

JOURNEY TO THE HORIZON

Escape & Evasion during World War II

Hans Onderwater MBE and Brian Lissette
Journey to the Horizon; Escape and Evasion during World War II.

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Hans Onderwater MBE
Brian Lissette

JOURNEY TO THE HORIZON

Escape & Evasion during World War II

Dedicated to the heroes of the Comète Line, who risked and sometimes lost their lives to help down airmen, fleeing soldiers and resistance members to evade capture.

Dedicated to the airmen who dared to run for freedom, to those who endured captivity and hardship and those who gave their lives for the freedom of others.

Dedicated to the families who had to endure so much fear, anxiety and sadness while their loved ones failed to return from their missions.

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FOREWORD

by Patricia Willis née Giles, widow of Major Don Kenyon Willis USAF

In March 1982 Patricia Willis came to the Netherlands to see where her husband landed in April 1944 and to meet several people in the Netherlands and Belgium who were instrumental in his successful evasion. Before she returned to Florida, she wrote:

‘It is with deep felt gratitude that I write these few lines as a foreword to the story of the successful escape of my husband Donald Kenyon Willis and his four comrades. They covered four countries before they returned to England. Although as time goes by it was not a very long span, at the time it happened during the war it was an eternity. I will never forget the day when I was informed that Don was missing in action. In spite of my confidence in Donald, I felt the chill of fear when I was left alone with the knowledge that there was only a slim chance of him returning safely to Britain. I cannot describe how I felt when I was called to the phone in the hospital where I worked. I still hear that voice saying to me: ‘Hi, Pat, it’s me, I’m home again.’

I knew little about Don’s Journey to the Horizon until Hans Onderwater contacted me and told me what he was doing.’ Little by little, a jigsaw puzzle formed into a fascinating story when I heard about the heroism of simple people in the occupied countries and five men on the run.

Hans has written many books about the history of his country The Netherlands during the Second World War, yet I do not think that any manuscript has taken so much effort and time as this story. I met Hans when I flew to Holland and he took me with him to meet the people who risked their lives to help my husband and so many other escapees. I will always cherish the first time I embraced old ‘Mother’ Kuppens in Oud-Gastel, who, with her husband had been the first to give shelter to my husband. They did this with their sons living in the house. My meeting with Yvonne Bienfait in Mons, Belgium will be a treasure in my mind as long as I live. Yvonne, a nurse like I, is one of the most courageous women I have ever met.

Hans travelled the long route Don and his friends took to reach freedom. During the second Journey to the Horizon Hans met as many eyewitnesses as possible. Now his story ends with a truthful reconstruction of an incredible evasion. To me it is impossible to express my gratitude to all the people who once risked their lives to help men like my husband. I cannot tell them how grateful I am, for they gave me back the best thing I have: the man I loved with all my heart. That is why he felt so strongly that he had to come back to me. His return to England and his continuing battle for our mutual freedom makes him my hero.

We were given many happy years until Don fell ill and died. Though I miss him a lot he stays in my memory as the man who gave me a wonderful life. I consider this book a tribute to all the people of the resistance and to the soldiers who tried everything to return to England to continue the war against the common enemy rather than to surrender.’

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia J. Willis". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the main text.

Patricia Willis née Giles.



FOREWORD

*By Glynis Spencer, Angela Barnes, and
Amanda Burrows, daughters of Pilot Officer
Len 'Barney' Barnes MBE RAF*

On March 15th 2020 we received a phone call 'out of the blue'. It was from Hans Onderwater in connection with the rewriting of a book he had originally written in 1985. The narrative recounted the passage of five brave aircrew in 1944, of which our father Pilot Officer Leonard Barnes was one, and their hazardous journey to safety and freedom across the Pyrenees.

They were guided by the selfless and courageous members of the Comète Line. As 'Reis naar de Horizon' was written in Dutch we were unable to comprehend it. However, it was a book we cherished dearly and recognised its importance as a treasured family archive. What was so amazing is that Hans' call came on the anniversary of our father's Lancaster bomber crashing in France on March 15th 1944! exactly 76 years later!

Hans has a lifelong interest in military history and is the author of many successful books on this subject. This particular project has been ongoing for nearly forty years, a testament to his perseverance in documenting these remarkable events. Now in collaboration with Brian Lissette a more detailed and informative edition is published. Brian has spent more than twenty years researching his uncle's wartime story, Warrant Officer Leslie Lissette RNZAF, who features in the original version. Their shared interest, research and dedication to bringing these stories of determination and bravery to print has culminated in this moving tribute to each and every one of those involved.

We can learn so much from these stories and how seemingly 'ordinary' folk could show such great courage, commitment, resilience and comradeship. Indeed, they were 'extraordinary'!

We feel so honoured and moved to have been asked to write this foreword and our sincere and utmost gratitude goes to Hans and Brian for allowing these stories to live on.

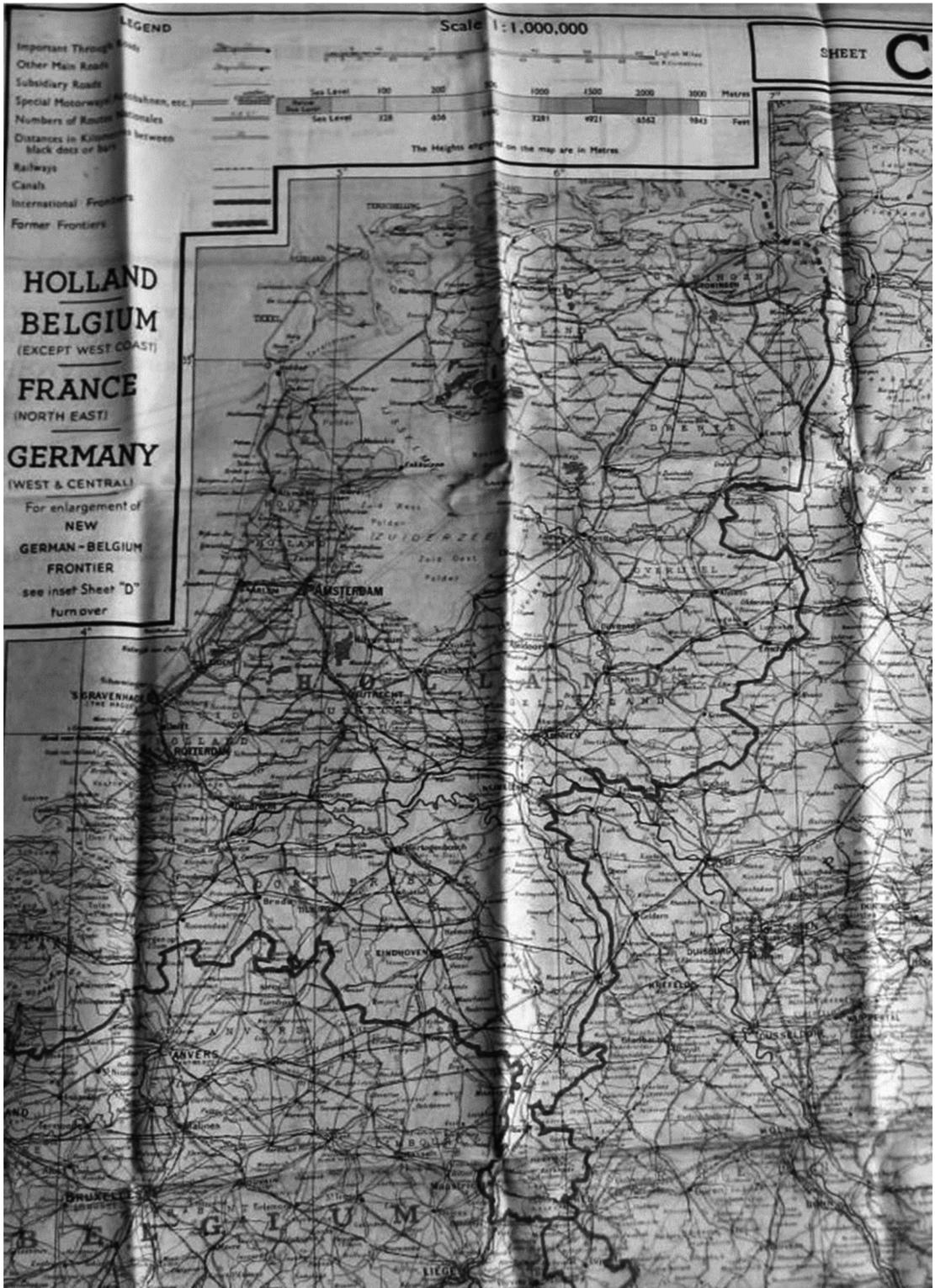
Glynis Spencer Angela Barnes Amanda Burrows

Glynis Spencer

Angela Barnes

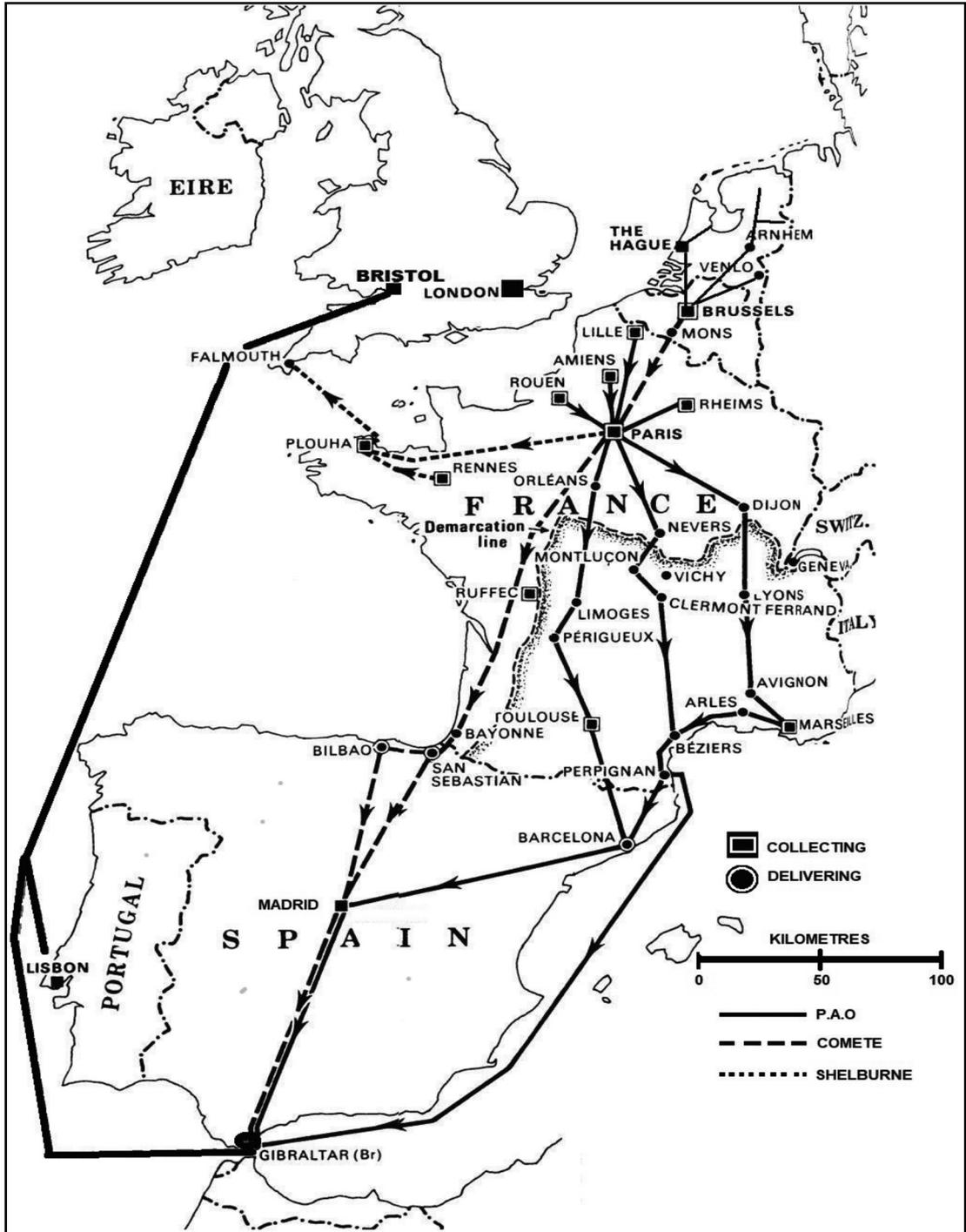
Amanda Burrows

A SILK MAP, PART OF THE ESCAPE KIT.



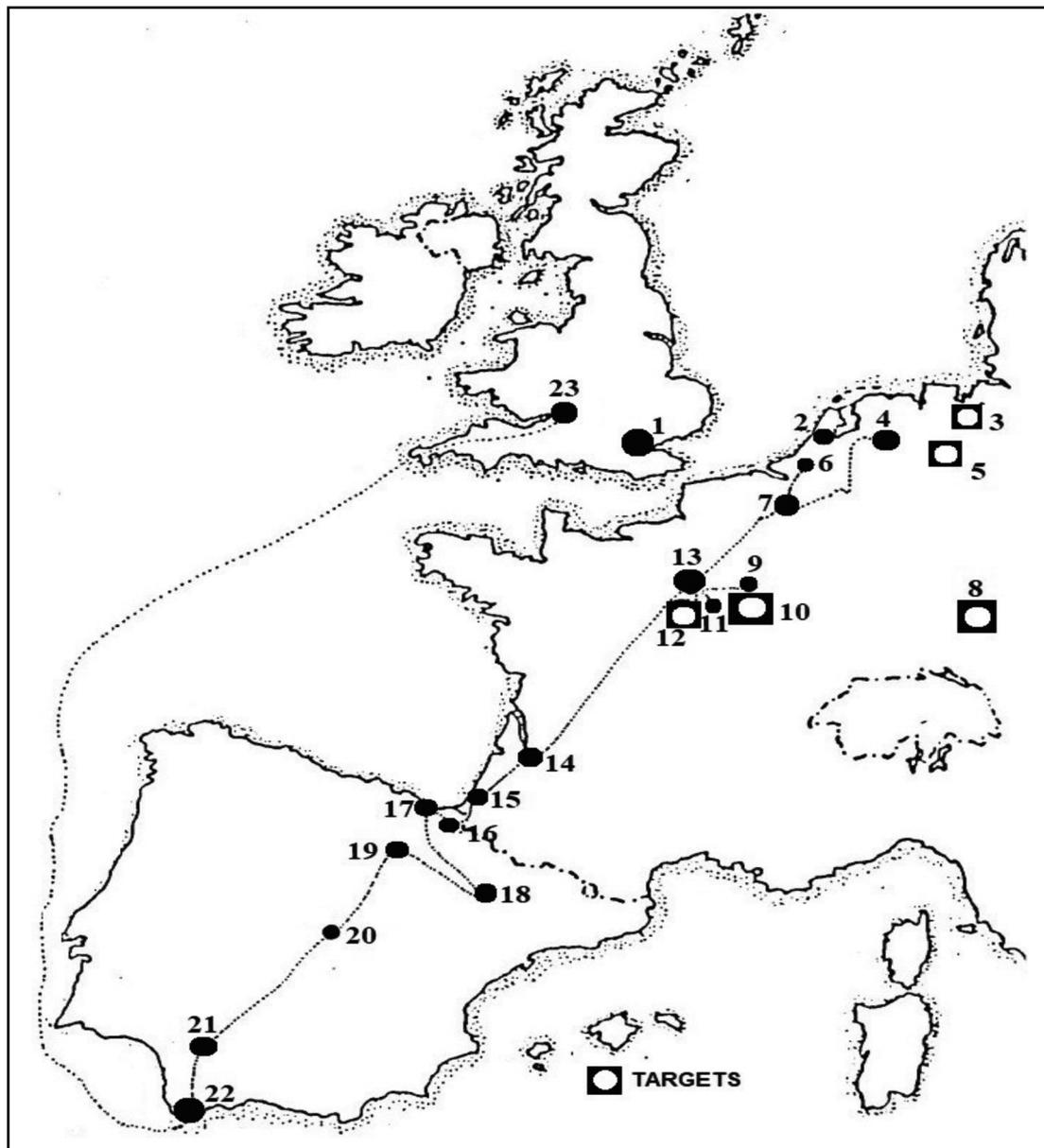
Holland and part of Belgium; One of the many silk escape maps. (HO)

ESCAPE AND EVASION LINES TO GIBRALTAR.



The different escape routes to Gibraltar, used by allied soldiers and aviators to return to Great Britain from the occupied territories. Comète ran all the way through occupied territory while the P.A.O. line partly went through Vichy France, the non-occupied part of the country. Shelburne was the shortest and most dangerous route, as the escapers had to pass the Atlantic Wall, the German defence line along the coast of Europe, heavily fortified and well-guarded and patrolled (via Philippe d'Albert-Lake).

THE JOURNEY THROUGH OCCUPIED EUROPE.



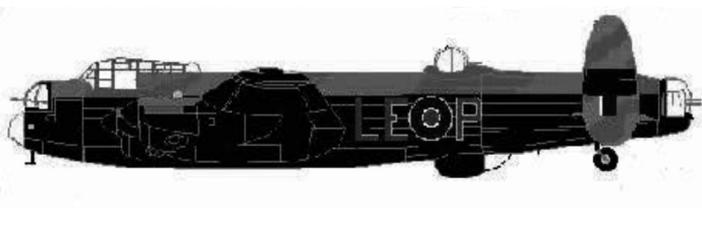
1.) London; 2.) Amsterdam; 3.) Bremen 13 November 1943; 4.) LtCol Hubbard lands near Marienberg, Holland, by parachute; 5.) Gutersloh, Droop Snoot attack by P-38 Lightnings on 10 April 1944; 6.) Maj Willis makes a forced landing near Oud-Gastel, Holland on return from Gutersloh; 7.) In Brussels: evading military collected by members of Comète; 8.) Stuttgart 15/16 March 1944; 9.) P/O Barnes lands by parachute at Dravigny, France; 10.) Mailly-le-Camp, France 3/4 May 44; 11.) Sgts Emeny and Pittwood land by parachute near Rossières; 12.) Etampes-Mondesir, France. USAAF strafing attack 27 April 1944. 2Lt Cornett lands near Arrancourt; 13.) Paris: major collection centre for evaders; 14.) Bordeaux; 15.) Bayonne, last town before trek through the Pyrenees into Spain; 16.) Pamplona, Spain; end of the evasion; 17.) San Sebastian, resort where enemies meet; 18.) Zaragoza, where aircrew are entertained by the Spanish Air Force; 19.) Alhama de Aragon; internment camp for refugees; 20.) Madrid, seats of the British and American legations; 21.) Seville; 22.) Gibraltar, haven of freedom and start of the last leg home; 23.) Whitchurch, Bristol; home after a successful evasion. (HO)

THE TRAVELLERS.



Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Harvey 'Speed' Hubbard USAAF.

American fighter pilot. Serial 0-380248, HQ 355 FG. Station: Steeple Morden. Flew in P-47D2 Thunderbolt 42-7944 'Lil' Jo', 13 November 1943. Landed by parachute at Mariënborg, the Netherlands. Evaded capture via Dutch resistance. Continued his journey in the Netherlands and Belgium. When in Antwerp, hidden by Miss Nelly Rosiers. Went to Brussels and to Paris, helped by the Comète Line. Like Barnes, Willis, Cornett and Emeny, he reached the Pyrenees. Entered Spain 4 June and briefly interned in Pamplona and Alhama de Aragon. The Spanish handed him over to American embassy. Hubbard left the Continent via Gibraltar. Returned to England 28 June 1944. After the war he returned to Antwerp and married Miss Rosiers, who became Mrs. Hubbard. Continued a career in the USAF and aviation. Died in 1983, buried at Greenwood Memorial Park and Mausoleum in Fort Worth, Tarrant County, Texas. His wife Nelly died in 1987 and rests by his side.



Pilot Officer Leonard Alfred 'Barney' Barnes RAF.

British pilot. Serial 168998. RAFVR No.5 Group Bomber Command. No.630 Squadron. Station: East Kirkby. Shot down in the night of 15/16 March 1944 flying Lancaster ND530, P-Peter to Stuttgart. Crew: Flying Officer Geisler (Nav), Sergeants Walker FI/Eng), Gregg (BA), Overholt (MUG), Plowman (Wop/AG) and Fox (RAG). Barnes landed by parachute near Dravigny. Found by a member of the resistance. First hidden in Fère-en-Tardenois. From there, to Paris to be handled by the Comète Line. With Hubbard, Willis, Cornett and Emeny taken to the border between France and Spain. On 4/5 June 1944, Plt Off Barnes entered Spain and after a brief internment by Spanish was handed to diplomats of the British embassy. Departed by plane from Gibraltar. Arrived in England 25 June 1944. Some of his crew members managed to evade capture as well. Barnes died in 1988.



Major Donald Kenyon 'Willy' Willis USAAF.

American fighter pilot. Serial 0-889159. Tactics Evaluation Officer HQ 67th Fighter Wing. Walcott Hall near Stamford. Willis took off from Kingscliffe to evaluate the Droop Snoot mission of 10 April 1944, in a borrowed aircraft. Willis landed P-38J Lightning serial number 42-68077, KI-X, 20 Fighter Group, 55 Fighter Squadron at Oud-Gastel in Holland. After landing Dutch patriots hid him and gave him shelter while German soldiers searched the area. Due to his fast departure, it was impossible to destroy the

aircraft and a German officer photographed it. In the meantime, Willis walked from Oud-Gastel to the Dutch-Belgian border. For days, he evaded on his own and reached Antwerp, where a Belgian resistance member saw him. He was passed to the Comète Line and spent time in Belgium before being moved to Paris. Don Willis travelled south with Hubbard, Barnes, Cornett and Emeny. He entered Spain on 6 June and after a brief internment in Pamplona and Alhama de Aragon, was handed to US embassy officials and travelled to Gibraltar. Arrived in England 28 June 1944. Willis flew as a pilot during the Winter War in Finland, during the German invasion of Norway in the Norwegian Naval Air Force and in the RAF Eagle Squadron, before joining the USAAF. After a long career in the USAF, Don Willis went back to sea. Suffering from Alzheimer's Disease he died in April 1977.



2nd Lieutenant Jack 'Jacko' Donald Cornett USAAF.

American fighter pilot. Serial 0-816632. 375 FS. 361 FG. Bottisham. P-47D Thunderbolt, 42-75219, E2-G. His aircraft was hit by Flak while he was strafing Étampes-Mondésir France on 27 April 1944. He landed near Arrancourt, south of Paris. Evading capture for a few days, he was found and taken to a safe house. First the local resistance checked Cornett's credentials and once satisfied took him under their wings. He went to Paris and was handed over to the Comète Line. With four others, he travelled to the Basque region of France and crossed the border on 6 June 1944. After a few days of internment in Pamplona, he went to Alma de Aragon and Madrid. American embassy officials arranged for transport to Gibraltar. He reached England on 30 June 1944. He retired a Lieutenant Colonel in the USAF and died in September 1986.



Sergeant Ronald Thomas 'Curly' Emeny RAF.

British air gunner, Serial 138167 RAFVR No.5 Group. Bomber Command No.207 Squadron. Station RAF Spilsby. Mid-upper gunner in Lancaster ND556, EM-F for Freddie. Shot down during the raid against Mailly-le-Camp, a Panzer training facility in France on 3/4 May 1944. The crew were: Warrant Officer Lissette (pilot), Flight Sergeant Pittwood (Nav), Sergeants Wesley (B/A), King (Wop/AG), Stockford (Fl/Eng) Ellis (RAG) and Emeny (MUG). Emeny was severely burned, and with the help of Pittwood hiding in a crypt near Rossières. The local resistance found them. Pittwood was taken to Paris and lost contact with Emeny. Due to his burns, Emeny had to stay behind until he had recovered or died, for which a grave had already been dug. Once he was fit, the resistance took him to Paris, where he met four other airmen with whom he was to continue south. From Paris he travelled to Bayonne by train, escorted by two members of Comète. During the night of 5/6 June, he and his four friends crossed into Spain and were briefly interned until the British embassy moved him and the other Briton Len Barnes to Madrid and Gibraltar. He left by aircraft and landed in England on 25 June 1944. Emeny AFM dedicated his retired life to the East Kirkby Aviation Museum. He died on 8th December 2001, leaving his wife Jess and family: Ron served twice on No.207. He had a long career in the RAF and told any number of stories of causing consternation among the local brass when senior officers he had known in their early days spotted him during visits.

THE LANCASTERS AND THE CREWS.



Lancaster ND530, LE-P for Peter, 15/16 March 1944.

No.5 Group Bomber Command. No.630 Squadron. East Kirkby, target Stuttgart.

Pilot Officer L. A. Barnes, Pilot 168998 (Evaded, escaped to Spain).

Sergeant K. A. Walker, Flight Engineer 1583707 (Evaded, hidden by French family)

Sergeant J. H. Overholt RCAF, Mid Upper Gunner R/197141 (Killed, buried St. Gilles).¹

Sergeant T. A. Fox, Rear Gunner 1433606 (Killed, buried St. Gilles).

Flying Officer M. Geisler, Navigator 151194 (PoW 4140, Stalag Luft 1, Barth).

Sergeant M. E. Gregg, Bomb Aimer 1576438 (PoW 3816, Stalag Luft 1, Barth).

Sergeant G. E. Plowman, Wireless Operator 1333979 (PoW 3198, Stalag 357, Fallingbostel).

All were RAF, except for Sergeant Overholt, who was RCAF.



L.A.Barnes

K.A.Walker

G.E.Plowman

T.A.Fox

M.Geisler

M.E.Gregg

J.H.Overholt

Lancaster ND556, EM-F for Freddie. 03/04 May 1944.

No.5 Group Bomber Command No.207 Squadron. RAF Spilsby, target Mailly-le-Camp.

Warrant Officer L. H. Lissette RNZAF, Pilot 391011 (Killed, buried Chaintreaux).²

Sergeant R. Ellis, Rear Gunner 537642 (Killed, buried Chaintreaux).

Sergeant N. J. Stockford, Flight Engineer 673915 (Evaded, escaped to Spain).

Sergeant P. N. King, Wireless Operator 1580576 (Evaded, escaped to Spain).

Flight Sergeant J. Pittwood, Navigator 1219454 (Evaded, escaped to Spain).

Sergeant R. T. Emeny, Mid Upper Gunner 1383167 (Evaded, escaped to Spain).

Sergeant L. Wesley, Bomb Aimer 1581817 (PoW 8122, Buchenwald, Stalag Luft 3 Sagan).

All were RAF, except for Warrant Officer Lissette, who was RNZAF.



L.H.Lissette

N.J.Stockford

P.N.King

R.Ellis

J.Pittwood

L.Wesley

R.T.Emeny

¹ Sgt (A/G) Fox Thomas Austin, RAFVR 1433606; Sgt (A/G) Overholt, James Henry, RCAF R/197141. Aged 20. Son of George Henry Overholt and of Irene Alberta Overholt (nee MacDonald), of Eastwood, Ontario, Canada. Died 16/03/1944. 630 Sqn.

² W/O (Pilot) Lissette Leslie Harry, RNZAF 391011. Aged 26. Son of Harry and Ellen Georgina (Nellie) Lissette, of Pakowhai, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, Service Number 537642; Sgt Ronald Ellis RAF 537642. Aged 25. Husband of Kathleen Ellis, of Duns Tew, Oxfordshire. Died 04/05/1944. 207 Sqn.