CAUGHT NAPPING!

George B. Thomson

It was our twentieth operation, the target was Frankfurt and the date was 12th September 1944. I was flying as Navigator in Lancaster LS-M (NF 958), the other members of the crew being F/O N.R. Overend (Pilot) a New Zealander; J.D. Jones (Bomb Aimer); R.E. Kendall (Wireless Operator); B.J. Howarth (Flight Engineer); H. Beverton (Mid-upper Gunner) and I. Spagatner (Rear Gunner).

We flew low level across France, only starting our climb when we crossed the German border. At 22.45 as we turned on to the last leg into the target there was a cry of "*Port Go*" from the Rear gunner; immediately we plunged into that sickening corkscrew known to all Bomber aircrew, and as we levelled out there was an almighty bang from underneath the Wireless Operator's position. Flames rapidly broke through into the fuselage and we realised that we had been hit in the bomb bay, and the incendiary load was alight. The pilot struggled with the controls for a moment or two but, as the flames began to spread across the port wing, he gave the order to bale our.

"B.J.", the Flight Engineer, went first through the nose hatch, followed by myself, then the Bomb Aimer, while the two Gunners exited through the rear door. I estimate that we baled out at around 12,000 feet, and in the darkness of the night it seemed a long way down. Shortly after we had escaped the aircraft blew up, throwing out the Wireless Operator, who remembers nothing of that incident, and killing the Pilot.

Hitting the ground, I realised that there was another parachutist on the corner of the field in which I had landed, and making my way to him found it to be "B.J." our Flight Engineer. Neither of us were injured in any way, so burying our 'chutes we decided to make tracks and get as far away as we could from the scene of our landing.

That night we simply headed in a southwest direction, keeping to fields and avoiding any roads. At one point we came to a large enclosed area, surrounded by high fencing, which we had to go around. Eventually, as dawn approached we found ourselves on the bank of a fast flowing river; there was a bridge downstream, with the occasional vehicle crossing it. The heavily wooded area on the other bank looked most inviting but prudence dictated that we should stay where we were, as the chances of being spotted as we crossed the bridge were too high for our liking.

As daylight came we could see that we were on the edge of a farm, the buildings of which could be seen some two hundred yards from were we were lying in long grass; fortunately the steep bank on which we lay hid us from the farm but we kept a watchful eye in case anyone came in our direction.

The day passed slowly. We had one Escape Kit between the two of us – "B.J." had left his in the aircraft - so we had a couple of Horlicks tablets and risked sharing a cigarette, being careful to blow the smoke into the long grass. It proved to be a very long day, as we lay there waiting for darkness to fall.

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As night came so too did the rain. And how it rained! We made our way to the bridge and got across it without any difficulty, then dived into the woods we had seen. And still it rained; so much so that we were obliged to seek shelter, and there was precious little about. An upturned tin bath, which we came across, when held over our heads provided only token cover, and the noise of the rain falling on it forced us to discard our primitive shelter. A thicker clump of trees provided some relief from the rain and we remained there for much of our second night, only resuming our "escape" attempt when it got a bit lighter. We were following a main road, while staying within cover of the trees, and there seemed to be only military vehicles passing from time to time. As it got lighter we decided to call a halt and get some rest; in any event, we had had little sleep so far. A clump of low scrub provided enough shelter and so we lay down and went to sleep.

It would be difficult to say that we slept well. Periodically, we would waken up and check that there was no one approaching our hideout. The occasional noise of traffic could be heard on the road some distance away; it seemed possible that this was a main route to the south and we took the decision to follow it. We were encouraged to believe that we might yet get out of Germany, and, with luck, get back to Britain.

Up to this point the lack of food had not of great concern. We still had some Horlicks tablets and a chewy bar in the Escape Kit. We also had a fishing line and a hook, but could not imagine us sitting by a stream while we dangled the line in the expectation that we might catch a fish. Some matches, a water bottle and water purification tablets completed our equipment. I had in my possession a pencil, which when broken open revealed a miniature compass, while "B.J." being a pipe-smoker had a tobacco pouch, which, he proclaimed had a map inside. Ripping open the pouch, we were somewhat disappointed to find a map of southern France, and we had a long way to go before it would be of any practical use to us.

Late that afternoon we decided that it would be safe enough to begin walking, provided we stayed within cover of the woods, so off we set. It was slow progress as we constantly had to be on the alert, and every now and then we would stop and listen for any unwelcome sounds.
Gradually, as it got darker within the woods, we edged our way nearer to the road and at times walked along it in an endeavour to cover a greater distance. It was a single track road, and not, as we had imagined, a major thoroughfare; it also ran fairly straight so that we could hear, and even see, any approaching vehicle, whereupon we would dive into cover and remain hidden for a suitable period.

We continued walking throughout the night, albeit at a fairly slow pace, and as daylight came we found that we were nearing some open country, with a few buildings set well back from the road. Then we had some good fortune by coming across apple trees growing by the roadside. We hastily filled our pockets and made our way across a field towards an old barn where we though we might find cover for that day.

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We approached the barn with caution, but it did seem to be disused and sure enough when we got inside we had the firm impression that nobody had been in it for some considerable time. A ladder led up to a hayloft and we settled down there, taking turns to sleep and keep watch. During one of my "watch periods" I came across a bundle of old newspapers and magazines; I could not read them but I thumbed through the pages looking at the odd photographs. Amazingly, I came across a map, which was part of a petrol company's advert, and it covered the very area we were in. It was somewhat crumpled, and torn in places, but I stuffed it into my pocket, feeling sure that it would prove useful in the days that lay ahead,

Feeling refreshed, we ate some of the apples and as dusk settled over the countryside we continued on our way. So far as I could judge we had covered some 50 to 60 miles, and were south of Mannheim and heading in the direction of Karlsruhe. We were still making slow progress, keeping to fields, passing through wooded areas, and trying at all times to remain invisible. This night we again experienced rain, and as it got heavier we decided that there was no alternative but to seek shelter yet again. This proved to more difficult than we had expected, but eventually we came to a bridge over an autobahn and took shelter below it at a point as high up from the autobahn as we could find. It proved to be just right for our purpose for, while we could watch the odd vehicle that passed along the road they were unable to detect our presence in the darkness. Thus passed a few miserable hours.

As dawn approached we thought it best to get away from this location so returned to the fields and continued our walk. We were getting a bit blasé by this time, and took the decision to continue walking through the day. As events were to prove this was a day we would not forget in a hurry. At one point we could see workers in a distant field, but if they saw us they took no notice. Boldness overcame us and we ventured on to a quiet country road in an endeavour to cover a greater distance.

Some miles on our way we spotted a civilian type truck parked by the roadside. There did not appear to be anyone with it so we approached it carefully, possibly thinking that we might be able to use the vehicle to get us further on our way. There was no obvious way that we could have got it started, which led us to abandon the idea of driving off in style, Before leaving the truck, however, we had noticed a packet lying beside the driver's seat; on closer examination we found it to contain two chunks of bread and some sausage. We could not pass up the opportunity to vary our diet a little, and to this day I wonder what the driver thought about his missing lunch, if that is what it was.

The decision to keep to the road was almost our downfall, for turning a bend in the road a few miles on, we saw ahead a group of houses on either side of the road, with one or two women and children actually within sight of us; indeed, it seemed that they had observed our approach. What to do? Walk on, we agreed! So, putting on a bold front we walked straight ahead at a steady but not fast pace; we nodded to the women as we passed and kept going. My spine was tingling but we dared not look back. Another bend in the road and we were out of view of the women.

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Heaving sighs of relief we stepped out a bit faster to get as far away as we could from the hamlet we had passed through. It is perhaps worth mentioning that we had taken the decision not to remove any badges from our uniforms, which meant that we were still wearing our flying badges and our stripes; and yet we had not been recognised.

Later in the day we came across a workman's hut by the roadside; as it was deserted we took the decision to rest for a while inside. It stood back a little from the road, and behind it was a thinly spaced wood. A knothole in the wall facing the road gave us the advantage of viewing anyone approaching. Then the unexpected happened. An army vehicle drew up alongside. As we watched, the driver and a woman got down from the cab. Hell! Were they coming to the hut? Fortunately, they passed behind and went into the wood, re-emerging some ten minutes later. The purpose of their visit was all too obvious, and we watched them as climb back into the truck and drive off. If they were satisfied, so too were we!

That was enough excitement for one day, and certainly more than we had experienced in our travels thus far. To avoid another encounter with any of the local population, we kept to the fields and woods for the remainder of that day, and chose to spend the night as "babes in the wood" once again.

Starting out the next day it was quite apparent that we were suffering from a lack of nourishment. We both felt a bit light headed from time to time and as the day wore on we realised that we needed to find another lorry with a supply of bread and sausage. No such luck, however! Taking it easy, and resting for longer periods in between walking meant that it was going to take longer to get out of Germany than we had imagined.

Never mind, just keep going and hope for the best. Later in the day we came across a vast potato field and filled our pockets in preparation for a bean feast that night. We still had a few apples we had gathered earlier in the day and this gave us the prospect of a better repast.

The hours of darkness came at last; we were still walking and had returned to a quiet country road on which we saw neither persons nor vehicles. When we came across another hut, again set back a little from the road, we claimed it as our own for the night. There was an added bonus in that this hut contained a stove; ideal for roasting our potatoes, so "B.J." foraged for some wood while |I went off to find a stream we could hear nearby in order to fill the water bottle. In my wearied state I misjudged the bank and finished ankle deep in the stream. Returning to the hut I took off my shoes and hung my socks above the stove, now alight, and waited for the potatoes to roast. They were excellent, and the apple desert finished off our evening meal. Before settling down to sleep I went out of the hut to relieve myself and to my horror saw flames spouting two or three feet high out of the chimney. A dead giveaway to any passing traffic, so out went the fire and we turned in for our rest.

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The next morning was sunny and warm. We resumed our trek and by this time I was estimating that we had covered a fair distance although by no means sure where we were having run off the map I had earlier acquired. Still, we were in reasonably good heart and feeling a bit stronger after our meal the night before. Nevertheless we were walking at a slower pace and we took time to rest more often. The result was that had probably covered little more than a dozen miles during that day. As evening came we found another road heading in what we though would be the right direction; it led us into the outskirts of a town of some size, so far as we could judge in the dark, and we were wondering what to do next when we heard approaching footsteps. Diving into a garden of a house, we hid behind shrubs until the figure passed, then re-emerged to continue on our way, still wondering what action to take.

A little further on we spied a railway yard and decided to investigate. Would there be any trains that might take us out of Germany? We never did get the answer to that question as we were suddenly confronted by a uniformed person who took a great interest in us. He spoke to us, obviously asking questions, but as we could not understand a word we just stood our ground and shrugged our shoulders. Bemused perhaps, our questioner eventually lost interest and wandered off. We wasted no time in getting out of that yard and hightailing it down the road with a view to getting as far as we could out of that town; a town we were later to learn was called Rastatt.

We walked at a fair pace and when we judged that we were a good few miles out of the town we looked for some place where we could lie up for the rest of the night. There were woods on both side of the road, but which to choose? We chose to go right and when we were some little distance away from the road we found a hollow under some low scrub, which we settled in for our resting place, and soon we were asleep. I must have slept soundly until I was rudely shaken awake by "B.J." who whispered in my ear, "Look whose coming!" I did look and my heart sank immediately, for there were four German soldiers bearing down on us with rifles and fixed bayonets. There was no chance of escape, and as I looked around I spied an elderly man standing well back watching proceedings; he had in his arm a bundle of wood and it was all too obvious that he had come across us as he searched for wood, and reported us to the military.

As events were to prove he had not had far to go to "turn us in," for we had selected as our resting place a spot some two hundred yards from a German Army camp, which we had not seen through the trees while it was dark. We had truly been caught napping!

We were taken back to this camp, two or three officers appeared and scrutinised us at close quarters before removing out shoes, presumably to avoid us making a run for it. We stood there not knowing what would happen next. The most senior officer, or so he appeared to be, stood looking at us in some amusement. Eventually a truck was brought along, we were invited to get aboard – we had no choice – and we were driven back into the town we had walked through the previous evening.

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What appeared to be the local county jail was our destination, where we were roughly searched then placed in separate cells. I do not mean that they manhandled us; what I mean by roughly is that despite their search they missed my escape kit box, which was by now near empty, and a knife I had in my possession.

After about an hour in the cell, the door was opened and an officer and senior N.C.O. entered. The officer stood and looked at me while the N.C.O. snapped "English?" at me. I don't know what prompted me to say "No," but that was my reply, whereupon the N.C.O. shouted "American?" Again I answered "No." The N.C.O. looked puzzled, but the officer smiled and said in almost faultless English, "Well if you are not English and not American, what are you?" "Scottish," I replied. At this the officer turned. and said a few words to the N.C.O. who then left the cell and I was left alone with the officer. He explained that he had gone to Oxford University pre-war, but, curiously, he asked me no questions. He did say, however, that an Austrian Regiment had picked us up, and that for me the war was over. A few minutes later the N.C.O. returned bearing a tray with a plate of meat and potatoes on it, together with a mug of coffee, then they left me to enjoy my first real meal in eight days.

The following day I met up with "B.J." when we were moved to another prison some miles away. I was a little amused to learn that when the German officer and N.C.O. had confronted "B.J." in his cell, and asked if he was English he had acknowledged the fact, only to be left alone without anything to eat; it was some hours later before he received some bread, cold meat and coffee. Obviously, being Scottish paid off!

Eventually we were taken to Frankfurt and found ourselves in Dulag Luft for interrogation. By this time the attack on Arnheim had taken place and the number of airborne prisoners was such that we were soon moved out to our Prison Camp, Stalag Luft VII in Upper Silesia, which we reached after a train journey occupying several days. At this time we met up with our Bomb Aimer and Wireless Operator, and were more than pleased on arrival at the Camp to find that Spagatner, our Rear Gunner had got there before us. As we were later to have confirmed, the Pilot had indeed been killed in the aircraft, and our Mid-upper Gunner had also been killed, but how and when we never did learn.

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Postscript - My sojourn in Stalag Luft VII was nothing out of the ordinary and there are quite enough stories about POW Camps without my adding to them. However, in January 1945 we were obliged to vacate Luft VII in front of the advancing Russians and were involved in a long march of 240 kms before eventually being loaded on to cattle trucks for the rest of the journey to our "new" Camp at Luckenwalde. The story of the march is set out in the report made by the Camp Medical Officer and the Camp Leader, as contained in the copy attached hereto.

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