

BOOK REVIEW:

Airmen's incredible escapes: accounts of survival in the Second World War

by Bryn Evans

Pen and Sword Aviation: Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2020; 290 pp; ISBN 9781526761729 (hard cover); RRP \$75.00



While Allied air power made a decisive contribution to victory in the European and Pacific theatres of World War II, the cost in terms of aircraft and aircrew was horrific. Royal Air Force Bomber Command suffered a 50 per cent casualty rate for its aircrew. While many perished with their aircraft, others survived, only to face the challenge of escaping back to England or face capture, interrogation, torture and internment – or suffer a worse fate at the hands of an enemy population enraged by the bombing of their homeland.

Bryn Evans has drawn together the accounts of British, Commonwealth and American airmen who survived to provide a remarkable insight into the challenges that faced them after they were either shot down or blown from their aircraft and catapulted into a hostile environment, often shocked and wounded.

The extraordinary stories of escape and survival by aircrew display the amazing resilience of the human spirit in extreme adversity in the air wars against Germany and its Axis allies in Europe and the militaristic regime in Japan.

Airmen's Incredible Escapes provides 37 self-contained chapters of individuals and groups of aircrews as they endeavoured to elude a determined enemy intent on their capture. Commencing with engagements during the phony war, the air war over Burma and New Guinea, through to the intense culmination of the bombing campaign against Germany and German forces in occupied countries, the actions are presented in chronological order across the various theatres of war in which aircrew were deployed.

While *Airmen's Incredible Escapes* includes the exploits of American and British air crew, many events focus on Australian aircrew or airmen who subsequently settled in Australia after the war. The experiences of aircrews in Bomber Command provide many of the stories, which is understandable given that some 10,000 Australians served with Bomber Command during World War II and 3486 were killed-in-action – Australia's highest casualty rate of the war.

Notwithstanding, one of the earlier chapters describes the challenges faced, in two separate instances, by United States airmen flying their stricken aircraft clear of the town of Redcliffe, Queensland, before crashing. Another describes the challenges faced by an Australian pilot's flight in a No. 10 Squadron Sunderland to Rabat, the French Moroccan capital, to enable an attempt by British emissaries to convince the French authorities to carry on the war and not seek peace with Germany.

Although carrying a common theme, each chapter describes a particular action and the book may at first appear to recount a disconnected series of events. However, such is the skill of the author that he captures the tension of the moment with the result that the reader will turn to the next chapter with interest and a sense of anticipation.

While many of the accounts have a grim similarity, each airman is confronted with a different challenge, opportunity and stroke of luck, resulting in varying outcomes. At the receiving end of the bombing campaign, the German population understandably labelled the airmen of Bomber Command *terrorflieger*s. Across the chapters of the book, the terrors faced by the airmen when their aircraft was damaged or shot down, often in flames, is brought into stark reality.

The book is well researched and indexed with a collection of excellent photographs and maps. The author has used primary sources, interviewing many of the airmen, as well as researching official accounts. Each chapter is presented in the same format: a brief description of the incident set in the context of the campaign or battle; the biographical background of the airman or airmen involved in the incident, including their prior training and operational experience; and an in-depth account of the focus incident. At the end of each chapter, there is a statement concerning the post-war life of the surviving airman, and sadly in many cases, of his recent passing – a reminder that living history is slipping through our fingers.

Bryn Evans writes extensively across a range of categories and genres. His most recent non-fiction books in military history are: *Air Battle for Burma*; *The Decisive Campaigns of the Desert Air Force 1942-45*; and *With the East Surreys in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy 1942-45*. His other writings have also appeared in various journals and media, notably in the areas of management, sport, travel and military history. For his fiction work, Bryn was awarded Second Prize in the Catherine Cookson Short Story Competition in United Kingdom for *In the Dark*; received a Commendation in the Australian Bi-Centenary Short Story Competition (Queensland); and published a short story anthology. Bryn now lives in Brisbane (formerly in Sydney) and is a member of the Institute.

Airmen's Incredible Escapes is an anthology of human endeavour, individual resourcefulness and the will to survive. It will hold significant appeal for those readers with an interest in military history and military aviation.

Bob Treloar