



Editor's note: Technical Sergeant Howard Joe Turlington was a B-17 Flight Engineer in WWII, serving on the Johnny Butler Crew in the 384th Bomb Group (H), 547th Bomb Squadron. He completed 13 combat missions before being shot down on 16 September 1943, after which he evaded capture and returned to his unit in early July 1944. This memoir was completed in 1998, and first posted on the original 384thBombGroup.com website. Some slight editing of the original text was done to improve readability (commas & hyphens) and to correct some terminology and place-names.

It was a typical English day: heavy fog and clouds looming overhead. Thinking I had the day off, I rode my bicycle to the dispersal area where our plane, "The Natural," was being repaired. It had been badly shot up on a mission to Stuttgart on September 6, 1943.

While I was talking to Sgt. Rukavina, our ground crew chief, an officer rode by and said a briefing was to be soon. I rode swiftly back to the barracks to pick up my things and headed for the briefing. Alas, I got there late; the briefing was over, and everyone was going back to their planes. I met Lt. Knowling, our navigator, who told me we were to go to Nantes, France, to bomb a ship in the harbor there. He also said if anything happened we should head south to Spain.

We were to fly "Hell's Belles II" again. We were not happy about flying that plane. We had flown it two or three days previous, and one of the generators was not working. After a quick visual inspection, I discovered the generator had not been replaced. I told Lt. Butler, and he was very upset that it was not in A-1 condition. He told the ground crew chief, in harsh words, that he was not happy with his performance of "his" duty. It was decided that "Hell's Belles II" would be used anyway, because this was to be an easy "milk run" (so we thought).

We got into formation without too much trouble and headed across the Channel to France. We were expecting P-47 escorts to the target but had not seen any. As we came closer to the target, I noticed planes in the far distance. I could not identify them, but assumed they were our escorts. Moments later we were attacked from the rear. Three abreast were coming at us with guns blazing. All guns aboard our ship were firing. The Me-109's would come in from the rear, fire, and then swoop under. Three more would do the same. I did see one Me-109 going down in smoke, but from my position I could not follow him down. All gunners were firing, so it could not be determined which shots hit him. After three or more passes I saw a reflection in my turret dome. I quickly turned the turret around and saw the left

wing and the #2 engine on fire. The fire had burned through the aluminum and the rubber tanks were bubbling. My first thoughts were to alarm the crew, but assuming the pilot had seen the fire, I thought he did not want to alarm the crew at that particular time. (I found out later that Johnny was in the nose checking the generators).

We left the formation and after trying to blow the fire out before descending, I was hit on the leg and told "to get the hell out." I thought at the time it was the pilot. (I found out later it was the copilot, Lt. Herman Wollenweber). I got

out of the turret and snapped on my chest chute. As I entered the door to the bomb bay I saw the radio man (Sgt. Preston Davis) entering the bomb bay from the rear door. He motioned for me to jump; I motioned for him to jump. He then jumped. I saw two others pass underneath the open bomb bay doors as they went out the nose hatch. I waited momentarily before I jumped.

Immediately I started spinning. I was afraid to pull the cord of my parachute for fear I would become tangled. I remembered in flight training being told that if you were spinning, to change positions and the spinning would stop. I crossed my legs and the spinning did stop. I looked down and saw that I was a long distance from the ground. Assuming that I was not in a dogfight, I pulled my cord; nothing happened. I became very excited. The parachute rigger had warned me that I should turn in this chute for a dry one. It was soaked with oil that had been leaking from the turret, and it may not open. While attempting to pull the chute apart, I saw a small kerchief spread out, and immediately the whole chute opened. It seemed like I stopped in mid-air. As I glided down I saw an Me-109 coming toward me. I was afraid he would shoot me or spill my chute with his prop wash. Instead he flew by and I suspected he would give my position to the ground troops. I did see three chutes at a distance higher than myself. I thought that they were the others who had jumped before me, but because of the delay in opening my chute, I passed them. I also saw a big cloud of black smoke that I gathered was the aircraft.

I wanted to hit the ground running so I tried to release my leg straps, but to no avail; the pulling and tugging completely tired me. I landed in a pasture on my feet but fell backwards almost knocking myself out. I got out of the harness and began running in the direction I thought was south. I realized I had too much clothing on. As I ran I pulled off two pair of the three pairs of gloves I was wearing. Another twenty feet or so, I stopped and pulled off my boots. I looked around and saw the three chutes at tree-top level a distance away. I decided to try and join them. I turned around and headed in their direction crossing over my boots, gloves, and chute. I crossed the road to an open field. A farm house was about two hundred yards away. A dog was barking fiercely. The open field was larger than I expected, and I was afraid to be in the open without some cover. I went to a ditch and a hedgerow which gave me cover. I was hoping the others would join me later.

Plane No 5852 5849

P : Butler, Johnny G., 1/lt
 CP: Wollenweber, Herman Jr., 2/lt
 N : Knowing, Edward J., 1/lt
 NG: Martini, Burnia (IDM), S/Sgt
 R : Davis, Preston A., T/Sgt
 TT: Turlington, Howard J., T/Sgt
 BT: May, Herbert E., S/Sgt
 TG: Barnes, Clarence B., Sgt
 PG: Rogers, Marion C., S/Sgt
 FG: Sord, Walter H., Sgt

1. The Crew of HELL'S BELLES II on 16 September 1943
 Note original aircraft assigned was "5852" – THE NATURAL

After about thirty minutes, I heard noises, so I peeked out and saw three German soldiers scouting around the farmhouse. All I could think of were those bayonets on the end of their guns sticking in my A--! I laid low and soon heard a commotion when one of the Germans found my chute. As they scrambled about, they found my gloves and a little distance away they found my boots. They assumed I went off in that direction and headed south.

I stayed in the hole. Knowing that I was in danger, I ripped off the squadron insignia and the bomb markings on my A-2 jacket. I dug a hole with my hands and buried it. Around dusk I saw five Germans returning. They passed me and went past the farmhouse. Soon I heard a vehicle start and drive away. I hoped they had given up their search.

Night was falling, and I felt somewhat safe, so I got out of my hole and went out onto the road. As I approached the farmhouse a farmer came to the road. I felt it wasn't safe to talk to him, and he didn't speak to me. But, I'm sure he knew I was hiding in the hedgerow.

It was a very dark night and I began walking. After walking for some time, I came to a village. As I passed a church the midnight bell began to toll, which startled me. Not expecting this I became scared and was sure I would be caught. Realizing what it was, I hurried out of town. I walked for a while but then became very fatigued. I came to a hedgerow and tall trees. I crawled into a spot, pulled pine straw around me, used my gloves for a pillow and slept until daybreak as a light rain fell.

There was a peasant farmer in a field nearby. It was raining, and I knew he would not be there too long. I had not eaten anything since breakfast at Grafton-Underwood the day before. I approached the man and showed him my translation card saying, "I am an American airman, can you help me?" He hesitated, but then motioned for me to follow him. He took me to his home. He and his wife had a very long discussion, but he finally took me into the kitchen. It had a dirt floor and a huge open fireplace. The cows were in a room just beyond the kitchen. The wife fixed some very good ham and eggs. In a sign language, he told me he could not help me, and that I must go because it was too dangerous. I thanked him and left.

I did not walk too much because I was in military clothes, and I knew I must not be seen this way. I stayed off the road and in the forest as much as possible. It kept raining but at least the trees were some cover for me. It stopped raining toward evening and I began walking until midnight. I attempted to sleep, but it turned cold and my wet clothes made it too uncomfortable to sleep. I walked a little and tried to sleep again but it was just too cold to lay on the ground. I would walk until I became tired and then I'd sit under a tree to rest. As the sun came up I knew just how cold it was because everything was covered with a heavy white frost.



2. MIA Telegram

I was hungry and tired and decided that I would have to take a chance and ask for help. Later that morning I came to a small commune. I showed a woman my translation card and asked for food. A group of people gathered around as they fed me. I asked if they could get some civilian clothes. They brought me an old suit coat, pants, scarf, and an old hat that was much too large. I made do by folding some newspaper and stuffing it in the lining of the hat for a better fit. The wine I drank with the food and the warmth of the house got to me. I asked if I could rest. I was led to a small cot and fell asleep immediately. When I awoke and looked up, people were lined up all around the room staring down at me, even children. My first thought was that I was a corpse. Then I thought I was captured, but I realized they were no Gestapo! They told me I must leave because it was too dangerous for me to stay. I started on my way feeling much more at ease in civilian clothes. I walked out of the village heading south.

For the next few days I walked and looked for out of the way places to ask for food, and to sleep in the barn. Most of the people wanted to help me, but they knew their lives were in danger if the Germans caught them. There was a lot of German troop movement in the area, and I could understand their being frightened. One day I circled a town only to find more troop movement on the other end of town. So, I retraced my steps and walked all day, and got nowhere.

I continued my walk, and most of the people I met on my way would speak. I would acknowledge them, but I would not dare to speak. I remember one night sleeping in a barn where a farmer had gathered up hay to make a pallet for me. I was awakened later by something pulling at me. It was only some cows eating from under me.

Another time I slept in a tall haystack and was aided by yet another farmer. He put up a ladder, dug a hole in the top, and put me in, and then covered me up with hay. Before daylight he woke me up and said I was to leave, because he did not trust his neighbor.

Another incident I remember was a farmer who led me to his loft and made a pallet from an old blanket and some rags. That morning I was awakened by a lot of meowing. I looked up and saw that a mother cat had given birth to kittens at my feet. I was sure I had taken the cat's bed that night.

One time I was actually allowed to sleep in a bed. I was fed inside and taken to "the company room" to sleep in two downy featherbeds. I felt ashamed because I had not bathed in days, and my clothes were dirty. I really looked and felt like a tramp.

I continued my walk, but my feet and legs were so very tired. Having only one pair of socks I decided to sleep in them at night and walk without them during the day. By doing this I had rubbed huge blisters on my feet because the socks were open at the toes, as on the top. My feet were so sore and blistered, that I felt I could no longer go on.

On September 29th, I met a farmer coming from his barn which was across the road from his house. I asked if I could rest in his barn. He hesitated and motioned to the hill close by. Apparently, that was where a German lookout tower and training base for Me 109's was. He said it was very dangerous, but he did allow me to go to the barn and rest. Toward the evening, he came back swinging his "feed bucket" and whistling. Only he brought food for me instead of the stock. I grabbed up the food and began cramming it in my pockets expecting to be told to leave. I didn't realize, because it was so hard to

communicate that he was telling me it was okay to stay. He said that he may be able to get in touch with someone who could help me. I believe Monsieur Guillemet delivered milk in Niort which was about five kilometers away. This was the first glimmer of hope that I had.

I stayed in the barn under the nose of the Germans. Monsieur Guillemet would bring food to me in his feed bucket so as not to arouse suspicion with the Germans in the watch tower. I was not aware of what was going to happen but welcomed the chance to rest my sore feet.

After three days of rest, Monsieur Guillemet and two other men came to the barn bringing three bicycles. One man, Monsieur de Peretti could speak English, and that was very welcome in itself. I had not spoken English all this time. Monsieur de Peretti questioned me thoroughly, and after being satisfied with my identification, he said I could stay with his in-laws in Niort. I would only be with them a short time while arrangements were being made for me to go to Paris and catch a night flight back to England.

We rode the bicycles to the town of Niort, to the home of Monsieur and Madame Henri Denoue. Monsieur Denoue had a garage and did auto repair, but only for a short time. Very few people were allowed to drive, so most of his work was on bicycle repair. He did some auto work on the German vehicles, and I must say he had many little tricks to get even with the Germans.

This was the first time I had taken a bath (in a wash tub) since leaving England. The tailor in town, Monsieur Henri Babin, sent a suit and other clothing which was a welcome sight. For weeks I had looked and felt like a hobo. I was then taken to a photography shop and photographed for an identification card. All people had to have one in France. I was given the name Alfred Savory.

I stayed in hiding and enjoyed being with the Denoues, but I was anxious to move on. After a while the Gestapo became very active, (I never knew what aroused them). They began searching everyone and everywhere arresting many people, including: Monsieur Lallement (Monsieur de Peretti's friend). I was then moved to Monsieur Babin's clothing store. I stayed hidden in the center of town right under the Gestapo's nose. When things quieted down, I went back to the Denoue's, and was told the plans for me to go to Paris were no longer possible. There were, however, new plans underway for me to go south and cross the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain with the Maquis Organization. My hopes were that it would be soon.



3. Monsieur Guillemet



4. Henri Denoue's Garage

By this time, it was December, and again I received bad news. There would no longer be any escorted trips over the mountains. The last few trips had been too dangerous because of the cold weather, and many men had gotten frost-bitten fingers and toes. It would be spring before I could leave.

I became very disillusioned and said I was going on my own. Monsieurs Denoue, Babin, and de Peretti pleaded with me to stay. I became disgruntled, disgusted, and angry because I had lost confidence in them. Monsieur de Peretti said to stay three more days and he would find a solution. The third day when he came to see me, he had another man with him who was from the Resistance in Paris. He pleaded with me and told me of the danger of going it alone. I told him I needed to get back with my group in England or I would be considered AWOL and charged with desertion. I said it was my "Duty to Return."



5. Denoue Family

Then he said to me, "You cannot go, and we cannot afford to let you go. You know too much about the organization, and surely you will be picked up by the Germans. They will make you talk," he said, "and you will talk, or they will kill you." He told me that many French people would be killed, and they couldn't take that chance. He said I should think about that very seriously.

The next few days I was very depressed. I thought about my situation and realized that I had no choice. Monsieur and Madame Denoue had been so good to me, and it wasn't right for me to put them in jeopardy, or the others that were trying to help me. I understood that I had to make the best out of the situation, at least until spring.

I became a little easier to get along with. I enjoyed working with Monsieur Denoue, and Madame Denoue was a very kind lady who did so much for me. She called me her "American Son." I kept busy chopping wood, but I always stayed hidden. Only a few people knew I was there. In March I was told I would be leaving. I was taken to Irais, a small village north of Niort [ed.: about 75km]. It was there that I joined two other Americans in the home of Madame Irene Bineau. She was the town clerk and very active in the Resistance organization.

A short time later four more American airmen were brought to the village. We were seven in all, and it made for much danger. Three of us were sent to the home on Monsieur Hullin. We were hid in his wine cellar and his three daughters brought us food. After three weeks we were told things had been arranged for us to leave. We



6. Monsieur Hullin

were loaded into a dirty cattle truck and taken to another small village where we met two more Americans before boarding the train to Tours [ed.: about 100km].

In Tours we were met by our escorts, a man, his wife, and another man. They were to escort us to Toulouse. We boarded the train, each escort taking three airmen with him. He gave us instructions for what to do at all times and told us to keep our eyes on him. As we boarded the train the security conductor checked our identification. The escort kept him in conversation while he checked our ID casually.

At a layover stop, one group had been caught. The Gestapo was put on alert, so it was a tense trip. My escort told us to scatter and board the train, and to get off at Toulouse and look for him there. I acted as if I were asleep most of the time, so no one would talk to me.

When we arrived in Toulouse, I located the escort and the other two airmen. As we left the station, our escort did the trick by keeping the guard occupied while we showed our ID cards. He took us to a nearby restaurant and ordered us a beer. He started talking to us in French as though we could understand. While talking he took out a piece of paper and jotted down a note in English. He then got up, bid us goodbye and left.

The note said to follow the girl standing in the doorway. When she left, we followed her walking through the streets of town for what seemed like a long time. We walked up a narrow alley to a big building and climbed a long flight of stairs. The girl opened the door and just disappeared.

In the room were forty more escapees and one woman. She was the organizer of this part of the trip. She gave orders to someone who we found out later was an Air Force Major who would be in command. He explained to us that we would be leaving in small groups to go to the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains, to be met by the Maquis.



7. Hullin Daughters



8. Group of Evaders; Turlington is second from right



9. Group of Evaders; Turlington is bottom right

The Maquis Organization was a group of young Frenchmen who, rather than go to Germany and work for the Germans, took to the mountains to do sabotage work against the enemy.

Our trek over the mountains was no easy task. We walked for three days and two nights, not sleeping much. It was dangerous climbing the mountains. If someone mis-stepped, a large rock could be heard coming down, and in the dark, there was no way to see where it would land. If you lost your footing, you could slide several hundred feet before you would stop. At night we held to each other for fear of getting lost. The second night it rained which made things worse. After going through this we were a mighty ugly sight.

The Maquis boys had cans of beans for us to eat at one point. Another time we came upon a shepherd and his flock. The boys asked for a sheep to feed us, but he refused. They took the sheep anyway and guarded the shepherd while they made a small fire and roasted the meat. The small fire only warmed the meat some, and it was the worst food I had ever eaten.

We trudged on to near the top. There the Maquis told us where the border between France and Spain was. They told us we were on our own, but that we would be in Spain in a short time.



10. French Resistance Workers

We set out for the top, and luckily did not see any patrol. To make sure we were in Spain, we ran down the mountain about a hundred yards and just collapsed. We rested awhile because we were exhausted from the rugged and rigorous journey we had made. It was a relief to finally feel safe.

After resting we descended down the last mountain, being careful nonetheless. We went in groups of two along the last mountain slope. As we passed a small wine shack, a G.I. who was ahead called to us. We joined the others and soon the Spanish police (who were Spanish soldiers) came and loaded us in a truck. We were taken to a small village jail, which could not handle all of us. So, they put us in a third-rate motel next to the jail. It was crawling with bugs and we had to



11. Members of the French Resistance

sleep on the floor. Since G.I.'s can be very unruly, there was a commotion and soon we were taken to a better place. After our identification was confirmed, we were taken to a nice hotel. We were then taken to a clothing store and were outfitted with new clothes.

There was a lot of red-tape to go through, but after a few days I was taken to the Rock of Gibraltar. I spent a few days there and was then flown back to England.

I went to the receiving center on Brook Street in London to be identified and integrated. Each one had to be identified by someone from their base. Lt. Joe Baggs, our bombardier, did not go with us on our Nantes mission, so I hoped he was still in our outfit. Soon, one by one, men were identified and allowed to leave. I was left alone and was afraid no one was left in England who knew me. I became concerned, but as I dozed, someone tapped me on my shoulder. It was Major Baggs, and boy was I glad to see him. He told me I was the first one back. There were five POW's, one in Switzerland, and three were missing. I finally got back to my base at Grafton Underwood, only to get my records straight. Major Baggs drove me around the base in his jeep, and that made it easier clearing to the base. After saying "so long" to all, I boarded a C-54 to the "Good Ole USA."