



So Close to Freedom: A World War II Story of Peril and Betrayal in the Pyrenees by Jean-Luc E. Cartron.

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It was tricky during World War II traveling any of the escape routes to European lands free from Nazi occupation. It became harder every year, as the German security services refined their methods for securing Nazi-land borders and infiltrating networks. *So Close to Freedom* describes the final, failed trip of the “people smuggler,” or *passeur*, “Charbonnier” (Jean-Louis Bazerque). On this occasion, his trek via his favored route through the Pyrenees Mountains separating France and Spain was compromised by the inclusion of “too many”¹ fugitives in the group. Instead of patriot secret agents being exfiltrated beyond German control, this party comprised American, British, and Australian airmen, continental civilians (including resistance fighters), and French, Dutch, and Belgian soldiers and civilians.

The number of Allied airmen needing repatriation kept rising as more planes bombed occupied western Europe.² For example, during a single raid in October 1943, 236 US Eighth Air Force bombers and a like number of fighters attacked the city of Münster (58). Helpers on the ground lived in constant fear of exposure and often kept their families in the dark about their clandestine aid to fugitives. The locals may have lost more people than did the fugitives who reached safety. The existence of such allies, male and female, in occupied Europe greatly heartened the downed Allied airmen. The Allies touted the rescued airmen and had them give lectures on escape and evasion; having bailed out or crash-landed, escaped to Spain, and then to Britain via Portugal and Gibraltar, they were living proof of what could be done.

Author Jean-Luc Cartron (Univ. of New Mexico) is the grandson of a French resistance fighter. He acknowledges the research aid of survivors in France and their children. In addition, some of the evaders wrote and sometimes published memoirs. Not all World War II narratives end in triumph. This one concludes (spoiler alert!) with the capture of nearly all those who were guided, sometimes in the dark, across nine-thousand-foot mountain ridges from the valley of Barousse past Luchon³—allegedly the highest, most dangerous, and therefore safest route (27).

The two main French organizations in this area (code-named “Dutch-Paris” and “Françoise”) guided many desperate Allied airmen who had been funneled into Toulouse by various escape-line organizations (appendix 2). Toulouse was the largest train station in the vicinity of southern neutral territory with connecting lines to all parts of France. Many French women played roles in hiding and helping evaders. The included Marie-Louise Dissard, a woman in her sixties who pro-

1. The title of chap. 5.

2. Cartron cites a tenfold increase in airmen escapees during the last two years of the war. Oliver Clutton-Brock’s *RAF Evaders: The Complete Story of RAF Escapees and Their Escape Lines, Western Europe, 1940-1945* (London: Grub St, 2009) reveals the breadth of the movement and its personnel. See, also, Peter Eisner, *The Freedom Line: The Brave Men and Women Who Rescued Allied Airmen from the Nazis during World War II* (NY: Morrow, 2004).

3. Pompey, Julius Caesar’s rival in the east and west, had passed through this locale before Romans established thermal baths on the site.

vided safe-houses, food, and guides as well as the organizational brains along the Françoise escape-line. Many Allied airmen traveled by foot, bike, and train from Germany, France, or Holland, after their planes were damaged or shot down on bombing raids in 1943–45. Ordinary civilians helped many of them along their route in German-occupied Europe. Besides airmen, other “evaders”⁴ needed help escaping imprisonment, torture, and death at German hands. The Spanish government, technically non-belligerent and neutral but commanded by a Fascist, and the Spanish police, the Guardia Civil, rarely helped and frequently harmed evaders. Spanish officials sent Gestapo agents and other German spies information about escape routes gleaned from interrogations of naïve or broken men after they reached territory outside Nazi control. Nevertheless, “tens of thousands of fugitives escaped out of Nazi-occupied western Europe by climbing over the Pyrenees mountains” (155).

The book concentrates on thirty-five men, including Paul Louis, a Catholic priest, who in April 1944 tried to cross the desolate, steep-sided and narrow valleys of the high Central Pyrenees. The route was especially difficult in early spring: the men had to endure sometimes waist-high snow drifts, ten-thousand-foot mountains, gale-force winds, loose rocks, and German border police with dogs and guns. The escapers exchanged few personal details, because, if they were captured, the less they knew of each other, the better; four of them remain unidentified to this day. At least six escaped (77) to Spain, but twenty-three were captured (102).

Some of the party, like Belgian Roger Bureau, a former Olympic ice-hockey star, had tried to escape by this route more than once. His mother believed he had rescued some seventy downed Allied airmen (13). Others had shady or mixed pasts, like the vain, thus too talkative resistance operative Maurice de Milleville, the son of an Englishwoman; Cartron denies that he was the betrayer (92). Since medical doctor Max Rens’s parents were Dutch Jews, his conversion to Catholicism when he married did him no good; he had been in hiding for a year and a half before he was captured in the Pyrenees. The Gestapo, having arrested one “Leopold Fernandez” were unaware of his Jewish origin, so he was merely interrogated and repeatedly physically assaulted like the other prisoners, including the priest.

A final chapter concerns the postwar careers of those who lived to have one. Dr. Rens survived a French prison and a fifty-nine-day trip to Dachau, where he spent eight long months before blessed liberation (146). At least one Frenchman, Jacques Lartigue, re-enlisted in the war. The Germans executed Fernand Bellenger for his resistance work on the eve of Paris’s liberation. Roger Bureau was locked in a barn with a thousand other political prisoners and burnt to death on 11 April 1945. Their starvation diet made survivors of camp horrors loath ever again to eat turnips (151).

Unlike so many triumphalist tales of Hitler’s War, this almost-escape has a dismal conclusion. Twenty-one men—hungry, weak, sleep-deprived—were trapped by about two dozen armed German mountain troopers near the abandoned Superbagnères Grand Hotel, reachable until 1960 only by rack railway or on foot (190). Many questions remain unanswered, such as precisely who betrayed the escape-party. Appendix 1 lists group members and their guides, but none left sufficient records of their lives for Cartron to capture a fully rounded personality.

4. Viz., men who had never been caught (xiii), as opposed to “escapers,” usually army fugitives who had once or more been captured and imprisoned. Many escape-line personnel were shot, others were sent to Dachau or Mauthausen concentration camps, where they were murdered or died from hunger, overwork, and illness. Each nation’s war archives contain an “Escape and Evasion Report” for each individual.

The Gestapo's local French interpreter later exposed the likely betrayer, Michel Pautot, a local woodcutter from Saint-Aventin (chap. 10), who stumbled on the cabin where the fugitives spent their last free night. Some managed to avoid capture by jumping from a moving prisoner transport train; others were shot, and the legendarily resourceful Charbonnier himself died in a fire-fight when he refused to stop his car (136-37). He had aided some 150 servicemen and French, Belgian, and Dutch patriots, all of them wanted men.

The volume's thirteen chapters feature seriously unsatisfactory maps⁵ and twenty-seven photographs. While I commend Jean-Luc Cartron for his years of research on an obscure subject, his disjointed narrative will make it hard for readers to keep track of a large cast of indistinct characters. And the escape he describes was one of hundreds like it, but its complications and the varied nationalities of its participants deserved to be so carefully researched and recorded.

5. Perhaps a hundred tiny villages and towns of southwest France are named, but many do not appear on the provided maps and, e.g., Gouaux-de-Larboust and Port D'Oô are hardly household names.