

## **Introduction to French Culture and Geography for Beginners with *Under a War-Torn Sky***

### **Background**

*Under a War-Torn Sky* recounts the journey of an American airman downed in France and his harrowing journey home, aided by members of the French Resistance. Hundreds of US aviators helped by thousands of French citizens were saved from Nazi prison camps or worse. Making it out of Occupied France was extraordinarily dangerous. Airmen were in a country they didn't know surrounded by people whose language they didn't understand. They often had to make split decisions about whether to trust someone and they had to be clever to avoid detection by the large number of German soldiers and Gestapo roaming the French countryside. The difference between life and death often came down to how quickly an airman could adapt to the language, social cues, and customs of a new country, in other words: how well they could communicate.

These lessons use *Under a War-Torn Sky* and primary source documents from the Second World War to teach beginner French students introductory phrases as well as French culture and geography. They also serve to attune students to subtle cultural differences and non-verbal modes of communication they will need to master as they learn French.

## Lesson 1

*Soon he heard the rush of water. A seething waterfall crashed through the gorge to a bottom Henry couldn't see. A hundred steps farther he came to a great heap of rocks that had tumbled down in a crushing avalanche of stone. He scrambled over it, knocking loose a slide of pebbles into the abyss. Henry stopped to catch his breath and calm his heart, racing with thinner air and the precariousness of his perch.*

*He could tell he was descending the Alps, heading southwest. He had tried to memorize a map of France at Madame's. He was probably in the Vercors—hundreds of miles still from the Pyrenees and the border of Spain. Henry had no idea what his destination was tonight. He had not been told.*

*Under a War-Torn Sky, Ch. 11, pp 108-109*

One of the key skills an airman had to master to get across France to safety was how to read the map of France. He would also have to figure out how to live off the land as there would be few safe places to stop for food between the front and the Pyrenees. In this lesson, students will learn about the geography of France and the major foods and agricultural products of its regions.

### Sources

1. *Carte des lignes de rapatriement*, published by the Belgian Ministry of Defense, repr. by Air Force Escape and Evasion Society (AFEES)
  - a. <https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lignes-de-Rapatriement-Pendant-lOccupation-from-Belg-Min-of.jpg>
2. *Carte régions de France*, www.Cartes-2-France.com
  - a. <http://www.cartes-2-france.com/carte-france-departements-villes.php>

### Lesson Plan

1. Distribute Appendix 1 to students. Go over the vocabulary for reading a map. Explain that the lines on the *Carte des lignes de rapatriement* represented rough indications of where downed airmen should walk to make it from the battlefield to Spain, where they could safely rejoin the military. If possible, use Google Maps to search for walking directions from Lille to Madrid. This will show how many hours the trip took (293), how far it was (1,418 km), and how much climbing was involved (9 km uphill, 8.4 km downhill).
2. Divide students into groups and assign each group a city from the following list: Lille, Amiens, Paris, Tours, Limoges, Angoulême, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Lyon, Dijon, Chalons
3. Ask students to find their city on the *Carte des lignes de rapatriement*. Then show them the *Carte régions de France*. Tell students to find their city on the map and identify what region it's in. Test vocabulary from Appendix 1 by asking students to describe the position of their city (dans l'est, au sud de... etc.). Ask students to name the rivers an airman would have to cross between Lille and Pau.
4. Assignment: Each group will present a short (3-5 minute) presentation on the region in which their city is found. The presentation should include the principal geographic features of the region, the local agricultural products, and the dishes the region is best

known for. Ask students to look up whether the region was part of la France libre or la France occupée during the Second World War. If students have time and are interested, they can also discuss other aspects of the region's history.

- a. There are a variety of websites that list the local foods for each region. They include:
  - i. <http://agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/en-region/>
  - ii. [www.fr.wikipedia.org](http://www.fr.wikipedia.org)
  - iii. <https://www.regal.fr/regions/specialites-regionales-tour-de-france-des-saveurs-12057>
  - iv. <http://les-departements.fr/specialites-regionales.html>
  - v. <http://www.tourisme-nordpasdecalais.fr/Gastronomie-regionale>
  - vi. <http://www.hautsdefrance.fr/categorie/dossiers/manger-local/>
  - vii. <https://www.iledefrance.fr/toutes-les-actualites/l-ile-de-france-une-region-plus-agricole-qu-on-ne-le-croit>
  - viii. <http://www.regioncentre-valdeloire.fr/accueil/ma-region-et-moi/une-chance-pour-tous/agriculture.html>
  - ix. <https://www.nouvelle-aquitaine.fr/territoire/notre-nouveau-territoire.html#Agriculture-terroirs-et-savoir-faire-de-qualit%C3%A9>
  - x. <https://grandest.chambre-agriculture.fr/votre-chambre/lagriculture-du-grand-est/lessentiel-a-retenir/>
  - xi. <http://www.auvergne-rhone-alpes-gourmand.fr/produits>
  - xii. <https://www.laregion.fr/Profil-geographique-et-administratif-du-territoire>
  - xiii. <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/bourgogne-franche-comte/bourgogne-franche-comte-terre-agriculture-elevage-1202689.html>
- b. After the presentations ask students which of the regions they'd like to visit today. Which one would have been best for a stranded pilot? Which would have been worst? Why?

## Lesson 2

“Mercy buckets,” Henry said, purposefully mispronouncing *merci beaucoup*, French for “thank you very much,” with absolutely the worst southern drawl he could muster.

The little boy laughed an honest laugh at the country hick accent. Then he asks, “Êtes-vous pilote?”

“Yes, a pilot.”

“The child repeated pilot, rolling the English around in his mouth to get the feel of it. “Petit ou grand avion?”

“Grand,” Henry answered. “Big planes. Bombers.”

Henry saw a shadow cross the child’s face.

*Under a War-Torn Sky*, Ch. 12, pp. 117-118

In Chapter 12 of *Under a War-Torn Sky*, Henry is taken care of by a young French boy and his family. Henry has to remember key French words like *eau* and *merci* to get necessary supplies from the family, but he also has to work out the dynamics between the boy and his grandfather and the attitude of the town so he can figure out whom he can trust and how best to ask for what he needs.

### Sources

1. Excerpts from *Lessons in Escape*, a collection of first-hand escape accounts distributed to American airmen providing advice from previous escapers on how to survive, reproduced by Air Force Escape & Evasion Society (AFEES)
  - a. [https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_11.jpg](https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_11.jpg)
  - b. [https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_17.jpg](https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_17.jpg)
  - c. [https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_18.jpg](https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_18.jpg)
  - d. [https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_19.jpg](https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_19.jpg)
  - e. [https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_20.jpg](https://i1.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_20.jpg)
  - f. [https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival\\_Page\\_38.jpg](https://i2.wp.com/airforceescape.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Power-of-Survival_Page_38.jpg)

### Lesson Plan

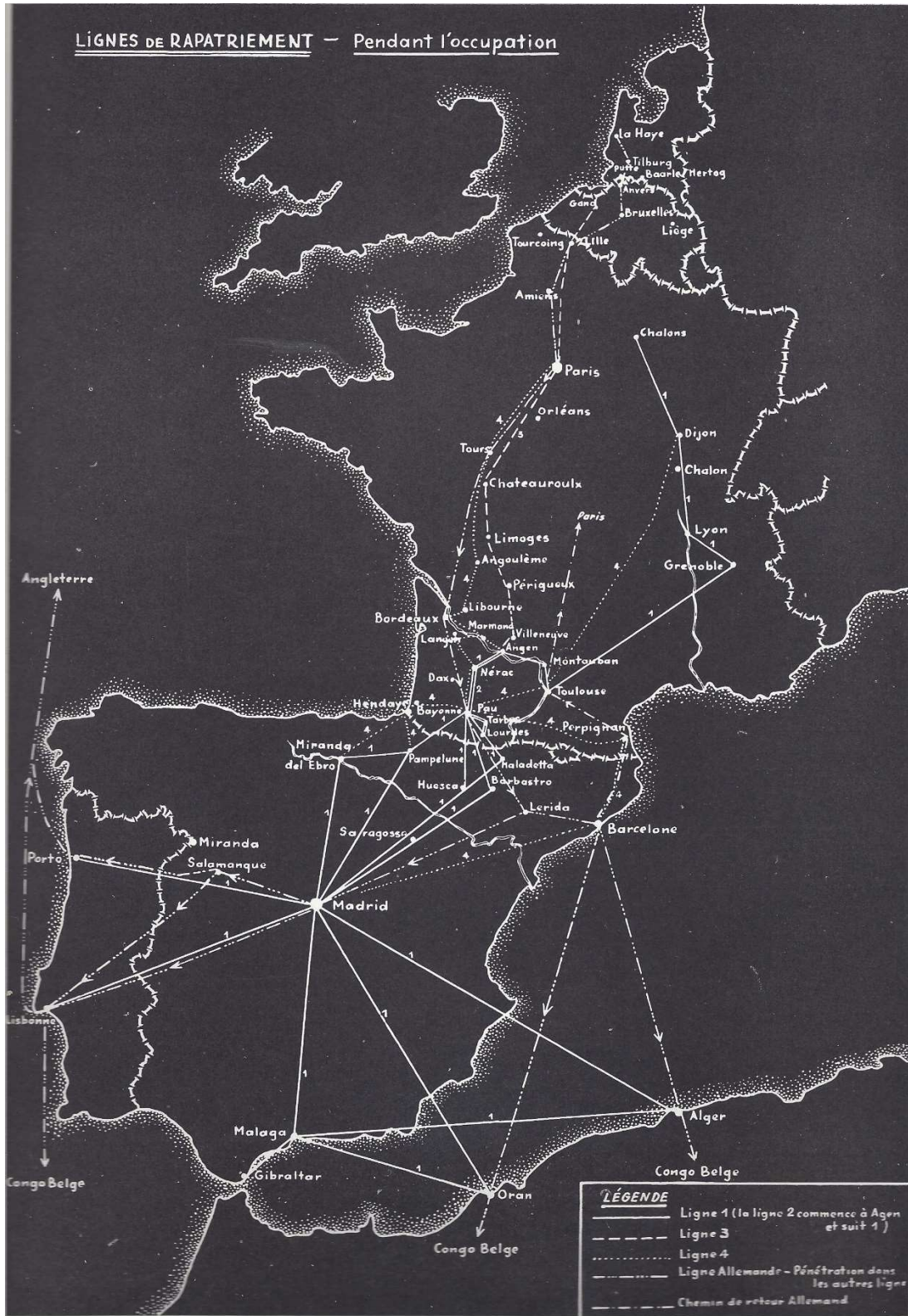
1. Begin by placing students in groups and asking them to brainstorm what supplies would be necessary for a downed airman. What does Henry rely on in *Under a War-Torn Sky*? What things do they use each day as part of their daily routine? (This can work as a vocab review.) Ask them to list items in French.
2. Distribute Appendix 2 to students, an inventory of supplies provided to US airmen in case they were shot down. Compare this list with the ones produced by the groups. What items are missing? Discuss why items they didn’t think of were given to airmen (e.g. chewing gum or the stimulant Benzadrine). What are the necessary things on their list

that weren't distributed to airmen and that the airmen would thus have to forage for themselves, e.g. food, clean clothes? Ask students where they would get those supplies, keeping in mind that modern conveniences like the supermarket didn't exist.

3. Distribute printed copies of the excerpts from *Lessons in Escape* to each group. Ask them to read them together and make a list of the advice given. Tell them to pay particular attention to advice related to French customs and culture (e.g. French men are all clean-shaven so carry a razor, don't say 'yeah' because it sounds like the German 'ja').
4. Discuss the documents with students in English. Ask what stands out to them. Is there anything they would add? Ask if they've ever been to a foreign country and, if so, if they stood out for any reason. If you have students from immigrant families and you and they are comfortable with it, ask what's different between American culture and their family's. What makes them feel like outsiders? You can also ask students if they've ever felt like they stood out in a social situation in their own country (attending dinner at someone else's house, going to the ballet, joining a club, etc.). Ask students to define 'customs.'
5. In their groups, ask students to compile their own French phrasebook of the most important words and phrases to use when stranded in the French countryside.
6. Divide the class into groups. Students from one group will play the stranded airman; those in the other will play French peasants. Provide students in the first group with Appendix 3-A. The handout is in English, but they can brainstorm vocabulary with their group and they are allowed to use the phrasebook they wrote in Part 5. Provide students in the second group with Appendix 3-B which describes their home and day-to-day life. Allow the groups to study the documents together and brainstorm for five minutes. Then place them in pairs with one student from each group and let them act out the scene. No English is allowed, but if students get stuck, encourage them to use gestures, sounds, and sign language to get their point across.
7. After the exercise, discuss what happened (in French or English). What did they feel? Frustration? Fear? Excitement? How did they communicate when they didn't know all the words? What was their partner's body language like? Were they confused at any points? Explain to students that many French people collaborated with the Nazis and would turn in Americans to the Gestapo. Ask how they could have known that the person they were talking to was friendly? What would they have done if they weren't sure?
8. How is this scenario relevant for their learning French today? Focus less on politics than on the importance of body language and the variety of tools available for communication. You can discuss how things like food and hospitality function can break down language barriers. You can discuss what the language barrier actually is: what is it a barrier around? What is it keeping us away from?
9. As a follow-on activity, you can show students the French website, *Do You Speak Touriste?* This resource was prepared by the Paris city council to help French business owners avoid cultural faux pas with tourists from different nationalities. The guide is in French and, while it is full of stereotypes, it serves much the same function today that the Escape Guides served for WWII airmen.

- a. <http://www.doyouspeaktouriste.fr/americains.php>

# Appendix 1



## Comment lire une carte en français

Où est... ? – where is... ?

Une carte – a map

Une boussole – a compass

Le nord – north

L'est – east

Le sud – south

L'ouest – west

Au nord de/à l'est de/au sud de/à l'ouest de – to the north of etc.

Dans le sud – in the south

Vers le sud-ouest – towards the southwest

La légende – the legend

Un point – a point

Une ligne – a line

S'orienter – to orient oneself

Se repérer – to get one's bearings

La position – position

La distance – distance

Un lieu – a place

Un endroit – a place

Un kilomètre – a kilometer

L'échelle – scale

Une montagne – a mountain

Un fleuve – a river

Une rivière – a stream

Un champ – a field

Un pré – a meadow

Une route – a road (usually applies between cities)

Une rue – a road (usually applies within cities)

Une forêt – a forest

Un lac – a lake

Un bois – woods, a wooded area

Une vallée – a valley

Un marais – a marsh/swamp

Une mer – a sea

Un océan – an ocean

Une ville – a city

Une région – a region

## Appendix 2

### Examples of Escape Aids Used by an American Airman

The Appendix D of the Escape and Evasion Report of 2nd Lt. Tom Applewhite, USAF, consists of a questionnaire that he completed asking him about his use of the various escape aids provided.

#### The **Aids Box** contained the following:

- Horlicks tablets.
- Chocolate.
- Milk (tube).
- Benzadrine tablets (fatigue).
- Halazone tablets (water purifier).
- Matches.
- Adhesive tape.
- Chewing gum.
- Water bottle.
- Compass.

#### The **Purse** held the following:

- Maps. (See next page of website for Cloth Maps.)
- Compass.
- File (hacksaw).
- Foreign currency.

#### Issued separately from the above were the **Aids to Escape (Gadgets):**

- Compass – The questionnaire lists seven types: Round, Stud, Swinger, Fly-Button, Pencil Clip, Tunic Button, and Pipe.
- Pouch.
- Special flying boots (and knife).



## Appendix 3-A

### Downed Aviator

You're an aviator in the American Air Force. Your plane was shot down by German forces over France and you survived thanks to your parachute. You are now lost outside a village in the countryside and you need help. When you meet a French person, communicate the following things to them. Remember that they don't speak any English so you won't be allowed to use any in this exercise. Use your phrasebook, gestures, and whatever else you can think of to communicate.

- 1) Explain who you are.
- 2) Ask for food and water.
- 3) Ask for new clothes. You can't walk around in an American uniform.
- 4) Ask if they have a toilet you can use.
- 5) Ask where the front line is and how to get to the nearest safe zone. You know that if you make it to Spain you will be safe.
- 6) Ask if there are German patrols in the area and where you should go next.

## Appendix 3-B

### **Paysan(ne) français(e)**

Vous êtes français(e) et vous habitez la campagne. Vous avez une petite maison avec une ferme. Les Nazis ont tué votre père et vous les détestez. Vous espérez que les Alliés libèrent votre pays. Vous avez déjà aidé un aviateur américain à s'échapper, mais c'est dangereux. Vous savez que les Allemands tuent des gens pour cela. Il y a une rivière près de votre maison avec de l'eau potable. Vous avez toujours faim parce qu'il n'y a pas beaucoup de nourriture, mais il y a un pommier derrière la maison et vous avez du fromage. Dans le village il y a une femme qui travaille avec la Résistance. Elle s'appelle Martine. Elle habite la maison à côté de la librairie. Il y a des patrouilles chaque matin et chaque soir dans le village, mais ils ne passent jamais dans les bois.

Lexique :

Habiter – to live in/inhabit  
La campagne – countryside  
Une ferme – a farm  
Tuer – to kill  
Détester – to hate  
Espérer – to hope  
Les Alliés – the Allies  
Libérer – to liberate  
Le pays – the country  
S'échapper – to escape  
Une rivière – a stream  
Près de – near  
L'eau potable – drinkable water  
La nourriture – food  
Un pommier – an apple tree  
Le fromage – cheese  
Travailler avec – to work with  
La librairie – the book store  
Les patrouilles – patrols  
Le matin – the morning  
Le soir – the evening  
Passer – to pass through  
Les bois – the woods  
Il y a... – there is/are...

These lessons were written by Dr. Macs Smith. Dr. Smith holds a Ph.D. in French from Princeton University and is currently the Hamilton Junior Research Fellow in French at the Queen's College, Oxford. He has taught French from the beginner to advanced level and in 2017 won his department's prize for best graduate student teacher in French. He was born in Virginia and is a close friend of L.M. Elliott.

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