

Against the Odds: Escapes and Evasions by Allied Airmen, World War II

Murray Adams (Editor)

Reviewed by Mark Lax

Paul Brickhill's *The Great Escape*, later made into a 1963 film, tells the story of the mass escape of 76 Allied prisoners from Stalag Luft III on 24 March 1944. The majority were recaptured, 50 later shot by the Gestapo and only three returned to safety – but their stories are each remarkable and unique. Such is the interest in the subject Brickhill's book has been extremely popular and is still sought after. In fact there were over 700 Allied airmen who escaped from enemy captivity or evaded capture during World War II.

Subtitled *Escapes and Evasions by Allied Airmen, World War II*, this publication from the RAAF Air Power Development Centre is a reprint, with minor updates and inclusions, of the highly popular bestseller published by the Australian branch of the RAF Escaping Society in 1995. Edited by Murray Adams, also a veteran of the 1939-45 conflict, all but one of the 31 escape and evasion accounts involve Australian airmen with the remaining one featuring an RAF officer resident in Australia since 1972. Most of the stories are of escape in the Mediterranean and European theatres. This is partly because there was no equivalent Allied Bomber Command air campaign in the Pacific that might have led to a large number of Prisoners of War (PW). It is also because escape from the Japanese was much more difficult.

It was regarded as one's duty to escape if captured, so it is not surprising that so many attempts were made. Nearly all successful escapes by airmen from enemy or occupied territory in World War II were from where they landed and before capture and incarceration. A few made it out of PW camps in Germany, Italy and the occupied European countries. Many returned to the fighting after recovering from their ordeal. In the European theatre the airmen's generally Anglo-Saxon appearance allowed them greater opportunities to blend with urban and rural populations. Coupled with ample food supplies and the many friendly people in occupied countries who risked their own lives to assist, often on organised resistance or escapee support networks, an escaper who avoided capture in the first 24 hours had a good chance to return eventually to allied territory.

On the other hand, escaping from the Japanese was virtually impossible. PW camps were often in inaccessible and even relatively impenetrable jungle locations and PW were generally suffering from severe physical privations that limited fitness and stamina. Outside the camps a general lack of food severely hindered the prospects of escape and survival by living off the land, there were virtually no organised escapee support networks in South East Asia and the

airmen's physical and ethnic appearance made it almost impossible to hide. Those who did break away often did not get far and were viciously dealt with

– as were reprisals carried out against remaining prisoners. Exceptions were those forced down behind the lines in the Pacific Islands and New Guinea, where friendly natives were often more motivated and able to hide downed aircrew and guide them to safety. Such is Flying Officer David McClymont's story but his is unfortunately a rarity.

Typical is Flight Sergeant Stan Jolly's experience. He was on one of 42 heavy bombers that failed to return after a night mission over occupied France on 03 May 1944. The target, Mailly-le-Camp, became infamous in RAF Bomber Command annals for claiming one of the highest loss rates of the war – 12.5 per cent or one in seven of the aircrew involved. Stan spent 16 weeks on the run and in hiding in Paris before being 'liberated' by the Free French and Americans when they recaptured the city. His tale is more about the brave French resistance who protected him than the escape itself – a familiar theme that comes out almost accidentally in all the stories.

Printed on good quality paper in A5 format, which makes it nice to read, the book has a good feel to it as well. Apart from a paragraph-length biography on each contributor at the end of the book, the only other section contains eight quite general colour maps covering the geographic areas described in each escape. These do not add much as many readers will not need to refer to them. There is a scattering of photographs throughout covering some of the stories but additional photographs from other sources would have enhanced the book considerably. The stories vary in length and style as the reader might expect, but all are readable and lack the self-promotion often seen in such accounts. Some tales are absolutely riveting and while you know the author gets away, many read like a thriller right to the end.

All in all an excellent, light read and available from the APDC direct or through their website at www.raaf.gov.au/airpower. For those with an interest in short and individual war stories this book is highly recommended. ♦

Murray Adams (Ed), 'Against the Odds: Escapes and Evasions by Allied Airmen, World War II', RAAF Air Power Development Centre, Canberra, 2005, Softback, 170pp., RRP \$A28.00.

