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# NARA Escape and Evasion Reports

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## ABSTRACT

*This Research Note gives a brief introduction to the series of Escape and Evasion reports held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Making up a rich source base, these documents can be used to explore the operational history of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF), the history of MIS-X, escape and evasion planning during the Second World War, diplomatic history, and social history.<sup>1</sup> In addition, they offer a very compelling story of the relationships that flourished between aircrews and European civilians during the war.*

Much of what we know about escape and evasion during the Second World War comes from memoirs written by aircrews who were helped by European civilians or by intelligence officers who spent the war years developing increasingly sophisticated protocols for getting aircrews out of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Scholarly attention to escape and evasion has lagged behind other aspects of the wartime experience. However, there is a rich source base, both from the American and British perspective, to support all kinds of research. There are two reasons for this excellent record keeping. The first is the fact that intelligence organizations understood they needed to know more about the experience of aircrew in Occupied Europe if they were going to better help them. The second reason is that the British and Americans agreed that they would support

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<sup>1</sup>MIS-X was a section of the United States Department of War that was modelled after the British MI9. It focused on helping prisoners of war and servicemen who were evading capture in occupied territories.

<sup>2</sup>There are a number of memoirs that deal with the subject, including: Herman Bodson, *Downed Allied Airmen and Evasion of Capture: The Role of Local Resistance Networks in World War II*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005); George Watt, *Escape from Hitler's Europe: An American Airman behind Enemy Lines*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); Airey Neave, *Saturday at M.I.9*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969); Donald Darling, *Secret Sunday*, (London: William Kimber, 1975); and Lloyd Shoemaker, *Escape Factory: The Story of MIS-X*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).

European civilians who had helped Anglo-American aircrews, so needed to know as much as possible about these interactions.

There are excellent records at the United Kingdom National Archives (TNA) at Kew, including a large collection of documents that helped the Anglo-Americans award honours to European civilians, which contain both biographical details of helpers and narratives of evasion. The archives at Kew also contain invaluable information about MI9, the intelligence branch devoted to escape and evasion, but finding information about individual flyers and their experience requires a bit more digging. However, the collection of escape and evasion reports held by the United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) allows researchers a way to easily access individual stories, as the series has been digitized by NARA.<sup>3</sup> Each of the approximately 2000 reports ranges in length, but many are 40 plus pages long. Every man who crash landed in Europe and made it back to the UK was interviewed at least once, and sometimes several times, about his experience.<sup>4</sup> One portion of the record contained a form with a list of set questions, though there was always a section where the flyer was invited to simply narrate his experience from start to finish. Interestingly, these narratives are sometimes edited by an unknown hand before they were typed up for the official record. We can find this editorialising especially when flyers were sharing information they thought other flyers should have. For instance, one man was adamant in his report that flyers should insist that civilians take them to 'les resistances' and that they should pressure the escape organizations to move them quickly. The note next to this adds: 'At the risk of being tedious, briefers must instruct air crews never to enquire about organizations, because 1) if such information gets out the helper gets shot; 2) only the Germans are making such enquiries; and 3) therefore the evader is risking his own life by his foolishness'.<sup>5</sup>

This example of editorialising for the sake of improving the success rate of evasion highlights how these documents could be used for research on escape and evasion at the highest levels – the planning that took place at MIS-X, the American branch of intelligence devoted to evasion. For example, the questionnaires given to flyers often asked about the aid boxes they were given. Through the answers, we can see the

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<sup>3</sup>NARA Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, Series: Escape and Evasion Reports, 1942–1945.

<sup>4</sup>This is true, too, for British flyers, but those interviews are not as well organized as the American ones.

<sup>5</sup>Stonebarger, Gilbert Marvin (Second Lieutenant), NARA Identifier:5555487/Local Identifier: E & E 846. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

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process of improvement and adjustment that took place during the war to better equip flyers before they left on bombing missions. But we can also use these records for many other avenues of inquiry: operational history, diplomatic history, social history, and more can be explored via these reports.

### **Operational history**

Each document tells us what the mission target was for the unit in question while the narratives often relay stories about what went wrong. Gilbert Schowalter told his interviewer that, on their way to bomb Romilly, they 'left Molesworth about 1030 hours 12 December 1942. We were over the coast of France at 1150 hours. We saw ship No. 582 jettison its bombs and the men bale out. This ship slipped under and to the right of us and it was at this time that two of their crew jumped. Our No. 3 engine ran away, shortly followed by No. 2. No.1 was throwing off violently. We all landed uninjured...Our crew estimated that we had destroyed six enemy fighter planes during the attack and while coming down.'<sup>6</sup> Some excellent work has been done on the bombing campaigns in France and these documents can add further details about missions, what kind of enemy response the USAAF met along the way, and the end result.

### **Diplomatic relations**

Using interpersonal relationships as a lens through which to explore diplomatic relations, I mostly use these records as a way to investigate relations between France, the UK, and the US, but Spain also features fairly prominently in these documents, as most evaders made their way through Spain, to Gibraltar. For instance, Second Lieutenant Howard Kelly crossed into Spain and was directed to approach the Spanish police who were 'pleasant to deal with'. He was briefly imprisoned, then released into a hotel, from where he contacted the American Consul.<sup>7</sup> We can compare this to First Lieutenant Cody Watson, who was imprisoned in Spain for 25 days<sup>8</sup> or Second

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<sup>6</sup>Schowalter, Gilbert (First Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554650/Local Identifier: E & E 8. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>7</sup>Kelly, Howard W. (Second Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554672/Local Identifier: E & E 30. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>8</sup>Watson, Cody (First Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554702/Local Identifier: E & E 62. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

Lieutenant Robert Smith, who was also arrested and sent to prison in Malgrat.<sup>9</sup> Taking into account the dates of these encounters, somebody could use these documents to chart out the changing nature of Spain's approach to dealing with Anglo-American evaders, which would fit into a broader history of Spanish-American or Spanish-British diplomatic relationships during the war.

### **Social history**

These records are particularly valuable for assessing the biographical history of the USAAF as each report tells us the flyer's age, length of service, peacetime profession, and address. Using them alongside similar records that we have for civilian helpers allows us to establish a collective biography of both flyers and helpers. A careful study will tell us more about their socio-economic backgrounds: How old were they? What kind of work did they do? Where in France did most flyers land? Where in France were 'helpers' located? What conclusions might be drawn about the connection between the flyers own personal histories and their decision to enlist in the Air Force? Establishing a collective biography can help us understand the connections between people that would not be apparent from individual biographies. We will be able to know more about which institutions or networks influenced people's actions and we can identify patterns of behaviour.

The narratives told by flyers help round out the biographical details, as we can use these stories to learn more about the relationships between flyers and helpers. Most flyers report that they were given immediate aid upon landing in France, which was an essential element to a successful evasion. Flyers needed additional food and drink, local intelligence, as well as civilian clothing, to be able to navigate through the country without being caught. Sometimes, as in Frank Greene's case, the immediate help was overwhelming – he reported that 40-50 French civilians came running to his crash site and his injuries were tended by a farmer's wife.<sup>10</sup> Others, like Carey Ford, were refused help multiple times.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the flyer would be helped by well-meaning civilians who would take him to local authorities, only to be threatened with arrest at

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<sup>9</sup>Smith, Robert E. (Second Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554649/Local Identifier: E & E 7. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>10</sup>Greene, Frank W. (ssg) NARA Identifier: 5554691/Local Identifier: E & E 51. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>11</sup>Ford, Carey Bernard (Staff Sergeant) NARA Identifier: 5554689/Local Identifier: E & E 49. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

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that level.<sup>12</sup> One important limitation to keep in mind when using these sources, however, is the fact that these are the narratives of flyers who successfully evaded capture. There were many others who did not successfully make it out of Occupied Europe and these records do not reflect this.

At the end of the day, these records can be used for all kinds of research, but they are most impressive, I think, for lending a human element to a story that sometimes leaves it out. Books and articles about strategic bombing sometimes neglect the fact that these missions were flown by young men and those young men sometimes ended up stuck in foreign countries, attempting to return home without getting caught. Nothing reflects this human story more than the evidence in these records of French civilians tending to injured aircrew or taking care to tend to their burials if they did not survive. Mark McDermott landed safely in France, but the other members of his crew did not make it. He remembered that one of them 'had a large funeral. There were over 2,000 at the funeral. The French people took his watch, ring and bracelet. They are going to send it to his wife after the war.'<sup>13</sup> Another file references American aircrew who were shot and buried in France and the note reads that 'A large number - several hundred - French people came to the funeral, which irritated the Germans.'<sup>14</sup> Attending these funerals was not without risk for these civilians and sheltering American aircrews was punished by imprisonment, deportation, and death. The human relationships that flourished in this context are worth remembering and these documents help us do that.

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<sup>12</sup>Kelly, Howard W. (Second Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554672/Local Identifier: E & E 30. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>13</sup>Mc Dermott, Mark L. (Second Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554654/Local Identifier: E & E 12. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].

<sup>14</sup>Wemheuer, Joseph E. (Second Lieutenant) NARA Identifier: 5554676/Local Identifier: E & E 36. Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, NARA [electronic record].