

<http://www.possumline.net/EscapersAndEvaders/gardiner/ownstory.htm>

The Possum Escape Line

Fred Gardiner's Story

Text and photographs courtesy of Fred Gardiner

Just before midnight on August 9th 1943, Lancaster W4236 'K' for King and dubbed 'King of the Air', was on course from base at Syerston near Newark, Nottinghamshire, to Beachy Head and climbing to 18,000 feet on its last flight. The all-sergeant crew, captained by pilot John Whitley and of which I was the wireless operator was on its fifth mission, a raid on Mannheim in Southern Germany.

Earlier that evening there occurred one or two incidents which would prove very thought-provoking after this night. Back at base we had been through the usual briefing procedures. My parachute was due for repacking and I had been given a temporary replacement. Having handed in a nearly new 'chute this one looked positively decrepit but one hoped it was not likely to be needed tonight (indeed any night), and before the next operational flight my own new 'chute would be available again.

After briefing we had time for a meal and a short rest. We shared a barrack room with another crew. They were very new, in fact had arrived on 61 Squadron only the day before. I was particularly pleased that the wireless operator was an old friend, Stanley Banting from training course days (killed on a raid on Leverkusen 22/23 August 1943).

His crew was not listed for this operation. They would have to make one or two squadron training flights before going on the 'real thing' and so Stanley was very interested as we prepared to leave. As my position in the aircraft was served with warm air it was not necessary to wear special clothing unlike the two airgunners. But I did prefer to wear my P.T. vest, which was longer and of better quality than the standard issue of singlet. My shirt for the night I noticed at the last minute had been badly torn by the laundry. In a weak attempt at bravado I joked to Stanley that he could send a clean and newer garment out to the P.O.W camp should we not return and even removed one from my locker and hung it over the bed. It would be handy for tomorrow.

It was a warm and pleasant evening so the crews assembled at the appropriate time on the grass in front of the flight offices. A local Home Guard platoon had been invited to witness our departure and they mingled with us chatting and sharing cigarettes.

Our crew of seven awaited the bus which would take us to our aircraft parked on a dispersal point some distance away. In addition to pilot John Whitley who lived with his parents and sister in a flat near Marble Arch, London, the crew comprised Jack Kendall, tail gunner from Edmonton Canada, at twenty four the oldest member; Peter Smith, navigator, from Woking, Surrey; Walter (Whiz) Walker, bombaimer who came from Leeds; George Spriggs, whose home was in Braunstone, Leicester, and myself from Banbury, Oxfordshire, all aged twenty or twenty-one. Finally, at nine-teen, Nevil Holmes from Whitstable, Kent, was the mid-upper gunner. Also to go on board was a small cage containing a carrier pigeon. If we had to ditch in the sea then at least here was another method of getting a message to base. Last but not least, was Jack's mascot - a doll in the image of Adolf Hitler, which would be hung by a string some-where in the aircraft. Whilst we were waiting Nevil insisted on checking and adjusting my parachute harness . Previously I had been lax about this. I returned the favour.

The crew transports arrived and soon some dozen crews of 61 Squadron 5 Group, Bomber Command were on their way to their aircraft. Syerston was shared by two squadrons, No's 61 and 106, and in half an hour's time Lancasters of both units would be thundering into the air at intervals of a minute or less. Our aircraft was a veteran of seventy-six operational flights. Not yet having been allotted a machine of our own we were 'borrowing' this one, its current regular crew being on leave. On arrival at dispersal we were surprised to find two of these crewmen out there awaiting us. This was the last day of their leave and they were just a little con-cerned that another crew was being allowed to fly their beloved 'K' for King. It had seen them safely through more than half of the thirty 'ops' which would complete a 'tour' after which would follow a posting for a rest on less hazardous duties. But concerned or not they wished us well, their comment being "Bring it back please!".

At eleven forty-five we were airborne, carrying a four thousand pound high explosive bomb or 'cookie' as they were popularly known, plus several thousand incendiary bombs of various types and sizes. The route was out and back via southern England to avoid the heavier de-fences of a shorter, direct one. At ten thousand feet we switched on the oxygen supply.

From Beachy Head we turned on to a more easterly heading keeping a lookout to avoid getting too close to others of the four hundred and fifty-seven Lancasters and Halifaxes we were with. We were carrying (the first time for us) a device code-named 'Monica'. This would detect another aircraft in the area up to a few hundred yards behind us and set off a 'bleep' on our intercom. Half an hour out from the English coast, at 18,000 feet and now over enemy-held territory the bleep came on. Our tail gunner quickly reported that it was just an-other Lancaster so we relaxed a little and eventually the signal ceased as the two aircraft drifted further apart.

My job at this point was to tune my receiver to German fighter control frequencies. On hearing German voices I was to jam them by transmitting the noise picked up by a microphone in one of our engines. This technique was called 'tinselling'. At regular intervals George Spriggs was push-ing bundles of metallised strips (code-named 'window') out of the aircraft through a special chute in order to confuse the enemy radar operators.

Photo of Norbert PietrekAt about this time Luftwaffe Leutnant Norbert Pietrek with his crew, Unteroffizieren (sergeants) Paul Gartig (wireless/radar operator) and Otto Scherer (engineer/gunner) was taking off from the German night-fighter base at Florennes, Southern Belgium. Their aircraft, a twin-engined Messerschmitt 110F-4 armed with four machine guns and two cannon was directed by their ground controller, Lt. Ernst Reith, to patrol an area called 'Room 7B' around its base. A German account based on crew reports continues:- "Expected altitude of approaching bombers was 6,000 metres. When the bombers came closer the communication failed and control was almost nil due to the dropping of 'window'. The night-fighter was finally given permission to leave its position and follow the bombers eastward. At 00.32 hours they found a bomber which was identified as a Lancaster. Pietrek opened fire....."

The attack on our 'Lanc' came from astern and slightly below. Suddenly in a few horrific seconds with no warning from 'Monica', the aircraft was filled with flashes, bangs and the smell of cordite as the enemy gun-fire ripped through from end to end. Holes and torn metal appeared and I distinctly remember our navigator still poring over his charts with tracer bullets passing under his seat. John put the aircraft into a violent evasive turn, at the same time Whiz Walker called on the inter-comm. to Jack. Neither gunner had opened fire and there was an ominous silence from the rear gun turret. Someone reported an engine on fire. The fighter was difficult to shake off and the attack continued.

John called for the 'cookie' to be jettisoned, not only to lighten the aircraft and improve manoeuvrability but to remove the risk of the aircraft being blown to pieces should it explode.

There was no time for the bomb doors to be opened and the bombs dropped by the bombaimer from his instrument panel in the normal way. Also the complicated release mechanism could well have been damaged. It was therefore my job to pull the emergency handle situated in the floor a few feet behind my seat. This would release the big bomb which would crash its way out through the closed bomb doors. Every second counted. There was no time to disconnect the oxygen line and intercom cord to my helmet so I discarded the lot, leapt over the main spar which formed a back to my seat and gave a big heave on the handle.

The fuselage was now on fire, the flames appeared to be coming from the floor on both sides of the aircraft. Could it be that our incendiary bombs, aligned on each side of the four thousand pounder in the bomb bay below had ignited? I was horrified to see flames surrounding the cases containing ten thousand rounds of ammunition which was fed on tracks to the rear turret.

The inside of the aircraft was well lit by the flames and I saw that Nevil was now leaving his turret amidships and making for the rear door which was our emergency exit. The navigator had left his position and was going forward to his exit down three steps to the front hatch. The captain must have given orders to abandon ship but without a helmet and earphones I could not acknowledge. To go back to my station and recover them was out of the question. The enemy fighter was still firing on us from directly astern and tracer bullets, making small points of light like glowing cigarette ends were flashing through the fuselage.

I started to make my way aft to the rear exit, grabbing my parachute from the rest bed. It had always seemed to me a better location, protected there by a headrest of steel plate than in its official stowage - a plywood box at floor level. I quickly snapped it on to the two hooks on the harness and continued towards the rear door which was on the starboard side.

Nevil must have had some difficulty extricating himself from the mid turret; one needed to be a contortionist to do so at the best of times, now with the aircraft making violent manoeuvres it must have been particularly awkward, and so I reached the door first. At that moment the aircraft performed such gyrations that I was thrown from floor to roof and back to floor where it was impossible to move. If at any time the thought "this is the end" entered my head then this was the moment.

At the side of the door was a rack carrying thin metal dip-sticks to measure the fuel in the aircraft's tanks. I managed to grab these and despite their sharp edges was able to pull myself upright and grasp the door handle. At the first attempt to open the door it reclosed on my thumb then suddenly it was wide open.

We had made no parachute drops during training but had received instructions on what to do should it be necessary. This advice now came sharply to mind:- kneel on the door sill and roll out head first to avoid being struck by the tailplane; wait until clear, not necessarily to the legendary count of ten, then pull the ripcord. Looking astern I put my head out into the slipstream. Perhaps a vacuum occurs across the face by doing this, in the event it was impossible to breathe. Turning to face forward into air moving at over two hundred miles an hour was also a startling experience, but this was no time to hesitate and I roll-ed out, aware that Nevil was about to follow.

It took no courage to leave the inferno of 'K for King' which roared away into the darkness. In a second or two it had gone. Completely disorientated I pulled the ripcord - a metal handle on the 'chute; there was a violent jolt then utter silence as I hung under the canopy in a clear sky. There was very

little moon but the sky above had the usual starlit glow. In one direction the horizon was particularly bright, Mannheim under attack perhaps.

I was now aware of having bare feet. The jolt of the opening 'chute had removed my wool-lined flying boots which had taken socks with them. How fortunate this was a summer's night.

Where would I land? Looking down there was nothing but inky black-ness contrasting with the pale light of the night sky above. With eyes focused to see anything that might be discernible several thousand feet below I struck the ground hands and feet together with a thud which knocked me breathless. I had seen nothing in the darkness and was quite unprepared for such a landing.

There was no wind and the 'chute collapsed gently over me. Extric-ating myself I realised how fortunate I was to have landed on soft grass, in fact the ground was rather soggy. But it had been a close thing, almost directly above were power lines. The edge of the para-chute may even have touched them causing my landing on 'all fours'. A loud buzz denoted that the lines were certainly 'live'.

There was nothing to do now except wait for daylight. Rolled up in the parachute I lay contemplating my good - or bad - fortune and wondering the fate of my crewmates. I felt a great feeling of thankfulness at still being alive. The gunfire had missed me. The big bomb had not exploded before it could be released. The aircraft had not blown up in the air. I had successfully jumped clear. The elderly parachute had opened. The ground was soft to land upon. Fate had been very kind to me, so far.

Ten minutes later in the night sky above, Leutnant Pietrek and his crew located another bomber - this time Halifax HR872 from No. 405 Squadron flown by Canadian F/Lt. Gray. It too was shot down by the Messerschmitt's machine guns, the cannons having failed during the attack on our Lancaster. Of the seven crew of the Halifax there were no survivors.

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10th August 1943

As dawn broke I could begin to see something of my surroundings. On one side grassland with a boundary fence some fifty yards away, after which the terrain fell away and I could see nothing beyond. On the other side a rough stoney track ran alongside the pylons and disappeared between a few straggly hedgerow bushes to right and left. Beyond the track more open scrubby grassland with pine forest perhaps half a mile away making a backcloth in that direction.

A few noises, mainly of animals, - a cockerel, a dog, could now be heard in the distance but there was no habitation to be seen. I examined myself for injuries; sprained ankles but not painful enough to suggest broken bones; a sizable bruise, almost from wrist to elbow on the right arm; cuts on the hands probably from the dipsticks; a pinched thumb of which the nail was blackening, and a black eye which would be more obvious in the next day or two. The opening parachute had given me such a jolt that I felt slightly bruised about the ribs and for a few days breathing was going to be noticeably painful. Overall the damage seemed to be superficial, a fact for which I was very grateful.

Next to check was what equipment and useful articles I possessed. The 'chute and harness were of no further use but the idea that the 'Mae West' lifejacket would make some sort of footwear was not very successful. Before cutting it up with a penknife I tried inflating it but the gas cartridge failed to work, an incident to make me reflect on my good luck to be on dry land.

I had cigarettes and matches but my watch was missing, likewise my cap although how the latter could have been ripped away from under a shoulder epaulette covered by a lifejacket and 'chute harness was a mystery. A pity about the watch but the lost cap was of no consequence. My escape pack was undamaged. I opened it and transferred the contents to pockets. The pack contained Horlicks tablets, chocolate, a tube of thick condensed milk, two silk maps the size of handkerchiefs, a compass in the form of a marked button pivoting on another, and, in a separate packet, Belgian and French banknotes to the value of about ten pounds. I also had three passport size photographs for use on identity cards should there be any chance of acquiring such items.

Where was I? That was the next most pressing question. I had seen the glow in the sky which could have been Mannheim under attack but at what distance?. We had been flying for an hour and a half at least. Studying the maps was not very helpful. This could be Germany, perhaps Luxembourg, Belgium, or even France. All these countries came together in this area. Pessimistically I concluded it must be Germany, with luck it could be Luxembourg but in any case it was now highly likely that I would be taken prisoner. The prospect did not daunt me too much, anything after the experience of four hours ago would be an anti-climax. Thought of being interrogated occurred to me, the possession of the identity photos bothered me; would the Germans consider them the property of a potential spy? Rather foolishly I destroyed them.

By now 'K for King' would be posted as "missing on operations". I thought of those at home, my RAF friends and colleagues receiving the news, and, later in the day that same news being received by my father and aunt at Banbury, and other relatives and friends. They would be left wondering my fate for some time to come. My fellow wireless op. Sgt. Stanley Banting would surely be shaken by our failure to return after my jest of the evening before (in fact Stan was posted 'missing believed killed' before my return to the UK and so never learned of my survival).

Despite my predicament I felt a certain sense of relief that perhaps the war was over for me and that my chances of seeing the end of it albeit as a prisoner of war were now considerably better than they had been a few hours ago.

Of my crewmates, Jack Kendall in the rear turret must surely be dead, the others would have had a reasonable chance of getting out but for the time being their fates would remain unknown.

Having decided to make a move I caught the sound of a horse and cart on the stoney track. Led by, presumably, a farm hand they came into view between the bushes and stopped abruptly on seeing me. In some gesture of greeting (or perhaps surrender!), I reached for a handkerchief to wave. The man must have thought I was about to draw a gun, he took cover behind the cart! However, seeing I was harmless and by now realising the situation he came forward. He shook my hand warmly and pointed in the direction from which he had come using the word 'camarade' which I showed I understood. He was soon on his way leaving me to set off in bare feet on the sharp stones in the opposite direction. Progress was painful.

I remained puzzled as to my whereabouts. The word 'camarade' sounded German to me but this man with his friendly greeting could not possibly be German. Perhaps he was a conscripted labourer or maybe this was Luxembourg after all. The track passed under an iron railway arch and formed a T junction with a second class road. A signpost opposite said 'RULLES' and pointed to the left. I could see

cottages a hundred yards or so in that direction and decided to make for them. Smoke was coming from the chimney of one of the cottages on the right, otherwise all was very quiet with no one to be seen. After all, it was still a very early hour. The weather was fine with hardly a breeze.

I was within a few yards of the houses when I heard the sound of a motor vehicle approaching from some way behind. Instantly it occurred to me that probably only Germans would have fuel for cars or trucks. With the need to take cover I ran to the house which had the smoking chimney. Throwing open the door I stepped inside, closing it quickly behind me. From a curtained window alongside the door I watched as a truck passed; it was a covered army vehicle, open to the rear and sitting inside were soldiers, rifles between their knees. This was the search party no doubt, but they had noticed nothing. For me it was my first sight of 'the enemy'.

The stone floored room was austere to say the least. There was a table, a chair or two, and a doorway leading to a back room. There were animals running about in this back room, I seem to remember chickens included. So it was true that country people on the Continent had their smaller farm animals in the house with them! An elderly lady dressed in black was in the room. On seeing me she burst into tears but whether from fright or pity was difficult to tell. A few moments later a man of about forty came from the back room and greeted me enthusiastically. He soon produced socks and boots and with an old black raincoat to cover my uniform he indicated I should follow him. The language I had now concluded was French. This did not completely solve the dilemma of my location but that it was not Germany was at least a source of some comfort.

We left the cottage and crossing the road made our way to another, less obtrusive from the highway and less austere than the first. Several people came to see me. I felt rather like an object of curiosity; one elderly gentleman spoke a little English. My uniform was changed for some very second-hand civilian clothes whilst my new-found friends were obviously trying to work out a plan to get me on to an escape route. A lady of about thirty whose name I learned later was Madame Thèrèse Féry took a prominent part in the proceedings and after some deliberation I was taken to a third cottage, even more isolated and some way from the road. Here we were greeted by a man who at last cleared up the mystery of my whereabouts by informing me "ici Belgique!". I was welcomed into the house and was soon eating a slice from the biggest plum pie I had ever seen and drinking what was perhaps a substitute for coffee. The food situation however was really quite grim as I was going to discover.

At this cottage I remember being intrigued with the handpump at the kitchen sink, the first time I had seen such an arrangement. During the afternoon a doctor came to examine me. He was soon convinced that I had no serious injuries, and handed me some banknotes before shaking hands and departing. Later in the afternoon two young men arrived on bicycles. A third machine was found for me and the three of us set off for a new destination.

Unlike Britain in wartime the signposts were still 'in situ' and so I was able to make a mental note of place names, unfamiliar though they were. En route one of my companions produced a black beret (every male member of the community seemed to be wearing one), which fitted me perfectly. Judging from the reaction of my friends I could now be taken to be one of them.

After a mile or so we arrived at a house in the little village of Marbehan. We entered but there seemed to be no one about other than ourselves. My guides however appeared to be quite familiar with the place and I was shown to a bedroom upstairs where it was made clear I could spend the night. Left alone I sat by the window looking out through the heavy net curtains; there was no one about, these villages seemed almost devoid of inhabitants.

The elderly gentleman from Rulles came to see me. He was a little pessimistic of my chances of escape. If I chose he would direct me to the gendarmerie where I could give myself up, presumably in uniform again. But by now I was beginning to think it might well be possible to get away and certainly worth a try with or without the help of these sympathetic people. So I declined that suggestion and left alone again began to feel the effect of no sleep for the past thirty-six hours. Dusk was falling so I undressed and got into the not uncomfortable bed.

On the verge of sleep I was suddenly awakened by a small, rather sharp featured man of about thirty-five. Monsieur Robert Féry, alias "Raymond", was a man wanted by the Germans. He had apparently recently shot his way out of a house where he was about to be arrested, killing several Germans. Now he was telling me in words and signs that I was in the house of a collaborator and we must leave at once. I dressed quickly and we were out of the house in a few minutes leaving by a rear exit. Now it was dark and we left the road and headed into the countryside.

We were soon on rough, undulating ground with stumps of trees in evidence. A few words in a mixture of English and French from my companion told me that this was a battlefield of the first world war. In the silence and in little moonlight it was a somewhat eerie place.

My ankles were painful and breathing became a little uncomfortable as we walked on for perhaps a couple of miles. Eventually we arrived at an isolated house with a small front garden enclosed by a wall and wrought iron gates. A knock on the door was answered by a priest who quickly ushered us inside. After some conversation between the two men, M. Féry departed and I was left with Monsieur L'Abbé Leon Chenôt, the rector of this tiny village of Villers-sur-Semois.

From the hall of the house a door to the left opened into a large but rather spartan dining room with scrubbed wooden-topped table. Here was L'Abbé's housekeeper M'selle Gerlache, a middle aged lady whose face was very badly disfigured, perhaps caused by a condition called Bell's palsy. I was given a warm welcome, food and drink. By now desperately tired I was shown to a small bedroom upstairs at the back of the house where I was soon asleep in a very soft bed.

11th August 1943 (Wednesday)

My benefactors allowed me to sleep on undisturbed through the morning. A meal followed, of what it consisted is long since forgotten among the many varied meals of the next few weeks. However, I well remember the black bread, not quite so unpalatable as might be expected. The substitute coffee (made from acorns so it was said) was a common feature of this part of wartime Europe. It was rather bitter but one got used to it. Generally food was scarce and I was conscious of being an extra mouth to feed. To say 'thank you' seemed quite inadequate and was in any case waved aside.

After this particular meal, I was invited to relax in a small study across the hall from the dining room. M. Chenôt told me (with some difficulty due to the language problem), how on the previous night after twelve o'clock he had been returning the few yards from his church to the house when he had heard an explosion and seen our 'Lanc' coming down in flames.

He had a radio receiver secreted in his writing desk and he invited me to make use of it but emphasised that the volume must be kept low. There was a penalty for listening to 'enemy' broadcasts although it was not as stern as for harbouring an escaping British airman, which could mean death or

the concentration camp - much the same thing. I was under no illusion of the risk these people were taking.

It was here that I was shown a detailed map and was at last able to pinpoint my location as being in south-eastern Belgium, not far from Luxembourg and the French border. From the radio I learned that nine aircraft had failed to return from the raid on Mannheim.

A motor cycle arrived at the front of the house and I was startled to see two uniformed Belgian gendarmes approaching the front door. Before I could make myself scarce they were being shown into the study by L'Abbé. My consternation turned to relief and pleasure when they both saluted smartly and shook hands with me in a most friendly manner. Neither could speak English but there was no doubt they were delighted to meet me. One of them, Monsieur Remi Goffin, I was to meet again.

During the evening M. Chenôt made me understand that I would be moving on once more. When the time came to depart, rain was falling. The earlier acquired raincoat had been left at a previous address but L'Abbé threw a cassock around me and with the black beret I was well camouflaged for a night excursion.

By now it was almost dark, we walked for some minutes until arriving alongside thick woods L'Abbé gave a low whistle. It was answered by someone in the darkness. A man came forward whom I recognised as M. Féry. Wishing us goodbye and good luck, L'Abbé turned for home. I could only thank him heartily for his help and hospitality.

"Raymond" was armed with a pistol; there was one for me too. It was loaded and I was shown how to release the safety catch if necessary. I was aghast at the thought of having to use it, but could not very well back out of the situation. Being now in civilian clothes, disguised as a clergyman and armed made me realise that I was in a rather perilous position should we be caught. Could I be accused of being an 'enemy agent' with all that implied?

The rain had now ceased, as we set off along a narrow road between the woodlands. As there was a night curfew no one was supposed to be out of doors. Also M. Féry indicated that we would have to pass through a military zone and we must be as silent as possible. This man must have enjoyed danger. Could we not have made a detour? Without a common language I was unable to put the question to him.

After half an hour I sensed from "Raymond"'s increasing stealth that we must be in the military area. Ahead of us and to the right was a typical army hut. Suddenly the door was flung open, light streamed out, and German soldiers emerged talking and laughing. M. Féry gave me a violent push into a ditch, fortunately dry, at the road side. We crouched there without a sound as the soldiers mounted cycles and rode off. Two of them came our way and passed within three or four yards. "Raymond" had his gun trained on them until they were well away from us. As they had just left a lighted room the soldiers could probably not see well in the darkness, and in my ankle length black cassock I must have been nearly invisible, but for us, eyes accustomed to the night all was easily observed.

As the soldiers dispersed we moved on again and had no further frights. Another kilometre or so and we came to Tintigny. Yet another small village it was silent and dark. From the street we climbed some steps leading to the front of a house at right angles to the road. M. Féry tapped lightly on the door. We were quickly admitted into a pleasant sitting room where our hosts were a man of perhaps sixty and, I presumed, his daughter, a young woman of about twenty-five. There was much serious conversation between these two and M. Féry, but as usual it meant nothing to me. I remember a sewing machine on the table bearing the make name RAFF. Our host made some quip, pointing to

me and the machine which caused a little mild amusement. I was relieved to return my gun to "Raymond". In no way did I wish to be involved in any future shooting match. The cassock would be returned to L'Abbé.

As it was by now quite late we were shown to a room upstairs which M. Féry and myself were to share for two nights. There was a bed fort-unately large enough for both of us but nothing else in the room except perhaps a small table and chair. Our ablutions could be carried out in a large basement room, bare of furniture with primitive toilet arrange-ments best described as a hole in the floor. This was certainly aust-erity but hopefully we were safe here. My companion did not venture outside, he was obviously hiding out like myself.

The time spent here was boring in the extreme. I do not remember seeing our elderly host, and meals were brought to our room by the young woman. It was almost a prison environment, with nothing to do, nothing to read, and no radio. These people must have been living in very hard conditions but one could see they were very proud and patriotic.

13th August 1943 (Thursday)

Very early in the morning of the second day at this address, M. Féry made it clear that we would be moving on, some arrangements having ob-viously been made. The sky was overcast and barely light as I said farewell to our hosts. There was no mistaking their warm feeling for me, the young woman kissed me on both cheeks with some emotion. No doubt they saw in me the evidence that they still had allies carrying on the fight against the hated occupying Germans.

After checking that all was clear, M. Féry escorted me a few yards to crossroads which seemed to be the centre of the village. Although houses lined the streets on all sides there was no one about until a car drew up alongside us. M. Féry wished me a quick 'au revoir', and bundled me into the back of the car. The driver, whom I learned later was the village physician, Doctor Wavreil, indicated that I must lay on the floor and we drove off. Away from the village the car stopped and waiting there was the gendarme Remi Goffin with his motorcycle. I transferred to the pillion and we were off.

I remember an exhilarating ride along the narrow Belgian roads, scattering chickens as we sped past little areas of habitation. The motorbike went well on what must have been at least a proportion of paraffin judging by the exhaust. After six or seven miles we approached a larger village and as we entered I noted the name 'FLORENVILLE'. After Remi had made one or two enquiries (there were a few people to be seen at last), we found a particular house near the centre of the village where I was welcomed by Doctor Pierre. This was his house and surgery. Remi Goffin did not stay longer than was necessary and I was left alone in a room at the front of the house. The windows were tightly closed as seemed to be common practice in Belgium, possibly against the flies and I remember feeling hot and uncomfortable as the day had turned out to be sunny and very warm. Refreshments or a meal must have been provided, probably by the lady of the house, because it was dusk before Doctor Pierre himself returned.

He beckoned me to follow him and we left the house, keeping a distance of several yards between us. As we walked past the quite sizable village square I remember noticing the array of posts and poles (many of metal), carrying 'phone and power lines. Insignificant perhaps, but like other unfamiliar features in these foreign surroundings, it was another reminder of the unusual predicament in which I now found myself. Taking one of the several roads leading from the square we were soon

passing rather larger and more substantial houses than I had noticed in the previous villages. Half a mile from the square we stopped at one on the left and Dr. Pierre cautiously made his way around the flower beds of the large front garden to tap gently on one of the windows. The door was opened and we entered. Photo of Fred Gardiner

"Welcome to my house" were the first words spoken to me by Monsieur Charles Spruyt. Charles was stocky, ruddy complexioned, and aged some-thing over fifty. It was a relief to find someone at last who could speak fluent English. With M. Spruyt (pronounced Sprate I was told), was his wife Genevieve (whom I was to call Madame Giny) and their eight-teen year old daughter Charlotte whose name was always shortened to Lolotte. After the very warm and friendly introductions, Dr. Pierre left and the evening was spent in much conversation with Charles being kept ex-ceedingly busy as interpreter. Madame Giny, an attractive and vivacious lady, was most talkative; she spoke only French but I had never heard anyone speak any language so fast. I could understand not a word, but it was a pleasure to talk with Charles after three days of mostly sign language. I was given the best bedroom for my first night here but subsequently was transferred to the 'room in the roof'.

"La Sapinière" was a sizable detached house of some character. At the front, a flight of steps with balustrades led up to the glazed wide door and a rail to right and left enclosed a veranda. The large square garden, in addition to flower beds had shrubs and pine trees which gave the house its name. From the central tiled hallway was a dining room to the left with large kitchen leading off. On the right from the hallway was a pleasant lounge with a dividing screen and amongst the substantial pieces of furniture was a piano and large portrait paintings of fore-bears of the family. A glass fronted bookcase had been struck by a bullet during the German advance in 1940 and still bore the scars. All the rooms had high ceilings, and with many windows, all with shutters, the house gave a feeling of spaciousness and luxury.

Before the first world war, Charles had worked in a London office, which explained his good English. Then, as a Belgian soldier, he had served alongside British units. He held the British in great regard and I am sure he thought it an honour to give shelter to a British air-man. His business was in the insurance world but doubtless the occ-upation of his country had had an adverse effect on such a business. I regarded him as being typical of a retired country gentleman of reasonable means. The family was able to obtain items of food including eggs, meat, and the scarcer vegetables and fruit from the local farms, a black market in fact denied to city dwellers and the less well-off. Meals were served in some style appropriate to the status of the family and I was treated as one of them and with the greatest generosity. Each day there was a packet of expensive Turkish cigarettes. That they were available was a surprise to me, but the local ones in cheap paper packs and labelled "VF" which I translated as 'Very Foul', were just that. Also I was supplied with my own toilet articles, a new shirt, cotton pullover, and for future travelling, a small haversack. All of these must have been very scarce and expensive at that time in a country de-nuded of consumer goods.

For transport everyone had a bicycle. It was strange for me to see that the cycles were registered and had to carry number plates. All three members of the family would make frequent journeys to the farm and shops and Charles always wore a 'plus-fours' suit, very sensible attire for cycling. This made him look even more the 'country gentle-man'.

On the second day a man obviously with active connections with the Resistance movement arrived to see me. He asked questions designed to test my authenticity. It was known that the Germans had introduced their own English speaking agents as RAF men on the run in order to ex-pose and destroy the escape lines which were being formed. During our conversation he suddenly gave me a sharp punch to the body, then with a smile explained that it was a test to see if my response would be

an exclamation in German! I was so non-plussed that I had not even exclaim-ed in English. Next, a head and shoulders photo was taken for use on an identity card. To admit to destroying copies of my own passport photos was too embarrassing so I did not mention it. As it was, the locally taken photograph clearly recorded the unmistakable black eye.

My room in the attic was pleasant and comfortable and included a water jug and basin (surprisingly the house had no bathroom) and there was a small window which gave a look-out from the end of the house. I was to spend two weeks at "La Sapiniere", Avenue de la Gare, Florenville. A cleaning lady came each morning. Her domain did not include the attic and she was not told of my presence and so I had to remain quietly in my room until she had finished her work. Only after the war did she learn of my existence, much to her astonishment.

Occasionally I would venture into the garden but kept a wary eye on passers-by. Charles had told me that a small detachment of German military police was stationed in the village and we were all sitting on the veranda enjoying a warm evening when two of them passed the house. For a few minutes the conversation remained strictly French.

As well as listening to the BBC, Charles was also breaking regulations by rearing a pig in a shed at the back of the house. With mischievous humour he told me its name was Fritz. The electricity supply was very erratic. The lights would frequently dim and brighten but apart from lights and radio there was no other electrical equipment to be affected, the days of the refrigerator and washing machine for everyone, not to mention TV, were some way off.

Each day after breakfast I would retire to my attic room and spend some of the time reading the two English books the Spruyt family poss-essed, "Little Lord Fauntleroy" and Dickens' "The Old Curiosity Shop". The rest of the day I was free to use the downstairs rooms, but had to take care to avoid being seen at the windows. Playing the piano (quietly, and within my limited capability) also provided a pastime. Nevertheless there was plenty of time to speculate on my chance of returning home safely. It was a daunting prospect; the way out was the walk over the Pyrenees, the whole length of France away. Alternatively there was the well-guarded border to cross into Switzerland, which meant internment until the end of the war, as yet nowhere in sight. To escape across the Channel was out of the question. As a crew under training we had been given one or two talks on evading capture should we be shot down. Although everyone listened intently to the speakers (one of whom had gone through the experience) it was something one couldn't easily vis-ualise happening to oneself; yet here was I now in that exact situation. It produced a feeling almost of incredulity.

M. and Mme. Spruyt received several visitors during my stay. Some, obviously were not to be told about the foreign guest and then I would be shepherded quickly and quietly out of sight. But I was introduced to one or two of them, in particular to Madame Giny's sister, Mme. Cornet and her husband who took photographs of myself with the family and made a great fuss of me to my embarrassment.

Fred Gardiner's fake id cardOne day my inquisitor of the Resistance returned. He had an identity card for me, a good forgery, on which I was named as Jean Joseph Jacques, a farm worker from the village of Hachy. The 'official' stamp was rather blurred but at least it was a document to produce should I be challenged. The prospect of being picked up by the Germans did not however become any less alarming. Madame Giny, on laundering my under-wear was horrified to notice my name, number and rank clearly labelling my PT vest. The only way to remove it was with scissors after which a very neat darn by my hostess repaired the hole. The vest complete with darn still exists more than fifty years later.

26th August 1943

It was time once more to move on. In the morning my new haversack was packed, Madame Giny making sure I had plenty of sandwiches. Then Charles and Lolotte pushing their bicycles accompanied me back to the village square where we took a road leading away in the opposite direction. Again there were few people and no traffic to be seen. Half a mile from the village we halted and rested on the grass verge. Two German military policemen cycled by but gave us no more than a glance. After a short wait a motorcyclist approached from the village. It was Dr. Pierre who was to take me to my next destination. With farewells and good wishes from Charles and Lolotte and some regrets I was off again. Not a long journey, perhaps four or five miles and we arrived at Muno, another village in the chain.

Doctor Pierre delivered me to a house with a small front garden and opposite the Gendarmerie. This was the home of the burgomaster, Monsieur Joseph Godfrin whom I saw but briefly before being taken through the house to a conservatory at the rear. For several hours I sat here alone and, well I remember, without a cigarette. At dusk a youth and a girl, both about sixteen appeared. Leaving with them I was taken a few hundred yards out of the village to an isolated house laying back some fifty yards from the road. Here I was to spend the night in a room with only a skylight in the ceiling, but it was comfortable and I slept well.

27th August 1943

Breakfast was served on a large table by the window in the front of the house and shared with three or four members of this household whose names I never learned. The only other feature of this place that I can recall was the outdoor lavatory. Typically rural with wooden top and front, lifting the lid revealed a drop of twenty or thirty feet to an underground stream, a convenience in every sense.

After breakfast my two young friends of yesterday re-appeared. They and the others were perturbed about the strips of 'window' littering the landscape. I was able to reassure them that they were not poisonous or harmful in any way, but with the language problem and their ignorance of radar it was impossible to enlighten them as to its true purpose. They settled for an explanation that it interfered with the radio.

We now returned to M. Godfrin's house, where once again I found myself alone. However, after only an hour or so two ladies appeared, one presumably Mme. Godfrin, the other being introduced to me as Mme. Alice. They were sisters and Madame Alice was to be my guide on the next stage of the journey. There was indeed some urgency to get away, the Germans were suspicious of M. Godfrin and we could possibly be raided. This house was in fact a link in the 'Possum' escape line.

We set off on bicycles. The weather was fine and very warm and the eight or nine mile journey was hard work for Madame Alice, a rather plump lady of perhaps forty. The ride itself was through the delightful forest region of the Ardennes, along narrow roads sometimes no more than tracks. It was evident we were keeping away from main thoroughfares for obvious reasons, and for the first few

miles saw no one. Eventually we joined a main road but again there was virtually no traffic, the occupation seemed to have immobilised the whole country.

I was aware that we were now approaching a town, but suddenly we made a sharp right turn off the road on to a narrow rough track which all but terminated after a hundred yards or so. Here on the left and after passing one or two windowless brick buildings, we arrived at a cottage situated side-on to the lane. The front of the house looked down the flat valley of the river Semois which flowed fast and wide some thirty yards away. From the edge of the far side of the river the terrain rose steeply and was densely tree covered, the whole area well qualifying as a beauty spot. The only man-made construction in this scene was a large tobacco drying shed situated about a hundred yards in front of the house and surrounded as one would expect by the growing plants.

We entered the house by the front door (there seemed to be no other entrance) and were welcomed by the occupants. They were Monsieur and Madame Pierret, a middle aged couple, typical workers of the land, and a somewhat younger woman whose name was Madame Simon. There was also an elderly lady, perhaps a parent of one of the others whose name I never knew. Once more I sat aside while a great deal of conversation went on in French. Madame Alice had brought knitting and wool. She unwound a ball of wool to reveal a handstamp, perhaps the one used for my identity card and now being passed on for further use. My new hosts provided food; I remember waffles with jam was a favourite in this household, and after a meal we said goodbye to Madame Alice.

Here I was to spend the next fourteen days. The house had three storeys and I was given a small cosy room on the top floor. It had a low ceiling and a window overlooking the track down which I had cycled. There were several small doors enclosing shallow cupboards on the walls. My curiosity led me to open them - they were packed tightly with cigars, undoubtedly the produce of this tobacco farm. My bed was very comfortable with an immensely thick duvet.

Unfortunately none of these people spoke English. I was learning a few words of French but in no way did it allow real conversation. M. Pierret was busy most of the day attending to the crops (there was a small orchard as well as an acre or two of tobacco), looking after five or six sheep in pens at the side of the house and sometimes fishing. I accompanied him on these occasions and we sat together on the river bank smoking either VF's or cigars but unable to make much conversation. The results of the fishing were not particularly impressive.

A somewhat solemn man, M. Pierret portrayed a rather unkempt figure, often unshaven, with drooping moustache and always wearing his large cap. His wife, a tall, rather plain, boisterous woman was less untidy, while Madame Simon was small, dressed in black with long skirts, perhaps to cover a deformity as she had a pronounced limp. Her husband, a Belgian soldier, was a prisoner of war in Germany. They were all living for the day when, as they told me "the British soldiers would arrive," and even pointed out the direction from which they would come - from the west no doubt, through the orchard! What a pity I thought much later, that it was the Americans who liberated this area.

This place was so well away from the beaten track that I remember only two visitors during the whole fortnight of my stay. Although it would have been foolish to wander too far, I spent many hours along the river bank and walking about the valley. Rarely would there be anyone walking on the opposite bank but the river was sufficiently wide to prevent any form of communication; this then was a good 'hide-out'.

One day the two young people from Muno called and ran excitedly across to where I was strolling among the tobacco plants. They had startling news; the burgomaster's house had indeed been raided by the Gestapo only hours after my departure but fortunately M. Godfrin had been forewarned

and by now should be safe in Switzerland. There was no other excitement during my stay at 'Au Maqua' but one night I was awakened by the roar of aircraft as RAF bombers flew overhead on their way to some target in southern Germany. The noise continued for more than half an hour. I got out of bed and sat by the open window to listen; my thoughts being very much with my erstwhile comrades in the darkness above.

Meals at 'Au Maqua' were rather less formal than at 'La Sapiniere' but were adequate nevertheless. Amongst the fare was milk from the sheep, which although looking richer than cows' milk, was agreeably very similar. One disagreeable feature of life here was the multitude of house-flies, at mealtimes they were particularly abnoxious, and apart from beating at them with anything that could be used as a fly-swat there was no cure. The weather during all this time remained fine and very warm and it was almost possible to imagine that one was on holiday.

10th September 1943

Eventually the time came to move on. Somehow a message was received that a car would collect me during the morning and so when it arrived at about 11.00 a.m. on Friday 10th I was ready and waiting. After fond fare-wells to the kindly people of 'Au Maqua' I found myself being driven away in a taxi, my escort this time, in addition to the driver, was a tall man who was in fact the husband of Madame Alice. We turned towards the town I had fleetingly seen two weeks before. It was Bouillon, a place with lots of history and a famous castle. The taxi pulled up in front of a hotel in one of the main streets and we quickly entered and made our way to a back room which had evidently been booked for the occasion. Two or three other men were in the room, seated at a large table which was laid for lunch. We joined them and the door was locked. After much shaking of hands, I was delighted to find that the youngest man present, apart from myself, was Flight Sergeant Herbert Pond of the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Photo of Herbert PondIt might be interesting to briefly relate his story. He was the pilot of a Lancaster 'pathfinder' which crashed in Belgium. After being attacked by fighters he dived in an effort to shake off the attackers. Damaged, the aircraft literally flew into and along the ground, killing at least one crew member. The survivors spilled out from the wrecked aircraft and scattered in all directions fearing fire or an explosion. In the darkness they had become permanently separated. Herbert Pond had not seen any of his crew since then. It was grat-ifying to think that from now on, I would have a compatriot to share whatever was in store for us. Moreover to talk freely in English again (even in low tones) was marvellous.

Flight Sergeant Pond was however in some trouble. Due to confusion on the radio link with London, the Resistance suspected that he was a German 'plant'. One of our party spoke some English and asked me if I could vouch for him. By questioning Herbert it transpired that he and I had been on overlapping courses at our OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Cottesmore, Rutland, earlier in the year. He remembered and described an occasion there when Australian crews 'acquired' live chickens and engaged in hen racing across the parade ground. Such a bizarre event (which I too remembered well)

would hardly have been known in such detail by an infiltrator and Herbert was exonerated. Afterwards he said that I had saved his life, such had been the suspicion in which he was held.

That lunch in the Hotel de Progress, Bouillon, seemed particularly good, almost like a celebration. After the 'coffee' and cigars, the door was unlocked and a surveillance of the street was made. Then Herbert and myself with Monsieur Arnould (Madame Alice's husband) reboarded the taxi and we were off once more. We were now to cross the border into France. At a convenient and quiet spot the taxi stopped and the three of us alighted. A young woman, who must have been awaiting our arrival, now appeared and escorted us into the thick woods bordering the road. The taxi driver would take his vehicle through the frontier barrier in the authorised manner while we were to cross unseen (we hoped) through the woods. After ten minutes or so of walking we arrived at a small building almost completely surrounded by the trees. Clambering down a slope, we entered via a back door which led into a tiny bar, almost English style. We were provided with drinks and although those present may have been aware of what was going on, Herbert and I stayed mute. We were now in France, at the Café aux Chapelle.

Here M. Arnould suggested we hand over our Belgian money to him. This did not seem to be unreasonable in view of the expenses being incurred, moreover the money was now of little use this side of the border. I learned later that the taxi driver was upset at not receiving a share towards his costs.

At this point we acquired a new guide whose name remains unknown. This man spoke some English and we were able to converse a little with him while M. Arnould made his farewell, presumably to return across the border. Soon the taxi appeared in the narrow road in front of the building and with our new guide we climbed aboard and resumed the journey. The situation was now to change dramatically. From seeing so few people during the past month, we drove into the French border town of Sedan which was a comparative hive of activity. The taxi pulled up in the precincts of the railway station. There were German soldiers everywhere. After a brief 'au revoir' to our driver, who stopped barely long enough for us to alight, our guide led us to an unoccupied bench-type table and obtained refreshments from a nearby kiosk. He then left us for a few minutes to buy rail tickets. We were now joined by several German soldiers who leaned their rifles against the table whilst they drank their beer.

To jump up and make off immediately was obviously not the best thing to do, so we sat still and unspeaking. The situation was eased a minute or two later by our guide who returned, and speaking a few words of French made it quite clear it was time to go. Handing us our tickets we passed through the gates on to the station. I was gaining some confidence by now and even risked a 'merci' to the ticket inspector. On a quiet part of the platform Herbert and I were briefed as to what we were to do next. Our tickets were for Reims; we would board the train separately. At our destination we would be met at the station exit by a woman dressed in black and with a floral buttonhole. We were to follow her, keeping at least ten metres apart.

The train drew in and suddenly I was on my own. The coaches were corridor type and the train stopped with a door opposite to me. I made for the steps whereupon a French porter shouted at me, waved his arms and pointed to a notice, of which there was one in every compartment window near me saying "Reserve pour les troupes d'occupation". Even I could understand that, but then I noticed that civilians were standing in the corridor. Ignoring the porter, I climbed aboard and took up a position midway along the coach. The compartments had been unoccupied, now they were quickly filled with soldiers. My carriage took on army and airforce officers in their resplendent uniforms displaying German crosses and swastikas in profusion. It was difficult not to stare, but I flattened myself against the side of the corridor while several of them squeezed past, one or two even giving me a curt 'pardon'.

How ridiculous, I thought, that German officers were being polite to me in French. If only they knew that this fellow traveller was wearing an RAF PT vest.....!

In addition to the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, a contingent of Red Cross nurses was boarding the next two or three carriages. All the Germans looked very smart in contrast to the outnumbered and shabbily dressed civilians. The train was quite full by the time we pulled out of the station. There was no sign of Herbert Pond; he boasted later that he spent the journey in the buffet car where someone bought him a drink. At Charleville we stopped, the engine was transferred to the opposite end of the train and we drew out in the direction from which we had arrived. The scenery was uninteresting and after a journey of perhaps one and a half hours we pulled into Reims station.

Here the plan went like clockwork. Herbert reappeared on the scene and we were soon following instructions to the letter. The lady was waiting at the station exit. Across the square in front of the magnificent cathedral and into one of the main streets, I kept a close watch on both our guide and Herbert. Presently we found ourselves in a smart flat on the first floor above shops. But this was a very temporary refuge, and after no more than an hour we were escorted again to a new address a few streets away in a quieter part of the city. Here were several members of the household including an elderly man, partially blind, who was continually being scolded by the others for listening to the BBC's French broadcasts with the volume dangerously high. Herbert and I were given a pleasant room in the style of a 'bed-sit' with twin beds, but it was to be for only one night.

During our brief visit to Reims, I asked the names and addresses of our benefactors, but as it would have been very unwise to have any written material on one's person, this had to be committed to memory. Our French friends were taking no chances and many years later I learned that even these addresses were bogus. That of the smart flat was subsequently found to be non-existent. The house, we understood, was No. 4, Rue de la Liberté, but post-war enquiries revealed that we stayed, in fact, at No. 51, Rue Battesti, the home of Madame Bulart, a middle aged lady and her family. Such were the ruses deployed by the Resistance. The blind man was Monsieur Drion whose family was also involved in the Reims activities.

Madame Bulart asked me to write to her sister, Mrs. Gray, who lived in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, should I reach home safely. The address, 15, Limetree avenue, was memorised. Mrs. Gray was to be told that the family, although living under difficult conditions, was well. I was able to carry out this small service sooner than I could have imagined at the time.

11th September 1943

In the early afternoon Herbert and I were visited by a suave, well-dressed Frenchman who spoke fluent English. He would accompany us on the next leg of the journey. We were soon back at Reims station where tickets were bought and where I remember a Dornier bomber circling overhead as we waited for our train. The local train pulled into a siding and the three of us boarded. This was definitely third class travel - wooden slatted seats facing each other across cramped compartments and with no corridor. The train filled up rapidly, our fellow passengers, mostly women, seemed to be local country people returning home from a trip to the city. Despite the fact that we never spoke for the whole journey of perhaps forty minutes, this did not seem to attract attention, and although friendly glances were exchanged, no one attempted to speak to us which was a relief.

We left the train at Fismes, a small town according to the map, but we saw little of it as our guide, led us to a house only a few minutes walk away. Our Frenchman, (he may in fact have been French Canadian) I surmised was rather more than just a patriotic helper. As if to confirm my view, he produced his identity card, the photo of which he explained had been taken in London the previous week. Our accomodation at Fismes was in a fair-sized end-of-terrace house with three or four occupants whose family name, Beuré, I did not learn until many years later. One of them showed us a dismantled 'Flying Flea', a small home-built aero-plane popular in the nineteen-thirties but considered dangerous to fly. This was stored in a barn, one of several outbuildings at the side of the house. The owner must have been joking when he remarked that as a last resort one of them might get to England in it! Once more Herbert and I were given a comfortable room to share and were provided with cigarettes and a copious supply of white wine. The windows were heavily curtained, we could hardly see out let alone anyone see in, so we felt fairly secure. I remember being asked not to disturb the spider in the outside toilet. Such a mysterious request had to be investigated! The creature was immense with a huge web; its duty was obvious and very effective.

The French (or Canadian) agent, who had brought us to Fismes, now had some remarkable and exciting news. It might be possible for Herbert and me to be flown out of France by an RAF 'plane which was expected to bring supplies in for the Resistance during darkness. This might be tomorrow, weather and moon permitting, but we would be kept informed. However, we were disappointed when, by the afternoon of the second day we learned that the operation was 'off'. There had been rumours back on the squadron that the RAF were operating in and out of France by night, carrying agents and equipment as well as dropping people and supplies by parachute. The rumours then were true.

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13th September 1943

In the afternoon Herbert and I were alerted for a possible rendez-vous with the aircraft that night. As darkness fell, our small party - including three or four members of the Resistance, set off under a bright moon through the silent countryside in single file and with no talking allowed. How far we walked is difficult to recall, three or four miles at least, but we had not reached the landing site when the aircraft arrived overhead, circled and flashed its identification light. We began to run whilst the 'plane made several circuits, occasionally going out of earshot. This activity must be alerting every German soldier for miles around, were my thoughts, as we ran on, the silence being shattered by the noise from the aircraft's engine each time it flew overhead at a few hundred feet. Then, consternation when, on reaching the landing field we found that most of it had been ploughed, leaving only a strip of grass with a haystack at the end. Would such a restricted landing area be adequate? Torches attached to sticks were quickly set out as markers for the pilot, and it was my job to flash the letter 'R' as a 'safe to land' signal.

The aircraft came in over the haystack and landed with a considerable bounce a few yards in front of us, then quickly came to a stop and taxied back to our party. The engine had to be kept running - it seemed deafening - and I half expected the enemy to rush out from all sides. The aircraft was a Lysander of No. 161 SOE (Special Operations Executive) Squadron, piloted (I learned later) by Squadron

Leader Hugh Verity whose book "We Landed by Moonlight" records this operation among the many others he successfully completed. The Lysander was a single engined, high wing monoplane, which could fly slowly and land and take off in short distances. This one had a large torpedo shaped long range fuel tank under the fuselage, and a fixed ladder to the rear cockpit on the port side. I had been instructed to remove parcels from this cockpit, take my place there and operate the intercom to advise the pilot when all was ready for take-off. Flight/Sgt Pond and an agent codenamed 'Grand Pierre' quickly followed me aboard. There was very little room in the cockpit designed presumably for one person but we closed the perspex cover and sat huddled on the floor. If there was a seat, I certainly did not get the benefit of it; also there were no parachutes, a disconcerting feature.

We flew back in bright moonlight at perhaps four or five thousand feet. There was no cloud and the ground could be seen clearly. At the coast, a few searchlights were evident but made no attempt to pick us up. Across the Channel and just off the English coast, I was able to identify Brighton and soon we were coming in to a smooth landing at Tangmere near Chichester. 'Grand Pierre' was whisked away in a car while Herbert and myself were taken to the special quarters of 161 Squadron. There, after expressing our admiration and thanks to Squadron Leader Verity, we were given a meal and quarters for the remainder of the night.

14th September 1943

In the morning, we were taken by car to the Air Ministry in London where our absence would have to be explained. Five weeks back pay plus a month's leave was to be some compensation for the 'inconveniences' suffered. Early in 1944 a German communiqué gave my name, number and rank as being an enemy airman "at large on the Continent of Europe". As a result, I would not be sent on operations over Europe again.

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[Sequel](#)

Of our crew, the two air-gunners, Nevil Holmes and Jack Kendall, as well as flight-engineer George Spriggs lost their lives that night in August 1943. From Belgian accounts, it seems that the Lancaster blew up just before hitting the ground outside the village of Marbehan. Jack was thrown from the aircraft; his body was found in the morning alongside the fence bordering a road, but he had probably been killed in the initial attack. The bulk of the aircraft crashed in a nearby field, some of the debris falling on the village although no damage or injuries were recorded there. As for Nevil and George, no one knows exactly how they died, and unfortunately my hopes for Nevil had been unfounded. For George, it was ironic that he should die in an aircraft which he had serviced and remembered well, from his days as a ground engineer, before volunteering for flying duties. He had

been delighted when, on completion of training we had been posted to his old squadron. The three are buried at Florennes near the enemy fighters' base in Belgium.

John Whitley and 'Whiz' Walker (who were both helped by the Féry family), made contact and together journeyed to Switzerland, where they crossed the border on Christmas Eve 1943 and were interned. Navigator Peter Smith saw the wreck of our 'Lanc' from a train on his travels to Brussels, before going on to Paris and the south of France on the famous 'Comete' escape line. He eventually crossed the Pyrenees on foot and was imprisoned by the Spaniards. Later he was freed after representations by the British Consul and reached home via Gibraltar. I met my surviving crewmates again; John and Peter by arrangement and 'Whiz' by sheer chance on Sheffield railway station some two years later.

On subsequent visits to Belgium, being treated with the greatest hospitality by Monsieur and Madame Spruyt at 'La Sapiniere' and, later by their daughter Lolotte and her husband Rene Zimmer, I met again many of my helpers. How some were located again makes another story. They included Robert Féry and his wife Thèrèse; the old gentleman from Mar-behan; Doctor Pierre; L'Abbe Chenôt and Mlle. Gerlache; M. and Mme. Pierret of 'Au Maqua' with Mme. Simon and her husband safely returned from Germany; M. Godfrin, and Madame Alice Arnould. Later I learned that my friends at Tintigny had indeed been father and daughter - M. and Mlle. Pauly, and I met again the taxi driver M. Paul Frerlet. They all had their own story to tell. Madame Féry was shot and wounded on being arrested for activities fortunately not related to my escape. Paul Frerlet had taken twenty-two airmen (British and American) as well as political refugees from Belgium to France, and both these brave people had spent several months in concentration camps suffering horr-ific treatment. M. Godfrin's house at Muno had been a 'transit camp' for more than twenty servicemen at various times. He had spent the latter part of the war in Switzerland, after the raid on his house. In 1947 my friends at Rulles presented me with part of my parachute, and in 1981 my cap was returned to me by its finder, M. Burton, a boy in 1943 living in Rulles.

Sadly, after more than forty years, many of these good friends have passed on. Charles and Giny Spruyt, M. Godfrin, L'Abbé and his house-keeper; Remi Goffin the gendarme, Doctor Wavreil of Tintigny, and no doubt others with whom contact was lost, have since died. Monsieur Georges Quinot, a lawyer who interrogated me at 'La Sapiniere' and pro-vided my identity card died in a concentration camp in Germany. Due to the indiscretions of a daughter, the Beuré family of Fismes, were also taken to Germany, where presumably they died.

Others, not known by name until many years later and who must not be omitted from this narrative include the Roussel family (first house in Rulles); Armand Zigueld (second house); Madame Keser (awarded honours for her Resistance work and who gave me my first meal of plum pie), and Doctor Abbaye who examined me for injury at Rulles. None will be forgotten.

Although we were never to meet, one more name must be added to those mentioned above; that of Edgard Potier (his home was Florenville). He was an officer in the Belgian Airforce, escaped to England, later to parachute back into Belgium. He was instrumental in setting up the 'POSSUM' escape line. Betrayed to the Gestapo, he committed suicide in 1944 after being horrendously tortured.