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Author interview – Bryn Evans v2

Can I walk across the Pyrenees in winter?

Bryn Evans is interviewed on his new book, *Airmen's Incredible Escapes*, in which the question 'Can I walk across the Pyrenees in winter?' is in the mind of an airman shot down in occupied Europe in WWII.

Can you tell us what the book is about?

Airmen's Incredible Escapes is a collection of fascinating true stories of Allied aircrew's survival in the Second World War, when hope was fast receding. Amazing narrow escapes by airmen occurred in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Life or death would often seem random and inevitable.

As if at the whim of the gods, men would die in countless circumstances: in shockingly accident prone training; being shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire or fighters; baling out over enemy occupied territory, and then on the ground executed by enemy troops or civilians; while hanging from a parachute, being machine-gunned by an enemy fighter; crashing or landing by parachute into the sea, a lake or river, and then drowning; crashing or parachuting into the middle of a mine-field or a land battle, and becoming another fatal statistic; being killed by 'friendly fire' of Allied anti-aircraft guns or fighters; a casualty of a mid-air collision with enemy or other Allied aircraft; crashing because of engine or other mechanical failure; trapped in a damaged and crashing aircraft, and in any number of ways.

Many were captured by the enemy, only to die in POW camps. Others died while on the run trying to evade capture.

How were you motivated to write *Airmen's Incredible Escapes*?

The genesis of the book occurred eight years ago with a request by a veteran of Bomber Command, Lloyd Leah. I met Lloyd while researching for one of my previous books, *The Decisive Campaigns of the Desert Air Force 1942-1945*, when he told me his extraordinary experience of being shot down over Germany. He asked me not to write an article of his astonishing story, but to put it in a book with others of incredible survival, and it was an obligation that stayed with me.

Although over the years many such stories have been published, it is likely that thousands have not. My research has shown that indeed a very large number of veterans' amazing survival experiences have only ever been known to themselves and their families. By publishing a request for such stories in the media, an unexpected wealth of unpublished accounts from veterans and their families was received.

Some airmen with help from selfless strangers in enemy occupied lands, evaded capture to journey back to their base over several months. Accounts of such extraordinary survival were often not made known until after the end of the war. The interest and enthusiasm of veterans and their families to see their stories recorded and published is inspirational. To these veterans of WWII, and all those who did not survive, we owe an incalculable debt. Their struggle and sacrifice to defeat the totalitarian regimes in Germany and Japan, gave us the freedom enjoyed in democracies to this day.

What primary sources did your research uncover?

I received more than a hundred responses from veterans, their friends and their families, describing miraculous escapes by airmen. Many airmen wrote accounts of their extraordinary escapes, which are extensively featured in the book.

Besides these first-hand eyewitness accounts, other research sources have been the RAF Squadron records at the National Archives at Kew in London, and RAF squadron associations. A number of books provided me with a rich source of reference material, most notably those of Martin Middlebrook and John Terraine. Middlebrook's books on Bomber Command, such as *The Nuremberg Raid*, have been described as the finest on the RAF's bombing operations over Germany and occupied Europe, and inspirational for any writer of military history. Terraine in *The Right of the Line* wrote an encyclopaedic yet absorbing history of *The Role of the RAF in World War Two*.

Do these accounts reveal new or little known insights of airmen's experiences?

These stories remind us of the mental health impact on airmen who did survive. Veterans speak of the grinding, accumulating stress of operations in the air war, an insight into what at the time was termed 'war neurosis', and its lifelong legacy. Now we call it PTSD. To combat the stress, anxiety, constant worry and fear, there was a culture of the 'stiff upper lip', with a 'sang-froid' approach in the RAF. Typically in RAF parlance airmen would describe an operation as a 'piece of cake'.

Stress, 'war neurosis', or just plain fear, were suppressed when flying on operations, or temporarily pushed aside when off duty through alcohol, merrymaking or outlandish pranks. For many at some point the stress would be replaced to some degree by a fatalism, an acceptance that surviving a tour of operations was most unlikely. Yet as one veteran airman remembered, the fear and numbing dread felt before an operational flight in war, can only be understood by those who have experienced it.

Those airmen who survived being shot down, and the parachute drop into enemy territory, and then tried to evade capture, were sometimes murdered by enemy forces or civilians. Deaths occurred in all kinds of ways, yet some airmen endured the most hostile circumstances, and would have one thought in their minds, 'How do I evade capture?' Almost as a sub-conscious reflex some would think, 'Can I walk to Switzerland?', or 'Can I walk across the Pyrenees to Spain?' After the D-Day invasion in June 1944 in Normandy, downed airmen would try and reach Allied lines.

Those who did escape to a neutral country such as Switzerland, or Spain and then onto Gibraltar, were able to do that only because they were helped by civilians or resistance movements who supported the Allies, and risked their lives doing so. Many airmen were wounded or badly injured. Only the help of civilians, or even on occasions of enemy troops, enabled them to survive. Many aircrew only lived to tell of their experience because of selfless acts of courage by their fellow airmen.

What thoughts does the book leave with a reader?

In this collection of remarkable survival stories, there is reference inevitably to many airmen who died. Some are named, some inferred, who did not survive. Above all this book is dedicated to all those who were unable to make an incredible escape. They made the ultimate sacrifice.

In this time of stress and worry caused by the pandemic, to read of the resilience of spirit of airmen in WWII, is humbling, and revealing of our present day inadequacy.

The stories in *Airmen's Incredible Escapes* are astounding, each one unique in many and different ways. Perhaps the most remarkable and wonderful aspect is that so many airmen owed their survival to the help and kindness of perfect strangers, many who gave their help knowing that if found out, it would bring death to themselves, their friends and families. The 'Helpers' in all countries knew the risks they were taking. Like the airmen they too were hostage to fortune, and their courage was just as incredible.