

**A SECOND WAR BATTLE OF FRANCE 1940 ESCAPERS M.M. GUNNER, 23<sup>RD</sup> REGIMENT ROYAL ARTILLERY, 51<sup>ST</sup> HIGHLAND DIVISION, LATER 9 COMMANDO, WHO WAS TAKEN PRISONER ON THE DIVISIONS SURRENDER, 12 JUNE 1940. ESCAPING 3 DAYS LATER, HE WAS RECAPTURED AND ESCAPED AND WAS RECAPTURED A FURTHER 2 TIMES BEFORE CROSSING THE PYRENEES INTO SPAIN, BEING REPATRIATED AND LANDING IN LIVERPOOL 16 MAY 1941 AND WOULD LATER JOIN 9 COMMANDO.**



MILITARY MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '808757 GNR. G. STEPHENSON. R.A.'

M.M. *London Gazette* 26 August 1941: 'In recognition of distinguished services in the field.'

George W. Stephenson from Bishop Auckland, Co Durham, was a regular soldier serving with the 23rd Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, when the Second War broke out, having joined the Royal Artillery on 28 May 1937.

23rd Field Regiment Royal Artillery, consisting of 60, 89, 90 and 100th Batteries, served with 3 Infantry Division when it moved to France as part of the B.E.F. on 29 September 1939. It transferred to 51 (Highland) Infantry Division on 5 March 1940. Seeing heavy fighting with the French 10th Army during May and June 1940, 51st Division was cut off from the rest of the B.E.F. during the evacuation of Dunkirk. Heading initially to La Havre in the hope of evacuation from there, they were surrounded at St Valer-en-caux and after heavy fighting, the remnants of the Division surrendered on 12 June 1940 and Gunner Stephenson was taken prisoner. It was reported that just 1 Officer and 10 men from 23 Regiment made it back to England with remnants of the BEF. The following outstanding website gives a very large amount of detail on events:

[https://51hd.co.uk/history/valery\\_1940](https://51hd.co.uk/history/valery_1940)

Stephenson specifically says he was captured in a wood about 8 km from Le Harve but how it came that he was captured outside La Harve, which was 59 km from St Valery is not known; though it should make an interesting research project. 23rd Regiment were not Part of Ark Force that was cut off from the rest of the Division at La Havre on 10 June and were evacuated between 11 and 12 June. Presumably elements of the Division were spread out over a wide distance so this could be a reason or perhaps he escaped from nearer St Valery and was headed to La Havre when captured.

M.I.9(b)/S/P.O.(P) 319 MOST SECRET

The information contained in this report is to be treated as MOST SECRET

ACCOUNT OF ESCAPE OF  
808757 Gnr. STEPHENSON, G., 23 Fd. Bde., R.A.

<p>Captured: 12 June 40 Escaped: 25 Sept. 40 Left GIBALTAR 8 May 41 Arrived LIVERPOOL 16 May 41</p>	<p>Army Service: 6 yrs. (6 yrs. Reserve) Peacetime Profession: Driver Private Address: 16 Toft Hill, Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham. Layton, Blackpool, Lancs.</p>
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<p>1940 12 June LE HAVRE CAPTURE 16 June ESCAPE 28 July Recaptured LENS Imprisoned ARRAS 1 Aug. 2nd ESCAPE &amp; Recapture LILLE 25 Sept. FINAL ESCAPE</p> <p>1941 2 Feb. Demarcation Line Nr. CASTILLON Feb. MARSEILLES</p> <p>5 Apr. SPAIN</p>	<p>I was captured in a wood about 8 km. from LE HAVRE on 12 June 40. After three days on the march, seeing no guard near, I dropped into a wood. After some 4 km. I found a Frenchwoman who gave me clothing. I made my way across country to LENS, where I stayed six weeks with a Polish friend. On 28 July, owing to informants, my friend's house was searched. I was taken to ARRAS and set to wash dishes for the Germans. After three days I escaped, but was retaken before reaching LILLE. There I was made to work in a barracks for 10 frs. a day.</p> <p>I escaped by dropping into the back-yard of an adjoining house, and so into the street (25 Sept. 40). I then found asylum with a Frenchwoman at FACHES, a few Km. South of LILLE.</p> <p>I left FACHES on 26 Jan. 41 and crossed the Demarcation Line near CASTILLON on 2 Feb. 41.</p> <p>I then went to MARSEILLES by rail, staying first at the MISSION and then at ST. HYPOLITE-DU-FORT. I was told by a French soldier, invalided home from a German prison camp - "British P/W at his camp started work at 5 a.m. and were locked down in the mines until 9 p.m. on bread and water only." Unfortunately I am unable to remember the number or name of this camp.</p> <p>I left there on 5 Apr., crossed the PYRENEES, and arrived at BARCELONA, where the Consul gave me a ticket to MADRID. I was arrested in the train before arriving there. After 12 days in jail I was released and sent to GIBALTAR for repatriation.</p>
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INTERVIEWED by M.I.9. 18 May 41 APPENDIX A - List of Helpers

Distribution of this Report:- Distribution: M.I.6 [REDACTED]  
S.O.2. (Lt.-Col. A.M. ANSTRUTHER)

S.O.2. (Lt.-Col. A.M. ANSTRUTHER) APPENDIX B - Secret Intelligence

Distribution: D.D.I. (Org.)  
M.I.3(a)  
M.I.14(d)

Regardless, from being captured, Stephenson leaves details in his MI9 report, of escaping after a 3 day march. He then goes on to tell how he was recaptured at Lens on 28 July 1940 and imprisoned at Arras but escaped again 3 days but was recaptured again before he reached Lille. He escaped yet again on 25 September 1940, finding 'asylum with a Frenchwoman' in Faches, just outside Lille. He left Faches on 26 January 1941 and on 2 February 1942 crossed the demarcation line between Occupied France and Vichy France, near Castillon. He then headed to Marseilles by train. He then stayed at the Sailors Mission, Marseilles and then Hippolyte du Fort, leaving there on 5 April. St Hippolyte du Fort was a French prison near Nimes but Stephenson does not seem to have been imprisoned there, so its not clear why he was here but at this time the Vichy authorities seem to have been turning a blind eye to escapee's at this time. However he then crossed the Pyrenees before arriving at Barcelona. Given a ticket to Madrid by the Consul, he was arrested on the train before reaching there and was imprisoned for 12 days and was then sent to Gibraltar for repatriation to England. Gunner Stephenson arrived at Liverpool on 16 May 1941, 11 months after his initial capture, having spent the majority of that time on the run or in safe houses.

Some time later Stephenson joined 9 Commando, as noted on the superb commandoveterans website:

*"The death of Gnr. George W. Stephenson (No.9 Cdo) of Bristol, Avon., was announced in Commando Association newsletter 117 issued September 2003"*

<http://www.commandoveterans.org/GeorgeStephenson9Commando>

No other details are known regarding Stephenson's service with 9 Commando but presumably joined not long after returning to England. He was awarded a M.M. on 26 August 1941, almost certainly from escaping, as most non recommendation M.M.'s to escapers were; the MI9 reports themselves serving as recommendations.

## 9 COMMANDO

Again taken from the commandoveterans website:

*"No. 9 Commando was initially formed with No.11 Commando in July 1940 from Scottish Command. Their first commanding officer was Lt. Col. John Maclean 'Jack' Saegert, RE. Many original members of No.9 came from No's 6 and 7 independent Companies which had been raised in April 1940. No.9 became part of the 2nd Special Service Battalion in the autumn of 1940.*

*The unit did not wear a cap badge as such but while serving in the 2nd Special Service Battalion they wore a black hackle in a khaki Balmoral hat. When the Special Service Battalions were re-organized in March 1941, the unit reverted to its 9 Commando title. Their H.Q. at this time was at Criccieth, North Wales. They retained the Balmoral and black hackle which was transferred to the green beret when the latter was adopted in 1942.*

*Operation Sunstar -The first operational raid by the Commando was on the nights of 22nd/23rd November 1941 on the French coast at Houlgate. A successful landing and evacuation was effected without loss. After this raid Lt Col R Tod assumed command of the unit.*

*Operation Chariot -In March 1942 a small contingent of Commandos from No.9 took part in the famous St.Nazaire raid in support of No 2 Commando.*

*No.9 Commando were then called on to reinforce the garrison in Gibraltar during the lead up to the Torch landings in North Africa .The unit remained in Gibraltar until March 1943 after which it returned to the UK for refitting. After being posted to the Mediterranean and arriving there in November 1943 No 9 were in action again on the islands of Tremiti and Pianosa.*

*Operation Partridge - December 1943 in the river Garigliano area.*

*On 20 January 1944 No.9 Commando landed at Anzio and then was promptly withdrawn on the 25th to be deployed to the area of Monte Ornito. The Commando suffered heavy losses during the bitter fighting at Monte Ornito and Monte Faito.*

*2nd Anzio Landing - 3 March 1944 No.9 Commando were once again deployed to Anzio and it was here that Major Call led 5 troop, now only half strength due to casualties at Monte Ornito, in a successful bayonet charge against a much larger force of German paratroopers.*

*Operation X - Anzio beachhead 19 March 1944 No.9 were tasked with clearing three Wadis about half a mile from the perimeter of the beachhead. With his Commando strength severely depleted Lt Col. Tod reformed the Troops into three Squadrons. Fighting was brutal and often at close quarter. No.9 Commando had 73 casualties killed, wounded, or missing*

*After this No.9 Commando was withdrawn to Naples, and then onto Molfetta. The next few months were spent rebuilding the Commando from replacements sent from the UK already Commando trained, and when there no more available, from volunteers from Regiments operating in North Africa and the Central Mediterranean. These then had to undergo their training from the Commando training group that had been formed in Italy.*

*Other operations by No 9 included Operation Darlington 11 May 1944, and Operation 'Gradient' August 1944. This latter operation featured men on bicycles attacking a garrison. The garrison did not exist so a local telephone exchange was ransacked instead !*

*Later No 9 Commando operated in Greece before returning to Italy for its last engagement at Commachio and Argenta in April 1945."*



Condition suspension re-pinned and edge bruising. A most interesting medal and story, certainly worthy of further detailed research.