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## *The Evaders* [Review]

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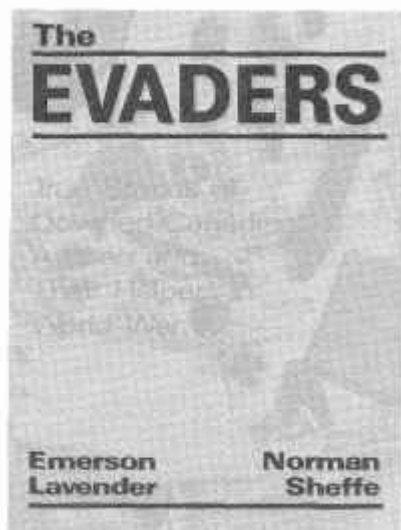
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## **The Evaders**

Emerson Lavender and Norman Sheffe, *The Evaders*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992, 264 pages, \$19.95.

When an Allied airman was shot down over occupied territory during the Second World War, he knew from training lectures to hide his parachute and, so long as the enemy was not awaiting him with open arms, make his way out of the area as quickly as his physical condition allowed. If he was fortunate, he would eventually make contact with sympathetic civilians who might pass him on to an organized escape line. Once in the hands of these resistance workers, usually known as "helpers," the airman had a reasonably good chance of evading capture and returning to friendly territory.

The experiences of evaders and their helpers are the subject of Emerson Lavender and Norman Sheffe's *The Evaders*, which relates the personal stories of members of the Royal Air Forces Escaping Society, Canadian Branch. Largely a work of oral history, supplemented by material from interrogation reports and squadron records, *The Evaders* follows in a very engaging and readable manner a number of Canadian and British airmen from their enlistment and operational flying to their experiences in enemy-held territory and eventual return to safety. It is an excellent complement to the memoirs of escape route organizers, such as Canadian Lucien Dumais' *The Man Who Went Back*, but its greatest strength, one which sets it apart from Edmund Cosgrove's 1970 book of the same name, is the use of oral interviews with some of the surviving



helpers. This adds a new dimension to the historiography of evasion by allowing the reader to compare the recollections of the evader, painfully out of his element in occupied territory, and the helper, whose life hung in the balance because of involvement in resistance work.

Evasions along the well-known European escape routes such as the Comet, O'Leary or Shelburne lines occupy the bulk of the book, but the experiences of airmen downed in Italy and the Far East are included as well. Particularly harrowing is the account of Bob Johnson's three-week trek through the Burmese jungle, with no outside assistance and sustained only by a few malted milk tablets and some benzedrine. The tales also reveal that evasion was not without its dangers for the airmen. Jim Moffat's experiences as a *maquisard* with an armed resistance group in France prove that, even out of their aircraft, evaders could remain very much in the front lines. In this context, Lavender and Sheffe might also have mentioned other Canadian evaders like H.J. Cleary of Cornwall, who was killed in a gun battle with German troops while fighting with a resistance cell in

northern France, or Peter Dmytruk of Saskatchewan, who fought with the *maquis* for nine months before being killed in a German ambush while laying charges to blow up a railway bridge.

The book's weaknesses are confined to those areas which take the authors away from their specific subject. It is by no means clear that the "taint of dishonour" was no longer attached to being taken prisoner, as Lavender and Sheffe contend [p.24]. Indeed, in July 1942 a British cabinet minister registered the not uncommon opinion that "it is surely not desirable to proceed on the assumption that the soldier [who is captured] must necessarily be guiltless." Obviously, the airman was in a somewhat different position than the foot soldier; nevertheless, experts who considered the problems of rehabilitating ex-prisoners agreed that most POWs would experience varying degrees of guilt, in part because of the perceived stigma which still accompanied capture. Also, the statements that Japan took very few POWs and refused to admit Red Cross workers to prison camps [p.228] are both erroneous. Granted, few is a relative term but the Japanese did take roughly 100,000 American and Commonwealth prisoners, in addition to thousands more from other Allied nations. Furthermore, Red Cross inspectors visited about half of the Japanese-operated POW camps over the course of the war, not a very impressive number but enough to have some impact on the lives of countless Allied POWs. Finally, it is well to point out the number of evaders from the Royal Air Forces was roughly 2800, not 10,000 as stated in the dedication.

These criticisms, however, detract but little from what is a most welcome addition to the sparse historical record of evasion. Lavender and Sheffe have captured the very human side of the story by highlighting the special bond which developed between evader and helper. In a poignant passage which reveals the desire of former evaders to repay their benefactors, the authors relate a postscript to the wartime experiences of RAF pilot John Hall. After the war, Hall learned that a woman who had assisted his escape through Italy in 1944 was destitute with a young daughter to support; he immediately contacted the local representative of the RAFES and arranged for financial support which allowed the woman to establish herself in business. It may have been only a small gesture, but it did symbolize the gratitude of former evaders towards the thousands of civilians who risked everything to help downed Allied airmen.

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