

**Recollections – Warrant Officer BF Hughes (Service No NZ402870  
RNZAF)**



Shot down 28th August 1942. Halifax BB214 - Sgt H G Dryhurst

Date	Target/Duty	S/N	Rank	Initials	Surname	Age	Hometown	Service	Missing	POW
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	Sgt	HG	Dryhurst					POW
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	Sgt	JW	Platt	25	Liverpool.	RAF	M	
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	Sgt	AA	Roberts			RAAF		POW
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	P/O	VMM	Morrison	19	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.	RCAF	K	
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	F/S	JJ	Carey	22	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.	RCAF	K	
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	Sgt	BF	Hughes			RNZAF		POW
28/08/1942	Nuremberg	BB214	Sgt	JL	MacLachlan	21		RAFVR	K	

This article was written by Bernie Hughes and sent to me by the Hughes family some years ago. It was published in the RAF Elsham Wolds Assn newsletter in 2007. In view of the renewed interest in the crew of BB214, I have added this to the web site. Many thanks to the Hughes family for submitting this interesting item. **DF 26th June 2014**

“Although the details of what happened within the plane the night we were shot down are still vivid in my mind, I am rather vague about such things as the target for that night and the number of aircraft taking part. I have a dim

recollection that the target was Nuremburg, that the number of aircraft was about 800 and that for the first time we were dropping bombs not pamphlets on that city. I could be mixed up with the stories shared by us later in our P.O.W. camp in Ober-Silesia of course, but it is my recollection that Nuremburg was our target.

We had an uneventful flight across the Channel until we reached the French coast where all hell broke loose. Very heavy anti-aircraft fire was encountered and we had an extremely busy time trying to avoid being hit. Eventually we had escaped it and pressed on towards our target. Along the route we saw heavy outbursts of gunfire on both sides of us, but apart from two or three awkward patches we seemed to be having a charmed run. I was just congratulating myself that we were going to have a rather easy trip when without warning there was a shattering sound of bullets cutting through metal, an explosion, flames everywhere and much coloured smoke. I was normally the tail-gunner in the crew but on changing over from Wellington bombers to Halifax bombers, I asked to change over to mid-upper turret for a few flights to see what a difference it made. Underneath my feet in the fuselage, flares were exploding, there was a lot of smoke and flames, and I could not see out of my turret. The plane was now in a dive and I slid out of the turret to get my parachute and clip it on to my harness. I have always been afraid of heights often "freezing" when climbing a ladder to get on to a wall or roof, and I had sworn that I would always stay with my plane as I felt I would be too terrified to bale out. However, when your life is out on a limb you forget your fears quickly and your main aim is to do anything to preserve yourself. I attempted firstly to get through to the front of the plane to contact the skipper. Finding this impossible I then tried to open the door into the rear-gunner's turret but this seemed jammed and would not budge. By this time I was praying, cursing, laughing and crying. I tried to open the entrance hatch to make my escape, but it would not move. I kicked, screamed and yelled and after what seemed an eternity I finally got the hatch open. I turned onto my stomach to slide out into space and my harness caught on a jagged piece of metal as I went through the hatch. I found myself pressed against the fuselage like a fly on a wall while the plane plunged towards earth. I consider only God got me off that hook. When, after what I consider the worst few minutes in my life up till then, I finally broke free from the plane. I found everything so peaceful that I delayed pulling the handle of the ripcord. When I did it was to find a forest of trees coming up to meet me. I landed in a wheat field completely surrounded by trees. I could hear machine gun fire in the skies above me and the barking of dogs through the trees. I rolled up my parachute, and together with escape documents that I tried to tear up, hid them under a wheat stack and proceeded through the trees on to a road, which sloped downwards. I started to walk down this road when I was suddenly confronted by a youth who peacefully but urgently tried to stop me and pointed in the opposite

direction. He kept saying, what I figured out later when I had learnt some basic German words, "Deutschen Zoldaten". Later on when I had time to think more clearly I figured out that he must have been the son of a foreign worker forced to work in Germany, and that he was trying to warn me to make off in the opposite direction. Later when I saw him in the crowd that gathered as my captors brought me to headquarters I smiled at him but he ignored me. I must have been in a state of shock after my escape from the plane and parachute descent because I did so many stupid things and took no evasive action.

I continued down the road, around a bend, and without warning two German Air Force soldiers stepped from behind the trees and with rifles pointed at my back, they shouted at me to halt. They marched me down to what seemed to be part of a monastery building that presumably had been commandeered for war purposes. I was told there was a night-fighter base nearby and that the pilot who had shot us down was from that base.

My interrogation was conducted firmly but courteously. I gave my name, number and rank but refused to provide further information. I was advised by my interrogators that they knew my squadron, but merely wanted me to verify the information. I said if they knew so much there was no need for me to add anything further. I must add that their information was pretty accurate but I refused to tell them so. Being still a little shocked might have helped me. I was told that Harry Dryhurst, the Skipper, had his parachute caught in the trees and had to unbuckle himself and drop into a canvas sheet held by his captors. Also that Roberts, the Navigator, was captured and was being interrogated, that the plane had dived into a lake and was on the bottom, and that the bodies of the crew had been recovered. From the information they gave me later I thought that only one body remained in the plane, John Carey, the Canadian front-gunner.

After the interrogation we were taken by train the next day to a P.O.W. entry camp. Here we were put in solitary cells. I spent about five or six days in solitary. I think the idea was to break you down a little so they could obtain further information from you.

I recall in the cell next to mine the window was open and I could hear the inmate giving lots of information about life on his squadron and how bomber crews reacted to raids, and how big the turnover was in aircrew. I still think this was a plant because I was interrogated not long after that and told I should co-operate more like many of my comrades. In case it was not a plant I mention the matter to the senior British officer when we were released into the main camp after solitary confinement. Solitary confinement, though not harsh or cruel, was very unnerving to young men coming straight from the free and easy camaraderie of an RAF squadron.

Release into the main camp was like an unexpected holiday. Here one could talk, read, play games, enjoy comradeship and have more satisfactory meals (Red Cross parcels, not German black bread, watery vegetable soup and ersatz coffee). Perhaps the greatest release was the feeling of space and not the claustrophobia of being shut up within four narrow walls.

After a short stay at this quite pleasant camp we were entrained and taken by rail to the huge P.O.W camp Stalag V111B – Lamsdorf, in Ober-Silesia on the border of Poland. This camp contained P.O.W.s from practically every war front commencing from the British Expeditionary Force in France up till Dunkirk, Greece and Crete, the Desert, the Mediterranean, Sicily and Italy. There were British, Anzacs, Canadians many captured after the abortive Dieppe raid, South Africans, Ghurkas, Americans and representatives from all the nations involved on the British side in the war. Although it was mainly an Army camp there were naval men and members of specialist groups such Parachutists, Commandos, Desert Long Range Groups and approximately one thousand Air Force men. From memory there were about ten thousand men in the camp at any one time, plus a total of nearly ten thousand men in various working parties attached to the camp for administrative purposes.

The camp was divided into compounds with approximately one thousand men in each, living in stone barracks with concrete floors and wooden shutters covering the window openings. In the middle of each barrack was a washroom containing cold water, washbasins and a stone copper for boiling water when wood was available. About a hundred men lived in each half of a barrack with three-tiered bunks in rows on one side of the room and wooden trestles with wooden frames on the other side. There was an outside latrine (a forty-holer we called it) built from the same materials as the barracks and with a covered sump at the back. Periodically, a horse-drawn wooden tank was brought into the compound, the wooden covers of the sump were opened and the human waste pumped into the tank. The tanks was then driven from the camp into the surrounding fields and used as manure. In the summer the latrine smelt to the high heavens. In the winter it was a severe penance to go to the latrine as it was icy cold, there being no doors nor shutters over the windows. As it was not permitted to go outside the barracks at night a wooden tub was positioned inside the porch for toilet purposes. Barrack inmates were rostered each night to carry out the tub and dispose of the waste. It was not a pleasant duty but luckily only happened two or three times a year for each man.

Life in each compound varied according to circumstances. At normal times the gates of each compound were opened at 9.00am and locked at 4.00pm in the winter or 6.00pm in the summer. Inmates of one compound could visit inmates of another or go to lectures in the school building, or play sport on

the two clay sites set aside for this purpose, or go under guard to the shower block on their rostered day of the week. Some nights there were stage performances in the theatre building and different compounds, whose turn it was that night, were escorted under guard from their compounds to the theatre and back afterwards. Roll call was taken in the morning and afternoon to coincide with the opening and closing of the compound gates. Normally this took 10 – 15 minutes but every so often if there had been an escape from the camp or radio sets, which were strictly forbidden, had been found in the barracks then the compound inmates could be kept out on parade for hours. On one particular occasion we were kept on parade from 9.00am until after mid-afternoon with only the proven sick allowed to sit on the ground for short periods of about 10 minutes. There was a strong protest by the senior British representative but this was ignored by the German control, as were other protests. There were frequent interruptions to the normal running of the camp when compounds were kept locked. Classes, lectures and the theatre were shut down and apart from visits to the latrine under guard no movement was permitted between barracks in the same compound. This was also a grim time as Red Cross parcels were not allowed to be distributed and the inmates had to exist on German rations such as watery vegetable soup, or fish soup with fish heads swimming in it, black bread, ersatz jam, or fish cheese (a vile tasting and smelling concoction) and black ersatz coffee.

Perhaps one of the worst periods for the camp was just after the Dieppe raid by the Canadians. Some of the German prisoners captured by the Canadians after their initial landing were found dead on the beach with their hands bound behind their backs. The Germans at first thought they had been bound and then shot by the Canadians and it was not until later they realised they had been killed by flying bullets, probably from their own side, when the Canadian attack was repulsed and the few who escaped were driven from the beach.

However, in retaliation, for what the German Command at first thought was a British atrocity all Air Force personnel in the RAF compound at Lamsdorf, as well as all Army personnel, in the other compounds of the rank of Corporal or over had their hands tightly bound with very strong string from early in the morning till evening. They were not permitted out of their barracks except under guard to the latrine. German front rank troops from the Russian front, who were on home leave, were brought in as extra guards. Armed with quick-firing rifles with bayonets attached they patrolled four to each end barracks. They were fine soldiers, unable to be bribed like normal guards, who once bribed, could be forced to bring into the compound forbidden items such as parts of a radio, tools, clothing etc.

These soldiers were not at all happy about doing guard duty in a P.O.W. camp but they did it with quiet efficiency, firmness and no cruelty. This period lasted for four to six weeks. With the demand from various war fronts for more experienced troops these guards were pulled out and replaced with the normal camp guards posted outside each compound. The string around our wrists was replaced by handcuffs. These were brought in a large tray into each end barrack by two guards. Each P.O.W. had to put on his own handcuffs and keep them on until they were unlocked at the end of the day. Gradually, the mean learned to open the handcuffs with a nail or similar shaped object and the whole operation became a farce. In the end the guards were bringing in the trays, leaving them in the porch and collecting them in the evening. This particular period of reprisal occupied several months before dying out. The next major disruption in the camp took place at the end of December 1944.

The Russians were breaking through on the Eastern front and the Germans decided to move the occupants of StalagV111B westwards. Each occupant was issued with a Red Cross parcel of food and told to carry whatever clothes and personal item he could manage. Under armed guard we started to march westwards through the cold and snow of a severe eastern European winter. We were billeted overnight wherever room could be found for each group in large buildings, other unoccupied camps, churches and factories. Many of us contracted Dysentery, various types of stomach ailment, feet troubles and because of lack of bathing, lice.

Eventually with another RAF friend and a British Army friend of his, we escaped from the main march, and after a series of adventures we contacted a party of Polish foreign workers on a party complex. With their help and guidance we hid up in a barn where they kept a farm tractor. For over a week they smuggled food and drink to us when they came each morning to collect the tractor. The last day they advised us that American troops were approaching the area and they would have to lie low to avoid being caught in any military action. That night there was a fierce battle. In the morning we could hear tanks rumbling along the road, then the sound of motor driven vehicles approaching the barn. We buried ourselves deeper in to the hay. The doors were flung open and an American voice called out, "Okay fellows you can come out now. The Americans are here."

It was April 9<sup>th</sup>, the greatest day in our prisoner of war life. The outfit that rescued us was the Second Battalion Combat team 23, Second Division (Infantry), 1<sup>st</sup> Army, Officer Commanding Lieut/Colonel William A Smith. I have his autograph and I have kept it since the war years." **Bernie Hughes**

**This item is courtesy of the Hughes family in New Zealand.**