What is?

The Comet Line (1941–1944) was a Resistance organization in occupied Belgium and France in the Second World War. The Comet Line helped Allied soldiers and airmen shot down over occupied Belgium evade capture by Germans and return to Great Britain. The Comet Line began in Brussels where the airmen were fed, clothed, given false identity papers, and hidden in attics, cellars, and people's homes. A network of volunteers then escorted them south through occupied France into neutral Spain and home via British-controlled Gibraltar. The motto of the Comet Line was "Pugna Quin Percutias", which means "fight without arms", as the organization did not undertake armed or violent resistance to the German occupation.

The Comet Line was the largest of several escape networks in occupied Europe. In three years, the Comet Line helped 776 people, mostly British and American airmen, escape to Spain or evade capture in Belgium and France. An estimated 3,000 civilians, mostly Belgians and French, assisted the Comet Line. They are usually called "helpers." Seven hundred helpers were arrested by the Germans and 290 were executed or died in prison or concentration camps. The Comet Line received financial assistance from MI9, a British intelligence agency, but maintained its operational independence.

For the allies, the rescue of downed airmen by the Comet and other escape lines had a practical as well as a humanitarian objective. Training new and replacement of air crews was expensive and time-consuming. Rescuing airmen downed in occupied Europe and returning them to duty was a priority.

Andrée de Jongh ("Dédée"), a 24-year-old Belgian woman, was the first leader of the Comet Line. She was imprisoned by the Germans in 1943, but survived the war. Subsequent leaders were also imprisoned, executed, or killed in the course of their work exfiltrating airmen to Spain. Young women, including teenagers, played important roles in the Comet Line. Sixty-five to 70 percent of Comet Line helpers were women.

Routes

A typical route was from Brussels or Lille to Paris and then via Tours, Bordeaux, Bayonne, over the Pyrenees to San Sebastián in Spain. From there evaders travelled to Bilbao, Madrid and Gibraltar. There were three other main routes. The Pat line (after founder Pat O'Leary) ran from Paris to Toulouse via Limoges and then over the Pyrenees via Esterri d'Aneu to Barcelona. Another Pat line ran from Paris to Dijon, Lyons, Avignon to Marseille, then Nîmes, Perpignan and Barcelona, from where they were transported to Gibraltar. The third route from Paris (the Shelburne line) ran to Rennes and then St Brieuc in Brittany, where men were shipped to Dartmouth.

Creation and exploits

The Comet line was created by a young Belgian woman who joined the Belgian Resistance. Andrée de Jongh (nickname "Dédée") was 24 in 1940 and lived in Brussels. She was the younger daughter of Frédéric de Jongh, a headmaster, and Alice Decarpentrie. A heroine of Dédée's in her youth had been Edith Cavell, a British nurse who was shot in 1915 in the Tir National in Schaerbeek for helping troops escape from occupied Belgium to neutral Netherlands.

In August 1941 Andrée de Jongh appeared in the British consulate in Bilbao with a British soldier (James Cromar from Aberdeen) and two Belgian volunteers (Merchiers and Sterckmans), having travelled by train from Paris to Bayonne and then on foot over the Pyrenees. She requested British support for her escape network (later named 'Comet line'), which was granted by MI9 (British Military Intelligence Section 9), under the control of an ex-infantry major Norman Crockatt and lieutenant James Langley. Langley had been repatriated after losing his left arm in the rear guard defence of Dunkerque in 1940.

Working with MI9 de Jongh helped 400 Allied soldiers escape from Belgium through occupied France to Spain and Gibraltar. Neave described her as "one of our greatest agents." Later Neave organised gunboats from Dartmouth to run agents and supplies across the Channel to the French resistance in Brittany and return with escaped POWs and evaders. Comet Line members and their families took great risks. De Jongh escorted 118 airmen over the Pyrenees herself. After November 1942 the escape lines became more dangerous, after southern France was occupied by the Germans and the whole of France came under direct Nazi rule. Many members of the Comet line were betrayed; hundreds were arrested by the Geheime Feldpolizei and the Abwehr and, after weeks of interrogation and torture at places such as Fresnes Prison in Paris, were executed or labelled Nacht und Nebel (NN) prisoners. NN prisoners were deported to German prisons and many later to concentration camps such as Ravensbrück concentration camp for women, Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, Buchenwald concentration camp, Flossenbürg concentration camp. Prisoners sent to these camps included Andrée de Jongh, Elsie Maréchal (Belgian Resistance), Nadine Dumon (Belgian Resistance), Mary Lindell (Comtesse de Milleville) and Virginia d'Albert-Lake (American).

The authors of the official history of MI9 cite 2,373 British and Commonwealth servicemen and 2,700 Americans taken to Britain by such escape lines during World War II. The RAF Escaping Society estimated that there were 14,000 helpers by 1945.

Notable members of the Line

Andrée de Jongh, (aka Dédée) Line creator and chief. Arrested 15 January 1943. Survived several Nazi concentration camps. Awarded the George Medal

Frédéric de Jongh, (aka Paul). Dédée's father. Arrested 7 June 1943. Executed 28 March 1944.

Monique de Bissy, Arrested in March 1944, freed in September 1944.

Baron Jean Greindl, (aka Nemo). Head of line in Brussels. Arrested 6 February 1943. Killed 7 September 1943.

Elvire de Greef, (aka Tante Go). Organiser in South France. Escaped arrest and survived. Awarded the George Medal

Jean-François Nothomb, (aka Franco). Succeeded Dedee in France. Arrested 18 January 1944. Survived several Nazi concentration camps. Awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

Comte Jacques Legrelle (aka Jerome), organised and operated line in the Paris area, linked the Belgium part of line to South of France. Was captured, tortured, sent to concentration camps and survived. Awarded the George Medal.

Comte Antoine d’Ursel (aka Jacques Cartier). Succeeded Nemo in Brussels. Died crossing Franco-Spanish border 24 December 1943.

Micheline Dumon (aka Michou), Operated line in 1944. Escaped arrest and awarded the George Medal.