied prisoner was fatally shot in the process. Then on the morning of Saturday, 11 September, the prisoners were told to be ready to move at one hour's notice, and in the afternoon were taken by motor lorry to the railway station and loaded into cattle trucks; about 30 to each one.

Soon, they were on their way to Germany, via the Brenner Pass. The prisoners in the truck with Geoff decided that this journey might present an opportunity for escape and someone produced an old table knife with a broken blade. With this implement they managed to cut a hole in the wooden door of the truck which allowed a hand to pass through to open the latch from the outside. The plan was for men to jump out of the moving train while it was travelling slowly up hill. Geoff said: 'We drew lots to decide the order in which we would jump. My number was 14, and 13 jumped at intervals before the train stopped at a station near the Brenner Pass. Then the Germans noticed the hole in the door of our truck and all hell broke out, and those of us who were left were unceremoniously bundled into other trucks and were on our way to Germany again.

'First, we were taken to a large camp at Moosberg and then on to Fort Bismarck, near Strasbourg. Our quarters consisted of two rows of cells in a wall along a dry moat. This accommodation was very crude, and we learned that it had been condemned by the International Red Cross so we felt sure that it would be abandoned before long. With this in mind, an Army officer and I decided to plan an escape. German workmen were bricking up openings in the passageways, so we stole sand and cement from them and hid it for future use. Then, in a dark corner we scratched out newly placed mortar so that we could remove sufficient bricks to gain entry, and by re-laying with paper between bricks and mortar we could remove sufficient bricks for future access. This provided a small cavity we could crawl into. The Escape Committee approved our plan and gave their support.

'When two Guards Brigade officers were attempting an escape we went into our "hide away" and friends bricked us in. The Guards officers were caught going over the outer wall, and there followed lengthy roll calls and inspection of every corner of the premises by soldiers with Alsatian dogs. Finding nothing, the Germans decided that four prisoners must have attempted to escape; the two they had caught and two more unaccounted for who had presumably got away. After the hue and cry had died down we came out of hiding, repaired the brickwork for future use, and kept out of sight during roll calls. We were off strength but our friends brought us food.

‘Eventually, when we were advised that the camp was to be evacuated on 9 October we delayed until the last before getting our friends to brick us in. Pepper was sprinkled all around to deter dogs. The medical officer had calculated that we would have enough air for 12 hours, so after several hours when everything had gone quiet we broke out. We got out of the building through the window where the bars had been cut for the Guards officers, using bed timbers to climb on. Then, it took some hours to get out of the moat and perimeter patrols were quite a problem.

‘We set out in a westerly direction, first getting past a border with sentry boxes and patrolled by soldiers with dogs, and then walking by night and hiding during the day we crossed the Vosges mountain range. The going was tough with stiff climbs and streams to cross. I had escaped wearing an overcoat made in the camp from blankets but it was unlined and, with frequent wetting, it became longer and longer and had to be discarded. After leaving the mountains we came upon a man in a field forking hay and we succeeded in getting him to understand that we were British escapees, after which, he directed us to a farmhouse. There we were fed but held under tight security for 48 hours, until a radio check with London confirmed that we were genuine. Now that we were accepted we were given bicycles and directed to the home of forestry worker, Paul Mediaur’s home in Celle sur Plein, where we remained hidden for three weeks. Here we were given false identity papers; mine in the name of Paul Durong, farm worker, deaf and dumb (due to shell shock) and across this was written, “non contagieuse”!

‘Now, equipped with clothing and ID, and with the invaluable help of the Resistance, we went by train first to Nancy and then to Belfort. From there we were helped to the Swiss border which we reached on 17 November, near St Croix, where, with difficulty, we negotiated barbed wire and very difficult walking across 150 metres of rough ploughed land frozen solid. Our first contacts in Switzerland were with farmers who telephoned the police, and after two days in a Swiss gaol we were released to the British Legation in Berne. We were told that we were not to attempt individual escapes from Switzerland but that the Legation had its own escape organisation which allowed an orderly exodus which would not overload the Resistance escape route to Spain. Most of my time in Switzerland was spent with other officers billeted in the Hotel Beau Rivage, in the alpine resort town of Arosa.

‘After 11 months we knew of only three of our number who had left Switzerland under the Legation scheme, so shortly after the 16 August 1944 American landing in the south of France another RAAF officer, Bobby Jones, and I crossed into France from Geneva. We met up with American troops near Grenoble and got on a flight to Corsica, and from there to the RAAF headquarters in Naples.’

ITALIAN ADVENTURE

Pilot Officer Robert Gemmell-Smith

On the night of 10 August 1942, Bob was the rear gunner in a Wellington of 108 Squadron RAF, based at Fayid, Egypt. It was the last operation of his first tour and he was looking forward to going on rest the following day. The target was the Luftwaffe base at El Adem, Libya, and they were acting as target markers, and after shooting down a Messerschmitt which attacked them they were then hit by ground fire, and Bob's ankle sustained some damage. The aircraft was crippled and the crew baled out, Bob getting out at about 1000 feet, right over the edge of the airfield. On the ground, he was immediately surrounded by Italian soldiers, who relieved him of his signet ring, fountain pen, revolver and flying boots, before marching him off with three other members of the crew. They were taken to Tobruk for interrogation and then on to a POW staging camp at Benghazi.

There, on 22 September, he had a grandstand view, and the pleasure, of seeing RAF Liberators give the port a proper pasting. A newly arrived convoy was anchored in the harbour, and a petrol tanker and an ammunition ship were among those blown sky-high.

In mid-October, they were shipped out to the big POW staging camp at Bari, Italy, where conditions were notoriously bad. As a result of the cold and wet, and poor diet, Bob found himself in hospital with jaundice and scabies. There were a number Sikh troops in the hospital and Bob, from his boyhood in Fiji, could speak Hindi so he filled a valuable role as interpreter. The Medical Officer tried to have him kept at the hospital after his discharge to continue carrying out that function. This was denied and on 30 November he was taken north to POW Camp No 59, at Swigiliano, in central Italy. Here, health and morale improved due to the influx of Red Cross parcels and, above all, warm clothes. In the middle of 1943, Bob and three mates decided to tunnel out of the camp. They had noticed that the guards tapped all the floor slabs in their hut, except the one the Camp Commandant stood on during hut inspections, so that was the one they chose for the entrance to their tunnel. It took four months to tunnel 110 metres, working from 2100 to 0400 each night, and on 4 September they struck air on the side wall of a one point two metre deep ditch. The next night, at midnight, they each took a Red Cross parcel and crawled to freedom. They crawled along the ditch for about 100 metres away from the camp before climbing out and heading for the hills. By dawn they had covered about 12 kilometres to the south, and then bedded down in a copse of blackberry bushes.

After a few days walking in a southerly direction they sighted the commanding peak of the Gran Sasso d'Italia (2900 metres) and used it as their navigational aiming point. At the end of a week they had run out of food and considered they were far enough away from the camp to risk approaching a peasant for help. Bob, who had acquired a useful knowledge of the Italian language, approached a house while the other two remained in hiding. He knocked on the door, and a woman beckoned him in and called him 'amico'. She informed him that Italy had capitulated and they were now allies. He called the other two and a grand party was held, with plenty of pasta and vino, and they were bedded for the night with straw and blankets in the vestry of the village church. The next morning they were on the road again, but a few days later Bob developed a poisoned hand, at Monti san Martino where he was attended by the local doctor and cared for by the priest. He spent three months there, but his comrades went on and later were recaptured and sent to Germany.

On 9 December, with three other escaped prisoners, he headed south but eventually German military activity barred their progress and they had to take a backward step. On the evening of 31 December they were in Caruchi, and after a good meal and plenty of vino they slept in the vestry of the local church. When they awoke on New Year's morning there was one and a half metres of snow all around and they could not get out of the village. On the other hand the Germans could not get in, so Bob and his friends stayed until the snow thawed on 2 April, when they resumed their southward march. They had only gone 50 kilometres when they found themselves surrounded by Germans and Fascists, but found a cave where they spent five days and nights. Bob was impatient to be on the move so, by agreement, left his companions and set off on his own. During the night he got through the cordon and back to Caruchi, but things had changed with increased Fascist activity and the local residents were no longer game to help him. People found harbouring escaped prisoners had their possessions confiscated and their houses burnt. He learned that shortly after he had left the cave German soldiers had found it and arrested his companions.

Bob was on his own again and wandered the hills, fending for himself, stealing food, and sleeping in barns, haystacks or caves. He became expert at sneaking into fowl yards, ringing a hen's neck without a squawk and roasting it over a fire in a cave. Potatoes, onions and green vegetables were now becoming more plentiful with the warmer weather, and sometimes an Italian would invite him to his home in the dead of night and give him a hot meal.

Later, Bob joined up with three other escaped prisoners and together they attempted to penetrate the enemy lines, but on three occasions they came under machine gun fire and had to retreat to the north. In a further southward move of about 80 kilometres they again found themselves surrounded and Bob escaped by diving into a stream and hiding in reeds, with just his nose out of water. He stayed there until nightfall and then crept away into the bushes, while his companions scattered and were recaptured. Alone again, he returned to his old haunts and habits of raiding fowl yards. One day he was

walking barefoot, because his boots had worn out, and with no shirt under his jacket when he met two attractive Italian girls. When they saw his plight they suggested that he meet them at a nominated place three nights later and they would bring him boots and clothes. Unsure whether he could trust them, he contacted some Patriots who told him to keep the appointment. He had been waiting for 15 minutes when they turned up, empty handed, and two German officers suddenly appeared with revolvers drawn. As Bob put up his hands there was a crackling in the undergrowth and a circle of armed Patriots closed in and took the Germans prisoner. As he was escorted away two shots rang out and one of the Patriots remarked that those two girls would not betray any more ex-prisoners.

A few of the richer peasants had radio sets and Bob was overjoyed when he heard that Rome had fallen on 5 June, and next day that the Allies had landed in Normandy. Then, on 12 June, that Pescara had fallen and British troops were moving rapidly northwards. On the 15th Bob set off again, and after passing Amandola he had the pleasure of seeing eight Spitfires shoot up a German supply column with great success. On the sixth day he was walking along a narrow sheep track in the woods, on the side of the mountain, when he rounded a corner and ran slap-bang into a young German lieutenant. The German walked towards him with his pistol in the palm of his hand and said, in perfect English: 'I surrender to you.' This enemy officer was so well groomed, in contrast to Bob who was without boots, and had no shirt or underclothes beneath his dirty old battledress. He accepted the pistol and informed him that it was bad enough trying to reach British lines without being burdened with a prisoner, and suggested they forget the incident and go their separate ways.

On 22 June he was in a small village, high up on the side of the Appenines, and while eating his evening meal was able to watch a tank battle going on in the valley below. His host sent his son off to find out the position of the British lines. The young man returned next morning and advised Bob that if he continued along the side of the mountain for several kilometres before dropping into the plain he should be well within British held territory. He followed this advice and the next day judged that it was safe to descend, and followed a road leading south and, after a while, heard a vehicle approaching. He was delighted when he saw that it was a Jeep, and the Italian driver said that he was going to Chieti and would drop Bob off at Allied HQ. Many times on this journey he began to doubt his good fortune as the driver seemed to rely on St Christopher more than skill in negotiating the winding mountain road. It was with relief that he dismounted at Allied HQ in Chieti, on the evening of 26 June 1944, after 294 days on the run!

After two weeks in hospital, curing a leg infection and recovering from malnutrition, he was sent to Naples for debriefing and eventually back to Australia.

SOLO TO SPAIN

Sergeant Edwin Armstrong Coates

On the night of 22 November 1942, I was the pilot of a Wellington of 115 Squadron RAF which took off from East Wretham, Norfolk, as part of a large force to bomb Stuttgart. My crew of six comprised two Englishmen, two Canadians and another Australian.

From Abbeville, at 8000 feet, we set course directly for Stuttgart and soon searchlights were probing the sky, and as aircraft were caught in the beams, tracers and flashes lit the sky. Approaching the target radar controlled gunfire was intense but we successfully dropped our load on the target, and almost immediately afterwards one of our crew was wounded in the leg by shrapnel so I dived away with the idea of flying home 'on the deck', to avoid heavy anti-aircraft fire and night fighters. Suddenly, a flash on the port side heralded disaster as a Messerschmitt 109 riddled our aircraft with cannon fire. The instrument panel was shattered, both engines lost power, I was wounded and the aircraft resembled a gliding torch. As more tracer crashed into the starboard wing I pulled up and issued the order to bale out.

The severely wounded Wireless Operator, John Devenish-Mears, and I helped each other attach our chest type parachutes and we hastily left the plunging craft. I was relieved when my parachute opened and as the ground came up to meet me there flashed into my mind the advice given by a parachute officer a few weeks earlier: 'Keep your legs together, relax and roll when you hit the ground.' Then I landed hard, feet first but crashed onto my head, which must have stunned me because I came to hearing the noise of exploding ammunition and flares and the roar of the fire consuming my aircraft about half a mile away. Obviously, this would attract attention and I needed to distance myself from it without delay, so, after hiding my parachute under a hedge, I hurried across fields into wooded country.

One flying boot was soaked with blood from a deep wound on my left thigh and I stopped the bleeding by using my handkerchief as a bandage. The remainder of the night was spent on the frost-covered ground and it was fortunate that I had kept my flying suit and helmet. Now I remembered the advice given during training: 'Keep moving, avoid main roads, railways and main towns and the Underground will pick you up.'

At first light I checked my escape kit, which included chocolate, malted milk tablets, cigarettes, a map and a compass. After studying the map I decided that the approach of winter ruled out Switzerland, German surveillance made the Channel coast too difficult,

therefore the route due south to Spain appeared the most attractive option. All it required was enormous luck 24 hours each day!

To allow any search to die down I stayed a second cold, damp and generally most unpleasant night in the thicket. My leg was very stiff and painful; made worse by severe cramp and I developed a great thirst. When morning came I set off through the fog to find better shelter but, at the edge of the wood, I froze as the black shape of a Junkers 52 loomed overhead at about 200 feet. As soon as it had gone I adapted my clothing by pulling the legs of my battledress trousers down to cover the canvas tops of my flying boots, and by tucking the flaps of my flying helmet under the head-piece to make it look something like a cap and took off my flying suit. Before long I found a hayshed, crawled into it and slept until late afternoon. I awoke refreshed but was concerned about my leg, now black from the knee up. I knew I must press on but water and food were the immediate priorities. Meanwhile some rain fell and I collected enough to drink as it ran off the roof—my first drink for two days.

The best plan seemed to be to look for an isolated farmhouse and seek help there. Accordingly, I left the barn as darkness came, soon saw the light from a small farmhouse and knocked on the door. It was opened by an elderly woman who accepted my explanation, in halting French, and invited me in. She and an elderly companion could not have been kinder. They brought me bread and cheese and wine, dressed my wounds and then prepared a delicious omelette with fried potatoes, followed by coffee. While enjoying this most welcome meal I told them all I could and that I had to journey on. So, expressing my heartfelt gratitude took my leave, but not before they had pressed me to take additional food (doubtless severely rationed) and a bottle of wine.

A fingerboard on the road told me it was 30 kilometres to Bucy, which I knew was in northern France and not far from the Belgian border. At about midnight I found shelter in a farm shed for the remainder of the night and the next day, and this was the pattern for the days which followed; travelling as far as I could at night and then sleeping in a barn or shed, usually sharing it with rats and mice, until the safety of the next night. The route south took me through some of the battlefields of World War I, and areas damaged in the German invasion of 1940. I approached small farms only when in need of food, and between calls supplemented my diet with sugar beet and carrots harvested from fields en route.

Passing through Soissons I avoided the large city of Reims to the east and headed for Chateau-Thierry, and at this stage there was an incident to remind me that caution was always necessary. On this night I was making good progress despite my limp when I was jolted into action by the sound of approaching German voices. In an instant I was off the road and flat on the ground, pressing my face into the earth and hardly daring to breathe as they drew level, and then receded.

Approaching Craonne after sunset I expected difficulties, as this was the border of the Occupied Zone and a likely place for guards. However, I walked through the town without trouble and turning a corner saw the River Marne, which was the actual border. At this moment a horse and cart appeared, making for the bridge. Quickly jumping on the back I sat there dangling my legs as it crossed without being challenged. Once over the bridge I left the cart and went my own way.

Passing through Fimes I found some sort of celebration in progress, and suddenly realised that among the crowds were many men in field grey uniforms—Germans—what was I doing here? However, no one seemed the least bit interested in me so I passed through without any trouble.

As the days passed I became bolder and started walking mainly in daylight. My French was improving with practice so that I could ask for directions and give a sufficient answer to any question regarding my identity. This increased confidence even led me to enter cafes from time to time and order an aperitif. At one point when a signpost indicated Paris was only 100 kilometres to the west I was sorely tempted to change my plan and attempt to contact the Resistance there, but decided the risk would be too great.

I continued my southward march, footsore, tired and hungry, and that night knocked on the door of a farmhouse. After my usual halting self-description I was made wonderfully welcome by the farmer and his wife. They gave me an excellent meal, during which they plied me with questions and wine. They considered it unwise for me to continue wearing my RAAF battle dress and equipped me with a beret and a blue serge coat. They also gave me detailed maps of the Province showing roads, gradients and police stations.

I found an equally warm reception at a small farm near Treloup, where M. and Mme. Georges Guy put me up for the night. I enjoyed the rare luxury of a bath, had my wounds dressed, was fed nourishing meals and had long talks about the progress of the War and the future. We maintained our friendship by correspondence after the War. In both these cases my helpers showed considerable courage because the penalty for assisting Allied servicemen was either the firing squad or a concentration camp.

I was making heavy weather of the walking, with blistered and infected feet, so in Nogent sur Seine I tried to buy a bicycle. The shopkeeper recognised me as a British serviceman and explained that bicycles and parts were very scarce, and also that a separate licence was needed for each Province. He then gave me the address of a M. Pierre Noel-Bonnet and his wife who proved friends indeed. I stayed with them for a few days resting and recovering my strength, and then Pierre presented me with an old bicycle that he had repaired.

I resumed my journey with the ability to travel up to 40 kilometres per day and by Christmas Day had reached Maurepas where I got shelter with Albert Seonage and his wife. He repaired both the ailing bicycle and the worn out soles of my flying boots, and they sent me on my way with quite a hamper of food and wine. This I enjoyed on Christmas Day in a deserted farmhouse, while my thoughts were 12,000 miles away with my wife and parents. I knew they would have received word that I was missing but would hear nothing more until I was either captured or in a neutral country.

The farms were now fewer and I slept mostly in woods, and carried the bicycle over hedges and rough country in order to avoid checkpoints on the 'line of demarcation' between Occupied and Vichy France. Cycling happily onward I was abruptly halted by a member of the Gestapo and a French gendarme who inquired where I was going, and demanded my identity card. This was a moment I had expected and feared. My prepared answer was that I was a Pole employed at a farm at the next township where I had left my 'tickets'. The German was unimpressed and insisted I was English but the Frenchman calmly repeated that I was Polish and told me to 'allez', which I lost no time in doing. Once out of sight I pedalled furiously until exhausted. It was my great good fortune that the gendarme, who must also have guessed my identity, was willing to take the risk of letting me go.

Snow began to fall that night and the following day it became heavier, making the bicycle useless. A farmer provided shelter and that night he produced a radio and we were thrilled to hear on the BBC 9 o'clock news that the Allies were making wonderful progress in North Africa. We then discussed how best I could reach Spain now that the snow had made the bicycle useless, and it was decided that I should travel by train to the border and then cross the Pyrenees on foot. I was carefully coached in how to ask for a third class ticket from the station at Gannat, a few miles away, to Carcassonne, via Clermont-Ferrand and Nimes. My main worry was the lack of an identity card if asked to show it at the ticket office, but that was a risk that had to be taken.

The following morning my host set me on my way to Gannat where, despite the presence of gendarmes, I was not asked for identification. Having purchased my ticket I sought to lose myself in a dim corner of the waiting room and to survey the scene, but a moment later three German soldiers entered noisily and threw their heavy packs on the wooden floor. No one took any notice of me and on the train I found a corner seat in the last carriage, and as it steamed off I felt relief that all had gone well so far.

At Clermont-Ferrand I had to change to the Marseilles Express for Nimes, and again there for the train to Carcassonne. I had survived the presence of German soldiers in the trains and on the stations, and a ticket check on the last leg, so that on arrival at Carcassonne I was beginning to feel that Spain was a possibility. I was trying to find a way out of the walled town when I was befriended by a tall, voluble Frenchman who, when I had identified myself, told me proudly that he had played Rugby League against

the Australians in 1936. An hour of revelry was necessary, therefore, before proceeding southward.

Once more I was on foot and in the days that followed there was seemingly endless walking and hiding and looking for someone who could show me a safe route into Spain. At the best I still faced a 70-mile walk to the foothills and then a climb over the forbidding Pyrenees. Altogether a daunting prospect.

Before long the country changed from open farmlands to hilly vineyards, with patches of heavy timber, and across it all blew a relentless cold wind. Spending a night with some friendly farmers we discussed the best means of escape across the border. One suggestion was to comb the forests for friendly Spanish woodcutters or charcoal burners, and another was to seek the help of a priest. I resumed walking along a route they advised and was soon in the foothills, and climbing steadily.

Having heard that the cure at Casafabra might prove a friend in need I sought him out and he undertook to find me a guide. The guide offered to let me join a party of seven civilians he was taking into Spain, but the size of the party caused me to decline the offer. I set off on my own, with eyes on the snow capped higher peaks of the Pyrenees. There were still centres of population which could not be avoided, and one of these was St Paul and the further I walked into the town the more Germans I saw—no doubt stationed there to prevent people like me from escaping. Once again my luck held but I decided there and then not to test it too much further, and to avoid the easier route near the coast and to take the more rugged way higher up the mountains.

Before long I fell in with some exiled Spanish timber cutters who were very helpful and cooperative. That night three of them took me on a four-hour walk, mainly cross-country through hilly terrain, to a village to meet Pedro, a small elderly Spanish smuggler. He asked all sorts of searching questions before agreeing to guide me for an agreed sum of money. The crossing would involve walking for three nights, and he would pick me up at the woodcutters' camp the next night. Then followed the agonising walk back to the camp, which we reached at dawn.

Pedro arrived as arranged and we tramped, on and off roads, often along winding goat tracks, and I felt almost dead by the time first light arrived. Once we had to make a detour around a German camp. During the day we hid in a barn, and the next night was similar to the first with the additional hazards of a guarded bridge to cross at Ceret and German patrols to avoid. But, the border was now only ten miles away and every step took me nearer to freedom. The following day we started before dark and called at the farm of some friends of Pedro, who were kind and hospitable and sent us on our way after a good meal and with their best wishes. At about midnight Pedro cautioned me to be quiet and we stealthily approached a clearing in the timber. There was bright moonlight and we sat watching. Suddenly, he sprang up with the cry 'vite' and began running across the clearing, and as I followed Pedro kept pointing to the south and

uttering the magic words, 'le frontier'. At that, all fatigue forgotten, I sprinted over the ground until, reaching the crest, I stumbled and rolled down the other side, ending with a crash at the bottom. Pedro, after cursing my clumsiness, kept repeating, 'Espagna!, Espagna!'.

When my wild exhilaration had subsided a little, I realised that caution was still necessary to avoid being apprehended by the Spanish Police, and interned in the dreaded Miranda camp near Madrid. Pedro had still to complete his side of the bargain by arranging contact with the British Consulate in Barcelona. As we resumed our journey we could see the distant lights of the Spanish town of La Junquera. More tramping through the hills and olive groves until, a few kilometres from Figueras, we camped in a tiny stone hut to await the dawn. As I could not travel in Spain without a permit, it was agreed that Pedro would travel by train the 80 miles to Barcelona, taking evidence of my identity and requesting assistance from the Consul. He left me food and set off, after I gave him my gold watch and fountain pen to sell for the train fare.

Two days passed, and then towards evening Pedro returned, obviously excited. Telling me to hurry, he led me down the hill along a rough track and there, barely 100 yards away, was a large black car and beside it two men—one, a tall man in a suit and the other, a short, thick set man in a uniform with a British crown on the cap. The Vice Consul, who gave me a very warm greeting, and his driver. The Vice Consul then thanked Pedro and handed him a roll of notes, which seemed to be a much larger sum than I had contracted to pay, and Pedro's gratitude was tremendous. 'Adios, mucho amigo, mucho gratias' he kept repeating. I waved to him through the car window until he was out of sight, and even after that I could still see the image of this great little man to whom, more than any other, I owed my freedom and safety.

A bowler hat was pressed on my head and I was told to keep my head buried in a magazine whenever the car was stopped at checkpoints. After questioning and preparation of a report, and a few days recuperating at the residence of the Vice Consul, and being royally entertained in many ways, I was taken by car to Madrid. At the Embassy the Air Attache welcomed me to 'British Territory' and added that a cable would now be sent to my wife. I was then accommodated in a special unit for evaders and escaped prisoners of war, and heard from other airmen some remarkable stories of their experiences with the Underground.

The next stage was a car trip, via Toledo, Alcazar and Linares to Seville, where other escapees and myself were disguised as sailors and put on a ship for Gibraltar, which we reached the following morning. There, I was whisked away into the bowels of the Rock, interrogated at length and outfitted in RAF uniform. The following night I boarded a ship, which sailed in a very slow convoy. The fourth night out in the Atlantic we were attacked by U-boats and one ship was torpedoed, and on the tenth night there was another explosion but we could not find out any details.

The following morning we berthed at Greenock; as another ship carrying me from Canada had done 15 months before. The date was 18 February 1943—just 88 days, which I would not soon forget, since that fateful bombing mission to Stuttgart.

MALTA TO THE ADRIATIC

Pilot Officer Jack Martin Kirkman

At 1000 hours on 12 March 1943, Jack Kirkham took his 1435 Squadron Spitfire off from Malta on what was to be the last operation of his first tour. He was flying alongside his Commanding Officer on a fighter sweep of the Straits of Messina. They flew ‘on the deck’, to avoid detection by enemy radar, but things were not going well for Jack; his aircraft would not trim well, which meant that flying it was a constant effort.

About 30 miles north-east of Catania they climbed to intercept two Italian bombers, and his troubles continued because he was unable to get his long range tanks to jettison and so had reduced speed and limited manoeuvrability. His first head-on attack was unsuccessful due to these difficulties so he turned and came in astern of his target, closing to very close range where he had the satisfaction of seeing pieces of metal break off the bomber. However, the Italian rear gunner had not been idle and kept up his fire throughout the encounter, and then Jack realised he had been hit. Still at a comparatively low altitude he climbed, with oil pouring over his windscreen, and within moments the oil pressure dropped to zero, the temperature soared and very soon thick smoke filled the cockpit and the motor ‘seized up’. That is when he remembered his emergency procedure; ‘jettison canopy, unfasten straps, roll on back, push on control column with foot’ and a combination of gravity and centrifugal force does the rest. He pulled the ripcord and the canopy opened, but there was no time to admire the view because in the next instant he hit the water. He inflated his dinghy and was soon drifting in the calm blue sea.

Jack was a bit ‘cheesed off’ at being shot down on the last trip of his first tour of operations [a fate which befell others in this book] because he was due to go back to Britain for a well earned rest. It was not long before his reverie was interrupted by Sicilian fishermen who took him ashore, and later he spent the night in a Regia Aeronautica officers’ mess where he had dinner with the crew of the bomber which had shot him down.

After interrogation near Rome he was taken to a POW camp at Sulmona, in the Abruzzi province, and three months later was moved to a camp near Bologna. He was still there on 9 September when the Italian government capitulated and freedom seemed at hand until, very quickly, the camp was surrounded by a German Army Reconnaissance Unit. That night a mass break out was foiled by German machine gunners. Only 20 made good their escape, before the Germans opened fire and killed one prisoner, and Jack was confronted by guns when he reached the gap in the wire and had to return. After

this incident the Germans tightened their grip on the camp and prepared to transport the prisoners to Germany.

While the evacuation was being organised Jack bailed out a water storage cistern in a toilet block. It was smaller than a coffin but he managed to squeeze into it and endured ten hours in an extremely cramped position. He could hear gunfire and explosions which he took to be German efforts to flush out those in hiding, and expected that at any minute they might ventilate his place of concealment with machine gun bullets. Subsequently he learned that a prisoner was hauled out of a similar cistern in another block, but his luck held.

About 0200 hours he left his uncomfortable quarters and climbed through a manhole into the ceiling, where he found four Englishmen, and they all stayed there for another 24 hours before attempting to leave. The Germans were now living in the barracks recently vacated by the prisoners so they had to move with the utmost caution, but they succeeded in getting clear of the building. They made it to the gap in the wire, where the attempted break out had occurred a few days earlier, when suddenly the perimeter lights were switched on. They all dived for the cover of a thorn hedge and lay there with bated breath, expecting shots to ring out at any moment, but their luck held and they had taken the first step to freedom.

From there he headed in a general southerly direction, sometimes in the company of other escapees and at other times on his own, keeping as much as possible to the high country and away from the towns. For the most part, Italian peasant people proved to be helpful and hospitable.

Later, he joined up with a band of Italian Partisans and he spent what turned out to be a bitter cold winter with them in the Appenines, but at the first signs of spring he headed south again. The going was tough, with plenty of snow remaining. He was lucky if he could find a bed of straw, over the stone floor of a cow barn, with a warm cow to snuggle up to; but had to sleep with one eye open as cows were careless in their nocturnal toilet habits.

By early May he was on the same latitude as Ancona, but still kept to the mountains. There he met another group of Partisans who said they were in radio contact with the British and would take him and some other Allied airmen to the coast to be picked up by a British submarine. At a pre-arranged time they were picked up in a captured Vatican lorry, ostensibly taking food to Rome, and hidden in the back under a tarpaulin. It had a wide cab and the three Partisans sat in front with Sten guns under their coats. All went well for an hour or so and they passed through several villages until they came to a roadblock manned by Fascist troops who wanted to search the lorry. Two Partisans whipped out their Sten guns and created havoc as the driver revved up the engine and sped down the road as shots ricocheted off the lorry. Soon after they abandoned the vehicle because the alarm was raised and they were approaching a large town. Again,

Jack was on his own until he caught up with a South African officer. [At this time there were many homeless Allied servicemen wandering northern Italy.] Together they headed in a south-easterly direction toward the Adriatic coast south of Ancona, and after a few days walking met a friendly Italian who took them to two British paratroop officers who had been dropped behind the lines to assist escaping prisoners of war. These officers organised the purchase of two fishing boats to accommodate about 15 men. Ten of the passengers were escapees and the others friendly Italians wanting to go south, and because of previous sailing experience Jack was made captain of one of the boats.

At midnight, 10 May 1944, they crept on to the beach with their equipment. The beach was only a few metres from the coastal highway, along which passed German military vehicles with hooded headlights. Jack and his crew launched their fishing boat, which had been lying derelict on the beach for several months and, not surprisingly, leaked like a sieve. They had to bail furiously but, after some anxious moments, managed to set sail. They had to bail continuously for the whole voyage, but with the benefit of favourable winds and current they made good progress southwards, keeping about 20 miles off shore. No German aircraft were sighted but many Allied aeroplanes passed overhead, going to and from their targets to the north.

As they moved closer to the coast they could clearly see shells bursting and hear artillery and machine gun fire; the din was terrific! They became becalmed close to the shore and had to row the last three miles, with the incentive of knowing that freedom was close at hand. As Jack said later: 'It was a delightful moment when we stepped ashore and were greeted by British Army officers.'

Jack had six weeks holiday in Cairo and then was flown back to England, where he completed another tour of operations on Spitfires before the end of the War.

TUNISIAN TRAVAIL

Flight Sergeant Neville Thomas Eric Hewitt

Neville Hewitt was the rear gunner of a Wellington bomber of 150 Squadron, RAF, based at Blida in Algeria during the vital hard fought closing stages of the battle for Tunisia. The conflict that resulted in an Allied victory and the end of any Axis presence on the African continent.

On 14 April 1943, his crew took off from Blida to carry out a low level night bombing attack on the docks of Tunis, the port of entry for German war supplies. The aircraft was hit by flak and badly damaged so the order to bale out was given and Neville was the last to go, except for the captain who elected to crash land. The other crew members all came down on the Allied side of the battle line but Neville parachuted into no-man's-land, and having got out at a very low level landed heavily and fractured a bone in his ankle. His first action was to call out in the darkness in the hope that other crewmembers were within earshot. He was rewarded with a burst of machine gun fire, and bullets spattered around him.

After this unfriendly response he crouched in the grass until dawn, when he could see the aircraft he had left some hours before sitting on the ground about one and a half kilometres away. His immediate thought was that his skipper could be injured in the cockpit and unable to move, and it was his duty to go to his aid. Taking the flying boot off his injured ankle and slinging it around his neck, he started to crawl towards the aircraft, making slow and painful progress. Three times enemy patrols passed near him, and at one stage he saw German soldiers approaching the aircraft only to be driven back by British artillery fire. During the first two days he ate some malted milk tablets and half a bar of chocolate from his emergency rations, but not having any water his tongue swelled and swallowing was too difficult after that. Pain, thirst and the cold of the night meant that he had little sleep during this period.

About midnight on the fourth day he reached the aircraft to find that his skipper was not there, and had obviously not been seriously hurt during the wheels-up landing. It transpired later that he was actually safely in Allied hands by this time. Neville was desperate for something to drink, and fortunately after much searching found a half-full vacuum flask of water in the aircraft. His hands and his knees were skinned and raw and he spent a few hours on the rest bed in the Wellington, before setting out again at dawn in the direction of the Allied lines. He made better progress after a drink and a rest and covered nearly a kilometre for the day.

Just before nightfall he could see some derelict Arab huts and a small stream in the distance, and after drinking the remainder of his water settled down to sleep. Next morning he set off crawling hopefully in the direction of the huts and the promise of running water. He reached the stream about mid-afternoon and immersed his face in it, but, alas, it was salt! Luckily, soon after he found an old well and hauled up a bucketful of water. It contained a dead snake and some frogs, but tasted good to a very thirsty man.

Then, he clambered up on to the flat roof of one of the huts to get a view of the land ahead. There, he was seen by Grenadier Guards looking out for some of their men missing from a night patrol, and they went out and brought him in to the safety of their platoon. Next day, mounted on a mule, he was taken to an Advanced Dressing Station to have his wounds attended to and rested there for a few days before being flown back to his Squadron. He had been reported 'Missing, Believed Killed'.

The sequel to this story is that, but for this enforced rest he would, indeed, have been killed, because that was the fate of his crew soon afterwards. As the sole survivor, he flew as a supernumerary with other crews for the remainder of his tour of operations.

PALMALMAL SPLASHDOWN

Flying Officer David Mackinnon McClymont

It all started at 0720 hours on 3 November 1943, when Squadron Leader Bill Townsend led 22 Squadron RAAF Bostons from Goodenough Island PNG to bomb Japanese barges massing at Palmalmal Plantation, New Britain. I was the wireless/airgunner and as we made a low level run over the target, after Beaufighters had strafed the area, I released our bombs on the barges, then the aircraft was hit by flak, both engines were knocked out and a fire started in the radio. We were much too low to bale out so Bill ditched and we settled onto a coral reef about 1.8 metres below the surface of the water. The dinghy was released from the wing and inflated by its self-contained bottle of compressed gas, and we got in and paddled furiously with our hands to cover the 150 metres to the shore before the Japs got there. Luckily the jungle came right down to the water's edge to provide immediate cover when we landed.

As we got ashore we could hear the Japs yelling but got our supplies organised without hindrance. We had our .38 revolvers, a jungle knife, a ground sheet and emergency rations, including dehydrated meat and vegetables and fruit blocks, which we rationed out to last 15 days. In our briefing on emergency procedures we had been told to head inland before making contact with the natives, in case those on the coast were under the influence of the Japanese. With this advice in mind we shouldered our gear, set off at right angles to the coast, and after 100 metres crossed the coastal track used by the Japs. We proceeded on a compass heading of north-west, avoiding native tracks, and soon found some propaganda leaflets in Pidgin dropped by our aircraft. The first night we ate a little of our rations and wrapped ourselves in the ground sheet to keep warm. We were sopping wet and it rained heavily all night. That taught us to stop walking at about 1600 hours each afternoon to allow time to build a lean-to keep us dry during the night.

We maintained our general direction, as far as the mountainous terrain would allow, for ten days, until at about 1400 hours on 13 November we came to a village. We approached it with caution but it soon became apparent that the natives were friendly. We had no real understanding of Pidgin but with the aid of a phrase book we carried were able to ask for food, water and sleep. There was one 'boy' who could make himself understood and he told us where there was a 'Captain belong English'. (We were aware of the Coast Watchers who did such sterling work in reporting Japanese movements but were unaware of other members of our forces working in enemy held territory.) The natives fed us well on taro, sugar cane and 'capiok belong master' (custard apple).

Eventually we met a native who we had first seen in an Australian slouch hat paddling a canoe across a small river, and he greeted us with: 'Me friend belong Australia true'. He was Golpak, chief of the Nengin tribe, and was to be our 'number one' for the next month. He was a colourful character who carried an old Winchester rifle and did much valuable work for the Allies. He built a house for us and we ate well on bananas, pineapples, pomelos (grapefruit), coconuts, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, taro, marrow, fish, chicken, pork and shellfish.

During this time there was much hide and seek with the Japs and things got so hot that Golpak and the two of us moved to a cave where we stayed for 11 days. Each day he would go to an old garden and get a taro each for us, and each night we would cook them in the ashes and if we ate them then we had nothing for breakfast and lunch the next day. Golpak's tactics were to go to the bush when his informants told him the Japs were looking for us on the beach, and vice versa. On one occasion when we heard shooting we bolted for the bush and Bill and Golpak hid in a waterhole, with just their heads out. There, Bill thought he heard Japs but Golpak said: 'He no Jap, he jus puk puk (crocodile), das all'.

We felt our presence was endangering Golpak and his natives so we sent word to the 'captain belong English' seeking permission to join him. Word came back that permission was granted and we set off in a north-westerly direction, towards the centre of New Britain, and on 20 December reached Millie where we were met by Captain Ian Skinner, officer in charge of the commando unit which included former patrol officer John Stokie and a radio operator, Mat. Foley. On the second day, after a five and a half-hour walk and a crossing of the Pandi River, we arrived at the radio station where we remained until 1 February. While there we were supplied with whatever we needed by aerial drops from a Liberator. One day, with Ian Skinner, we saw 56 fixed undercarriage dive-bombers, escorted by 30 fighters, heading for Cape Gloucester. This was reported by radio and it was pleasing to see only five return.

Ian learned from natives that there was an American living with them on the north coast so had him brought in. He was Fred Hargesheimer, a Photo Reconnaissance Unit pilot. For the first 30 days of his nine months in New Britain, before he met up with the natives, he lived mainly on snails. He was suffering from dysentery and malaria, as well as a painful tropical ulcer on his instep, and it took some time to get him right with good food and medicine.

One day, at the end of January, we received a radio message saying that if we could be at a given longitude and latitude two and a half days hence we would be picked up and taken back to Allied held territory. There was little enough time but we decided to give it a go. We had to traverse at least 20 miles of rough unknown country to get to the coast, and then ten or twelve miles along the coast to the take off point. We had one 'police boy', one mission boy and four other carriers from a nearby village. After much hard walking we reached the Canoe River, a swiftly flowing stream about 100 metres

across, which we forded with some difficulty. On the other side we climbed uphill in torrential rain and wind, when we got to the top, cold, tired and aching we found that the guide was bushed and unsure which way to go. However, after going up and down and crossing muddy little streams it was just before dark when we came upon a village. We had been walking solidly for six hours and had covered, probably, only six or seven miles. We had a native house for the night and a hot meal from our '4 x 3' ration pack, which was a four gallon kerosene tin with a press lid and contained dehydrated meat and vegetables, fruit, tins of M & V and bully beef, chocolate, salt, tea tablets, sugar, lime tablets, curry powder, tobacco, cigarette papers and matches.

Next morning we were ready to leave by 0720, with a new guide. First we went south, skirting a ravine, then north-east, up hill and down on muddy tracks in pouring rain, and after lunch came to a brown, raging, foaming stream which was clearly uncrossable in that condition. We turned back and at about 1400 hours we came upon two deserted houses and decided to camp in them for the night. The next morning after three hours walk we arrived at the village we had left the morning before! We were disheartened, to say the least, to find that after two and a half days walking we were only half a day's walk from our starting point. Then in came some natives, sent by John Stokie to tell us that the pick up time had been put forward by a day and we were to proceed as fast as possible.

Next morning we set off with a hill native as guide, and plenty of carriers, and walked hard, and now that the rain had stopped we were able to cross the stream that had stopped us before, but soon we came to another one which was still muddy and flowing strongly and was a real test. However, with the invaluable help of the natives, we succeeded in getting across, but with some difficulty. About mid afternoon we reached the second largest swamp in New Britain and followed a slow flowing river, occasionally fording small tributaries, until we crossed on a huge tree trunk that had fallen across it. On the other side we walked through rotting, stinking sago palm swamp that pigs had been rooting in. That night we slept in a hastily erected shelter beside a crocodile infested backwater. We started early and walked on through the swamp beside the sluggish Pandi River, sometimes up to our knees in mud and slime.

But, at 1130 we reached the coast, took off our boots so as not to leave tracks and walked about a kilometre down the Jap road to where canoes were waiting to take us to Baia. The road was just wide enough for soldiers to march three abreast and too narrow for vehicles, and well concealed from aerial surveillance. The natives said that the Japs were very afraid of strafing attacks by Beaufighters and Bostons. At 1540 hours the three of us, together with two police boys and a crew of four local natives, embarked in a big war canoe with outrigger and sail to cross the bay. At first a light breeze kept us going steadily, the water was calm and blue, and we had a fine view of the green jungle of the Macolcol country coming right down to the white sandy beach. Mid-way across we sighted the sail of another boat, which one of our boys said was probably manned by Jap police boys on a periodical patrol down the coast. He suggested that if they came

close enough most of us should hide under the deck, call them over and give them a broadside with our armament of four carbines, two pistols and a revolver! A diabolical scheme but one which we did not have to put to the test. We could see the smoke of Japanese cooking fires at Fosin, a few kilometres up the coast, and after being becalmed and having to paddle we made land just about dusk, at 1910 hours.

We had deliberately arranged to be dropped short of our destination so as not to give away the actual pick-up point, and now had to walk further along the beach. The going proved to be difficult with soft sand and three small rivers to cross. We had envisaged that the pick-up might be by Catalina flying boat but, with moonlight and reasonable visibility, we saw what looked like a submarine out in the bay. We started to break into a run when about eight natives armed with carbines suddenly appeared; they were a guard put there to cover our departure. Then we saw two big rubber boats about 100 metres offshore, and before long we were wading out through the breakers and clambering aboard.

The officers and men of the USS Gato, a submarine of 1700 tonnes with a crew of 70, treated us to hot baths and a good hot dinner. Squadron Leader Bill Townsend recalls that after they came aboard a young officer came up to him, saluted and said: 'Is it all right to start engines, sir?', to which he replied: 'My bloody oath!'. It was just three months since we had arrived, so unexpectedly, in New Britain.

POSTSCRIPT

Golpak was later made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for his service to the Allies, and on his death a plaque was set up by the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society, at Sali, on Jacquinet Bay, which pays tribute to their, 'Number One Friend Belong Australia True'.

Back in the USA, Fred Hargesheimer raised funds to provide some practical recognition to the native community that had saved their lives, and in Australia Bill Townsend, through RAFES, also raised money. The result was The Airmen's Memorial School at Ewasse PNG, the erection of which was supervised personally by Fred Hargesheimer. It has provided education for hundreds of native pupils over the years.



David McClymont and Haolea, New Britain

FIRST TIME LUCKY

Pilot Officer Donald A. Boyd

It all started at 1130 hours on 2 March 1944, when Don Boyd took off, in a section of four Spitfire V's, from 80 Squadron's PSP strip at Canne, on the Italian Adriatic coast near Vasto. The task was to strafe enemy troops and supply lines near Tivoli, a few kilometres east of Rome. After three or four attacks he was climbing to re-form with the section when glycol coolant mixture started pouring from his starboard exhaust, and the engine temperature went 'off the clock'. Turning toward the Roman plain he gained as much height as he dared and shut off the engine just before it was due to burst into flames.

He was too low to bale out and a hill blocked his glide path to the plain so he aimed for a vineyard, scraped the top of the vines and, too late, saw a tall tree looming up. Quickly, he braced one arm against the gun-sight and in the excitement of the moment had failed to turn the safety ring on his gun button, so that with the sudden stop a burst of 20 millimetre fire across the countryside provided a dramatic accompaniment to his unscheduled arrival in enemy territory. This was at the time when the Allied forces were fighting to break out of the bridgehead they had gained with the landing at Anzio, about 60 kilometres to the south.

He was knocked unconscious by the impact with the tree, and vaguely remembered being helped down a path by two Italians, and into a house where his, fortunately, only minor injuries were cleaned and dressed. Then he was sent out onto a path leading towards the mountains; he was on his own again. Still in a bit of a daze he ran into three fellows in khaki battledress who turned out to be South African soldiers who had escaped six months before, in September 1943, and were still trying to get back to the Allied side of the lines. The four of them camped the first night in a deserted hut and during the day hid in scrub on the side of a hill. It was learned later that the Germans searched for the pilot of the crashed Spitfire for four days, beat up his original helpers, and picked up about 40 unfortunate escapers and evaders in the area. The party of four moved on into another area and again found an unused hut. They established contact with the local people who refused at first to believe that they were Allied servicemen, and not Germans in disguise. After two weeks close to starvation the populace became a little more friendly and food started to come to them.

All went well until, alas, one bright day 12 RAF light bombers swooped and although successful in destroying a local German petrol dump and killing four enemy soldiers they also, unfortunately, caused the death of 37 civilians—mostly women and children.

The people were very angry with Don, accusing him of having a secret radio and using it to call in the bombers, and he countered by saying that if he did have a radio he would have asked for a drop of boots, clothes and food—not bombs. Relations were strained for a few days but gradually bread, and then hot meals started to appear once more.

One day Don and a mate were walking into the village to listen to the radio when they saw coming towards them four soldiers of a crack Italian Alpini Regiment (still loyal to the Germans). To run would have been courting disaster so they increased their walking pace in order to arrive at the crossroads before the enemy. They made it with about ten metres to spare and turned left, as the Alpinieri went straight ahead. That was a close one and there were many more close shaves in the days that followed.

Finally, as the Allies extended their perimeter from Anzio the Germans withdrew from the area and then the secretary of the village council requested Don to take charge to prevent bloodshed. Some of the villagers were inclined to take advantage of the situation to work off old grudges and to shoot those they accused of being Fascists. Don was not armed but he issued an order for all to stay calm and threatened that anyone causing a disturbance would be punished when the British troops arrived. The locals had one German locked in the village gaol and when Don and his friends left on the following day they took with them three German deserters. What a cavalcade! Half the village saw them off, and two and a half-hours later, after many goodbyes and glasses of vino, they were on their way, and eventually, after much walking reached some Allied troops and were free at last.

NIGHT FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

Flight Sergeant Colin Argyle Campbell

On the night of 30 March 1944, I was the mid-upper gunner of a Lancaster of 467 Squadron, en route from Waddington to bomb Nuremburg, when a German night fighter crippled our aircraft and we were forced to bale out over Belgium. I remember pulling the ripcord but nothing more until I came to on the ground. Apparently, the parachute pad had hit me with some force on the chin and I took the count.

I landed near Spa, about 25 kilometres east-north-east of Liege, and, when I recovered my senses, began walking in a south-westerly direction. Along the way I was given some bread and water to sustain me by a Mme. Laboureur, and after nine or ten hours I fell in with some Belgian workers. They hid me until nightfall when they took me to the town of Nanceveux, south of Liege, M. Georges Sante-Richard took charge of me, and he and his wife, Barbe, cared for me until the following evening. I had, with great good fortune, stumbled into the hands of the Underground, and the next move was with Josef Cadet-Levarlet, a local gendarme, to his home near Kin.

The next day my captain, Bruce Simpson, was brought in, and that night M Felicien Weber guided us to Aywaillie, and a cafe owned by M. Godefroid Diris which was to be our next temporary home. Then we were joined by Berna Johnston, a USAAF gunner who had been shot down some weeks previously, and later by Earl Brown, a Liberator pilot. After about two weeks, Bruce and I were taken to Mme. Germaine Lambotte-Noel's shop where we stayed until 26 April. Mlle. Josette Smits and Mme. Jeanne Lambregts-Vercheval acted in support, buying food and supplying clothing and other necessities. These were all members of the Aywaille Underground group, and others we saw but briefly. The leader was M. Fernand Ligot. These names were not divulged at the time, for security reasons, and were discovered on a visit to the area in 1958.

On 26 April Bruce and I, and the two Americans, were escorted on a train journey to Liege by Mme. Lambregts-Vercheval and M. Diris. Leaving them we joined a group of French escapees from Germany, led by M. Lambert Hosdin. Then on foot, and by train and bus via Namur and Dinant in Belgium, and then into France, travelling south through Charleville-Mezieres down to Belfort. From there, on 1 May, we reached the Swiss border where our guide handed us over to two local men, and returned for another group of escapees.

We were taken to the Swiss town of Porrentruy, and then to camps at Olten and Bad Lostorf before settling at Glion sur Montreux, under Wing Commander Bragg. It was

Against the Odds

from there, on 12 August, that an Englishman, Len Miller, and I set out in an attempt to reach the Allied forces in Normandy.

We travelled by train from Montreux, via Lausanne, Yverdon on the southern end of the Lac de Neuchatel and on to the railway terminus at St Croix, from where we crossed into France. We were assisted by a M. Louis Soret, and two days later we fell in with a Maquis party and were passed on until we came to their headquarters at Bellegarde, in the Jura region, and met their commanding officer, Colonel 'Xavier'. We were taken to Chamdor, where we joined a group of 13 Americans. Here our luck was really in because on the night of 4 September a USAAF Dakota landed with supplies for the Maquis, and flew us from this enemy territory back to England.

Later, I met our pilot, Bruce Simpson, in London and learned that he had come out of Switzerland to the south of France, and met up with Allied forces after the landing on 16 August.



Colin Campbell with crew, 467 Squadron, Waddington, England.

VIA ALGIERS**Warrant Officer James Eric Graham Buchanan**

I was a Mid Upper Gunner in 90 Squadron RAF, equipped with Stirlings and based at Luddenham, near Mildenhall in Suffolk and my first operation to bomb Berlin on 22 November 1943 was the last time these aircraft were used in the main bomber force. Thereafter we were engaged in mining enemy waters and dropping supplies to Partisans.

It was on a supply drop to the Partisans in central France, on the night of 4/5 March 1944 that disaster struck. We flew low over the airfield at Avord and were greeted with a fine display of searchlights and light flak. We held our fire until the searchlights coned us and then the rear gunner and I opened up. Suddenly, I saw flames begin to streak back from our port outer motor and reported the matter to the skipper, and then the rear gunner shouted: 'Take her up Frank, we will have to jump!'

He climbed for only a short while and gave the order to abandon aircraft, which I acknowledged by saying: 'Mid Upper jumping' and then went out through the floor hatch. I knew we had very little altitude—the navigator later told me we jumped from about 800 feet—so I waited only until I was clear of the aircraft before pulling the ripcord. The spare harness is held in place on one's chest by weak string which breaks and gives the startling feeling of having fallen out of the 'chute.

I landed in the middle of a level field, rolled up the 'chute and hid it in some bushes. I then cut all insignia off my jacket, including 'Australia' badges, AG brevet, and sergeants stripes and, after cutting off the tops of my flying boots to make them look like walking shoes, set off on foot for London—a journey which was to take six months! Our pilot, Frank French, for reasons that are not known, went down with the aircraft and was killed. The Wireless Operator was helped by French people for a fortnight before he was captured, the Flight Engineer also received help and had almost reached the Swiss border before he was caught. The Bomb Aimer, a charismatic Jewish French Canadian, made the mistake of talking to someone in Yiddish and was promptly handed over to the Germans. The Navigator and the Rear Gunner were taken to Paris by the Resistance and then by train to the south of France, across the Pyrenees to Spain, to Gibraltar and back to Britain three months late. Recently, at an Air Force function, I was talking to a woman with a very English voice and when I told her how long it had taken me to get back she said, in a very astonished tone: 'Six months?' and I felt she thought I should have been slapped on a charge for loitering!

Some years ago a friend asked me what I was thinking about as I came down in the parachute, and the answer was easy; I thought: 'Why didn't I join the army or the navy'.

The lectures we had on escape and evasion stressed keeping a very low profile for the first two days until the search became less intense, and to get as far as possible from the crash site, and that is what I tried to do. I went across country as much as possible to avoid roadblocks but the hedgerows were a hindrance. I had filled the rubber water bottle from my escape kit at the first stream but punctured it soon afterwards, getting through a hedgerow. That first night I walked until it appeared to be getting close to daylight and then rested in a wood.

It was a long, long, day, with no one to talk to, nothing to read, and only a few malted milk tablets and a tube of condensed milk to eat. The late winter weather made it too cold to sleep, except for short naps, and, when dusk came, it was good to get on the move again. This second night I kept walking along secondary roads until, at dawn, I came to a lonely workman's cottage and on going to the well for a drink was accosted by a man. When I told him what I was he took me into the house, where there was another man, an old woman and a four year old girl. The day was spent before their fire, sharing their midday soup, and sleeping awhile but, at about 1600 hours, they began to feel the danger of my presence under their roof and asked me to move on. This, I readily agreed to because I would not like to have been responsible for these kind people being shot for harbouring an Allied airman. One of the men came down to the crossroad to advise me which way to go and I thanked him for his kindness.

I walked all that night, and the next day was spent in the poorest wood I found in France—not at all fit for an 'aviateur Anglais'. The day was frightfully long, and at dusk I was off again and had the roads to myself. The only problem was the dogs that barked like mad whenever I came near a village. Eventually, I spotted a haystack in the corner of a field and thought it would be a warm place to sleep, but when I crawled through the fence a large dog appeared on top of it and barked furiously.

Soon after, I came to a barn housing a number of cattle and climbed high up in the hay. I was so tired that I did not come down to talk to the farmer when he came to feed and water the cattle. He was surprised to find me there when he came to repeat the performance in the evening. He knew a few words of English and I was able to explain who I was and what I wanted and, after feeding and watering his stock, he took me to his home where his wife fed me royally on meat, potatoes, bread and lashings of wine. I shall always remember that little place near Bannegon where I had my first real meal in France.

The wife gave me as much food as I could carry and, in response to her question, I told her I was heading for San Sebastian in Spain where there was a British consul. Later, when I met two Flying Fortress crewmen who had stayed at the same house they

said the old chap told them over and over about the Australian who was going to San Sebastian. I walked all night despite pains in my overfed stomach and by daylight had reached Urcay. Here I found a broad highway, and for the first time decided to travel by day and proceeded towards Montlucon; it was only later that I learned it was a German garrison town.

There were no restaurants along the way so I decided to spend some of my escape kit money on food in town, but each time I came to a cafe I decided to go on to the next one. Approaching the outskirts of the city I saw a sentry box with an armed sentry and four more men in uniform. It was too late to take evasive action so I walked straight on, looking neither to right or left. One moved over to have a close look at me but I just walked on and my blood pressure gradually returned to normal with increasing distance between us.

I had finished the Bannegon food early in the day and was becoming very weary but it was too cold to stop so I just kept plodding on until, at the top of a long hill, I came to the village of Quinsannes. Here I left la Route Gueret and turned south on a secondary road and, after walking up and down hills, came abreast of a small village where all the dogs started to bark and howl. I was beginning to hate these French dogs!

Soon I came to three isolated barns and going into the first one, which contained only one horse, I lay down on the hay. But it was too cold to sleep so I proceeded to the next one, which was unoccupied, but the third one was all that I could ask for. It contained about 18 head of cattle that were generating quite a lot of warmth, so I sat in a feed trough and leaned against a cow and dozed a bit from time to time. The farmer who came in at daylight got the shock of his life to find me there. After going through all the rigmarole of who I was he was satisfied and took me to his house, and here his 15 or 16-year-old son was so excited that he raced into the kitchen without his trousers! They fed me on fried eggs and bacon, bread, cheese and wine, and some ersatz coffee. Then the son, with the help of an English/French dictionary, told me that tomorrow there would be someone coming who could speak English. I was too tired to worry about tomorrow and the only place to sleep was the barn, so wrapped in a rug with hay piled over me I slept. It seemed no time until I was brought some more food, a dish to wash in and a cutthroat razor. It was ages since I had used a straight razor, and I had the farmer's wife and another woman of the village as an amused audience.

After that I went to sleep again, only to be awakened shortly after by the farmer, accompanied by three men. I showed them everything I had by way of identification but they were dubious because the buttons on my battledress were plain, and not RAF buttons. However, when one of them gave me a cigarette and I produced a box of Bryant & May matches to light it with they were relieved and forthwith accepted me for what I claimed to be, and after a glass of wine with the farmer I left with the three men in a car. They took me to the village of Domerat, and after downing a couple of cognacs I slept in a real French bed. Here, again, I was barely asleep before being roused to answer

questions such as the names and particulars of my crew, where we were shot down, and how I had got from there to my present position south-west of Montlucon?

That night, and every night for the next eight days, I was taken up the street to a cafe where we drank wine in a back room. Ruchon, the butcher, was very kind to me and we had good meat, in spite of the fact that often there was nothing in the shop. Once we even had chicken. Then, too, a full bottle of wine was always placed in front of me and if the level got low someone would rush off and fill it up again. The seven-year-old boy of the house used to raid the sweets and when caught would say he was getting them for me, and all would be forgiven. Whenever there was a knock on the door I had to disappear into the lumber room until the visitors had gone, and I could not help worrying that should I be found there by the Germans my host family would face torture and death. I stayed ten days with Andre Ruchon, his wife, son Roland and Madame Ruchon's mother, and they had been very kind to me.

Originally, the Resistance men at Domerat had told me that I would be back in Britain within a fortnight, but since that time the Germans had broken their escape route. It was now decided that I should be sent to Briffon, one of Resistance leader Gaspard's camps. He had been attacked by a large force of Germans and had now concentrated his 3000 men in the Foret de Margaride. I was on a big American 'White' truck loaded with weapons and supplies, and as we drove through Montlucon in early afternoon we saw off-duty German soldiers going to the cinema. There was one bad moment when the French lad driving the truck stalled it at an intersection but we got going again without incident.

We climbed up into the mountains for about 145 kilometres and it was dark when we arrived at Briffon—a shabby village covered by about a metre of snow. We were welcomed, with much hand shaking, by a party consisting of about ten men, all armed with revolvers and hand grenades. Next morning I asked an Englishman who happened to be there how they got on with their raid and he replied that they were not going on a raid. 'But', I said, 'they shook hands with everyone'. 'Oh' he responded, 'the French are always shaking hands, first thing in the morning and last thing at night; they shake hands all the bloody time!'

Late at night, in this village amid snow-covered mountains, when the truck stopped again and we ploughed through deep snow to a dilapidated house I thought my luck had run out. The kitchen was full of unshaven, ragged young men and I was introduced to an Englishman. Thinking he would also be an escaping airman I asked how long he had been in France. He replied: 'Four years' and I thought 'my sainted aunt' what hope have I of getting back to England? I cheered up a bit when I found out he was a 'civvy'.

It was really a beautiful place, at the foot of the Puy de Sancy, a 1800 metre mountain. There was brilliant sunshine and the 60 centimetres of snow covering the ground gradually melted and daffodils and wildflowers brightened the landscape.

After I had been there two days, we got word that there was to be a supply drop on our reception ground, so out we went. A very keen chap, a French former fighter pilot, lit three fires instead of using torches. He received much criticism for advertising our position in this way, but I thought it was too cold for the 'Jerries' to come out in the middle of the night, even if they did see the fires. Two aircraft came in very low, but instead of dropping on our nice level field most of the loads ended up in a rough gully. It was a case of all hands to the arduous work of retrieving the supplies, and there was an ex-Foreign Legion lieutenant who made it his purpose in life to make me work. Every time I managed to dodge off 'Beau Geste' would find me and there we'd be doing the heaviest work again.

After ten days at Briffon we had to find ourselves new quarters because the 'Jerries' had jumped two of our small camps and the panic was great. One night when we went to pick up a couple of drums of petrol in a small town clinging to the side of a steep valley, I was detailed to watch the police station when a very big Alsatian dog 'woofed' right in my face but before I had made up my mind whether or not to shoot it in self defence it turned and disappeared. Just at that moment an old woman put her head out of a window above the garage and commenced screaming. One of our chaps told her: 'Shut up; we are the Gestapo!', which made her scream louder than ever until, apparently, from advice inside the house she stopped.

I was keen to have a shot at the 'Jerries', but instructions to the Resistance from London were to withdraw when trouble threatened, to save the local people being shot in reprisal. At one of our small camps, which I had visited a few days before, Germans arrived at dawn, found 12 Maquis in bed, lined them up against a wall and machine-gunned them down. A man named Chariot was one of the first to fall, and another one or two fell on top of him. The German NCO then went along, with his revolver and gave the coup-de-grace to any who appeared still alive. After they went, Chariot, unhurt except for a bullet through the left hand, made his way over to us. After this, we moved from Briffon and made a camp in a wood about 16 kilometres away. On trips distributing arms and fuel to other camps I was always invited to go; probably because, as a trained gunner, I was considered more likely to hit the enemy than the untrained 'rookies' who made up most of our force.

When the snow thawed, Gaspard, our Resistance leader, moved a large number of us into the Foret de Margaride. We were a force of about 3000 against 11,000 German troops in the area, and after they attacked our headquarters at Mont Mouchet, including strafing by Focke Wulf 190 fighter bombers, we withdrew to the Fridfort Plateau where Resistance leader Fournier was operating. I had teamed up with two Canadian and one British airmen. One day, on a cold, windy, moorland ridge I was introduced to a British army officer named Hubert Anselm who, on learning that I was an Australian, said: 'I have a compatriot of yours on my team; come and meet her.' That was how I met the famous Nancy Wake, code named 'White Mouse' by the Germans.

At this time we were asked to escort Madame Fournier, who had with her a very large suitcase. We very nearly bumped into a force of the hated French militia, complete with Alsatian dogs, and were pleased to hand the lady over to another Resistance party who were to take her to her husband. The next day we learned from the Liaison Officer that the suitcase contained the group's funds of over two million francs (about 40,000 pounds sterling). Soon, with the Allied invasion of southern France, the Germans were getting out of the area as fast as they could. We managed to get a lift in a charcoal-burning car to Aurillac, where we met Major McPherson who had been second in command of the Commando unit, which had nearly succeeded in kidnapping Rommel in Libya. McPherson instructed his assistant to drive us down to Toulouse, and there we got on the first British aircraft to land there since the war commenced. We flew to Algiers where, after ten days in a rest camp on the Mediterranean, we were flown to Gibraltar and then on to Swindon, Wiltshire.

The first old acquaintance I met in England, a tall, quiet fellow named Bill Braun from around Murgon in Queensland, asked where I had been, and on being told said: 'Well how lucky can you be. I did 38 trips over Germany—every one the same—and I just sat there at my radio and you had an experience like that! By Joves, some people have all the luck.'

BELGIANS TO THE RESCUE

Flying Officer Geoffrey Johnson

On the night of 30 March 1944, I was the wireless operator in a 467 Squadron Lancaster on the way from Waddington to bomb Nuremburg, but, as the result of unfriendly action by the enemy, I was forced to bale out in the vicinity of the German–Belgian border. Four days later, in the hands of the Belgian Underground, I was reunited with our Flight Engineer, Charlie Curl, at a house near Spa, in Belgium. There, I was interviewed by an English woman married to a local chemist, and then we were taken to the village of Theux on one of those trans-country trams peculiar to Belgium. Our next surprise was to find that the Underground leaders were members of the local police force. We were placed in the care of four elderly ladies, the la Crosse sisters, who conducted a dressmaking business and lived above their shop. The Underground chief, Monsieur Serveirs, explained that this provision of shelter for us satisfied their desire to contribute to the war effort.

It was intended that we should move on in the direction of Switzerland as soon as forged identification papers could be prepared for us. However, this task took much longer than expected, due to recent increased surveillance by the German authorities, and it was six weeks before we received our new identifies. On the following Sunday morning, at about 0300 hours, the Germans surrounded the village and searched every house. We hid behind some boards under a pile of dress material off-cuts and were not discovered. Three able bodied young Belgians who had dodged the labour call-up were not so lucky. We never did discover whether the Germans had wind of our presence in the village, or were carrying out a routine search for unregistered workers.

The next night we were moved to a large, unoccupied chateau a few kilometres away in another village, just in case our existence was known to the enemy. Here we were looked after by Marie, the caretaker's wife, and the Underground advised us to be patient and not to make any move to leave until they advised us to do so. It was at about this time that the RAF started bombing bridges and rail junctions, in preparation for the long expected invasion of Europe, and the Germans increased their checks of all movements on roads and railways.

We found it difficult to pass the time in this big chateau, as night excursions were forbidden and we were not game to venture out in daylight. However, after eight weeks we were moved back to the la Crosse sisters' premises and they were very happy to see us. Here, on a number of occasions the monotony was relieved by night time expeditions with Underground members from which we returned with fresh poultry and eggs for the

next week or so. Also, in the village there was a German food depot protected by two guards who were rather casual about their duties and, as a result, there were times when one of us managed to procure some tinned food and boxes of fine Havana cigars. Some of the latter were enjoyed by my father, after my return home, and he claimed that the enjoyment was enhanced by the knowledge of where and how they had been obtained.

As time went on it became clear that travel to either Switzerland or Spain was out of the question with increased German attention to the established escape routes. We became very unsettled with no early prospect of escape and nothing to do, so, Rose and Augustine la Crosse introduced us to rug making and needlework. We made a couple of nice mats, and Charlie became quite adept at crochet while I favoured filet work. I brought home two table centres for my mother, and since her death they have reverted to my possession.

I never ceased to be amazed at the ability of these people in the Underground to keep information confidential. As an example, a woman who lived a couple of doors away was, unknown to us, hiding an escaped Russian soldier. It appears her husband, who was a boot maker, was taken off to Germany for compulsory work and she taught the Russian how to repair shoes, and in this way she continued with the shop telling everyone that she did the repairs herself. We did not know of this until the night before we left. There was also a girl of about 12 years, named Yvonne, who was a niece of the la Crosse sisters. Her parents lived in Liege, about 15 kilometres away, and she used to stay with her aunts to be away from RAF bombing and go home one weekend per month, and her parents never knew that we were staying in the house. She was learning English at school and it was good to be able to talk to her.

There was great excitement in the village on 6 June when we received news of the Normandy landing and we used to monitor progress from radio news received from the BBC. It was frustrating when progress was so slow initially, and it was not until 7 September that we first sighted American tanks on a hill outside our village. The Germans had retreated to a hill on the other side and for three hours we were in the middle of an artillery duel between the two, and a couple of shells did land in a street not far away.

We ventured out just prior to dark and made contact with the Americans, only to be told to return to our hiding place until the next day. Back at the house, out came the wine, which had been saved for this occasion, and we had quite a celebration, and members of the Underground came by to say farewell. We got to bed at 0350 and got up at 0500 hours, with very thick heads.

On reporting to the Americans we were attached to the service police who were guarding prisoners of war, and our job was to man machine guns on trucks taking them back to the cages. What a turn around! Twenty-four hours ago we were sneaking glances out of our window to watch the German retreat and now we were in control of German

prisoners. The Americans made us very welcome, giving us chocolate and fruit and supplying our every need. As we moved back from the combat zone we picked up three American airmen who had come out of hiding, and we were told that we would be sent to Paris as soon as transport was available. I, as the senior officer of the party, was given the movement order and the five of us went by Jeep to the next control point where we stayed the night. The following morning we transferred to a personnel truck as our party had now grown to 12.

In Paris we were met by a RAF sergeant who took us to be interrogated and to hotel rooms. It was great to have a really good shower and get into some new underclothing, and after two days sightseeing in Paris we were flown back to England in an old DC2. We arrived on 12 September, 166 days after take-off and by far the longest of the 25 operational trips listed in my logbook!

MON EPISODE FRANCAIS

Flight Sergeant Stanley David Jolly

One of RAF Bomber Command's more expensive raids was that aimed at the large German military depot at Maily-le-Camp, 70 kilometres south of Rheims in north-eastern France, on the night of 3 May 1944. Of the 340 heavy bombers which took part, no less than 42 (12 ½ per cent) failed to return. Warrant Officer Stan Jolly was the bomb aimer in one of the Lancasters of 467 Squadron and from his account this high casualty rate was due, probably in large measure, to spending too much time in the target area as sitting ducks for the enemy defences.

Jolly recalls: 'The trouble started when we reached the target area and were told to orbit; not to bomb. At the time, I thought the Pathfinders were late in marking the target, but years later I learnt that the problem was with the Bombing Leader's radio. After what seemed like an eternity, we were called in to bomb, and over the target at 5000 feet the aircraft was rocked by the explosions on the ground.

'Shortly after leaving the target the aircraft shuddered and I heard what sounded like bullets hitting metal. The pilot, Colin Dickson from Kempsey, immediately told us to bale out but as the aircraft was still flying straight and level, and "Dick's" voice sounded so normal I had difficulty in believing what I was hearing. Only when I heard him telling the flight engineer to feather the props did I realise it was for real, and wasted no time in going out through the front hatch.

'After my parachute opened I watched the aircraft just become a ball of fire in the night sky. Then I saw another parachute open way below me but, regrettably, there were no more. It wasn't until I was back in England that I learnt that the other survivor was Bob Hunter, the Wireless Operator, who had baled out of the back door and was badly burned in the process.

'The recognised escape routes were generally in a southerly direction to Spain, but to go south then would have taken me too close to where the aircraft crashed. Also, it was such a bright moonlight night I thought the Germans would surely have seen my parachute floating down and would expect me to head south. For these reasons I went east and after walking for some time came to a forest so decided to rest for the remainder of the night. Next morning, I walked in a south-easterly direction to detour around the crash site. By afternoon I had become very thirsty so when I saw a church spire, which would indicate the presence of a village, I headed for it but decided to wait until dark before trying to get a drink. Near the village I hid in a small quarry, but wasn't

there very long before two little girls wandered in and discovered me. They got a fright when they saw me and ran off to tell a man who was ploughing nearby.

‘He came over and, with the aid of the language card from my escape kit, got him to understand that I needed a drink and civilian clothes. He left and soon returned with a middle-aged lady who greeted me as if I had been her son, hugging and kissing me on both cheeks. She indicated that she would return after dark and take me to the village, but before then she returned with another lady because it had commenced to rain. I was given a double-breasted suit and a hoe, to make me look like a farm labourer.

‘After dinner, I produced the silk map from my escape kit and showed them how I planned to walk to Spain. They dissuaded me from that course, because I would encounter too many Germans, and convinced me that I would be better off going to Paris. They let me sleep in their barn, and after the hard forest floor, it felt like a five-star hotel. At the time, I thought they were all one family and it wasn’t until 1991 that I discovered two families were involved, and that the first lady was Madame Berque, and the village was Villacerf, [in the Champagne Province].

‘Early next morning, the two ladies took me about four kilometres to the railway station at Payns where, with 100 francs from my escape kit, they purchased a ticket for me, and we said au revoir. I wasn’t in the waiting room long before a middle aged couple entered and said, “Bonjour”. I responded and, fortunately, that was the end of the conversation—and very nearly the end of my French. The room soon filled up with travellers so I thought it would be safer out on the platform. When it started to rain I decided to wait in the lavatory, at the end of the platform, but I was in for a rude shock. The urinal proved to be on the outside wall and inside was just a hole in the floor; so it was back to the waiting room.

‘A train approached which I thought was heading in the wrong direction for Paris, but as nearly everybody seemed to be catching it I went up to a chap standing on his own, pointed to the train and said, “Paris”, to which he replied, “non”. Back in the waiting room, the couple who had greeted me earlier was still there, and when the train arrived I helped them with their luggage and sat next to them. The next station was Romilly, where, outside my carriage was a platoon of German soldiers. An officer addressed the passengers and it soon became apparent that he was commandeering the carriage for his troops. Once again, I helped my new friends with their luggage as we moved to another carriage, where the only seat left for me was opposite a German soldier. It was the only option available but I was a bit concerned because I was still wearing my RAAF polo neck jumper, and had not done a good job cutting the leggings off my “Escaper” flying boots and some of the wool lining was showing. After a few stops, I felt a tap on my shoulder and my lady friend was indicating that there was now a seat with them. I felt pretty sure that they knew what I was because they did not embarrass me by speaking and demonstrated friendliness by giving me a hard-boiled egg to eat. On the platform at the Gare de l’Est, Paris, they seemed to be asking me who I was so I replied: “RAF

Parachutist". With that the man went off and soon returned with the guard of the train who was so pleased to see me that he took me straight to the public bar at the station. At that time I was a teetotaler but it was easier to say beer than try to explain, as the bar was full of German soldiers.

'At a railway staff room I was introduced to Bernierd Mannin, who took me to his apartment where he lived with his parents. Next evening, I had a visit from a member of the French Underground and I gave him my passport photos, which we carried for such an emergency. The following day a group leader, Marcel Nicaut, visited me and said it was too dangerous to stay where I was as there were Germans living in the apartment building. I was taken to an unknown suburb, but only for a few days because the Gestapo was active in the area. While there Marcel gave me my new identity card and I had become Lucien Depris, a deaf and dumb masseur.

'Marcel and I cycled to my next host family in the outer suburb of Gournay sur Marne, approximately 15 kilometres east of the city. My new host, Edward Hermann, lived with his wife in a small flat above a workshop where he made beautiful canoes which people hired to paddle on the Marne, opposite his workshop. I lived in another house a short distance away, with Edward's son, daughter Rita and boyfriend Julian. I had been in the house about two weeks when Julian told me that he and Rita were getting married that day, which I thought was appropriate because she appeared to be about five months pregnant. That evening Julian called in and told me to go to bed in the main bedroom, as an out of town relative would be staying the night and they didn't want him to find me. I awoke to hear Julian at the door so I let him and his bride in. He told me to get back to bed and then, to my surprise, the couple undressed and got into bed with me.

'Marcel called one day to tell me that I would be leaving in a few days for Spain, with two Americans he had in hiding, but something went wrong and the trip was cancelled. After the Invasion, on 6 June 1944, Marcel said that orders were for all evaders to stay put until liberated. Up to this stage I had not been out of the house; my meals had been brought to me as Julian and Rita spent their days at Edward's place. Now, as my stay looked like being a long one, I started having meals with the rest of the family at the flat, which was much better as there was a radio with which to listen to the BBC and I could have an occasional swim in the Marne.

'But, after eight long weeks at Gournay my stay came to an abrupt end when Marcel arrived with the news that my house might be searched, and I had to leave immediately. He doubled me on his bicycle to his place for the night before going on to my next host family, who were the elderly M. and Mme. Salm and their daughter Fanny. Fanny spoke a little English, which made communication much easier. Their house was in the suburb of Raincy, 11 kilometres north-east of the city centre. There was no radio so I had to rely on news that Fanny brought home from work in the city. One day she came home with the startling information that Hitler was dead and that the Army had

arrested the Gestapo in Paris, but a few days later we learned that Hitler had survived the bomb plot.

‘After about two weeks with the Salm family, Marcel arrived unexpectedly and lifted my spirits by saying that an RAF Lysander would be landing that night near Paris with a VIP, and that he had arranged for me to return to England in it. Packing was no trouble because all I had to do was put on my jacket. Out on the street my hopes were shattered when Marcel revealed that the Lysander story was merely a ploy to get me out of the house without upsetting the Salms. Apparently he had given them instructions not to take me out of the house because the Gestapo were active in the area. However, the previous night Mme. Salm and Fanny had asked me if I would like to go for a walk and I jumped at the chance, as I had not been outside their high walled yard. We walked around the shopping area and at one time thought we were being followed. Apparently we were, but not by a Gestapo agent but by a member of the Resistance who knew I was not supposed to be out on the street.

‘Marcel took me to a cafe, which, I gathered, was the headquarters of the Resistance in that area. He showed me a cupboard where he kept explosives that he used to blow up rail tracks. At the cafe I met M. Gustave Bacot, my next host, who lived at Villemomble with his wife and daughter Suzanne. They had a radio so, once again, I was able to listen to the BBC and learn of the break out of the Allied forces from the Normandy area. Gustave, like the other families I stayed with, had turned his small backyard into a vegetable garden to augment the meagre supply of food. Everything was rationed and you could only get milk with a doctor’s certificate. With the Allies getting closer, Gustave, with my help, filled and corked about three dozen empty wine bottles with water as there were rumours that the Germans might poison the water supply.

‘I was in need of a haircut so Gustave took me to a barber who was a member of the Resistance. It was lunchtime so he shut the door and showed how pleased he was to meet me by opening a bottle of champagne. I must be one of the few who have sipped champagne while having their hair cut!

‘We knew the Allies were getting close, because we could hear the guns, but were very surprised one day when Marcel pulled up outside in an open tourer and dressed in French Army uniform. He said that the Germans had left Villemomble and he was taking us to the celebrations at the town hall. There I was introduced to the crowd and treated as if I had liberated them. Just after the ceremony we heard gunfire so Gustave and I made a hasty retreat home. Marcel went into hiding at a neighbour’s house as he had shot a German. For the next week before the liberation every time the doorbell rang I would dive out the back door and hide in the woodshed, as we thought that someone who had been at the celebrations might tell the Germans where I was staying.

‘I was in the suburb of Villemomble when Paris was liberated, and next day, 26 August 1944, I reported to the Americans in the Place de la Concorde. Freedom at

last! The Americans arranged transport, for myself and other evaders, to the Normandy Beachhead from where we sailed for England. So ended 16 weeks “on the run” which ended successfully, thanks to the courage and kindness of a number of French people who remained loyal to the Allies, through all the adversities imposed on them by the German occupation.’

The Crew

Pilot:	Colin Dickson Kempsey	Australia	
Navigator:	Oscar Furness	Wentworth Falls	Australia
Engineer:	Philip Weaver	Swansea	Wales
Wireless Op:	Robert Hunter Brassall	Australia	
Mid-upper Gunner:	Horace Skellorn	Manchester	England
Rear Gunner:	Hilton Forden	Newcastle	Australia
Bomb Aimer:	Stanley Jolly	Brisbane	Australia

The crew had been posted to 467 Lancaster Squadron at Waddington, Lincolnshire, on 10 April 1944.

THROUGH FIRE TO FREEDOM

Flight Sergeant Robert Ian Hunter

Wednesday 3 May 1944. It's on again tonight! Feels as though we are really in the war now, prancing the German military camp at Mailly-le-Camp from the low altitude of 5000 feet. I wonder if we will be able to see the buggers run?

We were delayed in making our bombing run but eventually dropped them on the target without further incident and were making our get-away when, suddenly, we were hit by one, or more, night fighters. The kite shook all over, like a tree in a windstorm. Immediately, Dick (the pilot) shouted: 'OK, fellers, bail out.' (Perhaps, the last words he ever spoke.) Our port motors were on fire and the petrol tanks in that wing were blazing fiercely.

I grabbed my parachute and bashed it onto the hooks of my harness, pulled off my helmet and moved first into the navigator's compartment but changed my mind and decided to exit from the rear door. I hurdled the main spar, an obstruction about three feet high by one foot wide, and threw open the draught proof door in the centre of the aircraft. From there to the tail the kite was ablaze. The aluminium fuselage, the oil from burst hydraulic lines to the turret, and everything else was burning. I thought of turning back again to the front hatch where there were no flames, but in view of the fact that there was no time to lose decided that through the fire was the way to go.

These thoughts all occurred in a second, or less, before I placed my right hand over my eyes and ran into the flames. I was bent over almost double in an effort to protect my parachute from the flames. I could feel and hear the exploding ammunition from the rear turret, and believe I was hit by a red-hot shell case because I had a burn over half an inch deep in my right leg. On reaching the rear door I grasped the knob with my already badly burned left hand. The door refused to open, and while struggling with it my left boot went through the floor and it gave way so that the lower part of my body was completely out of the aircraft. The slipstream caught me and turned me around so that I was facing in the opposite direction. By this time I was completely exhausted and was fast giving up all hope because my parachute would not go through the hole. At this moment a thought flashed through my mind, which gave me strength for a final effort. I gave a lunge with my feet and found myself back in the aircraft, on my hands and knees. This time I merely touched the door and it opened and I crawled over the sill. I was free of the flames and turning over and over as I fell.

I clutched and clutched at the D handle of the ripcord, perhaps a dozen times, before I succeeded. Even now, I have no clear memory of the cord coming away but the chute opened and I was making my descent. I fell in a plantation of fir trees and was not touched by a twig, but the canopy came down over the top of a tree and broke the fall so that I was suspended with my feet barely touching the ground.

I looked at my burned hands. The skin had peeled off the palm of my right hand and was hanging down, attached only by small pieces on the first and little fingers. I released the parachute with my left hand which was also badly burned, and still shows the result with missing flesh and scars. The lower part of my body was naked from waist to flying boots.

I began walking and after perhaps two or three hours came to a small village where I tried every house but no one would assist me. I finally crept around the back of a house and after opening the door with my shoulder was allowed to stay. The pain was intense and I just paced the floor for several hours, until some members of the French Resistance (FFI) came, placed me on a stretcher and carried me a long distance to their headquarters.

About midday the next day a utility truck arrived and then I met Flying Officer Neville Mutter, a Typhoon pilot from 65 Squadron RAF, who had been shot down the previous day. (In hospital I received letters from him until he began his journey back to our lines in Normandy.) I was placed in this truck and driven through what I discovered was the city of Troyes where I was taken to a house in the suburbs and remained there until sometime after dark. By this time my hands were a tremendous size, and Dad's wedding ring was cut from my finger with a pair of dirty nippers. The ring was covered with burnt flesh but I had no feeling of pain because the circulation of blood had almost ceased in my hands and they felt quite dead. During my short stay at this house the neighbours were invited in to see me, and I heard afterwards that my host family was shot by the Germans two days later.

I was then taken to another house and put in an attic room and, after a few hours, a Dr. Merat was brought to attend to my wounds. He said I would have to be moved to an hospital to have both hands amputated, in order to save my life. On the way to the hospital our car was stopped by German police who asked to see the driver's permit to drive at night. They shone a torch into the back of the car but luckily I had no clothing left to identify me as an airman and they allowed us to proceed.

I remember arriving at the hospital and walking along corridors and the Roman Catholic sisters taking charge of me. I was put on a trolley and after the remnants of my battle dress were removed I became unconscious, and the next thing I remember is being on the operating table. I was asked three times for permission to amputate my hands, but I was so close to being dead that I did not answer. I was given an injection in the foot and

I remember nothing at all of the next two weeks. The following description of events during that period are as told to me by my nurse, Jenny Daviau.

My hands were placed in boxes and the necessary instruments were prepared, and as the doctor was about to begin his dirty work his wife, Madame Merat, intervened and would not allow her husband to proceed. Dr. Pierre, agreeing with Madame Merat, said that as I was so young I would be better dead than without my hands. Dr. Merat then made incisions on the backs and palms of my hands, and along the fingers to allow the swelling to subside. I can remember, when regaining my senses, looking at the length of the bandages and knowing that I still had my hands. After three weeks I was told that my hands would not be amputated, and they asked me foolish questions to see if my mind was OK.

That week the Gestapo made three attempts to interrogate me but I refused to answer. On the fourth occasion I insulted one of the officers, but a few days later they were relieved by a fresh Gestapo contingent and, luckily, I seemed to have been forgotten.

I stayed in Troyes until the Americans arrived and, after visiting and farewelling all my French friends, I left for Paris where I stayed for five days. Then, on 13 September 1944, I was flown back to England in a Dakota, and after the usual red tape and much travelling around I was given 14 days sick leave, six of which Air Ministry spoiled with interrogation.

While on leave I met Stan Jolly, the bomb aimer of our crew, and he was greatly surprised to see me because he was quite sure I had been killed. We spent many hours discussing what had happened and swapping experiences. I am now back in hospital for further treatment on my hands, and we now know that Stan and I are the only survivors of our crew of seven.

There are some things that I have not mentioned, such as the arrangement I made with two French policemen to bring me in a civilian suit and help me to escape, but this was only a few days before the Americans arrived. At that time the Germans took some prisoners back to Germany, but left me there. Dr. Pierre gave me an injection in the back and the same night my policemen friends came, but by this time I had a very high temperature and could not leave with them. The next morning the doctor said that I had scarlet fever and had me removed to the isolation hospital, where the police could not guard me for fear of infection. I was there a few days when the battle of Troyes began. The Germans blew up a bridge beside the hospital and the roof and walls, as well as the windows, were extensively damaged. The shells were screaming overhead and we could hear them exploding nearby.

The morning after the assault began I saw a body of about 100 German soldiers bearing rifles and light machine guns pass along our road. That day I had a very narrow escape. I was standing out in the open and a piece of shrapnel from a shell hit my trouser leg

and embedded itself in the wall behind me. I still have it as a souvenir. That was the last day of the main fighting but there were still minor clashes and the last of the German snipers were not flushed out for four or five days.

When the battle was concluded the FFI began rounding up known collaborators. Many of the men were given severe beatings and some of them required hospital treatment. The women were a sight I shall never forget. When arrested their whole bodies were shaved, a swastika was painted on both the front and back of their bodies and they were marched naked down the street to the gaol. For days the whole population was drunk with freedom. The city was alive with members of the Resistance firing their guns at mythical snipers and shooting each other in 'fun', and some of them died from these accidental wounds. I believe that in the small part of France that I got to know, more of the Resistance died from accidents than from combat with the enemy.

To illustrate how trigger happy they were; as I was speaking to an American anti-aircraft gun crew in the park overlooked by the cathedral spire about 50 'reactionaries' began firing at the spire and said there was a sniper in it. There was one boy firing a revolver with a two and a half inch barrel, at a range of about 200 yards, and had as much chance of hitting it as I would have of killing an elephant with a pea shooter. However, the park was filled with people who applauded this gallant effort. When their ammunition was finished they searched the spire, and found nothing. Four times that day this farce was repeated, and then an American tank unit came along and opened up with 50 and 75 millimetre guns. Tracer was flying our way and one round cut a branch off a tree right above our heads. Some of the bullets went through the maternity ward of the hospital, and women panicked but, fortunately, no one was hurt. However, the American commander put an end to this fun and games by sealing the door to the spire.

EVASION IN NORMANDY

Warrant Officer Neil Roggenkamp

Shortly before D Day (6 June 1944), 129 (Mysore) Squadron RAF moved to Airfield 133, near Horsham in the south of England, and converted from Spitfire IXs to Mustang IIIs. It was named after the Indian State of Mysore in recognition of the Maharajah's financial contribution to its formation, and each pilot on joining was presented with a silver Mysore medal depicting a two headed bird named 'Gunda Burunda'.

On 7 June the squadron took off at 0540 hours on an armed reconnaissance over the invasion area in Normandy. Joe Tomey and myself became separated from the squadron in heavy cloud and came out into clear air occupied by six Focke-Wulf 190s. My aircraft was immediately hit by cannon fire, some of which I felt striking the armour plate behind me, and shortly afterwards it caught fire. I rolled it over, trimmed to keep the nose up in the inverted position, released the radio and oxygen leads, opened the canopy and dropped out. The soft sound of air through the parachute was a welcome relief to the noise of aircraft engines and gunfire.

I landed without injury in a small field not far from some houses and saw the occupants of one of them watching my arrival through a window. They made no move to approach me, probably because of uncertainty regarding the identity of German sympathisers in the area. I disposed of my parachute by hiding it in some bushes and then cut the tops off my escape type flying boots with the knife provided. Then, to make my appearance less conspicuous I cut off my pilot wings and the 'Australia' badges on my shoulders.

In accordance with regulations, my pockets contained no items that could assist the enemy to ascertain my squadron or where it was based. I had my standard escape kit containing Horlicks tablets, a compass, a small hacksaw blade and a silk map of the area. I also had a few French francs and some passport size photographs for the use of the Resistance in preparing false identity papers for me.

Shortly after having disposed of the parachute I had to flatten myself down amongst the vegetation as two German soldiers came walking down the nearby road. I have often wondered why they did not see me coming down in my parachute and then, a few minutes later, lying in the grass not far away. I was in the area Rouen to Elbeuf and, after first seeking the shelter of a wood in the vicinity, at about 0730 I began to make my way in a southerly direction, in accordance with instructions to proceed in the general direction of Gibraltar and to seek the assistance of the Resistance. After walking for some time

fatigue, and probably shock, caught up with me and so I lay down in a patch of bracken fern and slept for several hours, oblivious to the fact that it was raining. Late in the afternoon I went into a field to quench my thirst at a cattle trough and found myself being followed by about 30 curious cows. So much for trying to be inconspicuous!

Towards evening I approached a French farmer who kindly gave me a piece of long French bread and a pot of milk and indicated that I could sleep in his barn, with a horse for company. In the morning, he again produced some bread and milk and, more or less, told me to get going. These people took a great risk in helping Allied evaders like myself and, naturally, I did not want my presence to endanger he or his family. I continued my journey

south, avoiding villages because of the likely presence of Germans. Skirting one village at midday I heard the church bells ringing the Angelus and thought what a contrast it was to the war that was going on all around. Towards evening I approached a young boy and girl in the backyard of a house and said, 'Je suis aviateur Anglais'. They ran to their father who hid me in the loft of his barn for the night and gave me two boiled eggs, bread and milk for my evening meal. The next morning I was visited by Magnus, a member of the French Resistance, who spoke English fluently. He asked my name, number and squadron, which were checked with London to establish my legitimacy.

Forty-three years later, in 1987, accompanied by my wife Noreen and son Mark I visited my helpers in France and learnt the full story of how I came under the protection of Marcel le Cavalier, in the village of St Pierre des Fleurs. It transpires that Gaston Lessueur, whose barn I had stayed in overnight, in the morning travelled several kilometres to Marcel and said: 'I believe that you are looking after airmen; I've got one in my barn'. 'OK Gaston,' Marcel replied, 'keep him quietly, as the liberation is coming soon, and all roads are closed. Spain is out, La Rochelle stopped and fishermen have been told not to organise any more passages'. The following day Gaston went



In backyard of house in Saint Pierre des Fleurs 1944.



This is the loft above the barn in the village of Saint Pierre des Fleurs where I spent approximately three months sheltering from the enemy.

back to Marcel and said: 'I want to get rid of that chap because my parents (who lived with him) are so frightened that they want to give him to the Germans this afternoon'. So, that afternoon Marcel arrived with two digging forks, a beret and a leather jacket for me. Dressed in this gear and with a fork over my shoulder Marcel and I walked across the fields, like two farm workers, to the village of St Pierre des Fleurs. It was here that I met Marcel's wife Marcelle, five-year-old son Bernard, one and a half-year-old daughter Odile, and the dog 'Dakoo'. Marcel's neighbour Andre Hutin had a barn on the fence alignment, and it was there that I spent much of the time. They had put a bed in the loft and it was possible to pass meals through a window.

The Resistance had also erected a tent in the dense Heribal's Wood, not far from the village. If there was too much German activity in the village I would move down to the wood. It had previously been used as a stop over place for airmen on their way south.

Magnus, whom I had first met in Gaston Lessueur's barn, became a good friend, frequently bringing me reading matter, and we corresponded for some years after the war, until his death in Canada.

He told me that in the event of my getting back to England, through an escape route, the BBC, in a broadcast to the Resistance, would use his name in code as 'Mac and George never use soap', followed by my name and the Resistance would know that I had returned safely. Marcel and I occasionally rode bicycles to visit other airmen in the area. Also, I used to ride to the village of Lemonier, with Marcel, for the occasional haircut and sometimes to Mande-ville to visit other airmen in hiding. On one such visit to Mande-ville some Germans came up to the house we were in, but were making enquires on other matters and left us alone. When there were not too many Germans around I would help Marcel in the fields on such tasks as picking potatoes or harvesting wheat. Once, after picking potatoes for most of the day, and storing them in the shed, the Germans came and confiscated the lot. I ate well during my stay in France, because with farmers there was plenty of food, and often I would have a Sunday dinner with the le Cavalier family.

It was the role of the Resistance to cause as much trouble for the Germans as possible, but without taking unnecessary risks and getting caught. The members in our area would go out at night and cut the telephone lines between Paris and the Caen area. The Germans would repair it, and a suitable time later the Resistance would cut it again. Meanwhile the Allies continued to push the Germans back through Normandy, after being held up around Caen for several weeks. The Canadians came through our area, but when the Germans were pushed back to the other side of St Pierre des Fleurs they dug in and an artillery battle raged for a couple of days. During this period Marcel moved his family and me to a house on the outskirts of the village, and when the shell fire became too heavy we went down to the cellar. Eventually, on about 22 August 1944, the Canadian Army pushed through amidst great rejoicing, and a great sense of relief among all the people of St Pierre des Fleurs. With my school French, and what I had

learned during my stay in the village, I acted as an interpreter between the Canadians and the villagers.

After the battle the village showed some damage; the church, I remember, had a shell hole through the roof. But, in the fields it was pitiful to see cattle dead and some with gaping shrapnel wounds and I helped to bury a few of them. Women who had socialised willingly with the Germans had their heads shaved and were then paraded through the village, but I do not know their ultimate fate. The Army put on a party, attended by almost the whole village, in a field nearby and Canadian Army rations were washed down with French wine and cider.

When the excitement had died down, I approached a British Army unit camped outside the village for transport back to England, and they got me on an American truck on its way to Bayeux. Along the roads were French people using everything from prams to horse carts to carry their few possessions back to their homes, or what was left of them. Sadly, some of the villages we passed through were practically laid flat by the fighting that raged through them.

The Americans let me off on the outskirts of Caen and the first British Army tent I found was occupied by Military Police who drove me into Caen for interrogation. During this interrogation I gave full credit to Marcel le Cavalier, his family and the other Frenchmen who had helped me. After staying over night in Caen, further interrogation and 24 hours leave in Bayeux I was flown to Northolt; landing on 30 August 1944. Further interrogation followed in London, then extended leave and posting to the RAAF Embarkation Depot at Brighton.

Eventually, I went by train to Liverpool to board the *Mauretania* for New York, a stay of several weeks at Fort Slocum on Long Island Sound and then train to San Francisco. After a short stay at a camp in Oakland I embarked on the Matson liner *Lurline* for the journey across the Pacific, and arrived home in Brisbane mid-January 1945.

After the War Andre Hutin became Town Hall Secretary and his neighbour, Marcel le Cavalier, became mayor of St Pierre des Fleurs; a position he held for 23 years. Marcel received recognition from the British Government for his work in helping RAF aircrew, the *Medaille de la France Libre* and leather bound volumes of the history of the War, autographed by Charles de Gaulle, from the French Government.

Because all escape routes were closed after D Day I was the last airman helped by Marcel, and my stay was the longest. He and the others greatly appreciated my visit 43 years on, and the fact that I brought my wife and son to meet them, and we were treated like royalty.

ROMMEL'S BARBER

Flight Lieutenant Norman Keith Baker

It was from Arromanches, on the hot, stormy afternoon of 7 July 1944, that a section of 453 Squadron Spitfires including Norman Baker took off with orders to attack and destroy anything that moved in the German held sector south of Mont de Creisy. It was towards the end of the sortie when Norman saw a truck racing along the straight road west of Briouze. He dived down, steadied up close behind and gave it a blast with his cannon at close range and the truck exploded just as he passed a few metres over the top of it. When he climbed up he realised that he had been hit, either by ground fire or pieces of the exploding truck, because his oil pressure was falling and the temperature went 'off the clock'. The engine started to smoke and in view of his, by now, low altitude he radioed base that he was about to belly land. He skimmed over the roofs of the farms of la Morlandiere, just cleared an orchard and slithered to a stop in an open field. He quickly left the aircraft, and as his friend David Murray roared overhead at low altitude he gave a wave to indicate that he was OK.

Meanwhile, Marcel Hellouin who was working in a hayloft heard the crash and ran towards it along a hedgerow, to avoid being seen by German soldiers at Le Mont. When he saw Norman he called: 'Monsieur, come here quickly'. Norman saw him but ran back to the aircraft; he had remembered that he had failed to blow up his IFF (a radio identification instrument with an explosive demolition charge to prevent it falling into enemy hands). This action baffled the Frenchman until he heard a small explosion from inside the aircraft and Norman came racing back towards him.

Hardly had he joined Marcel on the other side of the hedge when Germans entered the field from the Caligny road. Without delay Marcel led the way across a wheat field and up a path to shelter, where they regained their breath. They heard the Germans firing shots off at random, possibly in an attempt to scare the pilot out of hiding. Marcel gave Norman his coat to cover his uniform and they headed towards a farm house as the storm broke and the rain came down in buckets; while the Germans apparently took shelter in the house of Albert Poulain.

On returning to the farm Marcel was questioned by the Germans and did not flinch when one of the soldiers said they had seen him with the airman through their binoculars. When they saw that even the threat of shooting would not make him confess they gave up.

As soon as the rain ceased Norman decided to put as much distance as possible between himself and the crash site, and to that end set off across fields to some high ground. From there he could see his aircraft and was pleased to observe that the Germans appeared to have given up the search for him. He proceeded along a track that took him over the Caen-Laval railway line, and on to the Caligny-Flers road. With darkness came a ground fog from the damp earth and he began searching for a barn in which to spend the night. The sound of an approaching vehicle interrupted his thoughts and there was no gap in the thick hedgerows to escape from view. The military Volkswagen passed by with the driver looking suspiciously at him, but he kept going. A few hundred metres further on he met a man in a cloth cap and, addressing him in French, said: 'Pardon monsieur, I am the airman who crashed nearby.' The man smiled knowingly and said: 'Yes, yes, I know. Come with me, we must hide you.' He led Norman into a small thicket near the Lebainy wood working factory and, when they were safely out of the view of any passing field grey uniforms, he introduced himself. 'Je suis Russe' he said. 'I am Baker from Melbourne' replied Norman, and added: 'G'day Monsieur Russe', to which he responded: 'No, no, I am a Russian from Leningrad.' The two men burst into laughter and shook each other warmly by the hand. It transpired that Ivan was an escaped prisoner of war who was being housed and fed by Monsieur Rabache, the Mayor of Caligny, who had a farm at the little village of Huguet.

By now it was completely dark and Ivan took Norman to the house of Arthur Lebailly, not very far from Rommel's HQ at Vassy. After a hot meal and a nap Arthur took him on a bicycle to Athis; they had to get away before the village folk awoke. There he was handed over to Arthur's cousin Fred, who was a link in the chain of an organisation which took care of Allied airmen, and from there he was taken to the house of Fred's parents who lived in the little village of Ste. Honorine-la-Guillaume. (Two weeks later, Arthur Lebainy was caught with two other young men, tortured and then buried alive by the Germans.)

About 20 July, Norman and his host were picking cherries in the orchard when Rene le Chevalier and Mlle. France passed by and warned that the Gestapo were looking for Fred. Without returning to the house, Norman, still carrying a basket of cherries, set off with his new guides and eventually arrived at Berjou where school teachers, M. and Mme. Ricordeau took him in. The school adjoined the teachers' living quarters and, for several days, was filled with German troops in transit to and from the front. Norman slept in a room right next door to a German colonel. He was given a false ID card and posed as a shell-shocked day labourer working for the Ricordeaus, and every day he worked in the garden, chopped wood, gathered grass for the rabbits and accompanied his hosts when they went to nearby farms for food supplies. Each time he was addressed by a German he pointed to his mouth and ears and shook his head.

One day, M. Bourg, M. Ricordeau's assistant who spoke excellent German, decided that Norman should have a haircut because one of the SS troops billeted at the school was a

barber who boasted he had cut Rommel's hair. So, in exchange for some butter, the field marshal's barber trimmed the Australian fight lieutenant's hair!

The efforts of Rene le Chevalier and Mlle. France to repatriate Norman ran into difficulties but, finally, when they learned that British troops had occupied the area near Vire and Vassy they decided it was time to attempt a crossing of the lines. So, on 3 August, le Chevalier, Mlle. France, a RAF sergeant, a Free French colonel and Norman left Berjou on bicycles, proceeded through Germaine du Crioult and headed for Vire. As they approached Viessoix some Germans, dug into trenches on the slope in front of the village, shouted at them to stop; but Rene urged them to keep going and pay no attention. They next saw three British tanks that had been knocked out and knew that they were close to the British lines but deemed it prudent to spend the night in a deserted house which had been partly demolished by shell fire. They got back on the road at dawn, but the Germans were now more nervous and hostile so they turned back.

On return to Berjou they found the town evacuated so went on to Bas-Hamel where once again they were in the middle of Germans. As a precaution, Norman was placed at one end of the chateau they had moved into and told to stay there. To pass the time he read English novels and played records on an old gramophone, and one day while listening to Maurice Chevalier there was a knock on the door and a young German orderly was there. He said: 'Will you please play the music more softly, the General cannot hear himself on the telephone.' His master was General Schraub.

Later, Norman, alone in his room heard another knock on his door and said: 'Entre'. A German officer entered and asked where he could find Madame M. so he said in his best French, 'Je ne sais pas, Capitaine', then smiled and signalled to the captain to follow. He led him downstairs to a part of the building he had not previously visited, hoping he would find Mlle. France. Instead, at the foot of the stairs he met Annie, aged five years, who guessed who he was but became frightened when she saw the German behind him. Norman smiled, gave her a sly wink and said: 'Ou est Madame M.?' Annie understood, turned to the German and said: 'Follow me I will take you to her.' Thus, thanks to the presence of mind of a very young girl, Norman was saved from a POW camp and his hosts escaped torture and probably death.

A few days later it was arranged for two young students of Caen University to take Norman to la Bertiniere, where he had spent the first two weeks after crash landing. They had barely left the chateau when a military police car caught up with them and passed on but when they got to the gate the occupants, a captain and a sergeant, were waiting for them with pistols drawn and demanded to see their identification. The students presented theirs but not knowing that Norman had one tried to explain that he had lost his. The Germans were not impressed and the sergeant barked: 'Your identity card?'. Nonchalantly, Norman ferreted around in his pockets and produced his false ID card. The captain gave it a quick glance, handed it back, and gave each of the students a sharp clip over the ears before climbing back into their car.

La Bertiniere was in ruins, having been bombed the previous day so the trio slept in a barn with 30 others. It was only a short distance from the road along which the enemy columns were fleeing in retreat, and the British were not far behind. Early on the morning of 17 August the Germans took up positions in the village, blew up the bridges and the remaining civilians were driven out and took refuge in the woods. Soon after 0700 hours bullets started to whistle through the trees and shells exploded around them. For part of the night a German mortar platoon had fired several rounds from the woods, and therefore it had become a prime target for the British. Fortunately, the Germans had run out of ammunition and had withdrawn.

At dawn someone returned to the village and brought back a bucket of milk and the news that the British were in the large Touze field. This news excited Norman and he rushed off in the direction indicated. Running up slopes and scrambling through hedges he arrived at the field and looked down on an unforgettable sight. The Tommies were around their tanks and other vehicles drawn up as if on parade, even after a hard night's fighting! They were in great heart and good humour; some polishing their boots, some shaving and others making tea or writing letters, while listening to the BBC news. Norman approached a sergeant and started to tell his story, but was quickly cut short with: 'Ah! You're an Aussie. Come and have a cuppa tea.' So ended Norman Baker's wanderings in Normandy.

BELGIAN INTERLUDE

Flight Sergeant Robert Charles Chester-Master

Suddenly the night sky was lit by a dancing line of green tracers snaking towards me—we were under attack! Immediately ordering ‘corkscrew starboard’, I rotated the turret and returned fire with my four .303 machine guns. Our attacker was the formidable Junkers 88, and as we dived in the corkscrew the ‘Jerry’ climbed giving me the opportunity to rake his underside. He caught fire, and even in the darkness I could see parts coming off his fuselage. The Junkers dived with fire and smoke trailing—he was mortally wounded and a victory to us; later confirmed.

I had triumphed and the adrenalin was pumping, but there was no time to gloat as our problems were just beginning.

This story really began on the morning of 12 August 1944, at Waterbeach, near Cambridge, which was the home of RAF Bomber Squadron 514. After breakfast we had been informed that we were to undertake an operation that night. Previous ops had taken us to the heart of Germany, to the Normandy beachhead to provide low level support for our troops and to various other targets. Where would it be tonight?

The Squadron’s aircraft were dispersed around the aerodrome, for safety in the event of attack, so we were soon being transported to our aeroplane to check it thoroughly in preparation for the impending operation. On arrival we were shocked to find that another Lancaster had taken the place of our trusted ‘U-Uncle’. Ground crew told us that the damage sustained on the last trip could not be repaired in time. Worse still, ‘U-Uncle’ was a Lancaster II, with powerful Bristol Hercules radial engines, and this substitute was a Mark III with the less powerful Rolls-Royce Merlins. Furthermore, this was a new, untried aircraft and its identification letters, JI-G, had previously been those of an aircraft which failed to return from a raid less than a fortnight ago. Consequently, it was a rather subdued crew that went on board to their usual positions.

It was necessary for each crewmember to check thoroughly his working area to ensure that no gremlins had got into the systems, and en route to the rear turret I checked the parachute storage area and the straps. Ground power was connected so I was able to rotate the turret and give it a good work out. Then a full check of the four guns; cocking and firing several times to ensure that the mechanisms were operating correctly. No adjustments were possible in flight due to cumbersome gloves and gauntlets worn as protection against the intense cold. Finally, each of us reported to the ‘Skipper’ that our respective equipment was satisfactory, so, off to lunch.

The afternoon was occupied with section briefings and as Sam, the mid-upper gunner, and I made our way to the Gunnery Section we wondered what would be revealed. Certainly not the target until all crews were together for the Squadron briefing at 2030 hours, but we were told the type and likely numbers of German night fighters we could expect to encounter.

Then it was time for supper and, afterwards, collection of flying gear, including parachute and Mae West. For me flying clothing, worn over my uniform, consisted of an electrically heated inner flying suit, slippers and gloves, outer flying suit, gauntlets and boots. All necessary for survival in the rear turret where temperatures ranged from -20 to -30 degrees Fahrenheit at 20,000 feet.

In the main briefing room there was a hushed air of expectancy as the crews sat on forms in front of a raised dais, behind which curtains covered a large section of the wall. On arrival of the Commanding Officer these were drawn aside to reveal a large map of England and Europe showing our track to the target, Russelsheim, near Frankfurt. This town had not been attacked before but it was learned that the Opel car factory there was making wings for the Vls, or buzz bombs, being used to attack London. What really made us sit up was that we would be flying to and from on the same track, which meant that we would stir up a hornets' nest of defences on the way out and reap the harvest on our return.

The plan was for a high-density raid by aircraft from several squadrons, with ours bombing from 18,000 feet, and over target at 0015 hours. Our bomb load would be two 4000-pounders of high explosive, plus incendiaries to start multiple fires.

After settling into the turret and carrying out pre-take off drills, my mind wondered and wandered. Would this trip be 'a piece of cake, or would we have trouble? Would we get back? Was it a bad combination that this was our 13th operation as a crew, on the 13th day of the month? This reverie was interrupted as the tail came up, then we were airborne and soon climbing steadily to 7000 feet for the first leg of the outward journey, then to 10,000 feet where we started breathing oxygen through our face masks, and finally to 20,000 feet for the run into the target. As the Belgian coast approaches I am on full alert, constantly rotating the turret and, as we leave a trail of engine sparks behind, I see many of our aircraft in the stream.

Closer to the target we had a close call as we had to dive suddenly to avoid another of our aircraft which cut across our nose. Then I saw one of our aircraft hit, an engine on fire and losing height; two parachutes blossom out in the moonlight and I hope the other crew members made it. Suddenly our own aircraft is being shaken by anti-aircraft fire; a probing searchlight catches us briefly, stops and comes back but fails to locate us again and we breathe more easily. The flak gets heavier as we near the target and one of our aircraft is seen to receive a direct hit and explode. The Navigator reports: 'Target in 15 minutes' and we descend to bombing height. Flares from the Pathfinders are sighted

and the Bomb Aimer takes over and, 'Bomb doors open—left, left, steady, right steady—bombs gone, no hang-ups—bomb doors closed—let's get out of here!' We keep straight and level for additional photographs and I see a tremendous number of fires and explosions and, as we set course for home, it looks like a successful operation.

Flak is still very heavy and bombers are being hit. Suddenly, we are caught in a cone of searchlights and the guns are trying to get our range until skilful evasive action by the Skipper gets us out of trouble. At 0200 hours, with the flak behind us, we fly on over Belgium, confident that the worst is over, and then we are attacked!

The port outer motor stops and the Skipper feathers the prop. Mid-upper Gunner reports extensive leaks from wing tanks, starboard inner motor cuts out and height is being lost rapidly. The Skipper says the hydraulics have gone and control is difficult so he gives the order to bale out. I centralise the turret, and climb back into the fuselage, clip on my parachute, find the rear door open and deduce that the others have gone. We are down to about 700 feet so there is no time to count to seven to pull the ripcord and the chute opens only minutes before I hit the earth with enough force to shock my whole body and send a sharp pain up my right leg. During the short time of my descent I saw the aircraft crash in a ball of flame.

I guessed that it was about 0230 hours (my watch had been torn off during my escape from the aircraft) and that I was somewhere in Belgium. There was a haystack nearby so I crawled into it and, with my parachute wrapped around me, soon fell asleep. I was woken by shafts of light from the sun now well up in the sky and as the pain in my leg was intense I downed some pain killers from my escape kit. What was a 19-year-old airman, in a foreign, enemy occupied country, unable to speak the language, to do? The predicament was made worse by hunger, thirst and the belief that my leg was broken. I felt a surge of self-pity, until it dawned on me that a more positive attitude would be needed.

I undid my tie, took out my stud compass, and having realised that my ankle was sprained rather than broken, resolved to try to walk towards a wood I could see. At that moment I saw a farmer with his dog crossing my field, and the dog came bounding over and was soon followed by his master. His Flemish and my English did not make for good conversation but I gathered he wanted to tell the Germans who would give me medical attention for my injury, but I rejected this proposal as it was my duty to avoid capture by the enemy. Besides, the prospect of a POW camp did not appeal to me. He then pointed to the wood and indicated that I should go there and wait. For help or danger? I could not know but there was little choice so I stumbled over and sat down, exhausted.

I guessed that it was after midday and, by this time, I was very hungry and thirsty but decided it was too soon to break into the emergency rations in my escape kit. The kit consisted of chocolate, sugared almonds, chewing gum, a fishing line, a pocket knife, benzedrine tablets, water purifying tablets and French, Belgian and Dutch money.

I made a bed in the bracken but spent a restless night, thinking every sound I heard was a German searching for me.

In the morning I heard a low whistle, but saw no one, and stumbled out to find food and water left for me. The same was repeated the following morning, and the third morning two men appeared from another direction and with a few words of English indicated that they would return. My leg still ached and all I could do was wait and hope. The next morning the two came quite early and the bigger one lifted me on to his back and carried me to a clearing where I saw three bicycles. One of them was a fixed wheel type and I was placed on the seat and my good foot was strapped to the pedal. The ride was of considerable distance along country lanes to a house in a small village, and here my ankle was heavily bandaged, and we had a good breakfast. Then, another long ride to the safe house of Hector and Maria de Smet, in the village of St Lievens Houtem.

My host and hostess spoke no English but indicated that I should undress and produced washing facilities. After a good scrub down and a change into some of Hector's clothes I felt human again, and was shown a pile of straw in the loft which was to be my bed.

The following day I was subjected to a thorough interrogation by a group which included a man who spoke excellent English. I satisfied them that I was not a German



Robert Chester-Master (right) with navigator Reg Orth, after return from Belgium 1944.

plant to infiltrate their underground movement and they took charge of my kit including the civilian type photograph that we all carried for the production of false identification documents. My stay in this house was uneventful. No talking, no reading, just boredom but, most importantly, I was safe. Each time a visitor arrived I had to retire to the loft, or the wood behind the house. Hector and Maria shared their meagre rations with me, which I augmented with ripe plums from their tree, and it was difficult to tell them in sign language how grateful I was for their kindness.

It was a great day when the English speaking man came back with a card showing my new identity of Albert Willems, bachelor and accountant. Soon afterwards two men arrived with three bicycles and we set off to ride 20 kilometres to Brussels. All

went well until, on the outskirts of the city, the leading rider returned to say there was a German checkpoint ahead. Apparently he had not been seen and we were able to skirt around and arrived at the safe house, at 18 Rue de la Surrere, of brother and sister, Willy and Maria de Keyser who greeted me warmly. Inside was our Bomb Aimer, Martin Carter, who had been picked up by the same cell of the Comete escape group. This was a very pleasant surprise and it was great to have someone to talk to, and Martin spoke reasonable French, which solved the communication problem.

Again, days passed slowly but at least we were able to listen to BBC radio from London and follow the fluctuating fortunes of our armies. Eventually it was decided that we should move on into France, and either link up with our advancing troops or go down the escape route to Spain. Food, water and clothes were packed and we set off with a guide, but after two days had to return as the Germans had caught and shot several members of the Comete line. After another abortive attempt to proceed in the direction of Switzerland it was decided not to risk any further lives and to stay where we were.

Boredom and lack of exercise finally overcame reason and Martin and I decided to take a walk through beautiful and historic Brussels, with its Grand Place and the old Craft Guilds building. It was probably foolhardy, because there were many German soldiers and members of the Gestapo on the streets, but we were not challenged. Brussels had been declared an 'Open City' and was therefore immune from bombing or shelling by either side.

From our house we could see Allied bombers flying over by day and hear their droning by night, but we could also observe German fighters climbing up to intercept from a nearby aerodrome and would wonder how many of our colleagues would fail to return.

Suddenly, ecstatic news from the BBC! At last our troops had broken out from the Normandy area and the advance was in full swing. It was only days before we heard fighting on the outskirts of Brussels and, as the Germans retreated, British tanks came rumbling in, and the people turned out in their thousands waving, cheering and clapping.

About three days later a general message was broadcast, over the German installed city loudspeakers requesting all Allied personnel in hiding to report to Army Headquarters at the Hotel Metropole. Imagine my surprise when over 500 airmen (British, Canadian, American and Australian) came forth. I was lucky enough to be given a room with the luxury of a bath at the Hotel, and the freedom to entertain my helpers in the dining room. It was here that I caught up with our Navigator, Reg. Orth, so that was three of us accounted for.

After interrogation and debriefing I was given an Army uniform and, following an emotional farewell to my helpers, was on a flight back to England where there was

further interrogation and debriefing. The good news was that my commission as Pilot Officer was gazetted and, with a good wad of back pay, I was sent off on leave. In accordance with accepted practice, airmen returning from enemy territory were not permitted to resume operations in the same theatre of war, so we knew that after leave we would be homeward bound. Only the Pilot, John Lawrie, of the crew of seven, failed to get safely out of the aircraft and he is buried in the Schoonselhof Military Cemetery at Antwerp. His interment there was made possible by the action of Nestor van der Heyden in burying the body in his garden, for safe keeping, until the War ended.

I, and many other members of aircrews, owe a tremendous debt to those wonderful people in Occupied Europe who risked their lives to save ours. Many were caught, tortured and then shot, or died in concentration camps. Their bravery was exceptional and it is always with pleasure that I return to Belgium to see my helpers. One of them, Norbert van Herreweght, I met again for the first time in 1992.

The Crew

Pilot:	Flight Sergeant John Lawrie RNZAF
Flight Engineer:	Sergeant Tom Young RAF
Wireless Operator:	Sergeant George Durland RAF
Navigator:	Flight Sergeant Reg. Orth RAAF
Bomb Aimer:	Sergeant Martin Carter RAF
Mid Upper Gunner:	Flight Sergeant Sam Burford RAAF
Rear Gunner:	Flight Sergeant Robert Chester-Master RAAF

GUEST OF THE FRENCH

Flight Lieutenant Alexander James Saunders

Hitler's planned strategic counter stroke to the Allied invasion of Normandy was the unleashing of his Flying Bomb (V1) attack on London, from launching sites in France. It commenced in earnest during the night of 15 June 1944, and although nearly one third were brought down by the combined efforts of RAF fighters, anti-aircraft guns and the balloon barrage, before reaching their target, the effect on British morale was serious and a massive counter measure was decided on. This took the form of saturation bombing of the launching ramp sites in the Pas de Calais area, and to this end, during the period mid-June to late August, half of the efforts of RAF Bomber Command were diverted to these targets.

It was on such a raid that 83 RAF PFF Squadron's Lancasters, operating from Conington, Lincolnshire, were engaged on 18 August and the fate of one of the aircraft and its crew is the subject of the following narrative.

The daylight operation against L'Isle d'Adam (in the Pas de Calais) was a rushed affair and, for the crews it was a case of chasing the clock until take-off.

The plan was for two waves, each of approximately 200 aircraft, to attack the launching sites target, and we were to go in first at 8000 feet with the second wave following at 10,000 feet.

The tail fins of the leaders were painted in different colours for each group to enable crews to identify their respective leaders and follow in loose formation. The Squadron just prior to this time had suffered heavy losses and a newly arrived squadron leader, who had not flown many operations and with little or no PFF experience, was appointed Controller. My crew was No 1 Deputy Controller.

We arrived at the first rendezvous point with several others right on time, but there was no sign of our leader, and we dog-legged around for about 20 minutes until he arrived. During this shambles period the leader of the second group, with his team arrived above us on time and set course. While waiting for our leader about 150 of our group joined up with the second group, leaving us with only about 50 aircraft, and to make matters worse, we were many minutes and many miles behind the second wave when we were supposed to be leading. The order for radio silence had prevented any attempt to correct the situation earlier.

Eventually, when the leader did arrive I formed on his left and the remainder of the aircraft fell in behind us. He increased speed, as I thought, to follow close behind the higher group but when we caught up he led us under the rear of the formation. With only ten minutes to the target I could see that at this rate we could not get ahead, and when bombs were dropped we would be directly underneath and suffer losses. Some of the bomb bay doors were already opening when I broke radio silence and told the leader, in no uncertain terms, to do a dog-leg to get out of the way and then follow what by then was the main force of the attack. There was no response so I repeated the message, and was about to break formation when the Number One Controller, in a Mosquito, who had obviously heard my call, came across and ordered our leader to do as I had suggested and get the hell out from under the aircraft above. This was effective and we followed as the second wave of the attack.

To partly explain subsequent events, I have to digress and record that on the previous Friday, 11 August, we were the controller on a raid to Givors when our bomb-sight became unserviceable so we were unable to drop our bombs. We had definite instructions that if the target was in occupied territory, as opposed to Germany, and faulty equipment prevented us from hitting the target with reasonable certainty then the bomb load was to be brought back. This was a political policy to reduce, as far as possible, casualties amongst the civilian population. So, after circling the target area for approximately an hour on controlling duties we headed for home with our bombs, except for one with a delayed action fuse which we dropped in the English Channel. This was in accordance with another regulation that forbade landing with such a bomb on board.

It had rained all the time over the target and was still raining when I approached for landing on one of the two short runways. After touchdown the brakes failed and I judged that, with the bomb load, there was not enough runway left to take off again. It seemed only moments before we had run out of runway and flare-path into darkness, and even less time before the aircraft crashed headlong into the far bank of the river which surrounded the airfield. The aircraft, 'L', which we had become attached to and regarded as our own, was completely written off. The crew was unhurt, except for the eighth member, Fred Hulland who was a specialist bomb aimer to operate the special bombsight we carried. He spent some weeks in hospital and so was not with us on 18 August.

Following the loss of 'L' we were allotted aircraft 'W' for this trip, as previously mentioned, it was a time pressure trip and when, ready to move off, my engineer tried to strap me into my seat the webbing straps were too short and would not go even close to locking into place. I told him to leave it until later and commented that the pilot who last flew this aircraft must have been 'a bloody midget', as I was only ten stone, four pounds. We had to taxi out from our dispersal point, and despite having previously been meticulous in following drill and safety procedures I told the engineer we would fix the harness in the air as we had no time margin left before take-off. Following this the

problems continued, and despite a further struggle with the seat harness we could not budge it, so I went to the target without the security of being strapped in the seat.

The shambles continued, and while I cannot accurately recall the compass course we should have taken upon leaving the target, I clearly remember the course the leader took, and consequently all of us, was approximately 90 degrees in error. Again, I called and told him he was on the wrong course. Meanwhile, it was apparent that we were not in the position we should have been according to our flight plan, and it was while in the process of correcting this situation that disaster struck.

We received a direct hit from anti-aircraft guns. The starboard inner motor was practically blown out of the wing, the starboard outer ceased to function, the cabin perspex was shattered, my combined oxygen mask/radio microphone was blown or shot off my face, leaving me with only my helmet and earphones in place; enabling me to hear but not transmit. This experience was very sudden and unsettling, to say the least, and initially I wondered if I still had a face.

As soon as we were hit and I realised I had no communication with the crew, I indicated by sign language to the engineer, who was positioned next to me, to take my parachute from its stowed position behind the seat and place it beside me. It seems likely that this was interpreted as a signal to bale out. As a result of being hit, we dropped out of formation and we lost some thousands of feet before I was able to regain control, and by then when I looked around I saw my crew baling out through the front emergency point in the bomb aimer's area, and there was nothing I could do about it!

By this time we were down to about 2000 feet and still losing height, and with both starboard motors out it was impossible to trim the aircraft and I could not release my grip on the control column. I believed all the crew had baled out and, obviously, it was time for me to go too, and I was trying to reach my parachute pack and keep control of the aircraft when I heard the wireless operator call out: 'Alex, Alex are you all right?' This message was repeated but I could not acknowledge it for reasons previously explained. Not knowing whether or not he was injured I decided I had to land the aircraft. We were getting low and I was trying like hell to strap myself in but to no avail. I just had to accept the risk of a crash landing without a seat belt.

Below was farm country and I landed, wheels up, in a recently harvested field. The aircraft touched the ground as it fell away in a gradual slope, skidded along a flat area and then rode up an incline where it came to a stop. I walked away without even a scratch, and when I checked the aircraft there was no one else in it. It transpired that the wireless operator and the rear gunner were at the rear door when they decided that my lack of response to their call indicated that I had baled out, so they jumped.

Now safely on the ground, I looked around and saw three or four wooded areas within reach but decided they would be the first areas searched so chose a country road, and

then hid in a ditch where I could watch the roads and then decide what to do. Not all that long afterwards a group of men appeared and I rightly and fortunately, assumed from their dress and speech that they were farm labourers. I identified myself and they raced me along the road to a farm house where I was hidden in a haystack and, several hours later, I was given false identification papers, put on a bicycle, and in the middle of about a dozen other riders, rode to a house where I stayed overnight. Next day the process was repeated and we travelled several kilometres to the house of Jean Berdier, in the village of Boudeville, in the general Rouen area. In this house I had a New Zealand fighter pilot for a companion, and there we stayed for the rest of our time in France.

The days were long because we had to stay in the attic until dark, at about 2300 hours at this time of the year, and then we would go downstairs to the blacked out living room. There we would converse with our helper and his wife, and usually four members of the Maquis. We could speak no French and only Mme. Berdier spoke a little English, so our conversation depended heavily on the use of a very large Webster English/French dictionary. It was agreed that the wisest course was for us to remain where we were and wait for the break out from the Normandy beachhead.

Allied troops reached our village on 2 September then, after a day of celebration with the local people, we were transported back to the Normandy beachhead by a truck returning from carrying supplies to the forward area. There we spent three or four days in an Army transit camp waiting for an improvement in the weather to allow a resumption of landing craft Channel crossings, and it was by this means that I returned to England, 19 days after being shot down.

After delousing and debriefing in London, regretfully, I was not given the opportunity to return to the Squadron but posted to Brighton for repatriation to Australia.

POSTSCRIPT

Of the crew, the rear gunner and mid-upper gunner evaded capture, returned to England and were repatriated to Australia. The navigator, bomb aimer, wireless operator and engineer all became prisoners of war and eventually returned to England.

I was greatly saddened to receive a letter from my helper, Jean Verdier, some time after I had returned to Australia informing me how fortunate I had been, because after their liberation his wife had been identified as a 'notorious collaborator' and had been sentenced to many years of 'national indignity'. He asked me never to mention her name again.

With the benefit of hindsight, my interpretation of the actions of Mme. Verdier is that because we were under the protection of the Maquis, the Normandy beachhead had been established and the writing was on the wall for Germany, she may have reasoned

that by outwardly demonstrating protection towards me her previous betrayals of Allied servicemen might have remained undetected.

When I revisited the area in 1967, Jean Verdier was dead and I was not able to gather any information on the family, but I learned something about my landing. I remember that as I was holding off, the thought went through my mind that I was so low that the whirling propeller of the port outer reminded me of mowing a lawn, and power poles loomed in front of me and I firmly believed that I had flown the Lancaster between two poles, and under the power lines. However, on this visit I was informed by the villagers that while I had gone between the poles I had hit the power lines and blacked out the district. I was also told how troops searching for me had burnt the crops of several farmers to make sure I was not hiding in them!

THE DUTCH UNDERGROUND

Flight Lieutenant C. G. Tapson

My aircraft was a fighter version Mark VI Mosquito, S-OM, of 107 Squadron RAF, based at Lasham in England. On 5 October 1944, during a night intruder mission over the Netherlands we were hit by ground fire while approaching to strafe a rail train at a station. There was an explosion under the aircraft and both our engines lost power. We were much too low to bale out but, luckily, there were open fields ahead and a successful belly landing was made. My navigator, Pilot Officer Frank Batterbury, and I spent the remainder of the night putting as much distance as possible between ourselves and the aircraft.

At about 0400 hours we came to the village of Olst, on the east side of the Ijssel between the towns of Zwolle and Deventer, and decided it was time to rest. Frank was uninjured, but I had a shrapnel wound to the head, and another cut caused by severe contact with the gun-sight during the landing—the result of neglecting to lock my harness. Frank bandaged my head at the crash site to stem the bleeding, but by this time I was beginning to feel the effects of my injuries. We made ourselves a shelter of branches amongst some trees and shrubs, opposite three houses on the outskirts of the village. After a rather sleepless night, due to a severe headache from my injuries, I crawled down for a dawn inspection of the road. There was no activity, but I picked out which of the three houses I would approach for help when darkness fell.

Accordingly, when it was sufficiently dark I crossed the road and knocked on the door. On the first attempt an old lady opened it a few centimetres, and on seeing my blood stained face and bandages promptly shut it again. I shouted that I was a RAF officer and asked for help, and after some time she opened the door again and let me in. The only other occupants of the living room were two men eating at a table, and they also looked horrified at my appearance and then ignored me, despite my efforts at conversation with my few words of Dutch and some German. The embarrassment ended when I produced a packet of English cigarettes and the father and son suddenly became my friends.

I took out my silk escape map and they confirmed that this was the village of Olst, and added that there was a large German SS camp only 400 metres down the road. After they had fed me I asked whether my friend and I could sleep the night there. They refused this request but the son took me by the arm and led me about 300 metres in a northerly direction to a farmhouse, indicating that I should knock on the door. It was opened by a middle-aged woman who appeared to be deterred by my appearance but a

30-year-old man came forward and, in response to my 'I am a RAF officer, can you help me?' (in English), he pulled me inside and slammed the door.

The family (by the name of Kolkman, as I discovered later), comprising the parents, two sons in their thirties with wives and children, were having their evening meal. Again, I was ignored and when I asked, in German, whether I could stay the night there was no reply. As they finished their meal and began to relax I decided to have a smoke to relieve the tension. The father and sons each accepted one of my cigarettes, examined them carefully, looked at each other, smiled, and in response to my further question agreed that Frank and I could spend the night in their care. Once more, my English cigarettes had turned frostiness to warmth. I ran across the road and got Frank who was fed while my wounds were washed with warm water. I had a conversation, in a mixture of Dutch and German, with the elder son and gathered that they were associated with the Dutch Underground. He offered the surprising opinion that we could be back in England in three days, by British flying boat from Elburg. We spent the night in a hide-out built of hay bales in the barn which was attached to the house. The next morning the sons dressed us in farmers' dungarees and Dutch caps, over our RAF uniforms. I kept my flying boots, despite misgivings by our hosts, and was still wearing them six months later. We had an emotional farewell from the entire Kolkman family; brave people living a stone's throw from a German SS camp and putting their lives in jeopardy to help two uninvited RAF officers avoid capture. It was about 0900 hours when we left with the eldest son on a 20-minute journey to make our next connection with the Dutch Underground. He led us past the sentries at the main gate of the SS camp, as I murmured a little prayer: 'Please, oh Lord, don't let them notice my flying boots.' Eventually we reached a large field of tall, dry grass and in the centre we were told to lie down, and we would be picked up in an hour's time.

We imagined the worst when we saw two men in black uniforms, with rifles, and a civilian until one shouted, in English: 'Are you there boys?' The civilian introduced himself as leader of the local branch of the Underground, and his two companions as Dutch policemen. He asked for our identity cards, but we had destroyed them at the crash site, and then asked questions about London and England to make sure of our status as evading Allied officers. (Later I discovered the leader's name was Des Tombe and the policemen, Heegsman and Geert.) The policemen then escorted us to a farm, occupied by a young couple with two children. It was the first time, but not the last, that I appreciated the magnificent work of the Dutch police in collaboration with the Underground.

Our new hide-out was a secret room built high in a barn and accessible solely by a very long ladder, which was put in place only when needed. For the next 14 days we were virtual prisoners, for our own safety, in this hay-lined room which, fortunately, had a large circular louvred window which provided fresh air and a view of the surrounding countryside. On the first evening the farmer's wife dressed the wounds on my head, and then we had a meal with the family. After that occasion all our meals were delivered to

our hide-out and we only came down at around 2000 hours each night for a wash and a shave.

On the second day at this location we had a visit from the brother-in-law of the leader of the local section of the Underground who said that he would be our liaison officer. He brought razors, toothbrushes, soap and, to our considerable joy, a supply of English books. On a later visit I asked him if we were still to be airlifted to England, and learned that the British officer who operated the secret radio in the woods near Elburg, together with a young Dutch girl from the Underground, had been caught by the Germans and shot, so that was the end of that escape route. Both the liaison officer and the farmer did their best to make our stay as agreeable as possible. They told us that two glider pilots from the Arnhem debacle, Angus Low and Robin Boyd, were hiding about a mile away, and arranged to pass notes between them and us. This was a welcome diversion; as was the activity viewed from our window. We could observe German Army traffic along a rail line and main road and were informed that the Germans were digging defences in the locality. This became a little too close for comfort one day when we saw workmen, supervised by SS guards, digging trenches about 25 metres from the farmhouse.

It was obvious that the Germans were building an elaborate system of defences on our side of the IJssel River, and we discussed with our liaison officer the need to get to the west side as quickly as possible to increase our chances of escaping. He agreed, but said it would be both difficult and dangerous to attempt a crossing at this point. However, two days later it was apparent that the farm was within a major defence system and the likelihood that we would be discovered by the Germans, and that the farmer and his family would be shot for harbouring us was an unacceptable situation. Plans were made to evacuate us without delay.

The two evaders from Arnhem were brought to our hide-out shortly after 0800 hours the next day, and it was a pleasant experience to meet our 'pen pals' and have new people to converse with. At 1300 hours the four of us were brought down to the ground level of the barn and told to lie face down in a large horse-drawn hay cart while a load of hay was placed on top of us. Under the hay we could not hear much of what was going on, but there was an animated discussion in the barn before we left and shortly afterwards we heard the order from the SS guards at the gate to stop for inspection. Later, we were told that the raised voices before departure were the liaison officer pleading with the farmer not to risk his life driving through the cordon of SS guards, and the farmer replying: 'I don't give a damn—let's go.'

His tactic when stopped by the guards was to bluff his way through by rudely telling them to get out of his way—which they did. Our destination was a farmhouse close to the river and here four men, apparently a father and his three sons, briefed us on the plan to cross the river that evening. We were told to rest and be ready to leave at 1800 hours. During this sleepless interlude I felt truly humble at the farmer's incredible courage on our behalf. Had he shown the slightest nervousness the guards would surely

have sensed that there was mischief afoot, have found us under the hay and shot the farmer. (His name was Sunlink.) We were to encounter more selfless acts of bravery by Dutchmen before we passed through the German lines to freedom.

At about 1700 hours we were given a final briefing and a bag of supplies (stolen from the Germans), in case things went wrong and we had to scatter. At 1800 hours, as planned, we were taken through the nearby forest until we reached the dyke along the river bank, and after some time we heard a shout and saw a green light signalling that it was OK to cross the dyke. On the other side the two policemen, whom we had first met in the tall grass about two weeks previously, were waiting to lead us through German defence works to a disused brickworks on the river bank. There, a steel rowing boat had been concealed for our use. This was to be a silent operation, but the rowlocks had not been oiled and every pull of the rusty oars produced a disconcerting amount of noise. On the other side we were greeted by a small group of helpers, led by a Dutch Reformed Church clergyman named Couvee, who took us through the village of Welsum on the way to our next hiding place.

Twenty minutes walking brought us to a farm, which smelled strongly of apples. The farmer, Hengeveld, had two beautiful young daughters who showed us through the house, including the secret radio hidden in a recess in the wall behind a picture. After a meal the farmer took us outside, put a very long ladder against a haystack and indicated that our quarters were at the top. They were sheltered by a large roof and proved to me most comfortable, with blankets, white sheets, eiderdowns and a good stock of English books. The only disappointment was that we were not allowed to come down to the ground to stretch our legs; due, we learned, to the fact that the farmer was also hiding a Dutch Jew and in the event of his capture and torture it was better that he did not know of our existence. The farmer's daughters had a habit of throwing large, juicy apples to the top of the stack, sometimes hitting one of us on the head, and eating them caused stomach pains and frequent visits to the toilet.

On one occasion we heard a female voice calling: 'Boys are you there?' On crawling to the edge of the stack we saw a well dressed woman of about 50 who, when she saw us, volunteered in a loud voice that she was 'the woman of the priest'. At a later date when we met face to face, Frank, to my embarrassment, explained that she was actually the priest's housekeeper. The clergyman, Couvee, was a frequent visitor and relayed a rumour that we would be moved south to participate in an organised attempt to get through the German lines and cross the Neder Rijn, somewhere near Wageningen. There was also talk that we would be moved to Veesen. All this uncertainty, lack of action and the fact that Frank and I had exhausted our topics of conversation led to moods of despondency. My sanity was probably saved by a book we had in our hide-out. Its subject was translating Dutch to English and, being interested in languages, enabled me to increase my knowledge of Dutch which was of considerable use later on.

One afternoon, at about 1700 hours, Couvee came to take us to the church at Welsum and, there, hid us in a small room with two bicycles until the evening service ended. Then we were introduced to two young men, Gerrit Huffelen and Wim Wolf, who were to lead us, on bicycles to our next destination. We soon found ourselves pedalling north along the dyke road, under a huge October moon that shone its silvery light on the river. Eventually, we reached the manse of the Dutch Reformed Church at Veessen where the clergyman, Dominie Louis Buenk, welcomed us in excellent English. We came to know him as 'The Dominie' and his vocabulary and command of English amazed me, particularly as he claimed that he had only learned it at university and had rarely spoken the language. He earned our considerable admiration as a combination of outstanding resistance leader and compassionate minister of his church.

The manse was a large and comfortable house, with upstairs bedrooms, large kitchen and sitting room with a piano and a good selection of English books. This was a big improvement on our previous barn and haystack quarters and a 16-year-old girl, Vim Hamer, was provided to clean and cook for us. Later in the evening 'The Dominie' took us to the dining room and pulled back the table and carpet to reveal a small trapdoor. This led to a 'dug-out' room under the floor which, in addition to being a hide-out, contained a large selection of arms and explosives obtained from RAF drops. The manse was a hive of illicit activity. Young men of the Veessen Group came for lectures and to plan means of harassing the Germans. Instruction on the use of weapons and explosives was given by Ben Lockett, an artillery officer trained also as a commando. The German authorities had a price on 'The Dominie's' head so he only visited, as necessary, to conduct underground business.

On our first night 'The Dominie' supplied us with pyjamas and showed us to our bedroom on the first floor. In case of an alarm, the emergency drill was to get dressed, make the bed—all as quickly as possible—and rush down to the dining room where someone would have the trapdoor open, enter the hide-out and then the trapdoor would be closed and the carpet and table replaced. After we had been hidden the boys of the Veessen Group of the Underground would disperse into the woods, and not return until it was obvious all danger had passed. We were required to practise this drill and Frank and I got our time down to about three minutes. Fortunately, the Germans did not investigate the house during our sojourn there.

We were amazed at the carefree attitude which existed at the manse, considering that the Germans were in the vicinity, but it appeared that 'The Dominie' had arranged for trusted villagers to give warning of enemy movements. Few Dutchmen had any petrol so it was comparatively easy to identify every vehicle that travelled the roads. Warning was also necessary when 'The Dominie' returned to the manse to change into his surplice and conduct a church service for the villagers. These services were arranged at irregular times, according to German movements, and lookouts were posted in the church tower and elsewhere while they were in progress. It was a tribute to 'The Dominie's' courage

and skill that he was never captured, despite his church and underground activities fight under the Germans noses.

Sometimes the manse would be almost empty, and at others full of members of the Veessen Group and their supporters. On one occasion a lady, who we learnt later was a baroness, burst into the kitchen and shouted in English: 'Hello! Boys.' She was dressed in black pants and jacket, wearing a crumpled hat, and with an automatic pistol inside her jacket and a hand grenade in a trouser pocket was every inch a resistance fighter; daunting enough, one would think, to terrify even the Gestapo. Another time a dentist named Van Dyk came to reconstruct Ben Lockett's jaw, which had been badly damaged by shrapnel at Arnhem when the Germans fired an 88 millimetre gun, over open sights, down the road along which he was fleeing.

During this period we assisted with a project to create a new hiding place for dropped arms by digging out under the church vestry. We worked from 2200 hours until 0400 hours, for five nights, to complete the task. The earth was taken in wheelbarrows and dumped in a nearby pond.

At last, there was a scheme to move us south in the back of a postal van but this had to be abandoned when an Allied aircraft bombed and made impassable a vital road we were to use. However, on 17 November 1944 we were advised of an alternative plan and told to be ready for departure any time after noon. Mrs Van Dyk, the dentist's wife came over early to help prepare sandwiches for the journey and then went out with the boys to secure our transport. There were now five of us, Ben Lockett (the artillery officer), Angus Low and Robert Boyd (both glider pilots from Arnhem), Frank Batterbury and myself. At about 1400 hours we saw a horse drawn cart loaded with freshly dug turnips arrive at the back of the house.

The boys unloaded the turnips in quick time, after which we lay on the floor of the cart with our heads in apple cases for protection. We were each equipped with a Sten gun and a pack of provisions. Then the turnips were loaded on top of us until we were completely covered, and held down by the considerable weight of the load. As we set off 'The Dominie' shouted his blessing and we returned thanks for his kindness and hospitality. Riding in convoy with us were the Van Dyks and some of the boys but we could not tell exactly who they were because we could not see a thing under the turnips. Several times one or other of the group would tell us where we were and describe points of interest. Eventually, Van Dyk said that we were about to pass through a German artillery camp, on both sides of the road, and that if we wanted to make water to do it now. I remember thinking: 'How the hell can I make water when I can't move my arms!' It also occurred to me that we would be in a pretty pickle if the Germans decided to requisition the horse and cart, as they were known to do. We got through the camp safely and shortly afterwards the driver, Henk Zwaan, attempted to increase the pace but the horse was in poor condition and at that point he refused to go any further.

We were told to extricate ourselves from the turnips, made muddier by the rain that had been falling, and discovered we were in a small country lane. It was a relief to be able to stretch our limbs after three hours of discomfort under the turnips. Local Underground members turned up on bicycles, put us on carriers over the rear wheels and pedalled fast until we arrived at a barn beside a farmhouse. Each of us carried a Sten gun and a sack of provisions, which did not leave a free hand with which to hold on but we all managed to complete the journey without incident. We were amazed to find about 20 evaders, mostly Arnhem veterans including medical officers and orderlies, in the barn and making quite a lot of noise despite being in German occupied territory.

The leader of the Elburg Underground Group arrived and told us it was intended to transport us in two ambulances (considered immune from German interference) to join about 75 other Allied servicemen waiting in the woods near Doornspijk. This plan failed because the ambulance drivers were stopped and arrested on the way to us. Nothing further could be done that night so we were billeted with families around Elburg. Frank and I with a middle aged woman whose house was on the main road and, next morning, we were able to observe German Army movements from the lounge room window, and noticed that shortage of motor fuel had forced them to rely to some extent on requisitioned horse drawn transport.

On the second morning a member of the Underground called to inform us to be ready at 1930 hours for movement to another rendezvous from which we would be taken by motor lorry to resume the original plan to make a mass crossing of the Neder Rijn to join the Canadian forces on the other side. A previous successful operation of this nature had been code named Pegasus, so this one was to be Pegasus II. At the appointed time a guide arrived and led us through back streets to a large house where the lorry was waiting. There were about 14 of us seated on forms on the back of the vehicle, and supplied with picks and shovels to make us look like a labour gang. Two members of the Underground rode 'shotgun' with their Sten guns. We travelled on the main highway to the south and, once away from the town, the driver switched on his headlamps and went like hell. We were a possible strafing target for an Allied aircraft and before long we heard the unmistakable noise of a Mosquito in the area. I thought how ironic it would be if we should be blasted to perdition by the four cannons and four machine guns of one of the aircraft from our own squadron. We breathed more easily when the sound faded away.

On arrival at our destination near Doornspijk two new guides informed us we were running late for our rendezvous with the main party, and led us on foot at a fast pace. We were delayed further by having to take evasive action from unidentified strangers and arrived to find that the party had left. It was a miserable damp and misty night but we had no alternative but to stay in the wood where we were while, the two Underground men went off to make other arrangements. During this period two of our number went off on their own to try to catch up to the main party, but returned to say that there was a German artillery camp a short distance up the road from where we were. Our guides

were very displeased when they returned and heard about this exploit, and said that anybody else who endangered our safety in this way would be shot.

During this period we heard bursts of rifle and automatic weapon fire in the distance, and realised that the main party must have run into trouble—the extent of which we were to learn about much later. Apparently, they were moving down to the river, single file with each man armed with a Sten gun and two hand grenades and holding the coat tail of the man in front when, out of the darkness, a German voice said: ‘Halt!’ There was pandemonium with shooting at the front but those at the rear were unable to fire for fear of hitting their comrades. It only lasted for a few minutes before they were forced to retreat, and the survivors ran for about an hour and a half until they found shelter with a Dutch farmer. It was estimated that up to 16 escapers, two Dutch guides and an unknown number of British commandos, in the lead, were killed in the action. The commandos had crossed the river near Leerdam to organise the operation. This action took place on 18 November 1944 and was used as the basis for a scene in the film, ‘A Bridge Too Far’.

For three wet miserable days we had to remain in that wood while our helpers were absent trying to make arrangements for us. The only shelter was what we improvised from branches and the only food was the emergency rations we had brought with us. Then a Dutch farmer and his very attractive half-Javanese daughter came with food and the news that we could expect transport to arrive that evening.

During this stay in the wood, Frank had found a common interest in cycling with a Typhoon pilot, Flight Lieutenant Adrian Davis, and asked if I would mind if they teamed up. I wished them luck and reflected that I must have been poor company at times, particularly when suffering headaches from my scalp injuries. Shortly after 1900 hours Underground guides arrived with transport, and some of our party went off in a horse drawn cart and three of us were more fortunate, being allotted to a post office van. The pleasure of being out of the cold wind and the frequent downpours of rain was considerable and our destination proved to be a loft in a hay barn, about an hour’s drive away. About 25 survivors of the ill-fated Pegasus II were already ensconced there. Most were NCOs but the man I became most friendly with was an Army Medical Officer, named Graham Warrack, from the Arnhem show.

This barn was a temporary transit refuge and after three days a guide led two of us on foot via country lanes to a butter factory on the outskirts of Bameveld, arriving at about 2100 hours. Half an hour later another guide named Prins arrived and took us on to an isolated farm, which was to be a longer term residence. Here I had a pleasant reunion with Ben Lockett, Angus Low and Robert Boyd and met two American airmen and a young Canadian soldier. The farm was owned by Cor Lof who was wanted by the Germans, but well armed and determined that they would never take him alive. We were forbidden to show ourselves outside, except for movement to the barn that was used as an observation post.

Altogether, we spent three months on that farm, including some anxious moments when Prins was presumed captured with a list of our names and addresses, and when German soldiers called seeking chickens or eggs. We were indeed grateful to Cor Lof and bade him farewell on 19 February 1945 when we moved out on bicycles, on the start of a long move towards Biesbosch. We were told that a new escape route had been opened up which included a trip by rowing boats from Sliedrecht to a position near the Moerdijk bridge, which was part of the Canadian Army front line. Finally, I made it to friendly territory but not without further trials and tribulations. There was the occasion when Johnny Sjurssen and I were staying with the Stapper family at Doom when Sonja, one of the daughters, rushed into our bedroom at about 1500 hours to say that Germans were at the front door and to hide in the wardrobe. We stood, hidden amongst the clothes for nine hours until Mr Stapper brought us down the staircase with the German officers drinking and talking loudly in the front room to the right. He took us to the sitting room next to it and then into a dugout underneath which was entered via a trapdoor under the carpet, and there we stayed for five days. My concern was for the Stappers because had the Germans, who had requisitioned the house, seen us the family would have been shot.

Unfortunately, Johnny, the 18-year-old Canadian, was captured on the bridge at Wreeswijk and later tortured and beaten so badly that he had to have medical treatment in Britain for two months after the War before he was fit enough to return to Canada.

Frank, who got to England before me, and I met again on a refresher course at Fersfield and we rejoined the squadron at Epinoy, France, on 22 May 1945. Our success was due entirely to the heroic efforts of the Dutch Underground and I pay a special tribute to the Veessen group under Louis Buenk ('The Dominie').

GUNS FOR SIGNPOSTS

Flight Sergeant Robert Venters Jubb

I had been trained for fighters, and it was with some apprehension that I greeted a posting to be retrained for bombers. But it turned out that I joined 76 Squadron, RAF at lonely Holme on Spalding Moor, and it had a high morale due to the example of Wing Commander 'Hank' Iveson. His habit of leading the Squadron on the high risk, tough targets endeared him to all.

Most of the ten trips done from Holme were full of activity, especially the long ones where we had to battle our way out of trouble from night fighters. It transpired that the visual 'monica' with which we were equipped to warn of an impending attack also acted as a homing signal for enemy night fighters.

In August 1944 we were posted to Driffield, where 466 RAAF Squadron operated, to reform 462 RAAF Squadron, with Halifaxes, and the difference in leadership soon became obvious.

After completing a normal tour of 30 trips we were asked to make up for crew shortages by volunteering for five more, and it was on our 32nd operation, to Dusseldorf, on 2 November 1944, that we were attacked as we left the target.

At the time there were differing opinions as to what attacked us but the evidence suggests that it was the classic 'schrage musik' method, i.e. a Messerschmitt 110 with two upward firing cannon, stalking 100 feet below. Anyway, we had the two starboard engines out of action and on fire, fuel lines ruptured, elevator and aileron controls gone. We left the stricken aircraft at 15,000 feet.

Descending by parachute, it first seemed that I would land in the Rhine, shining brightly in the moon and firelight. However, I glided in under a power pylon, buried the 'chute, cut off insignia and got going. In the backyard of a house I borrowed a brown jacket from a clothesline and, over the battledress it disposed of the uniform look. So with my black 'runaway' boots, always worn instead of flying boots, I was ready for the cross-country.

DAY TWO

The first night was full of apprehensions when crossing rail lines, which always seemed to have two men patrolling, and concrete roads carrying heavy traffic. The procedure adopted was to wait, observe and then duck across to resume my south-westerly course.

Night running was good for covering distance but bad for identifying what loomed up, and had the advantage of concealment if challenged, which happened at one road crossing. Daytime movement seemed risky so I lay up in a wood and watched a farmer coming and going. That's when I had a small visitor, a squirrel. I remember thinking: 'A German squirrel, but rather lovely and much smaller than I had imagined.'

DAY THREE

As darkness came I took off, after eating some rations from the escape kit and checking my cloth map. It started to rain but the warmth from jogging kept the cold out until I came to a river. Not wishing to divert too far off course looking for a bridge I took the plunge and swam across what I identified as the Roer. Then after emptying boots and wringing out socks, it was more comfortable to get going again. Then coming to a road without traffic, and heading south-west, I followed it until barking dogs indicated the proximity of a village. I skirted this and some time later my way was barred by a barbed wire fence and following it a short distance to the right saw a notice: 'Achtung Minen'. If it really was a minefield it presented quite a problem: how far did it extend to left and right across my chosen course? I followed the fence to the left for about two hundred yards, by my compass, a 90-degree deviation, and this frustrated me to such an extent that I decided to risk crossing the minefield. Like a homing pigeon, the right direction and the urge to keep moving were the motivating forces. Another word is 'fear'. Anyway, I crawled under the fence and resumed course, walking carefully and I hoped lightly. Nothing blew up, so maybe it was no longer a minefield.

DAY FOUR

By dawn I found myself on a farm with turnips growing, and although the water from a small stream was good my stomach did not relish raw turnip, but in any case I seemed to be too tense to be hungry. I lay up in a small copse but at about 1400 hours the urge to get going surged up and caused me to proceed. On approaching a small village I decided not to deviate but to walk straight through it. Two soldiers and I arrived at a corner together and one said: 'Wohin gehen sie?', so I went into my head shaking idiot act, which my Air Force colleagues said came naturally, and mumbled: 'Ich habe es eilag'. This seemed to distract or puzzle them enough for me to keep shuffling on; helped by the sight of a US twin boom Lightning zooming across and causing everyone to stop and stare.

DAY FIVE

A bit discouraged by this close contact; I lay up in a hedge until darkness gave me confidence to move on again. Then I came to a road absolutely teeming with traffic travelling north-east, and being unable to cross I settled down to wait and heard ominous sounds of activity coming from the west. I finally moved off about noon, drawn by the noise of an artillery battle in the distance. I came to a village, which I believe was Euchen, and it seemed to have been evacuated as I saw only troops there. While

fossicking in a deserted house I was confronted by a soldier with Mongolian features, and his small stature probably gave me the courage to push him aside and snarl: 'zuruck', and stand back he did, and I hoped he would think that I was the owner rummaging in his own house. Later, I learned that there were many Mongolians, formerly in Russian service, who had either been invited to join or were impressed into the German Army. Outside, surveying the line-up of 88 millimetre guns, the crazy thought occurred to me that their barrels were pointing the way to go, so I set off down the road until I came to an intersection where there was a burnt out tank and bodies and discarded rifles lying around. Another couple of hundred yards and the angry buzz of machine gun fire put me, crawling, in the ditch beside the road and every time my backside stuck up the area was stitched by gunfire. Proceeding desperately and steadily I came face to face with what is termed, 'not a pretty sight'. It was a German soldier, blue in the face and dead at the foot of a pole with wires dangling. We really got together when I had to crawl over the top of him, keeping my backside down. My urgency was the fear of pursuit, until I reached the point where shells from the rear were bursting ahead and showering me with dirt. Ahead came the periodic whoosh and bang of return artillery fire. I had found the proverbial position between a rock and a hard place.

My first inclination was to wait until dark, but reflected that if I were a front line soldier I would shoot anyone coming from the direction of the enemy, and ask questions afterwards. During the next hour, or so, I noticed that there was a lull of about a minute in the incoming artillery fire every quarter of an hour, so at the next lull I opened up my brown jacket to show the blue of the battle dress underneath, and with hands raised, belted along the road. It was undignified, but after about 200 yards a voice from behind called: 'Halt!' I was looking at the business end of a carbine levelled at me by a GI in a foxhole. I said: 'Take me to an officer I am an Australian airman.' 'Strellin?' he replied baffled, and ordered: 'March!'

I was in the hands of General Simpson's 9th Army, facing Manteuffel's 5th German Army, just five days after being shot down. Following interrogation, we watched the continuing attacks on German armour by dive-bombing and rocket firing P 38's (Lightnings in our language). This group said their advance was being delayed by the slow progress of the 'Limeys' in the north, but they planned to be the first to cross the Rhine; a feat which they did achieve. Next day they provided a Jeep and a driver to deliver me to the British base at Namur. From there I went to Intelligence in Brussels, back loading in a Dakota from Antwerp to Northolt on 20 November, and then to St John's Wood for interrogation.

POSTSCRIPT

My crew had all got out and were rounded up, some after evading for a few days, and all survived the POW camps. However, the big mid upper gunner did collapse in the snow during the forced march in the face of the Russian advance from the east, and was half carried and dragged by the wireless operator to prevent him being shot. Although both

Against the Odds

lived in Sydney after the war the gunner never saw fit or bothered to contact his saviour. It makes you wonder about human nature.



1944 Riccall Halifax II

*B/A: D. Eadie, Nav: J. Burden, R/G: J. Christensen, Pilot: R. Jubb, W/Op: P. Brett,
Mv/B: B. Sharpe, F/Eng: J. Bryden*

A WHEAT FIELD IN BELGIUM

Flight Sergeant Donald James Annat

Our target was the railway yard at Courtrai, about 75 kilometres west of Brussels, as we took off in a 460 Squadron Lancaster from Binbrook, on the evening of 20 July 1944. We bombed the target and were several minutes into the homeward journey when we were hit a number of times in the starboard wing and engines, and an intense fire broke out.

The captain gave the order to bail out, and I left via the forward hatch and was well clear of the aircraft before I pulled the cord of my chest pack parachute. There was a savage jerk and then my descent to enemy held territory was illuminated by the flames of the aircraft I had just left. Below the starlit surface looked like water and I thought it must be a lake, but instead I made a hard landing, in windy conditions, in a wheat field. It was a four pointer—two heels and two cheeks of my backside touching at the same time.

I was winded and sore as I knelt in the wheat field and shed my Mae West and parachute. The wheat provided little cover, and to advertise my presence every dog in the neighbourhood started barking and some cattle were bellowing, but it was 0200 hours and no one came to investigate so I hid my parachute in some bushes. I began walking across fields in a south-easterly direction, and as I stumbled along in the pitch dark fell down an embankment, blundered into a swampy stream and as dawn was breaking I decided to rest in the cover of a small wood with undergrowth near a brook. Here I tried to make myself look less conspicuous by taking off my badges and pulled my pullover over the top of my battledress jacket.

My hide was near a main road, and from the direction boards of the buses that passed I gathered that I was between Dixmuide and Ypres. Police on bicycles and Germans in motor cycle and sidecar outfits seemed to be patrolling, and I imagined they were looking for Allied airmen.

When darkness fell I set out along the roadside and after about four hours came to a cemetery, where I found a large grave well decorated with a good thickness of marble chips. Here I dug a hole for my hip and had a couple of hours much needed sleep—without any interference from the other inhabitants.

In the morning I saw a large farm nearby, with wheat harvesting in progress, and the stooks of wheaten sheaves provided cover in the fields. Soon, a farmer emerged from a cluster of buildings so I approached him and he allowed me to spend the night in his

barn. Meanwhile, he conferred with a Belgian who worked for the Australian War Graves Commission and it was confirmed that I was a genuine Australian by my accent.

Later, two Belgians arrived on racing bicycles with a very ordinary machine for me. It had fat tyres and weighed 'a tonne' and I worked hard to follow them for about 20 miles down to Menin Gate, on the French border. Here I was escorted into France by a Frenchman who had lived many years in the USA. Having my hand shaken and being wished 'bon voyage' by uniformed border guards was a bit shattering but I survived that and was taken to a cafe in Halluin. There, I met some of the local inhabitants and an elderly woman began singing 'Tipperary', with alcoholic gusto, and had to be silenced.

A young man took me to stay with a family in the nearby village of Neuville en Ferrain where there was also an American 'boarder'. It transpired that there were at least three other airmen in the village and accommodation was at a premium because no one could be moved due to heavy German military traffic, following our invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. It was a strange situation, in the heart of enemy held territory, with our hosts all using bogus names to protect themselves in the event of any careless talk. I spent several weeks concealed in this house, without being permitted even to look out the windows because they faced the much-used main road to Tourcoing.

Suddenly, one day we were moved to another house which already was sheltering two Americans. It appeared that our former host had been arrested, by whom was not clear; he was said to be a 'gross collaborator'. There was a German headquarters unit about a mile away and many of the enemy around so we had to remain indoors, apart from a few unsanctioned forays at night.

We were able to keep track of the progress of the War by listening to radio broadcasts from London to the French Resistance and the English language programs. It was good news when we heard that Paris had been liberated and the German retreat had begun. The local French people in our Pas de Calais area were afraid that it would become a battleground. This did not happen but we were able to witness the retreat of a defeated army. Strafing by Allied fighters was sometimes a hazard, but a good morale booster for the French.

Soon we were able to emerge into the real world again but were hustled into the Halluin town hall for safety when a shooting skirmish broke out between two factions of the Resistance. It was said that the Communist element was trying to gain the ascendancy.

Eventually, a British scout car arrived in the village, to a frenzied greeting from the local population. The driver of this vehicle was having a busman's holiday after driving a tank in the Normandy campaign: the Army has strange ways!

The three Americans and myself were taken by the Resistance to Lille, where the British Army Traffic Police billeted us, but they had their own problems directing a whole army. After a couple of days they directed us to a certain point where a policeman on traffic duty was asked to get us a lift to an RAF airfield near Arras. We eventually found ourselves in a box trailer with only a bottle of cognac, as a 'liquid overcoat' to protect us from the rain and the cold.

The puzzled RAF corporal at the guard post saw us as a wet, bedraggled bunch of civvies but because we spoke English 'pretty good' he let us in. Here we were taken to a RAF Typhoon squadron mess, and to show what a small world it is the first pilot I met was a lad I had gone to school with.

We arranged a flight to England in an American C47 and were delivered to our HQ for debriefing and, best of all, a clean hot bath. So the adventure which commenced on 20 July ended on 12 November 1944.

NOTES

1. The French villagers thought that anyone who bathed was strange. On one occasion I found a small wash tub, warm water and a piece of ersatz soap and was enjoying my first bath for three months when half the street came to observe this odd Australian custom. Prior to that each time I scratched I had to clean my fingernails.
2. Had the Germans arrested everyone carrying identity cards describing them as 1.78 metres tall and 'Sourd-Muet' (deaf and dumb) they would have got most of us. The deaf and dumb tag got around the problem of giving ourselves away with a foreign accent and imperfect French.
3. To this day I know the surname of only one of my helpers and I am not sure that it was his real name. When debriefed the best I could do was give addresses.

MOSQUITO TO MAQUIS ON "D" PLUS FIFTY

Flying Officer John Robert Crossley Walton

Mounting temperature from internal fire, exploding ammunition and loss of control prompted an urgent departure from Mosquito NT138, while in the general area of Orleans, in the Loire valley of France, on the night of 26 July 1944. The brief period of descent by parachute was sufficient to reflect on what now seemed an insane wish to free myself from the embrace of Training Command in Canada. A visit to our station by the Australian High Commissioner, Major General Sir William Glasgow, whose home town of Gympie was only 20 miles from mine, was an occasion for reminiscences and resulted in the posting to Britain which I had sought.

The rising hot air from my Mossie, now burning furiously on the ground, made parachute control difficult and I landed heavily. When I had recovered my wind I could see two of everything in the fire-lit surroundings. My right boot, into which I always thrust my service revolver, had gone and my ankles had suffered some injury, but I gathered the parachute and crawled towards a tree line visible at the top of a gentle slope. I was nearly there when a Mossie on a similar patrol to mine used his respectable firepower to strafe the general area illuminated by the fire of my aircraft. I shrank from the muzzle flashes as he made several runs, and my eloquence was lost in the din of his progress.

In the wood I found a hiding place and, after stuffing my 'chute and battledress jacket into the undergrowth, I set off and cautiously followed a lane bordered by ditches and hedges. As it was one boundary of a field of grain I thought there must be a farmhouse nearby. Light rain began to fall and I listened for dogs barking or other threatening noises, but heard nothing except the patter of the raindrops. The overcast delayed the onset of first light and allowed me to put more distance between myself and the evidence of my arrival. At 0400 hours, after about two hours' progress, the visibility was fairly good and I saw a large tree at the corner of a field where another narrow lane met my lane. A thicket filled this corner and I decided to make this my refuge for the day, as rest and time to take stock of the situation were now vital. Thirst was not a problem as the rain continued and enough moisture was available from shirt sleeves and foliage. Chance had brought me to one of the few reasonable hiding places in the locality, and good luck is needed to avoid capture in the early disoriented stage of evasion. I removed my one remaining boot and the wet leaves seemed beneficial to my badly swollen ankles, and I would have to remain here until they improved enough to make walking easier.

Dawn brought a procession of chattering locals trudging along the road, presumably to see the remains of my aircraft that had crashed and disturbed their sleep. They came so

close that I could have claimed their attention in a conversational tone, but refrained from doing so. Then the search party—two truckloads of enemy troops—came along, forcing the peasants into the ditch. The local inhabitants' curiosity lasted through the morning, but the trucks did not return my way. My first nourishment came from some Horlicks tablets in my escape kit, and I dozed on and off during the afternoon. I intended to head off in the evening while there was still some light to show obstacles, and then move again in the half light of the pre-dawn period. My attire comprised a light blue shirt, dark blue RAAF trousers, two black socks and one boot; all reasonably civilian but obviously I would have to acquire some footwear. The nine pounds I had won in the traditional post briefing game of pontoon back at the base, added to the money in my escape kit, should take care of that problem.

Escape kit maps were too small in scale to enable accurate pin-pointing of position but I knew that I was well south of Orleans, and that the River Loire was nearby, so decided that I must travel in a north-westerly direction to await the imminent Allied break out from Normandy. Having made that decision I decided that my ankles needed more time so postponed my departure until the following day. The night passed quietly and after dawn I moved to the edge of the thicket near the field of grain, and saw a young man move into the standing crop. I thought he must have seen me but he commenced harvesting some of the hay and stooking it. He left after several hours toil and later returned and worked until dusk. I again delayed my departure for another 24 hours, and next day he returned to the field and continued with his task. In the late morning, when he straightened up to ease his back, I rose from my observation post, beckoned to him, and then sank back out of sight. On returning to the field after his midday break he walked casually into my thicket, greeted me warmly, and handed me a bag containing bread, a shank of bristly smoked pork, and a litre of red wine; all of which I consumed with relish. With the help of my phrase book, assisted by the wine, we managed a brief conversation and he instructed me to stay where I was and reveal myself to no one until he came for me, which could be some time as he had people to see about my concealment.

He returned late the following day with some farm implements over his shoulder. In the gathering dusk he handed me a shovel and we set off, side by side with our implements at the slope, in the direction of the light I had noticed the previous night. We were quickly admitted to a kitchen occupied by a reception committee of the whole family, and in a confusing jumble of rapid French, but with food and a liberal flow of wine my comprehension improved. After the meal I was led to an outbuilding, filled almost to the rafters with straw, and given a wash basin and a pitcher of water. After waking early, I explored the interior of the barn and found a Citroen car loosely covered with straw. My prying was disturbed by a young woman who examined my ankles, and bathed and bound them, after treating the cuts with cologne. She gave me a pair of sandals, which were a good fit, and left with my mud encrusted socks, placing her finger to her lips at the door. After a comfortable day resting in the straw, my rescuer arrived with food and we left in the car as soon as darkness fell. Following a short journey we parked in

a street of the village of Lorris, and walked to the side entrance of a substantial house where my hosts were a reserved elderly couple who provided supper and showed me to a room where I spent the night. My helper, on leaving, refused my request for his name and warned me not to seek this information from anyone who might assist me in the future.

The following afternoon my host gave me a beret and a cardigan, in addition to the shaving gear he had provided earlier. After an hour's wait he told me to leave the house by the side door, turn right into the street and walk along the footpath. Fifty yards on a car stopped ahead and as I drew level the front passenger opened the rear door and beckoned me in. This driving around in broad daylight led me to speculate on the degree of control these people exercised. The rural scene appeared to be quiet and normal; we encountered no traffic and eventually entered the tree-lined drive leading to a chateau. My transport departed and left me in the hands of a reception committee who grilled me about my identity, checking times and dates relative to my arrival and subsequent movements. They could not be too careful as a plant of an enemy agent or a member of the Melice, a traitorous French police force, could destroy a whole resistance organisation. After several hours of repeating the details in different sequences they appeared to accept my statements and escorted me back across the moat to a substantial building in a group. It was previously the administrative headquarters of the estate but now occupied by the FFI and associates, including women, children and livestock.

I was presented to Maria, who conducted me to a room, sat me on a bed, examined my feet and ankles, and advised that medical help would be available. She said, also, that a false ID card would be produced using my escape kit photograph, and that because of my lameness a place would be made available for me on the next Lysander—a hope that faded over the next few days. Then, over hot chocolate and biscuits, she continued my interrogation, and later in the day it appeared that I had passed the test, because I was offered a choice of pistols. I was advised to take a German Mauser because it took 9 millimetre ammunition, which was in good supply, being used in the Sten guns dropped by the British.

A young medical doctor arrived the next day and offered to encase my feet in plaster and to provide a neck brace, but I declined both on the grounds that my mobility would be restricted and they would attract the attention of the curious. I was becoming conditioned to the pain in my ankles and had hopes that the symptoms were lessening.

Now accepted, I became one of the community and took part in expeditions involving hard living in makeshift shelters. The conduct of my companions varied at times from hilarious to hair raising, and the casual joining of battle with larger and better-equipped groups of professional soldiers sometimes bordered on foolhardiness. Even when we had the element of surprise on our side, weapons were poorly maintained and I saw no attempt to provide even elementary training. High explosive and hand grenades lay about, weapons were left cocked and it was not uncommon to stumble over boxes

of detonators, or have millegrenades rolling around over feet in moving vehicles. FFI members were more conservative and less evident and communication between them and our Maquis was by courier. One courier appeared regularly attired in riding breeches and riding boots, and mounted on a light motorcycle. Another was a Belgian girl on a bicycle called Andre, who one day demanded lessons on the motorcycle. Off she went to the applause of an admiring group until she jack knifed and went over the handle bars in a spectacular fashion; revealing that she wore nothing beneath her skirt. I pondered whether this spartan custom was due to wartime privations, or heralded the onset of women's liberation.

One day a courier arrived with the news that a US break out from Normandy had occurred and a rapid advance along the Loire was in progress. Rejoicing was in order, and it was soon plain that the German Army was in flight. In this situation the Maquis intensified their attacks against targets of opportunity. My sojourn with them was now almost over and the next few days were spent on such pastimes as swimming in the nearby canal with the black haired Maria. The pecking order was rigidly maintained and she exerted an iron control over her domain and the craziest Maquisard deferred to her will and had far more respect for her than for an equal weight of plastic explosive. Well-meaning Anglo-Saxon offers of assistance with domestic chores were scorned and treated as a reflection on feminine competence.

When my departure for Orleans was arranged at short notice, Maria appeared with a 1000 franc note, ripped it in half and gave me one piece, saying; 'a bientot Robert, a talisman, we will use it to start a party when we meet again!' She offered me her cheek, and were those tears in the eyes of those few kilograms of Moroccan dynamite. As the gasmobile jolted on its way to the British Army Liaison unit in Orleans I reflected that if there were more of her calibre France would live again.

SECOND TIME LUCKY

Flying Officer Donald A. Boyd

March was a bad month for Don Boyd, because on the second of that month in 1944 he was shot down by flak in Italy, and evaded capture as described earlier in this collection of escape stories. A year later he was flying with 274 Squadron RAF, a unit of the Tempest Wing based at Volkel, about 50 kilometres north of Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, when German gunners gave him another opportunity to exercise his evasion skills.

On 28 March, he took off from Volkel to test his four Hispano 20 millimetre cannons after some adjustments by the armourers. It was common practice, although unauthorised, to do so over enemy territory to avoid waste of ammunition. Consequently, he was over German-held Arnhem when he decided to carry out the test, but not wishing to risk hitting Dutch citizens he fired at a target on the German side of the Rhine. This move stirred up a hornets' nest of enemy flak which was both fierce and accurate, and as he attempted to take evasive action he heard a 'plop' behind the cockpit, and then his engine caught fire. Urgent action was called for so he dropped his long-range tanks, gained height, jettisoned the cockpit canopy and dived over the side.

His parachute opened at about 1200 feet and he thought the gunners were still firing at him so he spilled air from one side of his canopy to increase the rate of descent and reach the comparative safety of the ground as quickly as possible. His arrival in occupied Holland was arrested at the last moment by the branches of a fruit tree, and he was left dangling with his feet about 60 centimetres from the ground. After freeing himself from his parachute he set off at a fast sprint away from the densely populated area, and had not gone far before a Dutchman beckoned to him and, assuming this to be a friendly gesture, was elated at his apparent good fortune. This proved to be short lived because soon he turned to find himself looking down the wrong end of two pistols and a few 'tommy' guns and rifles. He was marched off to a German camp about three kilometres away. A preliminary interrogation followed and he was taken, at about 2200 hours, to Omersford, where he was put into solitary confinement for nine days with only half-hour exercise periods night and morning. The food was not good but better and more plentiful than he was to receive at the next camp.

On 9 April, about 80 POW arrived from Appeldorn and Don was moved into the proper POW compound, and then had the company of 14 other officers of various nationalities, and the food was very bad. Then, on 14 April, they were all moved to Aalsmeer where their quarters were in the monastery adjoining the church. Life was better, with

improvement in both the quality and quantity of food. The guards were very slack so Don got to thinking about escaping and formulated three plans, and finally settled on one that involved breaking out under cover of darkness.

On 16 April, he had broken the lock on the door of an empty room which gave access to the roof, to pave the way for the first stage of the escape. But when he and two Americans, Mac Robinette and Norman Durette, tried to use this exit two nights later they found that the lock had been repaired. There was a guard only about six metres away, but while some of their mates engaged him in conversation and dazzled him with match light they wrestled with the door, got it open and then secured it behind them. There was a full moon and they had to wait until it moved sufficiently to cast a shadow over their escape route. Then they got out of the building onto the flat roof that connected it to the church. This roof was covered with loose gravel and the noise of their progress sounded horrendous in the still of the night. The idea of climbing down a drainpipe to the ground was abandoned as being

too dangerous, and they settled for the alternative of breaking through a window into the church. Don worked for three hours removing glass from the leadlight window, pane by pane. All the time Norm was unable to stop coughing and two guards paced below. One piece of glass fell into the church and, to the three fugitives, it sounded like a thunder clap, but still no reaction from the guards.

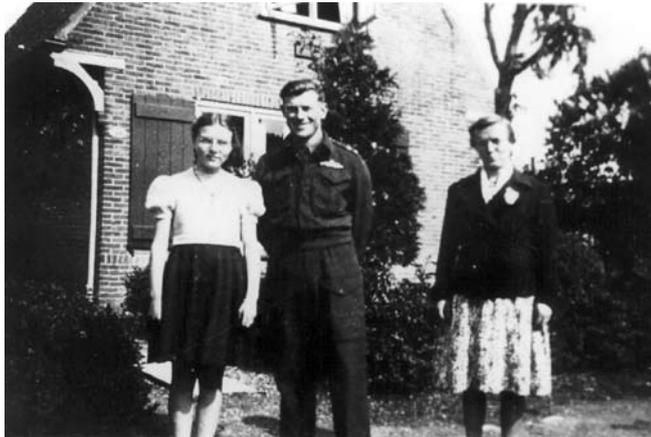


The monastery (right) from which Boyd, and two others escaped via the church on the left.

Finally, they were inside the church and looked in vain for a side door so walked out the front door, where Norm fell down the steps and dropped his boots causing Don's heart to miss a beat for the hundredth time that night! They went around the side of the church, climbed a fence and waded through a ditch full of nettles but their feet were so cold that they felt little pain. Their immediate problem was to stay free so they walked quickly until, after about an hour, they reached the outskirts of the town. There they saw a house which they decided to approach, even though at 0530 hours it was rather early to be making calls.

As they walked crouched over along the path, the daughter of the house saw them from an upstairs window and thought they appeared to be wearing uniforms. This girl, then just five days before her 14th birthday, was Trudy Griekspoor (who under her married name of Treuren, has lived in Australia since 1958) and she recalls that she alerted her mother. They did not look like German soldiers searching for labour draft dodgers, but to be sure Mrs Griekspoor opened a window and shouted out: 'What's going on here?'

Mac and Norm were all for beating a retreat but Don insisted that they seek this woman's help and went over to the window. Trudy remembers that they were wearing uniform, but with all insignia removed, and that she and her mother could not understand Don's sign language or words but knew that he wasn't speaking either French or German, and so assumed it must be English, of which they knew only a few words. Then Trudy asked in English: 'Our friends?' Don's reply was 'yes' so Mrs Griekspoor gestured towards the door and let them in, and Norm (true to previous form) tripped over the clogs that were left just inside the door. She had nothing to offer them except a cup of warm water, and they had no common language so Trudy was sent on her bicycle with a note to Mr Hendriks, an English speaking teacher, asking him to come and translate. His wife, in late pregnancy, refused to let him go but he got word to members of the local Underground. Soon men arrived with overalls to cover their uniforms. Mac was left in that house while the other two were taken on bicycles to separate safe houses. Don was billeted with Kees Knibbe and his wife on their farm, where he enjoyed good food. Initially, he had to remain indoors but later was able to ride into town to visit each of the two Americans he had escaped with.



Donald Boyd, April 1945, with helper Mrs Griekspoor and 14 year old daughter Trudy in the garden of their home at Aalsmeer.

Time dragged on, and there did not seem to be any end in sight to the war in Holland until one day the chief of the Underground in the village called to ask Don if he would be willing to ask the German commander to capitulate. Apparently, there was the belief that the General would be willing to surrender to a British officer, so Don agreed providing a meeting could be safely arranged. On the morning of 5 May, Don put on his RAAF uniform and waited to be escorted by a member of the Underground. With a civilian overcoat to cover the uniform, they rode to the German Headquarters and, at 1130 hours, announced to the officer on duty that Flying Officer Boyd had been dropped by aeroplane to speak to the Area Commander. After much telephoning, they were told that the General would see them at his home, to which they were escorted by a German officer. There, after 'heil Hitlers' and much heel clicking, Don called for his capitulation and said the terms were that all German troops were to assemble in a nominated area and surrender their arms, but officers would be permitted to retain their pistols. The old man exploded with rage: 'Capitulate!' he screamed. 'Me capitulate? Never!' He went on to say that now that the Fatherland was largely overrun from both east and west, he and his army in Holland were 'Germany'. Don expected that at any moment the guards would be called to take them away but, instead, they talked about Bolsheviks and Jews, both of which were like red rags to the German bull. The Dutchman had done most of

the talking, and Don was surprised when the General suddenly terminated the interview with a 'heil Hitler!' and a handshake, after three and a half hours. They went out, rode off on their bicycles, and three days later the Germans capitulated and the British troops moved in.

Don was taken to Brussels, and from there was flown back to Britain in a Lancaster, and so ended his second and last evasion in enemy territory.

HELIGOLAND TO HOLLAND

Flying Officer Maxwell Alton Norris

A raid on the German Heligoland Naval Base in the early morning of 18 April 1945 encountered considerable fighter opposition and this prompted a decision by Bomber Command to bomb the nearby fighter base the following morning. A force of 60 heavy bombers, including 158 Squadron, RAF, of which I was a Wireless Operator Air Gunner in Y-Yorker under the command of Wing Commander Lindsay Reynolds, was given this task.

We were in the last wave and after successfully bombing the target, the Skipper decided to survey the scene at low level, and thereby give the gunners some air to ground firing practice. Climbing away from the scene our aircraft was hit by light flak in the wing and the tail. No one was injured but the aircraft was decidedly 'sick' and appeared to have no hope of crossing the North Sea, back to base at Lissett, Yorkshire, so a course was set for Holland where General Montgomery's Army had liberated a large part of the country.

Height was being lost at an alarming rate and the Skipper advised us to jump, but by the time we had overcome our reluctance to leave the aircraft we were too low to do so. The Skipper skilfully belly-landed in a small field, ploughing the ground as he went and ended up with the nose of the aircraft in an irrigation ditch. Once on the ground, we left hurriedly but there was no fire so we had to take action to destroy the aircraft as we were in enemy held territory. An axe cut into a wing tank and a shot from a Verey pistol did the trick.

The Navigator said we were between Roden and Groningen, in the northern part of the Netherlands, and we knew that General Montgomery's forces were advancing from the south. Armed with this knowledge, we destroyed any documents we had, removed our badges, cut off the tops of our flying boots with the knife provided for the purpose, checked our emergency rations and prepared to walk in a southerly direction. But, before setting off, we remembered the Intelligence advice that German authorities in occupied territory were reputed to be empowered to shoot, on sight, parties of three or more suspected enemy personnel so split up into groups of two.

The Skipper and I headed off across a field to a small group of trees, and then followed any available cover to a towpath along a canal. At some risk, we followed this path but met no one and eventually saw ahead a moored barge which, on inspection, proved to be locked and deserted. There was a rowing boat, complete with oars, tied to its starboard

side, and we did not give the owner's interest a thought as we proceeded to row south, fortunately with the current. The Skipper had hurt his leg in the crash landing so I did most of the rowing. For some distance the only traffic we saw was one barge going upstream but then as we swung around a bend there was a small bridge guarded by a sentry. There was nothing we could do, but, fortunately, he was engaged in conversation with an old man sitting on the shafts of his cart loaded with hay. I do not know whether he saw us and found nothing odd in our appearance, or whether he was so engrossed in conversation that he failed to notice us.

Eventually, we abandoned the boat when we saw a fairly large town on the skyline and set off, mainly across country, towards it. That night we found a dilapidated old windmill and ascended a rickety ladder to the first floor landing, where we slept on the floorboards. In the morning it was raining and we set off early, proceeding south as best we could and dodging into cover when we saw enemy activity. We had one close shave when we almost stumbled into a well-camouflaged German anti-aircraft gun site. Having escaped after being shot out of the air by one flak gun there would have been some irony in being captured on the ground by another.

We were wet and miserable after trudging through the rain, when we saw an isolated farmhouse, complete with outbuildings. We approached it cautiously and a woman, who had evidently seen us approaching, came to the door. Our standard issue foreign phrase booklet proved valuable and we were able to convey that we were RAF aircrew and would be grateful for some food. They took us in and gave us bread, cheese and milk but, understandably, were not willing to risk being shot for harbouring us.

We set off again in a southerly direction and estimated that we were somewhere past Assen and approaching Meppel. Our progress was slow because the Skipper's leg was swollen and giving him trouble. Soon, we could hear the distant sounds of artillery fire and see the smoke of battle and there was considerable German activity, but mainly restricted to roads, buildings and villages. It was becoming increasingly difficult to avoid enemy troops as we got nearer to what we supposed was the front. Fortunately, it was a fluid defence and not one of static lines as in World War I.

That night we took shelter in the remains of a haystack, in preference to the ruins of an old farmhouse, and could hear the sound of armoured vehicles, which we judged to be about a mile down the road. Most of the noise of battle seemed to be in the same general area, but we were too fatigued and slightly unwell from eating raw potatoes to be concerned.

Next morning we heard the mechanical sound of a weapons carrier and it sounded very close. We looked out and saw infantry advancing behind it and thought our days of freedom were over. But, we looked again and saw that they were Tommies. We were greeted with suspicion and raised rifles, until we showed our badges and 'dog tags'.

The sergeant sent us back to battalion headquarters, under guard, where we were interrogated further. The next day we went to Amsterdam, Rotterdam and by a large landing barge back to England. In the following week the remainder of the crew, with the exception of one casualty, had arrived back in England. We were unlucky to be shot down, but fortunate that it was only three weeks before the end of the war in Europe.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Murray Adams was born in Melbourne in 1919 and enlisted on No 6 Course of the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) in September 1940. He trained at Somers and Essendon, VIC, and Forest Hill at Wagga Wagga, NSW, before being posted to the Middle East in April 1941. Posted to 250 Squadron, RAF, in October, he flew Tomahawks during Operation *Crusader* and participated in the advance beyond Benghazi and the retreat back to Egypt. From July 1943 to February 1945, he completed a second tour with 80 Squadron, RAF (Spitfires and Tempests), covering campaigns in Libya, Italy and Northern Europe, and was mentioned in dispatches. When transferred to the Reserve on 25 August 1945, his rank was flight lieutenant.

Donald Annat was born in Brisbane in 1923. He enlisted in June 1942, and after training was posted to England where he served in 460 Squadron (Lancasters). He was demobilised as a warrant officer in June 1945.

Norman Baker was born in 1920 at Melbourne and enlisted in December 1941. After training as a pilot, he served in Britain and northern Europe with 453 Squadron (Spitfires). He returned to Australia in May 1945, and transferred to the Reserve in November that year at the rank of flight lieutenant. On 17 April 1947, General Juin awarded him the Croix de Guerre with Silver Star, 'for exceptional war services rendered during the liberation of France'. Norm died in 1998.

Andrew ('Nicky') Barr was born in New Zealand in 1915 but was raised in Victoria from an early age. An accountant by profession, he was in England as a member of the 1939 Australian Rugby Team when war was declared. On return to Australia he joined the RAAF in March 1940 as a cadet pilot, graduating as a pilot officer in September. In October 1941 he commenced his operational career with 3 Squadron, RAAF (Kittyhawks), in the Egyptian Western Desert. He was appointed to command the unit in May 1942. One month later he was shot down and captured, but in the short period of eight months he was credited with 12 victories and awarded the DFC and bar. He won the Military Cross for his work behind the lines in Italy. On his return to Australia in September 1944, he was posted to 2 OTU as Chief Instructor at the rank of wing commander. Demobilised in October 1945, he became a company manager and director, but served in the active CAF in 1951–53. He was appointed OBE in 1982 for his contribution to the oilseed industry.

Donald Boyd was born at Longreach, Queensland, in 1919. He trained on EATS Course No 9 and graduated as a sergeant pilot from 2 SFTS, Wagga Wagga, on 19 August 1941. Posted first to England, he was transferred in September 1942 to the Middle East where he served with 80 Squadron, RAF (Spitfires), from December 1942 until shot down in Italy on 2 March 1944. Early in 1945 he joined 274 Squadron, RAF (Tempests), based at Volkel, Holland, and served until shot down and captured on 28 March. Returned to Australia and transferred to the Reserve, he died in 1995.

Graham Buchanan was born at Murwillumbah, NSW, in 1915. He enlisted in August 1942 and trained as an air gunner before being posted to England where he served with 90 Squadron, RAF (Stirlings). Demobilised in June 1945 with the rank of warrant officer, he died in 1987.

Colin Campbell was born in Brisbane in 1924. He enlisted in June 1942, and on graduating from training as a sergeant air gunner was posted to England. He went to 467 Squadron as mid-upper gunner on a Lancaster, via 27 OTU at Lichfield where he survived a mid-air collision with a Halifax. His aircraft was involved in a collision with a German fighter over Hanover on 8 October 1943, but succeeded in returning to England. He was discharged from the RAAF in December 1944 as a warrant officer. In 1950 he returned to England and joined the RAF, training as a pilot and serving in Coastal Command until November 1962. In October 1964 he joined Ansett Airlines in New Guinea and flew various types of aircraft there until 1974, and in Australia until his retirement in February 1983.

Robert Chester-Master was born in Brisbane in 1924. He enlisted in December 1942, and trained as an air gunner. Serving with 514 Squadron, RAF (Lancasters), he was demobilised as a flying officer in July 1945.

Geoffrey Chinchen was born in Melbourne in 1915. He enlisted in February 1940 and trained on the third last cadet course at Point Cook. On graduation, he was posted as an instructor to No 2 SFTS at Forest Hill, Wagga Wagga. His next posting was to 3 Squadron, RAAF, in the Middle East, where he was awarded the DFC before being shot down and taken prisoner. In 1945 he was appointed MBE, in recognition of his escaping endeavours. After reaching RAAF HQ Naples, he was sent to England where he was completing an OTU course on Mosquitos, with the intention of joining a night fighter squadron, when the war ended. He was demobilised as a squadron leader in April 1946.

Edwin Coates was born in 1911 at Guyra, NSW. He enlisted in March 1941 and graduated as a sergeant pilot. He served with 115 Squadron, RAF (Wellingtons), and was demobilised in July 1945 as a flying officer. He died in 1992.

Frederic Eggleston was born in Melbourne in 1914, the son of Sir Frederic Eggleston (a lawyer, state minister and diplomat). After graduating in 1937 from Melbourne University as Master of Science in physics, he worked with the Imperial Smelting Corporation in England and Germany. On the outbreak of war he returned to Australia and joined the RAAF, training at Point Cook on the last cadet course before the start of the Empire Air Training Scheme. Graduating as a pilot officer, he was posted to 22 (City of Sydney) Squadron based at Williamstown, NSW, and later sent to the Middle East where, after a short OTU course at Khartoum, he joined 3 Squadron, RAAF (Tomahawks), in the Western Desert in September 1941. Transferred to the Reserve in January 1946, as a flight lieutenant, he pursued a post-war career with the CRA Mining Group. He died in Sydney in 1995.

Robert Gemmell-Smith was born in 1913 at Ba, Fiji. He was a cane overseer when he volunteered for service in the Royal Air Force. Sent to Rhodesia for training, he graduated as a sergeant air gunner on 14 November 1941 before joining 223 Squadron, RAF; later, he served

with 108 Squadron, RAF (Wellingtons), operating from Fayid, Egypt. On demobilisation as a flight lieutenant, he settled in Australia, and died in 1994.

Neville Hewitt was born in 1920 at Theodore, QLD, and enlisted in October 1941. He trained in Australia, on EATS Course No 21, and graduated as a sergeant air gunner. Posted to England, he served with 150 Squadron, RAF (Wellingtons), in Algeria. He was awarded the MM for his ‘initiative, courage and fortitude’ during his period in no-man’s-land recounted in this book. Later commissioned, he was also awarded the AFM in June 1944 for meritorious service in the air. He was demobilised on 1 September 1945 as a flying officer. In 1956 he was elected as member for Auburn in the Queensland Parliament, and held various portfolios in government.

John Hobler was born in 1907 at Rockhampton, QLD, and after an education at Rockhampton Grammar School qualified as a solicitor. Deciding on a change of direction, he joined the RAAF as a cadet pilot. He graduated from Point Cook as a pilot officer in 1932, and next year took up a short service commission with the RAF. After a distinguished career which included war service with 142 Squadron (Fairey Battles), he retired in 1963 as an air vice-marshal, having been appointed CB and CBE. He died in Brisbane in 1996.

Robert Horsley was born in Yorkshire in 1921. He completed two very successful tours with RAF Bomber Command during World War II—the first as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner with 50 Squadron, RAF (Hampdens and Manchesters), the second as a pilot with 617 Squadron (Lancasters)—receiving a DFC for each. After the war he was granted a permanent commission in the RAF, commanded a jet training squadron, attended Staff College, and then did a stint at Air Ministry. In 1953 he was awarded the AFC. He was seconded to the Foreign Office as Air Attache, Baghdad, for four years, followed by two years in a similar position in Saudi Arabia. His final assignment was on Special Duties for the Foreign Office in Beirut. Retiring as a wing commander in 1972, he migrated to Australia and lives at Eagle Heights in the hills overlooking the Queensland Gold Coast. For several years he has been Honorary Secretary of the Australia section of the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society.

Robert Hunter was born in 1922 at Ipswich, QLD, and enlisted in August 1942. After training as a wireless operator/air gunner, he arrived in England in July 1943. There he served with 467 Squadron (Lancasters), until shot down and badly burned, after which he spent nearly two years in hospital in England having skin grafts. He was discharged as a warrant officer in July 1946, just after his return to Australia, and died in 1972.

Geoffrey Johnson was born in 1922 at Roma, QLD, and enlisted in November 1941. He trained as a wireless operator/air gunner before embarking for England in October 1942, where he served with 467 Squadron (Lancasters). Demobilised as a flying officer in September 1945, he died in 2001.

Stanley Jolly was born in Brisbane in 1921 and enlisted in July 1942. He trained as a navigator on EATS No 30 Course in Australia and was then posted to England where he served with 467 Squadron (Lancasters). When demobilised in October 1945, he held the rank of warrant officer. He died in 2001.

Robert Jubb was born in 1922 in Brisbane. Enlisting in July 1942, he trained on EATS Course No 30. Serving as a pilot with 76 Squadron, RAF (Lancasters), he was awarded the DFC in December 1944. He was a flying officer when transferred to the Reserve in August 1945.

Jack Kirkman was born in 1918 at Northam, WA, and enlisted in April 1940. After training as a pilot on EATS No 1 Course, he was posted to England. He served in Malta with 1435 Squadron, RAF (Spitfires). Transferred to the Reserve as a flight lieutenant in December 1945, he turned his attention to studying medicine and later practised in Melbourne. He died in 1994.

David McClymont was born at Inverell, NSW, in 1921 and enlisted in March 1941. He trained as a wireless operator/air gunner and served with 22 Squadron (Bostons) in New Guinea. He was serving as a flight lieutenant at 5 OTU when demobilised in April 1945.

Allan McSweyn was born in Sydney in 1918 and enlisted on 28 April 1940. His RAAF number (402005) indicates that he was the fifth man from NSW accepted under the Empire Air Training Scheme, which commenced the next day. After his escape, he arrived back in England on 19 December 1943 and three months later was awarded the MC for his exploits in enemy territory. He flew with Transport Command for the next two years, a stint which earned him an AFC and promotion to wing commander. Arriving back in Australia on New Year's Day 1946, he transferred to the Reserve the next month. He died in 1994.

Max Norris was born in Brisbane in 1920 and enlisted in August 1942. After training as a wireless operator/air gunner, he was posted to England where he served with 158 Squadron, RAF (Lancasters). When demobilised in October 1945, he held the rank of flying officer.

Alex Roberts was born in Lismore, NSW, in 1916 and enlisted in Sydney in April 1940 and trained as a pilot on No 1 Course, EATS. Posted to England, he served with 452 Squadron (Spitfires). Following the incident described in the text, he flew one more sortie before he was barred from missions over Europe, to protect his French helpers. He volunteered to serve in Singapore, but that place fell while he was en route so he was diverted to Ceylon, where he flew Hurricanes for 12 months. After a posting to Calcutta, he went to Burma where he served under Major-General Orde Wingate for about six months. He arrived back in Australia as a flight lieutenant and was discharged on 27 June 1945.

Neil Roggenkamp was born in 1921 at Toowoomba, QLD, and enlisted in October 1941. After training as a pilot, he was posted to England and served with 129 Squadron, RAF (Spitfires and Mustangs). He was a warrant officer when demobilised in October 1945.

Alex Saunders was born in 1917 at Charters Towers, QLD, and enlisted in February 1940. On completing flying training at Narrandera and Point Cook, on EATS No 21 Course, he was posted to England where he served with 83 Squadron, RAF (part of the Pathfinder Force, flying Lancasters), and was awarded the DFC in August 1944. He was demobilised in January 1946 and died in 2004.

Trevor Scales was born in Brisbane in 1918 and enlisted in April 1940. After training on No 1 Course EATS, he was posted to England where he served with 601 Squadron, RAF (Hurricanes). He transferred to the Reserve in November 1945, and was mentioned in dispatches in 1947.

After the war, he served with No 23 (City of Brisbane) Squadron. In 1950 he was appointed as a lieutenant in the Citizen Military Forces in Queensland; he commenced 15 months full-time duty with the Army in May 1952, including eight months as an observer in Korea. Relinquishing temporary rank as captain, he was placed on the Reserve of Officers in 1958 and formally retired from the Army five years later. In April 1965 he began part-time duty as an instructor with the Air Training Corps. After qualifying for the Air Efficiency award, he left the RAAF in 1974 at the rank of flight lieutenant. He died in 2000.

Charles Tapson was born in Melbourne in 1909. He was living in England when the war began, so enlisted in the RAF for pilot training. After serving with 107 Squadron (Mosquitos), he was demobilised at the rank of flight lieutenant. He returned to Australia in 1950 and pursued a career in advertising.

Robert Walton was born in 1922 at Maryborough, QLD. He enlisted in October 1941, training as a pilot before being posted to England to serve with 464 Squadron (Mosquitos). He was a flight lieutenant when demobilised in July 1945.

Robert Whittle was born in Brisbane in 1914 and was a pharmaceutical chemist before enlisting in April 1940. After training in Australia on EATS No 1 Course, he embarked for the Middle East in February 1941 where he completed a very successful tour as a sergeant pilot with 250 Squadron, RAF (Tomahawks) in Egypt and Libya. Shortly after his experience recounted here, he was awarded the DFM for shooting down at least five enemy aircraft. Commissioned and posted as an instructor to 73 OTU at Aden, he returned to Australia in mid-1942. In March 1943 he was posted to 86 Squadron, RAAF, flying Kittyhawks on operations from Horn Island and Merauke in Dutch New Guinea from May that year. In January 1944 he added two Japanese planes to his tally of downed aircraft (making a total of 11), and was then promoted squadron leader and to command the unit. Returning to mainland Australia in June 1944 he was posted for instructional duties at 8 OTU at Parkes, NSW, where he later became officer-in-command. He was transferred to the Reserve as a squadron leader in December 1945, and died in 2001.

