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‘A Jolly Romp We Were Always Destined to Win’: The BBC’s *’Allo ’Allo!* and British Memories of Downed Aircrew in Occupied France during the Second World War

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The long-running BBC sitcom, ’Allo ’Allo!*, has been thoroughly criticised for its use of various racial, gendered and sexualised tropes, not to mention its cynical view of the French experience of the Second World War. This article, however, reassesses the programme in light of what it highlights about the lived experience of Anglo-American airmen who were forced to bale from their planes over Occupied France. It uses the comedic aspects of the programme to investigate escape and evasion training, the use of language, ‘fitting in’ and the prominence of peasants in the wartime lives of Anglo-American aircrews in France. The programme, rather than being just another example of Gaullophobia, accurately represents some elements of the Second World War in France. In addition, changes in the plot over its nine seasons suggest that the sitcom reflects broader British concerns, as well as the Anglo-French relationship.*

When Thomas Harvell, a Royal Air Force (RAF) flight engineer, was shot down over Occupied France in 1944 he spoke no French and had little knowledge of French customs. His habit of chewing gum (not something the French were doing in 1944) and his tendency to ride a bicycle on the wrong side of the road put him in danger of being captured by the French police or German forces. However, Harvell was able to secure help after he decided that rather than head towards the Normandy coast, where the Allied forces had just landed, he would join the resistance. Harvell went into Landresse, a town in eastern France, where he was given the armband of the French Forces of the Interior, the resistance forces united under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle and fake identity cards.

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When Harvell reminisced about these experiences nearly fifty years after the fact, he told the Imperial War Museum interviewer, with a laugh, that he went to René's café in Landresse. The interviewer asked him if he was referring to the well-known sitcom, *'Allo 'Allo!* which was set in a café owned by a man named René, to which Harvell answered 'oddly enough, it was exactly the same'.[1] While the explicit reference to the programme is unusual, the fact that Anglo-American aircrews reminisced about events that bore a striking similarity to the fictional ones in *'Allo 'Allo!* is far less so. The 1980s sitcom reflected a re-picturing of the Second World War that was occurring simultaneously in popular British culture and in individual memories of war experiences. This re-picturing was part of a trend that emphasised non-elite groups and deemphasised traditional military heroics, in television and film productions after the 1970s,[2] a trend that would eventually manifest in scholarly reconsiderations of the war experience as well. The experiences of evaders and their civilian helpers, as depicted in the sitcom, were recognisable to Britons, even though the comedic aspects of the programme meant that it did not deal meaningfully with the more traumatic elements of the war experience, either in France or in Britain.

Despite the fact that it was one of the longest running and most successful BBC programmes, *'Allo 'Allo!* tends to be discussed both by scholars and cultural commentators with a rather hefty dose of derision and scorn.[3] One American reviewer of the programme noted that there was no reason to watch it, as 'it really is in bad taste', although he then goes on to note that 'it may not matter, somewhere there's an audience'.[4] Jürgen Kamm has argued that 'instead of employing comedy . . . to uncover the absurdities of warfare or the specific conditions of a country under military occupation *'Allo 'Allo* focuses on getting as much mileage as possible out of farcical constellations without ever touching upon the serious aspects of the Second World War'.[5] With eighty-five regular episodes, airing from 1982 to 1992, and multiple special episodes and theatrical spin-offs, *'Allo 'Allo!* certainly did find an audience. While reception is hard to measure, the Broadcasters Audience Research Board set *'Allo 'Allo!* in the top ten programmes in 1988, with 17.05 million viewers at the end of December.[6] The programme was also nominated four years in a row for Best Comedy Series at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards, from 1986–1989.[7] Even more recently, in a poll conducted by the BBC, the programme

[1] Imperial War Museum interview, Thomas Henry Harvell, catalogue number 11766, 10 Jan. 1991.

[2] Wendy Webster, '"Rose-tinted Blighty": Gender and Genre in *Land Girls*', in Michael Paris, ed., *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 14.

[3] Two outspoken critics suggested that the programme had no saving grace and they generally found the programme 'wearisome'. Bruce Crowther and Mike Pinfold, as cited in Simon Morgan Russell, *Jimmy Perry and David Croft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 49.

[4] John Corry, 'Britain's "'Allo, 'Allo," A New Comedy Series.', *New York Times*, 10 Apr. 1987.

[5] Jürgen Kamm, 'World War II in British TV Comedy', in Wolfgang Görtschacher and Holger Klein, eds., *Modern War on Stage and Screen* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 277.

[6] http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/since-1981/1988/top10 (last visited 2 Feb. 2016).

[7] See the BAFTA awards website for the history of the nominees and winners. http://awards.bafta.org/explore (last visited 2 Feb. 2016).

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was voted number thirteen in a list of Britain's best sitcoms.[8] As 'execrable' as it might seem to some scholars, the programme was indeed very popular among British audiences.

Set in France during the Second World War, the sitcom follows the antics of a small-town café owner, René Artois, his wife Edith and their waitresses as they deal with German troops, the Gestapo and several arms of the French resistance. The central plot that runs through the various series revolves around hiding a painting, *The Fallen Madonna* by Van Klomp, from Hitler so that it can be sold after the war. The humour, however, relies on physical gags and sexual innuendos. Ranging from a Gestapo officer who likes to wear ladies' underwear (Herr Flick), to a German army Lieutenant who seems attracted to René (Lieutenant Gruber), to the servers who exchange sexual favours for commodities (their names, Yvette Carte-Blanche, Mimi Labonq and Maria Recamier[9] literally embody the sexual humour of the programme), the characters and the jokes are undeniably bawdy.

The programme is replete with stereotypes about gender, sexuality and race, to name only a few. However, the few scholars who take the programme as a serious starting point for research have noted that *'Allo 'Allo!* is a programme *about* stereotypes, rather than simply being stereotypical.[10] While not wishing to ignore the crass elements of the programme, this article will focus on some surprising ways *'Allo 'Allo!* offers insight into the wartime experience in France, particularly in sketching out the relationship between French citizens and downed Allied aircrews.[11] By looking at the programme in the light of evasion reports written during the war, as well as post-war memories of evasion, this article will focus on the intersection of fiction and memory in the 1980s. First, however, it is important to underscore what the programme was *not* attempting to do. *'Allo 'Allo!* was not, perhaps contrary to first impressions, another manifestation of Francophobia. If the programme highlights any aspect of national stereotyping, it is one that is more reflective of British attitudes towards Europe generally, as opposed to France specifically. Similarly, although it is common to speak of the programme's representation of the French resistance, we must address the fact that it is not *the* French Resistance which is represented, but rather facets of resistance in France that had little to do with the military ethos of the organised Gaullist Resistance. Even though we see clearly identifiable resistance groups in *'Allo 'Allo!*, including the Gaullists and the Communists, the programme treats them as escape and evasion networks, a choice that was far safer, as it meant that the complex political situation of the organised Resistance did not need to be

[8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/top11to100.shtml (website no longer active).

[9] Recamier's name could be a reference to the sofa (Récamier), which is much like a chaise longue, but with two raised ends.

[10] Ginette Vincendeau, 'The French Resistance Through British Eyes: From 'Allo 'Allo! To Charlotte Gray', in Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley, eds., *Je T'aime . . . Moi Non Plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations*, (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 240.

[11] The programme only portrayed British aircrews, but their experiences were remarkably similar to those of American crews. Additionally, the two organisations that helped aircrew evade capture – MI9 and MIS-X – had goals and methods that were indistinguishable from one another, which is why I have chosen to include some American archival material.

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addressed. What the sitcom *did* do was to present a parody of another well-known programme, *Secret Army* (1977–1979), and, by using stock characters that were easily recognisable, it both helped shape and was itself shaped by memories of the British and French experiences during the war.

A superficial viewing of the programme would suggest that it takes particular aim at the French, and specifically the French experience of the Second World War. Aside from two older men, Monsieur Alfonse (with the 'dicky ticker' – a heart problem) and Monsieur Leclerc (noted forger and safe cracker), René is the only recurrent male French character in the programme. He is cowardly, clearly hoping to save his own skin, as he walks a fine line between resistance and collaboration. He neither wants to help the resistance, nor the Germans, but is too afraid of reprisals from both sides to stop assisting them. In some ways, he is akin to the main character in Louis Malle's film, *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) – there is no ideological commitment behind his behavior; luck, happenstance, self-preservation and threats of violence drive most of René's activities. In fact, most men in the programme are portrayed in a rather poor light. A striking example of their purported cowardice can be found in one episode from series five which shows the attempted murder of a French collaborationist General.[12] The General is originally thought to be dead and René refuses to go near the body. When his wife Edith makes an impassioned speech to the clientele of the café, telling them how the General has been murdered by the brave resistance and noting that they now need help disposing of the body, the men who had previously been enjoying their meals stampede out of the café. No man in the place is 'brave' enough to deal with the aftermath of resistance activities. Additionally, all resistance members in the programme – both Gaullist and Communist[13] – are women, a signal that, in combination with René's cowardice, has allowed Ginette Vincendeau, a film scholar who has written on the subject of British cinematic representations of the French resistance, to argue that the French were feminised by these depictions in the sitcom, which, in turn, reinforced the virility of the British.[14]

[12] 'Watch the Birdie', *'Allo 'Allo!*, series 5, episode 36, 28 Aug. 1987.

[13] The Communist resistance in the sitcom is the 'bad' resistance. They are portrayed as violent and unwilling to cooperate with other resistance groups.

[14] Vincendeau, 'The French Resistance', 248–9. It is tempting to think about this issue of gender through the prism of Mary Louise Roberts's new book, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), but I am not sure the similarities are strong enough to warrant it. While she argues that American soldiers were sold on participating in the war thanks to an image of a hyper-sexualised France, one that portrayed French women as open to any and all sexual advances on the part of GIs and French men as lacking any influence, thanks to their emasculation after the defeat of 1940, I hesitate to make the same arguments about British perceptions of France for a few reasons. The war didn't require the same 'selling' in Britain, as it was clear that the fate of the continent – not to mention the colonies – had a direct impact on Britain. Additionally, American GIs were seen by Britons as being oversexed and this was not a positive character trait, which might suggest that British men positioned their own masculinity differently. Finally, the role played by the US Army was, I would argue, fundamentally different than that played by the British one, which had contact with its French counterpart at many more points during the war than just at the Normandy landings, which are the focus of Roberts's book. This is not to say that Britons were any less guilty of imagining French men to be emasculated (even the Vichy government was worried about the masculinity of Frenchmen), but I don't think this is what is at play in *'Allo 'Allo!*.

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As Robert Frank has reminded us in his essay about the Second World War as seen through the eyes of the British and the French, 'the image of the "other" is intimately related to the perception of the self, of which it is a mirror image'.[15] The stereotypes presented in *'Allo 'Allo!* have less to do with a specific Franco-British relationship, whether that of the war years or that of the 1980s, but rather illuminate British perceptions of Europe generally and the place of Britishness within Europe specifically. David Croft, the creator of *'Allo 'Allo!* (along with Jeremy Lloyd), had already established a name for himself as one of the writers of the wildly popular *Dad's Army*, a 1970s sitcom about the Home Guard which was positively received by audiences and critics alike. Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird have written about the popularity of the programme and the way in which viewers wrote letters to David Croft and Jimmy Perry expressing their admiration. They have argued that 'viewers' responses suggested that *Dad's Army's* articulation of public with personal memories was successful' and have noted that there was a congruence between individual experiences and the televised representation of the Home Guard that made characters in the programme recognisable to viewers, by recalling the Home Guard specifically or the Second World War more generally.[16] If, as Jeffrey Richards has argued, *Dad's Army* reflects a nostalgia for a particularly British manner and way of life, *'Allo 'Allo!* does no such thing.[17] While the 1980s sitcom tells us something about how Britons imagined their own past, it also tells us much about how they viewed their present. While at least one scholar has argued that the antagonism between Britain and France in the 1980s continued to be the most noticeable element of the British-European relationship,[18] others have rightly noted that the Franco-British relationship was subsumed into larger British-European issues.[19] Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister for much of *'Allo 'Allo!*'s run, got along much better with the French President, François Mitterand (1981–1995), than she had with his predecessor, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Mitterand's early support for her during the Falklands War was clearly a central factor in smoothing out the relationships between the two nations. Joanne Wright asserts that rhetorical differences between Britain

[15] Robert Frank, 'The Second World War through French and British Eyes', in Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal, eds., *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth, and Memory*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 180.

[16] See Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird , *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 194. See also Corinna Peniston-Bird, '"I wondered who'd be the first to spot that": Dad's Army at War, in the Media and in Memory', Media History, 13, 2–3 (2007), 183–202, for another discussion of the relationship between private memories of the Home Guard and the dominant cultural constructions of particular representations.

[17] Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 352.

[18] P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain, 1940–1994: The Long Separation* (London: Routledge, 1997), 237.

[19] See, for example, John Campbell, 'From Heath to Thatcher, 1970–90' in Antoine Capet, ed., *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale since 1904* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 184-198; Joanne Wright, 'The Cold War, European Community and Anglo-French Relations, 1958–1998', in Alan Sharp and Glyn Stone, eds., *Anglo-French Relations in the Twentieth Century: Rivalry and Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 324–45.

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and France are often overstated[20] and Klaus Larres writes that 'with regard to the crucial questions, the positions of the French and British government are often much closer than the general public in both countries are aware of'.[21]

It seems clear, then, that *'Allo 'Allo!* is reflective of popular British attitudes towards Europe more generally, as opposed to being focused on a Franco-British relationship which had rather improved by the 1980s. Stereotypes about the French are dominant in the programme, given its setting in France, but no imagined European characteristics are left untouched by the programme's creators. Despite this, we should not automatically read this mockery as anti-European sentiment. This is not to suggest that diplomatic relationships between Britain and the European Community (EC) were always good; unlike Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher engaged in what one scholar has called 'gleeful' European bashing.[22] But the *British Social Attitudes* surveys from the 1980s tell us that, on the whole, Britons were committed to remaining part of the European Community. Aside from a brief blip in 1984, support for on-going participation in the Community continued to rise.[23] And although Thatcher cultivated a close relationship with the United States, most Britons thought that closer ties with western Europe would serve the country better than closer ties with the United States.[24] Although 36 per cent of respondents to a 1984 Ipsos-Mori poll viewed France unfavourably, a full 44 per cent viewed their Gallic neighbour favourably.[25] In other words, the complex nature of Franco-British relations should not blind us to the on-going commitment of most Britons to the European project, nor to the fact that France was not the only nation about which the British had complicated, and sometimes contradictory, sentiments. Not a single fictional European in *'Allo 'Allo!* was safe from the jokes based on stereotypes of their perceived national characteristics.

A poll about British attitudes towards Europe analysed by the *Observer Magazine* in October of 1990 highlights some of Britons' changing attitudes towards other European nations. The overall trend noticed by the author of the article was that younger people were more likely to look favourably on their European neighbours than their parents but were also more ignorant about Europe.[26] While all the answers to all the questions are telling, a couple stand out in particular. When asked where they would most like to live, aside from Britain, most respondents chose other English speaking countries (Australia, Canada and the United States). However, of the EC countries, France ranked the highest (although admittedly not very high in absolute

[20] Wright, 'The Cold War', 324.

[21] Klaus W. Larres, 'A Complex Alliance: The Explosive Chemistry of Franco-British Relations in the Post-Cold War World', in Capet, *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale since 1904*, 200.

[22] Campbell, 'From Heath to Thatcher', 181.

[23] Social and Community Planning Research, *British Social Attitudes – Cumulative Sourcebook, the First Six Surveys* (Surrey: Gower Publishing, 1992), D-1. Support rose from 52.7 per cent in 1983 to 67.9 per cent in 1989.

[24] Ibid. D-2.

[25] Ipsos-Mori poll, 'Foreign Countries and World Leaders', June 1984. http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2959/Foreign-countries-and-world-leaders.aspx (last visited 2 Feb. 2016).

[26] 'Damn Foreigners!: What the Brits really think of Europe', *Observer Magazine*, 28 Oct. 1990, 16.

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terms, at only 6 per cent). France was also the most visited EC country, although proximity to Britain might account for some of that travel. Unsurprisingly, a majority of Britons felt that France was the EC country that was the most hostile to Britain – especially amongst older respondents, which the author suggested might be due to 'the feelings engendered by the late General de Gaulle'.[27] The most intriguing questions, however, were about which characteristics Britons would ascribe to their European neighbours. The French were rated the 'sexiest', the most 'stylish' and the most 'devious'. While many respondents also thought the French were arrogant, their number does not come close to the full 48 per cent of respondents who rated their Germanic cousins the most arrogant. The French were not seen as particularly hard working (5 per cent), but nor were they seen as lazy (6 per cent – compared to the 16 per cent of Brits who thought the British were the laziest). Ultimately the stereotypes of the French seem no more or less pronounced than those directed at other European nations – the perceived inefficiency of the Spanish, or the uptight nature of the Germans, or the boring Dutch.[28] The creators of *'Allo 'Allo!* make use of the British impressions of all Europeans, not just the French, to mock these stereotypes of national characteristics.

Indeed, Caitlin Moran has written that 'the show isn't about the French Resistance at all – it's all about Britishness. A knowing parody of our vision of history. How we see the war – a jolly romp we were always destined to win. How we see the French – a bunch of sex-mad accordion-playing lushes. How we see the Nazis – a bunch of camp, uptight drama-queens with silly walks. How we see the Italians – they just put an "a" on the end of every word'.[29] Moran's point can be expanded even further. Although Jeremy Lloyd has said that he was never thinking about the programme *Secret Army,* but was only thinking of adventure and the French resistance, when he was coming up with the idea for *'Allo 'Allo!,*[30] this assertion seems disingenuous. *Secret Army* was a joint British and Belgian production which ran from 1977 to 1979. Set in Belgium and France, the programme focused on the attempts of an evasion network, named 'Lifeline', to get downed airmen out of Occupied Europe. The similarities between *Secret Army* and *'Allo 'Allo!* are numerous, explicit and frequently noted by viewers. Both programmes are set in a café with a male proprietor. The male café owners in both programmes carry on love affairs outside their marriages. The resistance activities in both programmes are organised by a woman; Lisa Colbert runs 'Lifeline' until she is killed in an Allied bombing raid and Michelle ('of the resistance', as she is always introduced) organises resistance in *'Allo 'Allo!*. The two women look virtually identical in the programmes. They dress in a shin length trench coat, they both frequently wear a beret and they are both dark haired, young and attractive. Both programmes represent divides in the German forces, mostly in the

[27] Ibid. 20.
[28] Ibid. 21.
[29] Caitlin Moran, ''Allo and goodbye', *The Times*, 28 Apr. 2007.
[30] 'The Return of *'Allo 'Allo!*', 28 Apr. 2007.

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form of struggles between the Gestapo and the regular forces.[31] Because of its long run, *'Allo 'Allo!* did eventually stop referring to *Secret Army*, but there is no doubt that the parody contributed to the initial impetus for the programme.[32]

No matter what prompted David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd to set their sitcom in France, as opposed to Belgium, it is clear that their programme does not deal meaningfully with the organised, militarily inclined French resistance, or elements of the French resistance about which British people would have known in the early 1980s. Although scholarship in the 1970s had shed much light on the nature of the Vichy regime,[33] and the fact that only a minority of French people had resisted,[34] not to mention the fact that an organised, overarching Resistance was not really a reality until after 1942,[35] this information had not yet been disseminated beyond the academic sphere. In fact, only a few Anglophone scholars were paying much attention to the resistance and it was far too early for their findings to have made their way into the public realm.[36] Scholars would later uncover the prominent role played by female resistors[37] and the rural nature of much resistance,[38] but when *'Allo 'Allo!* was being conceptualised this work had not yet been done. However, the 1960s and 1970s had seen numerous publications in English about evaders and the people who helped them.[39] The reason we see women in leadership roles and humanitarian

31 In *Secret Army*, the regular forces are members of the Luftwaffe, while in *'Allo 'Allo!* the regular forces are members of the Wehrmacht.

32 One major difference between the programmes, however, is that *Secret Army* dealt with very serious aspects of evasion during the war. For example, Jewish deportations were addressed in *Secret Army* and not in *'Allo 'Allo!*. Many RAF men were actually caught and/or killed in *Secret Army* and, because of this brutality, the escape line killed to protect itself. Episode 6 of series 1 saw the organisation killing a civilian woman before she could betray a recently saved RAF officer. Issues of collaboration and betrayal were dealt with on a regular basis, which was impossible in *'Allo 'Allo!*, given its narrative of absurdity.

33 With the publication of Robert Paxton's ground-breaking book, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1979]).

34 Thanks to the film *The Sorrow and the Pity* [*Le chagrin et la pitié*] (1969).

35 Thanks to Rod Kedward's early work, *Resistance in Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

36 For a good introduction to Anglo-American scholarship on the resistance and how it has progressed over the past four decades, see John Sweets, 'Les historiens anglo-américains et la Résistance française', in Laurent Douzou, ed., *Faire l'histoire de la Résistance* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 217–39.

37 Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France* (New York: J. Wiley, 1995); Paula Schwartz, 'Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies*, 16, 1 (1989); Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939–1948: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1998); Maggie Allison, 'From the Violence of War to the War against Intolerance: Representing the Resistant Woman, Lucie Aubrac', *South Central Review*, 19 (2002); Claire Andrieu, 'Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche', *Le Mouvement social*, 180 (1997); Valerie Deacon, 'Fitting in to the French Resistance: Marie-Madeleine Fourcade and Georges Loustaunau-Lacau at the Intersection of Politics and Gender', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50, 2 (April 2015).

38 Rod Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

39 For example, M. R. D. Foot and J. M. Langley, *MI9: Escape and Evasion 1939–1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979); Donald Darling, *Secret Sunday* (London: William Kimber, 1975). Darling was a Secret Intelligence Service agent working in Gibraltar to help shepherd aircrews back to the

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resistance in the sitcom is because the resistance in question is actually that of escape and evasion networks, not the military and political resistance of the movements and networks that had lent their support to Charles de Gaulle. The assistance given to aircrews was often undertaken by women, who fed, sheltered and accompanied British and American men as they navigated their way through Occupied Europe. Because it parodies *Secret Army*, which was created by Gerard Glaister, himself a Royal Air Force veteran, *'Allo 'Allo!* portrays evasion, even though reference is made in the programme to the Gaullist, Communist and Liberal resistance. And while some networks linked to the Gaullist or Communist resistances did actively support evasion, by making false identity papers, for example, this was not the focus of most of them. This conflation of different forms of resistance in the programme accounts for some misunderstandings, I would argue, about its intentions.

A prominent element of *'Allo 'Allo!* is the rural nature of French existence, as depicted by the sitcom. Aside from the fact that René's café is clearly situated in a sleepy town, most scenes that take place outside the café are, in fact, set in wide open fields or forests. There is never any sense that the characters have traveled any great distances to reach these pastoral settings, thus leading the viewer to subconsciously understand that the limits between town and country in the programme are very narrow. This nod towards a countrified vision of Frenchness is further emphasised by the behaviour of both the resistance and the German occupiers in the programme. The resisters in the programme favour the disguise of an onion seller to avoid capture and the Germans frequently threaten the execution of peasants in reprisal for resistance activities. There are never any actual executions in the programme (although René comes quite close), but the German military commander, Colonel von Strohm, frequently threatens to execute peasants when he is unhappy with René. Vincendeau interprets these rural portrayals as part of a larger British stereotype of the French, including the depiction of France as a nation full of peasants.[40] She argues that this portrayal in *'Allo 'Allo!* was not just due to the fact that France actually was still very much a rural nation in the early 1940s, but also because it highlighted for British viewers a negative vision of the French as cowed, and cowardly, peasants. Vincendeau argues that because the resistance, in its real incarnation, rather than its fictional one, was an urban affair, the rural setting in the programme further emphasised the lack of resistance in playing up the accommodations that the French made with the German occupiers.

While Vincendeau is right to underscore the urban nature of much resistance in war-time France, our sense of geography might change if we further develop the definition of the resistance about which we speak. Rural resistance was overlooked in

UK. See also the biography of Pat O'Leary (creator of the O'Leary escape line), Vincent Brome, *The Way Back* (New York: Norton, 1958); the memoirs of Donald Caskie (who worked alongside Pat O'Leary), Donald Caskie, *The Tartan Pimpernel* (Edinbugh: Berlinn, 1957); Airey Neave, *Saturday at MI9* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969). Neave, a prominent MI9 agent, published at least two other books about the war before 1970.

[40] Vincendeau, 'The French Resistance', 246.

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much early resistance history, but that certainly does not mean it was insignificant.[41] In fact, rural resistance formed the basis for an early rethinking of the general subject of the French war experience when H.R. Kedward published his *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942–1944*. Kedward rightly noted that because rural inhabitants in France had been associated with Vichy early on in the war, it became very hard for people to reassess the actual role that peasants played. Because Vichy's propaganda explicitly targeted, and lauded, the peasantry, many people naturally assumed that those warm feelings were returned and that the countryside was full of Vichy supporters who remained loyal throughout the war. However, Kedward convincingly showed his readers that not only were there fissures in the support for Vichy from its inception, but that rural resistance also became increasingly important as the war dragged on.[42] He sees December 1942 as the moment when the government was made aware of the fact that it could no longer count on the support of the rural population, as the pressures of the *relève,*[43] deportations and general authoritarianism were brought to small towns and villages that had hitherto remained fairly isolated from the excesses of Vichy. Evidence for such shifts in peasant attitudes, as described by Kedward, comes mostly from prefects' reports, which tell us a great deal about how the regime *thought* its citizens were reacting to wartime pressures, though accessing rural voices remains a challenge.

These voices, however, are there to be found, sometimes even in the silences. Kedward himself points to the silence of families in the face of police questioning as one example of rural support for resistance.[44] Ultimately, though, the acknowledgement of rural resistance depends on our definition of resistance itself. Jacqueline Sainclivier, amongst others, has highlighted the humanitarian nature of much resistance – the spontaneous helping of people in need – which means that peasants were certainly very involved.[45] Even if we widen our definition of resistance to one is that is broader and one that covers intentional, organised resistance, it too can

[41] Laurent Douzou, 'La Résistance et Le Monde Rural: Entre Histoire et Mémoire', *Ruralia. Sciences Sociales et Mondes Ruraux Contemporains*, 4 (1999), available at http://ruralia.revues.org/88 (last visited 2 Feb. 2016).

[42] Rod Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Bertram Gordon, in fact, has made a persuasive case that Vichy officials and other collaborationists so poorly understood the situation in rural France that they failed to rally peasants in any meaningful way. See Gordon , 'The Countryside and the City', in Sarah Fishman, Laura Lee Downs, Iaonnis Sinanoglu, Leonard Smith and Robert Zaretsky, eds., *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 145–61.

[43] The relève was a scheme announced by Pierre Laval (then Prime Minister) in 1942, whereby 250,000 French workers were asked to 'volunteer' to go and work in Germany in exchange for the release of French prisoners of war who were still detained by the Germans. The scheme was a failure and workers were later forced to go.

[44] Rod Kedward, 'Rural France and Resistance', in Fishman et al., *France at War*, 127. I don't want to overstate these silences, as there are also examples of families who informed on people hiding in their midst.

[45] Jacqueline Sainclivier, 'Les Paysans Ou Les "Mal Connus" de La Résistance?', in *La Résistance et Les Européens Du Nord* (Brussels: Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, 1994), 340–50.

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encompass rural resistance. This is especially true if we accept that resistance largely depended on a desire to disrupt the goals of the Germans, as has been suggested by Pierre Laborie.[46] Humanitarian impulses could go hand in hand with the intention to prevent the Germans from achieving their objectives, particularly in the many cases where rural dwellers gave shelter and other aid to British and American airmen who had been shot down over France.

MI9, the British organisation created to assist with escape and evasion, had a clear economic incentive, alongside a humanitarian one, in helping aircrews return to British soil. Put simply, it was costly, both in time and money, to retrain aircrews.[47] Finding men with the expertise to fly was challenging enough, but it also cost £15,000 to train a single RAF pilot.[48] The American equivalent, MIS-X, was officially created in October of 1942 and, unlike with some other intelligence agencies of the era, the relationship between MI9 and MIS-X was amicable. In fact, the two organisations developed identical goals and worked closely together to achieve them, including recognising the vital importance of evasion training, as well as escape training.[49] It was much better all around, not to mention the effect it had on morale, to have downed airmen either escape from the camps where they were imprisoned in enemy territory or avoid being captured altogether. Upon returning to Britain, these aircrews could almost immediately be sent back to work.[50] In *'Allo 'Allo!*, the main form of resistance that we see is indeed the help given to the two hapless, upper-class British airmen attempting to return to England. Although the shadowy, all-woman resistance also undertakes other activities in the programme – notably attempting to sabotage a train in one episode[51] – the interaction with the British airmen, Fairfax and Carstairs, who are hidden in René's café, is an ongoing part of the storyline, as is the plotting to return them to their country. In large measure, this focus may be due to the fact that *'Allo 'Allo!* was spoofing *Secret Army*. In addition, however, the fact that the French helpers in the sitcom are peasants and the setting for their escapades is the countryside reflected the reality of many evaders.[52]

While the obvious intention of the programme is to make viewers laugh and the fictional world of Nouvion was clearly not meant to mimic a real French town, *'Allo*

[46] Pierre Laborie, 'L'idée de Résistance, entre définition et sens: retour sur un questionnement', in 'La Résistance et les Français, Nouvelles Approches' *Cahiers de L'IHTP* , 37 (Dec. 1997), 26.

[47] The authoritative book about MI9 remains Foot and Langley, *MI9: Escape and Evasion*. The authors do an excellent job of digging into the rationale for MI9's creation as well as detailing its successes and failures.

[48] Juliette Pattinson, 'France', in Philip Cooke and Ben Shepherd, eds., *European Resistance in the Second World War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2013), 83.

[49] Sherri Greene Ottis, *Silent Heroes: Downed Airmen and the French Underground*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 11.

[50] With the notable exception of men who returned to freedom under the suspicion of having been turned by the Germans.

[51] 'The Execution', *'Allo 'Allo!,* series 1, episode 5 'The Execution', 5 Oct. 1984.

[52] Although a thorough study of rural resistance takes into account the plurality of experiences and the varieties of rural existence, I use terms like 'peasant', 'rural inhabitant' and so on, interchangeably, as no distinction was made in British escape and evasion instructions between, say, the French who lived in small villages and farmers who made their living from the land.

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'Allo! contains within it some interesting truths about the experience of the war in France. Neither of the programme's creators had spent any time in France during the war – David Croft served in North Africa, India and Singapore while his younger co-writer Jeremy Lloyd was under the age of conscription. Nonetheless, some elements of the programme that seem especially farcical also serve the dual purpose of providing some serious commentary on the war, Occupied France and the experience of Anglo-American airmen therein. Perhaps the best way to understand the confluence between the comedy in the series and the elements of realistic representation that slip in is to think about cultural and societal codes. The sitcom would not be comedic if viewers did not have the imaginative parameters within which the jokes make sense.[53] In other words, the situations needed to be familiar enough to viewers to enable them to 'read' what was happening on screen. In some cases, what was familiar to the viewer is the stereotype (Caitlin Moran's example of Italians adding an 'a' on the end of every word) and in other cases the broad outlines of events, settings or experiences. It has become clear that the Second World War has lent itself well to a generational memory and, as Geoff Eley has rightly noted, 'remembering World War II requires no immediate experience of those years'.[54] Indeed, as Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson have argued, 'individual personal memories of an event or period are shaped by public representations of the same, while public representations, equally, draw on individual memories for recognition and validation. Thus, a cultural circuit is in operation in which the public and the personal are bound in a mutual and active cycle'.[55] Viewers, then, of *'Allo 'Allo!* might recognise both the stereotypes and the general situations that were represented in the programme, which, working in tandem, made the programme entertaining for its audience, and thus, extremely popular.

Memories of the Second World War in Britain were differently shaped than in other European countries. This is crucial to remember, as all audiences are subject to relying on their own knowledge of the past to understand the meaning of any given cinematic representation of historical events. As Pierre Sorlin has noted, 'the context is therefore the previous knowledge which a given public invests into the images, and it changes considerably according to the place and period in which the film is presented'.[56] In Britain, unlike on the continent, films and television programmes about the Second World War were constantly made and remade, watched and re-watched. Although the nature of these films definitely changes over time, there is no gap, no alternating periods of curiosity and silence (using Sorlin's terms), for

[53] Andy Medhurst has noted that 'every comedy belongs simultaneously to both its own moment and its wider cultural antecedents'. Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (London: Routledge, 2007), 12.

[54] Geoff Eley, 'Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II', *The American Historical Review*, 106, 3 (2001), 818. This theme has also been taken up in further detail in the Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, eds., *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[55] Noakes and Pattinson, 'Introduction: "Keep Calm and Carry On"', in *British Cultural Memory*, 5.

[56] Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939–1990* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

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representations of the Second World War in Britain, especially those that dealt with resistance and espionage.[57] *'Allo 'Allo!* was broadcast at the same time as Britain's Imperial War Museum was undertaking an impressive effort to interview people about their war experiences, including, naturally, many Royal Air Force crews who had found themselves in Occupied Europe. The confluence of memories of evasion from the 1980s (as well as earlier reminiscences) and the representation of evasion in the sitcom is striking and highlights the cultural circuit referenced above. It is to this confluence that we shall turn now.

Even before they left British soil, most aircrews had been given basic training in escape and evasion. They knew that if they found themselves on enemy territory it was their duty to attempt to evade/escape if at all possible. Evasion was, obviously, the better option, as it meant that they avoided any time in enemy hands. It was also the more common outcome of having baled or been forced down from missions.[58] The basic training these crews received was mostly delivered through lectures, often given by escapees from the previous war, although these heroic tales were not always well received by aircrews. One American Staff Sergeant thought the lecturer had spoken too glibly about his escape and of the 'sightseeing they accomplished in Paris and of the good food the French had given them', thus rendering the lecture generally unhelpful to him.[59] There must have been sufficient complaining along these lines, as this problematic element of lectures was brought up in an official meeting held between MI9 and Bomber, Fighter and Coastal Commands in August 1941. The minutes of the meeting show that Fighter Command considered that most lectures offered 'too much personal reminiscence and too little up to date information'.[60] All commands agreed that lecturers should be encouraged to focus on recent and relevant information. The content of the lectures was thus partially determined by whoever was delivering them, but also by official sources. As a result, content changed over the course of the war, as British and American organisations learned more about what worked and what did not. The importance of peasants for evasion in France, however, remained fairly constant.

For the most part, aircrews who were shot down or baled out over occupied France landed, as often as possible, in rural areas. Witnesses to a plane crash were a danger for aircrews, as it was impossible to know whether they would lead German or French police to the site of the crash. In addition, there was a fear amongst aircrews that the German air forces would shoot at any moving target, including men baling out

[57] See Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), 1. Sorlin, *European Cinemas*, 20.

[58] See the appendix of Foot and Langley's book, which contains a table showing the numbers of escapees and evaders by region and by military branch. Foot and Langley, *MI9: Escape and Evasion*, 313–15. Evasion was strikingly more common than escape for members of the air force in western Europe.

[59] Milasius, Peter P. (S/SGT) ARC Identifier 5554713 / Local Identifier E & E 73 / MLR Number UD 133, UD 134, File Unit from Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, National Archives and Records Administration [electronic record].

[60] Minutes of a meeting between S.I.O.'s of Bomber, Fighter, and Coastal Commands and MI9 held at Beaconsfield, 26 Aug. 1941, Air 14 355, National Archives (Kew).

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of planes. Areas with few inhabitants and open spaces in which a parachutist could safely land were ideal for air crews coming down. However, successful evasions rarely happened without the help of locals, and air crews were at the mercy of the men and women who lived in the area of their landing. Whether the locals were friendly and sympathetic to the Allied cause or hostile, suspicious or simply disengaged would make all the difference in determining whether or not crews would achieve their goal of returning to British soil. A letter from the Air Ministry to Bomber Command from the summer of 1941 noted that RAF crews forced to land in France had found the most help forthcoming from farmers, although not Flemish farmers.[61] This information was usually conveyed verbally, either in a lecture or as instructions immediately before departure.

Evasion reports often reference the helpfulness of farmers and their families in the early hours after baling out. One Captain E.R.W. Williams hypothesised that the reason a farmer and his very large family helped so much was because they had less respect for law and order.[62] He went on to say that even though the farmers had been helpful, he thought they were less reliable in general than the Parisian evacuees who had helped him before the farmers. Given that it was far more dangerous to be a French peasant helping an Allied air crew than it was to be an evading soldier, it is no surprise that many reports mention the nervousness of the peasants and their families. Aircrews were constantly reminded that any help they received from the French put these helpers at risk of being arrested and executed, while the worst that was likely to happen to the airman was being sent to a prisoner of war camp. Nonetheless, despite their understandable fear, peasants were often the first line of help offered to downed airmen, providing basic necessities, as well as directions. Thus, the rural scenario that we see in *'Allo 'Allo!* was indeed in line with the lived experiences of many Allied airmen. Almost all of the RAF interviewees who told their stories to the Imperial War Museum in the 1980s reference the assistance given to them by farmers (or school teachers). Duncan Taylor's memories of avoiding churches and 'the very wealthy, who were probably in cahoots with the Germans anyways'[63] in favour of farmers is commonly repeated by other downed crewmen.

Upon landing, the aircrew's first priority was twofold – to hide their parachutes and other gear and to find civilian clothing. Flying gear was often either buried, if possible, or removed by French helpers. Clothing that would allow the airmen to pass undetected amongst the French was then procured and airmen were particularly reliant on locals for this task. An on-going discussion at MI9 throughout the war was how to protect evaders from any suspicion of espionage, which could result in a summary execution. For this reason, aircrews were forbidden from carrying with them civilian clothing, which could cause the Germans to be suspicious that the

[61] Most Secret letter from A.I.1 (a), Air Ministry, Whitehall to Intelligence Section, HQ Bomber Command, 18 August, 1941, AIR 14 355, National Archives (Kew). See also, National Archives (Kew), Air 14 463. A letter from MI9 to all Commands reinforces this advice.

[62] Report on assistance received from the French, n.d., WO 208 3298, National Archives (Kew).

[63] Imperial War Museum interview with Duncan Alexander Taylor, catalogue number 12421, 5 Feb. 1992.

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landing on occupied territory was for the purposes of spying rather than a forced bale-out.[64] Aircrews were thus obliged to find civilian clothes locally. An additional complication with fitting in was the fact that people in different parts of France often sported different clothes, had different mannerisms and had different customs.[65] Aircrews could not be expected to know about these often subtle differences and so relied on local knowledge to help them fit in as much as possible.

Given that aircrews were much more likely to land in rural areas than urban ones, fitting into the local community usually involved adopting the clothing and mannerisms of peasants. A document that was distributed to aircrews, entitled 'Notes on Avoiding Capture and Escaping from France', had this to say about the ideal disguise: 'if you have any choice in the matter, try to get a beret and a pair of rope-soled shoes. Another useful disguise is to carry a pitch-fork or rake. If you have a haversack carry it slung across one shoulder'.[66] So, when, in the pilot episode of the sitcom, we see Fairfax and Carstairs, riding their bikes down a French road, dressed as onion sellers, and discussing the trees along the way, we are actually seeing a fairly accurate depiction of early evasion; evaders would try to have a disguise, a destination and a bicycle. In the early days of the war evaders were encouraged to seek out bicycles as a means to get around the countryside.[67] However, as the war went on and bicycles became scarce and subject to requisition by the Germans, evaders were advised to forget about using bikes and to focus on getting around by foot.[68]

It was generally seen as a safer option to disguise oneself as a peasant – perhaps because of a sense that the Germans were generally found in urban areas and would also dismiss peasants as less of a threat than urbanites. Similarly, it is possible that because the Vichy regime paid such rhetorical attention to peasants in France, lauding the moral values of the peasantry and encouraging a 'return to the soil',[69] that evaders and their instructors assumed that the Vichy police would be uninclined to harass peasants if they could avoid it. What is striking is that there seems to have been no distinction in any of the instructions between different parts of France and the likely reception an evader might expect in different areas. We now know that the relationship between the rural population and the resistance was determined by many different factors, including local political traditions[70] and the extent of privations in

[64] Most Secret Memo from HQ Bomber Command to HQ Nos. 1,2,3,4,5,6 and 7 Groups, 7 July 1941, AIR 14 462, National Archives (Kew).

[65] Although she is discussing SOE agents, these difficulties are explored in detail in Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[66] Notes on avoiding capture and escaping from France, May 3, 1941, AIR 14 462, National Archives (Kew).

[67] Ibid.

[68] Letter to M.A.A.F. Intelligence, Attn: S/Ldr. Barrington, 10 August 1944, from P.V. Holder, Ref. 8917/15, AIR 51 260, National Archives (Kew).

[69] Robert Paxton has written of the conservative image of an upstanding peasantry, that 'fecund, practical, rooted in a traditional social hierarchy, the peasant family was the antidote to the decadent, abstract, rootless culture of city masses', in Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1979]), 201.

[70] Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 489.

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the area.[71] Gordon Bertram has written that 'historically, the peasants have been conservative when they owned what they wanted, radical when they did not'.[72] As the pressures of the war and the occupation increased, peasants experienced increasing hardships. Certainly de Gaulle's secret services and the British organisations operating in France would have had some sense of differing opinions in various parts of the country, due to public opinion reports, but the image of the peasant for escapers and evaders was a unitary one, in that the peasant was viewed as a likely source of help and a good model for disguising oneself while traversing France.

Dressing and acting like a peasant seemed to be a good way to avoid the scrutiny of the Germans in part because it played upon French divisions that were likely to confuse the German occupier. If the British made few distinctions between different parts of the French countryside, an ordinary German soldier was also unlikely to do so. A pamphlet for RAF crews about to embark on flying missions over occupied Europe, called *Language Aid to Victory*, had much to say about how aircrews could pass as French should they be forced to bale. It included many key French phrases and instructs aircrews to learn these phrases before flying so that they could be 'escape conscious', by thinking about ways to escape long before the need arose. Attempting to ease what must have been a common worry about terrible French accents, the pamphlet acknowledged that most aircrews are unlikely to speak the language particularly well. It says that:

> Your accent may be bad. But accent is a relative thing. Imagine for a moment listening to a Yorkshireman from the Ilkley Moors talking to a man from Somerset in a Hampshire country pub and then decide which accent is bad – the Yorkshire, the Somerset or the Hampshire landlord's. Och! away wid yer! It's all 'accent' to anyone who hasn't a thorough knowledge of English and of England. The very same applies in France – the fellow from Marseilles and the chap from Brest, the Parisian and the bloke from the Savoy, to say nothing of the Nice taxi-driver, all have 'accents' sufficient to puzzle not only each other but more especially the Gestapo.[73]

The pamphlet emphasised that the important thing was learning the language well enough to get by, especially in interactions with Germans, who were unlikely to know the language any better.

In *'Allo 'Allo!*, Officer Crabtree, a British agent passing himself off as a French gendarme, would seem to be a perfect embodiment of these instructions. Known for his embarrassingly bad French,[74] with catch-phrases of 'Good moaning [morning]' and 'I was pissing [passing] by the door', Crabtree is only ever mocked by the French. René frequently misunderstands Crabtree and leaves it to one of the waitresses to repeat what he has said in 'proper' French. At times, some of the French characters replicate Crabtree's 'accent', especially if, like René, they are exasperated with him. The Germans, however, seem to suspect nothing. In one episode, Crabtree poses as

[71] A point made clear in Shannon Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Occupied France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[72] Bertram, 'The Countryside and the City', 156.

[73] Air 14 463, Language Aid to Victory, n.d., AIR 14 463, National Archives (Kew).

[74] Crabtree was, apparently, modelled after Edward Heath, the former British Prime Minister, who was fluent but could not grasp the necessary accent. "The Return of *'Allo 'Allo!*", 28 Apr., 2007.

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a priest to officiate at a wedding between René and the leader of the Communist resistance, Denise Laroque. René is being forced to marry her under pain of death, and his servers secretly arrange to have Crabtree officiate so that the ceremony would be invalid. As Crabtree begins the ceremony in his terribly accented 'French',[75] Colonel von Strohm turns to Lt. Gruber and says that he cannot understand a word being said. Gruber's response is that 'these Roman Catholic ceremonies are always conducted in Latin'.[76] In a later episode, Herr Flick, the Gestapo agent, asks Crabtree what part of France he is from, obviously suspicious because of his linguistic abilities (or lack thereof). Without hesitation, Crabtree says that he is part 'Itoolian (Italian)' and that he was brought up in 'Nipples (Naples)', which seems to satisfy Herr Flick's curiosity.[77]

Most aircrews, whether British or American, would not have known how to speak French, despite learning the few French phrases in their pamphlets. The reports from evaders are replete with commentary about the difficulties in finding people who spoke English in France or trying to communicate using gestures exclusively. These challenges often complicated life for downed airmen. Sometimes they could not get the directions they needed, sometimes they became so frustrated that they set out on their own (which was not the best decision) and sometimes they were threatened or abandoned by French peasants who thought they were Germans.[78] Even those airmen who had some knowledge of the language were unlikely to be able to get far without local assistance. Many British evaders described their linguistic abilities as having had 'schoolboy French'.[79] Such limitations would have posed real challenges for aircrews.

While it might be possible to deceive the Germans by dressing and behaving like a peasant and speaking limited French, aircrews found it impossible to fool the local populations. Their attempts, however, sometimes provided humour for the observers, both in the sitcom and in real life. Fairfax and Carstairs cause quite a stir in the pilot of *'Allo 'Allo!* when they are cycling down a country road and all the people they pass stop to stare. Carstairs asks Fairfax if he has noticed the odd way the peasants are staring at them, to which Fairfax responds that it is probably because his fellow airman is riding a girl's bicycle. After a car almost crashes into them both, Carstairs exclaims 'Fairfax, I think I've cracked it. We're riding on the wrong side of the road'.[80] This

[75] All the characters in the programme spoke English, but with different accents to suggest the language they are meant to be representing. A fascinating article about the linguistic parameters of the programme and how they changed when it was translated into other languages has been written by Dirk Delabastita, 'Language, Comedy and Translation in the BBC Sitcom *'Allo 'Allo!*', in Delia Chiaro, ed., *Translation, Humour and the Media* (London: Continuum, 2010), 193–222.

[76] 'A Marriage of Inconvenience', *'Allo 'Allo!*, series 5, episode 33, 7 Aug. 1987.

[77] 'A Duck for Launch', *'Allo 'Allo!*, series 5, episode 42, 9 Oct. 1987.

[78] Smith, Robert E. (2nd Lt), ARC Identifier 5554649 / Local Identifier E & E 7 / MLR Number UD 133, UD 134 File Unit from Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, National Archives and Records Administration [electronic record].

[79] Imperial War Museum interview with Don A. Farrington, catalogue number 32394, n.d.; Imperial War Museum interview with Robert Wesley Hart, catalogue number 10557, 18 Dec. 1988; Imperial War Museum interview with Leonard Henry Williams, catalogue number 10184, 24 Apr. 1988.

[80] 'The British are Coming', *'Allo 'Allo!*, pilot episode 25 Dec. 1982.

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cultural misunderstanding had parallels in real evader experiences. Herbert Spiller, a British navigator, was shot down while flying to Milan in a Halifax Bomber. He secured the help of a local resistance group in France and travelled on bike to the Basque foothills with several resisters. All went remarkably smoothly as they crossed into Spain, except for the fact that he had started the trip by riding his bicycle on the wrong side of the road.[81] This experience is one that is not uncommonly remembered in later years by British aircrews. One American evader who was trying to get from Bayonne to Cambo-les-Bains in France wrote in his debriefing report that 'about halfway there I passed a group of people standing in front of a farmhouse who stared and laughed at me. This disturbed me because I had become confident of my disguise. A few minutes later a very young boy on a bicycle passed me, slowed down, and stared back at me over his shoulder. He went on and since I was getting near a village I left the road and walked around it'.[82] The boy he met must have alerted a gendarme to his presence, as the First Lieutenant was subsequently confronted by the gendarme, who let him continue on his way after showing him his dog tags and wings. A handwritten note from First Lieutenant Mayo at the end of his report said that he later found out that he had been laughed at because he was wearing a dirty peasant's cap and that was unusual in that part of the country – he should have been wearing a beret.

Such identity give-aways prompted various intelligence and military organisations to emphasise the importance of learning local customs, as well as the local language. Aside from tips on general etiquette, the various learning aids are replete with instructions about what to do at the dinner table – clearly eating, especially in public places, was a central concern for airmen attempting to fit into French communities. Instruction normally pointed out the central differences between French and English table manners, often with repeated admonitions that if these manners seemed strange, it was worth remembering that English manners also seemed strange to the French. Airmen were told that in small cafés, a general greeting upon entering was the norm, as was asking permission to sit in a chair at a table that was already occupied. At the table itself, British airmen were instructed to keep their water or wine glasses in front of them, not at the side 'as we do' and to tuck their napkins into their collars, as even the more cultured Frenchmen did this. In this particular set of instructions, airmen were reminded:

> they [the French] eat their soup with the point of the spoon, lifting their elbows outwards. The knife and fork provided has to see the whole meal through. Meat and vegetables are not served together. Salads also are a separate course to be eaten, though, with the same cutlery as you have previously used for your meat and also your vegetables. The knife is merely for cutting up the food – the usual practice is to cut up everything on your plate and then put the knife down, take the

[81] Imperial War Museum interview with Herbert John Spiller, catalogue number 7477, 4 Apr. 1984,. Reel 4.

[82] Mayo, Thomas Palmer (1st Lt), ARC Identifier 5554665 / Local Identifier E & E 23 / MLR Number UD 133, UD 134 File Unit from Record Group 498: Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), 1942–1947, National Archives and Records Administration [electronic record].

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fork in your right hand and shovel away the food with the help of bread. Any gravy or sauce not mopped up with the bread might in a working class household, be taken as a reflection on the cook's skill.[83]

It does not take much stretching of the imagination to see how challenging it was for British and American organisations to create these learning aids, given the wide divergence of customs in France, not to mention the different dining etiquette found in the wide variety of cafés and restaurants. Another document told airmen to avoid being too fastidious in their eating habits and included a diagram showing how French people leave their fork and knife after a meal (on opposite sides of the plate, rather than together at the bottom).[84]

The British airmen in *'Allo 'Allo!* were obviously not the recipients of such detailed instructions before they flew off to Europe, as it is clear in the programme that they knew little of what to expect and they remain safe only because they are hidden.[85] Unlike Crabtree, the two airmen speak no French and have no sense of French culture or traditions. From the very beginning of the programme, the airmen demonstrate their ignorance in a hilarious scene where René is trying to tell them that they have arrived too early, and the airmen misinterpret his actions and take his gestures to mean that they should give their watches to René in exchange for some food. The airmen are understandably upset when, after handing over their watches, no food is forthcoming. Meanwhile, René has no idea why they have given him their watches. Luckily, Michelle of the resistance is often around to speak to the airmen in English and communicate to them the plans to get them back home.

While the programme makes no obvious attempt at veracity in its representation of France during the war, we can see that certain elements of the portrayal of wartime France are not far off the mark. The rural nature of the sitcom's setting accurately reflects what real life evaders would have been seeking in their attempts to find assistance to return to England. The linguistic adventures and attempts to 'fit in' also highlight some of the very real experiences of Anglo-American evaders during the Second World War. There is no doubt that some elements of the programme would cause offense to contemporary viewers. But it is worth bearing in mind that the programme pokes as much fun at itself, and its British viewers, as the France that it purports to portray. The real driving force of the plot for most series is the attempts to send the airmen home, which are always concocted by British Intelligence and the French resistance and are always half-baked. They include sending the airmen in empty bombs on German bombers, to be dropped over Dover; sending them

[83] Air 14 463, Language Aid to Victory, n.d., AIR 14 463, National Archives (Kew).

[84] Air 14 462. Notes on avoiding capture and escaping from France, May 3, 1941, AIR 14 462, National Archives (Kew).

[85] Food and the culture of food featured prominently in the sitcom, even if not in relation to the airmen. The painting that all parties are hoping to sell at the end of the war – (known affectionately as the fallen Madonna with the big boobies) – is hidden in knockwurst. Explosives that have been removed from landmines are disguised as Christmas puddings. Helium that is destined to inflate an air balloon in one of the schemes to send the airmen back to England is disguised as prize winning vegetable marrows, sold by Monsieur Leclerc, disguised as an Algerian farmer.

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in a midget submarine that has come into the canal in Nouvion and flying them in an air balloon, which will be shot down by the RAF once it is over Britain. These plots inevitably always fail and, although he may be morally dubious, René's commentary on the plots takes direct aim, and successfully so, at the British. He frequently comments that these plots are thought up by British Intelligence agents in between doing crossword puzzles and reading *The Beano*, a popular children's comic. This is not exactly the serious image of intelligence to which we are accustomed and it is in this element that *'Allo 'Allo!* really shines – the portrayal of the absurdities of war. While it is difficult for historians to acknowledge absurdity, comic writers have no such difficulties and *'Allo 'Allo!* does it very well.

The programme's plot took quite a turn as it entered series eight. The story line was sped up, as the series opened two years after the previous episode, thus placing the story late in 1943, allowing for the final denouement of France's liberation to happen in the last two series. Rather more interesting, though, is the fact that the British airmen have made it back to England by the series eight opener, and thus the plot for the remaining series focused rather more on two storylines: the division between the clearly Gaullist Resistance, led by Michelle, and the Communist resistance, led now by Louise (who is also madly in love with René), as well as the playing out of rivalries between the Gestapo and the German military command in Nouvion.[86]

The new direction of the final two series likely reflects the growth of *'Allo 'Allo!* as it moved away from parodying *Secret Army*. However, the similarities between the sitcom and memories of evasion during the Second World War owe much to the initial parody and to the trend in British film and television to turn away from depicting heroic, masculine and elite experiences of the war, a trend that was also becoming apparent in serious scholarship about the war. Because of the ways in which public representations and personal recollections mutually reinforce one another, we can see representations of very real escape and evasion experiences in the comedic absurdity of *'Allo 'Allo!*. The programme's emphasis on non-urban settings, on the role of women in helping evaders and on the struggle of British and American flyers to 'fit-in' to French society well enough to avoid detection are all reflective of the real experiences aircrews had during the war – experiences that they were remembering in the 1980s as they shared their memories with interviewers. Contrary to the statements of the programme's creators, *'Allo 'Allo!* did not deal directly with the French resistance, or at least, not with the organised, militarised, resistances that ultimately supported Charles de Gaulle, most of which were rather more concerned with broad political and military goals than with evasion. If the differences between these various kinds of resistances are not taken into account, we might mistakenly read *'Allo 'Allo!* as

[86] Given that Colonel von Strohm, Lt. Gruber and their commanding officer, General von Klinkerhoffen (who participates in a plot to kill Hitler late in the series), come across as relatively benign, I wondered if they might fit into the larger cultural rehabilitation of the Werhmacht in the post-war period. Patrick Major has discussed this process via films, but focused on an earlier period (the 1950s, mostly). *'Allo 'Allo!* could be a later example of this, perhaps. See Patrick Major, '"Our Friend Rommel": The Wehrmacht as "Worthy Enemy" in Postwar British Popular Culture', *German History*, 26, 4 (2008), 520–35.

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a programme that mocked or derided the French resistance efforts of the Second World War. The mocking, however, that is found in the programme is rather more reflective of a broader play on British stereotypes of all European nations, including explicit references to the characteristics of Brits themselves.

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