

## *Chapter 14*

# **The Crossing**

We were to meet our guide at the farm. Others who might be crossing the mountains with us would join us there. We were assured that our mountain guide knew the area very well. Perhaps he had crossed the same terrain many times while smuggling items across the French-Spanish border. We also had the feeling he would be—or had already been – paid for this trip.

This was rough but beautiful Basque country, and our guide was Basque. Living and walking in, around, and over the mountains was routine for this man, who was to be our guide until we reached Spain. It was emphasized that the trip would be difficult and very long, that we would travel much at night, and that the weather would not be good. We could expect rain, fog and clouds, which would make the trip more difficult, but on the other hand the bad weather would reduce our chances of being seen or caught by the German border guards. The Germans sent their patrols into these mountains on a regular basis especially to catch groups like ours.

A third person had joined Ken and me in Pau, and we were brought to the farm together. He was a French courier, and his job was to parachute into France with money, instructions, and other necessary items for the French Resistance. After making his delivery, he would walk across the mountains into Spain and eventually return to England. From there he would begin a similar assignment. He told us this would be the third time he had crossed these mountains. Providing safe passage for this man and others with similar duties was part of the mission assigned to the Resistance group we had become associated with. Helping

downed fliers escape was not their primary mission and therefore, I have since learned, Ken and I were about the only fliers to receive assistance from this particular group. I am pleased that we successfully helped them in one of their primary missions when we delivered the arms and ammunitions to Toulouse.

After dark, when it was time for us to start walking, another man, a Spaniard who had apparently made his own arrangements with our Basque guide, joined our group. He said he had left Spain during the Spanish Revolution to avoid fighting in it and was trying to get back to his home.

Our group of four was an unusual combination with one objective keeping us together, to get safely across the mountains into Spain. The first night we walked on paths, lanes, and fields that would permit us to cover the greatest distance undetected. About daybreak, our guide told us to stop and wait in a safe spot while he walked ahead to check the barn and farm where we would rest and eat food. When he determined it was all clear, he returned for us and led us to the barn.

Our every move seemed to be on a schedule. When fog and clouds blanketed the area, we started moving again. That was about mid-afternoon. I remember thinking this was the first time this flatlander from Kansas had ever walked in the clouds. Darkness came early, and a light rain was falling on us. We continued to walk into what was perhaps the blackest night of my life.

The mountains were getting steeper, and we found we had to walk back and forth to create a more gradual incline rather than make a direct ascent, which would have been faster but more fatiguing. In doing this, we used paths the cows had made while grazing. When the night was at its darkest, we passed through some of the roughest terrain of all. When the walking was the most difficult and it was so dark we could not see three feet in front of our eyes, the guide had us walk with each man holding on to the coat tail

of the man ahead of him. The man holding onto the guide had to make certain he did not lose his grip, or we might all be lost.

In this fashion, we proceeded in a steep climb beside a mountain stream. We could not see the stream, but we could hear the water below us. When we stopped to catch our breath, we would remain standing and continue to hang on to the coat tail of the man in front of us. No one wanted to risk having the group quietly move away without him.

Finally, we came to a point where the guide gathered us around him to say that we would be crossing a swinging foot bridge. We were to hang on to the sides with our hands while moving steadily ahead and across the bridge and not look down because it was inky black, and one misstep could cause one to fall several hundred feet to his death.

As I started across the bridge, that swaying, which goes was a swinging bridge when it's being walked on, had me wishing for a bridge which was rigid. I could hear the loud sound of rushing water hundreds of feet below, and I wondered about the sights we were missing this coal-black night. At the same time, I realized we were so high that anyone who crossed that bridge in daylight would be visible for quite some distance. I thanked God when we were all safely on the other side. The long climb up the mountain in the blackness of night, with rocks cutting at our shoes, climaxed with the swinging bridge, is unforgettable. I have often wondered if it would have been more frightening for us had we been able to see where we were going. It was a "Trust Walk" unlike any other I have ever experienced.

We were now high on the mountain within a few kilometers of the border. It was time to go into hiding before daybreak. The area was isolated, but if the weather cleared, we were high enough to be seen for some distance, especially if guards were watching the area through binoculars as they normally did. At the same time we were

also ready to get off our feet and rest, which meant the guide had correctly estimated time, distance, and the limit of our endurance.

That afternoon, while the clouds continued to shroud the mountains, our guide started us moving again, back and forth up the mountain, up through the clouds. The snow covering the upper part of the mountain range slowed our progress, and by the time we reached an altitude above the clouds, darkness had come to the mountains. But this was not the all-restricting darkness of the previous night. We were above the clouds, and in the moonlight from a clear sky we could see how vast the area of snow there above the timberline was. We could see that the top of the mountain ridge was still some distance off. Meanwhile, the knee-deep snow and the high altitude were taking a toll on our energy.

The guide stopped to let us rest, and we reclined with our backs in the snow to make the best of our stop. It was quite cold, so the rest had to be a short one. At this point, the Spaniard indicated he could not go on. But we were not going to be denied the crossing after getting this close to the border. We felt it was important for all us to top the mountain together. I remember having saved the two Benzedrine pills from my escape kit for just such an emergency. Getting them out of my pocket, I gave one to the Spaniard. Then Ken and I shared the other one. We put some snow in our mouths and let it melt to help us swallow the pills. With some tugging and encouragement, we soon had the Spaniard on his feet and moving again. We pressed on!

Finally, in snow about waist-deep on ground that was probably high pasture land in the summer, we reached the crest of the mountain. The guide stopped and pointed out the border. France and Spain came together at the peak of the ridge which ran along the top of the mountain. That is where we were standing, and a down-hill trek would take us into Spain. The guide also pointed out a sheep herder's

shed some distance below us which was used only during the summer months and would make a good place to rest. This was as far as the guide would take us. His obligation completed, he wanted to get off the highest part of the mountain back into France before daylight.

We four, who had the common objective of reaching Spain, could now slide in our own. We started for the shepherd's cabin, but when we reached it, our objectives diverged. Ken and I decided to keep going to get further from the border before we might be seen and perhaps arrested. The Spaniard and the French courier stopped. The Spaniard hoped to get home without being detected. The French courier probably knew a route or had connections that would speed him on his way to England. Ken and I said farewell to these men with whom we had shared three nights and days. We never saw them or the guide again.

In our crossing we were fortunate to have encountered no Germans. Our guide clearly knew his business. We also were lucky to have had the stamina to make the climb with enough strength left over to help the Spaniard. That we were a small group worked to our advantage as did the rain, clouds, and darkness which were so disagreeable.

At that point we did not realize how fortunate we had been. We only knew that we had crossed into Spain. For me it was the climax of spending more than three months in enemy-occupied territory. For Ken it had been nearly five months. We were not certain about the future, but our adrenaline had us on the move, and were anxious to get on with our escape. We had to force ourselves to temper the feeling of exuberance with the awareness that we were not yet free from danger. England and the United States were still far away, but we were over the biggest hurdle. I had the feeling we were winning a contest against unbelievable odds; the finish line was still in front of us, and we dared not let down.



Left: After trying to climb the mountain to the swinging bridge, Clayton and “Scotty” David gave up and turned back. They settled for the postcard below which indicated the bridge is 173 meters (approximately 565 feet) above the floor of the stream bed. Clayton knew the climb had been difficult when he and the other three men with their Basque guide made it on that pitch black night in April 1944.

