

This narrative was written at the request of the 57/60 Batt Assoc and it was reprinted in their Annual Book 14th N. 30th April 2001 & April 2002 (I was a member of this Batt from Dec 1941 - Aug 1942 before my call up to the R.A.F.)

My squadron was No. 466, a R.A.A.F. Squadron stationed at Driffield and Leconfield, Yorkshire during the War years 1943 to 1945.

I was shot down by a German night fighter near Frankfurt On Main, the night of December 20/21, 1943. On that particular night our flight outward bound had been perfect, no sign of any night fighters, some flack and a little turbulence from the other bombers, 647 in total, as we crossed their slip stream - all in all, no worries!

The target was reached on time, target markers sighted and bombs were dropped spot on. Our course was set for home then suddenly "all hell" broke loose, there was a loud thump and the whole of the starboard wing burst into flames and both engines looked like two raging bonfires. A huge hole appeared in the fuselage. All this happened within minutes at approximately 7.45pm.

I was to find out later that a German night fighter, a J.U.88 fitted with their latest secret weapon, an upwards firing cannon code named by the Germans "Schrage Musik" (sweet music) had attacked us from our blind spot directly beneath our fuselage and had fired incendiary shells into our petrol tanks.

History has shown, it was many months before the R.A.F. authorities became aware of the new weapon and tactics that was having such a devastating effect upon bomber command.

Our aircraft lost height immediately and went into a spiral dive. The skipper struggled to get the aircraft back on a level keel whilst ordering the crew to abandon the aircraft. This all occurred at approximately 7,000 ft whereas we had been flying at 21,000 ft a few minutes earlier.

After leaving the aircraft by parachute, I floated down to earth and landed in a ploughed field alongside what I thought to be an air raid shelter but after inspection in the dark I could not find an entrance (I was later to discover that it was a potato and turnip storage for the winter months).

How I wished that I had listened more intently to those intelligence lectures on "If you are shot down in Germany". However, a couple of items did sink through: 1. clear out of the area you land in quickly 2. Bury or hide your parachute and any other unnecessary equipment 3. walk at night and hide during the day.

These instructions I adhered to and after orientating myself headed to the distant Rhine River, walking along country roads and throwing myself into ditches if I heard anybody approaching.

I walked until almost daylight when I decided to hide up in a large pine forest until dark. It was in this forest that I heard what I believed to be dogs barking, and I was cold with fear that I was being hunted by savage dogs. At one stage when the barking was

getting closer, I climbed a tree to avoid being torn to pieces. How long I was up the tree, I have no idea! But as soon as the barking subsided and moved away from me I made my way out of the forest and hid in a road culvert until I was ready to walk again. (It was not until I had been a P.O.W. for 6 months or more that I discovered from a fellow P.O.W. that the barking dogs I had heard were wild deer in the forest, he had experienced the same fear!).

The next night I continued walking westward, skirting little villages and continually jumping into evil smelling drains, at the sound of any movement around me. As daylight appeared I had to hurriedly find a place to hide, to dry myself out and if possible to sleep a little. The temperature at this time of the year in Europe is very low and it felt that it could snow. I chose a large barn on the outskirts of a small village, which I thought would be most suitable until I had to move again.

I made myself as comfortable as possible behind a large stack of firewood and proceeded to again count my money from the escape kit that had been issued to me. Why I counted that money so often I do not know, as I had not spent any of it since leaving the aircraft in such a hurry (maybe that's where I got my inspiration to become an accountant after the War!).

The daylight hours passed very slowly, I dozed fitfully, awaking at almost every sound even though I felt reasonably secure behind my pile of firewood. During those hours I observed school children passing down the road to school and housewives going about their duties in the village.

The light was beginning to fade and I was anxious to make a move as soon as the coast was clear and darkness set in, so I counted my money once again! I studied my silk map, put my flying boots back on and was preparing to do a few exercises before the next stage of my journey towards the River Rhine, when I saw through the cracks in the wall of the barn, cracks that I had enlarged during the day, a man and two dogs approaching the barn.

The dogs looked a mean and hungry lot and my fears of the previous night vividly returned to me. There was no way out of the barn except by the door now being approached by the German farmer and his two dogs - so I decided to lay "doggo" behind the wood pile, hardly daring to breathe, let alone move.

After a few moments the farmer opened the door of the barn, came in and commenced to collect wood from the stack that I was hiding behind. The dogs either saw me or sniffed me out and they took an instant dislike to me and showed me two perfect sets of teeth that I could see at a glance required no dental work. The farmer also saw me and after he had recovered from his initial shock, he grabbed a large length of timber and held it over my head whilst he yelled his head off to the farmhouse. His yelling brought forth a number of men and women from the farmhouse as well as exciting the dogs, the only one that remained calm and awaiting to be collected was myself.

I was then invited to join the welcoming committee in a walk down to the main street of the village. I did not seem to have any alternative, particularly when I noticed that the two dogs were still showing me their dentures and making funny noises in their throats.

By this time the whole village seemed to be escorting me down the main street, and each one seemed to me to think that they had the liberty to push and thump me.

I was searched a couple of times in the street and my foreign money plus a few pounds in silver plus my Rosary Beads, that I always carried were taken by a young man who may have been a German soldier, home on leave.

On reaching what was obviously the local lock up and with an excited audience behind me I was greeted by a uniformed official who proceeded to question me in German and as I did not know a word of German his interrogation fell flat, much to his annoyance. It was at this point that an old man dropped into my hand a broken set of Rosary Beads that he had obligingly picked up from where they had been thrown. Those beads I still have today.

I was placed in a cell in the lockup. This cell was partly below ground level with a broken window in front of the bars. The window attracted the local youth of the village and I spent the next hour or so moving around the cell to avoid a bombardment of an assortment of rubbish and probably a considerable amount of abuse, if I had understood German.

From the village lockup I was taken by a member of the Gestapo, who chained me to a motor bike side car for my transfer to yet another cell in another village. The Gestapo agents' English was not as good as he thought it was, and I was able to deflect his questions and annoy him immensely by saying I did not understand his English and that I did not speak German. The impasse finished by me being locked up in yet another cell.

In the morning two armed guards from the Luftwaffe arrived to take me to my next destination which happened to be Oberusal, an interrogation centre for all allied, shot down airmen. Oberusal was situated just outside Frankfurt On Main. En route we were joined by a R.A.F. officer who I thought may have been a 'stooge' trying to obtain information from me. He apparently thought the same of me as neither of us said a word to one another during the 2-3 hours we were together.

On reaching the outskirts of Frankfurt we were transferred to a train for our final part of the journey. Whilst we were on the train a few of the passengers took advantage of us to vent their anger on both of us, by belting us until our Luftwaffe guards decided the passengers had had enough fun.

The interrogation centre at Oberusal was a specialized establishment to closely interrogate allied airmen who had been shot down. It was at this centre that I realized that I was a P.O.W. and that all my bluff in answering and parrying questions would not be accepted in this establishment.

The first 24 hours was spent in a heated cell in solitary confinement. The light in the cell never went out and one lost all sense of time. Meals arrived via a trap door in the bottom of the door once a day and a bucket in the corner of the cell was emptied during night hours. A wire stretcher type bed with a straw palliase occupied most of the remainder of the cell.

Sometime, on the second or third day I was visited by a bogus Red Cross Officer, who indicated that he was very concerned that my next of kin in Australia should know that I was safe and well!

The top of the bogus Red Cross form showed name, no, rank, which is the only information that a P.O.W. should give to the enemy. This part of the form I completed but I upset my guest investigating officer when I refused to complete the rest of the form which showed squadron no., location and many other questions.

Sometime later I was paraded before a Luftwaffe Officer who took a similar line that the bogus Red Cross Officer initially took with me. Name, service No. and rank was my standard answer to all questions put to me, irrespective of the questions!

As a result of my determination not to get involved in a question and answer session or a friendly chat with an interrogator, my reward was 7 days in solitary confinement! I was soon to find that solitary confinement had a devastating effect upon those sentenced, an effect that you have got to experience to understand the drain that takes place on your mind and body.

The sentence also meant that I spent Christmas Day, 1943 in complete solitary confinement and no doubt the events of the past 4-5 days were beginning to take their toll, in particular the shooting down of the aircraft and not knowing whether you were the sole survivor of the plane or if others had escaped and where they were. I had a few bad days fighting a mental and physical state of mind and body. Christmas Day, 1943 will always live in my memory.

Solitary confinement is soul destroying. Just how long a man could stand it, I do not know, but I am sure time would eventually break even the strongest man. Man must be, by nature, a social animal and require the companionship of his fellow man. Solitary confinement was the one punishment all P.O.W.'s dreaded and one which the Germans knew could break all men. Some sooner than others.

I was released from solitary confinement without further interrogation. I think they may have needed the accommodation for other guests, as there were a number of R.A.F. and American Airforce raids in the last week of December, 1943 and from the yelling and shouting that went on in the cell block, it appeared a new batch of recently "shot down" airmen had arrived for interrogation.

From Oberusal I was moved by train to a destination unknown to the prisoners, but as it turned out to a prison camp in East Germany. The journey took several days with frequent stops for troop trains having the right of way and a number of air raids that took place at night.

Our final resting place was Stalag IVB, at Mulberg on the Elbe River, an army camp that was taking the overflow from Luftwaffe 3 at Sagan. I was part of 1,000 R.A.F. airmen in a camp of approximately 20,000 representing almost every Nation of the world. My liberation came by the arrival of the Russian Army in April, 1945 - but that is another story.!!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'C. W.', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the bottom of the signature.

(6) 30-11-01

I thought I had fulfilled my obligation to Hardnbold when I wrote of my capture by the Germans, but I made one mistake by ending my story with the words - "But that is another story". Now, a very persuasive ^{grand} daughter of Bill Gilbert requests that other story.

On my return to England in May 1945, I wrote long letters to my mother and 2 brothers, Pat and Vin, who were, at that time, serving in the Army and Navy respectively.

It is from those letters that my mother had kept that I quote my thoughts on the events of 1943-1945. Consequently this narration may appear a little disjointed and I ask your indulgence for this fault.

As I related in Hardnbold last year - destiny found me in POW camp Stalag 1VB Muhleberg - a small town approx midway between the large cities of Berlin - Leipzig - Dresden.

Stalag 1VB was an Army camp under the control of Wehrmacht. It held approx 7,000 British Army personnel (including 40/50 A.I.F.), 1,000 R.A.F. Bomber Command crews which were the overflow from a Luftwaffe camp at Sagan. The rest of the prisoners, totalling another 15,000 or more, representing every nation in Europe and outside Europe.

The prison camp was in the form of a rectangle with a perimeter of approx 1½- 2 miles. Along each side of the 10ft double barbed wire fence were the sentry boxes (on stilts). Each box was occupied by a sentry manning a machine gun. At night the perimeter was flood lit and from each sentry box there was a small search light on a swivel which used to sweep the camp.

The whole area was then divided into compounds by 10, or more, high barbed wire fences. This meant, that if, trouble broke out within the camp, the Germans could control a disturbance by isolating a compound. It also meant that various nationalities could be separated.

In each compound were timber huts about 90 ft long able to house 220 men - but, on occasions, more than 400 men were forced to use these huts. In these huts we lived, cooked, talked and slept. Our beds consisted of 3 tier bunks reaching to the ceiling. In bad times we were obliged to sleep 2 to a bunk, or on a brick floor which used to freeze in winter.

The month of January 1945 I will never forget because of the shortage of food, fuel for cooking and heating and decent blankets. It was a wonder more prisoners did not die!

The food question was very serious. If it had not been for the Red Cross parcels - the food we received from the Germans would not have kept us alive in the latter part of the war.

Here I would like to quote verbatim from a letter I wrote to my mother in May 1945. "Since being back in England I have thought a great deal over the past 18 months as a prisoner. I saw men who had been living peaceful lives suddenly dragged from their families, thrown into a dirty camp and forced to be slave labourers on hardly enough food to live on. Men shot dead because they were hungry and stole potato peelings from a rubbish cart.

When I first arrived in 1VB it used to make me sick to see Russians grovelling in the dirt looking for something to eat - scraping out tins that had been thrown into a stinking pit, fighting and kicking one another over a piece of spud pudding. But, after a few weeks I became like the rest of the British prisoners - a silent spectator, knowing that the tables would be turned".

Life went on in the camp. "Home for Christmas" was always the thought in everybody's mind. But, as Christmas approached and there was no sign of a breakthrough by the Allies, the morale of the camp declined until Spring started to appear and plans for escape were once again the constant source of discussion.

It was not until "D" Day that the morale of the entire camp reached the top. News that day was received on a secret radio built by an R.A.F. wireless operator hidden inside a straw broom. The prisoners knew of that event before the German guards.

With the good weather of Spring and Summer we had regular visits of 1,000 bomber raids on Berlin and Leipzig and we believed, once again, that we would be home for Christmas. But - that was not to be!

Most people will remember the uprising of Warsaw in Aug/Sept 1944. After a valiant effort the Polish Underground Forces were beaten by the German Army of occupation and the remnants of the Polish Underground were transported to Germany as slave labour.

Suddenly, and without notice, one compound of the camp was cleared in great haste, and the inhabitants had to double up with prisoners in another compound.

We then witnessed the result of the tragic saga of the Warsaw uprising when approx 1,000 Polish women with 400/500 young children between 5-10 years of age were pushed into the empty compound.

The Polish members of the R.A.F, who were prisoners with us, were very upset and spent long hours comforting the women from a distance through the barbed wire.

The English speaking prisoners immediately set up their own Red Cross fund and contributed (as generously as they could) in food, second hand clothing and even toys some of them had made.

The women's stay in Stalag 1VB was not long - their destiny was slave labour in the factories of the industrial Ruhr which were the target areas for Bomber Command and the American heavy bombers.

The war dragged on and it was not until February 11th 1945, that the R.A.F. and American Airforces virtually wiped out Dresden and, as a result, destroyed a rail centre to the Russian front, that we were seeing the beginning of the end to the War on the Eastern front.

However, it was not until the morning of April 23rd 1945, that we saw that the German guards has disappeared from their posts and that we were the owners of the camp.

Everybody seemed to be overwrought with emotion and were unable to express their thoughts except to shout, yell, slap one another on the back and hug one another.

Being an Army camp, it was not long before some sort of control was established - all food stocks were commandeered and the cook house geared to supply 1 meal a day. If it had been left to the Aircrews of the RAF and RAAF, I think we would still be there!!

It was just as well that this was organised, as Marshall Konev, the Russian Commander, informed us that after the meagre supply of food on hand ran out - we were on our own!!

This led to thousands of prisoners farming out over the country side like a plague of locusts into semi destroyed villages - looting food wherever they could find it. It was that or starve to death!!

Unfortunately, the Russian soldiers also had the same idea and there were numerous clashes which the Russians always won, as they had the gun!

The average Russian soldier - particularly those on horseback (cosacks) - was a mobile arsenal. He usually had a number of captured machine pistols or luger revolvers, as well as his own rifle. He carried his rations across his horse's neck or on his back. They seemed to display a childlike desire for watches and jewellery and many a POW who still happened to own such valuables, handed them over as soon as the Ruski reached for one of his many pieces of armament. As a general rule this was as close as most POW's got to Anglo-Russian fraternization.

As the food ran out in one area the prisoners were forced to forrage further a field, thus running into Russian patrols or S.S. forces making a last ditch stand.

On one occasion a number of us entered a village looking for food and we found that most civilian men had been hanged on light posts and the women were huddled in the cellars of their homes in fear of their lives after having been repeatedly raped by the Russians. That was when we decided, rather than wait for the war to end, we would make a break through the front to the American lines. As it happened it had another 7 days to run.

Walking at night and hiding and sleeping during the day, we reached a town named Reisa in a couple of days. We commandeered a flat which had obviously belonged to a Nazi official as we found his personal belongings and many S.S. photos and mementoes.

We were in Reisa on V.E. Day (May 7th 1945) and were awakened by a large calibre gun being fired, numerous hand grenades exploding and what was obviously a tank rumbling down the street firing a machine gun.

Not a very pleasant place for 5 peace loving members of the RAF and RAAF to find themselves in so early in the morning. This was the way the Russians celebrated the end of the war in Reisa, East Germany and we were not anxious to join them.

We decided to abandon Reisa and make our way to Wurzen - a small town on the Mulda River, which we knew we had to cross. To get to the Americans. On our arrival at Wurzen we found all bridges had been destroyed. This was a great blow to us - to have come so far and risk everything to escape the Russians. At this time we believed the Russians were still holding the Allied prisoners in Stalag 1VB and that was one place we did not want to go back to!

Whilst we were discussing our position and what we would do next, we spotted an American convoy approaching the bridge. We all decided, at once, to climb on the rail bridge and show ourselves to the Americans and hope for the best. About 100 metres behind - a squad of Russians followed us onto the bridge.

In a moment it seemed that the 3rd World War was about to break out, with us 5 airmen being the meat in the sandwich! Lucky for us the Americans who were very much a fighting unit from their appearance and all the equipment they carried, had a Russian interpreter with them and after a lengthy and loud argument between the "Allies", we were allowed over the prefabricated bridge.

The American Army took us to their base in Leipzig where we were, unfortunately, given a large meal, and we paid the consequence of eating too much after our meagre meals during the last few months.

Leipzig was a city in ruins - nothing more than a pile of rubble. I remember clearly sitting on the top of lamp posts that protruded through the rubble from buildings on each side of the main street that had collapsed. I now know what effect the raids of Bomber Command and the American Airforce had upon the cities of Germany. It was quite different from the view I imagined it to be from 5 miles up in the sky in the middle of the night.

Our stay in Leipzig was short. The Americans transported us to Halle - another city that lay in complete ruin as a result of Bomber Command. We passed a "Focke Wulf" factory on the way into Halle. It lay in ruins with hundreds of bomb craters surrounding it.

The American Airforce flew us from Halle to Brussels. It was the first time any of us had flown over Germany in daylight - but, more to the point, we flew without the fear of night fighters or enemy flak.

We disembarked at Brussels and lay in the long grass in the sunshine beside the runway until Bomber Command Lancasters and Halifaxes landed and lifted us back to England.

It was an amazing feeling to climb back into those wonderful aircraft that each of us had parachuted out of under desperate circumstances in the dark sky somewhere over Germany many, many months ago.

Finally, the friendly coast of England that each of us longed to see after each operation suddenly appeared to us. It was very hard to speak or look at one another without having a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye.

It was not so much that we had ultimately survived, but, I think each of us was thinking of those members of our crews we were leaving in Germany or somewhere on the continent in some cases in unmarked graves and more distressfully those thousands that had no known grave.

I was to learn many years later, when I returned to England for the dedication of a monument to the deceased of the RAAF Squadron 466 that 484 of my comrades had paid the supreme sacrifice over Europe.

Those prisoners that left it too late to make the break from the Russians and had trusted our "glorious allies" found themselves, once again, prisoners but this time under a different armed guard. It would appear that the Russians wanted to make some sort of deal with the Americans, the result being the repatriation of prisoners in Stalag 1VB did not take place until some weeks after I had returned to England.

R.A.A.F H. Q. in London were beginning to get a little worried over missing members that had not turned up in England and I had a visit from RAAF H.Q. whilst I was in hospital enquiring the whereabouts of missing RAAF members known to have been in Stalag 1VB. As far as I know all RAAF personnel eventually returned to England safe, if not sound.

My thanks to Bill Gilbert for asking me to complete my story. It has been a privilege and honour for me to oblige the 57/60th Batt. Association.

I trust I have been worthy of the honour.

Jim Cahir.

466 Squadron.

