

Royal Airforce Escaping Evading Society - Personal Story – as told by Sergeant Reginald Thomas Hoskisson

**Good Evening Ladies and Gentleman.

AIMS

You have been invited here this evening to tell you something about our society.

THE ROYAL AIRFORCE ESCAPING – EVADING SOCIETY

This society was formed towards the end of the last war, by Lord Portal and members, who had escaped or evaded capture and all had been assisted to do so by the ordinary people of the occupied countries of Europe. The aims of the society were quite simple.

HOW CAN WE HELP THOSE WHO HELPED US?

When you consider that 3000 Allied Airmen escaped or evaded capture between 1939-1945 from the occupied countries of Europe and returned to this country to carry on with the work they had been trained to do, it speaks well for the help given by the people of the occupied countries. Each airman had to be housed, fed and clothed. Food and civilian clothes were in very short supply and shelter was difficult and would often mean a barn, hayricks, outhouses and what was known as safe houses.

When the War in Europe ended, committees were set up in the occupied countries by the R.A.F.E.E.S to find out what help was required. It was very difficult to find those who had helped us, because only code names were used by our helpers, and most of these helpers were proud independent people who would never come and ask for help if they required it. In my own case it took me nearly 20 years to find the real name of a man called “Godfried” who helped me

Now first to make things quite simple to those of you who may be a little puzzled by our name.
The R.A.F.E.E.S

First, an evader is one who by 99% luck and 1% of his own intelligence evades capture and is returned to this country to carry on the job he has been trained to do.

Now an escaper, is one who has been captured by the enemy, and made a prisoner of war, and by 50% good luck and 50% of his own intelligence manages to get back to this country, which is quite an effort.

I myself was an evader;

MY STORY

I would like to take you back 39 years to September 1944. Montgomery’s plan to capture the bridge at “Arnham” had failed, much of Holland and Belgium was still occupied by the Germans. Antwerp was still held by the enemy; Brussels was about to be liberated. The Allies had not crossed the river “Maas” and the Rhine seemed a long way ahead.

TARGET FOR TONIGHT

I was a sergeant rear air gunner with No. 61 Squadron which formed part of 5 Group, which operated on "Lancaster" bombers.

We were called for a briefing on Saturday 23rd September, at 3p.m, and were informed our target that night was a junction in the "Dortmund Canal", at Ladbergen, 15 miles north of Munster. This was an important target, and was known in the R.A.F as a maximum effort. Some 300 "Lancasters" were to take part.

Our Commanding Officer on 61 Squadron seemed to regard Air Gunners as two chaps who had just come along for the ride, and seemed to think they used the briefing period for extra sleeping time. He developed the nasty habit of calling upon some unfortunate gunner to stand up and give a complete resume of the briefing. This briefing was no exception, and he called upon a certain Pilot's gunner to stand up and repeat all that had been said. This young gunner stood up and gave an excellent repeat of all our instructions and orders. The Wing Commander congratulated him, but said Sergeant, you have left out the most important thing, the object of the operation. The Sergeant replied, "Yes Sir, the object is to breach the banks of the Rhine and drain it dry to make it useless to German barges".

When the cheers had died down and order was restored, the Wing Commander said "Gentlemen, what you have just heard must not go beyond these four walls, because if Barnes Wallace hears about this he will make a bomb to do it, and I for one don't wish to be around to take it".

Much of Germany's war effort was carried by barges down the Rhine, and along some of the canals such as the "Dortmund Emms". A canal being man made can be breeched by bombing, draining it dry and rendering it useless. The take-off time was about 8pm, and our course took us up the Scheldt and over Holland to the "Dortmund Emms" canal.

After crossing the Dutch coast, we were attacked by German night fighters – it was going to be one of those nights. The Skipper took evasive action in the form of a violent corkscrew manoeuvre. A twin engine ME 110 kept on our tail, but after a short burst from the Mid Upper Gunner, and from myself in the rear turret, he broke off the engagement. By this time, the Flak Batteries had found our height and heading, and the search lights were picking up the stream of the Bombers.

Suddenly, we ourselves were coned; the plane was lit up as if some one had switched on a light in a darkened room. More evasive action from the Skipper, a terrific dive from 20,000 feet down to 10,000 feet, we lost the search light, but our trouble now began.

The plane was not responding to the controls, we came out of the dive and levelled out at about 10,000 feet, but the nose began to go down again, and it was becoming difficult to maintain our height.

The Skipper asked the navigator for our position, and a course back to base. The navigator was not certain, we could be just on the borders of Holland, Germany or Belgium, it was all enemy held territory.

After a few unprintable words about Navigator's in general, the Skipper ordered the Airbomber to jettison the bomb load safe (that is unfused) to lighten the aircraft. When the bombs were released, the aircraft became even more difficult to control, in fact her nose had gone down,

and both the Pilot and the Engineer were pulling back on the control column without any effect at all.

BAILING OUT

The Skipper called on the intercom to Bail out and told us he would try and hold her for about 5 minutes to give us time to get out.

I was fortunate in the rear turret; I was wearing a fighter pilot's parachute, and all I had to do was rotate the turret 130 degrees, disconnect my oxygen mask and intercom, pull the lever to open the rear door of the turret, lean back, and I was sucked out of the turret by the slip stream.

The next thing I knew I was floating downward, everything was quiet and peaceful, just a faint hum of the wind in the shroud lines of the parachute. This unfortunately did not last long, I noticed hundreds of small fires burning on the ground, this I concluded must be our incendiary bombs and flares which we had jettisoned. Then a new noise kept repeating itself, and I soon realised the war was becoming personal – I was being fired on from the ground.

OCCUPIED HOLLAND

I now began to look around me, I could see trees and hedges taking shape, and the wind was getting louder. I was not dropping straight down like a stone, as I imagined, but travelling along the ground at a very fast pace. It was then I saw my first German soldiers, they stood quite a distance from each other, one had a rifle, but the one nearest to me seemed unarmed. I was now only a few feet above the ground, the German soldier was running towards me, and by a self-preservation instinct I braced my legs in a forward position. The soldier had totally misjudged the speed I was moving along the ground - a gale force wind was blowing – I caught him full in the face with my feet, and his arms flew up in the air, and a revolver dropped to the ground. There was an awful crack, I think his neck was broken with the impact.

I was still being carried along the ground, and then my feet touched the earth, which was very soft and sandy, but before I could get free of my parachute, another gust of wind filled the canopy, and I was airborne again. Twice this happened but the third time I managed to run forward and fall on top of my chute to prevent it from becoming inflated again.

Well, here I was, all on my own, my flying boots had been sucked off when I bailed out, but I was wearing a pair of electrical heated flying slippers which looked like a pair "Aladdin" wore, with the toes all curled up at the front. Now what was I to do? - and something started to tick in my mind. All those lectures in ice cold lecture rooms – Flying Officer instructors saying, "Pay attention Cadet Hoskisson, it might happen to you!"

BURY YOUR PARACHUTE FIRST! Have you ever tried to gather up some 60 years of silk in a wind blowing about forty miles per hour? However, by lying flat out on top of it, I managed to gather it all underneath me and wrap the shroud lines round it, until it looked like a large bundle of washing. Not having been issued with a spade in our escape kit, I saw the burying the parachute was not doing to be as easy as it seemed. Also, as it had saved my life, I was becoming rather attached to it.

I began to walk on and eventually came to a small hedgerow, and on looking round the other side I discovered a ditch about 3 feet deep overgrown with weeds – it would be a good place to bury my chute, in it went, and I covered it up with dead leaves so nothing could be seen.

Having disposed of my chute I began to look around, and found I was standing in an overgrown cart track, deeply rutted with the wheels of farm carts. I began to follow this track, which eventually led me to the approaches of a small farm. My mind went back again to the lecture rooms of R.A.F Training command. Be careful when approaching your first contact, make sure no German Army transport is parked there, check to see if the house is on the telephone. While the occupants may appear to be friendly, making you coffee, some one else may be phoning up to the local German commandant.

I looked around the farm buildings, no German trucks, no telephone wires. The place was well isolated, not a chink of light from any window or door. I stood for some moments listening and decided to take a chance. As I was walking towards the house looking for a door, a dog began to bark. I stood still, but the dog knew his job, and barked louder than ever.

Then a door opened, and a shaft of light spread across the ground. I saw a man standing in the doorway and begin talking to the dog. I approached the man, and both of us looked at one another, as if neither of us had ever been a human being before. I asked him if he was Dutch- he drew himself up and said "Hollander". I think he mistook my Dutch for Deutch, and said, "Deutschland Kaput" and spat on the ground. From that moment, I knew I was safe. I said I was British R.A.F and pointed to the sky, he came forward and almost dragged me into the house.

The next few minutes was complete confusion, he told his wife I was a "British Tommie" I think the poor chap thought the village had been liberated. Then a little girl approached, aged about 10 years. She said "Winston Churchill" and gave me the "V" sign. I pointed to the half wing on my tunic and R.A.F., her reply was "R.A.F. Aviator British Bombers", pronounced with full accent on the silent B. I think this was the greatest compliment I had ever received during my four years in the R.A.F. "British Aviator R.A.F air crews were usually known as "Brylcream Boys" "Light Blue Jobs" and Overnight Sergeants. The Australians used an expression "Walking Tall", I was certainly walking tall that night.

I have never met a child so quick to grasp who I was and what I wanted. I produced an escape map of Holland, and she pointed on the map to a place called Deurne, near Helmond, and quite close to the German frontier. I produced a pencil to underline Deurne, she took the pencil from me and marked the Swastikas and the T at Helmond. I quickly gathered from her that I was surrounded by German Troops, in a few seconds she had marked "Swastikas" all around Deurne. I still have this map in my possession. The pencil was a Venus, dark green with gold markings, she looked at the pencil with eyes wide open, I said she could keep it, my first mistake.

In a few words she told her father and mother that I needed help to escape. By signs, they asked me to sit down, and I was welcome to stay, he knew people who could help me. Meanwhile, his good lady was producing a cup of coffee, two hard boiled eggs, bread and butter and cheese. The time was 9'o clock, I gathered from the little girl. Her name was "Hooning" and she was learning English, and they had listened to the British radio, all of which was strictly forbidden.

Mr Hooning now put on his hat and coat and went out. For the next ¾ of an hour, I sat and waited, when he had gone, doubts began to cross my mind. Well, I thought, I can't blame him if he turns me over to the Germans, after all he has a wife and child to care for, and he knows the penalty is death for helping an Allied Airman to escape.

JO BROUWERS

So, I sat and waited, and at last he returned accompanied by a young, dark-complexioned man with a large grin all over his face. He came forward with an outstretched hand and said in quite good English “My name is Jo. I am a member of the Dutch underground, Welcome to our country!”

In a few words I explained to him that I had bailed out, and he listened very carefully to my story, asking what our target was, what type of aircraft, and then as if checking my story, asked where was my parachute? I told him it was buried in a ditch alongside the cart track not far from the farm. Then he spoke to Mr Hooning in Dutch and asked me to go with them to find it.

I could see that this member of the Dutch underground movement was no fool – if I couldn’t find that parachute my chances of escaping were nil. I had to prove to him that I was a genuine British R.A.F Aircrew, and not a German plant. When flying we had to leave behind all identity cards and pay books at camp, the only identification were our dog tags, which we wore round our necks with our name, Rank and number, plus our blood group and religion - the latter was to make sure you had the right Padre to bury you.

We found the parachute and Jo seemed much relieved, and we returned to the farm. Jo asked me if I carried the usual photograph, I said Yes, I have 3, which one do you want. I never knew until then that these photographs fitted exactly in Dutch, Belgium and French identification cards, full face for French, left profile for Belgium, and right for Dutch. Jo now began to outline his plans for me. I could only stay here for one night, as the family would be in great danger, the child might talk.

Jo had a long talk with the little girl and told me he would call for me a 6 o’clock the following morning, and take me to another house. Mr Hooning would provide me with a civilian suit, and a pair of shoes. Jo would bring with him a Dutch identification card, and as it was Sunday we would walk from the farm to the Catholic Church for early morning mass. I had nothing to fear! The Deutchlanders could be fooled all the time providing you did things naturally. After mass he would take me to a house where he was staying, with other members of the underground. I found out later this was the headquarters of the Local Underground Movement – luck had been with me when I had bailed out almost on top of them.

I explained to Jo I carried Dutch money, and I could pay if money was required. I produced a 200 guilder note, could I give this to Mr Hooning for his suit and shoes? I could see Jo was thinking, he said they were a very poor family, but the note was of too large a denomination. If they spent it, it would attract attention in such a small village, however, he gave the note to Mr Hooning, telling him on no account to spend it or bank it until Deurn was liberated, as he might bring misfortune on himself and family.

Jo said goodnight and left, and the Hooning family retired to bed, all except Mr Hooning, who sat in another chair, and enjoyed my Player’s cigarettes. I couldn’t sleep, or even doze, I began thinking about the rest of the crew – had they all managed to escape from the Lancaster? Or by some strange freak had the Skipper managed to get control of the aircraft and return to base minus his rear gunner? Could he be put on a charge for losing a Rear Gunner? Poor old Hugh, could he talk himself out of that one? He was training to be a lawyer in civilian life.

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 24th

It was now early morning; the fire had gone out and it was cold in the kitchen. Mrs Hooning came in and lit the fire and made some coffee, it was terrible stuff, made from acorns I think, but it was hot. She then produced a plate of uncooked bacon, more bread and cheese, and some fat which was neither margarine nor lard - butter had vanished years ago - the Dutch were living hard under German occupation.

I changed into Mr Hooning's best suit, the shoes were a bit small, but I could manage. Jo had given instruction to burn my uniform and parachute, nothing must be left of my visit.

Jo arrived about 6 a.m. I had some silver coins in my pocket which I wanted to give the little girl, but Jo said NO! but she gave me a silver Dutch guilder, which I kept, and later had made into a brooch for my wife.

Jo asked if I had given the family anything. I said "no" but then remembered the pencil I had given to Betsy. Jo asked to see it, Betsy fetched it, Jo looked at it and pointed to the markings – VENUS PENCIL CO MADE IN ENGLAND. Jo said if she takes that to school everyone will want to know how she came by it. I was given the pencil back, and tears came to Betsy's eyes. I felt awful. But Jo gave her his own pencil, a dull unvarnished thing. It did not console the little girl. After the liberation my Mother-in-law sent Betsy a pencil box filled with Venus pencils.

We walked to church, there were quite a number of people going to mass, after the service we left the church and walked down the main street and entered a house, which stood quite close to the road.

I was introduced to the owner of the house and his wife, but again, no names were mentioned. I was then introduced to another man, again, no names. He spoke quite good English, he asked me where I lived in England and I said Birmingham, can you name me the two railway stations, I said "Snow-Hill" and New Street, he smiled and then gave me my Dutch identification card. My new name was Peter Van Loom, they then asked me who I was, and I repeated the name on the card, they all laughed and said it would fool the Germans, but never the Dutch Police.

I learnt later that the second man who interrogated me had the code name "Godfried" He also asked me which was the best football team in Birmingham. I replied – West Bromwich Albion, both my father and father-in-law were very keen supporters. Godfried's face looked blank and did not reply. I said, "You thought I was going to say "Aston Villa", his face broke into a smile, and he repeated "Aston Villa", but you asked for the best, he was not convinced.

After many years I learnt his name was Karrel Ex and he was at that time 21 years old and a university student, who had gone underground to avoid being sent to work in Germany. He was head of the underground in Deurne.

They assured me that I was safe, the identification card was genuine, it was signed by the Burgomaster and the German Commandant, they had a member working in the town hall.

The second man who I was introduced to told me my plane had been found, and after a pause said, "two of your crew did not manage to get out" "which two?" I asked. It was Sgt Twynham and Sgt Jennings. Jim Jennings was our Mid Upper Gunner, and Tony Twynham was our Radio operator. "They are being buried this morning, by a German troop, with the usual military honours. The local people will look after the graves. "

This was something I hadn't expected, I had to turn away from them and look through the window. We had been together as a crew for 12 months and were good friends.

As I gazed through the window, I saw streams of German soldiers marching down the road, ten on each side of the road, armed, with an N.C.O with a sub-machine gun at the end of each file. The men looked haggard and drawn, dirty and un-shaven, just marching on with a fixed stare.

My new friend was well informed as to what was happening in his area. He said their troops were being with-drawn across the frontier, as they could no longer be relied upon to fight. These troops consisted of mostly Latvians, Balts and Poles, who had joined the German army when things were good, now they were no longer interested in the Fatherland and Hitler's new Reich.

They had been without food and water for 48 hours, our typhoons had wrecked their transports, petrol dumps had been destroyed, and the road right back to Eindhoven was littered with trucks, they expected Deurne to be liberated within 24 hours.

We sat down and drank more coffee, and I watched the endless file of German troops pass by the window. As I stood watching, I saw a soldier make a dash towards a wood across a field, throwing away his rifle in the ditch. The German N.C.O in charge of the troop raised his sub-machine gun and fired a short burst, the man fell without a sound. The troop kept on walking, the N.C.O never crossed the road to see if he was dead or alive.

1st LIBERATION of DEURNE

At last, the road was clear of troops, and not a German in sight, after about an hour, at about 10.30a.m. four armoured cars came tearing down the road and stopped outside the house. Out stepped a British sergeant in the familiar battle dress and beret, looked around, waved his hand to us, opened the rear of the scout car, and pulled out a Dixey, and walked toward the house. I was already on my way to the door, he asked for water, and I asked him how many they were. "Just us four mate", then realising I had spoken to him in English asked me who I was, I told him, and he called back to an officer in one of the other scout cars, and said, "there's a bloody R.A.F bloke in this house."

It didn't take long for the local people to realise they were free at last; I have never seen such excitement. They poured out of their houses with orange bunting, and flags appeared from the bedroom windows, they all gathered round their cars. The army had stopped for a quick brew of tea and biscuits and bully beef, and they were given eggs and milk by the liberated people. The soldiers gave me a carton of 100 cigarettes and a mug of tea with sugar. They were a recce patrol of the INNS OF COURT REGIMENT, known as "Monty's Greyhounds".

RETURN OF THE ENEMY

But suddenly the air was shattered by a piercing scream of a shell, and the earth blew up in the field across the road. In a few seconds the scout cars vanished back up the road, and we dashed back to the house, and went down into the cellar. The Germans continued to shell the village all morning, till about mid-day, then more German troops and tanks came down the road. I cannot remember much about the shelling, as soon as we settled ourselves in the cellar on some straw, I fell fast asleep. It was about two o'clock when I awoke, German units continued to pour down the road all afternoon.

The shelling had stopped but a noise started to rend the air. My Dutch friends told me this came from a German Mortar sited on the crossroads just up the road, this was firing on our troops trying to advance. A little later more shells began to crump down again; this was our guns trying to knock out the German mortar. About 4'o'clock 3 typhoons flew over, located the German mortar and fired their rockets and all became silent. No more German troops came down the road, and we ate a meal of cheese, biscuits, tomatoes and apples together with more coffee. I shared out the carton of cigarettes, and finally we all closed our eyes and went to sleep.

2nd LIBERATION OF DEURNE

At first, light British troops appeared, then Tanks, Scout cars infantry started to dig fox holes to site Machine Gun posts, this time they had come to stay.

The news that an R.A.F sergeant was living in the village must have been passed on, about 10 a.m. two M.P's arrived and said they had orders to take me to their head quarters for interrogation.

I had hardly time to thank my Dutch friends for all their help, but I did manage to get Jo's name, it was Brouwers, and I gave him my home address. He made one request which I couldn't refuse after all he had done for me, he wanted me to return the Dutch Identification card as a memento he had obtained from many other Airmen, but of course, they had all passed on.

RANK NAME AND NUMBER

My journey back was irritating. I was in civilian clothes, unshaven, treated as a suspect by the Army. I was interrogated at the Army Head quarters by a Major, after giving my Rank Name and Number, what Aircraft was I flying? This went on for a long time, many forms were filled in, now another officer arrived, this time a Colonel, and it was about to start all over again. Then I said wouldn't it be best to take me to the nearest R.A.F unit and let them establish my identity? I refused to hand over to them the rest of my escape money, saying I had signed for that at Base, and it would be returned there. Seeing I was going to be awkward, they put me in a jeep with 3 M.Ps this time and drove to R.A.F Tactical Air Command Head quarters at Hellmond. NAME, RANK and NUMBER, here it all began again, what squadron? who was my pilot? what was our target, number of Aircraft, how had I obtained civilian clothes.

At last, I was taken I was taken to another office where two officers were present; one was my Skipper. all dressed up as if he was going on parade.

"Do you know this man? Squadron Leader asked the officer who had been asking all the questions.

"Never seen him before" replied my Skipper.

"He knows your name", replied the officer "Says he is your rear gunner"

"Well, I never see his face, he always sits with his back to me. "

Well, we had a good laugh, the two officers congratulated me on my escape, would I like a meal? I would like a wash and a shave first. I was given a towel, soap and razor, and cleaned myself up, and the Sgt. Mess was across the road. I went in but the N.C.O said civilians were not allowed in the Mess, I explained who I was, and he said have you got a chit for a late meal?

I knew now I was back in the R.A.F. I could write as much again on our return to R.A.F Brussels, both the Skipper and I were getting browned off. We stayed in Brussels for two days, then flew back to Hendon, we were picked up by R.A.F police and taken to Adastral House, where it all began again, RANK, NAME AND NUMBER.

At Adastral House I was interviewed by a number of RAF Officers. I was asked if I had any ideas to improve our escape organisation. I did ask why our parachutes were still white in colour, as they stood out so clearly in the dark night sky. If they were black or dark grey, we would not be so easily spotted at night. The Officer said this question had never been raised before but would bring it up at the next meeting of the escape committee.

I was also interviewed by a very senior WAAF officer with very grey hair and a very stern face. The officer asked if I had made use of the escape aids, I said "Yes, the maps and the money" Had I used the yellow card with questions in English and translated in French, and Dutch, also Danish? I said No.

"Could they be improved?" asked the WAAF Officer.

I said they could have a translation such as "What are you doing tonight miss?"

"Sergeant you were on an RAF Bombing operation, not a dirty weekend on the continent". She was not amused...

I always finish my talk with a quote from St Matthews Gospel, Chapter 25.

"I was a stranger and ye took me in.

I was hungry and ye fed me.

I was naked and ye clothed me".

Without these aids very few of us would have returned to this country.

*****Changes to Sergeant Hiskisson, Ret.'s original speech have been made where necessary, for clarity only, copies of the original unaltered speech are available upon request.***