

JOEL MCPHERSON

A downed American pilot in occupied France has the journey of a lifetime while trying to reach safety in Spain

By Bill Yenne

High over occupied Europe on a cold January 29, 1944, Lieutenant Joel McPherson realized that he was nearing the end of the line. The pilot had just completed a bomber escort mission into Germany and was headed home to the 352nd Fighter Group base at Bodney Airfield north of London when it became clear to him that his battle-damaged P-47 Thunderbolt would never make it—so he leaped from his cockpit into the unknown of the Périgord region of southwestern France.

Hanging beneath his parachute canopy that day, he could not have anticipated the unlikely chain of events that was to lead him to spend his 26th birthday recovering from an unnecessary appendectomy after he went under the knife as part of a desperate ploy to escape a prison. Nor could he possibly imagine that before he ever again saw the inside of another cockpit, he would be in the driver's seat of a bank robber's getaway car.

As he descended through the clouds, the boyish former railroad office worker from Lakewood, Ohio, pondered his next move. Eighth Air Force combat pilots were all in generally good physical condition and trained in methods of escape and evasion. As soon as he touched the ground, his goal would be to evade the Germans, escape if captured, and make his way out of France to the Allied bastion at Gibraltar by way of neutral Spain. Many Allied pilots had done this before. It was well-known that the French Resistance aided downed pilots and maintained escape routes into Spain.

McPherson landed in a field near the small town of Rouillac, where an elderly woman and her grandson watched him with curiosity as he pulled his parachute from a tree. They took him to their nearby farmhouse, but the woman's husband, fearing the imminent arrival of the authorities, insisted he leave at once. According to the pilot's own later written recollections, he pulled off the heavy flying boots that covered his rubber-soled shoes, and "set off south, down the road toward Spain." The border was 200 miles away. He didn't expect his journey would be easy, but at first it did seem reasonably straightforward.



Fighter pilot Joel McPherson (above) leaped from his damaged P-47—and into a dangerous land—in early 1944.

ON'S WILD RIDE



McPherson found himself in a situation where his life in wartime France imitated the art of the mobster movie milieu.

BY THE END OF HIS FIRST DAY, McPherson had met a farmer with whom he communicated using a card of French phrases from his survival kit. The man indicated he should hide in the woods because the Germans were searching for him. After dark, as the pilot nervously listened to German motorcycles roaring back and forth on nearby roads, the man brought him some bread and wine, as well as an overcoat and a blanket—overcharging him 500 francs (about \$140 today), which McPherson paid out of the cash in his survival kit.

The next day, McPherson continued on his way, chilled by the cold drizzle and occasionally meeting civilians. When he told one where he was going, the man replied, “*Formidable!*”

McPherson recalled that he “hitched three rides on French trucks without mishap” and grew complacent. When he flagged another vehicle, he realized to his horror that it was full of Germans. He breathed easier as it passed.

He traveled about 50 miles in his first week and it seemed that his plan to continue hitchhiking to Spain might actually work, but he still had no understanding of the political lay of the land into which he had jumped. As he would soon learn, France contained a vast and nuanced spectrum of competing interests. It was now governed by the “French State” (*État Français*), based in the city of Vichy and known colloquially as the “Régime de Vichy.” This was a government that was a beholden puppet of the Germans, whose own state police force—the Gestapo—maintained an omnipresent and omnipotent watchful eye on life in France. Most citizens begrudgingly accepted Vichy, but some at one end of

the political spectrum actively opposed it while others at the opposite extreme energetically championed it. The latter included the paramilitary Vichy-endorsed *Groupes Mobiles de Réserve* (GMR)—the Mobile Reserve Group.

Persistently opposing the German occupation was the Resistance, a maze of disparate groups that included the Maquis—a band of armed guerrilla fighters called Maquisards. They carried on an energetic campaign of sabotage and harassment against the Gestapo and the occupation. Still, the Maquisards were equally resolute in their attacks on anyone they suspected of collaborating with the Germans. Within the ranks of the Maquis were communists and anarchists, so their targets

often included banks, businesses, and wealthy French people who may (or may not) have sympathized with the Germans.

In early February, an English-speaking man who had put McPherson up for the night introduced him to the Maquis. Given civilian clothes, a bicycle, and a series of Maquis handlers, McPherson continued south. They promised to help him get to Spain, but as he became swept into the surreptitious world of the Maquis, he found himself in a situation where his life in wartime France imitated the art of the mobster movie milieu. He recalled that when three Maquisards showed up at a meeting armed with submachine guns, it was like “a Hollywood act.”

Over the next few weeks, McPherson found the Maquisards less concerned with aiding his escape than with their own priorities—and that their internecine politics, complex rivalries, and anti-bourgeois agenda were making his journey a less-than-straightforward one. As he wrote in the after-action report that he would pen half a year later when his ordeal was over, “gangsterism started and sabotage was carried on only as a sideline to the senseless looting of chateaux on the pretext the owners were collaborators.”

Why he allowed himself to be seduced into being a participant in this activity is unknown. Perhaps his excuse was that he was still fighting against the Germans. Maybe he did it to help win the Maquisards’ trust so that they would help him—or perhaps it was just adrenaline-pumping excitement.

The wild Hollywood parallel reached its zenith later in February when McPherson was introduced to a charismatic Maquis leader who stood out like the central casting ideal of a gangster kingpin. Described by his postwar biographer, Jean-Jacques Gillot, as being as “opportunistic as he was endowed with intellectual and physical faculties well above the average,” the infamous Andrj Urbanovitch was an English-speaking Yugoslav expatriate and former Paris corporate tax attorney known by the alias André Doublemètre. He was also a ruthless guerrilla leader whom Gillot called a “mercenary of purification.” McPherson described him as “a rabid communist.”

Whenever he brought up the Maquis’s promised efforts of help, Doublemètre would tell him the snow was still too deep in the Pyrenees for him to cross. McPherson was growing anxious. “I got thoroughly fed up with this



Issued to pilots and paratroopers operating over enemy territory, escape and evasion kits contained items aimed at helping them reach safety—or barter their way out of danger.



life,” he wrote, “and could not see how it was going to take me to Spain.”

IN EARLY MARCH, the course of McPherson’s life in occupied France took an abrupt and unexpected turn. One night, the Gestapo ambushed him and his Maquis gang (Doublemètre was conspicuously absent). They managed to narrowly escape and retreat to a farmhouse presumed to be a safe house—but it wasn’t.

They had just dozed off when someone suddenly shouted, “*Debout!* [Stand!]” McPherson recalled that “when I heard machine guns...I knew we had really been surprised.” They were inside a room with one window and a door to an adjoining room. One of the Maquisards, while trying to escape, dashed through the doorway, slamming the door shut after him. Machine gun bullets blasted through it as another man slipped out the window. “As a second reached the sill, he was shot dead from the doorway and I dashed back to a corner,” McPherson noted. “A grenade was tossed in and the lights went out. I came out and gave up before they had a chance to toss in another.”

The survivors found that they were surrounded not by the Gestapo this time, but by the GMR. After several days, the GMR turned them over to the *gendarmerie*, the regular police, and they were imprisoned in the city of Périgueux. McPherson recalled that among the *gendarmerie* there were many bureaucratic Samaritans who helped Maquisards whenever possible. This time they charged most of the Frenchmen in the group as “boxcar thieves” rather than Maquis, to save them from execution. McPherson, meanwhile, was told that as an American, he would not be turned over to the Germans—but would go to a French “concentration camp.”

Before that could happen, McPherson’s cellmate in the Périgueux prison connected him with friendly guards, who helped him to concoct

Members of the Maquis in southwestern France; the armed underground Resistance fighters offered to aid McPherson on his journey to Spain.

a ruse that they figured might allow him to escape. While in a prison hall on the morning of Saturday, March 11, a guard handed him a small package containing aspirin and a note. It read: “Friends await you in the hospital, but it is impossible to get to the hospital without a serious illness. Pretend you have a bad appendix.” The note explained that rolling aspirin tablets into a cigarette and smoking it could simulate the symptoms of appendicitis.

While these are McPherson’s recollections of this incident, others involved have also recalled it. Historian Guy Penaud referenced their accounts in his 1985 book, *Histoire de la Résistance en Périgord*. He writes that “agents working for the Allies had heard about his capture and approached a doctor by the name of Jean Gausson who was working at the hospital at Périgueux and involved with the Résistance. He was told to help McPherson escape, whatever the cost.” Penaud confirms that Gausson dictated the note containing “the old recipe that would bring on vomiting, a crushed aspirin mixed with tobacco.”

By early Saturday afternoon McPherson



The Maquis used a series of farmhouses, like this one in the southern French village of Boussoulet (above), as safe houses. On McPherson's long southward journey he visited several, with mixed success.

was feverish, vomiting, and complaining about a pain in his side. Whether the unlikely concoction actually produced all the symptoms or whether it just made him nauseous and psychosomatic, it *did* convince the prison doctor to call an ambulance. By 2:30 p.m. the American was lying on a gurney in a civilian hospital in Périgueux under police guard.

McPherson recalled that by the time he was wheeled into the operating room around 8:00 Saturday evening, he tried to convince the doctor that he was feeling much better and that the operation was unnecessary. The gendarmes had to restrain him.

"The gendarmes tried to hold me," the pilot recalled. "I struggled violently, but was finally overpowered and the ether mask put on."

According to Penaud's sources, however, McPherson had misunderstood the directions in Gausсен's note and acted a day too early: Gausсен was not on duty until Sunday. Penaud writes that the plan was for Gausсен "to examine him, confirm the diagnosis and

inform the surgeon that the problem was not extremely urgent, and that surgery could wait until the following day or the day after. A 'commando' dressed as a hospital worker would enter the hospital discretely, pass the concierge who would think he was from a nearby hospital, get to the ward where McPherson would be awaiting surgery, knock out the guard and with the aid of a wheelchair, wheel him out of the hospital."

When Gausсен arrived on Sunday afternoon, he was told, "Ah, you should have been here yesterday evening! A prisoner arrived suffering from appendicitis, an American or Englishman we presume.... You should have seen the circus; he certainly didn't want to be operated on.... When the surgeon came in wearing his mask the prisoner jumped off the operating table, shouting 'I'm not ill.' We thought he was a mad man!"

McPHERSON HAD AWAKENED on Sunday morning—March 12, his birthday—to find himself surrounded by Germans in the hospital prison ward. Two days later, he was transferred to a German military hospital. He was now at the low point of his strange adventure. Six weeks after he bailed out, he was a prisoner of the Germans, he was minus a good appendix, and he was farther from Spain than when the GMR had nabbed him.

Worse than the pain of surgery was the mounting fear of what would come next. He realized that as soon as the doctors decided that he was well enough, he would be shipped off as a POW to a German stalag. McPherson's search for a way out centered on a tree just outside the courtyard wall and on some scaffolding on the inside. If he could climb the scaffolding, he could get over the wall and climb down the tree. But when he tried pulling himself up on the scaffolding, the act was so painful he was forced to postpone his plan.

In the meantime, a young woman who worked in the prison kitchen's forced-labor detail, Jacqueline Braillard, approached him. The Maquis had informed her of his plight; she advised him of a safe house in a village about eight miles south of Périgueux where he could hide.

By March 24, McPherson had been in the German hospital for 10 days. He arose at 4:30 a.m. with the determination that he could wait no longer. He donned his rubber-soled shoes and, using a folding table he had stashed nearby

talked, and talked, then I
 got off the table and did
 belly-up exercises, but
 no one was convinced. The
 Germans tried to hold me
 and I struggled violently, but
 was finally overpowered and the
 ether mask put on.

When I came to in the
 ward, I was minus my appendix.
 The next day the Germans came
 to see me. They asked name,
 rank and date of birth, after
 examining my O.D. shirt, which
 still bore the decedent's
 name, was not an officer, as I claimed,
 and went off. I was to be left here
 until I was stronger. Monday
 morning, about 7:00, two
 men, in clean white butcher's
 smocks, walked into the ward
 with a stretcher. They said that
 the doctor wanted me downstairs



A Maquis patrol headed for a raid against the Germans navigates the foothills of the French Alps. Their knowledge of escape routes made them a mixed blessing for McPherson.

to reach the scaffolding, he climbed up, went over the wall, and stole silently into the night.

He spent five days at the safe house before continuing south toward Spain. When he arrived at another safe house—recommended by people at the previous one—he was startled to find himself again face to face with Doublemètre and several other Maquisards he had known previously. He was back where he had been—on the lam with the same “gangsters.”

For the next two weeks, McPherson and

this group were on the move, reeling from several near misses with German patrols and roadblocks. At one point, they spent two days living with a Swiss family from Paris named Doxat, whose young son was an aviation enthusiast who enjoyed meeting the American pilot.

In the middle of April, the driver for this band of Maquisards died in a car wreck. Now in need of someone who could drive, their eyes fell upon McPherson. As he later recalled, “I became a chauffeur for the Maquis,” adding that for another two weeks, he “lived a bandit’s life.” With Doublemètre and about 40 Maquisards armed with submachine guns, he was part of “an awful lot of plain thievery of chateaux. [I] drove on several raids...robbed post offices, banks, etc.”

By early May, though, whatever fascination he may have had for this lifestyle again waned. McPherson decided that he was “becoming thoroughly fed up” and ready to be on his way. Because Doublemètre repeatedly declined to help him, McPherson confided in another Maquisard named Philippe, who promptly introduced him to a woman named “Marie Schieffluer.” She may well have been the legendary Marie-Louise Dissard, also known as Madame “Françoise,” who helped countless Allied airmen escape across the Pyrenees on a maze of clandestine escape routes.

McPherson was astonished by how quickly Philippe had acted, recalling that “I was furious to discover that the Maquis member I knew best and longest [Doublemètre] was a good friend of all these people and could have passed me on months ago.” He realized Doublemètre had been lying to him about the deep snow in the Pyrenees: “He had refuted all knowledge of a route because he wanted me to stay with the Maquis.”

Finally in the escape pipeline, McPherson was in Boulogne-sur-Gesse, about 50 miles from the Spanish border, by June 3, drinking in a hotel bar and lunching with a man named Charbonière, who promised that he would take McPherson and a group of civilians across the Pyrenees. Nobody seemed to know when they would go, and after Charbonière said he was stepping away for 20 minutes but did not return for nine days, nobody seemed to know *whether* they would go.

Those were a surreal nine days. No one rested easy. As McPherson noted, “Everyone in town except the Gestapo agents, who lived in the hotel with us, knew we were there.”

At last Charbonière returned—everyone knew better than to inquire about where he had been—and moved the group to a safe house on a nearby farm. Only a day later, the refugees got word that he had been killed while trying to run a German roadblock. The tension remained high until his replacement arrived on June 16, but at least they were finally on the move. When they entered the Spanish village of Canejan after two days of hiking through the mountains, McPherson noted anticlimactically that they “walked into the arms of the police, who were very friendly.”

McPherson continued on by himself—on foot, hitchhiking, and paying for rides

on trucks. He crossed into Gibraltar on July 28, 1944, and was back at Bodney Airfield three days later. His “*formidable*” six-month odyssey was over.

COMPARED TO THOSE SIX MONTHS in southwestern France in 1944, Joel McPherson’s later life was a quiet one. He left the service in 1953, married, became a father, and worked as a building contractor in Winter Haven, Florida. In 1981 the curtain came down upon the McPhersons. That March, their daughter drowned in a lake near the family home. When Joel and his wife passed away three weeks apart in the fall, their obituaries did not mention the causes of their deaths.

Virtually nothing was published in the United States about McPherson’s adventures, but in France, he is remembered. In 1950, the French government recognized him for aiding the wartime Resistance and awarded him the *Brevet Militaire de Pilote d’Avion*—accepting him into the brotherhood of French military pilots. In more recent years, McPherson’s story has been mentioned in a number of French periodicals and in books, including the one by Guy Penaud.

The postwar life of André Doublemètre, in contrast to McPherson’s, was one rich in irony. The man McPherson had described as “a rabid communist” reinvented himself as the opposite. Settling in Paris in 1945 when the echo of war still reverberated, he became a wealthy art dealer specializing in contemporary masters and lived his final days in a chateau on the Côte d’Azur. ★

He realized Doublemètre had been lying to him about the deep snow in the Pyrenees.

After six months on the run, McPherson made it back to his base and back to his unit in England (below); that’s possibly him, middle row, second from right.

