

Escape From France

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Before the United States and its allies invaded Europe in 1944, Americans flew bombing missions over France from bases in Great Britain. Their mission was to stop Nazi Germany during World War II (1939-1945). Jason interviewed his great-uncle, Ardell [Adie] Bollinger, who was shot down over France in 1943.



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Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler wanted to conquer France.

My great-uncle, Adie, enlisted in the Army in July 1942. Instead of becoming a **paratrooper**¹ as he had hoped, Adie went to radio school and joined a B-17 bomber group. In May 1943, he was sent overseas to England.

During one mission, Uncle Adie was shot down. He jumped out of his plane into an open field. He decided to lie down in the field because the Germans would look in the barns and buildings.

The next morning, a local priest and three other Frenchmen brought bread and milk for Uncle Adie. The priest told him the Germans had left. The priest also told Uncle Adie that there were other Americans who had survived being shot down. One needed medical

attention. The other men were named Kelly, a **gunner**,² and Calais, an assistant radio operator.

All wanted to get back to England. The best route, they decided, was to cross the Pyrenees mountains into Spain.

¹ **paratrooper**: soldier trained to parachute from an airplane

² **gunner**: crew member in an aircraft responsible for operating the plane's machine gun

They would spend their nights sleeping in haystacks and their days walking. They would knock on doors asking for food. A man at one home was friendly and gave the three fliers food.

The next morning, an old truck picked up the Americans and drove them to a **château**³ 20 miles away, where they spent two weeks. The château was part of the French underground, which throughout the war resisted the Germans.

The lady at the château taught the fliers some French and gave them clothes and shoes to wear. However, Uncle Adie's feet were too big. They gave him wooden shoes. Uncle Adie said there was no way he was walking to Spain in wooden shoes.

One Saturday night, the same truck dropped off the Americans in a village square. A girl with a bicycle quickly grabbed Uncle Adie's arm and walked him to a row of houses. The girl knocked on a door of one of the houses. A man appeared and opened the door. The man who opened the door spoke English. He said the Americans had to stay there for a while. The plan was to get the fliers to Paris; then [they would] take a train south to the Pyrenees.

But, the Germans had captured the leader of the underground. Uncle Adie and the others decided to go to England alone. Uncle Adie found a priest who spoke English. The priest introduced the Americans to a French journalist.

The journalist took them to the house of a fisherman, who said he could get the Americans back to England by boat. When the time came, they went down to the harbor and met about 25 others—Americans, British, and Frenchmen—all trying to escape, including a former member of Uncle Adie's crew, Jim Armstrong. The plan didn't work.

Finally, a few weeks later, Uncle Adie got in a small boat jammed with people. They drifted down the river, out of the harbor, and into the ocean. They had escaped.

³ **chateau:** castle or large country house