

## Book Review

### *Evasion & Escape Devices Produced by MI9, MIS-X and SOE in World War Two*

By Phil Froom, (2015)

Book Review by Bill Steadman, Museum Curator

Hardly a snappy title, but it is one that tells the reader exactly what to expect. So how did I come across this book? Well, we have a small but quality collection of these gadgets in the museum, so having more information about them can only be a good thing and books on this subject are few and far between. Also, having the author visit the museum to discuss possible escape and evasion (E&E) displays helped focus the mind. So, on Phil's recommendation, I purchased his book on Amazon to fill a notable gap in the archive library.

When it arrived, I did the usual thing (for me) of quickly skipping through it to understand its scope and composition, and to look at some pictures (I spent some time in the cavalry so what do you expect?). Next, I read up about the sort of chess sets used to disguise E&E gadgets. We are honoured to have such a chess set on loan from the family of SOE operative Capt Desmond Hubble, who was murdered by the SS in Buchenwald concentration camp. That piece of research done (the chess set was x-rayed by the dental centre and disappointingly found not to contain anything of an E&E nature), I put the book to one side.

Having read scores of escape stories over the years, which often mention a few of the gadgets used, either smuggled in or home-made behind the wire or castle wall, the idea of a book focused almost entirely on the former group of objects was, I felt, in danger of being a heavy-duty book for spotters and unlikely to keep my flitting, lightweight attention for long. Tales of derring-do excite and fascinate me, whereas tales of inventing sneakily camouflaged maps may bore. Perhaps this was just the 12-year-old in me at work.

But unprepared to condemn this sizable tome out of hand, I did what any good intelligencer should do, I put aside my prejudices and preferences and undertook a little data collection and analysis, beginning with a revisit to the Amazon listing where I was reminded that:

‘This book describes the design, manufacture, covert shipment and use of the many ingenious evasion and escape devices provided to Allied troops during WWII. Following the fall of mainland Europe, hostile Allied actions against land-based Axis forces were generally limited to air attacks. However, as the numbers of those attacks increased, the number of aircraft and crews failing to return grew alarmingly: something needed to be done to provide these air crews with aids to enable them to evade to safe territory or escape captivity, or losses of irreplaceable crews would become critical. Britain's MI-9 and U.S. MIS-X organizations were formed solely to support evaders and prisoners of war in occupied territories. They developed a wide variety of evasion and escape devices that were given to Allied Forces prior to operations in hostile territory or delivered clandestinely to POWs. It worked: the aids facilitated the return of thousands of men to their units’.

All well and good I thought, and, on examination, accurate in respect of the book's contents. But what do others think about it? Media reviews told me:

‘What a book! Packed full of colour illustrations, maps and photos, it portrays every conceivable type of escape equipment, explaining who used them, how, why, when and where. It also explains their manufacture in top-secret locations together with how the cunning gadgets fooled the enemy. A huge volume, it deserves a place on the shelf of all historians’.

‘The first page I opened of this beautifully produced book featured the Caterpillar Club. As my father-in-law was a member, having bailed out of his burning plane over Denmark, I was immediately hooked. With over 700 unique images of immensely rare devices, this is a fascinating book which covers the evolution, formation and role of the secret wartime organisation known as MI9 and its US mirror organisation MIS-X’.

‘A lavishly illustrated, glossy and impressive publication which proved to be a thoroughly good read’.

All good so far, even accepting that media reviews can sometimes paint a rosier picture than perhaps the work deserves. So, what about people like you and me? The private buyer reviews I found all sat between 4.5 and 5 stars, which for any piece of written work is extremely encouraging:

‘Great book anyone interested in escape and evasion would love this read and photos of equipment and gadgets invented in ww2’

‘An amazingly comprehensive study of concealed escape equipment, extremely thorough, and a really fascinating read, with lots of great photographs. Thoroughly recommended!’

‘A beautifully illustrated and thoroughly researched book on the intriguing escape aids and maps produced by MI9 in the Second World War’

‘The best and most informative book on the market and I have bought various others previously. A must for the collector and dealer’...and most volubly...’AMAZING AMAZING \_AMAZING!!!!!!!’

So, everyone likes it, but is it any good? A quick look through the bibliography indicated that the work was based on solid research foundations so its reliability could indeed be relied upon.

So, what about the author? If you seek a few words about him you will learn that: ‘Phil Froom served nine years in the British Army working globally in Signals Intelligence, before taking up a role in the defence industry. A medal and militaria collector and military historian, Phil lives in England, is married, and has two children’.

So, media reviewers like it, private buyers interested in E&E enthuse, it has solid foundations and Phil has a good pedigree. About time I picked it back up again!

A sizable tome it certainly is, and although the quality does somewhat ameliorate it, the book is a little pricey. That said, if this subject matter fascinates you then the cost will be irrelevant. So on to the size. It is large format because it needs to be to contain and do justice to the many photographs, maps and diagrams that beautifully illustrate the informative text. The balance of image to text is very well considered, with each supporting the other and making the whole visually interesting as well as educational. A picture certainly paints a thousand words, especially for the more obscure objects.

The story of MI9, the other E&E units and their ‘customers’ offers a Boy’s Own blend of great stories of derring-do mixed with gadgets that 007’s Q would not sniff at, dusted with all of the oddness of wartime. In pulling together sufficient of the derring-do to make sense of the objects at the heart of his book, Phil has made an otherwise dull (to me) technical manual much more fascinating and accessible, whilst not losing the core importance of the material itself. It is a heavy book, but certainly not heavy going.

Each piece is presented in its broader context as well as in sufficient detail as an individual concept or object. The author treads the fine line between overly tedious minutia and genuinely interesting data, never falling on the wrong side of that line, although technophiles may take a different view to mine. On meeting Phil, his personal interest in and enthusiasm for the subject matter is evident. This translates into his book and I found myself being drawn into the background of objects, often against my expectations, and thinking, ‘Well I never’, on more occasions than I could count.

Whilst I did not find it readable in the same sense as a novel (it is not meant to perform this function), it is eminently readable as a source of information and to dip in and out of for entertainment ‘hits’. This is perhaps as much a reflection of my reading style (3-4 books on the go at any one time between which I flit like a moth

attracted to the brightest source of light), as it is the inherent nature of the book itself, research material presented in an entertaining manner.

Although I personally could not sit and read it for hours as one might a novel, the book moves along nicely enough with new discoveries on each page that kept the fluttering moth in me engaged, as well as informing the professional intelligencer who perhaps should have considered such gadgetry more closely during his own service. Luckily, I was never confronted by this gap in my education!

So, are the reviews reflective of the work? In a word, 'yes'. This is a book that will appeal to historians, collectors and experts as a source of reliable, well-researched and well-presented data. It should also appeal to anyone interested in escape and evasion wanting to know more about the gadgets intended to aid those incarcerated by, or on the run from an implacable enemy. As a reference document it is invaluable; it is also highly entertaining to wander through.

The only downsides are the cost, but only to the casual reader who I suggest would not see such a book as essential to their enjoyment of the escape and evasion genre (although if they found a copy in a library or could borrow one it would make for very pleasant browsing). Being published in America has led to the introduction of a few 'spellos' and awkward 'grammaros' which the more charitable would accept as being Americanisms and therefore forgivable from an ally.

In closing I ask myself, 'Were the author's personal recommendation warranted? Have I used the book since for research purposes? Have I looked through the book again simply to be entertained?' On all counts the answer is 'Yes'. The five-star reviews are indeed justified.

