

Chapter 8

Arrests and Escape

On this day, 26 February 1944, it was nearly two hours past the time when the priest, Father Superior, usually brought us our food, and we had heard nothing. Suddenly there were hurried footsteps and a light knock at the door before it was opened by a younger priest whom we had not seen before. He looked shocked to find so many men in this area. The Dutchmen had gone to the country for the day, but there were still eight of us.

This priest did not speak English, so his conversation took place with our British friend who spoke French. We were informed that we must immediately get out because the police were arresting Father Superior at that very moment. The charge for the arrest was possession of black market food, food he had been securing to feed us. If the police found us, it would be prison for us and death for Father Superior and any others who could be identified as helping us.

The situation required immediate action, and yet we did not want to walk out on the only connection we had with the organization that expected to get us to Spain. We selected Flight Officer Smith to go into the street and next door to see if it might be possible move back into the basement of the school. He not only spoke French, but he and three of the Americans had enjoyed Sunday dinner with the custodian, his wife and teenage daughter in their quarters before the last four of us had arrived. That had been possible because Sunday was normally a quiet day when students were not around.

Smith accepted the assignment and used good judgment in the way he carried it out. He returned quickly and gave

us this report. Instead of walking into the closed schoolyard and approaching the door to their living quarters, he had decided to walk by and first survey the surroundings. As he did, his eyes caught those of the custodian's daughter, standing at the window facing the street. She recognized him and with a slight hand gesture motioned for him to move on. The police were at the door at that very moment arresting her mother and father. After arresting Father Superior, they had turned immediately to the custodian and his wife with the same charge, possession of black market food.

Now it was clear that we had to move from that location and away from those who had helped us so much. Our capture would probably bring death to our helpers.

We had realized, while Smith was checking out the school next door, that we would need to break up, and we decided then to break into four pairs. The pairing came easy for the pilot Lock and his waist gunner, Mullins. It was also natural that Flight Officer Smith and Lieutenant Schumann, who had been together when they entered Belgium, stay together. The trio of Koenig, Butler and Shaver, who had been through much together, must now have one man shift and join me. Ken Shaver came and asked about traveling with me. Naturally, I answered, "Yes." A few moments later, Butler also came and asked me to be his partner, but I told him that Ken and I had agreed we would travel together.

Each pair of men would be responsible for themselves, where they went and how. Then I heard Koenig comment that he would like it if he and Butler followed some distance behind Smith and Schumann. I am sure he thought there could be some help and security in Smith's ability to speak French.

When we left our hide-out two by two, the priest who had come to warn us escorted us into the church sanctuary by way of a side door and out the front door into the street.

As we walked through the sanctuary, I noticed several people in there who had apparently entered to pray. I am sure they must have noticed us, and I prayed silently that we would all be free and safe. This was the last time Ken and I saw any of our group of eight while behind enemy lines. We now became two fliers traveling alone in a country we did not know and among people who spoke a language we did not understand. The young priest's view of that day and the results were explained in the following letter.

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DU
SAINT-ESPRIT

Paris, Le 5 Juin 1946

30, rue Lhomond – Paris VS

Dear Sir:

I was very glad to hear from your news and to know by the same occasion that you succeeded to land safely in England May 1944. I also am back again (since June 45) from my captivity in Germany.

I am the young religious who, on the 26th of February 1944, made you escape out of the Seminary (30, rue Lhomond) in Paris. One hour after your departure the Gestapo came in arms with the Dutch Brother (Rufus) to fetch you. They went upstairs and, of course, found the nest empty. Raging they came down and wanted to kill all of us. Finally they took Father Superior, Brother Rufus and myself as prisoners. The doorkeeper of the "Ecole Normale" and her husband were also arrested.

After three months staying in the prison of Fresnes, the military court condemned us and we were sent to Neuengamme (camp de concentration) in Germany. What we had to suffer in that camp you easily may imagine.

Father Superior died in December 44 of hunger and ill using. The husband of the doorkeeper of the Ecole Normale died there also.

We, who by God's grace and special protection of His Providence, are back again, recovered little by little our health and are quite well now.

I am glad to know that you arrived safe and sound in America. May God's blessing be with you for ever.

I send you my best greetings and remain,

Yours truly
Robo Mathurin

The sun was shining when Ken and I entered the street, and we took a southerly direction. We were determined to walk as far and as quickly as we could without appearing to be fugitives and thus more noticeable. The streets were quiet but not abandoned. We had not gone far when we chose a moment to stop and soak in the view we had of Paris. We could see the upper part of the Eiffel Tower and lamented the fact that we had passed through Paris without being able to visit it. We saw the tables and chairs which are a trademark of the sidewalk cafes, but they were scarcely used at the time because of the war and the cool temperatures. We saw enough so that it was easy to visualize what the scene could have been at another time when there was no war and the weather was warm. I tried to match what we were seeing with the picture I had in my mind from the travel brochures I had seen about Paris.

It is not easy to walk out of and away from a city as big as Paris, but we felt we had no other choice. Physically we thought we were up to the challenge, and we pressed on. With the afternoon sun on our right, we kept up a fast pace to the south, even though it was impossible always to go in a straight line since we followed the streets and roads the best we could. More than once we were tempted to stop and

seek a friendly contact. The greatest temptation came when we were walking across some small plots of farming ground that contained several structures which looked like shelters from the weather for people who worked the land. We saw a few people working there, and I liked to think they were reaching out to us, perhaps with an offer to hide us in one of those shelters; but the risk of identifying ourselves and asking for help, while still so close to Paris, caused us to keep walking. I have since wondered if we walked right by the help we were seeking. I guess we will never know. We were making good time and kept on going.

As the sun began to set, we had walked out of Paris, put some farm land between us and the city, and covered enough distance to separate us from the location where we had been hiding for two weeks. Our feet and legs started to ache from walking after our inactivity of the past, but the adrenaline was flowing in our bodies, and it helped us to overcome our discomfort. At least the air of the countryside was refreshing. Because we wanted to put as many kilometers as possible between ourselves and the hiding spot of a few hours before, we decided to keep walking until after dark. However, we knew we should stop before the curfew hour.

The time to stop seemed right when we entered the edge of a village some time after dark. At least we thought we could risk a contact for help without being exposed to more than the people of the house where we knocked. Something drew us to a house that was not isolated and yet not a standout from those surrounding it. We went up a few steps onto a porch and knocked at the front door. On the street, no one was in sight. The door opened, and a lady appeared, standing in the dimly lit entrance hall. I am sure many thoughts raced through her mind as we used the words “Americans,” “pilots,” and “parachutes.” We were also using gestures to indicate we had been shot down and needed food and a place to stay.

Directing her two young children, a boy and a girl, back into one of the rooms from which they had emerged to view the commotion, the lady invited us in. We had succeeded in the first step to sell ourselves. We had gotten in the door. Luck was with us, and the lady seemed to indicate that her brother also lived there and commuted to work in Paris. He was expected to arrive at any moment but was later than usual since this was Saturday night.

The lady gave us something to eat and waited for her brother before making a decision on what they would do about us. The wait for her brother was not long. When he arrived, they quickly decided to let us stay one night. During the evening, we learned that the lady's husband was an officer in the French Army who had been captured by the Germans and was in a prisoner in a war camp. We felt that our blind faith had led us to some wonderful people who saw helping us as one important act of kindness. They used a map to show us our location. We were surprised to learn that we had walked between 20 and 25 kilometers before arriving there.

The lady and her brother were naturally interested in knowing where Ken and I wanted to go. Although they did not seem to have any connections with the resistance, they were willing to buy us train tickets and get us started on the way to Toulouse, which we had indicated was our destination.

It felt good to get our shoes off and be able to rest. We slept with our clothes on as we had been doing for several weeks, ready to make a quick exit. Ken and I shared a studio couch, and even though it was very crowded, it was more comfortable than the floor we had slept on the past two weeks. And the house was warm.

The next morning we were told there was an afternoon train for Toulouse and that they were getting us tickets for the trip. The lady and two of her girl friends planned to walk us to the station and see us off. For two men with no

money and sore feet, this was music to our ears. The first day and night on our own could not have gone better. We had put distance between us and Paris, and if we got on a train, we could go even faster.

I have never learned the name of the lady and her brother who kept us overnight, or the exact location of that house, but it was somewhere in or near Bretigny.

Father Robo Mathurin, in his letter of 5 June 1946, informed me about the fate of Father Superior and the custodian of the school. The lady doorkeeper of the school survived her stay in the concentration camp, but died soon after the war suffering from the camp's effects on her health. When I returned to the church and school in 1985, I saw a plaque which recognized that Father Superior and the custodian had paid with their lives for their efforts to help the resistance.

On my return visit, I also learned that the places where we had been hidden were part of other facilities with many entrances and exits which comprised most of a city block. The physical layout had made it difficult for the police to catch people there during the war, so the area was used temporarily by a number of people who were trying to avoid arrest.

When Father Gerand Robo was awarded his “Legion D’Honneur” from The Community of Croix-Valmer, for his participation in the Resistance, he was called a hero of faithfulness to his job as keeper in the main home, Mere des Spiritains, rue Lhomond in Paris. At the awards ceremony, Father Didaiiller said, “A door-keeper because of his job may have instant surprises, some pleasant, some quite un-pleasant, unkind, sometimes cruel; that was the case when brother Gerand (26 February 1944) was told he was arrested and had to immediately follow the policemen who were addressing him. His job almost cost him his life, but all the fliers (and there were dozens and dozens) managed to go through or escape.”

With the attitude, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do,” Father Robo returned after the war was over from the Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany, where he had been confined for one year, to his assignment in Paris. He continued to serve his church in Paris and other locations in France until he retired. During his final years he was at Abbaye Notre-Dame, Langonnet, France, near Lorient in the department of Brittany, in his beautiful homeland. There he died in December 1985 at the age of 75. In his years of service to his fellow man, the events of the war in particular caused him to bear a heavy burden. I am grateful for his quick action at the critical time in Paris.



Left: Clayton stands outside the church doors from which they exited to avoid capture in 1944.

Below: The top windows of this church building are windows to the rooms where Robo Mathurin found eight airmen hiding when he came to tell them they must leave as Father Superior and others were being arrested.

