

“Remember: Do Nothing. Say Nothing. Write Nothing Which Could Betray Our Friends.”

This notice, posted for aircrew during World War II, reminded them of a reassuring secret: If they were shot down over France, Resistance networks were ready and eager to hide them from the Germans.

There was good reason to be optimistic. The Resistance enabled more than 3,000 Allied airmen to disguise their identities and walk out of German-occupied Western Europe. Airmen shot down in France and Belgium had especially good chances of making it out.

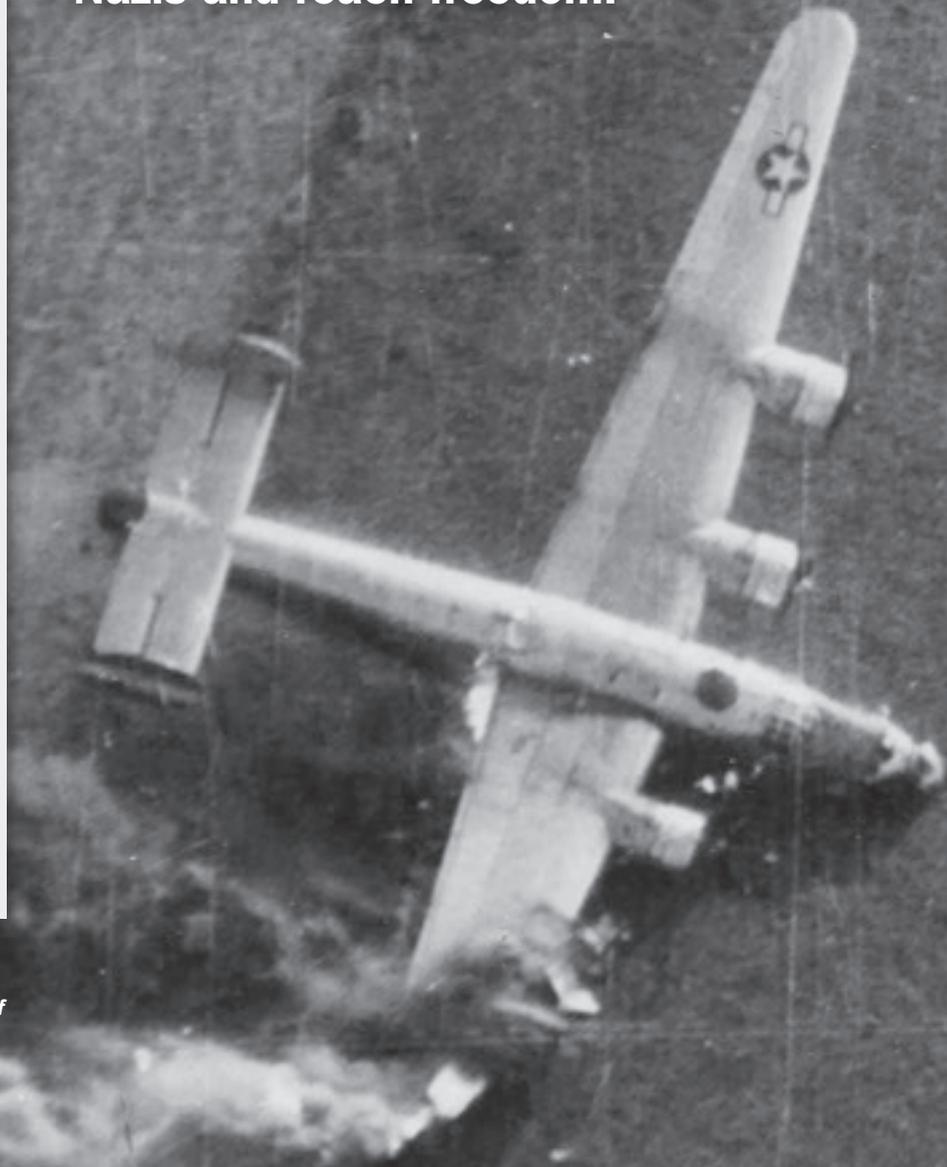
Future American ace and test pilot legend Charles E. “Chuck” Yeager was shot down by Focke-Wulf 190s on a mission over France on March 5, 1944.

“Before I had gone 200 feet, half a dozen Frenchmen ran up to me,” Yeager later reported. They brought him a change of clothes and hid him in a barn. Under the care of the Resistance, Yeager was transported to southern France, hiked into Spain on March 28, reached the British fortress at Gibraltar on May 15, and was in England by May 21, 1944.

Yeager’s speedy trip was made possible by years of effort to build networks for moving airmen from the moment they landed in their parachutes to the moment they reached friendly or neutral territory.

The evading airman’s journey always began with immediate concealment. Then they sheltered with families, often in several locations. Next they traveled in cars and trucks, bicycled, and even rode

American airmen shot down over Europe had a sophisticated web of supporters for attempts to avoid the Nazis and reach freedom.



A B-24 crash-lands near Eindhoven, Holland. Resistance networks in Nazi-occupied countries helped downed Allied airmen traverse hundreds of miles to safety.

Escaping the Continent

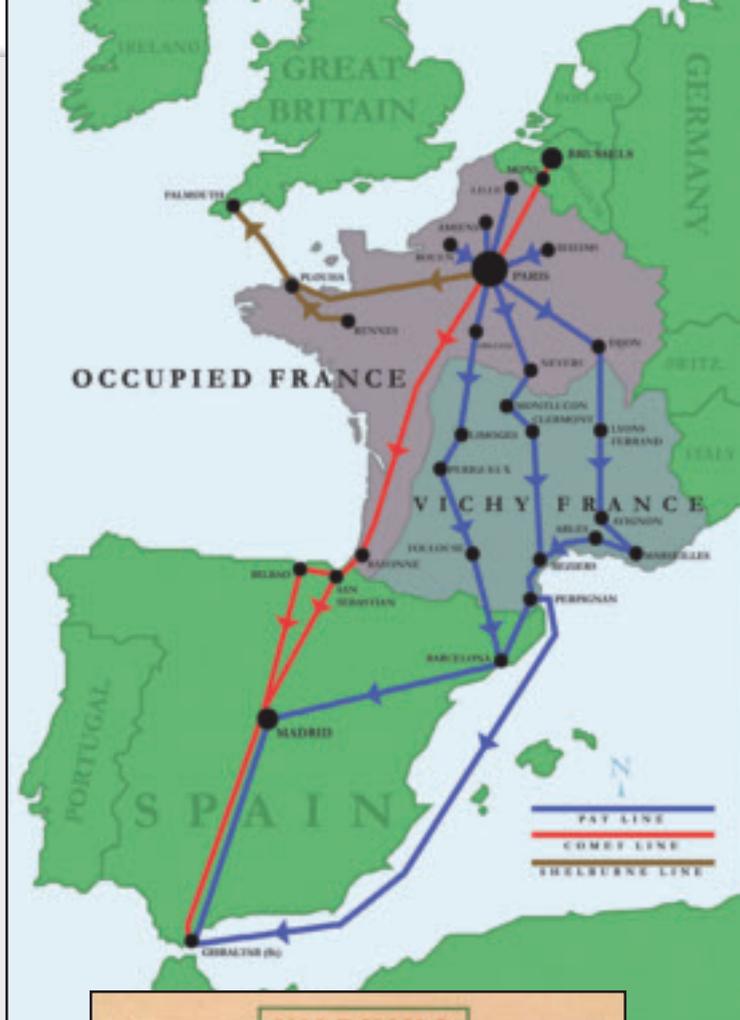
By Rebecca Grant

money purses combined French francs with Belgian francs and Dutch guilders.

How was the money spent? Pavelka told debriefers he spent his mix of francs and guilders for “black market tobacco and train and bus fare” before leaving the surplus “as a gift for [the] family who helped us last.”

Each aircrew member carried an aid box. These contained a chocolate or peanut bar, milk in a tube, Benzedrine tablets to counter fatigue, halazone tablets to purify water, matches, adhesive tape, chewing gum, a water bottle, compass, and Horlicks tablets, a malted wheat candy thought to stave off hunger. Some of the American evaders wryly observed that the chewing gum was best for taking away the taste of the Horlicks.

Benzedrine was popular. “Very necessary,” reported Capt. Douglas K. Hoverkamp of Staten Island, N.Y. “Used to keep awake and keep walking for three days while on way to Switzerland.” Despite this, it was all too easy for aviator and supplies to become separated. Harrison lost his money purse and supply box on Day One of his evasion. Others lost them during the bail out. Hincewicz threw



his money purse down on the floor of the burning B-24 in a fit of anger when he realized they couldn't control the spreading fire enough to make it back to England.

Passport photographs were perhaps the most valuable item carried. Typically, each aviator had three or four small head shots to be used for creating new identity papers. Hoverkamp was unlucky; he had four photographs, but they were cut to the wrong size and worthless. For the most part, the photographs were the crucial link enabling Resistance members to create new identity cards and work permits so that the airmen could move through occupied territory.

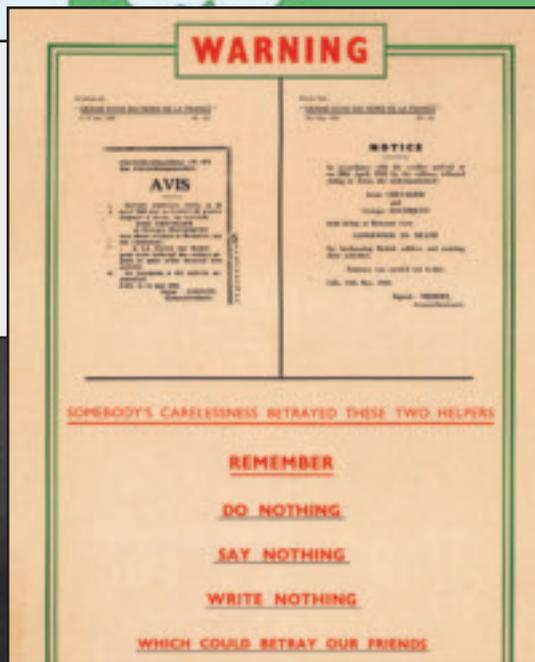
Uniforms conferred some protection if caught. Masquerading as civilians put airmen at special risk. “By donning civilian clothing,” stated Air Force historians, airmen lost their

Geneva Convention rights and ran the risk of “being shot as spies if captured.”

ROUTES HOME

The men, women, and children who made contact with the downed fliers were highly networked and organized. A special arm of British Intelligence, designated MI9, started work in late 1939 with the sole mission of feeding information to Resistance networks in occupied Europe. Returning downed airmen—and the intelligence they sometimes brought—was one of the main jobs of the Resistance movements.

Transporting the airmen out of occupied Europe involved hundreds of miles of travel. Three main routes, or lines, shepherded the airmen out. The Comet Line started in Brussels and moved airmen through Paris and into Spain where they exited through Gibraltar or Portugal. The name was a translation of the French phrase “Le Réseau Comète,” or Comet Network. The route was the brainchild of a 24-year-old Belgian woman named Andrée E. A. de Jongh. Her line moved some 800 people, many of them airmen of several nationalities, to safety.



USAF images

Clockwise from top: A map shows the three major lines of escape through Western Europe. The Comet Line alone moved some 800 people to safety. A placard warns of the consequences facing helpers who were betrayed. Albert-Marie Edmond Guérisse, aka “Patrick O’Leary,” organized the Pat Line. Betrayed in 1943, he endured Gestapo torture and a concentration camp without revealing his comrades. He survived the war.



them in half and saw that each man had some before they set off at 2 a.m. Hours later they approached an illuminated farmhouse that turned out to be the Swiss frontier post. “We were given food and [a] lot [of] chocolate,” recalled Hoverkamp.

ON THE MOVE

The bomber offensive intensified in 1944 as the planned date for the invasion of Normandy approached.

That’s when Hincewicz bailed out over occupied Europe. “I kept my walking shoes, my GI shoes, tied to my parachute harness,” he told a Pennsylvania newspaper, the *Dillsburg Banner*, in a 2009 interview. Unsure whether he was still over Germany, Hincewicz did not open the parachute until he was in cloud cover and near the ground. He was in Belgium. He landed near two women drawing water at a well. “One of them pulled up a bucket of water from the well and started washing the blood off me,” he said. The women gave him old clothes and gestured for him to move away. Hincewicz found a wayside chapel overgrown with weeds and hid there. Hours later he heard noises. A teenager and three or four other children on bicycles had come to fetch him—bringing a spare bicycle.

Far worse was the situation of 1st Lt. Henry C. Woodrum, who bailed out over Paris on May 28, 1944.

Woodrum was flying his 35th mission as pilot of a B-26 Marauder. His mission was part of the last crucial step before D-Day: destroying Seine River bridges to prevent the Germans from easily reinforcing the Normandy beachhead areas. Confident of their precision bombing, the USAAF held off on these last attacks for the days leading up to the invasion in order to deprive the Germans of time to rebuild. However, executing the attacks demanded low-level bomb runs for the accuracy required to drop the bridges. Woodrum’s B-26 was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

Woodrum parachuted onto the roof of a house in Paris. German soldiers began a door-to-door search for him, but he posed as a house painter and eluded them. Fortunately, he was then sheltered by the Resistance. Woodrum avoided capture until the Allies liberated Paris on Aug. 25, 1944.

Meanwhile, conditions for the evaders changed as Resistance members anticipated the June 6, 1944, invasion. Hincewicz became Pawel Hinewie,



USAF photo

Mademoiselle Sainson, a Resistance helper, took two Americans for a walk. When they ran into Italian soldiers, she asked them to pose for pictures with the group. They did, assuming the Americans were French.

traveling Polish journalist, according to his forged passport. German troops were suddenly on high alert. Hincewicz had been with one Belgian family for several weeks. Then he was moved every few days by the Resistance. One of the last stops was a stately manor house where the Resistance was hiding other downed airmen. Hincewicz bunked in the stables with three young enlisted men.

“One morning I was awakened by noise—a lot of shouting. I glanced out the door and there was a German military unit that was in the process of routing out the Americans. The three kids looked at me and I told them to follow. Those kids stayed with me and then the shooting started.”

The Germans were part of a retreating unit. Hincewicz and the three men managed to escape and rejoin the underground Resistance. Hincewicz finally made his way to British lines and then onward to American lines. Soon he was in newly liberated Paris.

DEBRIEFS

Returning aviators were debriefed by an attaché who met them. Evaders often brought back firsthand sightings of Germans, their vehicles, and installations.

In Britain, returning aircrew were under orders to report to locations such as the US Special Reception Center, then at 63 Brook Street in downtown London. They filled out lengthy forms describing how they used their aid boxes, reports on enemy

forces, assistance from Resistance and so on. Evaders could share no details, even with other flying units.

“Information about your escape or your evasion from capture would be useful to the enemy and a danger to your friends. It is therefore secret,” said the standard form they signed during the war. Today, thousands of the declassified reports remain on file with the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Aviators also commented on how well their escape and evasion lectures both Stateside and in theater had prepared them. Harrison reported there was no point in hiding in fields during the daytime, because the Germans used slow-flying airplanes to search for downed aviators. “Do not hide in woods at night because Germans use dogs,” Harrison also said.

Protecting the Resistance networks was paramount. Intense secrecy was necessary to preserve the escape routes enabled by thousands of French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, Greek, and other men and women who guided the airmen through Nazi-occupied Europe.

Even so, those civilians were often caught. Comet Line organizer de Jongh was arrested in January 1943 and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. She was liberated in April 1945. According to Britain’s *Independent* newspaper, “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.”

Yet their success was impressive. More than 3,000 US and UK airmen were returned from occupied Europe alone. Although aircrew that had been helped by the Resistance were usually taken off flying status—if they were shot down again and captured, the Germans could exploit their knowledge of the escape network—some, like Yeager, went on to fight again.

Hincewicz rejoined the Air Force in 1948, serving on B-29s and then in intelligence until retiring in 1970. Decades later, he summed up the experience in a letter to Richard Hansen, a gunner on the same B-24.

“The next six months were stressful, but I learned a lot, which helped me in my personal and professional life,” Hincewicz wrote. “I still owe a lot to the people in the underground, which I was never able to repay.”

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine was “The Reagan Buildup” in the September issue.