

Alexander Nitelet

Alex (Jean) Nitelet - Spitfire Pilot and Pat Line Radio Operator

Pilot Officer Alexandre Nitelet was a Belgian pilot flying with 609 Squadron RAF. On 9 August 1941 he was one of eight Spitfire pilots shot down during the bomber escort mission known as CIRCUS 68 - and the only one to get back to England before the war ended. Three pilots were killed outright, one died of his wounds and other three (including Douglas Bader) were taken prisoner of war.

Nitelet was shot down by Karl Borris of 6/JG 26 and crash-landed near the little village of Renty, a few miles inland from Boulogne. His aircraft turned over on landing and Alex suffered severe head injuries which led to the loss of his right eye. He was rescued from the wreckage by a local farmer named Louis Salmon who took him to the home of Vincent Ansel, a member of Norbert Fillerin's organisation. He was sheltered with the Fillerin family for two months and his wounds treated by Dr Delpierre from nearby Fauquemerges and Dr Houzel from Boulogne. During his stay with the Fillerins at least two other Spitfire pilots were brought to the house. F/Lt Denis Crowley-Milling stayed briefly in late August and Sgt Patrick Bell, whose wounds were also treated by Dr Delpierre, stayed with Alex from late September. In early October Alex and Pat Bell were moved to Burbure near Auchel to join a dozen or so other evaders hidden at various houses. They and the other evaders were being gathered together by Fernand Salingue to make up a party to be taken to Marseille by the ORGANISATION. Alex was told there would be a week's delay before the party could leave and so took the opportunity to go and visit his mother in Brussels.

When Alex returned yet another fighter pilot had been added to the party. A young baby-faced Eagle Squadron pilot named Oscar Coen had been shot down just a few days before the party left on their long journey south.

The party of four fighter pilots, three crewmen from a Wellington bomber, six soldiers and three guides - Paul Cole, Roland Lepers and Madeleine Damerment - left Burbure by different routes, meeting up again on the train from Bethune to Abbeville. At Abbeville they received papers to cross over the river Somme from the zone interdite to occupied France from the Abbe Pierre Carpentier. Then they caught the afternoon train to Paris where they were joined by another courier Susanne Warengem. After a night in Paris, the party took a train to Tours then crossed the demarcation into Vichy France at nearby Azay-sur-Cher. Then they walked through the night to Loches to catch yet another train to Toulouse then on to Marseille.

At Marseille the whole party first went to Louis Nouveau's fifth floor apartment on Quai de Rive Neuve but the soldiers were soon sent on to another safe house in Nimes. The airmen stayed the night with Louis and his wife Renee and were joined that evening by Pat O'Leary, Mario Prassinis and Bruce Dowding, fresh from their confrontation with Cole and O'Leary questioned Alex and George Barclay about Cole's behaviour on the trip down. Next day Alex was taken to Dr Rodocanachi for treatment to his injured eye while the rest of the airmen travelled to Perpignan to stay with Paulette Gastou at the Hotel du Loge before being taken across the Pyrenees to Figueras. A few days later Alex was taken across the Pyrenees near Le Perthus and delivered to the British Consulate in Barcelona where he was reunited with the other airmen. They all travelled together to the British Embassy in Madrid and then on to

Gibraltar. Alex and Oscar Coen were flown back to Plymouth together on Christmas day 1941.

Alex returned to France on 28 May 1942 - not as pilot but as a passenger in a 161 Special Duties Lysander flown by F/Lt John Mott. By early 1942 the Pat Line was in desperate need of a radio operator. One man had already been trained and sent in with O'Leary when he returned to France from Gibraltar on board HMS Tarana in April but the new man was unable to cope with the undercover life and O'Leary needed an urgent replacement. Alex was already a proficient radio operator and since he could no longer fly, had volunteered to join the organisation that had saved him the previous year. James Langley at MI9 knew that SOE were sending an empty aircraft to France to try and collect one of their agents and so he arranged to have Alex flown out. The aircraft landed in a field near Issoudon, south-west of Bourges in Vichy France but was soon bogged down. Alex left the scene whilst the pilot tried to set fire to the aircraft. Pierre Hentic, one of the operation's organisers, gave the pilot his identity papers and a bicycle in a bid to keep him safe but John Mott was caught and sent to the French army barracks at la Chatre and then on to La Turbie to join the other British detainees at Fort de la Rivere.

Alex (aka Jean or Jack Nitey) made his way to Marseille complete with his radio set and money for O'Leary as well as details of a sea operation from Port Miou, near Cassis, planned from two weeks later. Alex first radio call to London was largely unintelligible but all subsequent messages went through perfectly as he transmitted from the Rodocanichi apartment, from Leoni Savinos' flat in rue Dieude and from a flat rented in Stella Beale's name, all in Marseille, and also from Gaston Negre's apartment in Nimes. He also recruited another operator, Roger Gaston, and they alternated their transmissions and locations to minimise the chances of them being detected.

As well as his radio responsibilities, Alex was involved with the first breakout from Fort de la Rivere. It was Alex that made contact with Tony Friend, an Australian who knew the Russian born Bouryschkine (Val) Williams - a fitness instructor friend of the Commandant's mistress - who had access to the inmates. With help from the Polish Padre Josef Mirda and Mrs Thomas, the French wife of one of the inmates, the plan was successfully carried out on the night of 23 August when five airmen led by F/Lt Higginson escaped the Fort and were later evacuated from France by sea from Canet Plage. Unfortunately Alex was also involved in receiving a parachute drop near Nimes and he and three others were arrested just days before he was due to act as one of the guides. Alex and the others were held at Fort de la Duchere, Lyons but on 5 November he was sent to Chambaran where the remaining inmates from de la Rivere had been transferred after the mass escape of 5 September. As a Belgian Alex was suspected of being a spy but his Lysander pilot John Mott was able to convince the Commandant that he had known Alex personally in England before the war.

On 11 November 1942 the Germans occupied southern France and after much discussion the prisoners at Chambaran managed to convince the Commandant that when the Germans arrived they would shoot at least some of the prisoners. 27 November four SOE agents, two Dieppe Commandos, two soldiers who had killed German guards in an earlier escape and Alex were released from Chambaran and helped to make their way to Marseille. Alex travelled with the two army sergeants

Allen and Foster and SOE agent Denis Rake to Dr Rodocanachi's address and although the doctor and his wife were away, they were sheltered there by two young Greek girls. The soldiers and agent went on to cross the Pyrenees but Alex stayed first in Marseille and then at Toulouse in Françoise Dissard's house with Ian Garrow who had finally been rescued from Mauzac in late December. Three weeks later they crossed into Spain together and were delivered to the British Consulate in Barcelona by one of O'Leary's regular guides. On 7 Feb 1942 Alex was flown back to Britain from Gibraltar.

Colonel Alexandre E J G Nitelet of the Belgian Airforce died in 1981. Basic storyline from files at the PRO and the literature including "Saturday at MI9", "Fighter Pilot" and "We Landed by Moonlight" as well as the records of Louis Nouveau as reproduced in "Safe Houses are Dangerous" and his own "Captaines par Milliers". Additional background information courtesy of Derek Richardson from research for his book "Detachment W" and from Sherri Ottis. Personal details from Jules Nitelet and Philippe Meert. Information on escape line helpers from Philippe Goldstein with additional detail from the late John Mott.