

## *Chapter 12*

### **An Escort with a Lookout**

The morning after we had joined our hosts in celebrating their successful raid, things were off to a slow start. It was almost noon, and a few of the men were not yet up and around when a lady and a man we had not seen before appeared on the scene. They were about my age, and the lady spoke English. They were both well-composed and business-like in their approach to us. The lady, called “Claire,” was about five feet three inches tall, slender, and attractive. The man, “Andre,” was a full six feet tall and well built. They made a nice-looking couple, and they were better dressed than average. “Claire” would help us on the journey between France and Spain. “Andre” would be nearby and serving as lookout to help assure our safety.

We learned from “Claire” that we would be going to a railroad station to catch a train to Toulouse. That was the destination we had been unable to reach on our own a month before. We also learned that most travelers carried suitcases, and that we would do likewise. It was about 1:00 p.m. when we said our goodbyes and left camp on foot for the station. “Claire” as our guide and “Andre” as the lookout worked so well together that to us “Andre” went almost unnoticed.

We reached the station in mid-afternoon and entered a café nearby to have some food and wait for the train. I had succeeded in eating an apple earlier, and here I decided some soup might be the easiest thing for my stomach. It was, and I ate it without any problem. While at the café, we received the suitcases we were able to carry. I believe the maneuver which had made the arrival of the suitcases possible had been directed by “Andre.”

This was our first exposure to how the distribution system from the aerial drop zone worked. The suitcases were small and rather heavy. We were to carry one in each hand, but not to open them. We were told that among other items, the suitcases would contain machine guns, ammunition, and hand grenades. These would be distributed later to the French for use once the invasion began.

“Claire” wanted us to know how successful their organization had been in receiving and distributing the arms dropped to them. She indicated they were sufficiently organized and supplied with arms so that the French Resistance would be able to take over and control most of the area and many of the towns in Southern France. That would happen when the invasion began and they were told it was time to take action. History shows they were basically correct in their assessment. There were times when they may have tried to do too much and the Germans took offensive action that cost many French people their lives. Nevertheless, their achievements were many, and what may have been one of the most important occurred soon after the invasion.

One of Rommel’s elite combat units, the Reich Armored Division, was in the south of the district of Dordogne near Cantal. On 7 June, the second day of the invasion, Rommel called for that unit to move quickly to be used against the Allied beachheads in Normandy. It was a critical moment in the battle, and had the unit arrived in the following days, it might well have turned the battle against the Allies. The division had tremendous fire power and crack fighting units.

Resistance forces in the Dordogne were ordered into action against that armored division. They attacked with bazookas, machine guns, and hand grenades. Along the direct route the division was traveling, they blew up bridges and railroads, which forced the Germans to take alternate

routes. While the Resistance fighters were sacrificing their lives to delay the Reich, they also relayed intelligence information to London. London relayed the data to the RAF, and soon fighters and bombers of the Allied forces were shooting up the columns of the crack armored division.

The division was both delayed and weakened by the combined efforts of the Allied Air Forces and the Resistance. Only a few tanks managed to get through to Normandy a week or more later, too late to have any big influence on the battle. As a result of what happened to the Reich Division, the German High Command instructed other divisions heading north from the area of Montauban and Toulouse to circle around Dordogne. Two powerful forces, the Gross-Deutschland and the Goering Divisions, detoured to avoid the French Resistance forces. They ran into them anyway, for the Resistance was active everywhere. They also arrived too late for the battle of the beaches in Normandy.

It had been clear to us, there in the mountains before the invasion, that guiding Allied airmen out of France and across the Pyrenees was not the main mission to which these people were assigned. No doubt our delay at the Bifferas and in the camp had been a matter of priorities. But we were grateful for their help, and they were doing a good job in taking care of us. We were glad we had convinced them to move us on, instead of staying to join them in the battles which were to come.

Our trip had been planned correctly, and the train ride to Toulouse went without incident. “Claire” told us that guards were not normally checking at the Toulouse railroad station on Sunday. For that reason, they had selected Sunday for our trip. She told us to walk some distance behind her when we got off the train to leave the station with our suitcases. If she or “Andre” detected danger, they would warn us. At that point, we would take total

responsibility for our actions. As we walked through the train station and out into the darkened city, I realized it was probably divine guidance and good luck, which had kept us from getting to Toulouse on our own. If we had arrived in Toulouse on our own, it would have been early on a Tuesday morning, not on a Sunday. With German guards or the Vichy police there to check us, there was a very good chance we would have been detected and arrested. Years later I learned that many of the Allied airmen who got as far as the area of Toulouse had indeed been arrested and taken to prison or worse. In fact, only about one half of the airmen who reached the Pyrenees mountains succeeded in reaching Spain. The others met fate in a variety of ways. Some were captured and became prisoners of war. A number were killed in shoot-outs with the Germans who attempted to capture them and their guides. Some died in falls or drowned while attempting to cross mountain streams. Then there were those who found it physically impossible to make the difficult trek and gave up. When they returned to the foot of the mountains, they were often spotted and captured.

We followed "Claire" as directed and walked a few blocks to an apartment in the residential area of the city where we were the overnight guests of an older lady. At the apartment, someone else took charge of our suitcases, and our role in making the delivery was complete. We took some satisfaction in returning a favor to the group that had helped us, but often wondered what price we would have paid if caught with the suitcases and their contents. We were glad to be rid of them, and I am confident the contents were put to good use.