

**Narrative of E.B. Mason**  
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I was the navigator on the Halifax aircraft piloted by the 428 Squadron Commander, which was lost on the raid on Montluçon September 15/16, 1943. We were a crew of replacements made up on the day of the raid. Several of us were semi-screened personnel, restricted as to who we could fly with on operations, and the number of operations a month, but we were all anxious to go on the raid which demanded pinpoint accuracy in bombing a factory surrounded by residential areas.

How we were brought down has been detailed by other crew members. I was just entering the time for "Bombs Away" in the log when we were hit. It was my second experience at bailing out and I knew the urgency of the navigator getting ready as 3 or 4 others had to follow him out of the escape hatch and we were low, about 6000 feet.

I knew the drill well, having practised it many times. First you folded your seat up, then disconnected the intercom and folded your light and table up. You removed the escape hatch in the floor and passed it to the wireless operator who stowed it in his cubicle, snapped on your parachute (stored beneath your seat) and sat at the escape hatch opening waiting for the signal from either the wireless operator or the bomb aimer who were still on the intercom. I received the signal to go so left the aircraft. I remember seeing no fire and the flying attitude of the Halifax seemed normal. The thought crossed my mind that the rest might fly back to base without me. That thought soon left as the ground was coming up fast.

I guided my chute towards the middle of a small field and landed in what I suspect was a potato field. It was a full moon that night so visibility was fairly good. I buried my parachute, parachute harness and Mae West under overhanging brush at the edge of the ploughed field, checked my compass and started out southwest, towards Spain. I avoided the roads and struck off across country. Travelled all night and at daybreak took shelter in a small forest. That night traveled again across country. I found the country very rough and the going slow. Besides, the fleece lining in my flying boots had become matted and the boots were so loose that I was developing blisters. So the second day I again hid in the forest, checked my map and decided I had only covered less than 20 miles in two nights. I had found nothing to eat, was hungry, and thought I had better seek help.

I moved through the forest during the day, avoiding farm homes with telephone lines and by mid-afternoon saw a man with a bicycle looking for mushrooms in a forest clearing. I studied him for a long time, decided he was old enough to have served in World War I and was probably a loyal patriot, so I approached him. My high school French was meaningless and I couldn't understand what he said but by means of sign language I was to wait for 2 hours by a large rock and someone would come for me.

In two hours' time two young women who spoke excellent English came with food and a pair of coveralls to put over my uniform. I learned after the war that it was Monsieur Raynaud of Montluçon I had contacted first and it was his daughters Denise and Yvonne who brought the food and questioned me very carefully to make sure I was genuine and not an agent or spy. After satisfying themselves of my honesty they led me to a small foot bridge crossing a stream and told me to wait 1 ½ hours and a man would come.

At the night time a man about my age came and introduced himself as a leader in the local Resistance. He also questioned me closely as to my identity and finally instructed me to follow 200 yards behind him to his home in Montluçon. We went through German troops on field exercises and eventually reached his home where he lived with his wife, mother and a small child.

I couldn't help but admire the bravery of this small family in risking their lives to help me. I was fed a delicious meal and all evening people came with shoes, pants, coat, underwear, shirts, etc. for me to wear. The wife and mother spent all evening adjusting the clothes to fit me.

After dark the man guided me to another house where I stayed inside all day and spent two or three nights. I learned after the war that it was Monsieur Conrad Jurd who took me to his home and he had been an officer in the French Army and was the English teacher at a Montluçon secondary school. Also that the house where I slept was occupied by Mme Blum-Picard who originally came from Paris, and whose husband was with DeGaulle.

I was supplied with an Identity Card in the name of René Legrand, born at Montluçon Dec. 15<sup>th</sup>, 1908. Then M. Jurd, with another man, drove me 80 kilometers from Montluçon to Billy (near Vichy) where I stayed with a government employee. I stayed in a third floor room, away from the windows, all day and at night went for a walk in his walled garden.

After several nights I was driven to Clermont Ferrand and left with a local grape grower. It was the season for picking grapes and there were dozens of harvest employees working. Most of them seemed to know who I was but the owner said he trusted them all. That evening a man came with a driver and bodyguard. I was told his code name was "Prince" and he was the leader of Resistance in the area. I saw him many times over the next several months and one couldn't help being impressed with his courage and dedication.

He drove me to a Maquis camp near Giat, about 70 km west of Clermont Ferrand. There were about 20 in the camp including five other RCAF and RAF people. One, called Pierre, had been shot down in March 1943 and the other four were from a plane shot down in July '43. The Maquis were in charge of a man called "Duranton" who I learned after the war was named Marius Pireyre, 48 rue Eugene-Gilbert, Clermont Ferrand.

A few days later our mid upper gunner, John Nelmes, and the flight engineer Harry (Charlie Hayworth?), appeared so I had news of what had happened to the aircraft and that all had survived the crash landing. Then after several more days Murray Forman came. He had back and knee injuries from the crash landing, had received some medical treatment, and required a cane to walk any distance.

Within a week or two it was decided there was room for 6 airmen to fly back to England by Lysander aircraft that would be landing near Bordeaux during the mid-October full moon. Harry/Hayworth had been ill since arriving at the Maquis, unable to hold his food down. So it was decided that the four shot down in July plus Murray and Harry (Hayworth) would return to England and the rest of us, who were healthy, would wait for the next plane either mid-November or December.

So the six left with a guide to travel by car and train to the Angouleme area. We learned later that they had a great many difficulties and eventually flew back to England in mid-November.

By the end of November the Gestapo had penetrated the escape organization, raided many of the safe houses and captured or killed many of the French underground. In October and November, Pierre, Johnny and I were joined by two other airmen who had been shot down, one Canadian whose last name was Columbus so we called him Chris and an Englishman whose name I've

forgotten. It was decided that we should move to a new hideout near Pontaumur dearly in December '43. "Prince" had assured us there would be another escape organization formed and we were to be patient and wait.

On December 9, 1943, Pierre the Canadian was killed by the Germans at a road block near Martres-de-Vevre. We moved to another deserted isolated farm house near Tralaigues in January '44. It was about this time that we received our orders from London, via radio, that we were to remain in Auvergne and assist special agents that would soon be landing in France, members of S.O.E. (Special Operations Executive) teams. We were told that these teams would organize the parachuting of supplies and train the Maquis in the use of explosives and arms and guerilla war tactics. At that time we had no arms other than a few pistols with which the guards were armed, when on duty.

In March '44 we moved to a forest near St Etienne de Champs. Our group of Maquis had a petrol-powered truck or van we kept hidden and used on our moves to haul our supplies, while most of us walked to the new location, usually at night.

The end of March we received word that the Maquis were assembling near St. Flour, so we moved to that area. I drove the truck loaded with about a dozen Maquis and airmen in the van. The trip was uneventful except we had a flat tire in the German-garrisoned city of St. Flour and had to park the truck on a main thoroughfare for two hours while the tire was repaired.

We then drove on to the Mont Mouchet area, the assembly point. We four airmen were separated from our Maquis friends and reported to the S.O.E., a group of three English headed by a man named Victor, one of whom was a radio operator. Victor told us we would establish a camp nearby and be prepared to receive dozens of other shot down airmen who would be arriving with the assembling Maquis.

We eventually had a camp of 23 airmen, consisting of American, English, Australian, New Zealand(ers) and Canadians. We also acted as interrogators of people picked up by the Maquis who claimed to be escaped airmen, and discovered several who were not what they claimed to be. It was our in-depth knowledge of Air Force organization, aircraft, crew members and their duties etc., which enabled us to destroy their cover stories.

We became involved in receiving parachuted supplies, and operating the small hand-held short range two-way radios used for contacting the aircraft. We also gave assistance to Victor's armaments instructor René who became known as Bazooka.

Eventually 7000 Maquis were gathered at Mont Mouchet, all of whom were very brave and patriotic Frenchmen willing to fight the better armed and trained Germans who enjoyed air support, armoured vehicles and highly efficient and accurate mortar (mortier) sections.

Early in June '44 the Germans attacked by a single rough mountain road, the only entry to the carefully selected strong point, that their armoured cars could travel. The battle lasted until the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> of June when the Maquis withdrew after inflicting severe losses on the Germans. The combination of mortars and aircraft attacks on the Maquis machine gun positions was too much to overcome.

We 23 airmen, after fighting with the Maquis until the end, escaped through the encircling German lines to an adjoining plateau where we watched the fires and explosions for two days and nights. Our food supplies were limited so we had a meeting to decide our next move. None of us had heard of any Maquis plans to withdraw as disciplined troops and re-assemble some other place, nor did we know of any other Maquis concentration in that part of France.

There were many different opinions, some strongly held by individual airmen as to what we should do next and finally it was agreed that we should split up and go our separate ways. We ranged in rank from Majors to Sergeants but rank did not affect the decision. So I divided the remaining funds I had been given by Victor among us all and the third day we went our separate ways either singly or in groups up to 5 people.

Johnny Nelmes, an Australian called Buck, and an Englishman whose name I've forgotten elected to stay with me and try to reach Spain. We waited an entire day because our route led us back through part of the battlefield. We went to the Truyere River gorge and headed down it, south-west. We crossed a bridge to the south side one morning very early, and after 2 or 3 days we were approaching the main road from St. Flour to Chaudes-Aigues.

We stopped at an isolated farm house to buy some food and encountered a well-armed Maquis guard unit. After some questioning and a great deal of suspicion we were taken to a nearby Maquis concentration, with an SOE unit attached. We

were able to identify ourselves and met Denis Rake, the radio operator for the SOE group led by Nancy Wake. We stayed with Denis Rake in the SOE HQ building and made ourselves useful.

After about a week or 10 days the Germans attacked and headed straight for the village holding the HQ determined to capture the SOE team. We escaped down a valley towards the Truyere taking Denis' radio, codes, a large sum of money, and a couple of suitcases full of clothing of Nancy Wake, who was not with us, and the wife of a local resistance leader, who was with us accompanied by her personal guards, and who had orders to kill the woman if she was about to be captured by the Germans. She knew too many of the Resistance. We buried the radio, money and clothing in a grove of trees, covering the hiding place carefully by brushing the fallen leaves over the excavations and marking the spots by memorizing the trees.

Shortly after we started towards the river we heard the baying of bloodhounds on our trail. We could now travel faster and we did, crossing the river over a series of gravel bars so the water was never above our knees. As we had removed our shoes and socks, Denis Rake (said he must give himself up as he couldn't cross the sharp rocky riverbed) so I carried him on my packsack across the river. It must have been the excitement of hearing the bloodhounds and the extra adrenalin flowing, because my pack weighed over 70 pounds and Denis didn't seem like any weight hindrance.

We crossed the river and hid near the shoreline where we could see the opposite bank. Three dogs and their handlers followed by an armed squad appeared. The dogs seemed to be at a loss as we had entered the river at different points. Two of the dogs wanted to go upstream while the third dog kept baying across the river at us. Finally his handler pulled him away and followed the others upstream.

Then I learned that Denis had had all of the bones in his feet broken during interrogation by the Gestapo during a previous trip to France. He told them nothing and eventually escaped from prison with the assistance of the French Underground and returned to England via Spain.

We travelled in a north westerly direction carefully avoiding the (French collaborators formed as police, called the) Milice who with their dogs were searching the valleys and plateaus, and (also avoiding) the German troops patrolling the roads. This would be about June 21<sup>st</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>.

Our group of about 14 reached the farm home of a local resistance leader, M. A. Sagette Farges near Paulhac. We stopped there to rest and cars came for all except we four airmen who stayed and camped in the woods not far from the farmhouse. We ate with the Sagette family and slept at a neighbour's home when the rain was too heavy for our parachute tents.

After two or three weeks we moved to the Hotel Valette at Chaudes-Aigues. We had the hotel to ourselves with an excellent escape route out of the back door if the Germans entered on the one road into the village. We stayed at the Hotel for about 4 weeks when we were contacted by another SOE team. At that time many of the German garrisons were confined to their fortified towns and cities as their withdrawal routes were controlled by the Maquis. We helped to supply the Maquis with arms, munitions, explosives, money etc., dropped from aircraft. Many German troops were being taken prisoner, and we persuaded the Maquis not to execute their prisoners as there were many Frenchmen held as prisoners and (doing) forced labour in Germany.

By the end of Aug. the fighting in that part of France was over except for pockets of resistance which the Maquis were mopping up. The cities and towns were celebrating Liberation Days to which we were always invited. We learned that Toulouse was expecting an aircraft with guests from SHAEF\* HQ Algiers to attend their Liberation Day celebrations. So we four airmen requested to be driven to Toulouse and we flew back to Algiers and eventually flew back to England via Gibraltar arriving September 22/44.

\*Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force