



Operation Bonaparte, Plouha - Yvonne Millar

Yvonne 'Reseau' in French means network. And this was a network which was set up by the English secret service to help airmen who had fallen over, by being by their planes being shot down over Brittany, to help them to get back to England. The training for the airmen was very long, and very expensive therefore. Most of them were American, and they flew these huge flying fortresses, and a number of these were shot down over Brittany and the airmen were helped by the local population and their training was to get them to go to Spain which was neutral at the time.

Rob What years are we talking about?

Yvonne We're talking about the 1940s. The 'Shelburn' was set up at the end of 1943 but because of bad weather it didn't function until early 1944.

Rob In which area of Brittany?

Yvonne It was in on the north coast near St. Brieuc, just up the coast between St. Brieuc and Paimpol and when it was set up there was a little railway line which ran along there so that airmen who had fallen in other parts of France were directed by this network to Paris and from Paris they got the train to Brittany or pretending to be deaf mutes, they were also forbidden to light cigarettes because the way the Americans smoke their cigarettes is very different from the French and would give them away. Anyway, the ones that fell in Brittany interested me because there was a plane that was shot down over Kergrist Moëlou the crew of 10 all parachuted out. Three of them unfortunately died. Seven of them therefore ended up on the ground with their parachutes. They came across people who knew about this exit route through Plouha which is a little village on the coast between St. Brieuc and Paimpol but in the meantime they were hidden away from the Germans. They were concealed in people's houses, in haystacks, they slept in hedgerows. The crew that I'm talking about, that I'm particularly interested in, were shot down on the 5th January so it was a little bit cold.

Rob You have a particular interest in this group for what reason?

Yvonne The reason is that we have always known in our family that my grandmother from Guingamp had, some time during the war, looked after one of these airmen. She always said it was a Canadian but my research has discovered that it was the pilot of this plane that was shot down in Kergrist Moëlou who was only 21 years old. He probably spent 4 days at my grandmothers, he said that it was the best food that he'd had in all the time that he'd been wandering around Brittany.

Rob How did you know all this?

Yvonne A lot of the research is erm based on some reports. When the pilots and airmen finally got back to England they were immediately shipped off to London to the secret services and interrogated yet again. They were interrogated several times and they gave a report of what had happened. The reason why this was such a success is that it was all a great secret, every thing was very secret. People didn't know that their neighbours were looking after er people, they had to be so careful.

Rob They were putting their lives at risk?

Yvonne They absolutely were. If the Germans had discovered airmen in their house they would have been shot, just like that. This was kept a secret for many years after the, the war. And it was instilled in them by the organisers who were members of the British secret service, they were Canadians, they spoke both French and English - very handy - and very strict; very, very strict because other lines like this had been infiltrated and had collapsed. The, the strictness of er Lucien Dumais who organised the whole of the thing and his radio operator and....

Rob You said, you said that it was very successful, actually how long did this escape route last?

Yvonne It only lasted from January to August.

Rob Of 1944?

Yvonne Of 1944.

Rob And how many er airmen did they manage to....?

Yvonne One hundred and thirty-five aviators, plus other people. There was even an Indian cook in one of the, of the one of the journeys over. The way that it worked was they were all reunited in Plouha. The British had a French radio programme and it consisted of news for the French, cheering them up, erm and then there would be code words and the one that said "today a boat is leaving Dartmouth to come and fetch whoever has been reunited in Plouha" The way that that was transmitted to the French was "Bonjour a tout le monde dans la maison d'Alphonse."

Rob That was the signal?

Yvonne That was the signal - and then at 9.30 it was repeated and that meant that the boat had actually set sail from Dartmouth.

Rob And the Maison d'Alphonse?

Yvonne The Maison d'Alphonse was the house where they were all collected together.

Rob There was actually a place called the maison d'....?

Yvonne Well, that was what it was baptised by the British, they called the beach 'Bonaparte,' It was actually l'anse Cochat, which is its' proper name. So there we have some airmen reunited in this little cottage and to get to the beach they have a kilometre and a half approximately to walk, in the dark, because a night was chosen that was no, there was no moon. The airmen were told, "this is the most dangerous part of your journey, you have to be absolutely silent." There was a, a watch post, a blockhouse on the cliffs above this beach. You have to hold the man in front of you on the shoulder and you have to follow exactly and then you have to get down a high cliff and land yourselves on the beach.

Rob You can actually visit this beach now and see?

Yvonne You can but, it's been '*amenagé*' - it's been arranged so that you can't really see how difficult this, this was..

Rob You've done an amazing amount of work on this on this er subject - when's your publication coming out?

Yvonne I'm not going to publish anything, but I'm very happy to tell this story because it's such a brilliant story of co-operation, help and these young airmen, erm that chap that man Glen Lee Johnson, at 21 years old, was in charge of 9 other crew members.

Rob These young men were like heroes?

Yvonne Oh, absolutely and most of the French population treated them as such.

Rob Was your grandmother given an award for risking her life?

Yvonne She wasn't, actually, no, and she felt a little bit miffed about this - but she still felt that what she did was worthwhile and it's been a legend in our family ever since.

Rob It's a wonderful story, Yvonne Millar, thank you for telling it to us.

