The Comète escape line was completely disrupted in June of 1943 due to a number of arrests by the Germans. The entire leadership of the Belgian sector and sector “France” were taken prisoner. These arrests were caused by the infiltration of Jacques Désoubrie (alias “Jean Masson” or “Pierre Poulain”) into Comète. At the time, Jean-François Nothomb DSO, alias “Franco,” was the only person the British authorities trusted and he took over command of the line. He led it from June 1943 to January 1944. Nothomb reorganized the escape line with the help of Count Jacques Le Grelle, alias “Lewis,” who had been sent to Paris by M.I.9 (Military Intelligence 9) and Belgian State Security.

Albert Mattens

The goal of the “Lewis” mission was recruiting, financial support (250,000 Belgian Francs of which 75% was paid by the British authorities) and the reorganization of the escape line. Albert Mattens (Figure 1), alias “Jean-Jacques”, became responsible for the section Frontière Nord and received help from some of the line’s principal guides, namely: Odile de Vasselot, Henriette Hanotte MBE, Amanda Stassart KMC. Under his leadership crossing points were set up at Sivry-Sars Potteries, Erquennes-Bavay, Rûmes-Bachy, Hertain-Camphain, Beaumont-Maubeuge, Quévy-Aulnois and Bohan.

Towards the end of 1943, Albert Mattens attempted to evacuate downed allied aircrew from Brittany with the co-operation of Comète. Because of arrests this could not be done and “Jean-Jacques” himself was arrested in January 1944. Due to his and his group’s help, 151 aircrew members, nine agents from the Comète-line and five agents from other organizations had been evacuated. A further seven citizens had also managed to reach Spain via the Pyrenees.

After several more arrests, escape via France to Spain became seemingly impossible in 1944. As a result M.I.9 and State Security set up camps in the area of Châteaudun and the Belgian Ardennes. The organization ‘Marathon’ was born. The camps near Châteaudun were led by Baron J. de Blommaert DSO (alias “Rutland”) and Squadron Leader Boussa DFC, MC (alias “Belgrave”). Albert Ancia MC, Gaston Mattheys OBE and Yvon Michiels MC controlled the organization of the camps in the Ardennes near Beffe, Villiance, Acremont, Porcheresse, Bellevaux and Bohan, which were led by several Belgians. Most of the helpers at the camps were presented with the King’s Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom (KMC) or the British Empire Medal (BEM) for their meritorious support of the Allies. In total, some 230 pilots were hidden in these camps, approximately 130 of them in Châteaudun.

The Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) initially recommended Albert Mattens for the King’s Medal for Courage in 1946 but after re-examining the case, they strongly recommended him for the George Medal, or the Distinguished Conduct Medal if that was considered more appropriate as Albert Mattens held military rank. The main reason for the change in recommendation was the fact that Mme. Hanotte, one of his principal guides and responsible for convoyering some fifty evaders across the Franco-Belgian frontier on three of the routes formed by Mattens, had received the award of the MBE.

**THE GEORGE MEDAL AWARDED TO BELGIANS**

PETER VERSTRAETEN AND WILLY LIPPENS

Figure 1: Albert Mattens and his George Medal.
The DMI felt that it would be unfair if Sgt. Mattens didn’t receive a higher award and they consequently used the newly proposed citation of the Distinguished Conduct Medal for the George Medal award (Figure 2). After consulting the Belgian authorities, King George VI agreed on the award on July 30, 1947 and Albert was presented with his George Medal on January 11, 1949.

He returned to Belgium and four months later was working for an important Evasion Line. This period, the middle of 1943, will be well remembered as the height of the Gestapo activity against Evasion lines and Sgt. Mattens was given the task of reforming the very important Brussels-Paris link in the line.

By December he had perfected and was controlling seven different routes from Brussels to Paris and was himself conveying an average of sixteen evaders per week between the two capitals. Many times during these conveyances his refusal to desert an evader in difficulties led him to the brink of arrest, but his superb knowledge of the Germans, the speed of his reactions and his personal determination resulted in the loss of not one of his evaders.

Until the time of his arrest, in January 1944, Sgt. Mattens had conveyed one hundred and sixty Allied evaders from Brussels to Paris, but of equal significance is the fact that the seven routes organized by him were so well organized that they continued to function smoothly even immediately after his arrest.

Sgt. Mattens’ record of arduous and endurance for the Allied Cause is worthy of the highest praise. He made a substantial contribution to the allied victory in the number of lives he saved, always remembering that the whole of his Evasion activities were carried out in a highly dangerous zone and that the penalty, if captured, would be, inevitably, death. His personal example of dauntless service is outstanding.

Escape activities were a family business. Her husband, Fernand, who worked as an interpreter in the German Kommandeur in Baylet, picked up information about German activity in the area. Together with his wife he watched over the evaders on the Bayonne station and their daughter Janine De Greef KMC conveyed several pilots. Their son Frédéric (Freddy) helped his father with making false documents for the evaders. About 360 people, including 287 allied pilots, were safely escorted over the Pyrenees between the first use of the route and July 13, 1944.

Elvire made four trips over the Pyrenees with secret information about the German troops. After the Normandy invasion when it became nearly impossible to lead pilots via the escape route into Spain, Janine was taken there for her safety.

One of her heroic deeds was the rescue of Florentino, her principal guide, from hospital in Bayonne. Florentino had been shot a month managed particularly for the organization in the Pyrenees the safe houses (resting places) and contacts with the principal guide, Florentino.

Elvire De Greef-Berlémont

Mme. De Greef (Figure 3), alias “Aunt Go” or “GoGo,” was the principal coordinator at the crossing of the Pyrenees, Comète-sector “France-South,” and was stationed in Anglet-lez-Bayonne (Pyrenees). Through Mr. Apper, Secretary of the Société Générale in Brussels, and Arnold Deppé, she came into contact with Comète. She
after D-day while crossing the Bidassoa river with secret information for the allies. “Aunt Go” tricked her way into visiting him in hospital. The same day, members of the French resistance, disguised as Gestapo agents, stormed into his room. Fernand provided a false document to get Florentino released and “their prisoner” was taken to a safe house in area of Anglet. Her George Medal is shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: The obverse of Mme. DeGreef-Berlémont’s George Medal.

Aline Lily Dumont

Aline Lily Dumont (Figure 6), alias “Michou,” was one the most important agents in the Comète line from 1943 onwards. Due to her knowledge of, and connections with, the intelligence services such as “Marc,” “Clarence” and “Bayard,” she was able to gather evaders from several services to Brussels and help them escape to Spain.

Between December 1943 and May 1944 she led ten people in two trips to the south of France, crossing the Pyrenees twice. On May 10, 1944 she was forced to suspend her activities and arrived in London on June 22. She had by then assisted no fewer than 150 pilots.¹

M.I.9 asked her to enter the “Retriever” secret services. Known as “Mrs. Hawkins,” and with “Mrs. Robson” (alias for Mrs. Hanotte, MBE) they were the only Belgian women, to receive special SOE-retriever training in Great Britain. They both achieved excellent results in their training, especially with the use of coded messages. At the end of their course the allies had already reached Brussels and SOE decided not to drop them in Belgium. Nevertheless, she was one of our most courageous female agents of World War II, also known as the famous “Lily.”

Lily was at first recommended for gazetting as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) (Figure 7), but after reconsidering her file, the Directorate of Military Intelligence decided to propose her for the George Medal (Figure 8), a similar procedure as used for the award presented to Mme. De Greef.

Figure 6: Aline Lily Dumont.

Figure 5: The Reverse of Mme. DeGreef-Berlémont’s George Medal.
In April 1941 Andrée De Jongh (“Dédée”) (Figure 9) and Arnold Deppé decided to attempt getting allied pilots to Great Britain. In June 1941, Arnold Deppé made a reconnaissance run. From Brussels, he travelled via Lille (France), Corbie-sur-Somme and Paris to Anglet-Bayonne in the Pyrenees. He came back convinced that the evacuation was possible. The first escape trip was made in August, but Spanish agents stopped the Belgians that Deppé and Dédée were leading across. Finally, at the end of August, Andrée managed to lead the first “passengers” over the Franco-Spanish border. Deppé, on the other hand, was unsuccessful and was arrested with six Belgian officers.

Through Mr. Aracama, a Basque who worked for the Belgian and British Intelligence Services, she came into contact with the British consulate in Bilbao. She attempted to get support for her project with the help of Vice-Consul A. Dean. After a few days she got the green light. Cresswell, an officer from M.I.9 and an attaché to the British Embassy in Madrid, after deliberations and a report to London, confirmed the cooperation and a verbal agreement was reached: (1) the Line will help British nationals and, exceptionally, Belgians; (2) the British consulate in Bilbao will arrange transport to Gibraltar; and (3) a sum of 3200 pesetas will be paid to the guides for every British subject that is brought over the Pyrenees.

Between August 1941 and her arrest in January 1943, Andrée De Jongh crossed the Pyrenees no fewer than 20 times bringing 118 American and British aircrew over into Spain. With her father, Frédéric De Jongh, she led the line. After her father’s arrest on June 7, 1943, Jean-François Nothomb DSO took over responsibility until his...
Nothomb DSO took responsibility until his own arrest on January 18, 1944. Andrée received the George Medal at Buckingham Palace and her escapades were well publicized in England.

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Endnote:
1. The recommendation for the George Medal mentions 250 evaders. Her personal file in the US National Archives, concerning the Medal of Freedom with Gold Palm award, indicates 150 evaders.

Sources:
- Personal archives of Countess Andrée De Jongh, Mrs. Aline A. Dumont and Mrs. Janine De Greef
- The Archives of Ceges-Soma section Belgian State Security World War II, Brussels
- The National Archives, Kew, London