

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of my evasion from capture by the Germans in the summer and autumn of 1943. The events took place between 9th August - when the Lancaster bomber in which I was flying to Mannheim was shot down over the Ardennes in Belgium - and 4th November when I flew home from Gibraltar to Cornwall in a Dakota: A mere 3 months, but it had seemed much longer. Most of the time was spent in Belgium, the actual journey from Brussels to neutral Spain taking only 5 days. The route was one used by the Comète Escape Line, and many of the helpers suffered at the hands of the Germans in Ravensbruck or other concentration camps, or they were shot. In fact, for every allied airman who successfully evaded, three helpers lost their lives.

During our training we had Escape lectures which told us what we should do and shouldn't do once we had landed in enemy territory. We were told never to ask for escape organisations as they will find us. We were also told never to ask for names of people we met. All aircrew carried a) Money, b) Escape kit - water bottle, purification tablets, chocolate, horlicks, tube of condensed milk, maps and compass. Also four photos in civilian clothes.

9/10th August to 14th September.

Operating with 61 Squadron on Lancaster from Syerston, Notts. I was the Navigator. There was a crew of 7.

9 August 1943 - We were briefed to bomb Ludwigshafen/Mannheim. We took off and flew south to Beachy Head, then took a course for Mannheim at 20,000 feet. We were on course with Gee working normally until it jammed. At about 01.10 hours we were attacked by a fighter and suffered shells in the fuselage. There was no reply from the rear gunner over the intercom. The second attack resulted in the aircraft catching fire and conditions were hot. The skipper radioed 'O.K., you've had it chaps - bale out.' The bomb aimer jumped first, followed by me. The engineer and pilot were apparently O.K.

I don't remember much coming down. I landed in a corn field with only one flying boot! On looking around I couldn't see much as the corn was high. I seemed to be on top of a hill and decided to wait until dawn. I could hear vehicles on a nearby road - obviously Germans looking for us. There was no sign of my comrades. I cut off my epaulettes and badges and bundled up my parachute. I could hear the main bombing force returning - to egg and bacon! At dawn I was able to confirm my situation and decided to stay in the present location for the time being. I could see peasants harvesting corn in nearby fields. After examining my maps, I decided that I was most likely to be in Belgium, although I could possibly be just in France or even Luxembourg. If I was to move on my own, I decided to go in the direction of Switzerland to the south-east. I stayed in the same place all day, sleeping most of the time.

When night came it started to rain. I decided to move off and, finding some dips in the ground surrounded by bushes, I hid my parachute, but it was soon obvious that I wouldn't get far without footwear! At dawn I crossed a main road, but there was no sign of anyone or any vehicles. There was a farm to my left, but I decided not to make any direct approach to anyone at this stage. I could see a village and the spire of a church about 2 miles to my right and kept walking down a rough track. There was a woman wheeling a bicycle about 400 yards ahead, leading a cow along another track at right angles. Thinking that she might be worth approaching, I decided to await her return, presumably without cow! When she was making her way back I approached her and said:- "Je suis un aviateur anglais", and to my relief she shook me warmly by the hand. My french was not at all good, but she indicated that I should hide in the hedgerow and that she would return later with food. This she did, and brought her mother along to meet me. They also brought some clothes and it was indicated that I should stay in this place for the rest of the day and that they would come again in the evening.

When night fell I was taken to a small barn where I was to stay for three weeks. I slept on the hay in the loft and had the one cow as a companion in the adjoining paddock. Food was brought to me twice a day at milking times. Marie, the girl whom I had met, was obviously in charge! After a few days she came to me with a small piece of paper asking a number of questions concerning aircraft number, squadron, base etc. Weekends were washing and shaving time with a cut throat razor and cold water.

I stayed in the barn until the evening of 31st August when I was taken into their house in the village of Etalle. Here I had a comfortable bed in a room on my own where I remained during most of the day, but I usually came downstairs for meals and in the evenings, when I listened to the BBC. One afternoon I received a visit from a man obviously concerned with an escape line. He asked me several questions and indicated that I would soon be moving on. Shortly afterwards some smarter clothes were produced and some shoes. I had been wearing clogs up until then.

Tuesday, 7th September - I left the house early in the morning, in company with Marie and wheeling a bicycle. Our destination was the railway station at Marbehan about 6 miles away. Before arriving at the station we had said our farewells outside the village. From now on we did not know one another. Marie bought tickets, gave me mine with the bicycle, but came on the train and sat opposite me to ensure that I got off at Libramont, about 25 km up the line. The train journey gave me my first view of Germans. There were many on the train and they were in high spirits like any soldiers.

At Libramont my instructions were to proceed out of the station where I would see another man with a bicycle. I was to follow him, keeping about 50 metres behind and when out of the town, if he dived into bushes at the side of the road, I was to do likewise as any vehicle was likely to be German or a sympathiser. After about 10 km I was to leave him and turn right to a village called Remagne.

Here I would stop at a crossroad and wait until 4 p.m. precisely when a man would appear and blow his nose with a red handkerchief, and I would use the password 'Jacques.' I waited, but could not see anyone except a farm cart with two farmer types. This was in fact 'it' as one man blew his nose with a red handkerchief! I followed to a barn where I met a Belgian who turned out to be an agent sent from the U.K. After some chatting in the barn, he took me into the nearby forest and, after walking a mile or so, we came to a house which was a hunting lodge. Once inside I met three other RAF aircrew from the same crew who had crash landed on their way back. What a relief it was to chat with people in one's own language after being on my own for a month. Eventually the agent left saying that he would be back at 1600 hours tomorrow, and he disappeared into the trees.

Amongst my new comrades we soon organised a watch system, keeping a look-out from two bedrooms in the roof. The agent was given the nickname 'Pimpernel Joe' as he was quite a character, not unlike the Scarlet Pimpernel.

We remained in this lodge until Saturday 11th September. Pimpernel Joe appeared every day with food of some kind - not very much - bread and potatoes I seem to remember, the latter of which we cooked at night as smoke would not be advisable during the day. We did have some other visitors (by chance) who were members of the Belgian Armee Blanche, a resistance group who were armed and who invited us to join them.

On Saturday night, when it was dark, we moved back to Libramont on bicycles with guides, in order to meet other guides just outside the town on Sunday morning. It was intended that we should then travel on to Brussels by train in pairs, each with a guide. However, no guides turned up and that was because, we learned later, there was no train expected at the time as it was Sunday! This caused quite a problem and the two young guides with us did not know what to do.

There was a barn on the outskirts of the town where we forced an entry and lay down on the straw to sleep. The guides then left us. We were quite happy there for a while, but about midday a boy came to the barn and was scared out of his wits to see four men there. He soon disappeared, but later returned with his father, the curé and a gendarme! It seems they thought we were stealing corn. After some discussion it transpired who we were and the father did not seem very happy. Our two boy guides then appeared, but were obviously very worried lest these people could not be trusted. By this time other people had seen us and it became obvious that it was not a very satisfactory hiding place. However, we stayed in the barn for the night, but first thing in the morning our two young guides came and took us away to an old caravan a short distance away. It was then arranged that we would spend the days there, but return to the barn to sleep. Needless to say, food was very short and after two days morale in the caravan began to suffer. One of our group wanted to go off on his own, but was dissuaded from doing so after much argument. Such a course of action could prove very dangerous and was quite contrary to our instructions back in the U.K.

Tuesday 15th September - After another day in the caravan, our two lads came in the evening when it was dark, but instead of taking us to the barn, they told us to follow them. After some minutes two gendarmes appeared, but we were assured not to worry as they were helping!!! After walking for some time, I asked one gendarme where we were going. "To a Chateau" he said! I must say that I thought I had misunderstood, but he was right!

We were taken to this Chateau where all was prepared for us. It was arranged that we would sleep in a summer house in the garden, and four beds had been made ready for us. Before sleep, however, we were conducted into the Chateau to have baths. Hot water, soap and towels were supplied, and even a clean set of underwear for us all, our present underwear being taken away for washing. Once we were clean, we were taken downstairs to meet the Baron, and then to eat - of all things Steak and Chips!

During our stay at the Chateau our morale was boosted enormously. All our clothes were reorganised. I was fitted out with a suit, shirt and tie, trilby hat, and also boots which I was told would be necessary later on.

Early on Friday morning, 17 September, we left the Chateau for Libramont Station. This time the guides were at the appointed place on time and we soon found ourselves in pairs on the train to Brussels. I should mention, however, that when we left Libramont, people were waving from windows and giving the V sign - it seemed that half the town knew we were going!

The journey to Brussels was uneventful, except that all the passengers were looking at some damage done by American bombers as we came into the City. At the station we were met by a lady who was to be known as 'Madame Pauline'. After a short tram ride we were taken to her house in the centre of Brussels where we were soon reunited with our two other comrades. Over lunch it was explained that two of us would be 'boarded out' elsewhere and that I would be one of those as I knew a little (very little) French! In the afternoon I was taken for another tram ride, a short train ride to the suburb of Groenendael. After a short walk we arrived at a house and I was introduced to Marcel and Suzanne who were to be my new hosts. The house was situated in the Avenue des Anglais. Here I stayed for the next three weeks until 8th October. During this period, Marcel and Suzanne were very kind to me, particularly in that Marcel took me for a welcome walk after dark each evening to get exercise, since I would probably soon have to walk (and climb) over the Pyrenees.

In the evening of 8th October I was taken back to Madame Pauline's house where I met three new RAF aircrew, my previous colleagues having already departed. We all stayed the night and left early in the morning in pairs, with new guides and identity papers, to walk to the station. There we changed guides again and finally left by train for Mons. The journey was uneventful. We had to wait outside the station at Mons for a tram to our new destination which took us into the countryside, and eventually we were taken to a house near to the frontier. After lunch the man of the house indicated that he must go to work and proceeded to put on his uniform, that of a frontier guard!

That evening I was one of two who left the house with two young lads on bicycles. They rode on to reconnoitre ahead and, on several occasions, it was necessary to hide and wait until the coast was clear. Eventually we arrived at the frontier post, having been told to keep walking, our guides having disappeared. We walked to the post and then straight into France - not a soul was in sight!

We were soon met by a French guide and taken to a house for the night. In the morning our other two evaders arrived and we soon left for the station with new identity cards and tickets. As we had our tickets punched, we realised that the ticket collector had been our host for the night.

Without incident we arrived at the Gare du Nord in Paris at about midday. We were guided to a nearby quiet square where we met a man who was obviously in a senior position in the escape organisation. He asked us a few questions just to check that we were not Germans. We split up again and a colleague and myself were taken with a guide on to the Metro for a ride to the outskirts and a flat where we were to stay. I can well remember that ride, seeing the coaches which were reserved for the Wehrmacht and others for the Jews. The Jews could be identified by a large Star of David which they had to wear. There were also large posters showing caricatures of Roosevelt and Churchill labelled murderers!

I didn't stay in Paris long, for the following evening I was taken on my own back into Paris to the Gare d'Orleans (now Gare d'Austerlitz) where I met another RAF colleague and a new guide. Our train was due to depart at 10.20 and, as there was some time to wait, we were taken to a cafe where we had a meal. Not a very relaxing meal as there were so many Germans around. The train left on time and arrived at Bordeaux, also on time, at 7.00 a.m. the next morning. On the platform we did a quiet exchange of guides and identity papers. We did not go through the ticket barrier, but were taken down some steps along to another platform. We were to board another train to a place named Dax in the Landes region of SW France. This was an uncomfortable electric train which rattled its way across the flat landscape of the Landes. At Dax we were hustled from the platform through the luggage office where all four of us (plus two guides) were presented with bicycles. It must have been an odd sight as we cycled up the road, particularly the American who was now with us who was not used to such a mode of transport.

Once out of the town we stopped and found a good hiding place in the bushes for food and rest. Soon we were on our way again and, although the riding was easy at first, it soon became more difficult as we came to the foothills of the Pyrenees. It was a long ride and I don't mind saying that I was exhausted when we came to our journey's end for the day to a small cafe near the village of Espellette. The four of us stayed here overnight until dusk the following day when we took to our bicycles again. After some hours of hard riding, mainly uphill, we discarded our machines and said farewell to our guides who had cycled with us.

Two new guides appeared; this time they were Basques, dressed in black and armed. These men were obviously professionals and used to the mountains. We proceeded on foot, taking instructions from our guides as we hurried along mountain paths, scrambled up ridges, lay flat on the ground etc. At the first light of dawn we came to a stream and the guides indicated that we were now in Spain. They then left us, but before doing so pointed out a farm on the Spanish side where we could rest and would be fed. It was now 14th October, some 10½ weeks after being shot down.

Later that morning we walked to a village named Elizondo where we gave ourselves up to the police and, unfortunately, spent the rest of the day and night in the local jail. Early the next morning we were put on a bus to Pamplona where we were taken to police H.Q. and later to a guarded hotel in the country. We were, however, able to phone the British Embassy in Madrid from there.

Subsequently we met the British Vice Consul in Saragassa, and from then on we were under British control. We arrived in Madrid on Wednesday 27th October. The following day we went on to Seville and then travelled to Gibraltar. There we were reissued with uniform and back in the RAF.

The flight home took place at midnight on 4th November, arriving at Portreath at 8.15 a.m.

THE END OF THE ADVENTURE!