
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the second March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speakers are Michael Lee Lanning, author of *The Blister Club* and Barbara Wojcik author of *Bud's Jacket*. They will describe the stories of the Eighth Air Corps B-17 crews shot down over France and the French Resistance that saved the lives of the survivors.

Death and danger took on a myriad of forms in the human catastrophe of the Second World War. American servicemen confronted a wartime environment unlike any other. For soldiers cemeteries of white crosses memorialized their sacrifice. For many sailors, however, dying in the flooded compartments of a sinking vessel, the sea was their only monument. Airmen faced death at high altitudes alone or going down in flames in a fiery crash. To soldiers and sailors the Eighth Air Force had it easy: they lived on bases in England with good food, and R & R; their time facing the enemy was measured in hours rather than weeks or months, they were the “glamorous flyboys.”

But Eighth Air Force air crews suffered disproportionately higher losses to their numbers. Approximately 10,000 fighters and bombers were shot down over Europe, of the crews aboard 26,000 were KIA, while 30,000 who survived, were made prisoners of war (POWs). Nearly 3,000 managed to evade capture and escape, some to fight again, others to neutral territory to sit out the war. This small group through good luck, sheer chance, and the help of Resistance networks survived the unreal environment of being hunted deep in enemy territory often hundreds of miles from American lines.

Upon bailing out, airmen were often lucky to fall into German military hands. Inside the Reich, Eighth Air Force prisoners were the responsibility of the Luftwaffe, which had specific interrogation centers and special prison camps for aviators alone. However, in many instances after bombing civilian centers the local population, encouraged by the SS, would lynch the “air pirates” that rained down death on their towns and villages before the Luftwaffe could take control of them. In Occupied territory airmen were sometimes lucky enough to encounter friendly civilian assistance.

Thus, the unique status of Luftwaffe prisoners provided the basis for many dramatic stories and adventures of Allied airmen behind barbed wire. From *Stalag 17*, *The Great Escape*, even *Hogan's Heroes*, movies have portrayed the cat and mouse game of airmen prisoners and their German captors. Even more dramatic were the stories of those who successfully escaped Axis captivity, either by escaping the *Stalags* or evading capture in the first place. Here is where the secret world of the Underground and the Resistance movements in occupied territory distinguished themselves. In this sometimes romanticized tale of World War II, the French Underground played a huge role in Allied escapes.

The internal politics of Metropolitan France after the surrender in 1940 was more than a little complex. Northern France (including the Channel Coast and Paris) was under direct German military government. The rest of France (until Summer 1944) was the nominally “neutral” Vichy France, with a significant pro-Nazi structure. Once SS *Obergruppenfuehrer* Reinhard Heydrich became head of Interpol, Vichy's internal security apparatus was under *de facto* SS control. Allied airmen landing in one part of France would be hunted by the SS *Sicherheitsdienst* and the *GESTAPO*, as well as *Wehrmacht* military police, by Vichy French *Gendarmes*, and later the *Milice Francaise*. Therefore, the airmen would fear French as well as German personnel.

However, by no means were all French collaborators. But the French Resistance movement was as divided as France itself. Free French supporters of General Charles De Gaulle formed the nucleus of what may be called the “Patriotic Resistance.” These anti-German and anti-Vichy French citizens (including military veterans) were active almost as soon as the surrender took place. Owing to its subversive and criminal nature, the large French Communist Party already had a secret underground network of party cells and hidden organization (as appendages of the Soviet Union). Since Stalin was a partner with Nazi Germany since August 1939, it was not until the Germans *Operation Barbarossa* (June 1941) that French Communists and their supporters were engaged in any anti-German activity. Just as many American Leftists suddenly changed their “stay neutral” position to full support of American intervention in the war as soon as the Soviet Union was attacked, so too the French Communists would spring into action

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

only after the Soviet Union was in danger. Communist Colonel Pierre-Georges Fabien would assassinate a German officer on 21 August of 1941 marking the beginning of their participation in the Resistance. The French Underground was thus divided: the pro-De Gaulle F.F.I. (*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*) was nominally the leader of the Resistance. In practice the relationship between the F.F.I. and the Communists was marked by deep suspicion at best and open hostility at worst. Indeed, allegations that rival resistance groups would denounce each other to the *GESTAPO* contributed to internal French tensions long after the war.

The United Kingdom's covert warfare directorate, Special Operations Executive (SOE) furnished training, supplies, and support for the French Resistance throughout the war. Prodigious feats of bravery and courage were commonplace among SOE agents inserted into France to both gather intelligence and also facilitate the escape of Allied prisoners. "Underground Railways" conducted many airmen to neutral Spain and Switzerland as well as very dangerous pick-ups by air or sea. All of these cells were relentlessly and ruthlessly sought out by the German authorities. Two famous SOE operatives Violette Szabo and Noor Inayat Khan were both captured and executed after torture by the *GESTAPO* after harrowing pursuit when their networks were penetrated by German informers. Both were the first women in British history to be awarded the George Cross, the equal of the Victoria Cross in British honors.

For a parachuted 8th Airforce crewman, alone in Occupied France, the challenges were daunting. Rarely speaking the language, if it were not for the efforts of the various Resistance cells scattered across France, the most probable fate would be a quick arrest and interrogation by German authorities. If the airman had the misfortune to fall into SS hands, his life would be up to the whims of his guards. Even after the good fortune of being taken to a safe house by Resistance forces, every moment meant the increased chance of capture, either by the Germans infiltrating the cell, or intercepting communications from the Resistance clandestine radios, or by a regular citizen deciding to make some money by collecting the reward offered for all Allied escapees.

It is no wonder the story of the escaped airmen makes the basis for so many popular motion pictures and books. Here we have, on a very personal basis, the story of heroism and facing danger that fiction could scarcely compete with.

FURTHER READINGS:

Michael Lee Lanning, *The Blister Club: The Extraordinary Story of Downed Airmen Who Escaped*

to Safety in World War II (Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2021).

Barbara Wojcik, *Bud's Jacket: An American Flyer Evades the Nazis in Occupied France* (Stillwater, MN: 4 Square Books, 2020).

Susan Tate Ankeny, *The Girl and the Bombardier: A True Story of Resistance and Rescue in Nazi-Occupied France* (New York: Diversion Books, 2020).

Robert Gildea, *Fighter in the Shadows: A New History of the French Resistance* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2015).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 17 May 2022 – *CS Gen. Lewis Armistead* – www.tccwrt.com – info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table – *TBA* - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Civil War Symposium – 2 Apr. 2022 – www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 -

<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 -

www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 -

<https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 -

<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN -

Air show – 18 June 2022 - 320-564-6644 -

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie – 22-24

July 2022 - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org

Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST,

<https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/>

Western Naval Historical Association

info@wnha.net

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

crazyjerry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -

www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2022

12 Apr. Doolittle Raid

10 May Last Battle: in the Alps

The Round Table is a 501.c.3 non-profit. We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT.



Aircrew being hidden in a forest 100 mi from Paris (in OPERATION SHERWOOD) next to German base. Brits and Americans were separated to keep the peace and US fliers created a golf course in the woods using homemade wood clubs and balls. (The Brayley Estate/Lorraine Vickerman-<https://www.mirror.co.uk>)

