

May 15 – 1984

Hello Ben,

I'm glad you straightened me out in regards to the history of the 492<sup>nd</sup> (formerly 801<sup>st</sup>). We left Harrington on our 5<sup>th</sup> mission assigned to the 801<sup>st</sup> (April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944) and while I was missing in action until Aug. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the group was re-assigned to the 492<sup>nd</sup>. I must admit it has been rather confusing for me. After I got back to England, I didn't stick around too long. I spent about a week in London going through interrogations and etc.. I also had to have someone from the outfit come to London and identify me, and take me back to the base at Harrington. I left for the states shortly afterwards.

I am going to write about some of the things that happened to me in regards to my evasion from France as you asked. I will try to keep it brief as I realize you are writing your book about the 492<sup>nd</sup> B.G. and not in particular about me. I will write on some of the highlights ( who knows, maybe some-day I'll elaborate on them and have you help me write a book.)

You know I became very involved with the French people and after all these years I still hear from them and correspond back and forth. I can not speak French (only basic words) and it has been very difficult for me. I have saved just about every card and letter or newspaper articles since the war. The same week of July 1974, when I had the honor of having the square in St. Cyr de Valorges, France, named for me and at the same time in the village of St. Germain Laval, France, the main street was renamed after a Frenchman Jean Boyer (I mention him in the following pages.) He was killed about the same time Geo. Henderson and myself were getting ready for our escape, by a secret flight out of France. These are the type of French people that Henderson and myself hid out with, very brave and very patriotic people. In the last part of my book, the article "Le Resistant De La Loire" it tells of Jean Boyer's last battle with the Germans. I was told later that if Geo. Henderson and myself had remained in St. Germain Laval, we would have been assg to go with them. Well enough of this reminiscing but I was only trying to tell you about the French Underground (Maquis) and how involved we became with these people.

Well Ben, you let me know what glossy pictures, if any, you want me to send you, after you look at this brief story of my escape from France and what happened to the Ambrose crew and I will send them to you. I know I can trust you with them. Every year the French meet around the 27<sup>th</sup> of April and pay homage to the 5 men from my crew at the monument, without fail. Myself being at (2) of these, 1964, 1981, believe me, it is very emotional.

I guess I better get started with my adventure if you can call it that and I hope you forgive me for my rambling on and on.

"The Ambrose Crew"

As I recall we were one of the 1<sup>st</sup> crews to fly at night without benefit of the full moon, on the night of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944. It was around 1:00 in the morning, when we reached our target area. We made the 1<sup>st</sup> pass for identification and circled around for position to make our drop (2<sup>nd</sup> pass) the wing flaps start to come down and the bomb bay doors are starting to open. Suddenly they start back up, we don't drop and it is like we were practicing and we climb back up. As we start to circle around again, I can still see the lights on the ground in the distance on our drop area. When we start in for the 3<sup>rd</sup> pass Sgt James Mooney is over the "Joe Hole". He volunteered for this mission (his first) we only met him shortly before take-off, as a regular crew member Sgt. W. Bollinger reported off sick. I am over the smaller hole behind Sgt. Geo. Henderson, who is in the tailgunners position, getting ready to throw some packages out. Once again the flaps start down and the bomb-doors open and we are starting our approach. I can look out and see the hills, or mountains on our left side. Suddenly the plane shakes violently, apparently we hit or clipped something. 1<sup>st</sup> I hit my forehead, partly falling out and then I was thrown backwards toward the "Joe Hole" area, with the back of my head slamming into something in the plane. Sgt. Mooney is gone, he apparently fell out of the "Joe Hole". I found out later he held onto the chutes (packages). Luckily he wasn't killed, although the poor man must have suffered terribly. His back was broken, this I was told later. Sgt. Henderson was immediately out of the tail section. The engines were racing and the plane was climbing, seemingly straight up. He yells for us to get out. He helps me up and out, and follows very close through the window. We no sooner cleared the plane when it starts down again, only this time it is too late, because it is burning when it crashes. I was told later that the canisters were scattered everywhere and the French worked very hard throughout the night, very hard, trying to retrieve them. Sgt. Henderson and I were apparently fairly close to each other and as each of us made our way back to the plane, we found each other. The plane seemed to be everyway a real holocaust with the ammunition exploding and whatever was in the canisters also going off. Mooney, we tried to find him, hoping he was alright, but it was night and in the mountain area and after a while we gave up. We were not only hurting physically, but also emotionally, myself being only 20 years old at the time. We could hear noises like cars or truck engines or so we thought. My left leg was hurt and was getting worse as it was swelling around the knee. We had no idea where we were, but the 1<sup>st</sup> thing we thought of was it could be the Germans. Our plane could be seen like a beacon for miles and the noise it made in the still of the night with everything exploding certainly would attract a lot of attention. We started down the hills toward the valley, not knowing anything about the territory, we just decided to slip away in the night, the best way we could. We assumed everyone was killed except Sgt. Mooney. His condition was such, I found out later, that the man whose house he was taken to, had to turn him over to the Germans. He told me personally how sorry he was for having to do this. He

said he felt guilty. But I tried to assure him that in Sgt Mooney's case (broken back) he probably saved his life as I heard the Germans took him to a hospital. There was nothing this man could do the French assured me.

It was the next day that they (the French) realized that two more Americans survived. They found the chutes, 1<sup>st</sup> one and then another, which they immediately buried. We moved only at night as we travelled quite a way for the shape we were in. The French started to look for us they said in every direction possible. We skirted villages and main roads, avoiding everyone we saw, especially the Germans. Having no idea where we were, we headed South.

After several days of hiding and only moving at night, we ended up in a cemetery, when daylight came we decided we better hole up for the day, when we saw an old man walking towards us. We really scared him when we approached him for food or help or anything. I showed him my "wings" and he motioned for us to follow him, at a distance. Eventually we ended up in the garage of a schoolhouse. We were given some bread, cheese and wine and after dark a group of men came in a car, it was M. Benoit the school teacher. They were all armed with pistols and rifles. After a few questions and some very vague answers, they decided we were the two Americans that everybody was looking for. I also knew then, that at last, we had made contact with the French underground (Maquis). We then were taken to a farm (in the car) and hidden in the barn. This place was owned by a Mme. De Havrincourt. We stayed there a couple of weeks, hiding sometimes in the nearby woods and barn and house. She had a doctor come and he fixed up my forehead, he opened up the gashes and re-stitched them. I mean the hard way, with a needle and thread. I can still remember that. We were spotted by the wrong person at this farm and she told the Germans "she thought she had seen some English fliers". When the Germans came through the gate, we escaped out the back of the barn to the woods. We could see them looking everywhere, but to no avail.

Mme. De Havrincourt convinced them (the Germans) the woman was demented and they finally left. Needless to say the Maquis decided it was time for us to move on. We were taken to the Jean Crozet farm near St. Germain Laval. The main structure was walled in and a person could feel slightly safer. While there, we participated in two different night parachute drops. This was not only dangerous but a lot of work. The parachutes were everywhere. We loaded them into trucks and even oxen-drawn wagons. We stored them in various barns before daylight. I can still remember looking up and seeing those B-24's flying very low and turn and head back to England, Harrington, I assumed. It gave you an empty feeling in your stomach. I spelled my name with a flashlight in Morse code several times but I never knew if they received it. From the Crozet farm we went to the village of St. Germain Laval to stay. We first stayed at the home of Rene Simons for a few days, never venturing out of doors. From here we went to the home of Jean

Boyer. He was an officer in the Maquis. We stayed with the Boyers the longest, about 8 weeks. It was through Jean Boyer that we participated in several raids with the Maquis. I can recall one raid in particular that involved Jean Boyer, Henderson, Joseph Tournaire, and myself.

We rode at night on a bicycle, quite a distance from St. Germain Laval to a railroad trestle that we were going to blow up (sabotage). It crossed over a small river. Boyer and myself went to the center of the trestle and we climbed down over the side carrying our explosives. We had a timing device for it, and we thought we had plenty of time to make our escape and would be well on our way back to St. Germain Laval, before any action took place. I could look back over my shoulder and see the trestle behind us, when all hell broke loose. Obviously our timer was wrong. ( I believe these were from a parachute drop). In the still of the night the explosion was felt from where we were. We made our departure immediately away from there. Several times we would hide along the road as the Germans would pass us on their way to the trestle, or what was left of it, not seeing us. We made it back to the Boyer's house just as the sun was coming up. Needless to say we were very shaken and tired. The Boyer's house was located almost in the center of St. Germain Laval and had a small walled-in area about 24ft by 20ft. It was here we would spend our time cleaning and assembling British machine guns, that were parachuted to the Maquis at night. Many a time we would go to the basement of the schoolhouse where the walls were about 4 to 5 feet thick, and testfire these weapons, always on the lookout for the enemy, because of the noise.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of June (1944) it was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and the Boyers family told Henderson and myself to get ready, on a minutes notice, to leave. We accepted our fate, and after dark, they led us through the back streets, often hiding in the shadows as people would approach, so as not to see us. We approached a familiar apartment, I began to get curious as you see it was the house of Rene Simon's. When we went inside it was full of people and they actually had a surprise birthday party for me, with a few gifts too. The people had been planning and saving things for this occasion. Such as sugar, butter and meat. They had baked a cake and we had drinks. I had the most memorable birthday of my life, I shall never forget it. You would never believe it could happen under those perilous times.

When we left St. Germain Laval, I thought we were going to hideout somewhere else, but they took away our uniforms for civilian clothes and gave us a passport (fake of course) stating that I was deaf and dumb. Henderson and myself knew what the results would be if we were caught, it would probably mean death, but we didn't seem to have much choice. Two men came in a car and after a tearful goodbye, we left. It was from here we stayed in the towns of Montbrisson, VilleFrance and many more. We would casually stroll down the streets, looking very French in our berets. We were working our way to a secret landing field near the village of Lanquait. We saw many

Germans, but luckily we were never stopped, the French took good care of us. Only on one occasion we had a very close call. We were eating at an outside restaurant along the Rhone River, when word came that the Germans were stopping everyone for their papers. We climbed over a wall and dropped down to the river bank. Just as we cleared the wall I spotted the Germans, we made it. From here we were taken to a farm to hide out. We met several more French people who were also escaping back to England. The plane was supposed to come in July but didn't arrive until the last week of August. (See translation in French newspaper 1969, "Jimmy L'Aviateur Rescaped De St. Cyr de Valorges S'Envolait Pour London Avec J. Chaban-Delma. Also article "L'Avion de la Lune De Juillet" Emmenait a Londres" "Jimmy and Chaban-Delas") The article tells of our escape.

We were taken to a field before dark and hid in the nearby woods. As we heard the plane approaching, the Maquis lit several fires for the plane to land, when it came in and landed we were waiting to climb aboard. It only took several minutes to take off. We were overloaded but we made it. The next stop, London, England.

I was told by the French in July 1981, that I was one of a few people who completed the circle:

- (a) I flew the parachute missions from England.
- (b) I participated in the drops from the ground.
- (c) I fought with the Maquis and did some sabotage.
- (d) I escaped back to England by the secret landings.

This I was told, was one of the reasons for the renaming of the square at St. Cyr de Valorges, to the "James Heddleson Square".

(Ben, I am not sure but I think I am the only enlisted man to have a "Square" named after him in WWII, and this in 1974 (30 years later)).

Well, I hope I didn't bend your ear too much of a "Bragadosa", but I didn't know how else to put something like this together. I also have pieces of my plane, part of the navigators book and even my leather flying jacket that people gave to me when I returned to France in "1964".

I the book I made up for you, it tells about this in the article from the "USIS" Paris Office to Washington dated June 17, 1964.

When and where do you think these will be a Carpetbaggers Reunion? Just let me know and I'll be there. Hoping to hear from you soon. I remain,

Your Friend,  
Jim Heddleson

P.S. Please write me and let me know what you think of my story. Since I completed my copies for this book I received some more stories and photos from France in regards to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and I am enclosing these also.