

Along the somber hours

Even with their airplanes shot up, pilots of the B-24 planes continued on their mission. (Russel's B-24)

For the eleventh time, Toulon is bombed by the 15th AF. 2 B-24 and a P-38 are hit. Among them Lt A. Amman (376th - BG / 13th Sq. The picture depicts the plane hit to the right wing - a few minutes later, a hit by the flak to the bomb bay will set the plane on fire. It will kill five airmen on board including the pilot. Four other airmen bail out - three are captured - Lt Russel Weyland, bombardier, will escape capture from the Germans with the help of young Maurice Costa.

In 1940 Germany and France are at war to satisfy the whims of a dictator called Adolph Hitler. Taking Napoleon Bonaparte as his mentor, his target - to unify the whole of Europe. Heavily armed, the enemy had no difficulty in invading a good part of the country. The French military forces poorly armed and led by a few unqualified General officers, themselves at the mercy of corrupted politicians who gave free access to spies preparing for the invasion of France.

Occupation - first stage:

Coming through Belgium on 10 May 1940, having circled the "Ligne Maginot", the German army seized Paris on 14 June. They continue south until Marechal Petain signs a Armistice treaty in Rethondes on 22 June 40. France is now divided in two zones. From the North to the Loire river and all along the Atlantic to the Spanish border, France is now under German occupation. The second zone, free zone, is presided by Marechal Petain and his Minister Pierre Laval. They too are under German power (traitors). A General, Charles De Gaulle, refuses the defeat, leaves France for London on 17 June where he plans to build some kind of resistance to the Germanic invader. On 18 June, he makes an appeal on the BBC for the fight to continue. He creates the French Free Forces and becomes its commander.

Stage 2

With no respect for the armistice treaty, German armies invade the "Free Zone". On 27 November they enter Toulon where they planned to recuperate French warships docked at the port arsenal. Ships are ready to weigh anchor with supplies such as food, ammunitions and fuel which the Germans planned to use to attempt a landing in England. Admiral De Laborde, Head of the High Seas Forces orders the crews to scuttle their ships so they will not fall into enemy hands 90 warships will explode and sink in the coastal waters. Only four submarines will escape the same ordeal - Iris - Marsouin - le Glorious - and Casablanca - they will sail to allied ports. Commander L'Herminier, Captain of the Casablanca will eventually become a hero of the resistance.

At that time, myself and my parents lived close to the port (La Fayette). When the ships explode my bed was literally uplifted from the floor at each of the explosions. My father had left the house to work at the Pyrotechnics plant came back to tell us the Germans were in Toulon and that the whole armada of ships were being sunk.. Being very nosy, I quickly dressed and went down to see what was happening. That's when I saw my first German soldiers, ammunition magazines around the neck, machine gun ready to shoot while watching the ships explode one after the other spilling fuel all around. I was 16 years old, and what I was seeing reminded me of war films I had seen at the movies. For a long time, we could hardly see the sun hidden by heavy smoke coming from the ships afire which no-one attempted to extinguish. The water was covered by a thick coat of fuel seeping through holes in the ships.

NOTICE POSTED BY GERMANS

Having witnessed the attitude of the French population in occupied zone, I noticed the majority of the people continue to work with calm. One disapproves the acts of sabotage conspired by the British and Russians and the attempts made to the lives of the Occupation Army . One knows well only the French population will suffer the consequences . I am fully resolved to maintain a calm environment and security for the French population during this war.

However, I discovered it is mainly the close relations to the conspirators who

helped the authors of sabotage and other attempts either before or after the events. I have therefore decided to penalize most severely not only the "saboteurs" once arrested, but should they become fugitive, the families of these criminals if they do not give themselves up within ten days to a German or French police station.

Here are the penalties to be imposed:

- 1: All close relatives males, females - ascendants and descendants together with brothers in law, cousins 18 years and over will be shot.
- 2: All women - same classification - will be condemned to forced labor.
- 3: These families' children, 17 years old and younger will be sent to a monitored schooling institution.

So, I call on all to stop sabotages, life threats and trouble in general and to advise either the French or the German police of any information which would help arrest these criminals.

Signed in Paris 10 July 1942 by the Alte SS Police and Military Occupation in France.

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So Germans never got a chance to use any of these ships. They did manage to restore a submarine with the help of French workers forced to work under German control. Several mischievous happenings to the submarine caused by the French workers ended up with the Germans sending the submarine for a new dive with all workers on board. The submarine was never found. Hitler, upset with the defeat of his plan decided to occupy the whole country helped in the South by Italian troops under the orders of Mussolini. These Italian fanatics were dressed all in black reminiscent of the black uniforms worn by the SS and were allies to Germany since the beginning of the hostilities.

Lack of food, clothing, etc.. and the use of coupon books for meat, bread, oil, sugar, etc.. came to existence. A curfew was called and incessant ID controls took place. Certain ill disposed French people decided to collaborate with the enemy including some elected ones who became the "boche" allies by forming groups of militants whose job was to spread German

propaganda and attend torture sessions of underground patriots. On the other hand, many associated themselves to General De Gaulle in London to help him organize a resistance group to fight against the invaders. It is however in France, where most decided to defy the German occupation by organizing innumerable underground networks such as the FFI (Interior French Forces) that Germans called (terrorists). The role of such networks consisted of derailing German operations by sabotaging bridges, railroad tracks, convoys - anything and everything that could benefit them including the very important transmission to London of all suspicious activities and information collected on the occupying forces. That particular organization needed to keep track of all communications between networks. Men and women were hence charged with delivering documents (mostly coded) by train, car, bicycle or on foot between the hqs and different underground groups or "maquisards" right under the nose of German soldiers, SS, Gestapo. They were called "courriers" That work was very dangerous - many were caught and shot or sent to concentration camps in Germany - not many survived the camps. Your great grandfather, my father - Marcel Costa - was one of the first to enroll in such a network. His code name was "Max". He was courier for the Provence area replacing another resistant who had been caught and shot. From Lyon, his sector covered le Var - Les Alpes Maritimes and the Basses Alpes. Recuperating documents from various places in Lyon he delivered them to their destination by train notwithstanding the many German controls on trains, railroad stations and within the city.

One day my father, carrying secret documents, was stopped by the French police who thought he was a "go-between man". Taken to the police station he was interrogated by inspectors. Denying the charges against him, he asked to see the Chief of Police which he did after a prolonged interrogation and thorough body search. Once alone with the Chief of Police, he disclosed a password and explained the real reason for his presence in Lyon. The Chief called in his men and ordered them to give my father all assistance he might need. These men, also were part of an underground group.

Whenever I had free time from work, I used to help my father distribute tracts throughout Toulon. I traveled by streetcar or on foot with a baby's wicker basket- documents hidden inside and covered by a newspaper- surrounded by Germans. I often I found myself on the back platform of the tram in order to jump off should the need arise.

Germans on the streetcar sarcastically laughed watching me carrying a baby's wicker basket not knowing what was hidden in it. I used to leave my package with my father's friends whom I knew or drop the package at a prearranged spot. I was then on my way back without having met anyone. These drop-off spots were called "Mail Boxes". Had I been stopped with such documents I was for sure in to face the firing squad.

Germany and Italy officially declared war with the United States on 11 December 1941, but America already engaged in the Pacific in a war with Japan was not yet much involved with the European conflict. The enormity of Germany, little by little, taking over all of Europe, North Africa and demanding Great Britain to submit to the (Charte de l'Atlantique) rendered the US uneasy. America reacted by landing troops in Morocco and Algeria on 8 November 1942.

After a strenuous campaign all over North Africa, with the British (General Montgomery) and the French (General Leclerc) troops at their side against General Rommel's Afrika Korps, Americans and their allies landed in Sicily on 19 July 1943 - then in Italy on 9 September 1943. From bases established there, they began bombing all German strategic points with their Flying Fortresses (B-17) and Liberators (B-24). Toulon and mainly the arsenal were one of the first targets for these bombers. The US wanted to be certain Germans would at no time be able to refloat the submerged French ships or use the port for their own fleet.

The Lafayette area where we lived suffered some small damage during the first raid (500 deaths among civilians). To escape the carnage, my mother, my brother Roger and my sister Marcelle left and took refuge in the Haute Loire. Father rented a house in the suburbs of Aguillon - East of Toulon for my maternal grandmother bedridden after an accident and myself. The house, at one time, belonged to our family. The house still nicknamed "La Campagne Costa" far enough from the city would give my father enough privacy to continue his underground activities and it also kept us safe from bombardments. For one year, I watched American planes drop their bombs; the dreaded Flak that often missed their target and the "ballet" of parachutes bringing down airmen in a quest to save their lives but they then became targets for enemy machine guns.

Eleven bombers made a group flying in a "V" formation - that first

formation was followed by several more formations flying at 300 Km/ph following the same trajectory. The first formation usually cleared the area without too many mishaps - the first formation served as an aim for the flak to adjust their fire to shoot at ensuing planes. Many such fortresses were badly damaged and many airmen were killed. Others after successfully bailing out - and if they reached the ground without being machine gunned, were taken prisoners. Some were luckier and were recuperated by the resistance groups and returned to their units. Pilots used to align following precise landmarks such as monuments, hills, creeks, etc.. To shun this, Germans used to position smoke-shell containers all around Toulon. These were set fire to as planes were on the way enveloping the city with a thick blanket of smoke. This made it impossible for the pilots to pinpoint spots on the grounds which sometimes caused a few "misses" - bombs would fall on the city rather than on the arsenal.

One day, in August 1944, a young friend of mine came to tell me an American airman was hiding in the Tourris hills close to the cabin his parents were occupying to stay away from bombardments. Aware of my connections with the resistance groups, he hoped I could help the flyer to return to his unit in Italy. Since my father was otherwise busy with "deliveries" I took over and immediately contacted a group who repatriated downed airmen. After a few days, I contacted my friend again and told him I would personally come and fetch his "cumbersome" guest in order to take him to a rendez-vous place where he would be taken over by the appropriate resistance group.

On the designated date, I set off very early in the morning on foot arriving at my friend's cabin in Tourris 2 1/2 hours later. There I found a bewildered young man, in an American uniform probably in his twenties. He had superficial wounds on his face and arm. He looked frightened and gave me a suspicious look. The only word he seemed to know in French was "resistance". Using hand signals, I made him understand he needed to don overalls and a Basque beret - I also gave him a haversack to make him look like a French worker. After bidding goodbye to my friends who were happy to see their uninvited guest leave we both started on our way to the rendez-vous spot located close to La Fayette. On the way, we crossed several German soldiers belonging to the "Todt" organization. The American who had never seen German soldiers

kept nudging me saying” Germans..Germans..”. I reassured him and told him to be very quiet - not to talk. We eventually arrived at the prearranged meeting place about 15 minutes early. We found a little corner where we could hide and awaited the arrival of a black four wheel car.

We had just been in our secluded spot for about five minutes when the sirens announced an imminent bombardment. Several soldiers set fire to smoke shell containers while others insisted we follow them to an underground shelter located at a villa close by. My airman is definitely frantic and again I warn him not to speak. Soon we found ourselves sitting on a bench, in the shelter, surrounded by Germans offering us cigarettes which we accepted with a forced smile. I decided to start talking to my companion as if nothing was out of order and he, not understanding a word I was saying, merely nodded with his head. Next to us, Germans are busy talking away but for my part, I hope this alert will not last too long.

About 30 minutes later, the all clear siren sounded and we quickly left the shelter while still taking time to profusely thank our unforeseen hosts by gesticulating around. Unfortunately, no more black car in sight so the whole scenario will have to be repeated. Not wishing to take him back to the forest, I decided to take him home until I had a chance to contact the resistance group to arrange a new meeting place and time. Proceeding along small roads because large arteries would no doubt have tight surveillance, we reached la “Campagne Costa” not without finding ourselves going right under the nose of German soldiers on guard duty at the Place de la Serinette where a considerable number of vehicles were parked. At each encounter, my companion almost faints whispering..Germans..Germans but we finally made it to my grandmother’s house. She, used to meeting strangers (transient patriots) did not ask questions of this unknown visitor who did not speak our language.

After a bit of cleaning up during which time I tended to the superficial wounds he received during the explosion of his plane, I prepared a small meal consisting of the few supplies we had. Feeling less stressed, knowing he now had a roof over his head and protected from the Germans, my companion relaxed and we tried somehow to communicate. Between hand signals and written words with the help of a dictionary we exchanged a bit of information. This is when I find out his name is Russell Weyland - he lives in

Chicago - he is a 2nd Lt in the United States Air Force - a bombardier. This means he pin points targets and pulls the lever for the bombs to drop. He explained he was unable to take anything more than his parachute when the plane was hit. Damaged by the explosion, his parachute was slowly disintegrating as he was floating down over Mourillon where he landed thankfully without too much trouble. A man appeared - had him climb in a van - covered him with a tarp and took him to the Tourris forest. At nightfall he saw a light in my friend's cabin and hoping the owner was a patriot, asked for asylum. I knew the rest of the story.

In front of the house there was a patio, surrounded by a trellis that gave some well needed coolness in the Summer. It also allowed us to watch the proximity outside without being seen. Russell, still apprehensive, approaches the trellis checking the surroundings. Suddenly, he grows pale and with a tap on my arm indicates a German soldier pacing in front of our portal. I again reassured him. The aging soldier and the kind of rifle he carried was nothing to be concerned about. I explained to him the man was in charge of the smoke shell container planted in front of the property entrance. At no time fire would be set to the container - the soldier had been bribed by all of us neighbors. This allowed us to escape the heavy opaque smoke and reeking odor.

This is how my suspicious guest observed Toulon being bombed. He witnessed formations of B-17 and B-24 go over and the damage caused to them by the German FLAK. He watched, powerless, as his fellow crewmen dangled down under their parachute being machine gunned - only hoping their luck would be similar to his - arrive alive on the ground. Eventually, having observed the carnage he indicated to me he would rather be on board a plane with all the risks possible than being on the ground and be subject to bombing. He further told me - if one day I get to fly again, I will drop all the bombs over the water rather than risk the lives of innocent civilians.

On 15 August 1944, under the command of Gen De Lattre de Tassigny for the French and PATCH for the American, allied troops landed in Provence and quickly reclaimed its territory. There was only feeble resistance from the Germans due to the lack of troops now in the North engaged in stopping the allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944.

A few days after our return to the house I again made contact with the resistance group in question and a new date and time were set in the Serinette area - not far from our house - with the same conditions : black four wheels car, password, etc.. This time all went well, the car arrived simultaneously with our arrival and without any further ado, the American got in and the car soon disappeared . We hardly had time to say goodbye.

Before leaving the house, Russell and I exchange a few mementoes. I gave him a medal for winning a cross-country race at school and a signet ring made of stainless steel (inox) my father made. He handed me a silk scarf depicting Italy which not only kept him from the cold but also served as a map of the country where he might be shot down. He kept the map of France with Toulon circled in red color pencil. He then gave me his parents 's address but refused to take any document with my name, address so not to compromise me should he be later caught by the Germans. As soon as we were freed (8 May 1945) and when the postal services were once again available, I wrote his parents to find out how he had fared. Their reply came thanking me for looking after him .It was then I found out soon after his return to the United States after being reunited with his compatriots who landed around Hyeres, he enrolled in a class in order to continue the fight in the Pacific against Japan. Surrender of Japan on 2 September 1945. Some time later, I wrote them a second letter but this one remained unanswered. This was 1945.

Years went by and when one is 17 years old tragic events as the ones we lived through remain forever vivid in our mind.

I married, became a father then a grandfather without forgetting the adventure which by now I thought was a thing of the past until one evening in 1986, around 2000Hrs. The telephone rang and a voice asked me if I was indeed Marcel Costa and if the name Weyland rang a bell. Right away memories floated back to the surface. Answering affirmatively, the caller identified himself as Leslie Atkinson's son - former Commander in the French Air Force. He was the representative of an American association called AFEES. Their goal -search and find people who helped allied downed airmen in Europe during WWII. The caller had been asked by Russel to find me with the only information available, my name and address figuring on

the last letter to his parents which remained unanswered. Assisted by his son living in Toulon and with the help of the telephone book, they managed to locate me.

The next day I called the father who explained he met with Russell at one of the AFEES reunions during which time Russell showed him my letter found among his parents belongings. He noted my address and that of Russell's in Chicago. Offering to act as interpreter for me, I told him I had a cousin living in the United States for the past 12 years who would gladly translate the letters.

Without any further delay, I wrote Russell describing Mr. Atkinson's efforts in finding me and the events of the last 42 years. That first letter was the beginning of a fruitful correspondence and exchange of gifts which eventually brought us closer together. Finally, in October 1990, in Toulouse, 45 years after Russell climbed in a black four wheel car we were reunited with our respective wives and Lilo who was still acting as interpreter. That reunion was organized by the town councilors of both Toulouse and Arieges who gathered former downed American airmen and their helpers in order to dedicate a monument to the "passeurs" who accompanied the escapees over the Pyrenees mountains.

A successful reunion and a most emotional get together. Time had modified our faces and bodies but the joy in finding each other again was that intense it left us speechless. After a reception in the Toulouse town hall ; a visit to Albi with a delicious meal in the Montgey castle; the dedication at Tarascon and the reception in Andorre organized by the "passeurs" -(guides) - the irrevocable departure time came and with teary eyes we said goodbye at the train station not without promising each other to meet again either in France or in the States.

In France, in September 19⁹44, at the Brusac, we hosted Russell, his wife and his sister in law. With Lilo as interpreter we toured the region and gave them a taste of the Midi cuisine which they much appreciated. Accompanied by our wives, we retraced the path we walked 50 years earlier but this time both on foot and by car. If changes to the road between the Tourris forest and the Aguillon district were apparent, the house itself was intact - same portal without the German guard - same hedge - same name inscribed at the time by my father " Campagne Costa " -only the trellis was missing. Russell did not recognize any of the places not even the spot where we hid, among

Germans, but then his mind was otherwise preoccupied in 1944. We then stopped by the American Cemetery in Arguignan where we paused and remembered five of Russell's crew who perished in the crash - Out of the nine crew members only four survived - among them, Russell. Since we were in the area, I took them to the Faron Memorial where several artifacts and photographs recall the landing of the allies in Provence. As we walked past a picture of a B-24 with a damaged wing Russell, with tears in his eyes exclaimed " That's my plane"!! Its was a photo taken from above by another B-24 crewmember, a few seconds before the fatal blow.

The following year, accompanied by your grandmother and Lilo, we visited the Weylands in McHenry - a small suburb of Chicago. A most enjoyable visit. While Russell was busy at work, it was his wife Francene who took us to tour Chicago. We lunched on the 95th floor of a building that gave us a magnificent view of the city and that of Lake of Michigan. We then ambled through several super -centers where one can buy a trinket for \$.10 or a top of the line automobile.

Our visit coincided with a joint AFEES/RCAFES in Toronto - Canada. A two thousand kilometers drive with a stop in Detroit where we spent the night in a five stars hotel.

Our rooms were reserved in the same hotel the reunion was taking place - the Royal Hotel - A bus made available for a city tour and a cruise on Lake Ontario occupied our time during the reunion. We met several French helpers. French organizations, in regional costumes, entertained us during the meal and dance which followed.

The following day, we made our way back with a detour via Niagara Falls which viewed from a boat below looked impressive and magnificent. We spent our last pleasant evening together in Buffalo before the Weylands left for McHenry and it was France by plane for us. We had a heavy heart and the parting was emotional - yet we were thankful for a sojourn that gave us a chance to discover a life style different to ours but which, nevertheless, has a certain charm. !!!!!!!!!!!!!

Our exchange of letters continued but the wear and tear of time saves no-one and Russell passed away in November 2000. His memory remains and will

always remain with me. We continue our most cordial relationship with Francene, his wife, his children, grandchildren to whom I dedicate these few lines without leaving out my son, his wife and my grandchildren Anthony and Nathan.