

The Blister Club: The Extraordinary Story of the Downed American Airmen Who Escaped to Safety in World War II

By Michael Lee Lanning. Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2021. 349 pp. Hardcover, EPUB. \$29.95. Hardcover ISBN 978-0-8117-3974-0.

When we think of United States airmen in the European theater during World War II, we may picture rugged veterans who flew numerous missions, or soldiers who were killed in combat or captured. Michael Lee Lanning's *The Blister Club* focuses on another compelling group of World War II-era Americans: those GIs who were forced to abandon or crash-land their aircraft in German-occupied territory and who managed to evade the enemy and escape to the United Kingdom. Lanning is a retired US Army lieutenant colonel who served for more than twenty years and has written over a dozen books about American military history, many of which focus on US Army personnel in the Vietnam War. *The Blister Club* is about "the ranks of young men who earned admittance to 'The Blister Club,' those who walked out of German-occupied western Europe" (p. 2). The book's title refers to the considerable discomfort suffered by airmen who were compelled to walk hundreds of miles to safety—sometimes wearing flight boots that were not designed for such an arduous ordeal—not to mention dealing with the injuries that many of them had sustained upon landing. These airmen then had to evade German soldiers and hostile civilians, find help among members of the local population, and make their way to the United Kingdom or other European nations unoccupied by Axis forces.

Lanning's writing style is clear, straightforward, and engaging, but what makes this book especially riveting is that these stories are told largely in the words of the airmen themselves in their Evasion and Escape (E&E) reports. Using archival materials located at the National Archives and the Air War College Library, Lanning starts most of his twenty-six chapters with an airman's E&E report and follows with a discussion of similar reports. Most of these documents begin with American and British classification status, report number and date, and the serviceman's name, rank, unit, home address, target, MIA date, and arrival date in the United Kingdom. The reports then include the names, roles, and ranks of all personnel in the aircraft before the narrative section of the report begins. Lanning uses these documents so that the narrators can tell the stories of their survival in their own words.

Early in the book, Lanning focuses on three major escape routes: the Pat O'Leary Line (which runs through central and eastern France to Spain), the Comet Line (which runs through western France to Spain), and the Shelburne Line (which runs westward through northern France and across the English Channel). Later

chapters cover various subjects, such as the airmen's footwear and escape aids kits, local people who helped these soldiers, German soldiers and pro-German locals, the French resistance movement, the atrocities inflicted on the airmen, and the hardships GIs endured while trying to cross the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain. Other chapters focus on specific countries (including Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Romania, Italy, and Yugoslavia) to which airmen made their way out of German-occupied territories and then to the United Kingdom after being forced to abandon their aircraft. Despite the hardships endured by these airmen, however, Lanning notes that their ability to evade the enemy and escape to safety was emphasized in training other airmen to give GIs hope that they might survive even if their planes were shot down (p. 13).

This book is not driven by a thesis; in this sense, it differs from typical academic historical studies. It also differs from most academic historiography in that it does not make a clear effort to situate itself within a scholarly discourse, in this case the history of US airmen in the European theater during World War II. The book's publisher, Stackpole Books, is a trade book press focusing on military history, so the lack of a thesis and the absence of a literature review should not be surprising. Rather than arguing a thesis, Lanning's purpose is to present the stories of the airmen. Lanning does not assume that his audience has more than a layperson's knowledge of this period in US military history, and, as a reader who has not read extensively on this topic, I found this book to be accessible. At the same time, it would be of interest to scholars who are well versed in the history of US Army Air Forces in the European theater of World War II. In particular, it offers details regarding the missions flown and the personnel involved, and it provides information regarding the escape networks for downed airmen as well as about local populations that supported the Allied forces or Axis forces. In addition, it includes information about the escape kits, purses, and footwear of the members of the flight crews.

In his two-page introduction, Lanning relates his encounter with an elderly rancher in a cemetery in his native West Texas who had been shot down in Yugoslavia during World War II and explains that the experience inspired this book and the research upon which it is based. After this introduction, the book opens with an airman's E&E report. On the one hand, this immersive beginning is an interesting way to plunge readers directly into dramatic action, but, on the other hand, readers may have benefited more from a conventional introduction that provides a historical framework. Although it is interesting to read a handful of the most compelling E&E reports in their entirety, too much of the book is taken up by these long blocks of text, and perhaps quoting excerpts from these records (which Lanning also does in each chapter after including the E&E report) would have been a better use of the material. The organization of this book is not its strongest feature, and

the sequence of chapters seems somewhat random. The chapter “Odds and Ends” is as miscellaneous as one might expect, though the narratives in this chapter are riveting and do demonstrate that the experiences of the downed airmen were wide ranging. The chapter “Humor and Religion” also seems like an odd combination of topics as well as a rather superfluous addition to the book.

Aside from the main body of the work, Lanning includes eight pages of illustrations, with mixed results. The two maps of escape routes throughout Europe help readers to visualize these routes, but the photos of US and German warplanes are unnecessary to readers who are familiar with such aircraft, and they add little to any reader’s understanding of the airmen’s stories. Lanning also includes an index that consists mostly of personal names. This would certainly be useful to researchers focused on specific airmen and to relatives of these servicemen; however, the paucity of subject headings makes the index less helpful for readers with a more topical interest who wish to read the book selectively. Other backmatter includes appendixes on American aircraft, German aircraft, and German anti-aircraft defense.

Lanning’s research is based on a combination of archival research and secondary sources. His bibliography includes nearly fifty book titles, eight articles published in periodicals, several websites, and a handful of documents. The archival sources fall into two categories. The first group consists of records in the War Department, US Forces, European Theater, Military Intelligence Service Escape and Evasion Section and Interview Section (MIS-X). These records are housed at the National Archives facility in College Park, Maryland. According to the National Archives catalog, the E&E reports and interviews consist of fifty-eight archival boxes (over twenty-five linear feet); Lanning notes that these records consist of about 43,000 pages (p. 2). Fortunately, the National Archives catalog includes digitized images of 2,953 file units from this record entry (mostly reports and certificates). The second group of archival materials consists of records from the Air War College Library at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. These records are not cited, except in the bibliography, and it seems that they are used only in the chapter on the Halyard Operation in Yugoslavia and the evasion of downed airmen there. Lanning cites the E&E report numbers clearly, but, unfortunately, much of the material taken from secondary sources is not formally cited. While casual readers may not be interested in such documentation, academic and professional researchers appreciate endnotes that allow them to seek more information from cited sources. In addition, the book may have benefited from the use of a wider archival context, such as German or French military and civilian documents (Lanning does include one intercepted German report from the MIS-X records), or British records documenting the arrival of these airmen in the United Kingdom that trace the presence of downed US airmen during the war.

Overall, the strength of *The Blister Club* lies in the stories of the courage, endurance, and humanity of American GIs during World War II. Lanning notes that “[t]he passing of the years has thinned the ranks of the evaders and their helpers” (p. 310), so the book is timely in preserving their stories. However, for readers who are looking for interpretation and documentation of historical documents relating to this subject, this book may fall short of their expectations.

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*National Archives and Records Administration*¹

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- ¹ The opinions expressed in this review do not represent the views of the National Archives and Records Administration.