

Collection of WWII escape items to go under the hammer in Bristol

A collection of 'secret' items sent to British soldiers trapped in France during the Second World War is due to go under the hammer in Bristol. The collection, amassed over forty years by an ex-WWII soldier is set to sell for thousands of pounds. The late Arthur Muggeridge served with the Royal Artillery during the war and was present at during the Dunkirk evacuations where he was injured and forced to leave the military. In later life he amassed an impressive collection of military artifacts – his specialism being 'escape and evade' items. His collection is being sold by relatives at East Bristol Auctions' specialist 'Military, History & Transportation' auction on May 22nd.

Less than a year after war broke out, the British Government set up the 'MI9' – with the simple mandate to help 'escape and evade'. Its purpose was to conduct espionage, sabotage and escape assistance to those British troops stranded in occupied Europe, by distributing secret items hidden in everyday objects. A highly secret organisation, many of its operations were not known until long after the war ended.

Auctioneer Andrew Stowe explains; 'this was real espionage work – secret meetings, coded messages, real cloak-and-dagger stuff. A big part of the MI9 operation was sending secret items to troops in occupied territories. Useful items like maps, compasses and even secret orders – anything to help them escape or evade capture. Very often these items were 'normal' items that were sent in aid packages to camps, and the way items were secreted was very often ingenious!'

Among the highlights of the sale include two dominos which, once pulled apart, reveal a small section of map. 'These were likely sent as a full set,' adds Andrew 'Once they had all been pulled apart, they would likely have a complete map of France to England, or similar. German prison camp officials wouldn't think twice that an innocent set of dominos could do harm, but how wrong they were. You can almost picture some RAF officers in their hut pulling apart these dominos and planning their escape. It's incredible stuff, both frightening and exhilarating at the same time'.

A simple and somewhat crude string vest also features in the auction, but even with this item all is not as it seems. 'This was a really great idea,' says Andrew 'these string vests were made from a single piece of string, all knitted together to form a vest. Not only could it keep you warm, but if you unpicked it, it formed a very useful and very long rope. Apparently if several vests were unpicked together one could form a strong rope – perfect for scaling walls. It's just the most incredible invention!'

Also featuring in the sale are two taxidermy studies of War Pigeons, both complete with secret message capsules. During World War Two the British Army used around 250,000 carrier pigeons for various purposes – not least for the carrying of important and secret messages. An official Air Ministry 'Pigeon Section' was maintained throughout the period and there was even talk of them being used to carry explosives or bio-weapons, although this was never put into practise. The carrying of messages however, was. A small capsule was affixed to the foot of a willing pigeon and then set free to fly back to England. In a world of listening devices and decoding machines – strapping your message to a pigeon's foot was very often the most successful way of communicating.

A few other seemingly ordinary items which harbour secret tools or weapons include; fountain pens with hidden daggers, a box of matches which hide a secret compass in the base, a piece of explosive coal, a miniature 'spy' camera, miniature radio listening device, and even a specially magnetised razor blade compass.

'These items are very special,' says Andrew 'they highlight not only the ingenuity of the time, but also the desperation. Can you imagine being trapped in the middle of France during the war, and the only tools you have to aid you getting home safely are a map on the back of a domino, and a compass from your razor blade. Terrifying. But it worked. People successfully made it back to Britain because of these items. These objects saved lives. It's really humbling – and a perfect example of finding little ways to help those in need. They are quintessentially British.'

The collection which comprises some forty lots goes under the hammer at East Bristol Auctions as part of their Military, History & Transport auction on Friday May 22nd. It's expected to fetch over six thousand pounds. The auction is broadcast online-only due to the current situation, but the catalogue is available for viewing on their website two weeks prior – www.eastbristol.co.uk

Additional quotes for use – all credited to Auctioneer Andrew Stowe

'It's a unique collection – I've never seen another like it. These items are rare – really rare – near impossible to find, so to have an entire collection of them is certainly very special indeed. They were clearly a labour of love for the late vendor.'

'Mr Muggerridge apparently scoured antique fairs, military fairs, and travelled the world collecting these items over a period of some forty or fifty years. His service in the Royal Artillery during the war led to a lifelong love of all things military. I suspect his love for these items gave him the connection to the army he so desired after being injured and forced to retire early.'

'We're talking about items that are eighty years old – but the idea behind them is still so relevant. They were created by a small team of people whose job was to do anything they could to overcome a common enemy. It's that inner human desire to 'do something' about a situation is something we can all relate to right now.'

'It was all about hope. Sending these tiny compasses and miniature maps gave those stranded hope. They were tiny acts of bravery, and although the items within them are miniature, their effect for those they helped must have been enormous.'