

COPY OF A LETTER WRITTEN

TO MARY EGAN OF PRESTON MILLS BARNES
AFTER MY RETURN FROM P.O.W. CAMP.

W/O F.S. CAHIR
AUS 419441
RAAF LONDON.

Sunday May, 27th 1945.

Dear Mary,

Well here goes for the story, I hope I dont bore you! I seemed to have lost my touch for letter writing, so dont expect too much, (of course I am taking it for granted that I could write a letter before my holiday in Germany).

First of all let me thank you for your letters to me in Germany it was great to receive them, and it gave me a kick to know I had not been forgotten; sorry I could not write more often to you, but it was owing to the rather strict sorting by the Germans and their meagre allowance of one letter and two cards per month, still I hope you did receive the three or four cards I did write; quite a few of your letters went astray in transit to me.

I think it would be best if I went back to the night of Dec. 20th, 1943, and tell you how I got into the jam I was in. We had just dropped our load on Frankfurt-on-Main and were about to head for home when a Jerry night fighter appeared on the scene, my skipper immediately put the plane into a steep dive then a climb to regain lost height, it was just when the plane was on the top of the climb and ready to go into another dive that Jerry let us have it with everything he had. We were hit good and proper - the whole starboard wing was on fire, also the Bomb bays (lucky we had dropped the bombs).

Both motors on the starboard wing went hay-wire and we immediately went into a dive, the pressure was terrific, I couldnt move, and to be honest I thought my end had come, but the "skipper" managed to get the plane under control a little and ordered us to bail out; it was hard going to get out of a turret and down to the escape hatch as the pressure was still very great.

I think I bailed out at a height of approx. 9000', it may have been less! I landed safely and only twisted my ankle a little.

You have no idea what my feelings were when I landed, I lay on the ground in a ploughed paddock for a few seconds or it may have been hours, time did not seem to exist, then I got to my knees and I

I had just thanked "Almighty God" for saving me, also that the rest of the boys had managed to get out of that blazing inferno.

As there was no sense in me hanging around the spot where I landed, I immediately made for some bush I could see in the distance and buried my parachute and various other unnecessary gear. After studying an escape map I had, I reckoned I was approx. 40 miles N.E. of Frankfurt and my best plan would be to reach France, so I started walking, I walked all that night and by morning I found myself near a small village.

I spent the daylight hours in a small wood shed on the outskirts of the village watching German kids going to school and women doing their shopping. Just as it was getting dark, and I was getting ready for the road again, a Jerry for some unknown reason had to come and look in the shed and there he found "your lordship". Well the game was up then, he knew who I was as soon as he saw me and I didn't think it advisable to make a break for it as once they know you are in the area they send out armed Guards.

He took me to the local Police station where I waited for a Gestapo agent to come and pick me up. I was then taken to some kind of Gestapo H.Q.s and saw nothing but photos of Hitler and his Gang on every wall (I might add here that Hollywood's Gestapo agent is typical of the real Gestapo agent in Germany, they are not very nice people to meet!)

From Gestapo H.Q.s I travelled to a lock-up and spent a few hours in a cell with a mob of Hitler Youth passing wise cracks at me from outside the bars. At this prison they tried to interrogate me, but not with much success, the interrogator could not speak very good English, and if he asked me any questions I used to shake my head and say he spoke very bad English and I could not understand him. After this had gone on for about half an hour he got "browned off" and gave me up as a bad job.

From here I was taken along with another R.A.F. chap to a Military Barracks and there we spent the night in a cell. We travelled to Frankfurt (or to be more correct "the remains of Frankfurt

The next morning, when once again we were thrown in cells. I spent until December 26th in these cells. Christmas Day 1943 will live in my memories as the most miserable day of my life, I shall never forget it!

My next move was to Dulag Luft also in Frankfurt, then onto Stalag IVB Mulkberg- on - Elbe where I spent the rest of my prison days.

Mary, I have only one person to thank on this earth for my life, and that was my late skipper, it was only by his bravery that I with the other five members of the crew got out of that kite, he stuck to the controls and fought them to bring the kite back on some kind of a level keel to get us out; it cost him his life, but I will always remember him as a "Man, whose bravery is worth more than a hundred V.C.s"

Now for life in stalag IVB. It was quite interesting and very cosmopolitan to say the least of it. Every nationality inside and outside of Europe was represented there, at a rough guess I would say that there were at least thirty five different nationalities.

The camp was a very big one in the form of a rectangle and with a perimeter of approx. 2 miles. Along the barbed wire fence were three sentry Boxes per side with machine Guns, they were just like the Boxes you see on the walls at Pentridge, so when I come home and I feel a bit lonely all I have to do is to dash over to Coburg and take a look at the Sentry Boxes. At night the barbed wire perimeter was flood lit and from each box there was a search light on a swivel, which used to sweep the Camp at night, of course the guards used to be doubled at night, so you see we were pretty well kept well under control as far as escaping through the wire was concerned. The best means to escape was to change places with somebody that was working outside the Camp, and from your place of work escape; there were two or three spectacular escapes, but I dont suppose they have much interest to you so I will get onto Camp activities.

Stalag IVB was an N.C.O.s camp in the main part, and consequently the inhabitants were not required to work, so most of our day used to be spent in walking, talking and sleeping, it sounds very nice doesnt it? but after you have walked around the Camp a few times

AND SEEN NOTHING BUT ARMED GUARDS & BARBED WIRE, WALKING AS A PLEASURE IS RULED OUT. TALKING & SLEEPING COMES OUT BECAUSE OF LACK OF

news and scandal etc., and sleeping is the only pleasure left to you if you can call it a pleasure with fleas and bed bugs crawling over you. Do you know, (it sounds funny even to me now) I used to sit on my bunk and go through my clothes, article by article, picking the "hoppers" off before I crawled into bed.

I did a fair bit of reading, but books were hard to get especially good books. During the summer months I played cricket or rather a condensed form of cricket, the winter months were not so good, snow was on the ground and the food problem was very serious and most of the chaps were too weak to bother with sport of any description, in fact last winter I can't remember one snowball being thrown in the Camp.

We had a Theatre in the Camp, it was converted from a Barrack Room and could seat approx. 500 patrons at a time. Shows as a rule lasted about ten days, all the actors were men, some with experience on the London stage, other with no experience at all. Among the shows produced was "The Man who came to Dinner", "The Rope", "Tons of Money", "Dover Road", "You Can't take it with you", "Petrified Forest", "The Women", and many others.

The last mentioned show was a marvellous success the 43 parts were all taken by men and there were 13 different changes of scenery.

I can't very well describe a show to you, I suppose you think I must be rather soft to be deceived by men taking the part of Women, but I assure you, there were some very clever actors in the Camp and with the help of a little make up etc., I defy anyone to say they were anything but women. I think it is much easier for a man to take the part of a woman than it would be for a woman to act the part of a man. If you ever get the opportunity to go and see a play with a male cast acting the part of women, I would advise you to take it, I am sure you would like it and be amazed at it!

There were also many other types of programmes produced such as Varieties Revues (with Chorus Girls) Concerts and Displays.

During the summer months when we were receiving Food Parcels, there were Sport Days with cricket and Football, we even held a Test

match series between England and Australia and South Africa. Many other sports such as Rugby and Volley Ball were also in vogue.

Our sleeping quarters, which were also our Dining Room, Washing Room, Recreation Room and anything else you wish to make them, consisted of a long Barrack Room approx. 100 feet x 30 feet, in it were three tier bunks, enough Bunks for 200 men, but if you put two men in each bunk you could get 400 men in a Barrack Room; that is what happened quite often. Jerry would bring thousands of new prisoners in and put them into already overcrowded Barracks.

The food question was serious, whilst we were on Red Cross Parcels, things were very bright but as soon as they stopped the chaps started to get sick and weak and it was an effort to walk around the camp even once a day. We were unfortunate in having no food parcels during the winter and we felt the cold very badly. Typhus broke out but nobody in the British or American Compounds died of it, there were quite a few hundred deaths in the other Nationalities Compounds; as a matter of fact the chap in the bed beside me caught it but he recovered after a few months. The German food ration consisted of a cup full of soup, pea soup mainly (sometimes you would get peas in it) four or five potatoes and two or three slices of bread; now and again we would get a little margarine or turnip jam.

Do you know, Mary, hunger and misery bring out the animal in man, when I first arrived in the prison camp I was in good condition and had human feelings, not that I have lost them now, but what I am trying to get at is when I first arrived at IVB, it used to make me sick to see men grovelling in the dust looking for scraps of potato peeling to eat, scraping out old tins that had been lying in a pit for weeks in the hopes of finding something to eat.

After a few weeks I became like many others, a silent spectator, surprised at nothing and expecting Man to do anything.

It makes you feel a bit callous sometimes against the Germans when you think of him shooting men without warning just because they are hungry and steal food that he has not use for, and is throwing out.

(I SUPPOSE YOU WILL THINK I HAVE CHANGED) MARY, SINCE LEAVING

home, I don't think I have, certainly not in my principles, they will always remain with me, but when one sees men die for almost nothing one cannot help thinking that the Killers should be punished and that's how I feel when I say Germany deserves everything that is coming to her, beyond that I neither hate nor love the Germans.

I was able to carry out my Religious Duties. There were twelve Priests in the Camp of all Nationalities, we had a small Chapel for week-days and on Sundays Mass used to be said in the theatre. There was only one English Priest, he was captured in the Desert somewhere. The German did not make it easy for our Chaplain then again he did not hinder him to any great degree, the Priests had to fight for everything they had.

The French Priest in the Camp had been a prisoner since before the fall of France and had spent his whole time in Stalag IVB.

One of the most heart-tearing sights in the Stalag was the arrival of 1,000 Polish Women prisoners, do you remember the Polish uprising in Warsaw in Sept. 44? Well these were the gallant Women that fought! Jerry treated them just as he did us, using the rifle butt on them if they were slow etc. The British Personnel, as well as others made a collection for them and helped them out a little. They were in the Stalag for about a month and were then moved out to be put into factories etc. All the time they were there I couldn't help thinking that if we had gone under, my Mother, you, and many other Australian girls would have been in their position, a terrible thought but a true one.

Reading that last paragraph I think I must have been getting a little morbid, so I will carry on with the story about our liberation.

April 23rd was the great day, we were liberated by the Russian Army. We remained in the Camp for about a week, then we moved to a place called Piesse and put up in a home of a Naya, the owner having fled of course. Whilst we were in this house we lived like Kings sleeping in beds, eating with knives and forks (The first for 18 months) and taking hot showers at all hours of the day, we had a marvellous time!

We stayed there for a week waiting to be taken out, but the Russians did not seem to be worrying much about us so we decided (five other chaps and myself) to walk to the American lines and refabricate ourselves. We reached the American lines after a couple of days of walking and were eventually packed up by the Yanks, who treated us like royalty. We were taken to Halle for a few days to await transport which arrived in due course. From Halle we flew to Brussels in a Dakota, there we transferred to R.A.F. Lancasters and flew the rest of the way to England.

On arrival in England I was admitted to hospital with stomach trouble and malnutrition. At present I am still in hospital but I expect to be out sometime this week. I think I am due for twenty-eight days leave, and what a leave I am going to have!

The past couple of weeks has worked wonders on me, I feel a hundred percent now and I gained 2½ lbs. this week, I have still about 1½ stone to catch up on!

I dont know just what I intend to do with my leave, I suppose I will spend a week or so in London and the rest with my Aunt.

I went to the pictures last night, it was a free show in the hospital. I think the name of the show was "The Sky's the Limit" with Fred Astair, I dont know if it was an old or new film, but to me it was very enjoyable.

I wonder if I have forgotten how to dance? heaven help the poor girl who has first dance with me, she wont be able to walk for about a week after it.

How's everything at home? Every-body in the best of health I hope, how have you been keeping yourself? I suppose I will be a stranger to everybody when I get home, not many of the old crowd seem to be left.

I have no idea when I will be leaving England for Australia, I should imagine it wont be for a few months yet, so I should have a good change of seeing a fair bit of England before I set out on the last lap home. I might even be able to get across to Ireland for a few days!

Well, Mary, I think I had better bring this letter to an end,
I hope I have not bored you too much. Thanks again for writing to
me so often, you have been a real pal! and I really appreciate your
kindness.

Mr. Aird / Herewith letter from Jim Cahin as arranged

McAker

McAker. Returned with thanks

17.9.45