

# GREAT ESCAPES



TERRY  
TREADWELL

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**TERRY TREADWELL**



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# INTRODUCTION

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Twenty years after the ‘war to end all wars’ ended, a Second World War erupted and once again Germany was the instigator. This time the war was to encompass and involve almost the entire Western world and spread to countries in the Middle and Far East. Commonwealth countries ‘rallied to the flag’, and the United States’ entry into the war after the attack on Pearl Harbour was to be one of the major turning points, but also added to the cost in human lives, which was to be incalculable.

With the German military’s *Blitzkrieg* in Europe, and the sudden collapse of allied armies, came the inevitable prisoners of war. These were, in the main, young men who had been thrust into battle and had fought with the zest that young men do, only to find themselves incarcerated behind barbed wire, under the gaze of searchlights and machine guns, manned by trigger-happy guards. The prisoners of war were taken to camps called *offizierlager (oflags)* for officers and *stammlager (stalags)* for other ranks, where food was short and clothing, when worn out, could not easily be replaced. It was this environment that was to spawn some of the most ingenious and audacious escapes ever devised or imagined. It also encouraged men to discover talents and bravery that they never knew they had. However, the majority of those who either evaded or escaped did so with the help of hundreds of nameless and faceless civilians, who daily risked their lives to help them.

Within days of the tragedy of Dunkirk, groups of civilians were helping soldiers to escape without detection. Within months, escape organisations were beginning to be set up. The role of the Resistance fighter was highlighted by sabotage and assassinations and was an extremely dangerous position, whereas the role of a member of the escape organisations was so low profile as to appear almost non-existent – but was equally as important, and just as dangerous.

The men and women, and indeed children, who helped run the escape lines came from all walks of life – doctors, lawyers, housewives, shop assistants, farmers and labourers, covering all classes and age ranges. So efficient were these escape lines, that the Gestapo often used fluent English-speaking agents to pose as downed allied airmen in an effort to infiltrate them. The infiltrators were often very successful, as was demonstrated when the Comète Line was betrayed. The Germans arrested two-thirds of its members, over half of whom were executed. The Germans even helped some allied airmen to escape so as to penetrate and gain information about the escape lines and the helpers. But what makes a person in an occupied country, controlled by ruthless Nazis, put their life on the line on an almost daily basis in order to help someone from another country that they don’t even know? When asked, most just shrugged their shoulders and said, ‘Because we had to do something!’

Such was the need for absolute secrecy that some of the escape lines operated independently from the others, although they did help each other on the odd occasion. The Pat O’Leary Line was a good example of this.

In France, over 29,000 people were executed by the Germans for being members of the Resistance, and that figure is not included in the 40,000 that died in prisons for various other reasons. In Denmark reprisals were carried out on the citizens by shooting five of them for every German said to have been killed by the Resistance. The Danish Resistance itself saw over 3,000 of its members killed. The proud boast of the Danish Resistance was that of all the allied airmen that were placed in their care, not one

was ever captured by the Germans.

The total number of Resistance and escape organisation members killed throughout Europe will never be known, as it was impossible to keep records, and such was the necessary secrecy behind the organisations that very few people knew who was a member and who was not.

Such was the fear of the Resistance, that Field Marshal Keitel issued the infamous *Nach und Nebel Erlass* (Night and Fog Decree), which decreed that anyone suspected of opposing Nazi rule would be arrested in the dead of night and simply vanish from the face of the earth. In a rider to this decree Keitel wrote, as an explanatory note:

If these offences are punished by imprisonment, even with hard labour for life, this will be looked upon as a sign of weakness. Efficient intimidation can only be achieved either by capital punishment or by measures by which the relatives of the criminals and the population do not know of his or her fate.

Some of the escapees and evaders joined up with the local Resistance fighters and fought alongside them. One such man was Sergeant Cyril Rolfe, RAF, who, after being shot down twice, had escaped on both occasions from German prisoner of war camps. After his second capture he was being taken to Germany when he escaped and headed east towards Russia. Making his way through the German lines he joined up with Russian Cossacks and for the following ten weeks was involved in a number of cavalry charges before being repatriated to England.

1st Lt John Mead, USAAC, a B-24 pilot, was shot down during a raid and was picked up by a Maquis group. Because of the situation at the time, he found it impossible to get back, so instead he fought alongside them and eventually took over the leadership of the group, when its leader was killed in a gun battle with German forces.

Some of the atrocities suffered by captured airmen were brought before the Nuremberg trials. One particularly brutal incident concerned forty-seven British, American and Dutch aircrew. Imprisoned at Mathausen, the airmen, all barefoot, were taken into a deep stone quarry and made to carry large rocks, weighing about 60lb each, to the top of the quarry. SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) troopers lined the route and beat the men with whips and clubs. On their second trip, the load was increased and those who fell were whipped or kicked to their feet. By the end of the day twenty-one of the men were dead, the remaining twenty-six were killed the following day.

Fifty escapees from *Stalag Luft (Luftwaffe-Stammlager) III* were murdered after they made a mass escape from the prison camp. This was in retaliation for causing the authorities huge embarrassment after the Germans had declared that the camp, full of habitual escapees, was escape proof. Most of those involved in both atrocities were later brought to account at Nuremberg and were either hanged or given life imprisonment.

Even when the news of these atrocities filtered through to the prisoner of war camps, it was not enough to stop escaping or evading airmen risking their lives in an effort to get back to England and join the fighting again. The moment they discarded their uniforms and carried forged identity and travel documents, it made them liable to be shot as spies if caught. Not one of these young men was necessarily equipped for escape and evasion, but they all felt it was their duty to get back to England.

At the end of the war it was estimated that of the Royal Air Force, forty-six officers and sixty-three other ranks had escaped from prison camps, 401 officers and 946 other ranks had successfully evaded capture. Of the Army, 106 officers and 711 other ranks had escaped from prison camps, 30 officers and 344 other ranks had successfully evaded capture. Of the Navy, ten officers and thirteen



other ranks had escaped from prison camps, six officers and eight other ranks had successfully evaded capture. This, compared with just *one* German officer, Leutnant Franz von Werra, who successfully escaped from a prison camp in Canada, was a truly remarkable achievement, due to a great extent to the courage and fortitude of the citizens of the occupied countries of Europe. The reason for the small number of naval personnel becoming prisoners of war was because there were very few ever captured, as most either went down with their ships or were picked up at sea by rescue vessels.

The Americans also set up their own section of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) called MI.9 X. Unfortunately, after the war virtually all the records of this section were destroyed on the orders of Major-General George V. Strong, the Deputy Chief of Staff for G-2 (Intelligence).

# THE RUMBLINGS OF WAR

For some years Britain and the rest of Europe had watched the rise of Nazism in Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Hitler had fought in the First World War as a corporal in the army and had returned to a defeated and destitute Germany. The rise of socialism in Germany gave Hitler the platform upon which to build a ruthless regime. After taking over as President and Chancellor from Otto von Hindenburg, Hitler set about rebuilding Germany's military strength under the guise of rebuilding the country.

One or two minor acts of aggression by Hitler towards neighbouring countries were enough to make Britain and France take note of Germany's intentions. Hitler had sent some of his troops into the Rhineland. This was in breach of the Treaty of Versailles and when France objected and asked Britain for support Britain refused to get involved. Seeing that Hitler's act had been unopposed, the Italian dictator Mussolini saw his opportunity to make an alliance with Germany and form an 'Axis' around which Europe could revolve. This act of aggression caused rumblings of war to filter through Europe and the British government started to make plans in case they became involved.

At the beginning of 1934, Hitler encouraged Alfred Frauenfeld, the self-exiled Austrian Nazi party leader, to broadcast anti-*Dollfuss* propaganda against the Austrian Chancellor. During this period Austrian Nazis carried out terrorist raids on essential facilities, with weapons and explosives supplied by Germany. There was also an Austrian Legion, consisting of several thousand men, camped along the border ready to move at a moment's notice.

Then on 25 July 1934, seven Austrian members of the Nazi Party, dressed as Austrian army soldiers, burst into the Austrian Federal Chancellery and murdered the Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. The attempt to seize the Chancellery failed, and Dr Kurt von Schuschnigg, with the backing of the government, regained control. Efforts were made by the Nazis to give the assassins safe conduct to Germany, but they were arrested and hanged.

Under the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was forbidden to have a union with Austria, even though the majority of the people there spoke German as their native language. When Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany he had written in his book, *Mein Kampf*, the 'reunion of Germany and Austria was a task to be furthered with every means'. In short it meant that the expansion of Germany would include Austria.

All the time Hitler was building his armed forces and by the end of 1934 had increased the military personnel from 100,000 to 300,000. He also declared that he would repudiate the Treaty of Versailles and introduce conscription in Germany. The shipbuilding programme was increased, including the development of the U-boat and the building of two battle cruisers, later to be known as the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*.

All this of course was in direct contravention of the treaty, but such was the apathy of surrounding countries to get involved that only mutterings within the diplomatic corps were heard. It soon became obvious that the Treaty of Versailles was now meaningless and toothless, as Germany began to open

rearm. It was only then that Britain and France made strong representations to the German government. Germany then stated that it would show 'unconditional respect' to the non-military clauses in the Versailles treaty, which included the territorial provisions. As for disarmament, Hitler stated that he would agree to limitations on both weapons and ships, but for Germany this would be final and abiding.

In 1936 Austria and Germany signed the Austro-German agreement in which Germany agreed to respect Austria's independence and not interfere in the political affairs of the country. Two years later Hitler was to renege on this agreement when, after rigged elections, a union (*Anschluss*) between the two countries was announced, with an Austrian Nazi as Chancellor.

Mussolini, on seeing Hitler flex his muscles and the rest of Europe back down, decided that the time was right for him to take over Abyssinia. On 3 October 1935, Italy invaded Abyssinia and on 5 May 1936 entered the capital Addis Ababa taking complete control of the country. The League of Nations, who had voted for sanctions against Italy, which had only been partially implemented, capitulated. Encouraged by this, Mussolini then invaded Ethiopia and took control of this country.

Two weeks later Hitler, who was at the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, was given an urgent letter from General Franco, who had staged a coup in Spain, requesting aircraft and weapons. Hitler immediately dispatched an air force unit that was to become known as the Condor Legion, together with tanks and other weapons. Italy also sent some 60,000 troops as well as weapons to help Franco in the Spanish Civil War, which raged from 1936–9. The success of the war and the alliance with Spain gave Hitler another border to France and another country that owed its allegiance to Germany.

It was while this was going on that Hitler took the military gamble that was to be the catalyst that would plunge Europe, and ultimately the rest of the world, into war – the reoccupation of the Rhineland. After the First World War the Rhineland had been classified as a demilitarised area and the Treaty of Locarno guaranteed this. Two of the signatories to the treaty – Britain and France – were becoming increasingly concerned with the situation in Abyssinia. Taking advantage of this, Hitler moved his troops in to the Rhineland and occupied the area, and had Britain and France retaliate there is no doubt that the Germans would have had to withdraw. As it happened no retaliation occurred, and Hitler's confidence in his ability to do whatever he felt like doing, received a massive boost.

This was further endorsed when an Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan was signed. This pact was specifically directed against Russia, and both countries agreed to have no political dealings with the Communists. In the event of one of them being attacked by Russia, both countries would take measures to protect the agreement.

On 12 February 1938, Hitler summoned the Austrian Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, to Berchtesgaden, and asked him to appoint Austrian Nazis to his government. Realising that there was an underlying threat to take over his country if he acceded to the request, Kurt von Schuschnigg returned to Austria and ordered a vote to see if the people wanted a union with Germany.

Hitler then issued an ultimatum, either he agree to the 'request', or the soldiers massing on the German–Austrian border would be unleashed. The reason for this ultimatum was that Hitler feared the vote would go against the Nazis, and so decided to use the threat of violence to 'persuade' the electorate that his was the best option. In the early hours of 11 March, Schuschnigg was awakened by a telephone call from the Austrian Chief of Police, saying that rail traffic between Austria and Germany had been stopped, the border at Salzburg had been closed and German soldiers were massed along the border. Kurt von Schuschnigg had no choice but to resign and hand over the Chancellorship to the Austrian Nazi Dr Seyss-Inquart.

The writing was on the wall as far as the British military were concerned, but still the politicians held out hope for a peaceful solution to the evergrowing problem.

It soon became obvious that Hitler was now switching his sights to Czechoslovakia, and British Prime Minister Chamberlain sent Lord Runciman to Czechoslovakia in an effort to persuade the government there to form some sort of agreement with Hitler. This was a pointless exercise because Hitler was determined to destroy Czechoslovakia. The country was made up of several provinces: Slovak and Czech together with Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Ruthenia and Sudetenland, all of whom wanted a measure of autonomy. The Republic had been formed in 1918 just after Germany had been defeated but since its formation it had been subject to domestic problems concerning the minority nationalities within the country. The sudden rise to power of Hitler and the expansion of German power gave the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia the encouragement they needed to push for autonomy.

In Britain, Prime Minister Chamberlain became increasingly concerned that Hitler's continuing demands on the countries bordering Germany would bring about a war in Europe. He flew to Germany for talks with Hitler who demanded that the Sudetenland province of Czechoslovakia be returned to Germany. If this were to be granted he would make no more territorial demands. Chamberlain managed to persuade the French that this was the best way to prevent a confrontation. They in turn told the Czechoslovakian government that unless they agreed to surrender the Sudetenland, they would withdraw their support. Reluctantly the Czech government agreed and all parties signed an agreement to that effect. Chamberlain returned to England, confident that he had averted a war, waving the famous piece of white paper and declaring 'peace in our time'.

President Hacha of Czechoslovakia was invited to Berlin for talks with Hitler. Under extreme pressure, both political and military, from the Germans, he agreed to place his country under the protection of Germany. Immediately the Germans annexed Bohemia, Sudetenland and Moravia, while Ruthenia was placed under the protection of Hungary and Slovakia was made a protectorate.

Whilst Germany was in the process of fragmenting Czechoslovakia, it cast its eye over the slice of territory that bordered East Prussia, and which Poland had acquired during the Treaty of Versailles. In the centre was the city of Danzig that Germany insisted should revert back to them. If Poland agreed to this, they would be invited to join the Anti-Comintern Pact, Germany would guarantee Poland's frontiers and would extend the existing Polish-German treaty from ten to twenty years. Poland refused and warned Germany about trying to take Danzig by force.

Germany wanted to build a highway and a double-track railway between Czechoslovakia and East Prussia. This meant going through the strip of land now held by Poland, with Danzig at the centre. On 19 November 1938, the Polish Foreign Minister, Colonel Józef Beck, told his German counterpart, Ribbentrop that his country gave an emphatic refusal to this proposal. Hitler's response was to order the mobilisation of his military.

On 5 January 1939, Hitler invited the Polish Foreign Minister to Berchtesgaden for talks, in which he informed Beck that Danzig was German, always had been and always would be. He was also sure that the two countries could reach an agreement over this 'little' problem. The city was under the control of local Nazis and, in the event of an attempted takeover, it would be simple for them to create a quasi-revolutionary situation there.

Within days the situation regarding Poland deteriorated and in Britain, Prime Minister Chamberlain now announced his country's support of Poland. This created a new dilemma for Hitler as up to now his occupation of surrounding countries had gone unopposed. In a top-secret directive codenamed 'Case White', Hitler spelt out his plans to his armed forces. These plans were for the invasion of Poland and to crush the Polish military, making the Free State of Danzig part of Third

Reich territory. The occupation of Danzig was to be effected from East Prussia with the help of the German Navy.

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Well aware that Poland also shared its borders with Russia, Ribbentrop set about cementing German-Russian relations, the Anti-Comintern Pact conveniently having been forgotten. Using the pretence that the deterioration of Polish-German relations was the fault of British policy, Ribbentrop went to Moscow with a letter from Hitler for Stalin, in which Hitler described the tension between Germany and Poland as having become intolerable. Because of the possible intervention of Britain and France, he suggested that it would be in both their interests if they signed a non-aggression pact. Stalin agreed and on 21 August 1939 the two countries signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Four days later Britain signed the Anglo-Polish Pact.

On 1 September 1939, German SS soldiers dressed as Polish soldiers, under the command of Lieutenant Alfred Naujocks, attacked and took over the German radio station at Gleiwitz. Claiming that Polish soldiers had attacked the radio station, Hitler stated that the German people had no other choice but to retaliate. He ordered his troops to cross the borders and his bombers to attack Warsaw.

Chamberlain gave Hitler another opportunity to withdraw but on hearing nothing from the German government announced in a memorable broadcast to the British people on the 3 September 1939:

This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.

Within days Britain had started to mobilise its armed forces.

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## THE INITIAL YEARS

Within a year of the Second World War starting, the British army found itself on the back foot and retreating in an effort to escape the oncoming German army. In the hasty retreat, a number of soldiers and airmen found themselves stranded behind enemy lines. Initially the majority of men who found themselves in this position, or had been captured, belonged to the BEF (British Expeditionary Force). In later years this number was increased by allied airmen who had been shot down whilst on raids on targets over occupied Europe, and a small number of Royal Naval personnel. It was from these beginnings that the various occupied countries formed their resistance organisations and escape lines.

The first British servicemen to be captured, were Sergeant George Booth and Aircraftsman Larry Slattery, who were flying a Blenheim bomber of 107 Squadron when they were shot down during an attack on Wilhelmshaven, the day after war was declared. The first officers to be captured were Squadron Leader Murray and Pilot Officer Thompson. They were shot down whilst attacking German warships in the Wilhelmshaven area just four days later. The German sailors who picked them up from the sea had no idea what they were going to do with them. Initially they treated them like civilians and put them in the local prison, but later transferred them to an old fortress in the middle of Germany – Spangenberg. The British government asked the Red Cross to keep an eye on them and look after their welfare.

Later, other prisoners of war found themselves taken to various prison camps where, in the main, they were treated reasonably well. There were of course a number of prison camps in which the inmates were treated dreadfully and suffered harsh and barbaric treatment at the hands of their guards. The Germans opened up special camps for airmen, soldiers and naval personnel, and even separated the officers in some cases. Special camps, known as *Sonderlager*s, for persistent escapees were also set up, such as *Offizierenzlager (Oflag) IVC* (Colditz Castle) in Saxony and *Stammlager Luftwaffe (Stalag Luft) III* near Sagan.

One of the most famous of all the German prisoner of war camps was Colditz Castle. Originally built in 1014 as a hunting lodge for the Saxon kings, Colditz became a castle over the following years because it occupied a stronghold position on top of a hill. It was destroyed in the fifteenth century but rebuilt in 1583. Over the next 200 years it changed hands through various wars, and then in 1800 was converted into a prison. Thirty years later it became a mental hospital, and remained as such until the outbreak of the Second World War when it was turned into a prisoner of war camp for Polish officers after the fall of Poland. In November 1940, a small number of RAF officers arrived to join the Polish officers, followed by six British army officers and then some French officers. During the next few years the camp became truly international with the addition of Belgians, Dutch, Canadians, South Africans, Indians and a number of other nationalities.

Situated over 300km from the nearest border of a neutral country, the camp was filled with notorious and persistent escapees. Almost all of the inmates had made three or more escape attempts from other camps and were considered to be a dangerous nuisance by the Germans. The boast by the

Germans that the camp was escape proof only gave the inmates more of an incentive to prove the wrong. At one point the camp was visited by Reichsmarschall Herman Goering, who, after being escorted around the camp, declared it to be the most secure of all prisoner of war camps. This was a statement he was to regret making as within months a number of escapes had been made. It was also said that Leutnant Franz von Werra, the only German to successfully escape from an allied prisoner of war camp, visited Colditz to advise on security.

With the debacle of Dunkirk well under way, troops were attempting to make their way back after finding themselves behind enemy lines. Among some of these were RAF pilots who had been shot down and then joined the thousands on the beaches waiting to be rescued. Others, finding the roads jammed with fleeing troops and civilians, decided to head across country and find other ways of getting back to England.

Aircrew who were shot down over Germany found themselves being hunted not only by the military, but also by the local people who would, on some occasions, capture and then lynch them. Heinrich Himmler actually issued a directive to the local police, saying that they were not to interfere with the justice being carried out on the 'Terrorflieger' by local people. On the Eastern Front the SS units took no prisoners and anyone captured was immediately shot.

From the beginning of the war, allied soldiers, sailors and airmen were told that it was their duty to try and escape. In the event of their being captured, it was incumbent upon them to put the enemy to great inconvenience, both in time and manpower, in keeping them incarcerated. The prisoner of war camps themselves were not the most pleasant of places and some of the guards were chosen for their harsh attitudes. In Italy and Japan the vast majority of the guards were just brutal thugs selected for the task. In Germany, however, the majority of German guards were relatively reasonable and the majority of Kommandants were elderly officers who had been recalled to service to release young men to fight.

It became the responsibility of the International Red Cross to look after the welfare of prisoners of war irrespective of nationality. The beginnings of the organisation began as a result of strong representations by Florence Nightingale and others after the Crimea War. She had complained loudly about the inhumane treatment suffered by the sick and wounded. Her cause was helped by the publication of a book by Jean Henri Dunant in Switzerland called *Un Souvenir de Solferino*, which gave an account of the victims of the war. Dunant had witnessed the sight of thousands of wounded men lying helpless and abandoned after the Battle of Solferino and decided to try and do something about it. In 1863 he invited twelve European countries to send representatives to Switzerland to attend a diplomatic conference. This resulted in the first Red Cross convention in Geneva where the twelve European countries decided to lay down the rules of war concerning the treatment of the wounded. In 1864 the Geneva Convention, as it became known, came into being. In 1906 the rules were revised to include the treatment of prisoners of war and, in 1946, further revised to include the civilian population, which included members of organised resistance groups.

There were four Geneva Conventions at the time; they covered the sick and wounded, armed forces on land and sea, prisoners of war and civilians. With regard to the rights of prisoners of war under the rules of the Geneva Convention, they were as follows:

Prisoners should be:

Treated humanely with respect for their persons and honour.

Allowed to inform their next of kin and the Red Cross.

Allowed to correspond with relatives and receive relief parcels.

Allowed to keep their clothes and personal effects.

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Given adequate food and clothing.

Provided with quarters not inferior to those of their captors.

Given medical care as and when their state of health requires.

Paid for any work they do for their captors.

Repatriated if their medical condition is such that they would no longer be able to resume active service.

To be released the moment hostilities cease or as soon as practicable.

Prisoners must not:

Be compelled to give any other information other than their name, age, rank and service serial number.

Be deprived of any monies or valuables without a receipt.

Given any special privileges except for reasons of health, sex, age, military rank or professional qualifications.

Held in close confinement except for breaches of the law or security reasons.

Forced to carry out military work, work that is dangerous, degrading or unhealthy.

The Geneva Convention was put in place to try and prevent brutality and inhuman treatment of prisoners, and was usually monitored by the Swiss, who were neutral. Unfortunately the Japanese and some of the Italian guards had never read (or in some cases, even heard of) the Geneva Convention, just simply chose to ignore it. Under the rules of the convention it was perfectly legal for prisoners of war to try and effect an escape, but although the Germans had signed up to the convention, they had a different interpretation of the escaping clause. They held that if the enemy had spared your life and accepted your surrender you had no right to attempt to fight again. If you were placed in a hospital because of injuries you had received, and had been treated humanely by your enemy, it compounded the offence if you tried to escape.

One of the methods put forward for getting escape kits to prisoners was to place them in Red Cross parcels. Colonel Norman Crockatt, Head of MI9, fought against this very successfully, arguing that if the Germans found the escape kits they would confiscate not only them, but also the Red Cross parcels. The fact that food and medicines were in desperately short supply placed the health of the prisoners at great risk. This was highlighted by a number of Russian prisoners who died from malnutrition when their Red Cross parcel supply was cut off.

Time behind the wire could be used beneficially by learning new skills and languages, but in some camps, with the exception of officers and senior NCOs, prisoners were sent to work in factories and on farms, which left little time for study. Amongst the most popular languages to learn were French and German – for obvious reasons. Another use of time was seen in the development of theatres, which enabled the prisoners to put on shows. This also gave the prisoners access to materials for props and costumes, which were also utilised in the making of civilian clothes and in some cases German uniforms.

In all prisoner of war camps escape committees were formed, utilising all the civilian skills that the soldiers, sailors and airmen brought with them.



Being on the run in the spring or summer was preferable to the winter, as raw vegetables and fruit were quite plentiful to forage, and moving around in the countryside was considerably easier. It also had to be remembered that not all the local people were friendly toward the allies. The fear instilled in them by the Germans if they aided an escapee or evader was enough to deter all but the brave. The people faced torture and death if discovered, but the real number of the many unknown and faceless people in the occupied countries, who daily put their lives on the line, will never be known.

# ESCAPE LINES

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## MI9

In December 1941, MI6 had created a special section called MI9. It was staffed by some former escapees and evaders with the aim of aiding the escape organisations in occupied Europe and the escapees. The department was in two sections, MI9a and MI9b; 'a' was concerned with helping allied escapees and evaders, whilst 'b' dealt with captured enemy agents and servicemen.

Placed under the overall command of Major (later Colonel) Norman Crockatt, MI9's headquarters were located at a secret location in Beaconsfield, but they also had offices in the War Office which were just known as 'Room 900 War Office'. Norman Crockatt was the ideal person to head the organisation – he had fought in the front line of a number of major offensives and had been wounded several times. He was also a good judge of men, an effective organiser and, more importantly, he had no respect for red tape, as many a department head was to find out.

Colonel Crockatt concerned himself with department 'a' and placed a Major A.R. Rawlinson in charge of department 'b'. The whole of MI9 came under the umbrella of military intelligence, but Crockatt saw his role as helping to facilitate the escape of British prisoner of wars and aiding their return to the United Kingdom. By doing this he would not only bring back men ready to fight again but would also secure vital information about the enemy. This would have the additional benefit of helping raise the morale of the troops held in prison camps when they heard of successful 'home runs'.

MI9 helped fund the escape lines that were operating in Europe and developed a large range of aids that could be concealed in everyday objects and sent to men in the prison camps by means of the international postal service. Items included compasses hidden in the tops of fountain pens, and playing cards which when soaked in water displayed a map of Germany and its surrounding borders.

A school was set up in Highgate, London, where Intelligence Officers (IO) from the Army, Navy and Air Force could go to learn about escape and evasion techniques from men who had actually escaped or evaded and had managed to make their way home. Armed with this information the IO would return to their respective services and pass on what they had learned to their men.

Airey Neave had been recruited by MI9 and was the ideal person to give lectures on escape and evasion as he had escaped from Colditz Castle, the so-called escape-proof prisoner of war camp. It was important to learn that the everyday habits of escapees and evaders might betray them. For example, smoking English or American cigarettes, or eating chocolate in public places was something very few people had even seen in wartime Europe. Even placing a knife and fork together in the English way when finishing a meal, was likely to get an escapee or evader caught. If travelling by bicycle it was essential to remember to cycle on the right-hand side of the road. Escape packs, which contained foreign money, silk maps of Europe, hacksaws, bottles of water, compasses, chocolate and even a fishing line, were devised by MI9 and issued to airmen and commandos.

Interrogation methods used by the Germans when questioning escapees or evaders were an aspect of this school's curriculum. The planting of English-speaking Germans amongst prisoners was one

ploy used by the Gestapo on a regular basis, so the need to be wary of your companions until you knew them better was highlighted. Questioning under the threat of violence, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement in windowless and airless cells and torture were amongst the many subjects examined.

As more and more escapees and evaders managed to return, so more and more important information filtered through to MI9. Norman Crockatt gradually increased his staff using experienced servicemen, all of whom had seen action at first hand, to interview the escapees and evaders when they returned.

Throughout the war, and indeed for some time afterwards, MI9 looked after the needs of the returning airmen to the best of their ability and were responsible for the saving of many lives. They also lent financial, physical and moral support to those faceless people who ran the escape lines throughout Europe.

After the war Airey Neave was appointed Chief Commissioner for Criminal Organisation. Together with MI9, he and his team were instrumental in bringing many members of the Gestapo, Abwehr, SS (*Schutzstaffel*) and SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*), as well as traitors, to the attention of the authorities for their mistreatment, torture and murder of allied servicemen and members of the various escape organisations.

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## THE COMÈTE LINE

The Comète Line was an escape network that was set up in Belgium during the Second World War to aid escaping and evading allied soldiers and airmen by helping them return to England. At the outbreak of war, the German army quickly overran Belgium, France and the Netherlands. In Belgium the King surrendered his army even though the consensus was to continue to fight. With their armed forces disarmed and imprisoned, some of the civilian population took it upon themselves to create a resistance organisation.

Although it was known as an organisation, the Comète Line was in fact more like a structure of many parts, because the majority of the people concerned in its make-up never knew each other. Such was the secrecy required that it was necessary that no one person would ever know the full extent of the structure. Initially the escape line formed part of the humanitarian section of the Resistance, where Belgians visited the hospitals where hundreds of allied soldiers were being treated after becoming injured during the fighting. The retreating allied army had left these troops behind because, for a variety of reasons, they didn't have the facilities to take them with them. When the captured troops had recovered, they were taken to prisoner of war camps in an area east of the German Reich. There were also hundreds of captured soldiers that were being transported to these camps, and because they were only lightly guarded, a number managed to slip away from their captors.

Hidden and helped by local townspeople and farmers, those who escaped found themselves with a restricted type of freedom, but with no opportunity of getting home to England. It soon became obvious that those troops that were being hidden by local people could not be hidden indefinitely. The penalty for those found harbouring or helping allied troops was torture or death and in some cases both. The decision was made to make arrangements to start moving the evaders, and in Brussels Baron Jacques Donny started to organise safe houses to where allied troops could be moved prior to being taken through Belgium. In addition to finding safe houses, forged travel and identity documents had to be obtained before the men could travel. The plans were to take the evaders by train to France and from there over the Pyrenees and into Spain.

From the start of the war, the allied troops in France were almost entirely made up of soldiers. By August 1941, the RAF were beginning their bombing campaign on the industrial areas of north-west Germany and the first of the RAF aircrews who had either baled out or crash-landed after being shot up, were being picked up by the Resistance. The number of allied troops requiring help was increasing. In addition to this, German Intelligence was becoming increasingly active and was beginning to penetrate the organisations. The GFP (*Geheime Feldpolizei*), the plain-clothes section of the German military police, concentrated a large part of their efforts in this quarter.

Then in December 1941, when the United States was thrust into the war, the number of bombing raids by B-17 bombers increased dramatically and so did the number of airmen shot down. The number of airmen requiring assistance was growing daily. It was during this period that a 25-year-old Belgian nurse by the name of Andrée de Jongh, codenamed Dedée, one of the main founders and

leaders of the Comète Line, came to the attention of the allies. Together with some of her friends, she took to hiding allied airmen and arranging help for them through the Belgian Resistance.

One of her first triumphs was when she and her friend Arnold Deppe took a British soldier, Private Jim Cromer, through France and over the Pyrenees, the natural border with Spain. Arnold Deppe had already carried out a dummy run travelling by train through Paris and Bayonne, and then walking and climbing over the Pyrenees into Spain.

Together with two other Belgians, who wanted to join the organisation as couriers, Dedée and Arnold Deppe guided Jim Cromer over the Pyrenean Mountains to the British Consulate in Bilbao. The Consul, amazed at seeing the slight figure of Dedée, asked how the organisation was being funded, and she informed him that it was through the generosity of a few rich Belgians. He told her that he would contact the British Embassy in Madrid and attempt to secure additional funding for her. This would be based on 6,000 Belgian francs per person and 1,200 pesetas for the mountain guides. This was to be the first of many such trips and the rescuing of dozens of allied airmen and soldiers.

Together with her father, Frédéric de Jongh, Dedée set up a chain of safe houses along the route. Among these safe houses was one owned by Madame Elvire de Greef (codenamed 'Tante Go') who had left Brussels when the Germans invaded, and moved to the town of Anglet close to the border with Spain. It was with Tante Go that servicemen were rested before starting on the last leg of the journey.

Back in London there was a certain amount of scepticism about the young girl running the Comète escape line. A number of people thought that she might have been a 'plant' by the Gestapo in order to infiltrate the Resistance organisations that they knew were being developed. But when three of the men she had guided through Belgium, Vichy France and over the Pyrenean Mountains into Spain were questioned on their return to England, they could not speak highly enough of her incomparable firmness, resolution and courage. With that kind of endorsement MI9 felt that they had no other option than to fund the escape line – which they did.

On her return to the Consul's office in Bilbao, Dedée met Michael Cresswell, an MI9 officer from the British Embassy in Madrid, and was told of the decision. She was delighted, but emphasised that although London was funding the Line, the overall control would be hers and that London was not to interfere. Cresswell agreed and told her that every time she crossed over into Spain and reported to the Consul in Bilbao, he would give her what money she required and any other items she may have requested.

Over the next two years Dedée travelled along the escape line taking scores of allied airmen with her. Together with Basque guides, notably Florentino Goikoetxea, they escorted the weary, frightened and sometimes injured men over the mountains into the relative safety of Spain. Dedée then returned to Brussels to start all over again.

On one trip, Dedée returned to Brussels to discover that her friend Arnold Deppe had been arrested whilst boarding a train in Brussels with a party of allied airmen. It appeared that a Belgian officer who had been arrested some months earlier attempting to escape using the Comète Line had been tortured and persuaded to talk. In addition to giving up Deppe, he had also given the GFP (*Geheime Feldpolizei*) an accurate description of Dedée. The Gestapo had also questioned Dedée's father, but he managed to persuade them he had had no idea of his daughter's whereabouts or her activities. He was just a simple schoolteacher. Fortunately they never searched his schoolroom otherwise they would have found a hoard of forged identity cards and ration cards in one of the desks.

It was quite obvious that Dedée could no longer operate in Brussels, so she moved to Paris. In Brussels the Germans were making arrest after arrest as the Brussels section of the Comète Line crumbled. In one incident, Tante Go, with Dedée in Paris, returned to Brussels to collect two British

soldiers. The journey through Belgium was uneventful, but at the border crossing with Vichy France one of the British soldiers presented his forged papers to the French official together with his British Army identity card. Without batting an eyelid, the official glanced at all the documents and handed them back without a word. It is not known whether or not the official saw the identity card or simply chose to ignore it.

In Valenciennes, Dedée joined the group and they crossed over the Somme River in a boat owned by a woman known only by the name Nnette. The river was the unofficial crossing point for the *Zone Interdite* (Forbidden Zone) and once across the group boarded the train for Paris. There the group changed trains and went on to Bayonne and from there to the town of Anglet where the Basque guide Florentino Goikoetxea was waiting.

Florentino Goikoetxea was Dedée's first choice of guide; she had used another Basque by the name of Donato, but he had proved to be unreliable. Although he only spoke Euskera, the Basque language, his knowledge of the mountains was second to none. His strength and stamina was another of his many assets and although he had a fondness for alcohol, as many an allied escapee discovered when he provided refreshments for them halfway across the Pyrenees, he proved to be the most reliable.

The escape line's priority was to help allied airmen escape and this was becoming so successful that Herman Goering ordered Luftwaffe Intelligence to destroy the Line. Pressure was now being exerted by all the German Intelligence sections and a large number of arrests were made.

In Brussels, the role that Dedée had vacated was taken over by a Belgian aristocrat by the name Jean Greindl. Codenamed 'Nemo', Greindl ran a Red Cross section that looked after destitute children and set up the headquarters for the escape line on the premises. From that moment on, all escapees were referred to as *Les Enfants*.

In order to continue the Line he also set up 'clearing houses' in various areas such as Ghent, Liege, Namur and Hasselt, where allied airmen could be brought before being put into the escape line. While in these houses, they could be interrogated by the Resistance to make sure they were not Gestapo infiltrators.

With the pressure being intensified to discover those who were running the escape lines, Aire Neave, who had escaped from Colditz and was now working in MI9, tried to persuade Dedée and her father Frédéric to leave Paris and come to London, but they refused.

Among those who worked with Dedée in Paris was Kattalin Aguirre, also known as Kattalin Lamothe. She worked as a cleaner in a hotel that billeted German officers and it was here that she picked up snippets of information that proved helpful to the Resistance. Gaining the trust and respect of the Germans, she used this to her advantage and smuggled parts of radio equipment whilst working for Resistance groups in the area. She was also a key figure at the Paris end of the Comète Line, which passed escaping allied airmen from Paris through to the Bayonne area in the south and then on to the Pyrenees.

The journeys from Paris to the Pyrenees were becoming more and more hazardous, as the German and Spanish border guards increased their patrols and vigilance. On three separate occasions Dedée and Florentino came under fire from both the German and Spanish. It was only Florentino's expert knowledge of the mountains and the smuggler trails that helped them get away.

Such was the spirit that Dedée inspired in others, that when Jean Greindl approached her to say that more than 100 people in Brussels had been arrested in two days and he felt it was too dangerous to go on, she managed to persuade him that he was necessary and vital to the escape line, and so he continued. Then disaster struck. Dedée was about to take three airmen over the Pyrenees when the

weather closed in making it too dangerous for even Florentino to cross over. It was decided to shelter in a farmhouse close to the foothills where a lady known as Frantxia, who owned the farmhouse sheltered and helped to prepare the escapees for the arduous journey over the mountains.

It was while waiting in the farmhouse that *gendarmes*, accompanied by German soldiers, raided the house and arrested them all after a tip-off by a renegade Basque guide by the name of Donato who had once worked for Frantxia. They demanded to know where the other one was, obviously referring to Florentino, and as Donato was the only person who could have known who was in the house, they all knew it had been him who had betrayed them. Florentino had left just hours before and so was able to escape. Imprisoned first at the French-administered Château-Neuf prison in Bayonne, Dedée was questioned by the French. She told them that she was a French girl local to the area showing them her forged papers. Despite her excellent French it soon became obvious that she was lying and the Germans insisted that she be transferred to the notorious Fresnes prison just outside Paris. At first she denied everything, then admitted to just being a courier for the Resistance, but when she realised that they had information that would eventually lead to her father, she decided to admit to everything.

Dedée was handed over to the Gestapo for interrogation but after some hours of interrogation, which she told them a mixture of truth and lies, they refused to believe that such a young girl was capable of organising and running the Comète Line. She was being interrogated alternately by the Gestapo and Luftwaffe Intelligence. Luck then played a part when Luftwaffe Intelligence, who had always been at odds with the Gestapo, insisted on moving her to Germany for further interrogation. Over the next few weeks she was moved to prisons in Essen, Zweibrücken and Westphalia before being placed in a concentration camp. Somehow she got lost within the concentration camp system, whether by design or by accident, but she survived the war at Ravensbrück and was able to give evidence against collaborators.

Dedée's father, Frédéric de Jongh, was arrested when a Belgian by the name of Jacques Desoubrier, a Gestapo double agent who also called himself Jean Masson and Pierre Boulain, had infiltrated the Comète Line and had set a trap using escaping airmen. After his interrogation by the Gestapo, Frédéric de Jongh was taken to Mont Valérien prison and executed by firing squad.

A man by the name of Camille Spiquel, a member of the Belgian Resistance, had introduced Masson to Frédéric de Jongh. He had taken the word of others but no one checked his background. Had they done this they would have discovered that the Belgian Police wanted him for a variety of offences. Masson managed to destroy the organisation run by Spiquel soon after joining the Comète Line.

The arrests of Dedée and Frédéric de Jongh seemed to open the floodgates for arrests. Among those arrested was Jean Greindl who was interrogated by the Gestapo, and then condemned to death when they were unable to make him talk. Sent to one of the Gestapo's barracks to await execution, he was killed during an air raid when allied bombers decimated the barracks, also killing a large number of Gestapo officers.

With the Comète Line seemingly in tatters, Madame Elvire de Greef, (Tante Go) took over the running of the escape line until Baron Jean-François Nothcomb (Franco), a Belgian Army officer who had been operating in Paris, took control. Elvire de Greef's husband, Fernand de Greef, worked as an interpreter in the German *Kommandantur*'s office in Anglet, and so was able to obtain copies of identity cards and travel documents. A number of attempts were made to try and get Dedée out of gaol but none were successful.

Madame de Greef was also arrested at the same time as Jean Greindl, but she 'persuaded' the German authorities that arresting her would only reveal their extensive dealings with local black



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