

Threads of History

MI9, the escape and evasion wing of British Military Intelligence during World War II, engaged the ancient practice of cloth cartography for pilots who needed a resilient map to avoid capture if downed over enemy territory. Paper disintegrated easily. But cloth, MI9 soon discovered, was more durable even when wet, quiet to unfold, and easy to conceal and store in small places. Dubbed “silk” maps, the fabric was actually made of rayon and occasionally balloon material.

It wasn't long before the U.S. Army Air Forces, with the help of the Aeronautical Chart Service, patterned its own two-sided escape and evasion maps for survival kits. The colorful souvenir-like scarves draped here depict sections of the Far East and India. The Army Map Service printed the blue map (C-52/C-53) in February 1945; it features Japan and the South China Seas on one side and the East China Seas on the flip side. The land map, No. 133, features East and West K'un Ming—Yunnan, China, to Assam, India—and was published January 1944.

—Kathleen L. Witman

for more information:

Cloth Maps, Charts and Blood Chits of World War II, John G. Doll, Merriam Press, Bennington, Vermont.

“U.S. Cloth Maps of World War II,” www.silkmaps.com.

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/guide/gmillspc.html.

“A History of Silk Maps,” www.mapscarves.com/history.html.

“Wall Tiles and Free Parking: Escape and Evasion Maps of World War II,” by Debbie Hall, www.mapforum.com/04/escape.htm.