

Traversée de la Manche 1<sup>er</sup> récit

WE ESCAPED FROM FRANCE BY CANOE by  
PIERRE

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On Sept 18, five young french boys landed in England afterhaving escaped from German occupied France in two canoes. It took them 30 hours to cross the dangerous English Channel. The story of their marvel escape is told by Pierre, their curly haired 19-year old leader (inset). Pierre surname and those of his companions have been omitted for the sake of relatives still living in Occupied France.

After the armistice, when General De Gaulle urged our people to fight on, we all had the same idea but we didn't quite see how we were going to England. Jean and I wondered if we could get across in our canoe. We expected our parents to make a fuss, but they thought the idea so crazy they didn't bother. Last May our plans began to take shape. I took on the organization of the trip while Christian collected maps, charts, navigation instruments and data. Jean and I had one canoe. Reynold got hold of another one for only 300 francs because it had a huge hole in it. As the Germans had instructions to be pleassants with the local people, Reynold became friendly with a Nazi motorboat crew who gladly helped him to repair the canoe. It took us six weeks to make the canoes sea-worthy and then Reynold and I tested them up and down the coast while Guy and the others walked along the cliffs, timing us and making noisy jokes so that the Germans would get used to seeing us playing together. We guessed we could make the crossing in 15 hours.

The next thing was to collect food and water and wait for a calm seas. We had 20 lb. of bread, 75 soldier's ration biscuits stolen from the Nazi stores, a homemade French flag, a service rifle and 40 rounds of ammunition "borrowed" from a surrendered arms dump at Nazi headquarters. The day we decided to leave we buried our stores in the sand near my canoe. That night at 9 - an hour after curfew - we sneaked out of our bedroms windows. Each of us left the same message pinned to his pillow: "Chers Parents - I have gone to join General De Gaulle".

All of us dropped suddenly flat behind some sand dune when we heard sounds - the Nazi patrol of eight men . we had an hour before they would come tramping back; according to plan, we rushed the to canoes to the water's edge, quietly stowed everything away and pushed off from France.

Reynold was alone in his single seater. The rest of us were in my big canadian canoe.



We set our course by my grandfather's compass which I borrowed from my grandmother before we left. She smiled a little when she gave it to me and only said

"For your trip to De Gaulle".

We paddled hard for 15 minutes to get out of sight. We were lucky because the wind was dead behind us, so we lashed Reynold's canoe alongside, hoisted our sail and were soon making eight knots towards England. We dared not risk using a torch to see the compass so Christian directed us by the stars. Owing to an error in navigation, however, we were again running close to the French coast by 2 o'clock. So we took new bearing and headed once more towards England.

At 3 a.m. we heard the roar of engines. Frantically we dropped ou sail and lay flat. Two hundred yards away, a German E-Boat shot through the water. Suddenly their searchlight picked us out. But a few seconds later the light flashed off and the sound of their engines died away.

As day broke, we were all panting for a drink. We got out three military water bottles and a petrol tin which was also filled with drinking water.

We made our breakfast of water and some bread and especially enjoyed the bread when we remembered how we had procured it.

My brother Jean had gone to the baker with a gang of his friends who were fetching their families bread rations. The lads started a heated argument about whom should be served first and while the baker was dealing with them, Jean put his hand around the end of the counter and grabbed a handful of bread coupons.

We kept time by Christian's alarm clock. It is rusty from sea water now, but Christian is keeping it until after the war in case the makers feel like giving him a new one. True to his name, he also brought a large bible with him.

The sea was getting choppy and we had to lighten our load so we threw the rifle and ammunition overboard. As we were shipping water,we bailed constantly for about nine hours. By one in the afternoon I had been steering or paddling for 13 hours. Suddenly I was horribly sick and just fell into the bottom of the boat and slept for three hours in 3 inches of water.

We had hoped to reach England by about five in the afternoon but we had lost time and so we realized we had another nightbefore us. I risked standing up to peer ahead for the English coast. There was a dark line - it must be a cloud. I sat down without saying

anything to the others. For half an hour, I watched the minute hand of the clock plod around before I dared look again. This time I could see the cliffs clearly. I told it to the others and in turn each of us got up to look. Then we suddenly heard the sound of an earplane engine. It was a spitfire and it circled around us within 50 feet of the water before disappearing.

The wind sprang up again and though it wasn't quite on our course I thought we needed rest from paddling. An hour later I knew I had made a mistake – I could see a motorboat on the horizon which had obviously been sent by the Spitfire to look for us, but it was ten kilometers off and we were right in the sunset without hope of being seen. The sea was getting rougher and we were getting colder, but at the sunset I saw the cliffs straight ahead. Reynold was looking played out – he has been paddling steadily for 20 hours except for an occasional tow, so we changed places.



CHRISTIAN, AGED 17

As it was getting dark, I noticed Christian picked a soggy packet from the bottom of the canoe and smiled faintly: “*I was going to take my baccalaureate next month, but I have just escaped in time – these are some of my books*”.

I told General De Gaulle the story later and he said Christian could take is “bacho” here in England. Christian face fell when *Le Général* told him that.

I was getting alarmed now because the coast ahead was rocky, our canoes were fragile and I was sure the beach was mined. We paddled on until 4. Blearly, i saw a big bank of black clouds ahead. I realised it was a big black cliff just in time. “Hold it” I yelled. We paddled seaward again, pulled the canoes around on the leeside and clutched the slippery rocks with numbed fingers. One by one, we heaved ourselves out. Each time we all laughed weakly baccuse as soon as anyone set his feet down on the rocks, his legs gave way and he folded into helpless heap. We staggered across the rocks; everything seemed to be swinging around us – cliffs, sea and rocks whirled about us in a devilish jig. Finally we huddled as close as we could and sank into sleep.

The warmth of the sun awakened us. We were about half a mile offshore on a long tongue of rock. It seemed better to took our canoes farther in but we found the big one had been smashed against rocks overnight so, clutching our french flag, we scrambled exhaustedly over the rocks. Suddenly a gruff voice shouted “Halt!” . We gaped at a woman with very short skirt holding a rifle. I knew the British were expecting an invasion but I didn't think the coast guard would be kept by tough women in

short skirts. We approached and then I shouted to the others: “It's a kilted Scottman!”.

He spoke perfectly french and soon realised there was no danger from us.

He took us to a cottage were they gave us hot tea.

Then two police cars came along and we were taken off to the Police station were they gave us hot baths, dry clothes and a rest before going to London.



**CHURCHILL** toasted them after they arrived in London. Boys are left to right Pierre 19, Jean 16, Reynold 17, Guy 16, Christian 17. only lower part of Guy's face is visible.

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