

Abstract

The Shelburn Line, facilitated by Military Intelligence, Section 9, was something like the American Underground Railroad, but in this case, it was developed during the waning days of World War II to help evading or escaping aircrew to get back to fly against the Nazis. Wherever the airmen went down, they were first housed in Paris, then were accompanied to a small town in Brittany, where a BBC announcement would alert the helpers to start conducting the airmen to “la maison d’Alphonse” atop a Nazi patrolled promontory. From that house, they would have to descend a steep cliff, wait anxiously for oarmen in smaller vessels, and then get into a larger ship, and back to Dartmouth. In silence and in stealth and risking the lives of everyone concerned they escaped to fly again. This is their story.

Introduction

Flying was dangerous and pilots expensive to train and absolutely mission critical for the victors of World War II. “8,000 men were killed in training accidents. During the whole war, 51% of aircrew were killed on operations, 12% were killed or wounded in non-operational accidents and 13% became prisoners of war or evaders. Only 24% survived the war unscathed” (Imperial War Museum). “At a cost of 900 aircraft, young British pilots—aided by gallant Poles determined to avenge the loss of their homeland—had fought off the Luftwaffe, downing about 2,000 enemy planes. The Battle of Britain was the first setback Nazi Germany had encountered anywhere since the war had begun a year before Churchill would sum up the national mood in his tribute the airmen: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few’” (Fraser, 2006, p.633)" Airmen were too often killed or downed in their perilous journeys. Sometimes captured, sometimes saved by locals, they needed to return to England to fly again against the Nazis. Both escapees who broke out of captivity and evaders who were never held captive, were assisted by locals individually or those part of resistance networks, supported by the Military Intelligence 9 group, in many cases just helping when they saw someone in peril. “Up to 30 June 1945, 695 officers and 1,270 other ranks of the RAF and its associated air forces

had been evaders” (Cutter-Brock, 2009, p. xxv). Airey Neave wrote that the “fairest estimate which can be made is that over 4,000, including Americans, returned to England from these occupied countries before the Allied Landing in Normandy in June 1944. (Cutter-Brock, 2009, p. xxv). The following will provide the tale of only one short-lived line, the Shelburn line, that allowed almost 200 airmen to return via Bonaparte Beach near the town of Plouha in Brittany. While in college at Concordia in Moorhead, Minnesota one of my roommates, Elizabeth Billon, would tell of her mother, who was recognized after the war for her work getting airmen back to fly again. Wherever she is, I thank her for sparking my interest in this topic.

To ever so briefly sketch the background before turning to a closer look at MI9, Brittany, and the Shelburn line, it is necessary to review in brief France during WWII, an extraordinarily complex story by necessity just outlined here. Three zones divided occupied France, Vichy France for a few years, and the forbidden zone. Smaller zones existed as well. France’s recent history of a left leaning government, the Popular Front, had brought significant benefits for labor, but in the end had spelled economic disaster and the nationalization of military armaments and aviation, which had negative consequences for preparedness for the oncoming war. "Disappointment and failure," says Julian Jackson, "was the legacy of the Popular Front." Jackson is a professor of History at Queen Mary University of London, and is one of the leading authorities on twentieth-century France and twice winner of the Dufferin Prize. In addition, demographic changes had meant an intentional invitation to foreign workers but there were also unwelcome immigrants. By the end of 1933, 25,000 German refugees had arrived, 85 per cent of them Jews. Half a million Spanish Civil War refugees, “depicted in the conservative press as criminals and reds” (Jackson, 2001, p. 105) were needing housing, food, and more services. Refugees complicated everything. “The refugees presented three kinds of threat to the French,

whose confidence was already shaken. First, the threat to employment. More subtly, there was a threat to swamp French culture, already under assault, many Frenchmen feared, from the mass cultures of America and Russia—mass cultures created and spread, it was alleged, by Jews. Finally, and most urgently threatened to involve a deeply anxious France in unwanted international complications.” (Marrus & Paxton, 1995, p. 36). There was also those fleeing Mussolini’s Italy. France shared much of the racial sentiments and anti-communist sentiments of the Nazis. France, at the outset of war, was unprepared, both practically and emotionally, after WWI. “The shadow of that war was everywhere—in the hundreds of thousands of war cripples, the war widows, the ruined cities of northern France, the war memorials” (Jackson, 2001, p. 86). Naturally most were hoping against hope that war would not come, but Hitler’s menace was very real. They had not had enough time to build up a strong military, their economy was in bad shape, and politically, citizens had widely diverging opinions from the far right to the far left and everywhere in between, which made it hard for people to coordinate efforts. The Germans overran France in weeks. By June of 1940, the French was divided into Vichy France and Occupied France, with a long swathe of coast being the Forbidden Zone.

In hindsight, and to many at the time, it is and was, crystal clear that Nazi Germany was evil incarnate, but in the moment, to many French, the Nazis: a/looked like winners; b/Nazi hatred of Jews and communists was shared to one degree or another, by many; c/Nazis had ideas that appealed to people, not only the antisemitism but the appeals to family and motherhood and traditional folk culture and d/if not a Vichy government, a German puppet government would be the alternative. Jews and communists were both irrationally the target of the Vichy. “The anti-communism of Vichy was not the principled opposition to the soviet system or the disgust with the acrobatics of the French Communists was widespread in many quarters, including the

Resistance. Rather it was an irrational, paranoid, and hysterical reflex” (Novick, 1968, pp. 9). Vichy believed that it had important cards to play—the naval fleet, the Empire, the Free Zone—but paradoxically the very existence of those prevented a more robust policy. Precisely because it did have something to lose, the Vichy government was always terrified to push its case too far for fear of provoking the Germans. (Jackson, 2001, p. 233) The French were unable to see how much Hitler wanted to first milk them and then destroy them, especially since in the beginning they saw affable young men who in many cases tried to smile at babies and act with some measure of kindness. But since France had to pay all the occupation costs --the payments were set at 20 million marks at a crippling exchange rate of 20 to one (Ousby, 1997, p. 66) and give up resources at inflated prices, the Germans soon showed their real impact. The French were hungry all the time. The health impact was real, resulting in higher death rates, weight loss, and disease. “The psychological effects of malnutrition are subtler, less noted by the sufferers themselves and less susceptible to scientific survey. The chief effect of being unsure of one’s next meal and of being naggingly hungry in the longer term is that one gets overwhelmingly preoccupied with food...In retrospect, this would seem to many of those who did manage to survive the real humiliation of being occupied: they had thought of themselves and their stomachs when they should have been thinking of France” (Ousby, 1997, p. 125). Their economic situation was dire. One example, “the total contribution of the French aircraft industry to Germany was not insignificant; 27 percent of Germany’s transport planes in 1942, 42 percent in 1943, and 49 percent in 1944 had come from France”(Jackson, 2001, p.187). “By the end of 1941, the Germans were taking 40 percent of French bauxite, 55 percent of the aluminum, 90 percent of cement, 40 percent of wool, 60 percent of champagne and 45 percent of shoes and leather supplies.” (Jackson, 2001, p. 188).

Pétain, hero of WW1, ambassador to General Franco, became “Chief of State” in the Armistice signed with Germany on 23 June 1940, making him leader of a rump state. The border between Vichy and occupied France served the Nazis in that “it made those who advocated a defiant government in exile less credible. It encouraged the French to rally round the national government...On a practical level, the national government and its sovereignty were tolerated by the Germans as devices for getting the French to do their dirty work” (Ousby, 1997, p. 68). “How could Vichy have been so credulous about Germany? A partial explanation can be found if one moves from the high politics of collaboration, which was a dialogue of the deaf, to collaboration as a daily process of negotiation.” (Jackson, 2001, p. 186). Vichy did share certain values with the Nazis. Vichy forbade employment of married women in public sector, made divorce harder, promoted regional culture, and reversed naturalizations that had occurred since 1927, so 6000 Jews of 15000 people lost their naturalization. By June of 1941, between 4000 and 5000 communists had been arrested. “At the end of 1940, the internment camp population stood at about 55-60 thousand, consisting largely of foreign Jewish refugees, former members of the International Brigades, and French Communists.” (Jackson, 2001, p 151)

Collaboration as specified by Article Three of the Armistice, required the French authorities in the Occupied Zone to conform to the regulations of the German authorities and “collaborate with them in a correct manner” (Jackson, 2001, p. 167) They had to: prepare for a “favorable outcome” in the “imminent peace treaty and pay for the German troops, 400 million francs a day” (Jackson, 2001, p. 169) The Nazis got the best food, the best wine, and the softest landings, while the French lived in fear, went hungry, and were always at risk. “In total, 471 hostages were executed by the Germans between September 1941 and May 1942” (Jackson, 2001, p. 182). It is really not possible to discuss one monolithic France during the war, however. Besides

the Unoccupied Zone, there was a small Italian zone, Alsace-Lorraine, The Nord & Pas-de Calais and Forbidden Zone. Bretagne 's coast was part of a long wall of concrete for U-boat pens and mined waters to prevent the British from interfering and was administered by the Military. “In the occupied zone, the Wehrmacht was quite present; at certain times there were close to two million men in these regions. The population felt it physically and daily and suffered the consequences: requisition of houses, the seizure of foodstuffs, obstructive control by the administration” (Dreyfus, 2019, p. 18). The communists acted to sabotage the Nazis, but “from June 1941 to March 1944, the Wehrmacht lost less than 2500 men because of the Resistance...German reprisals, on the other hand, entailed for the same period close to 10,000 shot and around 40,000 deported” (Dreyfus, 2019, p. 20).

Resistance

There are wranglings about what resistance was, from those claiming that their Parisian chic was to resist the German breaking of the French spirit to very military identification of specific acts and groups that could be demonstrated to deter German military success. (Jackson, 2001). As Jackson argues, “Contesting or disobeying a law on an individual basis is not the same as challenging the authority that makes those laws” (Jackson, 2001, p. 388). “On 1 January 1941, when, via the BBC, the Gaullists in London urged people to mark the New Year by staying indoors between 2 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the call was widely heeded and not just in Paris, despite German arrangements to distribute free potatoes during the proscribed hours, but also in other towns and even villages through the Occupied Zone “(Ousby, 1997, p. 208). One of the mechanisms of resistance was newspapers and as Jackson writes, “The first Resistance newspaper was a bottle thrown into the sea; it was impossible to know what happened to them next” (Jackson, 2001, p. 440). These newspapers were used to publish something approximating the truth as well

as naming traitors. But by the end of the war most of these had significantly increased distribution. *Combat* published 10,000 newspapers in 1942 but was distributing possibly 200,000 by 1944. Similar increases in *Franc-Tireur*, *Defense de la France*, and *Cahiers du témoignage Chrétien*. “France’s collapse into defeat had been marked by her collapse into dependence on rumour running to wildness, her subjection to propaganda and censorship from the Germans, from Vichy and the presses they both controlled. Resistance set out to answer the hunger, which neither rumour nor officialdom satisfied...Their most tangible purpose was to provide information otherwise censored and to counter official propaganda. Effectively the two activities were indistinguishable: merely to record the de facto annexation of Alsace and Lorraine and other German violations of the armistice agreement, for example, or the extents of German requisitioning, was also to protest and oppose them” (Ousby, 1997, p. 219). De Gaulle, through his spokesman Maurice Schumann, provided more than 68 radio speeches between 1940 and 1944. Vichy estimated that 300,000 were listening to him in the beginning of 1941 and that 10 times as many were doing so a year later” (Ousby, 237). As we will see later, the BBC played a role in the Shelburn Line. “Resistance was a territory without maps” (Jackson, 2001, p. 406). Jackson characterizes the Resistance as on a spectrum of networks and/or movements. Networks performed tasks—information gathering, sabotage, helping with escape routes. Movements were about connecting like-minded patriots. There were as many kinds people involved in the resistance as there are French people. Studies done more recently have delved into the gender, labor status, religious beliefs, and political leanings. But one man, Jean Moulin, was tasked by de Gaulle with coordinating the principal resistance organizations into one, the National Council of the Résistance. Moulin was an extraordinary man. He refused to sign a document blaming the massacre of civilians in La Taya on Senegalese troops of the French army. Having inspected the scene, he knew that

they had been gunned down by the Nazi, and rather than endure more torture he used a broken pieces of glass to try to kill himself. He survived long enough to act as coordinator of resistance groups before being captured near Lyons in June 1943 and killed. He coordinated the largest resistance groups. They were:

Henri Frenay (Combat) [Christian conservative]

Emmanuel d'Astier (Libération) [left, masonic, workers]

Jean-Pierre Lévy (Francs-tireurs) [Communist]

Pierre Villon (Front national) [All inclusive, including Catholics]

Pierre Brossolette (Comité d'action socialiste) [Socialist, Labor]

But resistants were everywhere. H. R. Kedward, in article about “resiting” Resistance research, discussed the resistance that resulted from Pierre Laval’s targeting of young men for the Service du Travail Obligatoire, and eventually led to tens of thousands of refractaires who sought refuge in the countryside” (1997, p. 271), becoming resistants and making those who gave them shelter resistants as well. As Ousby writes in his books, intellectuals, career army officers, disgusted by Petain and the surrender, were resistants as were teachers, laborers, farmers, women, and men from all walks of life. (Ousby, 1997)

Women seem to have sought titles of recognition less than men, especially since they had "done nothing but ordinary things," and that, in the spirit of the time, a distinction awarded to the "head of the family" was considered valid for the household. The value system of that time is clearly reflected in this tribute to the "women in the Orne resistance," written in 1947 by the former F.F.I. chief of Orne. He resolutely places women's resistance in the sphere of the private, love, and even spirituality... The question of the propensity of women to resist leads to the issue of counting resistants as a whole. From questioning a part, we thus arrive at questioning the whole, around hypotheses whose testing will help delineate the interest. It seems for the moment that women registered as resistants only represent full members of the organizations. An accurate count, however, should take into account resistance "at home," which could prove to be as dangerous as any other. In a struggle where the front was everywhere and the rear was nowhere, since the battlefield included the homes of families, traditional distinctions fell, whether between soldiers and civilians or between the public sphere and the private domain. The 12% of women present in the organizations

therefore does not seem to constitute the index of female participation in the Resistance, but rather an indicator of their form of participation, itself linked to a sociocultural situation. (Andrieu, 1997, p. 93)

Resistants did have to share certain characteristics in terms of being able to be nimble, secretive, and not liable to break under questioning. One of the resistants, known as Val Williams, a Russian raised in the U.S, was problematic in talking too much in public places. A lawyer, Paul Campinchi who we will meet later, “mentioned Williams’ imprudent behavior, saying the Oaktree chief had talked about his mission to anyone who wanted to listen. Seemingly the only blunder he had not made was to put ads in the newspaper to recruit MI agents” (Douglass, 2022, p. 16). It wasn’t uncommon for people to fail under pressure. One leader, André Girard, kept elaborate records which fell into the hands of the Nazis allowing them to get the members at their leisure. (Ousby, 1997). “In a fight where the front was everywhere and the rear nowhere since the battlefield included the homes of families, traditional distinctions fell, whether between soldiers and civilians or between the public sphere and the private domain” (Andrieu, 1997, p. 93). The French resistance had to learn gradually to cope with a great deal of ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty and even violence, and an elevated level of brutality. ‘When we think about repression, we need to draw not only on statistics (a valuable resource and one that has become more accurate in recent years), but we also need to consider the ways the repression worked, since this affected and shaped the modus operandi of the resistance. Studying repression in all these dimensions, we come closer to understanding that death was constantly on the mind of each resister, daily and insistently. (Douzou, 2019, p. 101). The most violent of the resistance groups called for the death of traitors “*Combat* wrote that it was necessary for patriots to take justice into their own hands since if the traitors to continue to get away with their crimes, they would be joined by other cowards and opportunists. Justice and public welfare demand that they be pitilessly punished”

(Novick, 1968, p. 31). *Défense de la France* wrote to kill Germans was to purify—and for the traitors and the miliciens, “exterminate them” (Novick, 1968, 31).

“The dichotomy between ‘resistance’ and ‘collaboration’ is too crude to accommodate the multiplicity of responses to the (Vichy) regime” (Jackson, 2001, p. 13) And while anti-Jewish measures were not the only Vichy policies to be resisted, it is important to note that far from following the dictates of the Nazi regime, Vichy’s discriminatory laws were passed independently of German pressure. Until 1942 the “attitude of the French populations towards the Jews was one of indifference verging on hostility” (Jackson, 2001, p. 15). “The collaborationist world was not homogenous—it contained pacifists and fascists, Socialists and Catholics (Jackson, 2001, p.192). “Membership of the collaborationist movements is difficult to estimate. If one adds up the membership of all the various movements between 1940 and 1944, the total will not exceed 220,000” (Jackson, 2001, p. 194) From the beginning, Jewish shops had their windows smashed with no actions taken by their neighbors, in large part. But, as Jackson (2001) wrote, “the audience for collaborationist ideas was larger than the membership” (p. 198). “Although we must try to penetrate the various meanings of silence it would be wrong to go to the other extreme of trying to fit all conduct onto the spectrum of resistance and collaboration. “Individuals were confronted with moral choices every time they came into contact with a German, and they had to fashion individual codes of conduct compatible with dignity, self-respect, conscience, and survival” (Jackson, 2001). By 1943, it is impossible to draw neat lines. Who was resistant? Membership in a group doesn’t count all the folks who just did the right thing in a human sense. Take the example of an FTP fighter wounded in the village of Barjo’s in the Var and given refuge by a peasant also working for the FTP. After his wounded finger went gangrenous, this resister was looked after by two doctors, both of whom kept silent. The whole operation was organized by the wife of a local

agent of the Azur F2 network. In total, ten people participated in saving this one. (Jackson, 2001, p. 477). Women in particular, maybe, wanted to help to be reunited with their husbands, in Germany in the STO. Some 1.5 million French were prisoners of war in Germany. Others had joined the Free French in Britain, while others were hiding with the maquis. Singles, widows, and couples provided shelters, as they wanted to contribute to the fight, but all had to weigh the risks. (Rossiter, 1989, p. 5) “No clandestine circuit of any use or size could work in the field without extensive help by women, if only as safe-house keepers and couriers; a point often forgotten by male commentators” (Foot, 1987, p. 154). Sainclivier (1980) studied the composition by worker-category in one department of Bretagne and found that shopkeepers and merchants were overrepresented -- making up between 15% and 20% of the total membership” (p. 49). They were also overrepresented in the collaborators’ numbers. Also, she found surprising the “near-absence from the Resistance: that of farmers. Although farmers make up the majority of the active population in the department (52.38%), they only constitute 6.54% of the Resistance members. Their under-representation in the Resistance is undeniable, even when considering the war prisoners and gaps in our sources”(Sainclivier, 1980, p. 49). This is surprising, as well, from the accounts of escapees and evaders, who often talked about their heavy reliance on farmers for their initial rescue, at least.

Military Intelligence, Section 9

British Directorate of Military Intelligence Section 9, of the War Office, was responsible for understanding and responding to the needs of downed airmen. “MI9 had several aims: to secure intelligence about the enemy, from repatriated prisoners-of-war and by coded correspondence with those still in POW camps; to assist prisoners to escape, by advice given beforehand and by smuggling escape gear in to them; to train the armed forces in methods of escape and evasion; and,

eventually, to organize groups of helpers abroad to assist escapers on their way home” (Foot, 2001). During the day, crash landings in France could be met with clothing and assistance: “Lieutenant T. P. Mayo of the American 422nd Bombardment Squadron was shot down on his way back from a raid on St Nazaire; several Frenchwomen came up to him as he landed, some of them already carrying plain clothes for him” (Foot & Langley, 1980, p. 201). Nighttime help was harder to come by, as curfews prevented people from being available. Major Norman Crockatt was put in charge of this new organization, responsible for getting servicemen from all branches, back to England, sometimes to fly again, if they were pilots and able to fly again. To that end, returnees were interrogated to best understand their needs. In addition to training to act as though French, their immediate needs were addressed in an emergency kit. “Besides the water bag and Halazone tablets for purifying the water, the kit had a number of other items that were useful to a man on the run. It contained a tube of condensed milk or candy bars, which provided energy, as did the Horlicks malted milk tablets also included. Benzedrine tablets in the kits helped combat fatigue. In many cases the men had been up since before dawn preparing for their mission, and these tablets counteracted the shock and exhaustion that resulted from the combination of a long waking period and the experience of being shot down in enemy territory. Also included were matches, a sewing kit and adhesive tape-both useful for mending torn clothes while bailing out-and chewing gum for promoting the production of saliva. A compass, included in every kit, enabled the evaders to keep up with the direction in which they traveled. (Ottis, 2001, p. 13) MI 9’s Clayton Hutton had the British Museum collect for him narratives of evasion from over 50 used bookstores to determine the need, one of which was maps, which were created on silk. These were small and not damaged by water, and did not make noise. Evaders and escapees needed compasses, so he crafted them in the brass buttons on studs that attached collars to shirts. He also included fishing hook and line

(Foot & Langley, pp. 30-34). As early as Dunkirk, those escaping were urged to “notice everything they can” (Foot & Langley, 1980, p. 56). They were interrogated when they returned, and the information churned into assistance. One of those inventions, based on the complaints, was new flying boots. Clayton Hutton got to work “The final mark of Hutton Boot contained a considerable array of escape aids—the heel could be opened to reveal a small cavity containing several silk maps, a compass and a small file; the laces contained a gigli flexible saw; and concealed in the cloth loop at the top of the boot was a small knife” (Clutton-Brock, 2009, 247). Much of the assistance was also the random generosity of farming families. One example: Don Wares and Ray Barlow were down but stopping to beg for food and were treated to “food and warm hospitality. They also had their first shave in 10 days, before being offered the bliss of a soft warm bed and given coats the following day. (Clutton-Brock, 2009, p. 247-248), p. 201). Other stories are as common, where airmen are betrayed and taken to prisoner of war camps or shot on the spot. MI9 officers facilitated existing networks of resistants in France to try to have positive outcomes for their downed airmen and fewer of the other stories.

Brittany

Brittany has long been independent-minded. Granted a certain measure of independence from François I in the 16th century in a treaty revoked in 1789 in the revolution which also intended to make the Bretons more in keeping with the rest of France. During the nineteenth century, Brittany remained predominantly, according to Mees (2011), “Catholic, clerical, conservative, scarcely republican in spirit . . . within the framework of an increasingly bourgeois, anticlerical, and republican France.” The nascent and slow process of industrialization did not produce any remarkable transformation of the agrarian structure of society. In 1856, 84 percent of the 2.3 million Bretons lived in a rural habitat. By 1936, this figure had only dropped to 73 percent, with

the French average for the same year at 48 percent” (Mees, 2011, p. 257). Separatism was expressed in independence-minded intellectuals who promoted the language and culture of Brittany. Emsav means “insurrection” or “recovery” in Breton and by 1938 this Breton movement was strong and their paper, the *Breiz Atao* had twenty thousand subscribers. “Its core ideas were twofold: first, the racial conviction that the Breton people were ethnically superior and had more in common with the other Celtic people than with the French; and second, the notion that the preservation of the race required separation from the French enemy and the establishment of an independent state” (Mees, 2011, p. 260). Thus, they were very much sympathetic to the racialized notions of the Nazis. In the Cotes D’armor (Breton Ar Mor—the sea, but also harking back to the Roman province name of Amorica), was particularly anti-French. “A 1938 publication charged that Bretons were once free; now they are the slaves of France” (Peters, 1986, p. 68) and discouraged young men from responding to the draft but more men from this region fought and lost their lives (Peters, p. 71). The Breton independence movement is still strong, though the French government resists call for instruction in the Breton language.

The Nazi navy needed Brittany to launch its U-Boats out over the Atlantic (Zloga & Tan, 2018). 1,170 U-boat patrols were conducted from fight-to-the-last-man stations with U-boat pens located in 3 deep harbors—Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire. Many homes were destroyed, people displaced, and those hospitalized moved. (Lozac’h, 2013, p. 68). Fishermen couldn’t ply their trade, hotels were requisitioned, and workers worked on the Atlantic Wall, which cost 3.7 billion Reichsmarks, took 20 million cubic meters of concrete, and 1.2 million tonnes of steel. The Germans fortified the ports they thought the allies might come to use for troops and material (Lozac’h, 2013, p. 71) Brittany played a significant role in the Allies Operation Overlord plans as well, due to the Allies’ need for deep-water ports to resupply their troops. Brittany experienced

a “relatively quiet war” (Clout, p. 167) overall in keeping with its long history of agricultural production. Five departments were then Finistère, Côtes du Nord, Morbihan, Ille et Vilaine, and Loire Atlantique but one Brittany, one independently minded cultural group with their own language, which had been pressing for separation from France for generations. They did, controversially, actively collaborate with the Nazi’s, figuring the enemy of their enemy was their friend and being in alignment with many of their ideas. The Germans concurred, in August 1940, Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in Paris, after meeting Hitler on the Berghof, declared that the Reich should have “the possibility of detaching Brittany from France” (Mees, 2011, p. 271). It is easy to look back knowing how events would unfurl, but when the Nazi’s stormed through the Maginot Line and conquered France, many of the citizens of Brittany, as did many French, assumed that they were planning for a future world with the Nazis in charge and the Nazi’s were willing to grant independence for Brittany.

The Shelburn Line

It took 2 years and cost 10-15 thousand British pounds to train a pilot. (Huguen, 1972, p. 34) Almost all of the accounts, while praising the courage of all the helpers and the airmen, acknowledged the critical need for pilots as well as the cost of training them. If they survived the downing of their aircraft, were not immediately found and captured by the Germans, they needed to be housed, fed, issued documents, and be transported. Being transported out via Spain and Gibraltar meant more time for the aircrew to get discovered and more time that they had to be fed and housed, risking betrayal and possible death for their hosts. The escape routes over land could be complex and crisscrossed hundreds of miles across the heart of Nazi-occupied countries” (Fry, 2021, p. 162). An account well worth reading, *The Lost Airman*, of one tough Bronx native, Arthur Meyerowitz, did not evade through Brittany but the more typical route

Spain, underlines just how many preparations had to be made and sustained, and how many died keeping the airmen safe. From the time he was initially downed in December 31, 1943, until June of 1944, with many close calls, close inspections of papers, restless stays with hosts, a dangerous 115 mile drive from Seville to the southwestern port of Algeciras and then a seven mile trip by boat to Gibraltar through mined waters and U-boat active routes and an arduous and a year's worth of hospitalizations ahead of him at the end of his ordeals he was assisted by dozens who were risking their lives housing, feeding, creating fake papers, and transporting him. There were many lines that helped with these activities, all of them presenting dangers. The Comet Line was very successful, but at a cost. Of the comet Line helpers who fell into German hands, 23 were executed, while another 133 died in concentration camps or as a result of their incarceration" (Grant, 2014, p. 74).

The MI9 leaders okayed the proposal for the Shelburn Line. Alternatively spelled Shelburn, Shelbourne, Shelburn it was a short lived but important line, one window into the tens of thousands of underground movement people that got British, Canadian, and American pilots back to fly again, if their health permitted. The Shelburn Line Air operations over Europe intensified in 1943 and with them the number of airmen being shot down over enemy territory increased. One of many (Comet and the Pat O'Leary lines were the largest) lines, something like the underground railroad in American history, was facilitated by the MI9 Military Intelligence 9 back in London. Airey Neave and Jimmy Langley, who had their own first-hand experiences with escapes, headed up Room 900 in charge of escapees and evaders, responsible for interrogating returnees to get insights into what was needed and then finding the trainers, the money, and the material. Dartmouth in England to the beach at the Anse Cochat (4-5 hours) near Plouha was the route using Royal Navy Motor Gun Boats (MGBS) to get airmen back to

England with smaller boats oared into shore to drop off material and collect the airmen. The first trip was planned for December 1943 but not undertaken until January of 1944. The Shelburn line would take pilots and other airmen from wherever they landed, to Paris. The airmen, wherever they had fallen, were first put up in safehouses in Paris, before taking a train at the Gare Montparnasse to St. Brieuc with minders, who gave them strict instructions to “keep their mouths shut, not to smoke (since Americans held their cigarettes differently from the French), not to make eye contact with each other or anyone else, and to feign deep sleep to avoid having to reply if they were spoken to by an official” (Douglass, 2022, p. 26). Some remained in St Brieuc for some time, which was the center of active resistance people and where the paper, the *National Front of Cotes-du-Nord* was printed, with instructions to members to have a plan for hiding, organize yourself (as “The Gestapo and its lackeys from Petrain-Laval have already covered out raids” (Lozac’h, 2013, p. 93) and a column called the Kollaborators, which called out the guilty.

The two men heading it up in France were Lucien Dumais (codename Lucien Desbiens, a purported undertaker (the identity it was thought would make it uncomfortable for people to ask about his work), with a backstory that made sense of his French-Canadian accent and Raymond LaBrosse (codename Marcel Desjardins, salesman of medical equipment). Dumais describes the experiences in commando training after he escaped his Germans captors following the 1942 disaster of Dieppe, when 3,623 of the 6,086 men who landed had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Dumais knew the French to be friendly by first-hand experience because when the Germans marched him and the other captives through Saint Martin-L'Eglise, French people gave them clothes and food. "Before we left England we had been given an escape course by Special intelligence officers. One thing they told us was that there were organizations helping shot-down

airmen of the Allied forces to return to England. Should we ever need them, they said we should look around and not despair” (Dumais, 54). He learned from the locals as well as making his way back, everything from removing the hobnails on his boots and using lofts in barns, “At our escape conference they had said: Not in the morning, but at the end of the day. Women in preference to men. Old rather than young. Poor rather than rich. Country people rather than city. Priests and doctors rather than merchants or shopkeepers” (Dumais, 1975, p. 60). He knew how to dawdle, and to ask for advice. One of his hosts recommended a path, bought a train ticket and he rode in nervous silence near German guards, fortunate to have avoided a demand for papers. He was lucky again and again and was connected with the local Resistance. The American Consul refused to help him in Marseilles officially (since he was Canadian, not American) but connected him to another resistance group. He was given clothes, food, and even wine and left on a stressful voyage back to England through Spain, where he was linked up with Raymond LaBrosse, his radioman, another who could speak French, from Ottawa who had already affected the escape of 27 airmen through France and across the Pyrenees into Spain with the Burgandy network. After the war, LaBrosse was awarded the Military Cross, the Medal of Liberty with Silver Palm, and the French Croix de Guerre and Legion of Honour. The two of them would successfully affect the return of around 200 airmen.

Being the radioman was tricky, both because it was very dangerous to get caught with the equipment and the equipment was delicate. Both Dumais and LaBrosse were trained with parachuting, pistol shooting, forcing locks and much else. They were given close to a million francs to do whatever was needed. The network included one MarieRose Zerling who had attended Wellesley College, and was responsible for obtaining false papers, food, and clothing for the evaders and arranged for their shelter and transportation to their next stop. (Ottis, 150)

including permits to be in the forbidden zone, the *Ausweiss*. On them, the airmen had forged demobilization papers, old metro tickets, and the *Ausweiss*. They had tear-gas pens, buttons that were compasses, strong cable espadrilles (Huguen, 1993, p. 284) Zerling was betrayed, though, and “she was tortured by the Germans and sentenced to be executed but was instead deported to Auschwitz along with her parents. Though her father died at Auschwitz, Zerling and her mother were repatriated when the Allies liberated the camp in August 1945" (Ottis, 151). Betrayals were more than norm than the exception and she would feel guilty for the death of her father for the rest of her life.

Betrayal was part of the story for Dumais and LaBrosse. Their first contacts in Paris were arrested, and they had to move quickly connecting with a lawyer who, it was suspected, could have been betrayed by others who had been taken by the Germans. But LaBrosse trusted him and turned to him for the Paris operations. Their head of operations in Brittany was François Le Cornec, whose job was to ascertain who would shelter aviators, devise a system of quickly getting the airmen (priority pilots, navigators, crews, and agents at risk) from outlying safehouses to the Maison d'Alphonse, at the edge of cliffside they would have to descend. Le Cornec would distribute money for food for the airmen which would have to be purchased at great expense on the black market. In return, the British boats would bring cases of needed materials, including guns and ammunition (Douglass, 2022). The resistance members developed a system of making sure they didn't have spies, that the downed airmen were who they said they were—with British airmen being tested their knowledge of cricket, but with Americans, baseball. Dumais found safe spaces for ammunition, guns, plans, codes, radio equipment, and money.

Members of the resistance could and were arrested by the Germans and obviously, this area was carefully and heavily guarded. One American, married to a Frenchman, housed dozens

of airmen in her chateau in Bretagne, but was betrayed, tortured (they removed her fingernails) starved, were what we would call water-boarded, and eventually sent to Ravensbrück and then Buchenwald until liberated by Patton's troops (Lyman, 2022). One of the early contacts told his brother and sister-in-law everything, moments after having just been briefed by Dumais on the importance of being discreet. But Dumais' strongest recollection was that "the hospitality of the Bretons was heartwarming; in fact, their one ambition on meeting strangers seemed to be to see how fast they could get them drunk. They considered it an insult if one left their house without eating and drinking" (Dumais, 1975, p. 140). François Le Cornec, cafe owner, had chosen the beach, which was accessed with difficulty but was felt to be best, as it had caves to hide in, while waiting for the boat from Dartmouth to be in place. The "parcels" would have to slide down a hundred feet cliff, but it was considered doable both for exiting airmen and for those hauling supplies up the very steep cliffside" (Dumais, 1975, 141). The places where Dumais and LaBrosse waited for the anticipated call to move were infested with fleas and freezing, making them even more anxious to get a move on. When they got the word, from farmyards from near and far, airmen were conducted to the Maison d'Alphonse, knowing the boat was on its way. There were still lots of tense moments, including one where Dumais's bag was searched back in Paris and him with tons of French resistance money on him. He told the guard, "You're with us or against us" and the guard said they were only looking for food and pretended like he did not see all the francs. (Dumais, 1975, p. 156). Initial planned rescues were delayed by weather.

In the end, the first run included airmen and Val Williams, who had gotten a number of airmen out through Spain but who was betrayed by Roger le Neveu "Roger le Legionnaire," as were many. Val Williams is just one of many who were betrayed, arrested, and in his case, escaped. The boats from England, manned by 36, were 128 feet long, and had smaller boats that

could get into shore. The BBC would broadcast messages saying the operation was going to happen or not, such as “Bonjour tout le monde a la maison d’Alphonse,” a delay being signaled by “Yvonne pense toujours a l’heureuse occasion.” Airmen would have been waiting (and endangering those who hid them and shared their food with them, etc.) for this moment. There were so many things that could go wrong--bad weather, betrayals, arrests, torture, before the lucky were gotten back to England to fly again. The helpers were from all levels of society as Clutton-Brock (2009), outlined in *RAF evaders*: a doctor, a schoolteacher, a lawyer and insurance agent Gilbert Thibault, a merchant navy captain Joseph Mainguy, tailor Monsieur Ballet, and several farmers, but to name a few.

January 29th in 1944 was the first successful run, the evaders gathered literally at the house of Alphonse, a sailor called Gicquel, atop a very steep cliff leading down a path to the beach. Nazis patrolled the area, so with silence, the 13 American airmen, 4 RAF, and two future Free French as well Val Williams were expatriated, Val Williams, a Russian who had escaped the Gestapo daringly, was completing his service, although he wanted to return but was too well known by the Germans. He was incapacitated with a broken leg so had to be, with great difficulty, taken down the steep cliffside in a stretcher. The whole operation was fraught, from getting the airmen to Brittany from Paris, getting the airmen from their safehouses to the Maison d’Alphonse, getting them down the steep cliff, hiding in the caves until the rowboats were in place, getting on the boats manned by oarsmen wearing soft felted shoes and oars wrapped in rags to minimize the noise, getting to the MGBs. The airmen were warned about the potential consequences of making any noise and were really careful to obey the orders of the guides. The entire process took 25 very tense, silent, minutes for unloading materiel, loading the airmen, and getting back to the MGB for the trip back to Dartmouth. The second operation took place

February 28, 1944, this time 20 rescued, 16 of them American airmen. Increased patrols meant increased chances of discovery. In that run, the transport was caught up in an obstacle and when the French gendarmes approached, the driver enlisted their help and later said “If they were not patriots we would have killed them with our bare hands.” (Neave, 2010, p. 308) The gendarmes let them pass. On March 28, 1944, another 30 airmen were sent on their way to Dartmouth, 18 of them USAF. “I was able to report to the USAF command that a substantial portion of those who bailed out of their aircraft on these raids (preparatory to the Invasion) within a month, and sometimes within a few days” (Neave, 2010, p. 309). March 30th saw another, July 13th, and 14th, the final runs. Shelburn was therefore responsible for the rescue by sea of 128 airmen and seven agents, making a total of 135 men and women” (Neave, 2010, p. 312) In addition they conducted 98 men to Spain. Others were rescued from the Freteval Forest in August.

To give a sense of one man’s experience, although there are literally hundreds, here is the account of one rescue. One of the airmen on the third Shelburn line rescue was Neelan Parker. Four crew were killed when his B-17 was shot down. “He followed a railway line and hid in a ditch... He and two others were hidden in an old stable, then guided to some woods. From there they were picked up and taken to a farm where they were given civilian clothes. They then left the farm separately, at different times. Then they were hidden in a hut in the initial copse, were brought wine and told to keep calm. Other Frenchmen took the navigator, Jarvis Cooper (who spoke some French) there. At about 9 p.m., carrying a wounded colleague, they took them to the small village of Bonvillers (south of Noailles). There, their equipment was destroyed, and they hid their identification tags in their shoes. Jarvis Cooper was given civilian clothes and taken away. Parker went to a second house, where he was given clothes and spent the night in a third. He was unable to move when he woke up. Taken to a butcher, they sent a doctor

to examine Parker. The chief of police of Bonvillers, was the head of the local Resistance. Like Jarvis Cooper and Glenn Camp, Parker slept two nights at the home of Dr. Charles Andrieu and Marie Granger at 39 Rue de Paris in Neuilly-en-Thelle (Oise), from December 31 to January 2, 1944. In his RAMP report, Jarvis Cooper confirms that Dr. Andrieu then drove Parker, Camp and Cooper in his car to a blacksmith in another village. The RAMP report indicates a stay from January 1 to 8, 1944 with the "Malangue (Robert?)" family, in Croix-en-Thelle (accommodation, food, clothing)". This was in fact Auguste Malingue, a blacksmith in Crouy-en-Thelle by Blincourt, who appears in the list of French Helpers. They stay there for a week, visited daily by the doctor. At the end of the week, the doctor and another Frenchman come to take the three men to Clermont. They are the lodgers of Henri Maigret and Gilbert Thibault. Eventually, with the aid of dozens, they get evacuated. (American Air Museum, n.d.) The accounts of those repatriated are in various repositories and are solidly documented. Some of the places I found accounts were the American Air Museum, the Association des Sauveteurs d'Aviateurs Alliés, and the Air Forces Evade and Escape Society.

What is clear from the Shelburn line story, is that many were willing to assist downed airmen, risking their own safety and even their lives. People contributed as they were able, from sheltering people, feeding them, creating fake paperwork, transporting them (and the guides who took them out through Spain are worthy of special praise in the physical athleticism needed for those endeavors), and treating them with medicines and surgery. In the midst of unimaginable pressure, in the presence of hunger and fear and the knowledge of possible deadly consequences, everyday people stepped up to help the airmen and support the war effort. All the innovations in the story are remarkable, from gadgets to forged papers, which needed to pass the scrutiny of the Nazi police. The airmen themselves, of course, showed resourcefulness, courage, willingness to

adapt to constantly new terrors, from having papers inspected on trains to descending the Bonaparte beach cliffside in absolute silence. Reading about this chapter in World War II's history has been a lesson in understanding both courage and evil (of the Nazi's, the French betrayers, the torturers, and the people who watched on without reaction). Elie Wiesel writes that "the keyword of my Weltanschauung is the fight against indifference...Indifference is a danger; indifference is an evil...I always did believe that the opposite of love is not despair but indifference. The opposite of hope is not despair but indifference. The fight against indifference has its roots in the author's experience. In *Night* he remembers the day of his deportation in 1944: "Behind their windows, behind their shutters, our compatriots looked out at us as we passed" (Boschki, 2013, p. 298). The French resistants were not indifferent and, while supported by MI9, did as individuals and then in groups, do what they could to help those in danger, not because they were not afraid, but because they overcame fear to help the downed airmen out of the human impulse to help succor those in need and because they wanted to support the war effort and resist the triumph of Nazi power. This story, as all history does, reminds us how difficult it is to really understand any episode. History is made by complex factors, some parts personality, some parts geography and weather, in this case, many parts the ingenuity of one particular Christopher Clayton Hutton. Many parts of careful training after lengthy interviews of those had returned and being responsive in a bureaucratic way to making sure those in charge had personal experiences to guide those they were sending, potentially to their deaths, were important. This story has lessons to teach everyone.

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