

1944 - Rescued by the Bravest People I've ever Known

THE FRENCH UNDERGROUND

Written by Bob Kelley

I owe my life, or at least nine months of it that would otherwise have been spent as a P.O.W. in Nazi Germany, to some French farmers who loved liberty so much that they risked death to hide me and six members of my crew from the searching Wehrmacht.

In January 1944, after completing nine months of training as an Air Cadet, I was given my wings as an Air Force Pilot. I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant at Stockton Field, California and sent to Hobbs New Mexico to train as a first pilot in B-17 Flying Fortress Aircraft. The B-17 was a four-engine bomber used mostly for daylight bombing raids in Europe. After completing that training, I was sent to Rapid City, South Dakota. There, I was assigned a crew consisting of co-pilot Robert Casey, bombardier George Lancaster, navigator Alton Karoli, engineer gunner Ira Krammes, radio-gunner Grover Nordman, ball turret gunner Frank Trim, and waist gunners Edward Duemmer and Zalma Mitchell. Richard Doyle rounded out the crew as tail gunner. He was to become my favorite among the enlisted men. After five months of arduous training along with fifty-five other crews, we finished high in the ranking. Despite the long hard hours, it was a happy five months. I met a young woman in Stockton during the time I was an Air Cadet. She came to Hobbs and we got married there. So Rapid City, despite the time spent on the base and in the air, was our honeymoon, and I was able to rent an apartment and live off base. I had promised the crew we would become a lead crew overseas so we trained hard. The only cloud on the scene was the fact that we were going to have to leave our wives and girlfriends and go into combat. Finally, in July, we were sent to Kearny, Nebraska and were assigned factory new B-17Gs. We flew to Manchester, New Hampshire, then to Gander Lake, Newfoundland. After ten days of waiting, we flew the long route (twelve hours in the air) to Nutts Corner, North Ireland. I had naively assumed that the plane we used was going to be ours, but the next day we were sent by boat to Scotland, then via train to Watford (just north of London) to ground school. One day, six of us pilots asked the assignment sergeant which was the best bomber group in the ETO (European Theatre of Operations). He told us it was the 91st, known as the "Country Club" because it was a permanent R.A.F. base with paved streets, brick buildings, and all facilities. It was one of the oldest established units. We asked assignment, and all six of us - Hare, Martin, Maplesden, Laws, Kirkham, and myself - were sent to the 91st, stationed at Bassingbourn, just south of Cambridge. It turned out to be all that the sergeant had said. LeRoy Hare and I were assigned to Karl Thompson's 322nd Squadron, with the others assigned to the other three squadrons. After several flights with Captain Thompson to team the "Darkle" system, etc., I was posted to fly my first mission August 30th. On this mission, I was not first pilot but instead was flying with Lt. Russell Brown and a seasoned crew on their fifteenth mission. The target was the submarine pens at Kiel. Although the flak was intense and caused lots of damage, all 36 aircraft returned to base. On September 5 my name came up to fly with my crew on a mission to the Opav Synthetic Oil plant at Ludwigshaven. It was my second mission and the crew's first. The seasoned co-pilot I'd replaced on the September 3 mission was now assigned to fly in place of regular co-pilot Lt. Casey to add aircraft, (Tail End Charlie) in the low squadron and the last to take off. Briefing was delayed due to the extremely bad weather, which combined rain, wind, and low visibility. However, we finally ended up in a truck on the way to our aircraft.

The one furthest from the base and in a hard stand next to a farmhouse. On the way out, the truck stopped as the siren indicated a VI rocket was approaching, and we all ran into a shelter. The rocket passed over and hit on a hillside farm nearby. There was rainwater in the shelter and I got my feet

wet - not an auspicious beginning. When we finally got to the hard stand, we saw our aircraft for the first time. She was a silver B-17G with 58 mission bombs on her nose. Also on her nose was a garish painting of Carmen Miranda (a Brazilian dancer-actress of the time) and the name "My Baby". While pre-fighting her, the Crew Chief assured me that despite her missions and damage she was in mint condition. On taxiing out I had to open the side window as the windshield was *so* pitted from flak that you couldn't see much through it. Finally, on instruments, our time for take-off came. As number 37, we were the last to go. In heavy prop wash we drifted to the right and, just before becoming airborne, we hit a landing light and blew a tire. Being the last aircraft, we were loaded with stick incendiaries rather than bombs; at 4400 pounds, this made us lighter than the lead planes. My instruction, as the extra aircraft, was to fill in for any who might drop out. Assembly, at 8000 feet, was uneventful. The group moved out. Over France the weather steadily worsened. Then we lost the #3 engine due to an oil leak and overheating and we feathered it. Around Metz the group ran into heavy flak. This knocked out our #4 engine and we had to feather it to eliminate the possibility of fire. Just before the IP the lead aircraft advised the group we were to climb an extra 3000 feet to 24,000 feet in an attempt to get on top of the still-worsening weather. With only two engines, we were unable to keep up or climb and couldn't even stay under the low squadron. We talked to Captain Evers, the group leader, and he advised us to turn back, find a hole, and see if we could get far enough to find a landing field in liberated France and land. He also told us he had requested fighter escort for us. After turning back, I asked navigator Alton Karoli if we had crossed into Germany. He advised me that we were still over occupied France. Then I made a decision which I've agonized over for 47 years. My mother was born just over the border into Italy, but she was of French descent. As a result, I refused to drop the bombs through the overcast and possibly kill French civilians.

This decision became moot when German ME 109 fighters hit us out of the clouds from behind, killing the tail gunner S/Sgt Richard Doyle, destroying part of the rudder and elevator, and cutting off communication with the rear of the aircraft. After a couple more hits on the wing near the #3 engine we were down to 6000 feet and there was still no sign of any opening in the ground cover. I rang the bail out bell and told the co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, and engineer to go. I trimmed the aircraft and stowed down as best I could and set the autopilot. Then I told co-pilot Lt. Anderson to go. He stood behind my seat and gave me a pep talk, "Don't worry everything is going to be OK. I'll see you on the ground..." I finally told him to get the H— out. He disappeared into the crawl space to the door on the navigator's compartment where the bombardier, navigator, and engineer had gone to jump after Ira Krammes had opened it. Finally alone, I left the pilot's seat to put my chute on and was horrified to find that it wasn't hanging on the back of my seat. "God", I thought, "I forgot my chute back in England!" A terrible feeling came over me until I looked at the co-pilot's seat and saw Anderson's parachute hanging there. In the same door as the others. As soon as I left I pulled the ripcord. This was a mistake, as I still had the aircraft's initial speed; with an altitude of 5000 feet, I should have taken a free fall for a while. Then I received my second shock of the day - the parachute didn't open! The spring popped on the pilot chute cover so, in desperation, I tore at the pilot chute and threw it out. The shroud lines came out, singeing my hands and the chute open. I suspect I was tumbling, as there was a terrific jerk. Soon I was hanging, I saw the B-17 going away somewhat above me and I was shocked at the damage to the tail section just above the tail gunner position. Then, amazingly, I saw an ME 109 pass some 1000 yards in front of me, chasing "My Baby". It was beautifully marked and I could plainly see the pilot leaning forward and shooting at the B-17 as he closed in. I didn't watch him long, for I became aware of a second ME 109 coming out of the clouds. He spotted me, turned off his run toward the bomber and came at

me with his guns firing. He passed directly over the parachute. I looked up to see six holes in the fabric. I don't know whether he intended to set it afire, spill it, or hit it, I recall pulling on the lines and shaking my fist at him, two rather stupid moves. I entered a second set of clouds just as he passed back over and didn't see anything else until I came out of the mist and rain about 300 feet off the ground.

I could see a farmer with a horse pulling a farm machine in a field, a colliery to a mine to one side in a valley, and I noted that I was heading for the only woods around. In fact, I was drifting quite swiftly in a wind right to the center of a four-square-block area of dense woods. I was also amazed to see that the B-17 had done a full 180-degree turn and was now coming towards me, but off half a mile or so and heading for a small town. The woods were coming up fast so I closed my eyes and doubled up my legs and arms, which I'd read somewhere was S.O.P. The last thing I saw was the B-17 passing directly over a town (which I later learned was called Bazailies), missing the city hall and a church steeple by just a few feet, and hitting in a field just outside of town with a crash and a tower of flame.

I opened my eyes and found I was sitting unhurt in a hazelnut bush. My chute had hooked on a beech tree and swung me gently to the ground. I had no idea where I was. It could have been Belgium, Luxembourg, France or even (if we had drifted north) Germany. I took off running as I could hear voices and a dog barking. As it turned out, it wasn't German soldiers with dogs as I had feared, but rather a farm dog barking at bombardier George Lancaster who was running with a limp due to a sprained ankle. After running up a creek and sprinkling pepper on my trail, I realized I could run no longer. I decided to sneak up on the voices to see what language they were speaking. I finally got close enough to see an elderly man and woman. I heard him say, in French, "He has to be still in the woods as we found the parachute." My mother was born in northern Italy but the family was French and my grandmother always spoke French when she talked to me, but in the confusion I accidentally answered in English. Then I ran to them and said, in French, "I'm the pilot." They quickly took me out of the woods to a meadow, across a footbridge into another woods, and up a path to where I was met by Jeanne Jacob, wife of the chief of the Underground. She stooped, crawled under a hazelnut bush, and opened up a trapdoor in the ground. She told me to descend, and that Anderson the co-pilot and Karoli the navigator were already underground. The opening was about 2,5 feet by 2.5 feet square. It was made of logs with cleats for footholds and went down some 30 feet before opening into a room.

There I found my two crewmen plus two Russian soldiers, Paul and Timothy, who had escaped a year ago from the mine at Bazailies where they had been forced to work as few days they realized that the American Army was different. Both of them had learned passable French. On seeing my bloody hands, Anderson and Karoli thought I was wounded. I then noticed the burns for the first time, but they were so slight that in a few days I couldn't even notice the scars.

The cave was lit by carbide miner lamps, the smell of which I hate to this day. I had bailed out at about 11:30 A.M. By the time I was safely ensconced in the cave, it was midafternoon and raining hard. Anderson the co-pilot told me he had come down in the meadow. The chief of the Underground, Roland Jacob, and his wife Jeanne were eating their noontime meal when they saw him come down. They rushed out and took him to the underground hideout immediately. They heard the gunfire and the crash and realized that the Germans were out looking for the crew so they and others from the town of Baslieux bravely entered the woods in hope of finding them first. The

navigator came down in a wooded area. He was partially dazed from being dragged by the wind while in the chute, but he was unhurt.

After night fell, Roland Jacob came to tell me to come with him. The bombardier was several kilometers away, in the woods. He was on a stretcher because he was having trouble walking. He did not understand French, and was frightened. He was making so much noise that they were afraid the searching Germans would hear them. I reluctantly left the safe dry hideout and went with Roland through the heavy rain and the dark to where four farmers had Lancaster on a blanket on two poles. I talked to him and explained the situation and the need for quiet. After a struggle, we got him to our underground home. I've since met and talked to farmer Pierre Francois, who saw him enter the woods pursued by two German soldiers at a distance. Pierre met him as he exited on the other side of the woods, put him on his mowing machine, and drove him to a temporary hiding place until he could contact Roland Jacob and arrange to have him transported to a permanent hiding place.

The next morning, food was brought to all six of us. Roland explained that engineer Ira Krammes had damaged the ligaments in his legs on landing and had difficulty walking. He was told to wait hidden till night, then to make his way to the railroad bridge in Longwy. He was captured crossing a field. The Underground then planned to attack the house he was in the next night, but the Nazis moved him to prison in Luxembourg and put him in solitary confinement. I've talked to and met with him three times since the war and only now will he finally talk about his miserable nine months as a P.O.W. He was taken to Czechoslovakia, where he spent the last seven months on the road running from the advancing Russians. It was the coldest winter (1944/45) in 50 years, and the food consisted mainly of cabbage soup and raw sugar beets. The body of the tail gunner, s/sergeant Richard Doyle, was found near the wreckage by two brothers and the mayor of the town of Bazailies. They placed him on a rubber dinghy from "My Baby" and carried him to the town cemetery. He was buried without ceremony because they didn't know his faith. Each morning the townspeople covered his grave with flowers, which were soon removed by German soldiers. On the third day, waist gunner Edward Duemmer, at great risk, visited the gravesite briefly to pay his last respects. After the area was liberated, the U.S. Graves and Registration Department removed s/SSgt. Doyle's body. He now lies in the cemetery at Saugerties, New York, next to his brother who was also killed in World War II. Some families paid too great a price. Aged couple, until the American troops arrived. Another waist gunner, Zalma Mitchell, was knocked unconscious by the blast that killed the tail gunner. When he came to, he realized that he was alone and the rear door was open. He jumped and landed in a water-filled ditch, and hid in the mud while several German soldiers ran past on the road. He then walked to a farm, where the family cleaned him up and fed him. Two days later, they built a false bottom on their hay cart and drove him some 60 miles through the German lines to the American Army and safety. The radio operator, Grover Nordman, Jr., came down in a field just outside a town called Pierre Pont. First he ran into a flak tower, then into a barn. A French farmer arrived and told him through sign language that the Germans were searching for him. The farmer fed Grover. Then his son led him into a deep woods full of Maquis (French underground fighters). When Grover had bailed out he lost his shoes. The Maquis gave him shoes, fed him, and supplied him with civilian clothes and false papers listing him as a Polish worker going to Paris to work. Several days later, Grover was led to Spincourt and was able to contact the American troops. At Rheims he was able to catch a C-47 returning to England. Remarkably, the pilot of that C-47 was a person with whom he had gone all the way through high school.

The Germans were bringing up troops to meet Patton, who had taken Paris just nine days before, so we caught glimpses of them and heard shelling almost continually. Roland warned us that the roads and even the small towns were swarming with Wehrmacht, so it was best for us to just await the Americans who they felt would eventually arrive. He was fearful of the collaborators, which were numerous due to both the closeness of Germany and the fact that from 1870 to 1919 the area had been annexed to Germany, but the approach of the Americans would, hopefully, act as a deterrent to their turning us in.

Later, in my trips back to the region, I discovered that food for four extra people was a problem. One member, Jean Ney, was somehow able to get some. We didn't get a lot of food or anything fancy - it was mostly vegetables- but we managed. I've always had the feeling that someone went without so that we could eat. On the third night, we were invited to Roland Jacob's home, where Mrs. Jacob had cooked a rabbit. That was one of the only two times we had meat. Unfortunately, the Germans moved into the woods between their house and our underground hideout, so we were taken to a bombed-out house some distance away. We slept on straw stored there for cows and awoke the next day covered with fleas which were to stay with us until we finally got back to London.

The fourth day (September 9) dawned bright, the first without rain since our arrival. Since no Germans appeared to be around, all six of us stood in the meadow and watched the whole first division of the 8th Air Force fly over on their way to Ludwigshaven again. The ground shook for over three hours as they made their way in, and for the same time as they came back. Paul, one of the Russian soldiers, told me that all those aircraft were actually made in Russia and sent (end-lease to America, and I didn't know about it because the American government lies to us. There was no use trying to convince him otherwise! In one of those passing planes of the 91st bomb group was my ball turret gunner, Frank Trim, who was reassigned when we went to nine-man crews. He was to die when his aircraft blew up over the target; only the bombardier and the navigator escaped.

On the fifth day, I asked to go see the wreckage. Roland was reluctant, but I pressed him. By that time, we had given him our uniforms and were dressed in ill-fitting epileptic brother. All the young men in the area had been sent to Germany for slave labor; only idiots had been spared. As a last precaution, he gave me some charcoal to chew, as my teeth were too good and white. I was also given a rake to carry. I toured the crash area. It was still smoking, I wanted to pick up a souvenir, but I had been warned not to as that would probably bring the guards who were stationed on both ends of the field. Later that day, several armed men visited us in the woods. Roland Jacob warned me not to trust them, as they were Communists, and were hoarding the arms dropped to them, in his opinion, they only wanted to wait and overthrow the French government after the war. He said they did little fighting and probably would have turned us in to the Germans if it wasn't for the fact that the American Army was coming. Their leader had been drinking and waved a silver-plated pistol around as he spoke (mostly bragging). Once it went off when he banged it on a stump to emphasize a point. He also had a big cigarette lighter that sent out a long flame every time he used it. When I asked him where he got the fuel for it, he explained that it was fueled from a belly tank on a P-51 that was in the woods nearby. Needless to say, after that I backed away every time he went to light it and ignite that 100 octane fuel.

Late on the afternoon of the sixth day, a squad of German soldiers came into the meadow below our entrance and set up camp, laughing and cooking a meal. An American L-5 aircraft passed over and soon shells began to fall in the meadow. We retreated completely underground and prayed that the

shells wouldn't hit our entrance. After the bombing ended, we peeked out and the soldiers were gone.

At first I assumed the underground room we were hiding in was small. It was padded on all four sides with straw and approximately 15 ft. by 20 ft. in dimension. On the third night, Paul made a hole in the straw and picked up a lamp. Then he motioned for me to follow as he led me into a much larger room. I realized that the part we'd been in was sectioned off for warmth and light. A draft ran through the larger area, which made me think there was an airshaft somewhere else. Paul showed me a big pile of French uniforms, helmets, guns, and ammo in one corner; I've since been told they were from troops who changed into civilian clothes and tried to melt into the populace after being surrounded in 1940. I've been back five times since then. As far as I can determine, the cave was built in 1936 in conjunction with the Maginot Line. We were the only Americans to be hidden there, as the towns were so small and off the main roads. It was used as a safe hiding place for Frenchmen and other nationals who had escaped work details in Germany and were returning home. Also, local men hid there when they were on call to go to Germany as forced labor. Roland Jacob told me he hid there for 11 months while Jeanne told the police (who cooperated with the Nazis) he had run out on her and the two boys. At great risk, she kept him fed.

Finally, on the afternoon of the ninth day, Roland and Jeanne brought us our uniforms, watches, and rings, and told us that the Americans were finally in Baslieux. We entered the town square, where about 200 people had assembled around three G.I.'s, a jeep, and only one rifle. The last item should have alerted me. After tearful good-byes, several shots of the strong Mirabelle liqueur the area is noted for, and my leading them all in rendering "Le Marseilles", we left. It was then that the three G.I.'s confessed that they were lost. Two days before, they had gotten drunk and stolen the chaplain's jeep, then blundered back of the lines. Besides, they were service troops, not combat. We had only and intended to blow it up as the Americans approached. The G.I. who had consumed the most Mirabelle liqueur went down and began pulling out wires and throwing blocks of explosive into the water. When it didn't blow up, I and the rest went forward as well. All eight of us completely de-mined the stone bridge, which I've since learned is over 300 years old. Needless to say, the farmers cheered us loudly as we drove off. I've also since learned how unstable that explosive is.

By that time, it was nearly dark. As we approached a town called Pierre Pont, a young boy rushed out and cried out "The Boche are in town just up the road!" We stopped and two men opened a courtyard gate. We drove in. They covered the jeep with willows and branches, and then led us into the house. It turned out to be the mayor's. He, his wife, his daughter, and his son fed us and asked us if we would like to hear the news on the BBC. We sat facing a big china closet with a large mirror on it - and the broadcast came out of the cabinet. I noticed the young son was not among us. When I asked why, the mayor told me to go down in the basement. When I did, I saw the son pedaling a bicycle, which was attached to the generator. That arrangement produced the electricity needed to run the radio.

I slept in the basement with the GIs and the son so that, in case of trouble, they could warn me in French. Karold, Anderson, and Lancaster slept in a bed upstairs and Karoli remembers what a treat it was. During the evening meal one GI and the mayor's daughter were flirting and in the night I heard him get up and go upstairs to her room. The son woke us before dawn. He led us to a back road, and we were able to leave Pierre Pont undetected. As daylight came, we kept to small back roads, several times glimpsing Nazis cooking and setting up guns in the fields. We were never stopped, nor did we see any roadblocks. About 9 A.M., after traveling about three hours, we

saw some trucks in a field and we realized that they were American. We drove over and were greeted by a group of black truck drivers who were eating breakfast. They fed us K rations and gave us some 5 star cognac (which they had found in a German Army warehouse) to drink. That's the first and last time I've ever eaten K rations, and I must say they are the best argument around for joining the Air Force. The G.I's and the jeep left and we asked if there was a truck going south. The sergeant told us that one was leaving for Chalon-sur-Marne in fifteen minutes, and that we could ride on the load that far. We climbed on the load of bags, which I assumed were full of potatoes. The truck was also pulling a small trailer. When the driver stopped partway, I asked him what the bags contained. He informed me that they were bodies from the battle up around Metz. The rest of the trip was rather solemn, and I was glad when Chalon-sur-Marne came into view. We stopped to have the bombardier's ankle x-rayed and found that he had a small fracture. While we were in the hospital, a badly wounded S.S. major was wheeled in, but he died soon after. We ate, were given new field jackets, and caught a ride through Verdun to Paris, arriving late that evening. I told the other three that we were M.I.A. so why turn ourselves in when we could take a couple of days to enjoy the sights. We all agreed. Since I hadn't thought we were going to fly that day, I wore part of my Class A uniform and carried my A.G.O. identification card with my picture and fingerprints-a violation of all rules. With it, I requisitioned hotel rooms for each of us and a meal ticket at the officer's mess without turning ourselves in for interrogation. Paris was still celebrating the liberation of twelve days before. Thousands of French and American soldiers and the Parisians were few months, I went in with them and signed their pay books, claiming to be their commanding officer on detached service from the Air Force to the Army for air support. For this most gave me a percentage (generally 10%). One sergeant, seeing my A.G.O. pass, suggested I accompany him to a supply depot and requisition supplies, which we could sell to get some French money. We did this twice, offering soap, K rations, etc. on the street near the Eiffel Tower until a Frenchman warned us the M.P.s would catch us and offered to buy anything we brought him. I'm not proud of this and worried about it for several years, but have come to see that it was due to youth and relief at surviving the mission.

The bombardier turned himself in due to the fear that his wife would get a Missing In Action telegram. This meant that it was necessary for the rest of us to go to headquarters and do likewise. Even though Paris was blacked-out, with no heat in most buildings, and the Germans had stolen all the furniture in my hotel, I hated to leave such a beautiful city. In two days we were taken to Orly Airport and flown in a C-47 to London. At "Widewing", an estate near London, which had been taken over for an Air Force headquarters, we were interrogated extensively. The British gave us "winged boots" to wear on our uniforms as evadees. We returned to Bassingbourn, stopping at Switik Parachute on the way to pick up our caterpillars for bailing out. At the 91st Bomb Group we were taken off flying status and told we would be returned to the U.S.A. for training for the war effort against the Japanese. Since we had been out of uniform back of the German lines, we could be considered spies. The 91st was stood down for several days to celebrate the second anniversary of their being in the ETO. On September 23rd, a base wide party was held in one hangar, with a big band and lots of girls bussed in from Cambridge. Someone tipped off Colonel Terry that I flew with part of my Class A uniform, and he snuck up on me and cut my tie off below the knot as punishment. He enjoyed it so much he cut a few more off in the course of the evening. Two or three days later, I was able to catch a flight, as co-pilot, on a C-54 out of Prestwick to New York via the Azores. After a rest & recuperation leave, I taught engineering ground school to cadets for a while until I could get into a flying squadron. I eventually ended up in Westover, Massachusetts, flying A-26 Invaders training for the invasion of Japan.

In all of my 10-man crew, 2 became P.O.W.'s (My regular co-pilot went down 2 Nov 1944 over Merseburg and was captured), 2 were killed in the air, and 7 (including a borrowed co-pilot) were saved due to the bravery of the French Patriots.



- Bob Kelley

POSTSCRIPT: Updates on the lives of the crewmembers

Lt. Karoli died some years ago but I met him and his wife in the 1980s. Lt. Anderson and I still write and have visited once. I've talked to Lt. Lancaster but he is in ill health. Ira Krammes has visited several times and now lives in Florida. Grover Nordman, Jr. I located after 52 years. He lives in Iowa and is retired. Both Mitchell and Duemmer died before I was able to contact their families. I am in contact with Frank Trim's sister. Lt. Casey, my original co-pilot, spent seven months as a POW and now lives in Texas. LeRoy Hare and I met 3 times but he died in May 1996. Hooper Maplesden lives 100 miles north of me and we see each other from time to time. Both Martin and Kirkham died in the 1980's. Bill Laws, who entered the Air Force with me, stayed in the Air Force and died in a crash in 1949.

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