

DAVID JOSEPH ; WORLD WAR II RAF PILOT AND PRISONER OF WAR

Introduction

David's early RAF career is still being researched, but we have a comprehensive set of material and information from Jan 1944, including his original flying log book, copy diaries made by fellow prisoners, letters from one of his crew, and various books and articles. We also have his "wings", medals, inscribed "caterpillar club" broach, and the original letter to his parents advising David was missing in action.

The following notes are drawn from the material, and include some direct quotations from it. The prime sources are

1. Of Ploughs, Planes and Palliasses, by Percy Carruthers, a fellow RAF POW's story of survival of camps and forced marches. It includes a reference to David by name, and others from his crew.
2. To See the Dawn Breaking, by Bill Chorley, an official RAF historian, a history of 76 squadron. It records all their bombing missions including those David was on.
3. The Army that Didn't March on It's Stomach, by Cecil Room, an original diary of forced march from Feb to April 1945. David was with the group of pow's on this march.
4. The Last Escape, by John Nicholl and Tony Rennell, written in 2002 based on research and interviews with WWII pow's.
5. Letters from Ted Giles, flight engineer on Davids Halifax Bomber crew, and also a pow, at times in the same camps as David and also repatriated together.
6. David's log book Jan-March 1944 with 76 Squadron, recording the planes, crew, and missions.
7. A photocopy from the original postmans list of pow's in Gross Tychow, 1944

For any amateur historian or student project, the material is superb historical evidence, fascinating, sobering and emotional, and brings vividly to life the hardship, heroism, camaraderie and sheer will to survive of the pow's, many of them like David barely turned 20 years old.

Brief Edited Highlights of David's Experiences

1.From training to operations.

David joined the RAF in October 1941 aged 18 years 8 months, with Service Number 1576383, and was finally decommissioned on 2nd Feb 1946. His training included spells in Canada and he qualified as a pilot and was awarded his wings, an achievement commemorated in an inscribed silver cigarette box given to him on his 20th birthday in Feb 1943 by the workforce at N.C.Joseph Ltd.

David was posted to 76 Squadron, Bomber Command in Jan 1944, a Halifax bomber base at Holme-on-Spalding Moor, and one of many RAF bases in Yorkshire. (The village church has a commemorative stained glass window to squadron members lost

in action.) He began operational flights with them on 20th Jan, piloting the four-engined bombers including missions to Berlin, Trappes, Le Mans, and Stuttgart.

2. Shot down and captured

On the night of 18th March en-route to Frankfurt in Halifax LW 655, the plane was severely damaged by streams of gunfire from an unseen attacker, and the crew were forced to bail out. As pilot, David was last to jump, by when the plane was spiralling down out of control. David's Canadian navigator, Ken Ramsay was killed during or immediately after the parachute descent, but the rest of the crew survived (and thus became members of the Caterpillar Club of airmen whose lives were saved by silk parachutes). They all landed near to Niederehe and Nohn.

Ken's family never knew where he lay until 1984, when David in retirement researched and tracked the grave through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. It is at the Rheinberg war cemetery 15 miles north of Krefeld .

David set off on foot towards the West and bumped into one of his crew, Ted Giles, who was using the same hedgerow for cover !! They were put up in a barn and fed by some French farm labourers the next day, but set off again on foot as soon as night fell only to be captured by armed police in an unknown village. After a few hours in the local cells, they were shipped off to Dulag Luft IV Interrogation Centre at Frankfurt, and from there to Luft III Sagan. This was the scene of the famous " Great Escape " and although David's group were only there for a few hours and not directly involved, the timing was coincidental with the escape activities as it was on the 23rd March that 50 Airmen from Sagan were shot as reprisal for the escape.

3. Heydekrug POW camp

Next David and his group were shipped on to Luft VI Heydekrug, "bleak and cold and inhospitable in the barren wastes of Lithuania", which was to be their "home" through to July. Stories abound of tunnelling, trigger happy guards, regular searches by Gestapo who stole the prisoners' personal possessions and food, great ingenuity, deliberate disruption by the pow's of daily roll-calls, sport and self-created entertainment, and a lethal home-brew fermented from raisins, prunes and sugar received in red-cross parcels.

In June 1944 news of the allied forces D-day successes left Germany fighting on two fronts, and gave pow moral a great boost. " The long hard winter had passed, we now had sunshine with us and more to look forward to, plus hope to sustain us. Within the next ten months we were to discover that we needed every bit of both we could muster, and every ounce of food we could find, just to survive."

By early July, heavy artillery fire from the westward advancing Russian army could be heard in the camp, as the Red Army swept the front line through Poland and ever closer to the border with Germany. The German's attitude to the pow's hardened dramatically.

On 13th July Luft VI Heydekrug was evacuated. There was no transport and men could only take what they could carry, and they were marched to the railway station.

Here the group split, some including Ted Giles going to Thorn in Poland, the rest with David among them beginning a trek during which they suffered unbelievable horrors.

4. "Baltic Cruise", the Insterburg.

Crammed into cattle trucks, they arrived that night at Memel, a Baltic seaport on the west coast of Lithuania. 900 men were forced into the two holds of the "Insterburg", "a dilapidated, old and dirty coaster of about 1500 tons". There was no light or ventilation once the hatches were shut, no food, no drink except for one bucket lowered by rope occasionally, no sanitation, and dysentery was rife and spread fast. The journey lasted 60 hours ending at Swinemunde at the mouth of the river Oder, and an important base for the German Navy.

As the men were unloaded, they were forced to remove their boots and were handcuffed together in pairs, then forced at bayonet point into yet more cattle rail trucks. At that point an allied bombing raid began and the trucks jumped into the air, vibrated and splintered from the blasts.

Eventually the train set off, and "most were in a bad way, and some slumped on the floor, tongues parched and gasping for breath; but the wagons were so crowded no one could bend down to help them."

But the worst was still to come.

5. Hitler Youth. Bayonets, alsations and "The Run Up the Road"

After an overnight journey, the train halted "on a long lonely stretch of track beside a pine forest. A sign announced the name of a tiny station, Kiefheide". The original guards got out and were replaced by "lines of vicious looking young men in white uniforms, brandishing unsheathed bayonets." They were marine cadets from the Hitler Youth, teenage Nazis reared on adulation for Hitler. "We saw hate in their eyes," and kept in the trucks again overnight, "we slept little, kept awake by the sounds of steel blades being sharpened on grinding wheels and laughter as they boasted how they would teach the Terrorfliers a lesson tomorrow."

Kept shut in the trucks until the following afternoon of 19th July, the prisoners were finally hounded out still manacled, struggled to retrieve their boots, and made to stand in lines beside the track. Then they were marched out onto a road, to be confronted by double lines of cursing shouting marine cadets, fixed bayonets, alsation dogs, and guards with machine guns at the ready. The German plan was apparently to incite the men to panic and run, to be shot down "while trying to escape." There were even cameras on tripods to record it all.

Remarkably the prisoners kept their discipline and maintained a fast walking pace until in frustration the German major began yelling at his troops "Alles laufen. Make them run. Make them run until they drop." The marine cadets lashed out with their rifle butts and bayonets, and shots rang out. "Blood oozed from cut flesh and the smell of it enraged the snapping dogs. Men fell to the ground, tripping over or simply too exhausted to carry on. The marine cadets closed in around them."

And yet the prisoners still kept in ranks, shouted encouragement to one another, and the stronger moved to the outside of the line to protect the injured and the weaker in the centre. "There were many acts of courage amidst the confusion."

6. Gross Tychow, Stalag Luft IV.

They arrived at the gates of Gross Tychow, Stalag Luft IV, in the German province of Pomerania, after 6 days without food, water, sleep or sanitation, "an exhausted, scared and subdued bunch. The Germans sat outside eating food they had taken from our packs." And still it was not over, as to go through the gates they were forced to run a forty metre gauntlet of guards in two lines with bayonets fixed, jabbing incessantly at them. Then they were forced to lie on the ground and were strip searched.

This camp became a byword for brutality. POW numbers in the camp grew to 10,000, severe cold and snow set in, there was very little food and Red Cross Parcels only got through rarely. There is evidence that preparations and training were made by the Germans for organised shootings of prisoners.

Initially there was no accommodation, then dog kennels 14 feet by 8 feet and only 4 feet high each with 10 men. Finally barrack huts were available, and we have a photocopy of the postmans list which includes David and 4 of his crew, plus Jeff Longford another Stratford man and school contemporary at KES with David.

Camp numbers swelled dramatically as "hordes of weary dishevelled soldiers, mostly British with some Russian and other Nationals all arriving on foot from the East. They were footsore and limping, dirty, ill-clad, very hungry and exhausted."

7. The Death March from Gross Tychow to Fallingbomel.

By 6th Feb 1945 the advancing Russian army was only 15 miles away, and the RAF prisoners were forced to set off out of the camp on foot, "herded out onto the road and to the fields and woods, in snow, frost, rain and sun, to experience frostbite, hunger, thirst, blisters, swollen limbs, spastic muscles, colitis, dysentery, pneumonia and many other afflictions." It was the start of a massive exodus that would see "the arteries of Germany clogged by millions of displaced people heading west in varying degrees of terror and horror."

The journey covered 380 miles over 8 weeks, and is fully documented in Cecil Room's diaries and Percy Carruthers book.

7th Feb "rain and sleet, we shall be sleeping in wet blankets tonight."
"Bloody awful night, no room in barn and again no food from Jerry."

8th Feb "we see how long the column is. 2000 men three abreast takes up a lot of roads."
"I break the ice in a puddle to get a moderately clean cup of water."

13th Feb "we purchase a small sheep from a farmer, and the boys slaughter it. Divided among 600 men and my share is as big as a sugar lump"

"the dysentery situation was also deteriorating. Many were too weak to go any further, and burning wood to make charcoal and eating it in large quantities. Thankfully it did seem to ease the burning rawness and soothe tortured bowels."

15th Feb "a day of 25 miles and no food. The evening was intensely cold under a clear sky portending frost and body numbing temperatures." There were no buildings to sleep in and the night was spent in the open. "Most of the boys were in such an advanced stage of physical fatigue they just folded up on the wet ground where they were standing."

"the ground we slept on was disgusting, the snow was the colour of khaki from human excrement from those further up the column who had gone before. That night allied bombers came over the area again, not too far away an anti-aircraft battery was firing, and big chunks of shrapnel were coming down from the flak. It was terrifying. We had no helmets to protect us. But what was happening made me so angry, I was determined to survive. Come hell or high water, I was going to get home. This was without doubt the worst night of my life."

16th Feb, (Davids 22nd birthday) "we awoke to see everything and everybody covered with white frost. How some had survived the night I shall never know."

"this was another day of total abstinence from food. We did receive some drinking water late in the day."

By the 15th March, they had covered 288 miles, "I can count the ribs easily now and don't suppose I'm more than six and a half stone. In the 37 days so far, our food supply from the Germans has been 2 loaves, 4/5 of a pound of margarine, 4 ounces of meat, and two and a half Red Cross food parcels." The only extras were from stealing, bartering (twelve cigarettes for two cattle cakes), hacking flesh of dead horses on the roadside, raiding the fields for root crops to gnaw on, occasionally finding grain and potato stores.

"I looked at my own forearm and saw it as a piece of meat. My own arm for Christ's sake. I would wonder if I could bite into it and not hurt myself. "

"so little water was issued that men drank water or snow from the ground or from ditches others had used as latrines. Dysentery was so common and severe that wherever our column went, there was a trail of bloody movements and discarded underwear. "

As the health and strength of the prisoners slumped, the doctors with them were a source of strength and survival despite desperate lack of equipment and medicines. They walked at the rear of the column encouraging and supporting the weakest. They scraped lice off patients bodies to listen to their chests with bare ear pressed to the skin. All they had to lance hundreds of abscesses was a razor blade.

Often a pep talk was all they could offer . " The human body is the toughest device ever built. You fellows are young, far stronger than you realize. You can take an

unbelievable amount of punishment and make a snappy comeback. Hundreds of men have already done it, and you will too."

"Each man on that march had a moment or several when they faced utter despair. Each had to find his own medicine within himself or die."

There are no formal records of the numbers, but eyewitness accounts suggest a minimum of 150 of the RAF prisoners died along the way.

8. Fallingbostell. Hell, Chaos, and Freedom.

The march ended on 28th March, when the prisoners were yet again loaded into rail cattle trucks at Ebbsforf, packed 80 to a truck and left locked in overnight and it was "truly hell. We were all so tired and the very sick were totally worn out. The number of men capable of standing up all night was very few indeed. This resulted in bodies being heaped on each other, exhausted."

A two and a half hour, 70 kilometre journey followed to Fallingbostell, between Hamburg and Hannover, where the group was split between two camps, David's going to Stalag 357. Remarkably here he met up again with Ted Giles, whose group had been transported in from Thorn in Poland. "To say that I was delighted to see David was a gross understatement, but he had experienced a grim journey, very evident in his appearance."

The camps in Fallingbostell were hugely overcrowded, numbers rising daily as more POW's, refugees, concentration camp inmates and slave labourers all of every nationality poured in from the east. There were French, Russian, British, American, Serbs, Indians, Yugoslavs and many other minorities.

The compounds were shanty towns, and there was no food. "I was so frigging hungry there. We received potatoes and a green stew that was made up of boiled grass and boiled sugar beets. All it did was fill a space, there was no nutrition in it."

Information about the advance of British and US troops was conflicting and confusing, and hopes of early release into friendly hands were not realised. On 6th April the RAF prisoners were ordered to leave the camps and to set off marching yet again, this time to the North East away from the advancing allied forces. There were various groups, some returned to the camp as their guards disobeyed orders, and one was tragically mistaken for German soldiers and shot at by allied Typhoon fighter planes. Some, including David and Ted Giles's continued marching, and for the next few weeks were caught up in "the utter chaos of a scarred landscape, full of people who seemed to have nowhere to go, but who filled the roads trying to get there." At times they were overtaken by retreating German soldiers, and at others were in the front line battle zones.

Finally in late April or the first few days of May, David and Ted Giles were together when the British Army caught up with their group, and freedom was quickly followed by starting the journey back to the UK via Brussels on VE night 8th May. "Frankly we were too exhausted to join in the fun."

They were taken to the reception centre at RAF Cosford, to be re-kitted and debriefed. At the end of the program David and Ted Giles "suggested they be sent on a refresher course and then on operations in the Far East. The Medical Officer's reply was not encouraging !!"

9. Reflections

David weighed an emaciated 6 stone on his return home, carried stomach ailments, bayonet wound scars and a hatred of alsations for the rest of his life. His legs remained pencil thin. No doubt there were deep mental and emotional scars too, but like many of his fellow POW's he rarely spoke of his experiences, just once talking for hours to Beryl (who he met in the autumn of 1945 whilst recuperating) on a drive down from Stratford to Biggin Hill to see Beryl's parents.

But in many respects David was one of the lucky ones. 76 Squadron alone lost 775 crewmembers killed in action, David's navigator Ken Ramsay among them. And David's cousin "little David" Silverman was killed on operations when his Lancaster went down. And not forgetting that 150 of his fellow prisoners did not survive the "Death March".

The so-called " Baltic Cruise" and the " Run up the Road " were the subject of a Foreign Office letter dated 27th Jan 1945 requesting a full investigation as war crimes breaching the Geneva Conventions.

1. A letter from Ted Giles, flight engineer on David's Halifax bomber crew, and also a POW, at times in the same camp as David and also repatriated together.
2. David's log book Jan-March 1944 with 76 Squadron, recording the flight crew, and miscellanea.
3. A photocopy from the original prisoner list of POW's in Gross Tschow, 1944

For any serious historian or student project, the material is superb historical evidence, fascinating, gripping and emotional, and brings vividly to life the hardship, boredom, camaraderie and above all the survival of the POW's, many of them into the 21st century now 60 years old.

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