

Escape and Evasion

The following story was related by Geoff Cooper who has been researching the operations of the Belgian resistance organization designated the Comet Line. "2nd Lt. James F. Burch, Co-pilot of B-17 42-3539, Michigan Air Force took off on 10 October 1943 on a mission to bomb Muenster, Germany. His aircraft was shot down over Holland that day by a bf109G. Two of the crew were killed that day, four were taken POW and four, including Lt. Burch evaded capture. After landing in Holland, Burch was eventually taken to Brussels where he stayed with helpers of FI & EVA (Belgian resistance groups) before he was eventually handed over to the Comet resistance group. Comet provided him with false papers and a train ticket to Dax in southwest France from where he and other evaders would make their way by bicycle and train to St.-Jean-de-Luz and ultimately to Cibourre.

During the night of 23-24th December 1943, a ten-strong mixed party of evaders (airmen and civilians) led by Comet Line guides set out on foot from occupied France to cross the Pyrenees into Francoist Spain and once in Spain to head for a "safe" farm known as Sarobe. This was a grueling hike and it involved a night crossing of the river Bidassoa which was running high after days of rain. Two evaders – Count Antoine d'Ursel (former chief, Comète Belgium) and 2nd Lt. James F Burch, USAAF – were swept away and drowned. The Germans recovered their bodies the next day, and, as a warning, displayed them briefly in a local church at Biriadou. Overnight, the villagers covered the bodies with flowers, angering the Germans so much that they removed the bodies the next day. The bodies have never been found.