

Introduction

ONE AFTERNOON IN OCTOBER 1942, a young man and a young woman could be seen sitting on the back steps of a farmhouse in south-west France, looking up at the Pyrenees as they talked.

Bob Frost was nineteen, and should have been feeling badly shaken by what he had just been through. After baling out of a Wellington bomber over Belgium he had been taken in hand by what was known as the Comet Line, perhaps the most famous of the underground organizations formed to smuggle Allied air-crews out of Nazi-occupied Europe. They had looked after him well, but at one point he had been hauled off a tram and made to lie face down while his pockets were searched, and at the frontier between Belgium and France he'd had a gun thrust in his face by a German soldier who did not like the look of his ill-fitting clothes.

He had been escorted across France in the company of six other Allied evaders, one of whom was an American pilot who had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force as a way of getting into the war. Halfway through the train journey to the south the

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American woke up suddenly and spotted a woman standing in the corridor; disorientated by sleep he spoke in English with a broad American accent as he courteously and loudly offered her his seat. She smiled and accepted, and the incident passed, but it was a sharp reminder of how fragile freedom was.

Bob Frost's companion on that afternoon beneath the Pyrenees, the 26-year-old Andrée de Jongh, was one of the most luminous and engaging figures to emerge from the world of underground resistance to the Nazis. Dédée, as she was almost universally known, the daughter of a Belgian schoolmaster, was the leader of the Comet Line, and had been tramping back and forth across the Pyrenees for more than a year, escorting dozens of so-called 'parcels' to safety. She was slightly built, a blue-eyed brunette with a high forehead and strikingly determined features. She cast something of a spell over young men like Bob Frost; far from feeling shaken or frightened, he was calmed by the complete confidence she inspired.

That afternoon Bob Frost asked Dédée de Jongh why she was willing to run the huge risks her work entailed. 'It is simple,' she said. 'It is a job that has to be done to free my country.'

The following day she delivered him successfully to her British contacts in neutral Spain, and he was on his way home. He served out the rest of the war as a gunnery instructor in Shropshire and fell in love with a WAAF, with whom he enjoyed more than half a century of marriage.

Dédée de Jongh's future was rather different. A little over three months after her conversation with Bob Frost she was back in the same farmhouse preparing to take another group across the Pyrenees when the German military police turned up and arrested them all. She was imprisoned, interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo and eventually sent to the Ravensbrück and Mauthausen concentration camps.

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Bob Frost, well into his eighties now, is overcome with emotion when he remembers her sacrifice; he says he owes 'his whole life' to Andrée de Jongh and her Comet Line. The time he spent on the run between baling out of his Wellington and completing his journey over the Pyrenees was really very brief (it has been said that the Comet Line earned its name because of the speed with which it spirited people to safety), but the experience was so intense that it remained vividly with him; his memory of those days is still astonishingly clear.

That intensity of experience is one of the reasons the Second World War exercises such power over the imagination of my generation. In terms of years it is really not so very far away from our own lives – I was born in 1957, little more than a decade after the war's end – yet in every other way it is so far beyond anything we have known that it seems almost to belong to another dimension. And when you listen to men like Bob Frost describe what they did you realize that it was sometimes – I hesitate to use this word, but I think it is the right one – fun. Escaping across Occupied Europe was a high stakes game, and for the helpers who operated escape lines like Comet it was often deadly. But it was also an adventure, and they were young.

Jean Cassou, a writer, poet and Resistance leader in Toulouse, a critical Resistance hub in the south-west, described the wartime experience: 'For each *résistant* the Resistance was a way of life, a style of living, a life we invented for ourselves. It stays in our memories as a unique period, quite unlike any other experience, something impossible to relate to or explain, almost a dream. We see ourselves there utterly free and naked, an unknown and unknowable version of ourselves, the kind of people no one can ever find again, who existed only in relation to unique and terrible conditions, to things that have since disappeared, to ghosts, or to the dead. If each of us who went through that experience had

to define it, we would give it a name that we would not dare give to the ordinary aspects of our lives, and which would surely cause astonishment. We would whisper the word, to ourselves. Some of us would say “adventure”. I would call that moment of my life “happiness”.’

Of course we can never recreate the ‘unique and terrible conditions’ of the Second World War – nor would anyone want to – but in 2011 I was commissioned to work on a project which I thought might bring the experience Jean Cassou describes a little closer. It involved walking the Chemin de la Liberté, a commemorative trek across the Pyrenees to remember the escapers, evaders and helpers who made the journey during the Nazi Occupation of France. The project began as a Radio 4 series (perhaps appropriately, given BBC Radio’s role in nurturing resistance in Occupied Europe) and became this book because of the richness of the material I found.

The Chemin de la Liberté runs forty miles across the central Pyrenees from the town of St Giron in the Ariège department, and it is walked each July. It has strong links with the Royal British Legion and the Escape Lines Memorial Society, but by no means all those who escaped this way were Allied service personnel; some of the most compelling stories I was told came from Jews fleeing the deportations to the death camps and French refugees who wanted to join the Free French forces in North Africa. In fact I discovered so many different people who tried to cross the Pyrenees for so many different reasons that I came to think of the mountains as a kind of vortex, drawing in all sorts of disparate and dramatic wartime experiences; down-to-earth Londoners like Bob Frost could sometimes find themselves in very diverse and exotic company on this last leg of their journey.

The route – which is laid out in an appendix – is only one of many that were used to cross the Pyrenees in those dark days, but

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it is among the toughest; it involves climbing some 15,000 feet up and 11,000 feet down, and it takes four days. The 1944 document *Tips for Evaders and Escapers* lays out what today we would call the 'skill set' you need to do it: 'The good escaper,' it says, 'is the man who keeps himself fit, cheerful and comfortable. He is not a "he-man" who boasts about his capacity to endure discomfort. He should be a man with sound common sense and above all a man of great determination.' I am certainly not a 'he-man', I hate discomfort, I am cheerful by nature, I have a reasonable supply of common sense (I hope) and I like to achieve my goals, so I tick most of those boxes. The problem lay in that unassuming little word 'fit'; when I began preparing for the walk I was fifty-three years old, and most of my work involved sitting in studios or at desks. And I liked the good things in life – and, lest that past tense allows for any confusion on this point, I still do.

As soon as the BBC agreed to my proposal for a series of programmes on the Chemin my bosses sent me off – in the best caring traditions of 'Auntie' – to an extreme sports clinic in Harley Street, where I was put through a human version of an MOT. It involved attaching a great number of electrodes to my chest and strapping a strangely fashioned respirator to my mouth, so that I looked like a half-naked Spitfire pilot, or perhaps some ghastly apparition from an S and M film. I was then required to pedal away on an exercise bike until I reached near collapse. A group of technicians monitored the behaviour of my heart and lungs, chatting away calmly as I huffed and puffed to the point where both seemed ready to explode. Once they had inspected their charts and graphs I was given something called an 'exercise prescription' to get me into shape.

Phil Pegum, my producer, is as thin as a whip, and during the weeks leading up to the walk he was often spotted climbing up and down the staircases of the BBC's Manchester offices with a rucksack full of bricks on his back. To help us through the ordeal

he recruited an ex-BBC man with a distinguished record of making programmes about climbing; Graham Hoyland is an experienced mountaineer and a veteran of several Everest expeditions, and polished his fitness with a few days' yomping over the Scottish Highlands. I, on the other hand, found it extremely difficult to take my exercise prescription as regularly as I should have done, simply because I was so busy with other projects, many of which involved travelling (BBC budgets do not always stretch to hotels with gyms). There was no doubt about who was the weak link in the chain, and I was duly punished by pain.

The first time I really took in the scale of the Pyrenees was during a French weekend break with my wife, long before this project was conceived. We sat on the terrace of a restaurant called *Le Carré de l'Ange* in St Lizier, a red-roofed village of winding, narrow streets which, through some long-forgotten accident of history, has two cathedrals (so I suppose it is technically a city twice over rather than a village). The Carré occupies the cellars of the former bishop's palace, and it is one of those French restaurants that immediately tell you – through the starch on the napkins and the glint on the glassware – that you are about to enjoy a treat.

The restaurant says its cooking has been inspired by the 'culinary culture of the Pyrenees' and describes its menu as 'a walk from Catalonia to the Basque country, looking both north and south'. On sunny days this can be enjoyed with the peaks of the Pyrenees shining in the distance. St Lizier sits on a hillside just above St Giron, so the view from the terrace is a view of the *Chemin de la Liberté*, right up to the towering peak of Mont Valier which stands like a sentinel at the frontier, snow-capped even in high summer. Returning there on the eve of the trek, I wondered why on earth I had decided to turn this wonderful panorama into a sweaty challenge; but I would, I thought, at least be able to enjoy the beauty of the scenery up close.

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In that consoling hope I was, it turned out, to be cruelly disappointed. A really tough walk is an absolutely rotten way to enjoy a landscape; you tend to keep your head down and your eyes on the boots in front, concentrating on each step as you take it, and when we stopped for a break I usually found myself flat on my back staring at the sky. Hugh Dormer was twice dropped into Occupied France on sabotage missions during the war, and twice made his way home across the Pyrenees. His *Diaries* include some of the most vivid writing there is about what it was like – and in many ways still is – to trek across the mountains. ‘The going is so difficult and varied in the Pyrenees that one can never fall into the rhythm of walking,’ he writes, ‘but must concentrate all the time on the ground at one’s feet.’ And whenever they stopped, ‘I would throw myself down again on the ground and be instantly asleep, and wake later cold and shivering in the wind and completely lost as to where I was or what I was doing there.’

Dormer’s account caught my eye partly because I had been half aware of his exploits since my teenage years; he was an old boy of my school, and his portrait used to look down at me when I was working in the library. After his hair-raising missions behind enemy lines he rejoined his regiment before the D-Day landings and was killed in Normandy in July 1944. The *Diaries* are a minor classic, and Dormer acquired a semi-mythic status in school lore as a kind of ideal of what a Catholic soldier should be.

His journeys across the Pyrenees were of course infinitely tougher and more dangerous than ours, and he and his party walked at night to avoid detection, but I do recognize his description of the Zen-like state the trek sometimes induces: ‘As the hours passed one lost oneself . . . till every action became automatic and the mind soared out from the tired body, either into the fields of memory or into the realms of imagination, and then one knew one was asleep. I found myself back again in the peaceful

routine of the Benedictine School and monastery at Ampleforth, or at Oxford, or in the Irish Guards. Sometimes one would walk on like that alone with one's distant thoughts and then suddenly the mind would revert with a start to the dark file of men threading their way through the vineyards in the silence of the starlit sky, and one could not think for a moment what one was doing in such a scene.'

He also witnessed the near collapse of several refugees, including two women who were among his party on his second crossing: 'The women could not have walked along unaided, and even with our help kept on falling down and going over on their ankles,' he records. 'Several times they had implored us to leave them where they fell to the mercies of the Spanish police. It was really terrible to witness their sufferings, which were hard enough for fit men to endure. It was heartbreaking to witness the crucifixion of those two women. It made one, Englishman that one was, realize the price of liberty and how little it is valued in our land.' I never quite got to the point where my limbs refused to respond altogether, but on the afternoon of the third day of the Chemin, on what seemed like a never-ending scramble over scree to reach the relative comfort of the Refuge des Estagnous, I came very close.

The refuge sits in the lee of Mont Valier, over 7,400 feet above sea level and four hours' climb from the nearest village, and it was the scene of one of the more surreal incidents of the trek. It has been there for at least a century but it was recently given a makeover, and now has bunk bedrooms, good kitchens and a bar. After a very good dinner (the food and wine are helicoptered in periodically), I woke at three o'clock in the morning needing a pee with a fierce urgency.

The only power in the refuge comes from a few solar panels, so there are no lights left on at night; when it is cloudy, with no moon and no ambient light, the darkness is uncompromising

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(and, useless camper that I am, I had of course managed to lose my head torch on the first day). Many of my sleeping companions were former or serving soldiers connected with the Royal British Legion, and I reflected that if I strayed into a neighbouring bunk on my return from the lavatory (always assuming I could find it without opening the wrong door and plunging down the precipice outside) the fighting instincts would kick in, and they would probably kill first and ask questions afterwards.

And then my brain made one of those imaginative leaps that real fear can inspire. I had noticed a tiny pinpoint of light at the on/off switch on the base of my electronic reading device, a Kindle. My mobile phone had long since packed up, but the Kindle battery is remarkably long-lasting, and when I fumbled it out of my rucksack I found it did indeed produce just enough of a glow. I negotiated my way safely to relief and back by Kindle-light.

There were of course some jolly moments too. I noticed that the guides and the old hands were using long, thick staves as supports rather than walking sticks or ski-poles; on a steep descent you can dig your staff into the side of the mountain and punt yourself round it, taking some of the pressure off your knees. So when we reached the town of Seix, where we spent the first night (on the floor of a gym), I bought one. The 'i' in Seix is silent, and you may imagine the amusing jokes my BBC colleagues made about my new pole, which had the town's name proudly emblazoned along one side. One of our guides, an attractive young woman and keen mountaineer, informed us, to our great delight, that she was a member of 'the Seix Outdoors Club'.

Our guides had an unnerving habit of changing their minds about the length of our lunch breaks. Just as you were settling back with a cup of coffee and easing your boots off, one of them would spot a distant cloud somewhere on the horizon; there would be a lot of head-shaking and muttering about the danger of

being caught by *orages*, swiftly followed by shouted instructions to get moving again. So it really was only on the overnight stops that we could soak in some of the scenery. The most memorable of them was spent camping outside a shepherd's hut on the second evening of the trek.

There is a tradition of seasonal grazing in this part of the Pyrenees; each spring the villagers in the valleys bring their livestock into the mountains to enjoy the summer pastures, and the odd shepherd is despatched to look after them. It means six months or so living in near-total isolation. Our shepherd was provided with a small amount of power from a solar panel, but that was about it as far as mod cons were concerned. We were told that if we wished to defecate we should walk at least five hundred metres from the camp before doing so, 'but you might want to go further to be on the safe side, since a group from the Parachute Regiment stayed here last week'.

A rumour went round the group that the shepherd – an almost impossibly hairy fellow with two delightful dogs – was a professor of philosophy who had chosen this spartan and lonely life as an aid to contemplation, but when my colleague Graham Hoyland plucked up the courage to ask him, the man himself dismissed this as romantic speculation. 'No, no,' he said, 'my discipline is sociology and I'm only a PhD.'

I hate the whole concept of camping with a passion, and the thought of sharing a tent is beyond hell to me. This is partly because of embarrassment about my snoring (I once drove out a battle-hardened marine captain in the middle of the night in Afghanistan) and partly because the thought of cuddling up heartily with other blokes reminds me uncomfortably of the post-rugby communal shower culture of my schooldays. Since the sky seemed to promise a dry night I decided to risk sleeping in the open, and was rewarded with the most spectacular view of the Milky Way I have ever enjoyed;

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the stars seemed to stretch eternally back into the blackness above me. It almost – but not quite – made up for the miseries attendant on sleeping outside (like waking up soaked in dew).

Roger Stanton of the Second World War Escape Lines Memorial Society describes the Chemin as one of the society's 'walking memorials', and at various points along the way there were ceremonies to recall particular events or aspects of the story of the escapers and the *passeurs*, or guides, who helped them. There would usually be a brief speech, a minute's silence, and then someone would play a CD of the 'Song of the Partisans', the unofficial anthem of the Resistance, which was written and composed in London in 1943 and broadcast to France on the BBC. The words of this song – which became so popular that there was a move to make it the national anthem in place of the Marseillaise – are haunting: 'Friend, if you fall another friend will emerge from the shadows to take your place. Tomorrow black blood will be drying in the sunshine on the roads. Sing in the night, for in the night freedom listens to us . . .' But after hearing the same version again and again it began to lose its charm, and, as I walked, I found the tune going round and round in my head in the most irritating way.

For me the walk was made a real memorial not by these formal remembrance ceremonies, but by my fellow walkers.

The English master who introduced me to *The Canterbury Tales* was one of those rare teachers who can change your life; Chaucer's masterpiece remains an intellectual reference point I keep coming back to four decades after his first 'O'-level class on 'The Merchant's Tale'. Walking the Chemin brought home to me what a brilliant conceit lies at the work's heart. Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, his Knight and his Miller, we walkers were engaged in a kind of pilgrimage, and the group who gathered around the fire outside the home of that sociologist shepherd and toasted the sunset above the clouds at the Refuge des Estagnous had

much in common with the pilgrims who met in the Tabard Inn on the way to Canterbury. We were very different people from very different worlds, and without the Chemin we might never have met; but we had been brought together by a common purpose.

Four days is really quite a long time to spend with the same group of people. Whenever we could talk – lack of puff being the main inhibiting factor for me – we did, and, perhaps because the circumstances were so far removed from everyday life, people seemed surprisingly ready to share intimate thoughts and experiences. Almost everyone had some connection with the history we were commemorating, and many of them had the sort of life stories that would have delighted Chaucer.

In 1943 the Gaullist Resistance leader Emmanuel d’Astier de La Vigerie wrote a song called the ‘Plaint of the Partisans’ (like the ‘Song of the Partisans’, it was originally sung by Anna Marly, ‘the Troubadour of the Resistance’, and was later recorded by, among others, Leonard Cohen and Joan Baez):

The wind blows across the tombs.
Freedom will come,
And we shall be forgotten.
We shall return to the shadows.

He could not have been more wrong; listening to the walkers of the Chemin I came to understand that the memory of what happened in the Pyrenees during the Second World War is not just being kept alive, it is acquiring a new life as it passes down the generations.

I have used my fellow pilgrims as guides back into the world that is explored in this book. Many of those walking the Chemin were fired by a real passion for the past, and listening to them gave me a sense of which parts of this story matter the most. It

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goes well beyond the history of the Chemin itself; there were dozens of escape routes across the Pyrenees, and they were used by all sorts of different ‘escape lines’ – as the clandestine organizations which smuggled people out were called.

And as I have researched the subject I have come into contact with more and more people – sometimes in the most surprising circumstances – who have a connection with this relatively little-known chapter of the Second World War. Almost every time I have mentioned what I was doing in public – whether in a newspaper article or while giving a talk at an event – it has prompted someone to get in touch to tell me that they had a father, mother or cousin who was part of the story.

Over the past decade I have developed something of a passion for using journeys as a way of bringing history alive. It began in 2001 with an odyssey around the Mediterranean in the footsteps of St Paul, and since then I have made radio pilgrimages in the footsteps of Mohammed, Moses and Jesus, and negotiated the waters of the Jordan, the Bosphorus and the Nile. Walking the Chemin made me want to know more about the people who made all those cruel crossings to freedom during the war years, and to explore the stories that brought them to the Pyrenees. Those stories in turn led me to try to understand the historical context in which they unfolded and the way they are remembered today.

There is no neat way of telling this piece of history; it is a jumble of individual lives. But the rules of the game in this small corner of south-west Europe kept being changed by the big strategic and political developments of the Second World War, so I have tried to provide some sense of how events in the Pyrenees were influenced by the wider conflict. A trek across the mountains is the most basic form of human activity, requiring very basic human qualities like physical strength and determination. But the conditions under which wartime walkers completed the hike were

affected by complex political decisions taken in Moscow, Washington, Berlin and London, and by battles won and lost from Stalingrad to North Africa.

At the pass where we crossed the frontier into Spain – seven and a half thousand feet above sea level – we paused for a moment of silence in remembrance of an RAF evader called Maurice Collins. Collins had needed real grit and determination to get home – he crossed the mountains alone in 1942, ‘up to my testicles in snow’, as he later so vividly put it in an interview, and spent three months in a Spanish internment camp before the British authorities were able to extract him. Despite this searing experience he became a keen supporter of the Chemin, and when he died in 2006 it was suggested at his funeral that some of his ashes should be scattered here. The ceremony was duly carried out that July.

I have a great affection for this part of France, and it is tempting to think that its attraction to men like Maurice Collins went beyond its connection with their youthful adventures; the Pyrenees, and the central Ariège region in particular, have a distinctive feel, what you might call, to use an almost untranslatable Latin phrase, a *genius loci*, a spirit of the place that makes its association with the idea of escape feel especially appropriate. It is a secretive region, full of deep, unexpected valleys and isolated hamlets that keep their stories to themselves, and it is very easy to disappear there. These days it is full of hippies, many of them quite elderly ones who moved down south on the rebound from the unfulfilled dreams of the heady days of *soixante-huit*. Tony Blair once let slip to me that he used to spend the summers of his hairy teenage years playing in a band in St Martin-d’Oydes, a village some fifteen minutes’ drive from St Girons; it seems fitting that the Ariège episode in his endlessly examined life has escaped the attention of his biographers.

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People have been seeking sanctuary in this region for centuries – millennia, indeed. Not far from the starting point of today's Chemin there is a vast cave called the Grotte du Mas d'Azil. It is five hundred metres long – the river Arize runs through its centre – with an opening fifty metres high and forty-eight wide at the southern end, and it has been providing shelter for human beings for some twenty thousand years. In recorded history it is thought to have served as a sanctuary for early Christians in the third century, Cathar heretics in the thirteenth and Protestants in the seventeenth (Cardinal Richelieu took his revenge by blowing up one of the chambers).

And at the outbreak of world war in 1939 the Pyrenees region as a whole was feeling the impact of one of the most dramatic refugee crises of the twentieth century.

The Spanish Civil War was a source of acute anxiety to the French government, and the fall of Barcelona to General Franco's Fascist forces and their allies in January 1939 precipitated exactly the kind of crisis Paris most feared. A vast exodus of Republican refugees, an 'anthill of human beings', as one observer put it, began to move north towards France. On 28 January fifteen thousand of them walked across the Pyrenean border, and on 5 February the French government was forced to agree that it would accept soldiers of the defeated Republican Army too. Hugh Thomas, in his authoritative history of the Spanish Civil War, estimates that the flood of refugees included 10,000 wounded, 170,000 women and children, 60,000 male civilians and 250,000 soldiers.

Thomas describes the frontier as a 'scene of consummate tragedy', with the long lines of refugees arriving freezing and soaked by Pyrenean rain and snow. An eyewitness recorded 'scenes of utter desolation . . . like pictures of the ravages of a flood or earthquake. It looked as if a giant wave had flung up the broken

suitcases, the littered clothes, the swirling heaps of paper. Exhausted refugees flung their possessions from them as they trudged to France.’ The French were quite unable to deal with the influx of half a million refugees, and the *Retirada*, as this moment of mass migration came to be known, was, as we shall see, to have a profound impact on the lives of many of those drawn into the Pyrenean vortex of the war years.

France can be both coy and lazy about her history; there are some episodes she would rather forget, others which have simply disappeared beneath the tide of events. Today you can drive through the French Pyrenees without encountering the remotest clue that they were witness to the greatest movement of people in this part of Europe since the expulsion of Arabs and Jews from Spain in 1492. Part of the purpose of this book is to unlock the secrets of this most secretive region.

Tales of Warriors



Peter Janes and Gilberte

KEITH JANES WAS LEAN AND BEARDED and looked frighteningly fit. For a nervous neophyte like me, walking the Chemin for the first time, the intimidating impression was completed by the patina on his gear, which was weathered by long use. He wore his rucksack as comfortably as a cashmere coat and managed his Pyrenean walking pole with practised ease. He was making the trek for the tenth time.

Keith Janes's dedication to the past began with a death and a diary.

Between 26 May and 4 June 1940 more than 300,000 troops – 225,000 of them from the British Expeditionary Force which had been sent to support the French – were evacuated from Dunkirk as the advancing Germans swept through northern France and closed in around them. The armada of pleasure boats and fishing vessels which crossed the Channel to help save them made Dunkirk part of our national myth – by which I do not mean to suggest that the story is not true, simply that the way it has been told has helped form our national memory; the episode became a symbol of British pluck in the face of overwhelming odds. For many French, Dunkirk was an equally powerful symbol of British perfidy.

The story of those who remained in France after Dunkirk is told less often. About 10,000 British soldiers were waiting to be taken home in and around St Valéry-en-Caux, a fishing port on the coast between Dieppe and Le Havre. Here the rescue operation was much less successful; fog in the Channel and German shelling of the beaches made the Royal Navy's task almost impossible. Most of the Allied troops at St Valéry surrendered to General Rommel on 12 June, and one of them was Keith Janes's father, Peter, in civilian life a butcher's assistant from Surrey.

Chance could change everything in those chaotic early days after the fall of France. Peter Janes was trudging along in a column of POWs, heading for Germany and a long stretch in a prison camp, when a French girl darted up to him on the road just outside a village and grabbed his hand. Janes recorded the moment in a diary he had been keeping since he was called up in December 1939. It was two weeks since the surrender, he had become determined to escape, and he had had a premonition that something would happen on Wednesday 24 June.