

## *Chapter 16*

### **Return to England**

While we were on the train headed toward Gibraltar, dawn revealed orchards of olives and oranges, a warm and peaceful sight, which I enjoyed very much. From the train I also saw for the first time a forest of cork trees and could observe how the cork was harvested. The entire setting was far removed from the war, and it had me wishing there was time to get off the train and stroll in the beauty of the countryside.

The train could not go all the way to the Rock, and our last few miles were by car. As we entered that British facility, it was quite evident Gibraltar was basically a military establishment. After we checked in and received our billeting, British intelligence officers took us through some debriefing exercises that could help them spot the unusual and might supply new information to update what they already knew about escape lines and the enemy.

Our three days on the Rock provided some interesting sights and some transition back to military living. We were issued some make-do uniforms, and we turned in the civilian clothing we had secured in Pamplona. We understood the civilian clothing would be boxed up and returned to Pamplona or to a similar place in hopes other evaders could or would use it – the idea being to avoid buying all new clothes for everyone. It impressed me as an optimistic and economical gesture, but I wondered what really happened to the clothing during the chain of events.

While on the Rock, we learned something about British customs. We watched the guards each evening as they went through their traditional ceremony of closing and locking the gate which led to the mainland of Spain.

Our stay at Gibraltar gave me my first chance to stand on one continent and be able to look across a body of water at another continent. As I stood one day on a peak of the Rock and looked across the Strait of Gibraltar to Spanish Morocco, the value of having the British in control of the Rock took on added meaning for me. In one sense, the Rock is one big fortress, honeycombed to make it as functional as possible for military purposes, with powerful guns that could be aimed at potential targets in almost any direction.

The value of Gibraltar as a port and trade center was also visible. I enjoyed the bananas, oranges, and other fresh fruits available in the markets and on the streets. As strategic as the location was for military purposes, the commerce, the view, and the weather almost made me envy the people who were assigned there.

My stay on the Rock was a short one. The evening of the third day, I was taken down to the airport for a plane ride back to England. The airport was, as it remains, one runway along the side of the rock that faces Spain. Takeoffs and landings are limited to the two opposite directions. When the strip is in use, the road across it that carries traffic between Spain and Gibraltar must be closed. In some ways it resembles an aircraft carrier. You are going to get very wet or worse if the plane is not airborne when you reach the end of the runway on takeoff. Overshooting the runway on landing is just as disastrous.

Our transportation was the old faithful C-47 with passenger seats. The flight was made over water and some distance from the coastline to make it safer. In order to increase its range and flying time, the plane was not heavily loaded. On board with several of us who had been interned was a guard with a blindfolded prisoner. Our vision was also limited, as curtains were drawn on all the cabin windows to make certain that not even the smallest amount of light would be emitted accidentally, making us visible in

the night sky and endangering our flight. We certainly didn't want to be picked off by a German night fighter at that point, not after we had survived so much and were so close to being back in England.

At day break we landed safely in England some distance southwest of London. From the airport we took a train to London and checked in at an assigned hotel within walking distance of Piccadilly Circus.

On the train to London, I sat across from two English ladies. Each one had a son that appeared to be about eight years old. When their conversation turned to comments about the war, I heard them talk about shortages and the hardships the war had created. One of the ladies pointed to her son and said, "He can't remember what a banana or a fresh orange tastes like." Less than 18 hours before, I had been where they were plentiful. How I wished I might have been able to reach into my duffel bag and pull out bananas or oranges for those young lads. But our mission was secret, and we were encouraged to take or say nothing that might reveal where we had been.

Positive identification was the first thing which occurred in London before we could be permitted out of the sight of military personnel. Jack Watson arrived from our base to identify me, and it was a great relief to see him. I was pleased to see him wearing captain's bars but shocked to see that his beautiful black hair had turned mostly grey during the four and one half months we had been separated. It was now the 25<sup>th</sup> of May and I had bailed out on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January. Naturally, we had more to talk about than we could cover during our first time together again. We would have a lot to talk about later.

Another pleasant surprise greeted me in London. It was a footlocker containing all my clothes and belongings. When I had not returned from the mission, the officers of the crew with which I trained had assisted in gathering up my belongings. The articles had then been put in a

footlocker and sent to a depot for storage. When it was learned that I would be arriving in London, the footlocker was delivered to the hotel. I was more fortunate than most, since I had been housed with the officers from my training crew, and they were there to look out for my interests. It took a crew reunion 40 years later before I could thank them in person. They had been shot down three days after me. They all survived their jump but ended up as prisoners of war.

My debriefing in London was very thoroughly and professionally done. The female officer who did it had traveled on the continent before the war and had actually visited the school where we had been in Paris. She apparently had a record of the inquiries my helpers had made with intelligence in England. She was so thorough in her interrogation that I had the feeling she knew more than I did about where I had been. My confidence in the intelligence branch of service was enhanced by that experience.

From our debriefing at the hotel in London, we were sent out to S.H.A.F. (Strategic Headquarters for Allied Forces) for physical examinations. The medics found me in excellent health. I felt great, but not all of the returning airmen were so fortunate. Some of them suffered from wounds that had not been treated properly and others were experiencing the ill effects of confinement or improper nutrition.

That the men who had experienced any exposure to the German gun placements along the French coast or missile launch sites were promptly interviewed by intelligence at S.H.A.F. gave me the impression we were getting close to the time of the invasion. When the streets of London contained only a few military men because most were restricted to base with their units, I was certain the time for the invasion was near.

Staying in London a few extra days for my records to be cleared and to receive my promotion orders also gave me a chance to see more of London. The British navigator who had been with us in Spain returned to England on the same flight I did from Gibraltar. He went immediately to his base but agreed to come back to London one night and take a couple of us on a visit to Scotland Yard. He had been working there when he entered the war. True to his word, he came in the third night we were in London and told us he had been back over Berlin the night before. The British were short of fliers, and they wasted no time in returning their evades to combat. The inspectors at Scotland Yard were pleased to see their friend had made it back from "Missing In Action." They provided the three of us a most enjoyable and interesting evening at their pub.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, several of us left our hotel in London for breakfast at a nearby USO club. As we were walking, we heard a flight of bombers overhead, and we looked up. They were flying formation in a configuration different than normal. This had to mean the invasion had begun. Anxious to learn as much as we could as quickly as possible, we ate our breakfast and caught the subway out to S.H.A.F. where we could expect accurate information. Our timing was excellent. As we entered headquarters, General Eisenhower's famous announcement of the invasion was being given over the public address system. Our speculation about the invasion was confirmed. I wanted return to my base near Molesworth and learn what was happening, so I caught a train out of London.