

infiltration by spies. The Abwehr, the secret intelligence and counterespionage service of the German General Staff, made determined efforts to penetrate Comet and other escape lines. Agents successfully posed as Allied airmen more than once. As Airey Neave explained in "The Escape Room," by 1943 a system of interrogation was devised in London to assist the Belgian and French helpers in checking the men who came into their hands.<sup>8</sup>

In mid-February, an increase in German activity on the border made it necessary to find Chuck a new hiding place and he moved into Bricout's residence in Bachy, France. After a brisk two-kilometer walk, Chuck found himself with a roommate. Charley Elwell, another airman, had been aboard one of 60 planes shot down during an Aug. 14 raid targeting a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt, Germany. Losses had been so high that the Allies had considered discontinuing daytime bombings. Not only was there a shortage of planes, but no one could dispute the fact that crews had little chance of completing the 25-mission requirement for an honorary discharge. Morale was terribly low.

The daytime bombings did continue, which is why Charley Elwell of Connecticut and Chuck Carlson of Minnesota, met in France.

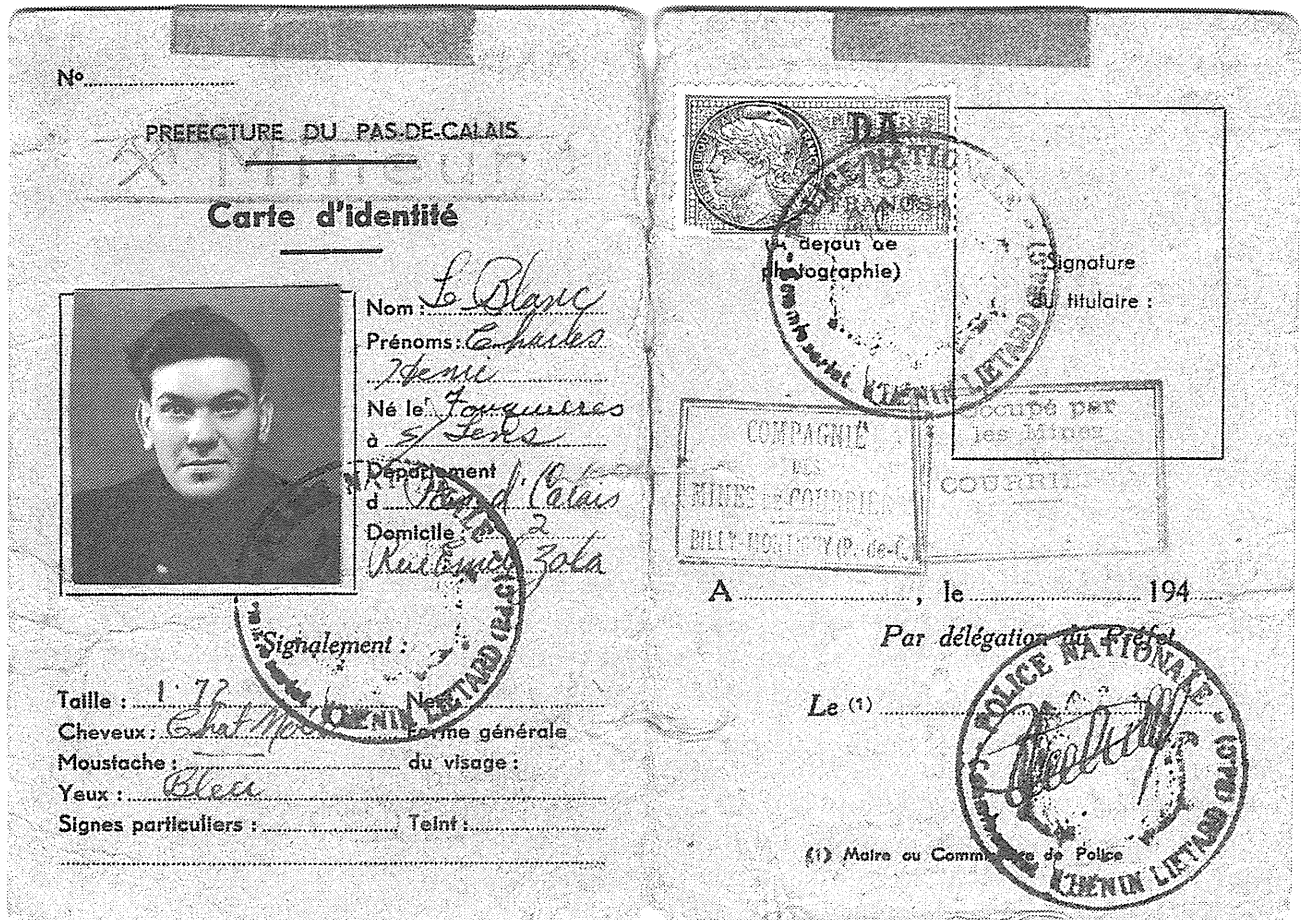
"Being with someone who could speak English was a real treat," Chuck said. "We played many games of cribbage. We didn't have a cribbage board, but we kept track on a piece of paper." The slender Elwell loved to crack jokes, and the two talked about taking a fishing trip if they survived.

Sometime before March 1, the Resistance learned that the Germans planned a sweep through Bachy to look for Allied personnel. Bricout quickly moved Chuck and Charley into the attic of the local school for the weekend. The headmaster spent Saturday working so the two men had to sit tight and in silence. Sunday was a little better, and they returned to the Bricout home that night. The Nazis went away with nothing to show for their searching, but left behind a promised reward of 1 million francs.

In the weeks that followed, the 5-foot-4, stocky and strong Bricout openly walked the streets of Bachy with Charley and Chuck, introducing them to friends. When the nervous U.S. airmen questioned the practice, Bricout laughed. "The informant would be dead before he could spend the first franc," he said. The townspeople knew better than to turn traitor.

Bricout put Chuck and Charley to work on sabotage in preparation for the Allied invasion. The local Resistance chapter needed to destroy one of the three mobile cranes in all of France. The cranes were used to right derailed railroad cars, and removing the cranes would hurt the German supply lines. Other Resistance chapters had crippled a crane in the south and destroyed the crane that served Paris. Bricout, who had 137 people under him, opted to use a new weapon — plastic explosives, which an Allied air drop of materials, arms and money, helped procure. The saboteurs pounded the explosive flat with their hands and then wrapped it around a young woman's body. They also slid gun parts down the seat pipe of a bicycle. The girl then rode her bicycle to the Nazi checkpoint. Soldiers looked her over and let her ride through. She deposited the materials and returned in the evening.

8. Neave, The Escape Room, pgs. 50 and 148. Numerous other stories are documented elsewhere in the book.



After about a week, the saboteurs had stashed enough explosives. The men slipped into the railroad marshaling yard one night, stuffed the explosive in the drum of the crane, blew it up and fought their way to safety after the boom alerted soldiers.

Word came in early May for Chuck and Charley to continue their journey to Spain, the Allied line and eventually home. Chuck had a new set of forged identification papers; Bricout had taken the poor Belgian version. Chuck was now Charles Henri Le Blanc.

"The clerks working in the German agencies were French and some of them cooperated with the underground. When the German officer in charge was real busy, a clerk would bring a whole stack of identification papers in at the end of a busy day. The officer would be in a hurry to go and would sign all of them," Chuck said.

Charley and Chuck were to travel separately to Paris and then reunite for the move to Spain. The appointed guide took Charley first as he had been in hiding the longest. Because permits were needed to travel more than a short distance, the guide explained that he would take Charley in three stages. The guide then would return to do the same with Chuck.

Chuck waited and waited. Six days beyond Chuck's expected departure date, both the guide and Charley returned. The house where the two airmen were to have stayed in Paris had been taken by the Germans.

Before new arrangements could be made, the British and Americans started to

prepare for D-Day. Because the Allies planned to destroy the rail lines, thereby cutting the Germans off from their supplies, Comet leaders were directed to stop using trains because it was longer safe.

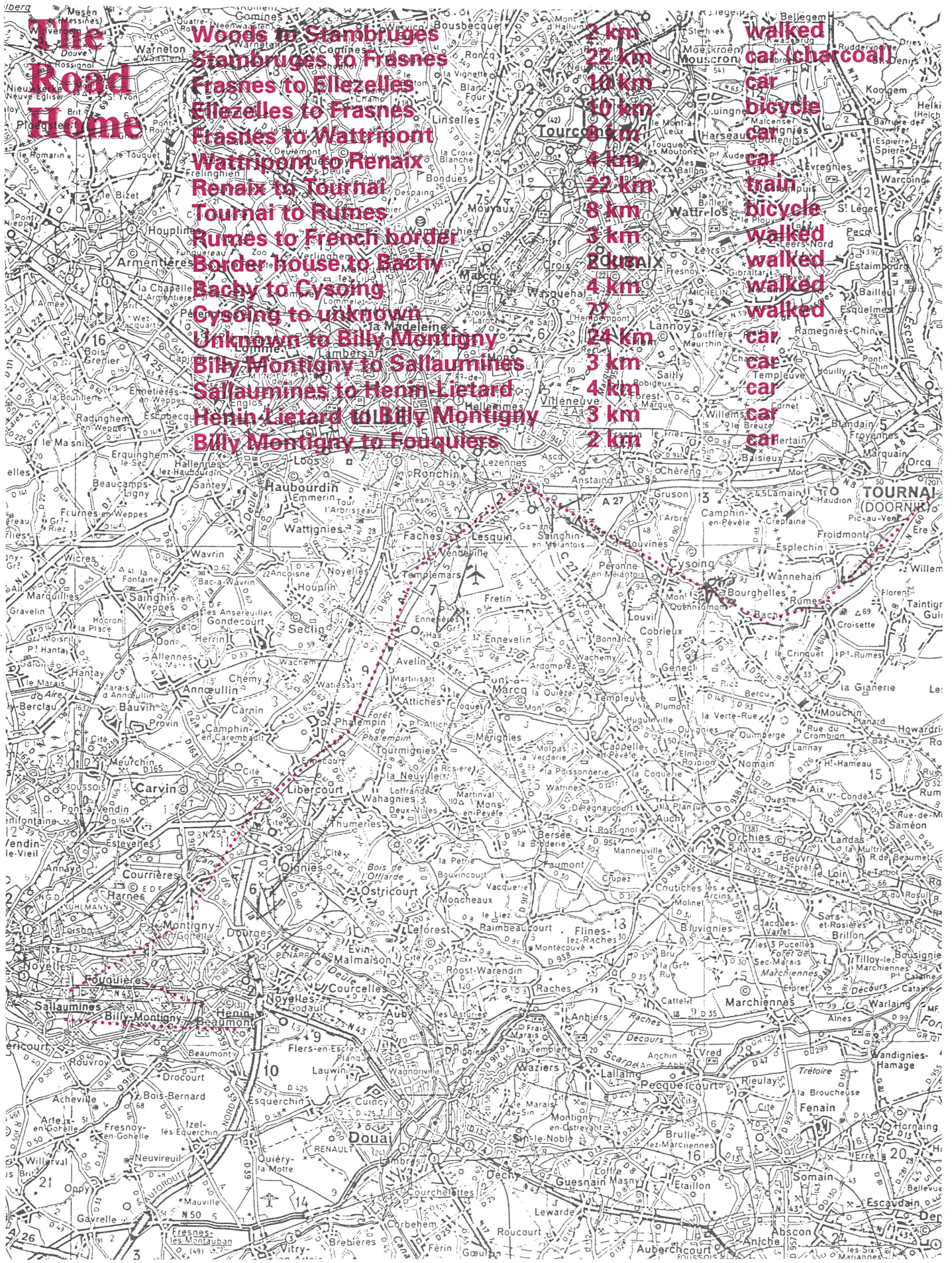
Bricout decided Chuck and Charley should go to Billy-Montigny where he hoped they could be made part of the Resistance. Bricout walked with Chuck and Charley 4 kilometers to Cyosing where the mayor hid the two men for a few days in the City Hall belfry. The first day they had nothing to eat or drink, but the mayor slipped them bread, cheese, wine and water the second night. They walked and rode for several more days, rarely staying more than one night in a given place. They spent their final night of travel at a small house in the countryside where they were given a meal and a place to sleep in a shed. The next day a car and driver took them to a photography shop in Billy Montigny and they met people by the name of Heller who would find them a new, more permanent place to hide.



These unidentified residents of the Bachy area belonged to one of the families that helped Charley Elwell and Chuck Carlson before they left on their trip to Spain and then after it was canceled.

**Correction to the above photo caption:** The caption of the family group shown above is incorrect in saying that they are unidentified. The five adults and child are members of the Cnudde family as follows, from left to right, adults: Jeanette Cnudde; Jeanette's sister, Henriette Cnudde; Henriette's husband, Francois Ross; and Henri Cnudde and his wife. The little boy is Pierre Balcq, son of Jeanette.





**The Road Home**

**Woods to Stambruges**  
**Stambruges to Frasnes**  
**Frasnes to Ellezelles**  
**Ellezelles to Frasnes**  
**Frasnes to Watripont**  
**Watripont to Renaix**  
**Renaix to Tournai**  
**Tournai to Rumes**  
**Rumes to French border**  
**Border house to Bachy**  
**Bachy to Cysoyng**  
**Cysoyng to unknown**  
**Unknown to Billy Montigny**  
**Billy Montigny to Sallaumines**  
**Sallaumines to Henin-Lietard**  
**Henin-Lietard to Billy Montigny**  
**Billy Montigny to Fouquieres**

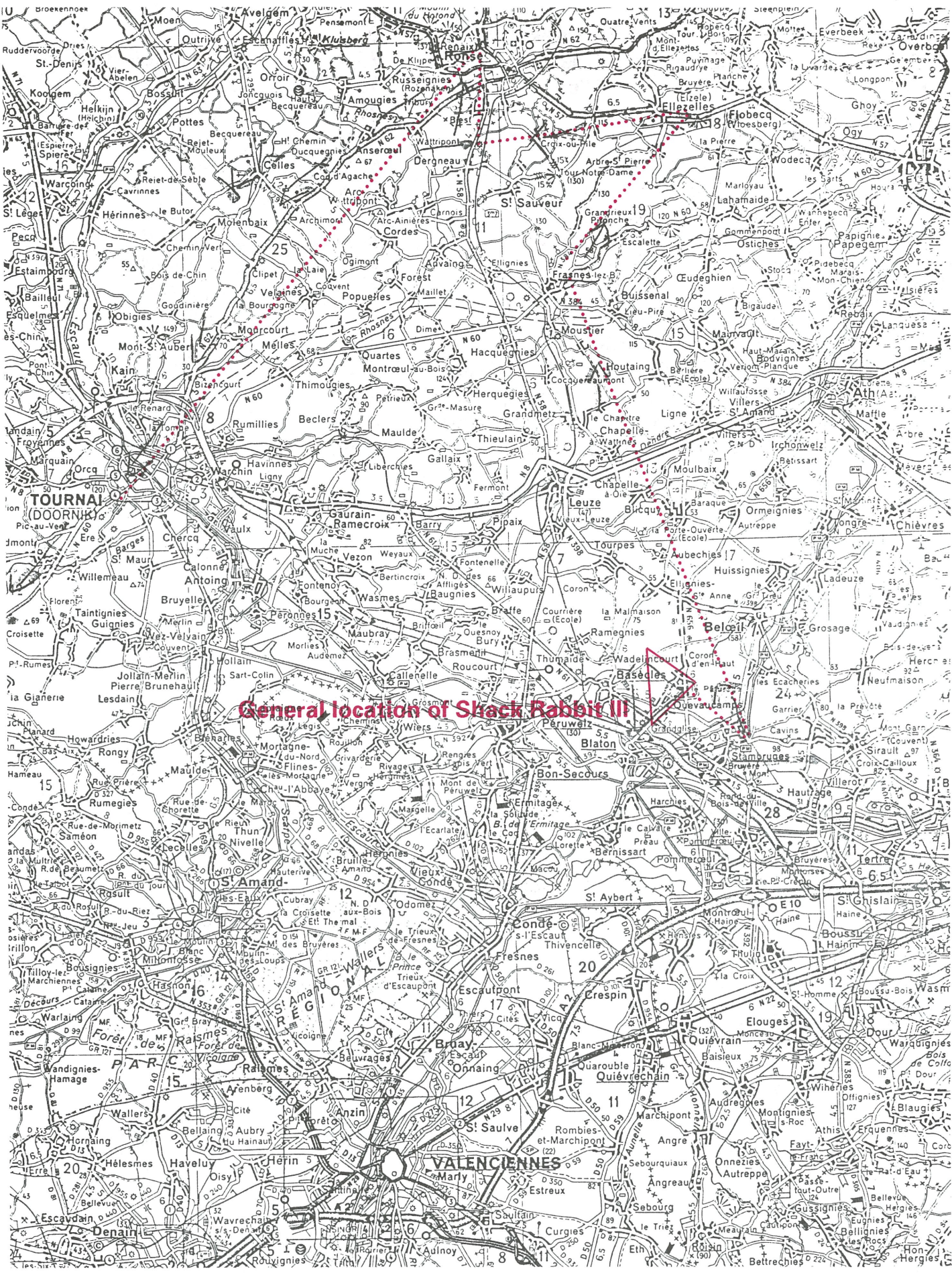
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**walked**  
**car (charcoal)**  
**car**  
**bicycle**  
**car**  
**train**  
**bicycle**  
**walked**  
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**walked**  
**car**  
**car**  
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**car**

**TOURNAI (DOORNIK)**

**Douai**





General location of Shack Rabbit III





## Chapter 9

### The Hellers

Ernst and Louise Heller were anti-Nazi from before the beginning days of the war. A Hungarian, he was a photographer, and she was from Austria. In 1939 and 1940, the Hellers took a risky step in alerting the United States officials as Adolf Hitler gained control of one country after another on the European continent. The Germans stationed in France didn't trust the French photographers and turned to Heller Photographie to process their film. Ernst Heller made extra prints of every picture in which a military vehicle, equipment or soldier insignia appeared. When he had gathered a fair number, he or his wife dropped them at the mailbox of the nearby U.S. Consulate office; it was open because the United States hadn't entered the war.



Ernst and Louise Heller of Billy-Montigny.

The couple's next major contribution came in early 1944 when they hid their first Allied airmen. Among those were Charley and Chuck, who spent two nights at the end of March sleeping above the photograph shop before traveling with Mme. Heller by car to a coal mine foreman's home in Sallaumines three kilometers away.

The foreman was in charge of a great many Russian prisoners of war whom the Germans had assigned to help mine the coal. He did not stay in the house, but his daughter, who assisted him, did. Despite the proximity of the prisoners, Chuck and Charley could enjoy the outdoors because the house featured a walled garden.

Louise Heller visited frequently and sometimes asked the two men's opinion about Resistance activities. On one occasion she reported that between 15 and 20 munition boxcars had pulled into Billy/Montigny and were on the tracks near the mine. She wanted to know if she should inform the English. There was a risk that the hidden airmen, as well as local civilians, could be hit in the resulting raid.

"I told her she should and let them decide if they wanted to endanger the people," Chuck said. "She evidently did get it on the wireless and a few nights later the British came."

Chuck was indoors when Charley hollered from the garden that there were fireworks. Chuck, who had been shot down two months later than Charley had, knew a bit more about Great Britain's newest nighttime bombing tactics. A few specially trained pilots would drop target identifiers which could be seen from the air. Then the larger planes flying a couple of minutes apart in a single line — not in formation as the United States squadrons did — dropped their bombs one at a time.

When Chuck saw "the fireworks" he led Charley and the miner's daughter into



the cellar. "For the next 25 minutes we were under a very severe bombing. It was close enough that it knocked a lot of the roof tiles off of the house," he recalled. "The bombers missed the train, but took out the tracks so the raid was partially successful since it delayed the Germans moving ammunition."

One late April evening after the men had been there about three weeks, Mme. Heller arrived obviously upset. Chuck and Charley had to leave Sallaumines immediately, she said. She had a car waiting, so the two men gathered their meager belongings and went outside. She remained indoors only briefly with the daughter.

"It had come out that the people had corroborated with the Germans. The girl had gone out with German soldiers and been seen," Chuck said. They apparently were playing both sides in the event that the Nazis won the war after all.

It was already dark and the driver drove with the lights off. Mme. Heller told him to go with all haste to a town east of Billy-Montigny. On the way she explained that the talk in the town was that the mine foreman was no longer to be trusted.

"We arrived in Hennin-Lietard and after making our way through some narrow streets we arrived at a very large house surrounded by a tall, brick wall. Mme. Heller got out and opened a large, solid metal gate and we drove into the courtyard," Chuck said.

They waited in the car while she talked with the estate's owners, who weren't expecting her or her passengers but who previously had said they would be happy to hide fliers. Quite some time passed before she returned, ushered them into the parlor and introduced them to the lady of the house. Mme. Heller said that although there were German soldiers billeted on the third floor, the two airmen were going to have to stay here until another safe house could be found. The risks here were preferable to the danger of remaining at the miner's home.

The lady — Chuck and Charley never did learn her name — explained just how dangerous it was for her family. All of the other family members had gone to stay with friends or relatives in other towns. She said there were a hundred or more Germans living in a schoolhouse across the street; the soldiers in the house numbered eight plus an officer. It was possible for the two Allied airmen to stay, however, because the officer — who was the only Nazi who had complete run of the house — had just departed for Germany on a 10-day leave.

The family bedrooms were on the second floor, but the lady of the house deemed it unsafe for Charley and Chuck to be walking up and down the stairs where they too easily could encounter the Germans. She decided the Airmen could sleep in the parlor (with the officer gone no one would be playing the piano there) on a bed that could be slid as a barricade to the door to the hall. She figured the arrangement would work well because every night around 10 p.m. the German soldiers left for night patrol. Then Charley and Chuck could sleep.

That first night the tramp of boots signaled bedtime. But it wasn't long before Chuck awoke to hear Charley snoring vigorously. Shaking him awake, Chuck warned him that it wouldn't go well if the soldiers returned from their shift at 3 a.m. only to make two arrests at the house. For seven more nights Chuck and the lady had to wake Charley whenever they thought the Germans might be traveling the hallways.

Mme. Heller returned for them a day before the German officer was due back.

She and her husband would have to keep them in the home above the photography shop because she hadn't found a new place. Because the two Americans again were stuck indoors they developed an exercise routine to keep fit and to stave off boredom. During the final three weeks of May, Chuck and Charley met some of the other fliers whom the Hellers were helping to hide. The two airmen didn't learn until they were free that there would be 26 in all by the end of the war. Food and cigarettes were scarce, but Mme. Heller had developed a network in which trusted area residents who couldn't house an airman contributed ration stamps instead.



## Chapter 10

### Just say ah-h-h

When Chuck fell from the tree after his parachute jump, he not only hurt his back and foot, but knocked a filling out of a tooth. Up to this time the tooth had not bothered him. Now the pain was constant.

"I tried to pull it out myself, but my efforts only made it feel worse. Charley offered to pull it out for me, but we did not have as much as a pair of pliers — so much for that idea," Chuck recalled.

Finally Mme. Heller learned about the problem and decided that a visit to the dentist was the best option. Chuck tried to explain to her that his dental work would show that he was not a Frenchman, but she said not to worry about it; she would make the necessary arrangements. Nothing happened for a few days, then during the lunch hour day in early May, Mme. Heller took him down into the photography shop and introduced him to a boy of about 12, who would escort Chuck to the dentist. Chuck was told to act as though he were mute. "When the dentist asks, 'Que dont sa mal?' you point to the infected tooth," she told him.

Chuck and the boy walked to a nearby small town where they went directly to the dentist's office. There was no one in the waiting room, which was a great relief. The young guide sat down and the two waited. At last, the dentist came out of his surgery and, ignoring Chuck, talked to the boy. Then Chuck was directed to the dentist's chair.

"He examined my teeth very carefully and paid extra attention to the three-quarter crown that my brother, Harold, a dentist, had made after I lost most of the tooth in a football game. All of this time the dentist was carrying on a fast-moving conversation with my young friend," Chuck said. "The dentist gave me a shot of Novocaine, and we waited until my jaw was numb. Then with a plier-like instrument, he locked onto the ailing tooth. A few preliminary twists and then a strong pull, he removed the tooth. He stopped the bleeding with a pad and indicated that I could leave the chair. There was no payment that I saw, and my young friend and I were on our way back to Billy-Montigny."

## Chapter 11

### Liberation

Chuck and Charley's final hiding place was with Mr. Caron, a restaurateur in Fouquieres, which was two kilometers northwest of Billy-Montigny. He hid the airmen in a cold storage pantry for vegetables behind the kitchen. The men's adventures of actively assisting the Resistance had ended. There was no more talk of moving them by foot over the mountains into Spain and they knew it was a matter of time before the Allies would reach them.

By now Operation Overlord, the June 6 D-Day invasion of Normandy, had occurred. "The Breakout," in which the Allies broke through the German line and began pushing through toward France and Germany, came July 25. Several key factors had kept the Allies from marching forward: the Nazi troops, of course, but also the thick hedgerows east of Normandy created in the days of the Romans, plus there was a bottleneck in the topography that limited the space to 2 and 5 miles wide through which troops and supplies could move.

On Aug. 1, the U.S. 3rd Army under the direction of Gen. George Patton became operational. It spearheaded the liberation of France, Germany, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Later that month the Allies reached France.

The Hellers held a celebration Sept. 3 on what turned out to be the day before liberation. They gathered the last 16 of their airmen for a commemorative photograph and served delicacies that were nearly impossible to find — a filet, mushrooms and champagne.

The photograph by Ernst Heller appeared in several local newspapers a short time later, including the Sept. 14, 1944, edition of *La Voix Du Nord*.

A French account of Mrs. Heller's activities appeared Sept. 17, 1944, in *Nord Eclair*, another local newspaper:

Our readers have had before them these past days a picture of Mrs. Heller surrounded by 16 of the 21 Allied soldiers whom she hid, lodged and fed during the war. We visited her at her house at Billy-Montigny, where her husband is a photographer.

Mrs. Heller, Viennese by birth, became Hungarian by her marriage.

In January 1944 she received the first two English pilots. They were entrusted to her by an organization which could not hide them at their own places. Then in March, two others came to look for asylum at her home. Thus, each month she lodged some and attained the impressive number of 21 in July. At the moment of liberation, 16 of them still were entrusted to her care, the other five having rejoined the Allied lines.

It goes without saying — the most elementary wisdom demanded it — that all did not remain at her house. They were harbored in the neighboring communes.





Ernst Heller shot this photo Sept. 3. Chuck is seated in the front row, holding the Hellers' dog. Next to him is William DuBose and then Louise Heller is front row, center. Charley Elwell is in the far right in the back row.

Mrs. Heller does not wish to dwell on the inherent difficulties of such an enterprise. She went herself in the car up to a radius of 40 kilometers to look for the aviators in the different regions where the Germans were swarming . Often the airmen were dressed in a rudimentary fashions: she set her wits to work to furnish them with sufficient clothing and supplies.

Those times of misery are not yet so distant in our memory that we don't remember the agonizing problems which then placed on all of us. Mrs. Heller applied herself to solve them for her "boarders" who didn't lack appetites. Some generous assistance helped her in her task. Her guests endured becoming accustomed to our vulgar gray tobacco and even to Belgian tobacco. They were almost all rabid smokers and used a frightful quantity of tobacco. "They didn't lack it," said Mrs. Heller while smiling.

Her refugees went out only when it was completely dark. The little indiscretions, so often fatal, were thus avoided. When one person outside the family knew of the presence of an English aviator at one house of another, Mrs. Heller changed his residence. In the summer, a person preceded at 50 meters Mrs. Heller accompanied by her outlaw friends, so that if a patrol presented itself to verify papers they had time to do an about face.

The houses which sheltered these Englishmen were always rigorously shut up. If someone knocked, the pilot hid himself on the floor. In most of the cases, a sort of help was foreseen. If one or the other were captured, he confessed that he had arrived in the night and that he was getting ready to present himself to the commander.

Thank God, it didn't ever come to that.

Thanks to the precautions taken, the people who harbored some Englishmen did not know each other — and all went well.

But that did not end the activity of Mrs. Heller. She contributed to setting on its feet an organization of 400 F.F.I. of the region. In direct relation with the agents of the Intelligence Service, she often gave them information on munitions depots, rows of torpedo supplies, passing of troops, situations of major importance. Her devotion extended to all domains. It is thus that she did so much and so well that she succeeded in making the food get to the Russian prisoners of the hospital.

It would take a book to write on all her activity. Let's finish by citing the people who most helped Mrs. Heller in her work: the two Baudart brothers, who often transported arms and aviators; the Deconcourt family, grocers at Sallaumines who sheltered nine aviators simultaneously; Mr. Laine and Mr. Langlin at Fouquieres; Mr. Caudrelier at Mericourt; Mr. Caron, restaurateur at Fouquieres; Mr. Merlin of Passerelle Street; Mr. Roussel of 2 Fosse Ave.; Mr. Perrey, dairyman at Billy-Montigny; Mr. Chopin, brewer; Mr. Vaniskemski, butcher at Mericourt, Finally, Miss Eliane Delayence of Noyelles-sous-Lens, who brought her precious help in many circumstances.

The day of liberation at Billy-Montigny, Mrs. Heller went to look for her proteges everywhere they were found. From the window of her house Commander Bastien addressed the crowd. But the exclamations became delirious when the 16 aviators of the Allied Army were presented to the people. A vibrant "Marseillaise" (The French national anthem) then broke forth. And never had Mrs. Heller been more happy than at the moment.

The Germans left Fouquieres and Billy-Montigny the afternoon of Sept. 4 just a few hours before the first British tank battalion arrived. Chuck said one might think that the Nazis would have had one of the most modern armies of the day, but in fact they pulled out their artillery pieces with horses. The Carons, Chuck and Charley watched through cracks in a shaded window as liberation came.

It was perhaps 9:30 that night when there was a knock on the door. The cafe had closed. The knocking continued. Finally, the Carons told Chuck to answer the door.

"Here was a British soldier. He said in very bad French, 'Would it be possible to have a cup of tea?' 'Hell no,' I said. 'Come on in and we'll give you some coffee.' He was astounded," Chuck said.





"You guys are like roaches coming out of the cupboard," the Brit said. Chuck was the seventh airmen the officer had encountered in 10 miles.

The officer was in charge of a van of tools and parts to fix tanks that had gone ahead. When Chuck and Charley asked what they should do, the officer said he would radio to headquarters and in the morning a truck would pick up the two men.

That same night the British major wrote his wife, Ann Saphir, about the encounter and said that Chuck was well and en route to headquarters and debriefing. She passed along the good news via cable Sept. 9 to Mrs. Carlson and followed it with a letter that same day:

As it will probably be some time before you receive official confirmation of same, I sent you a cable this morning, as I realize how very anxious you must be about his welfare.

The boys seem to be doing very well and I feel sure it won't be long now before our loved ones are home again.

I do hope you have good news from your son shortly, and should I receive any further information I shall immediately pass it on to you.

All good wishes for a very speedy reunion.

The family also received word when a friend, who subscribed to a Swedish newspaper, noticed a story mentioned Chuck. No one knew how or why his story was mentioned.

On Sept. 5, Chuck and Charley ate in the officer' mess hall of the tank outfit, enjoying a table with good food and plenty of it. The British were happy to see these evaders and although the tank crews couldn't take the Americans with them, they gave them a driver and truck to reach the nearest prisoner of war camp so the Americans there could process their papers.

"We were in civilian clothes, of course, and the officers grilled us. They were always testing us about baseball teams, etc. We were there two days. We saw them take in a lot of German prisoners," Chuck said.

A truck eventually took them to Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's Allied Headquarters and to Paris where Chuck and Charley were debriefed. By this point the Allies weren't terribly interested in the experiences of the men and women, soldiers and civilians, Americans and Europeans, who eventually would make up the Air Forces Escape and Evasion Society. The two friends were put into the Hotel Maurice. After months of sleeping in a cold pantry they found themselves riding elevators fashioned to resemble coaches from the era of King Henri XVI. Their room for five days was 30-by-30 feet with a 14-foot ceiling.

From Paris they caught a plane to England for more debriefing. More important, the Allies were short of bombardiers and they wanted Chuck back in action as soon as possible. However, there still existed the danger that if someone in his circumstances were shot down again by Nazis, he would face charges of spying and instant execution. Therefore, Chuck couldn't fly again in Europe. He had a choice. He

could help train bombardiers in England or he could fly missions in Asia after some leave time home. He said he'd rather go to Japan. It never transpired.