

The Evasion of Flt Sgt Peter Bellamy Smith

RAF Number 1333883 (Navigator)

Lancaster Bomber W4236 QR-K

61 Squadron (RAF Syerston)

Shot down 10th August 1943



Flt Sgt Peter Bellamy Smith

Crew

Pilot Sgt John C Whitley

Flt/Eng Sgt George Sidney William Spriggs

Nav. Sgt Peter Bellamy Smith

W/Op/Air/Gnr Sgt Ernest F Gardiner

Air/Bmr Sgt Walter Walker

Air/Gnr Sgt Nevil Temple Holmes

Air/Gnr Sgt John Topham Kendall

Timeline of Evasion 1943

(to be read in conjunction with Peter's own report)

9 August

At 23.10 the Lancaster W4236 (QR-K) of 61 Sqn takes off from Syerston RAF Station in Nottinghamshire for a bombing mission on Mannheim in Germany



***Lancaster W4236 QR-K taking off from
RAF Syerston on an earlier mission***

10 August

At around 01.10am en-route to the target and over Belgium, W4236 was attacked by an Me110 Nightfighter of 2/NJG4 piloted by Lt Norbert Pietrek



An Me 110 Nightfighter of NJG4



Lt Norbert Pietrek

It is thought that the tail gunner is killed in the attack as he doesn't respond to the intercom. A second attack is then made by the fighter when the Lancaster is set ablaze and, after jettisoning the bombs, 4 of the crew, including navigator Peter Bellamy Smith, bale out but 3 of the crew are either killed in the attack or die when the plane crashes at around 01.30am at Marbehan in Belgium. Nevil Holmes was behind Peter as he bailed out but it is unclear whether he got out of the door and he was killed.

- 11 August Peter Smith makes contact with Marie Bodart (see his report)
- In the evening he is taken to a farm near Etalle (10k west of Arlon)
- He stays at the farm for 3 weeks where Mr & Mrs Joseph Bodart and daughter Marie bring him food every day
- 31 August Peter is taken to the house of Marie Bodart
- 7 September Marie takes him by bicycle to Marbehan Station and they take a train to Libramont. At Libramont station he is told to follow a man to a crossroads, around 10km away, where he has to wait for another man at 4.00pm who would blow his nose on a red handkerchief and use the password "Jaques".
- After meeting the man, Peter is taken by train and bicycle to a house in a forest 16km NE of Libramont, meeting the agent Captain Bradley aka "Badger" en route. Bradley is actually Raymond Holvoet, an SOE agent parachuted into Belgium.
- Peter is then taken to Chateau Rolley in Longchamps, the property of local burgomaster Mr Gaston Maus de Rolley whose daughter-in-law is responsible for filling in details of the airmen on a form known as "Form E" which is sent to Brussels for verification.
- 11 September In the evening he is accompanied by a guide while returning to Libramont station by bicycle but his next guide fails to show so he is hidden in a barn near the city.
- 13 September Peter meets with Luxembourger Max Brahms in a chalet in the forest of Remagne and remain under the care of the Maquis Lieutenant Dominique, (another Luxembourger). There he meets 4 RAF Sgts: Sgt James Rainsford, Sgt Oscar Ramsden, Sgt Joseph Kenny and Sgt Ernest Gillman who are the surviving crew from a crashed Lancaster JA707 (OF-T) which was shot down at Sibret on the night of 27/28 August. It was shot down by a Ju88, the tail gunner being killed in the attack and the bomb aimer being killed when the plane crashed into a hillside.



Joseph Kenny James Rainsford Oscar Ramsden

Brahms tells them that the Gestapo is searching for them all and that the stationmaster, his son and two gendarmes from Sibret have been sentenced to 6 months in prison for failing to report that the crew of JA707 had fled from their burning Lancaster.

Kenny and Gillman are later to be captured on a train from Paris to Bordeaux

14 September Peter is introduced to the resistance fighters. At 3pm he is taken to Libramont by Jean Martin and Jean Gregoire, an agent of the "Zero" Resistance Network.

Together with Rainsford and Ramsden, Peter is hidden in a small hut on a construction site where a new church is being built on the heights of Bonance, a little to the east, just outside the city. The Dominican Fathers were unaware of them being there. Gillman and Kenny stay with Paul Lambert at Libramont Station.

Max Brahms had earlier met a guide, Mrs Gringoir, in Brussels on 13th September and arranged for her to collect the group at Libramont station on 16th September for the journey to Brussels.

16 September Mrs Gringoir travels to Libramont station but doesn't recognise Jean Gregoire who is carrying a bunch of heather for identification so the opportunity is missed.

At 9pm, following the failed rendezvous at the station, all 5 are guided from the Dominican Father's site by Jean Martin to the north, through the woods (possibly the Bois de Bernihe) and across the railway line which runs from Libramont to Grupont. A gendarme guides them part of the way. They arrive at Chateau de Ronfay, in the region of Ochamps, where they are greeted by the Baron and Baroness Eric Wykerslooth of Rooyesteyn.



Chateau de Ronfay

The chateau is halfway between Libramont and Libin and has a private airstrip. Stakes in the airstrip can be removed in a few hours to allow small or twin engined aircraft to land.

They all receive fresh clothes, are fed and take hot baths. They are housed in one of the castle outbuildings.

19 September Jean Martin and Jean Gregoire guide them to the bridge in Libramont where they meet Max Brahms who takes them to the railway station. The group follow a young woman, Mrs Gringoire, into the station where she buys them tickets. Captain Bradley has been watching all this from afar. The train departs for Brussels at 8am with them travelling 2nd class.

When they arrive at the Brussels-Luxembourg station, Mrs Gringoire passes them to Dominique Pauli who takes them a short distance to 30 Rue de Naples, home of Isabelle Anspach known as "Pauline". They have to be careful as a German headquarters is located three houses away and German officers are lodged on the other side of the street.

Pauli questions them to confirm their identities and tells them about an American airman, Sgt Victor Ciganek, who had recently been arrested after his B17 bomber "Lady Satan" was brought down by Flak following the Schweinfurt Raid.

The house can only hold three men so between 2.00 and 2.30pm Peter Smith is taken by tram and train to a house on the outskirts of Groenendael in the Avenue des Anglais, owned by Marcel and Suzanne Bouffa.

8 October Peter is returned to Isabelle Anspach and he sleeps at 30 Rue de Naples for one night as the other 4 airmen have left that day.



The blue door of 30 Rue de Naples

9 October

Peter is guided to the Brussels-Luxembourg railway station to meet another Comete guide, Micheline Dumon, known by the codenames "Michou" or, on this occasion "Lily"



Micheline Dumon "Lily"

Lily has with her 3 airmen from a Halifax bomber, JD371 (KN-O) which was shot down by a fighter when returning from a daylight bombing mission to Nuremberg. 4 crew bailed out of the burning aircraft before the crash but one of these, Bomb Aimer Flt Sgt Peter Humphries did not survive.

The 3 survivors with Lily were Sgt Arthur Beard (Navigator), Sgt William Palmer (Rear Gunner) and Sgt William Catley (Radio Operator)



Arthur Beard



William Palmer



William Catley

They separate in pairs, Peter travelling with Beard, and with a guide for each pair they travel by train to Mons where they take another train to the border town of Erquennes.

After leaving the station the guides take Peter and Beard on a short, 5 minute walk to meet a customs officer, François Boulard.

That evening Boulard, wearing his uniform and with the authorisation of his chief, escorts them across the border into France and introduces them to a controller of the SNCF in Houdain-lez-Bavay where they stay for the rest of the night

They are then joined by Comete guides Henriette Hanotte (codename "Monique") and Georgette Dieu.



Henriette Hanotte

Peter and Beard then meet with a 30 year old Parisian woman, Fernande Onimus-Phal, who, together with Henriette Hanotte, take them to Paris, arriving at the Gare du Nord. Palmer and Catley were to cross the border the following day.

10 October

In Paris, Peter is separated from Beard and meets Jacques le Grelle who asks him a lot of questions to authenticate him before taking Peter out to the suburbs by the metro.

He sleeps one night at the house of Raoul Touquet and Lucienne Prioul, members of the Fernande Onimus-Phal group, at 16 Rue Henri Tariel in Issy-les-Moulineaux



16 Rue Henri Tariel

11 October Peter is escorted to the Gare de Orleans station by Fernande Onimus-Phal where they meet with an American flyer T/Sgt John Frank Buice. He was the mid upper turret gunner of a B17 (QE-?) 42-3071 which was shot down at Gonesse by FW190s while on a bombing mission on Le Bourget airfield on 14th July. Buice later describes Fernande as a woman, around 35 years old and dressed in black wearing large, thick glasses.

They go to a restaurant where they meet with a man who gives them new papers and on the evening of the 11th the two men make the 22 hour train journey to Bordeaux travelling 3rd class with 2nd class tickets as the train was crowded.

12 October On arrival in Bordeaux they change guides and have a meal. During the meal they are introduced to another guide, a very small woman named Marcelle Douard, who brought two RAF flyers with her from Paris. These are Flying Officer Norman Tracey Fairfax (Radio/Gunner) and Flt Sgt Roderick John Angus Macleod (Navigator).



Norman Fairfax



Roderick Macleod

During their mission on a power station at Gosnay their Boston aircraft, BZ237 (OM-S) was damaged by Flak and then shot down by a Focke Wulf fighter. The aircraft made an emergency landing near Greuppe where it was deliberately set on fire by the crew.

Peter, Fairfax, Macleod and Buice are then taken by another train in the care of Jean Francois Northomb and Elvire de Greef. They travel to Dax where Peter meets up again with Rainsford, Ramsden, Beard and Palmer.

They take bicycles from the luggage compartment and, accompanied by two new guides, they cycle to Bayonne, following a river most of the way. On the journey they stop in a wood and have a picnic. Their two guides are Denise Houget and Jeanine de Greef who is the daughter of Elvire de Greef (codename Tante Go) who is responsible for the southern network of the Comet Line and the Spanish border crossing.

They arrive in Sutar and all 8 spend the night at Jeanne Marthe Mendiara-Villenave's home, the Larre Restaurant, near the school on the outskirts of Anglet.



Larre Restaurant

While staying at the Larre, they meet Pierre Elhorga who asks them to write in his notebook



It is impossible to write
in words the deep gratitude
which I feel for what
has been done for me
by the patriots of France
and Belgium. Let us hope
that it will not be long
before I can return and
revisit some of these people
without the presence of
La Roche.
Vive La France!

Peter B. Smith 1333895
Pennyway
Boundary Lane,
Woking, Surrey England.
13 October 1943

**Peter Smith's message written
in Pierre Elhorga's notebook**

13 October They then prepare for what is to be the 62nd crossing made by the Comete network, using the relatively new Larressore route.

In the evening their Comete guides take Peter, Fairfax, Macleod and Buice by bicycle to Larressore near the Spanish border. They arrive at nightfall and then travel the short distance to Espelette, only 7km from the border. They continue their journey into the foothills but eventually have to leave their bicycles to be collected by the local baker. Their Comete guides leave them and tell them to continue walking until they are met by their Basque guides. The Basques appear, dressed in black and armed, one of whom is Pierre Etchegoyen. The guides then escort them on the difficult journey across the Pyrenees mountains.

14 October They arrive at the border during the night, and cross into Spain at 2 o'clock in the morning, stopping at an isolated farmhouse in the hills, just half a kilometre over the border. The farmhouse, called Jauriko Borda, is owned by Xan Mihura and is located near the village of Elizondo. Mihura is a member of the evasion network and the house is regularly used on the evasion route.



Jauriko Borda

The following morning at 10.00am they leave on foot and walk through steep gullies and streams to the N-121-B road and then follow this into Elizondo, Navarre where they approach the Civil Guard and are arrested. They then spend the night in a cell.

- 15 October The group are released and travel by bus to Pamplona where the Spaniards give them temporary identity papers and take them in a police vehicle to a hotel in Lecumberri where evaders are housed until they can be officially moved on.
- 16 October The group makes contact with the British Embassy in Madrid by telephone, but remain at the hotel.
Later the group meet with the British Vice Consul in Zaragoza
- 27 October The group travels to Madrid and arrive at the British Embassy
- 28 October The group leave Madrid and are taken by car to Seville. They travel to the coast and stay in a house on the quay for several days.
- End October Some of the group report that on 1st November they embarked on a 2,400 ton Norwegian vessel, the SS Star, and sailed to Gibraltar
(Note: research shows that the 1,531 ton Norwegian vessel, "D/S Star", detached from convoy KMS 29G and arrived in Seville 25th October. She sailed for Gibraltar on the 29th and arrived on the 31st.)
- 4 November Peter leaves Gibraltar at midnight on a flight to the UK
- 5 November Peter arrived at Portreath at 8.15am and is interviewed by MI9

Ken Welch

4 February 2019