

## Tragedy in the Pyrenees

Author's Note: 381st pilot 1st Lt. Olof Ballinger and crew were shot down on 4 July 1943 on the LeMans raid (Mission No. 7—42-29928). Three of the crew were KIA, two POW's and five evaded. Ballinger and waist gunner S/Sgt. Francis "Bud" Owens stayed together in the Ste. Opportune area of l'Orne, Normandy for a couple of months before being moved to Paris by the Resistance for eventual escape over the Pyrenees Mountains. Here is their story:

For many evaders, the final and most formidable obstacle to their escape from occupied Europe is scaling the Pyrenees Mountains separating France from neutral Spain. The hazards are numerous and in winter the mountain range can be deadly for the unprepared.

After months of inactivity and marginal food, Lt. Olof M. Ballinger and S/Sgt. Francis "Bud" Owens leave the countryside of the Department of Orne on 1 Sep 1943, for Paris and prepare to cross the Pyrenees. On 21 October 1943, Ballinger and Owens join five other allied airmen and seven Frenchmen at a train station in Paris for the trip south to Toulouse and then St. Girons. The other Americans include Maj. William T. Boren (387th BG), 1st Lt. Keith W. Murray (95th BG), 2nd Lt. Harold Bailey (379th BG), 2nd Lt. Charles H. Hoover (381st BG), and T/Sgt. William B. Plasket (306th BG). Each airman has his own guide for the train journey; all are female members of the Resistance. The Frenchmen in the group, all military officers, are risking the trip so they can join Free French forces in North Africa.

The climb up the mountains begins on 22 October 1943 and the route chosen transits the small country of Andorra before turning southeast towards the S/Sgt. Francis "Bud" Owens ultimate destination of Barcelona. However, trouble haunts the expedition from the very beginning. Lt. Ballinger finds that his legs will not do what he wants them to do and he experiences severe cramping. The group is barely in the foothills of the Pyrenees range at Suc, southeast of St. Girons, and Ballinger can go no further.

Ballinger is instructed to hide and wait for the guide's return in eight to ten days. Ballinger then spends the next week-and-a-half waiting for the guide's return at a farm near Suc. On the 29th he is warned that the Gestapo is in the area and that he has to move. On the 30th of October, Ballinger decides to try crossing the mountain range alone without a guide. He has no compass and so is forced to navigate by the sun and stars. He eventually reaches Spain through Andorra, but he is in poor condition. He is briefly taken into custody by Spanish authorities and spends several weeks in Manresa and Barcelona recuperating from his ordeal before moving on to Gibraltar and returning to England on 3 December 1943.

For the remaining climbers, the going is even more difficult because German sentries seem to be everywhere. Climbing for 30 hours, the progress is very slow as the group avoids enemy soldiers which force them to take difficult passages through the mountains. As they reach the summit, a fierce storm strikes bringing bitter cold and deep snow. One of the Americans can no longer walk and he collapses in the snow. He is carried by the others, but the effort is exhausting.

Shortly after beginning the descent on the Andorran side of the mountains, two more Americans fall to the snow-covered ground, utterly drained by their ordeal. The lack of food and exercise plus the severe cold has drained away all of their energy. Their feet are frozen due to the disintegration of their French "ersatz" paper shoes which are hardly suitable for the wet climb through several feet of snow and sharp rock.

The guides are furious at the delays and they go to great lengths to get their American charges to stand up and move on. At one point a guide points his weapon at one of the airmen and orders him to get up. The airman seems not to hear and the guide fires his pistol next to the head of the dazed evader. It has no effect. The group must move on and they reluctantly leave the fallen men and proceed down the mountain. Thus no one witnesses the final hours of Lt. Bailey, T/Sgt. Plasket or S/Sgt. Owens which probably come on 25 October 1943 at Port de Rat, Andorra.

In the spring of 1944, the bodies of the three airmen are discovered by local mountaineers and are buried at Arinsal, Andorra. The remains are exhumed by the U.S. Army in 1950 and are positively identified in June, 1951. The family of S/Sgt. Owens elects to have his remains interred at the Ardennes American Military Cemetery in Belgium, while they simultaneously celebrate the requiem high mass at their parish church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on 1 October 1951. Earlier during the war, the Owens family is presented with the Soldiers Medal that their son Francis has earned saving the life of a fellow airman during the bomb loading accident of 23 June 1943 at Ridgewell Field.

In the spring of 2006, the Owens family is presented with Bud Owens' dogtag which has been held by the McConnell family over the years while they search for his survivors. Francis Owens leaves the dog tag with the Duval family of LaCoulonche when he departs for Paris in September, 1943. In 1983, former navigator Paul McConnell is visiting LaCoulonche with his wife Marie and is given the dog-tag by the elderly Duval family in the hopes that Francis Owens' next of kin could be located in

America. Despite a concerted effort, Mr. McConnell passes away before he could locate the Owens family. Warren Carah, son of 42-29928's co-pilot, John M. Carah, finally locates the Owens family in the Pittsburgh area in early 2006 and arranges for the transfer of the artifact. And so, a part of Francis "Bud" Owens finally returns home some 63 years after he has left to fight for his country in the skies over Europe.

Researched and Compiled by Warren B. Carah from Official Records

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