



MY EXPERIENCE AS A PRISONER OF WAR IN GERMANY 1943-1945

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Possibly the story of my POW life begins one month before the official date. We crewed up at Operational Training School - where, unlike the Americans, we picked the people we would fly with. Our crew was very closely knit and this feeling stayed with us through Heavy Conversion Unit (where we changed from Wellington to Halifax bomber) and then a posting to 428 Squadron at Middleton St. George, in the county of Durham, England. With three commissioned officers and 4 sergeants it was an average mix. 428 (Ghost) Squadron was a Canadian squadron in a Canadian (6) Group of Bomber Command. By 1942 the second pilot position had disappeared although we quite often carried pilots with no combat experience to give them an idea what it was actually like. Discipline on a Canadian Squadron was somewhat different from that on RAF and US units. Although this was a Canadian squadron the air crews were rarely 100% Canadian as we trained at a RAF unit (OTU) and it depended on who was there at the same time, for example, there were no flight engineers in the RCAF at that time, they were all British. Similarly the other groups had 36% Canadian aircrew members. While on the ground we had to maintain a position of respectability, but in the air everything was on a first name basis. The same thing held when we were in town with our ground crew (all RAF). This would shock army officers in pubs etc. To see a sergeant talking to a wing commander using his first name. - I recall one time an army type said to my pilot - "I'd have that man on charge if he spoke to me that way" - and he replied "If I'm flying the aircraft and the rear gunner says corkscrew starboard, I don't ask him why -- I do it". Luckily we had enough ground exercises in abandoning aircraft, dinghy drill etc. that when something happened in the air we were trained to react by rote. This eventually saved my life.

In the summer of 1943 we had been busy bombing assorted targets such as Pennamunde, The Ruhr Complex, Hamburg and Berlin. On Nov. 20, I was in the station hospital with pneumonia when my crew flew to bomb Frankfurt (all up effort) and didn't return - one killed and three wounded, as I found out later. When I got out of the hospital I decided that the least I could do was to go with the crew whose navigator had gone with mine. This was a largely Australian crew, the only Canadian had been the navigator - and they had only four more trips to go. They were a good bunch and I felt very confident flying with the Aussie sergeant pilot - more so than one trip with our commanding officer. I was able to get him commissioned after two trips together - so that he could share my room, as rooms were scarce in the mess, and I had been sharing with Jack Beggs who was shot down in November. It was one of the best rooms.

On the night of Dec.20/43, I somehow did not feel too well but decided to fly, wearing my one piece flying suit for the first time (usually wore battle dress and Irwin jacket). Bearing in mind that the temperature at 20,000 feet was about 52 below, I wore silk and wool underwear (longjohns) and as a navigator I had silk gloves under leather. The target was again Frankfurt where my original crew had gone down, and was winter in Yorkshire in December.

We took off at 1700 hours for what should have been a six hour flight and proceeded across the North Sea, over Belgium and then Germany. The aircraft we were flying was an old Mark 2 and we could not get it into a safety height zone, so we were proceeding at 17,000 feet, well below the main stream at 20,000 plus. This must have made us stand out on a radar screen; incidentally we were carrying a second pilot for the experience. This was to be his first and last Operation. We didn't fly Missions!!

About 1930 hours I heard loud bangs and the lights went out - simultaneously the aircraft went into a spin. My seat came down from the starboard wall with my desk on the other side (with the forward escape hatch underneath me). I reacted as I was trained and threw back my seat and pulled the hatch door into the cabin and jettisoned it into the nose. We wore parachute harnesses but the chute itself was in a steel case beside my leg, so I grabbed it and holding it with one hand tried to pull myself out the hatch, bearing in mind that the aircraft was spinning out of control. I had difficulty getting out (though I was smaller then), then someone stepped on my back and I went out at about 15,000 feet. Then discipline took hold and I realized I had to attach my chute to my harness, then fall some distance to get into the oxygen area. This all took place on a pitch-black night with no lights of any kind. As I neared the ground I could not make out any objects, and was quite surprised to land in something that was soft and dry -- A HAYSTACK! The impact when the chute opened had emptied the outer pockets on my flying suit and I had lost all my cigars - was I ever mad! My sheep skin lined boots were also lost, so I was in stocking feet.

I decided to spend the night in the haystack - burrowing in to keep warm. The next day there were no people around and I heard church bells - which I thought to be a good omen as I might be near the Belgian border. Having spotted a farmhouse near the spot, I proceeded with caution and approached the door. An old farmer (German) opened the door and pointed a shotgun at me, and shaking all the while, he motioned me to come in and keep my hands up while he phoned the local army station. About 10 minutes later a Kubelwagen (jeep) arrived with a sergeant and two soldiers who drove me to the town jail. They spoke no English and I at that time no German - but I was treated courteously. The German system was that as an air force officer I must be transported to a Luftwaffe facility, escorted by a German officer, so I spent the whole day in jail until the Luftwaffe personnel arrived to take me to Koblenz. They were Flak personnel (anti aircraft), which was part of the Luftwaffe, but decent types.

One day later I left for Frankfurt (by train) accompanied by four guards and an officer. He spoke some English and explained that the guards were to protect me and I should stay close to them. The officer and I occupied a first class carriage and the guards stood in the hall, outside the door. He told me that no lunch was provided for me so that I would have to share his, which I did.

When we got to Frankfurt I saw that the railway station had been bombed and the glass roof was all in pieces on the ground. The guards formed around me and we pushed our way thru an unruly crowd to another Kubelwagen and drove to Dulag Luft on the outskirts of the city. This was the main holding and interrogation centre for air force POWs. I was then led to a small room (8 ft. By 5 ft.), where I spent the next 10 days. This had in it a bed and one blanket - heat and light were controlled from outside -- which was part of the scheme to make me tired and uncomfortable. Cabbage soup was fed to me (Room Service) and altho I saw many doors off the halls when I went to the bathroom, I saw only the guard who was conducting me - altho I did see a lot of doors.

For two days I saw no one except the guard. On the third day I was taken upstairs to a well-furnished office where I met my interrogation officer. He was a major in the Luftwaffe who I later found had been a professor of psychology at Heidleburg university in peace time. He was pleasant and offered me cigarettes and coffee - I noticed that the cigarettes were Camels (U.S.). I got the classic "for you the war is over" and a few questions about my squadron etc. Luckily we had been trained to give only our name, rank and number (Geneva Convention) and he didn't threaten me or behave in any hostile manner! Spent about 20 minutes with him constantly smoking his cigarettes and then returned to my room. Nothing happened for another two days then this process was repeated. Then another three days past before I saw him again. This time when I sat down facing him there was a file on the desk in front of me labelled "428 Squadron - RCAF". This didn't surprise me as I had been told this could happen. He informed me that all my crew were dead and had been given military funerals by the Luftwaffe They were able to ascertain from the wreckage, apparently, that the aircraft carried two pilots and no navigator, so the assumption was that it was me. Altho this saddened me I still repeated name, rank and number. He talked about what they knew about the squadron - including the name of the station commander and the WAAF officer he was running around with (but I was not surprised and made no comments.) After some bread and butter and, coffee and cigarettes he said I would be released and transferred to a holding unit until I was sent to a permanent camp. He wished me luck and we parted company.

The next day I was transferred another compound (about 50 feet away) and met (about fifty) other like souls including Americans. They had Red Cross food and fed me well. Altho I had spent Xmas in solitary confinement and missed all the joyous time they said that they had experienced at Xmas and New Years.

This was a holding unit with RAF staff, and we saw virtually no Germans around. When it was decided where they were going to send us, we would be formed into groups, as logically it was not possible to send us out one at a time. The American and RAF Officers (including all the various Royal Air forces) would go to one camp and our NCO's to another. The Yanks were more populous so would be leaving more frequently. Altho our Raid Complement (no of aircraft per trip) was about the same as theirs, they had a better survival rate (not to be construed as cowardice on their part)-- we had a lot of respect for them flying in daylight without fighter escort. Once a B17 lost its place in the formation thru damage it was fair game for the Luftwaffe fighters - so they were more or less prepared to bail out. We later calculated

that whereas we were getting one man (no women) out of each plane shot down (out of 8) - they were getting an average of 5 out of 10.

Eventually there were enough of us to make a shipment to our camp, which was on the Polish border - and some distance from Frankfurt. We travelled by box car and frankly I cannot recall anything about the trip except it took about 4 days - with considerable time being spent on sidings as troop trains went up to the Russian front with priority. We finally got to Sagan to find that we were not going to Luft 3 at Sagan, but to a new camp some eight km away. Some of the Kriegies (POW in German is Kriegsgefangenen) from Sagan had already been transferred to this camp to get it going. This included a SBO (Senior British Officer - Group Captain) and his staff, plus a lot of characters such as Bob Stanford - Tuck, Wally Floody, and some Polish types. This was how Floody, who built the Great Escape Tunnel at Sagan, was not still there at the time of the escape.

We were assigned to rooms with 2 of these in each room so that we would learn what it was all about. Our 2 were Polish pilots who had been flying in the RAF so were considered RAF not Polish. The rooms held 10 men in double bunks and 5 were Canadian. Quite an interesting group with varied backgrounds but we got along well together. There were 10 such rooms in each hut with a small pot-bellied stove for warmth in each -- and it was cold. We had each been provided with US army greatcoats and boots (if required - and I had lost mine when my parachute opened), plus one towel and two US army blankets. They must have captured a US supply depot somewhere. The Germans provided us with pillow and sheets and a straw filled mattress. In addition to these rooms there was a small room at one end for a senior officer and a kitchen of sorts, and a nite bathroom (sans bath) at the other. Each room had one table without chairs.. but the Red Cross parcels came in wooden crates and we were able to make chairs from them. We were provided with toilet articles (soap - toothbrush etc. - by the Red Cross) and the people at the main camp had provided us with cigarettes and newspapers (no toilet paper available).

We quickly learned the rules from the Polish fellows such as appel (rollcall) took place every morning at 8 am and 4 pm in the after noon. "German time " but we operated an hour later so it was 9 am our time. As I was a navigator my watch had been taken from me as it was government property - a Longines!! Everyone in the room had a job and I elected to become cook. This was a good move because it got me out of a lot of other duties. The system on food was that each person got 1/2 a Red Cross parcel twice a week and as we lived as a commune we drew 10 parcels a week for the room. The parcels mainly were American, but we had some Canadian and some British. The contents varied and schedule A lists the contents of each. I gather that the Canadian Red Cross sent one parcel per week for every Canadian, whereas the Americans sent three parcels a week for everyone. The rationale I gather was that if they sent three, one would be stolen at the docks in the US, and one in Lisbon(Portugal) so we would end up with one each. The only honest people in the chain were the Germans. The British parcels were infrequent but we also periodically got bulk shipments from Argentina (which had a large British population) and Denmark. The Germans supplied us with vegetables, bread and meat. So that we would not hoard food for escape purposes every can was punched so that the contents would not keep.

This Camp (Belaria) was operated by the Luftwaffe and contained what would have been similar personnel in the German forces. Hence naval fliers, glider pilot, paratroop and anti-aircraft were considered air force. Some of our NCO aircrews were in army camps and as we were allowed one batman (servant) for x number of officers we had the alternative of taking army privates or our own NCO's, bearing in mind these were the people we were crewed up with. We requested that some of the earlier shot down NCOs be transferred on a voluntary basis with the understanding that they would not operate in a servant capacity. All camps were covered by The Geneva Convention, which contained a lot of rules and by and large the Luftwaffe kept to them. We were supposed to get the rations equal to garrison troops (non combatants), so with the Red Cross parcels we were probably eating better than our guards.

According to the Geneva Convention, officers were to be paid an amount equal to a Luftwaffe officer of equal rank, but the decision had been made by older Kriegies to take the money and treat it as a camp fund, so that no one in the camp ever saw any money. I don't think this was a universal rule but it was a wise one because we were able to use the money communally and to assist our NCO camps who had no income. Fortuitously we were not charged by the RCAF for the theoretical amount we were paid by the Luftwaffe. Altho they had been charging us all along - it was reversed when we got back home. We were paid by deposit into our London bank accounts - which was the normal way to pay RAF officers. Unlike the USAAF we were not paid flying pay as such but there were two types of officers namely, "General List" and "Administrative". Getting wounded, being taken prisoner or temporarily taking a ground job between operational tours, did not alter our status and as the rates of pay were different we were the highest paid POWs. The U.S. were paid flying pay only when flying

Having taken a course in administration at some time, I (later) tried to get a "hard lying allowance" too, but the fact that we were supplied sheets and batman (theoretically) was held against us. We did use the monies to purchase things like newspapers, matches, toilet paper, soap and then the instruments for our band, plus from time to time we would rent clothes from a theatrical company in Berlin for our stage presentations.

We also diverted some of the money to the NCO camps as they were not paid. Altho non-officer prisoners were allowed to work this did not apply to our crews so they had no income - nor could they get a job on a farm which was in most cases a good deal as farmers seldom starve - and they also had some Polish girls employed.

In addition to the actual barracks there were other buildings including a combination wash room and showers (cold), an abort (outhouse), a theatre which we filled with seats made from Red Cross crates and a library. The flagship where the SBO and his staff lived and the hospital were included with living quarters. We had an army doctor who in civilian life had been a Harley Street gynaecologist and I think he had four beds. If anyone got really sick he would be transferred to the local hospital in Sagan. A German dentist visited about once a week but he had portable equipment and was not prepared to do anything complicated. We also had a German doctor visiting periodically. There was also a combined kitchen and warehouse building where our NCO's would periodically cook some porridge or gruel, but it

was mainly used for storing and issuing Red Cross parcels which were opened and had the cans punched. (See appendix A) of metal tins in parcels.)

Every morning we would parade and be counted (rain or shine), then the process was repeated about 4 pm German time. We were a relatively small camp of about 750 until the USAAF really got into the war and then we went up to 18 to a room. Due to their method of flying they were able to get an average of 5 out 10 out of the aircraft whereas ours was 1 out of 8. Due to their formation system they were considered kaput (lost) once they dropped behind or out. They of course were flying in daytime whereas we always flew at nite as single units. This changed in 1944 when they got fighter protection all the way to the target by the Mustangs with Rolls Royce engines, and their losses fell considerably. They were a different breed compared to the stoic English types but we got along fine with them. They were all spread around the camp and not living as a separate unit.

Our leisure time was used in learning such subjects as German, calculus and many other subjects as with the diverse group of kriegies we had people who could do almost everything, with civilian experience. If one was interested he could join the theater group which was constantly putting on plays - with the help of the Germans who got us all the necessary scripts and stage props, costumes etc. from Berlin-as were our orchestral instruments.

We also had a playing field where soccer, rugby (English) and cricket were played in season, and a hockey rink in the winter. Most games were played by country teams and the competition was fierce at times. I even learned to play cricket, but our Canadian team did not have the experience of the Australians or British. The doctor forced the halt of rugby games as there were too many injuries. (Mostly collarbones and ribs.)

The soil at Belaria was not good for tunnelling, as it was all sand. A few unsuccessful escapes such as hiding in wagons going out were attempted, and there was only one man who got out. This was a navigator from Halifax who for a year sat at the main gate with a suitcase he had made (rain or shine). When the Swiss Red Cross (protecting power) visited us they convinced the Germans that he was 'Round the bend" (crazy) and he was sent home. He was also the first person I saw when I came home by boat in '45. The Great Escape (starring Steve McQueen) from the main camp at Sagan sort of took the edge off escaping but there was always somebody with a hair brained scheme which of course had to be approved by the escape committee, but none were acceptable.

We followed the land war efforts starting with the invasion in June 1944, plus the eastern front, which was taking a heavy toll of German lives. Fortunately we got the BBC with our own secret radios and we found that the Germans continuously broadcast news of the Russian front as it actually was - they had the Russians advancing faster than the BBC reported. As we were in Poland near the border with Germany we were concerned, but totally unaware of the Russian mentality. The German guards would shudder when the Ostfront (Eastern Front) was mentioned and we could see the casualties coming back on the railway track that ran by our camp. One could see ambulance trains coming back and ones loaded with SS troops going to the front.

As the Russians got closer the rumours around the camp got numerous with every possibility being exploited. We would all be held as hostages...we would all be shipped to the south... we would be left to the mercy of the Russians.. or we would be all shot. On January 19/45 we received notice to be prepared to move, and on the 29th of the month after many false alarms, we finally left the camp with all the food, clothing and belongings that we could carry and started our route westward. I cannot call this a march as unlike the army and navy, aircrew are not good marchers, so we were spread out in a disorganized fashion, which eventually worked to our advantage as our fighter bombers figured we could not be Germans and left us alone. Three of our fellows were not in good shape to march, so they rode in the German commandants car, and he walked at the head of this motley crew - despite the fact that he was a paratrooper who had been badly wounded in the legs at Crete.

Some of the more ambitious kriegies had manufactured toboggans and were transporting things like the copies of 'THE CAMP' (our newspaper) and about a million cigarettes. These toboggans were not strong enough and eventually most of this had to be dropped. Fortunately about half the copies of THE CAMP survived and were bound and printed after the war. Like the others I had given a blank cheque (on toilet paper) to the editor and about one year later received a bound book, which I still have.

The first day was the roughest as it was snowing and the slush made walking difficult over rough roads. We made about 30 km. In all until we reached a big farm - where the commandant exercised his authority and took over two barns. We had no food this day so ate a cold meal from our Red Cross stocks and snuggled up to each other in the straw and hay. For the most part we were in good physical condition as we had been playing hockey the day before and were not carrying any excess fat. The next day it continued to snow and we made about the same distance. About 4 pm the major made a big speech in German which sounded to me like a warning of some kind as I was too far away to pick up the words. He was telling us not to escape, as there was an SS Panzer division nearby - plus if we could keep up for another hour he had arranged for a hot meal which we eventually received. It was cabbage and potato soup with pieces of sausage in it - cooked by the SS troops. This may seem strange to civilians who have heard all the propaganda, but the fact that we were all officer aircrews and obviously combatants made this possible. Spent a nite in an abandoned factory.

We were near Lumberg and after about an hour's travel in the morning reached a railway siding where a train of box cars awaited us. The American people were leaving us at this point and going south whereas we were going west. This was not the first class accommodation we were accustomed to, as there were about forty of us in each box car, but at least we were warmer and out of the snow. The biggest fear we had at this time was that one of our own fighters would show up and attack us, particularly when we were on one of the many sidings along the way. The one thing that stands out in my memory was the time we were on a siding and allowed out of the cars, and ours being next to the locomotive we were taking advantage of the warmth when one of the fellows discovered the drain tap to the water supply. As we all had cans of Nescafe and as the water was hot we were soon enjoying the first hot drink in some days (and the best cup of coffee I have ever tasted). The engineer finally noticed us and with a lot of screaming this was stopped.

We eventually reached a station late at night and we were told to get out and line up - and we did see a lot of strange soldiers with guns in front of us. Eventually we were marched off in groups and after an hour or so reached some old buildings where we were deloused and then put into barracks about 5 in the morning. This camp was Luckenwalde which was located south west of Berlin and we saw in the morning a lot of Norwegian officers in the camp and about 2000 Russian prisoners across the road. The Russians went out to work in the morning and some even came into ours to sweep up and take out garbage .One of the Russians approached me - asking for a cigarette in French, and I found that he was a Ukrainian officer who had got rid of any sign of rank. This was necessary he explained as the Germans at the front had a habit of shooting officers (and probably vice versa). I said looking at the scruffy Russians that it was a shame the way the Germans treated them - and he commented that it was no different from the way they had been treated by the Russians.

About 4 days later we were awakened by a lot of noise and saw big tanks (Russian T40's) taking out all the barbed wire between the compounds - and no Germans in sight (they apparently left during the night). We went over to the Russian compound that could only be described as filthy but did see a chapel they had made which was beautiful. The most powerful Russian was a political officer (Major Medvadov) who was disappointed that we didn't want to grab a gun and join their army. We said we were only trained to fight in the air so we declined, and found that they had placed guards around the perimeter wires so that technically we were now prisoners of the Russians and they intended to send us home via Sebastopol - as had been agreed on at a conference 2 years previously. We knew that the American army was on the west bank of the Elbe which was no more than 10 miles away so 3 of us decided to take off. The Russian guards were stationed between upright posts and we found that one had taken off. Approaching the one on the next post I tried to talk to him while I was giving him cigarettes (Lucky Strikes), as the other 2 cut the wire. He smiled and turned his back so we got out and hightailed it away. We had covered about a mile when we saw a Russian tank approaching us and they stopped and made motions for us to climb on - which we did. They had a big gun pointing forward but the back was loaded with big bottles of Vodka in wooden crates - which they insisted we drink with them. We kept saying "Americans" so they kindly took us all the way to the river. There was a footbridge at that point so we crossed the river and finally convinced the Yanks we were legitimate and told them there were a lot more like us at Luckenwalde. We later heard that they sent an armed force plus ambulances and took out all the sick and wounded guys. They also informed their superiors and the entire camp was released soon after. Being RCAF we were a novelty to them and they gave us stuff like underwear and socks but we felt it better that we keep our scruffy blue battle dress. We stayed with them for one day and then left in a jeep they gave us, well stocked with food and gasoline. We drove as far as Hanover and then found a DC3 pilot who was going to Brussels - so we went with him.

Brussels had been taken by the Canadian Army who seemed to have taken over the town and after some talks with intelligence people we found that we each had a suite in one of the best hotels, and as much money as we wanted - which we didn't need as everyone wanted to treat us. There were a number of RCAF fighter squadrons around Brussels and one night in a night club I met a pilot who had been on the same course at ITS, and who was leaving for England the next day. He gave me a little suitcase full of Belgian money and told me to spend

all I wanted, then give it to someone else when I was leaving, and not to take it to England. It was probably counterfeit printed by the Germans but we had no trouble spending it in stores.

After a week of the high life we decided to go home as we were seeing pink elephants in our sleep. Some army fellow drove us to the airport where we had offers to fly us to Paris but eventually found someone who was flying to England so we gave the rest of the money and we went home. We stayed one nite at the air station where we had landed, then took the train to Bournemouth which was the big RCAF holding unit. It took a day to get my uniforms and personal stuff back, then we took off on three weeks leave in England. We were given civilian ration cards specially made for pregnant women because of the hardships we had suffered. I weighed 180 pounds when I was shot down - now I was at 120 pounds -- but in the best physical condition (even after Brussels). I came back from leave and left for Canada 5 days later by boat.

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J.D.Elliott

January 30, 2000

P.S. In the 55 years since the end of the second Great War I have belonged to many organizations in different locations and for various reasons.

DATA (From war diary)

Halifax V aircraft NA P took off at 1600 hours, Dec.20. 1943 from Middleton St. George, County Durham, to bomb. Frankfurt, Germany. This was part of a force of 650 aircraft - 390 Lancasters, 257 Halifaxes and 3 Mosquitoes. Other targets for the nite were MANNHEIM, an armament factory near LEIGE, France, mining in the FRISIAN Islands and other minor

sorties. The total effort for the nite was 802 sorties with the loss of 43 aircraft. (41 of these on the FRANKFURT OPERATION). Using radar the Luftwaffe was able to plot the bomber force as soon as it left the English coast and track it all the way to the target. Many including P (Peter) were lost before reaching FRANKFURT - including one other from 428 Squadron.

CREW OF NA-P were experienced and nearing the end of the tour of 30 operations.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Force</i>	<i>Fate</i>
Pilot P/O.W.J.(Joe) Armour DFC	Royal Australian Air Force	KIA
Navigator: F/O J.D.Elliott	Royal Canadian Air Force	POW
Flt.Engineer: Sgt. S.P.Page	Royal Air Force	KIA
Wireless Op.	Royal Air Force	KIA
Bomb Aimer	Royal Air Force	KIA
Rear Gunner	Royal Australian Air Force	KIA
Mid Upper Gunner	Royal Australian Air Force	KIA
Second Pilot	Royal Canadian Air Force	KIA