



Brian Walley

Sole survivor

Brian S. Walley

Service particulars

1062112—Sgt Pilot B.S. Walley (promoted to WO1 as a POW)

Enlisted—1 July 1940

51 Squadron—11 Sept. 1941 to 9 Nov. 1941

POW: Norderney and Hohemark hospitals—9 Nov. to 15 Dec. 1941

Stalag VIIa—15 Dec. 1941 to 15 Sept. 1942

Stalag 383—15 Sept. 1942 to 30 July 1944

Stalag Luft 7—30 July 1944 to 19 Jan. 1945

The long march—19 Jan. to 8 Feb. 1945

Stalag 3a—8 Feb. to 5 May 1945

Walk to American lines—5 to 7 May 1945

Arrived in England—11 May 1945

Released from wartime service—27 Oct. 1945

Discharged on re-enlistment into the RAFVR for further flying on 1 July 1949 as WO1, No. 2604630

Commissioned 4 Feb. 1951 (Pilot Officer)

Commission relinquished (Flying Officer) on completion of service 5 Feb. 1961

Dinghy in the drink

51 Squadron, RAF Station Dishforth, Yorkshire, flying Whitleys

Crew

Skipper S/Ldr. Dickenson, RAF

2nd pilot Sgt. B. Walley, RAF — sole survivor, POW

Navigator F/O Simpson, RCAF

Wireless operator Sgt. Carpenter, RAF

Rear gunner Sgt. Chambers, RCAF

I was still only 17 on 1 July 1940 when I enlisted for aircrew training so I had to put my age up one year to be eligible. Exactly one year later, on 1 July 1941, I got my coveted pilot's wings with an above-average rating. There was no passing out parade or official presentation, just a list to take down to the stores with 'brevet flying' a short jump ahead of 'boot laces'

At the OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Kinloss in Scotland I learnt how to fly a Whitley, the twin engined bomber I was destined to fly on operations. During this time I qualified for membership of the Goldfish Club on ditching one night in Spey Bay after losing one engine on take-off. No problem on this occasion as all three pilots on board didn't even get their feet wet.

After posting to 51 Squadron, Dishforth, Yorkshire, I completed four ops as second pilot:

1. to Stettin, duration 10 hours 40 minutes
2. to Le Havre, duration 6 hours 40 minutes
3. to Frankfurt, duration 9 hours 55 minutes
4. to Hamburg, duration 10 hours. We were coned by searchlights over the target. The master blue radar beam lit us up like a Christmas tree. A corkscrew drop of 8,000 feet got us out in one piece. Then followed a single-engined landing at Driffield after the other engine blew up on the way home.
5. to Berlin; it would be three and a half years before I got home from this trip.

On 7 November 1941 'F' for Freddie, a 51 Sqdn Whitley bomber, flew out from Dishforth with a load of explosive and incendiary bombs, one of 350 aircraft bound for Berlin with me as second pilot. The weather, though atrocious at takeoff, was forecast to improve for the return journey. The 40-knot tail wind, rising to 60 as we climbed up through 15,000 feet of solid cloud, blew us south of our track and slap bang over the heavily defended port of Kiel.

The enemy guns were on target. Flak set the port engine on fire. Thank God the fire extinguishers worked! We jettisoned the bombs—Kiel got the lot—retribution for such an unfriendly welcome! We then turned for

home, this time heading into the gale which, far from subsiding, had swung round to the north, straight from the Arctic at 80 knots or more.

A long, slow single-engined power glide would have got us home if it were not for the icing conditions now encountered, leaving us no option but to get below the cloud base as quickly as possible, eventually breaking cloud at 1,500 feet.

The wireless operator got through to base, informed them of our predicament and got a fix while the rear gunner and I were to lighten the plane by throwing out guns, ammunition and anything else we could lay our hands on. I went down to the front turret, opened the escape hatch in the floor and tossed out the pans of ammunition, then unhitched the Vickers machine gun and dropped it through the hatch. It became entangled with the dangling intercom cord attached to my helmet, dragging me forward and downward across the open hatch, and there but for the grace of God went I along with helmet and gun.

The W/Op sent out an SOS, then clamped the key down to enable base to get a final fix on our position. Rescue would be more likely if our rescuers knew where to look for us. I collected all our flasks of hot coffee and sandwiches, put them into a duffle bags and took the lot back to where the rear gunner was standing by the open rear hatch ready to throw out with the dinghy as soon as possible after impact. My last words—'Don't forget the duffle bag'—must have fallen on deaf ears.

I was back in the cockpit and strapped into my second pilot's seat when we hit the water. The sea was in a malevolent mood. The waves like mountains piling up on top of each other slipped by below illuminated in the landing lights. We pancaked on the crest of one, planed down the trough and ploughed right through the next one, coming to a bone-shaking stop. The whole front of the fuselage disintegrated with most of it wrapped round my legs.

I was trapped. The sea, pouring through the gaping hole was up to my chest before I broke free leaving one of my flying boots behind in the wreckage. I half clambered and half swam up and out through the open escape hatch on top of the cockpit.

My bootless left leg dragged limply behind me as I crawled along the top of the rapidly submerging fuselage, whimpering like a whipped schoolboy

in utter shock. In that moment I grew up from a nineteen-year-old teenager to manhood. I pulled myself together and tumbled towards the dinghy, one moment 10 feet below, then way above my head. I was the last man out. The other four, already in the dinghy, grabbed me and pulled me aboard.

We were not yet free. The umbilical cord still tethered us to the plane. The Skipper, knife in hand went back into the sinking wreck to cut us free. The tension snapped. His head bobbed up a metre away. As we hauled him back into the dinghy I saw the plane's landing lights shining a good twenty feet below us in the sea. Another wave rolled by and they were gone. The sheer desolation was terrifying. Just a few thou' of rubberised fabric between us and such a watery grave.

We spent the next few minutes retrieving all sorts of gear, tied on with string and festooned around the dinghy. We found an air pump and repair kit, a couple of hand paddles (not much use 100 miles from land), a bottle of fresh water, two distress flares, a pocket knife and a pack of emergency rations.

Rations? Where was the duffle bag? In the flurry it had been left behind. Hot coffee later could well have saved lives. However we each carried a small pack filled with Horlicks tablets and chocolate, so we were not entirely destitute.

About this time we began to lose interest in food. Our Skipper, who must have had a bellyful of sea water was the first to lose his pre-flight supper. It was catching, for without exception we all followed suit spasmodically for the next hour or so until we just had nothing left to throw up.

My left leg ached abominably. The kneecap was broken and both thighs severely lacerated, leaving a trickle of blood to stain the water we were sitting in as it slopped around in the bottom of the dinghy. I took off my remaining boot and used it as a baler. None of the others had a scratch.

Many is the time I have watched the dawn break, but never have I experienced such a scene of desolation as those first few grey streaks heralding the morning of 8 November. In a very humble voice, our Skipper suggested we pray to God for succour. We did so most fervently, each quietly in his own way. Afterwards, feeling much better, we nibbled a bit of chocolate to keep our spirits up.

The dinghy, not surprising after all the battering, had sprung a leak. Not to worry—we had the pump to keep it topped up. That was until about 10 a.m. If anything the storm had strengthened with the dawn. We would rise slowly up the face of the twenty foot waves, hang for a moment on the crest, then literally shoot down into the trough. A gust of wind more spiteful than the rest simply picked us up from one such crest and dumped us all, lock stock and barrel, into that raging sea.

I never saw the rear gunner or the wireless operator again. They just vanished beneath those great, grey, ugly breakers. The plight of we, the remaining three, was not much better. Weighed down with waterlogged flying gear, and suffering from the previous night's sea-sickness, not one of us could muster enough strength to clamber back. Our prospects were grim indeed. I'd had enough and had the crazy idea that I could swim home. After about 20 yards, my mother, acutely aware of the crisis, called across the miles for me to turn back. Her prayers were answered for, as I turned, the navigator rolled back into the dinghy. How he managed it after so many unsuccessful attempts I shall never know. Suffice it he was there to help the Skipper on board, then came my turn.

Yet another shock awaited us. All our meagre supplies had been lost in the capsizing, except one of the flares still tied to the thwarts. We were reliant on air to keep us afloat. The loss of the pump had to be replaced by lung power. We took it in turns to blow and managed to hold our own.

Night came all too soon, the prospect of rescue disappearing with daylight. Once again, we put our trust in God and journeyed on through the storm which showed little sign of abating. We were in dire straits, sitting in about six inches of ice-cold water, with flecks of ice on our clothing, tired out, hungry and facing a doubtful future.

That night we lost the navigator. He had scared us to death by standing up. Another capsizing would have been fatal in our weakened state. We got him settled down. He drifted off and died in his sleep, simply frozen to death.

It must have been in the small hours of the morning of 9 November when we heard the plane. We shouted and waved but never saw it, only heard it disappearing into the night. Afterwards we remembered the distress flare and could have wept at our stupidity.

Came dawn of the second day. Both of us were in bad shape now. Whenever I called up enough energy I had a blow into the inlet valve to try to keep us afloat. The time lag between blows lengthened as my energies dwindled, but the storm was at last blowing itself out and we were shipping less water.

The Skipper died that afternoon, leaving me all alone. I began to doubt my senses. I thought I could see land but when I looked again—nothing. It was only later that I realised we must have been blown over 100 miles south of where we had ditched and we were slowly drifting along the Friesian Islands.

The night could not long be put off. All pain had left my numbed body. I was settling down to a sleep that could only have one ending, knowing full well that I couldn't possibly last another night, when out of the blue a Heinkel 59 seaplane roared overhead. I stared down the barrel of the front machine gun trained on me. I distinctly remember screaming out, 'NO ! NO!! NO!!!', fully expecting the burst that would put me out of my misery.

It didn't happen. I waved weakly as the pilot banked and came round to alight about 50 yards away. One of the crew climbed down onto the port float and tossed me a rope which I secured to the thwarts. They hauled me on board, followed by the bodies of my crew and finally the dinghy. I was stripped of all my freezing sodden clothes and wrapped in warm blankets. A couple of swigs from a bottle of schnapps and I went out like a light, only to come to as the plane landed at its base on the island of Norderney, where I was stretchered ashore and put straight into hospital.

That night, five kindly German doctors patched up my wounds, splintered my broken knee-cap and somehow kept me alive. In the morning, Hauptman Karl Born, the Squadron Kommandant, commiserated with me. His words, 'For you the war is over', were to haunt me for over fifty years until I returned to Germany in 1995 when I met him once more and said 'Thank you' for my rescue. While there I was able to pay homage to my two less fortunate crew members, who now lie side by side in the War Graves Cemetery at Sage, near Oldenburg in northern Germany.

Convalescence Norderney and Hohemark 9 November 1941 to 15 December 1941

'For you the war is over'; how wrong can one be? For me the war had just started! I was beginning to regret putting my age up just to get into the war. The next three and a half years of travelling around Germany taught me not to be so impetuous.

That night, 9 November 1941, was undoubtedly one of the worst I've ever experienced. Having survived the ordeals of being shot up, ditching and subsequent rescue by the wrong side, I now had to come to terms with being a POW.

The doctors had finished their ministrations and had left me lying on my hospital bed on Norderney, with an armed guard outside the door. Reaction to the past two days in the dinghy had set in with a vengeance. I was utterly worn out both mentally and physically. I had witnessed four of my crew members die around me. The living nightmare continued as I tried to get the horror of it all out of my mind.

Next day a German Luftwaffe officer informed me that the skipper and navigator had been buried in the local cemetery with full military honours. He spoke reasonable English and started to ask a few pertinent questions about my aircraft, my squadron, the target etc., to which I responded with no comment but to give my name, rank and service number and the names and rank of my deceased crew. This information was subsequently broadcast by 'Lord Haw-Haw' on his 'Germany Calling' program, to be heard by my uncle who immediately phoned my parents. It would be another two months before they got official confirmation that I was alive though a POW.

I lay on that hospital bed slowly, very slowly recovering. Although hungry I just couldn't eat. All I could manage at a time were a couple of mouthfuls. My stomach must have shrunk to nothing. It was a physical impossibility to eat more. The doctors and nurses were exceedingly good to me. They could not have taken more care of me had I been one of their own airmen.

A week after capture, still very weak and hardly able to walk, I boarded a ferry from Norderney to Nordereich on the mainland, where I entrained for Frankfurt-am-Main under armed guard to be handed over to the

Luftwaffe camp at Dulag Luft where all RAF prisoners were interrogated before going to a POW camp proper.

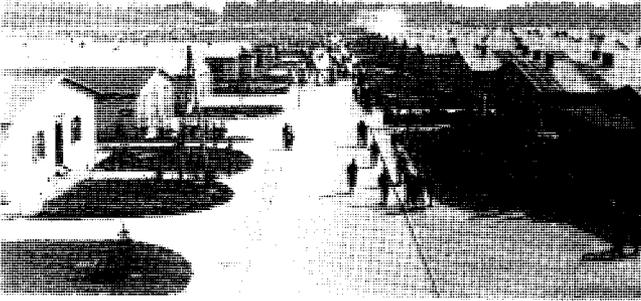
The interrogating officer was a pleasant enough chap about 25 years old. He chatted away about his university days at Cambridge, popping in the odd question about the RAF and in the process informed me that I came from 51 Squadron, Dishforth. I neither confirmed nor denied the statement, but simply repeated my name rank and number as per instructions should one be unlucky enough to be ever faced with such a situation. My condition was obvious, so I was transferred to Hohemark hospital for further convalescence.

'Scotty' (Sgt/AG Graham Leslie Scott, RNZAF) and 'Bill' (Sgt Pilot William Charles Hayman, RNZAF) were already inmates of Hohemark when I arrived. Scotty had a badly broken leg, a result from his parachute jump from a Manchester. Apparently he baled out at 8,000 feet but got caught up between two fir trees on the way down and, after unclipping his 'chute, fell the last 20 feet to earth. He always said that it was the bump at the bottom that did the damage, the parachute descent was a piece of cake. Bill had a broken ankle, not an unusual occurrence when baling out at night. These two were to become my bosom companions and mates in every sense of the word. From then to the time of our release in 1945, we shared everything with hardly a cross word between us in all that time. We were a truly compatible trio.

Stalag VIIA 15 December 1941 to 15 September 1942 Moosburg

Came the time to leave this somewhat sheltered existence and head off to the outside world and our first POW camp. We—Scotty, Bill and I—having all been passed fit enough to do so, moved out on 12 December to Frankfurt railway station, which still showed signs of recent bombing. We were joined by another 45 recently-captured airmen and entrained in a couple of wooden slat-seated carriages under a heavily armed guard; our destination, the infamous Stalag VIIB. It later transpired that, because of an outbreak of typhus at Stalag VIIB, we were rerouted in transit to Stalag VIIA, near Moosburg in Bavaria. Although we grumbled at the hard wooden seats, we should have been grateful for, in comparison to later journeys by cattle wagon, this was indeed first class travel.

To a newcomer, Stalag VIIA was quite exciting, with some 120,000 POWs and civilian internees, either taken prisoner or rounded up during the German occupation of Europe and their incursion into North Africa. Most inmates were NCOs with other ranks out working in and around Munich. Here I met the ANZACs captured in North Africa, Greece and Crete as well as the remnants of the BEF left behind at Dunkirk.



‘Main Street’, Stalag VIIA



Inside Hut 106, Stalag 383. Brian Walley reading, top right

One section of the camp was completely segregated as a Russian compound. Whereas we British got a reasonable supply of Red Cross parcels, the Ruskis, poor sods, had to exist on the 'pig-swill' the Germans dished out. They were literally starving.

In mid January 1942, a second batch of 50 recently captured airmen joined us in Stalag VIIA. There are many stories told of death-defying escapes from crippled aircraft; none more so than that of Teddy Holt, one of these new arrivals. Teddy was the blister gunner on a Hampden on a low-level intruder mission to shoot up searchlights and ack-ack sites in the Black Forest region in advance of the main bomber force. The navigator from this mission was one of the first draft of RAF POWs to arrive in VIIA with me. He told us that they had literally scraped the ground and, although both props were bent, managed to stagger back into the air again. However, the vibration from the bent props had caused both engines to fall out in quick succession, resulting in a crash landing, which was accomplished safely. On the subsequent head count, Teddy Holt was missing. They back-tracked the crash landing path, but no sign of him. He had, in fact, been scraped off on the mountain top and was picked up next morning by a German patrol, still wedged in the gun cupola but unconscious, in which state he remained for the next twenty days. Apart from a dislocated shoulder, cuts and bruises, he had sustained no other injury. Retrogressive amnesia had set in, however; his last cognisant memory being home on leave before joining his squadron. When confronted with Teddy, his navigator thought he had seen a ghost. He was, however, able to fill in some of the unremembered period for him.

Escape

In the spring of 1942, Cpl Dick Morris (AIF) and I decided we'd try to break out of Stalag VIIA by going over the wire. Working parties were rostered daily, loosely counted on the way through the barrier to the works compound and checked once more on return to the main camp. We joined one of these parties and with help from the gang got through without the guards noticing two extra bods. We slipped away quietly, hid under a hut on stumps by the wire and laid low until after midnight.

We had picked a dark moonless night. It was freezing and the wires were very taut. The dog patrol outside the wire had just passed as we stealthily

crept out from under the hut. We took a post each and whispered—‘OK, let’s go!’

On my second step up the post, the wire snapped with a loud ‘TWANG..G..G..’ All hell let loose, guards screaming, searchlights flashing and dog patrols homing in from all directions, luckily outside the wire, with what little wind there was blowing from them to us. We both dropped to the deck, noses buried in the dirt, not daring to move and fully expecting a machine gun burst at any moment. It must have been a good ten or fifteen minutes before the hubbub died down. We had not been spotted. Enough was enough for one night. Badly shaken and cursing the poor quality of German wire, we crept back under the hut and later joined a work party returning to the main camp.

After this unsuccessful attempt to scale the perimeter wire, Dick and I joined a more organised plot. The camp main drainage outfall was by way of a four-foot diameter concrete culvert discharging into a small stream meandering through an adjacent farm. By tackling the problem from the stream end, all barriers back to the camp had been disposed of, the final one to remove a fishplate securely holding down a manhole within the camp’s sports field and to mark it with a small stick.

On 29 July 1942, some 35 British POWs (I use the term ‘British’ here in its widest sense, encompassing the Dominions and Colonies), made their way through this stinking, stygian, ready-dug tunnel, roughly a mile and a half long, en route for Switzerland, that being the nearest non-belligerent country. The first six out got clear away, only to be recaptured later; one got to within five miles of the border. The rest of us were pounced on as we emerged, by a platoon of German guards wielding rifle butts like pick-axe handles.

Lights were flashing, savage dogs sinking their teeth into whatever parts of our anatomy that came within range, posterns yelling and screaming as only Germans can! What an anti-climax! Literally bashed into submission, we were at last lined up for the humiliating return to camp. I can still see that *Feldwebel* as he cocked his rifle and jammed the barrel into a very white face, yelling for information: Where had we entered the sewer? How many were involved in the escape? In German of course, to which came the standard reply, ‘Nicht verstehen’ (I don’t understand), at which the rifle was jammed into an even whiter face, now with a trickle of blood

coursing down, but back came the answer as before, 'Nicht verstehen'. That steadfast reply certainly saved some, if not all of us from being shot out of hand. It was as close as that to disaster.

This escape attempt is noted in my POW records, recovered from the camp office at the end of the war, as follows:-

'29-30/7/42 Flucht aus dem Lager. 30/7/42 Wiedergriffen in Moosburg' (escaped from the camp—recaptured in Moosburg)

The punishment—28 days' close arrest in the bunker, mostly on bread and water.

At the time none of us could understand how the guards had rumbled the escape so quickly. We heard later that one of the European inmates had noticed us going down the manhole and, to curry favour, had reported it to a sentry. So much for the 'Étente Cordiale'. We were not amused!

Stalag 383 Hohenfels 15 September 1942 to 30/7/44

The Geneva Convention, as it relates to the treatment of POWs, states that NCOs would only work in a supervisory capacity while the less fortunate 'other ranks' would be put out to work. It was therefore not surprising for all NCOs not out with working parties to be gathered together in a separate camp. On 15 September 1942, all British NCOs in this category were moved out from Stalag VIIA to Stalag 383 at Hohenfels, close to Regensburg.

For this trip we had our own special troop train consisting of strawed out cattle wagons divided into two sections, one wired in with barbed wire for us, and the rest opening from the central door for our guards. With two or three guards for each wagon of a dozen POWs, escape was out of the question, so we just sat back and tried to enjoy the trip. The guards in our wagon were co-operative and for the usual bartering with goods such as cigarettes, chocolate, coffee and soap from our Red Cross parcels, we managed to get some extra bread, some cheese and the odd bottle of beer.

We had to walk the last twenty miles from the Parsburg station to the camp through some very pretty, undulating country. Apple trees along the route lost quite a lot of fruit as we passed.

Stalag 383 was a good camp in so far as Stalags went. Being a camp for British NCO POWs, there was none of the incessant backbiting so

prevalent in VIIA. It was originally built to house German troops prior to the annexation of the Sudetenland (being quite close to the border), and consequently was not so spartan as those camps built specifically to house POWs. In fact there was quite a village atmosphere, with streets of neat chalets each housing twelve men (later increased to sixteen). Windows at either end let in plenty of light.

Camp strength rapidly built up to about 5,000, of which the RAF and Allied Air Forces made up a mere 98 comprising 11 Canadians, 8 Australians, 5 New Zealanders, 2 Poles, 2 Rhodesian brothers, and one each from South Africa, Free France and the USA, the rest all from the UK. We ran a competition to find the youngest member of the camp—guess what?—I won!

Because we were all vitally concerned about the conduct of the war, the collection and dissemination of up-to-the-minute news from both Allied and Axis radio broadcasts became a number one priority. We had a clandestine radio monitoring both sides of the story and, in spite of numerous searches, always managed to have the BBC 9 o'clock news sent round the entire camp within the hour.

Social life was good, with sport playing a leading role in keeping us sane and healthy. Soccer, rugby, hockey and even Australian rules were played in winter. Inter-company as well as international events were staged. Cricket ruled in summer, with test match scores being just as important as they ever were back home. Boxing, wrestling and weight lifting were very popular, while the Canadians got into the act with volleyball and softball. When the Germans excavated a fire water tank within the camp it made water polo possible in summer and ice hockey in winter. I was a member of the No. 1 Company winning water polo team, as well as the Welsh international side but without the success of the Company team.

For the less athletically inclined, one could always fall back on the Arts. The theatre, opera, vaudeville, symphony orchestra, and dance bands all flourished. Some excellent shows were produced such as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *George and Margaret*, *Night Must Fall*, *The Gondoliers*, *The Mikado* and *Madam Butterfly*.

Our physical well-being depended on a regular flow of Red Cross parcels, put together to augment the basic rations handed out by the Germans. For the best part of three years out of my three and a half in captivity they came through as regular as clock work. To this day I am convinced that they made the difference between life and death for many of us. In my own mind I am so sure of this that I made a vow never to pass a Red Cross collector without making a contribution. A vow I've kept and intend to keep to my dying day.

Following representation to the Kommandant through the Red Cross, permission was given to start a market garden on land outside the camp, seeds and tools to be provided by that Society. I was fortunate to be selected as a gardener. To dig and delve in the earth must be one of mankind's basic instincts, but when coupled with the chance to get outside that infernal barbed wire cage it just had to be heaven on earth. All the produce came back into the camp, helping to keep us all healthy.

Immediately following the Dieppe Commando raid the entire camp was shackled from dawn to dusk in retaliation for treatment allegedly handed out to German troops captured there. However we were able to 'buy' our freedom from the worst of the shackling with the usual trade goods; cigarettes, coffee, chocolate and soap, such commodities being non-existent in Germany at that time.

In 383 I struck up a friendship with an Austrian Alpine trooper, just 20 like myself. It started when I found he was prepared to bring in extra bread and other non-procurable goods from the outside world in exchange for some or all of the above-mentioned trade goods. I found that he had been conscripted into the German army after the Austrian *Anschluss*. He had been on the Russian front, had been wounded three times, the last one severe enough to warrant a return home for recuperation. Part of his convalescent duties was camp guard in the confines of 383. Like all Germans who had seen action on the Russian front, he had a horror of being sent back. One of his friends was a POW in Canada and his one ambition was to join him there. I often wonder if he survived the war?

Life's like that—a laugh a minute

To survive as a POW one acquired a somewhat warped sense of humour. The following illustrations will bear this out. In Stalag VIIA my friend

Scotty said that he had heard that the human exhaust gasses would readily ignite. So, in the cause of science, one night after lights out, he and Bill put on a demonstration. Sauerkraut being a good source of ammunition, Bill, the more gaseous of the pair, prepared himself for the pyrotechnics. Scotty struck the match. Consternation in the barracks: A huge stream of flame leapt from Bill's upturned rear. With them both sleeping on the top of the three tier bunks, the effect was, to say the least, startling. The theory, now proven, was taken up by most of the other 400 inmates of the barrack. Flames of all colours flashed intermittently round the room. It stopped when Hodge, a six-foot-four Canadian, had a backfire and set his pants alight. Just as well before we burnt the place down!

In Stalag 383, a hut full of enterprising Scots had scrounged enough material to build a 'still', and had gone into production making up to 100 bottles of raw distilled liquor a week; pure wood alcohol which, when blended with some of the Red Cross honey to help it down, was in great demand, selling at so many cigarettes per bottle, the price fluctuating according to supply and demand. We all had a good laugh when a directive came from the Kommandant to the effect that it had come to the notice of the authorities that the illicit distillation of spirits was going on in the camp. This practice must cease or duty would have to be levied. Major Brookemore, AIF, our MO, had already put a stop to production following several cases of alcohol poisoning. 'The Brew', as it was lovingly called, proved to be a deadly poison if taken in any quantity.

Our various theatrical shows were put on with as much authenticity as we could manage. Female characters were dressed remarkably well and really looked the part. After one dress rehearsal, some of the 'ladies' still in their finery decided to front up at evening dancing classes. That night two big hefty guardsmen ended up in hospital after a fight. Our resident POW doctor finally got the story out of them—they'd had a fight over who was to take the ladies home.

Make do and mend, an essential part of POW life, often led to hilarious results. Take the case of 'Chummy', a rear gunner from Merseyside, who was endowed with a full set of false teeth. After biting into a crust of black bread, the top set cracked and unknowingly he swallowed some of the broken pieces along with the bread. We had facilities in the camp to repair dentures but not to make new ones. Chummy thought of inducing

vomiting but our MO suggested that he take a longer but surer method of recovery: eat plenty of roughage to pack round the missing bits and let nature take its course. After a couple of days and much searching through his bowel movements, most of the bits were recovered, washed, disinfected and handed over to the dental mechanic for the repair job. Chummy once again flashed his full set of 'gnashers' and as far as I know, they lasted to the end of the war. He always said it didn't put him off his food, which under the circumstances was just as well!

Stalag Luft VII Kreuzburg, 30 July 1944 to 19 January 1945

The 98 RAF personnel were moved from 383 on 27/7/44 to Stalag Luft VII at Bankau in what is now Poland, again by cattle truck. Arrival at Stalag Luft VII was an eye opener. Our mob had already endured two and a half to three years in the bag, and to be thrust into a crowd of newly shot down POWs, some less than a month out of England, proved to be quite an exciting experience. It was good to hear first hand that the war was finally going our way and should soon be over.

We were now under the control of the Luftwaffe, and when this fact was coupled with the incarceration of those responsible for the barrage of bombs being dropped on Germany, we could hardly expect any favours. All past escapees were segregated and put into the 'naughty boys' barrack and subjected to constant surveillance. I was able to skip some of the frustration by being hospitalised with jaundice for three weeks; the cure—mint tea and dry bread—it worked, too. I wangled a job after release from hospital in the cookhouse to try to recover some of the lost kilos, a position I held until the camp was evacuated and throughout the coming three-week march to Luckenwalde.

The forced march, Stalag Luft VII to IIIA, 19 January 1945 to 8 February 1945

The Russian Baranov bridgehead offensive commenced on 15 January 1945, reportedly one of the biggest attacks of the war. Gun flashes from this attack and the rumble of gun fire were evident to the north and northeast of the camp.

19/1/45 We pulled out of Luft VII in the early morning. Before the start each man was given two and a half days' marching rations. We, the cookhouse staff, headed the line of 1,550 camp inmates, manhandling a

heavy sledge loaded with cooking supplies and camp records. The going was very tough through Kreuzburg where the streets were cleared of snow. The sledge was exchanged for a wagon commandeered from a local farmer at Konstadt. We pulled this to Winterveldt, covering 28 km for the day. Next morning, a horse was provided for the wagon which was then kept for the transportation of the sick.

20/1/45 We started at 5 a.m. and made Karlsruhe (a distance of 12 km) by 10 a.m., where we were shoved into an abandoned brick factory to rest. The Germans provided two field kitchens, each capable of cooking sufficient food for 200 men. It was a thankless task to try to provide a hot meal for all. We did our best, made everything into the proverbial soup and doled it out, half a cup per man. We left Karlsruhe that night and covered the 42 km to Schonfeld in temperatures down to -13°C, arriving at 9 a.m. on 21 January. We were herded into a typical German farmyard and left to our own devices. We were issued with about 100 gm of biscuit per man to which we cooks could only add half a cup of ersatz coffee. However, we milked the cows dry for a little extra nourishment. Although we had been promised a two-day rest, it was not to be. The 1.30 a.m. 'raus! raus!' nearly caused a mutiny, quickly subdued by rifle butts and a volley of shots into the barn rafters.

22/1/45 31 men, too sick to continue, were evacuated and a further 33 absconded (it was ascertained later that they had escaped and eventually reached England via Russia). The rest of us moved off at 5 a.m. and marched the 34 km to Jenkwitz where we were again housed in a farmyard. Rations for the group were 114 kg of fat, 46 tins of meat, 3/4 of a pig, which with some barley, peas and water was made into soup and doled out at 1/4 litre per man. Not much joy after a 34 km walk!

23/1/45 We left at the respectable time of 8 a.m. and marched 20 km to Wansen where we scored a rest day, though bedded down once again in drafty old barns. Rations issued for the two-day stop were 400 loaves of bread (approximately 1 loaf to four men)

25/1/45 On the road again at 4 a.m. and covered 30 km to Heidersdorf. During the day we crossed paths with another column of POWs from Stalag VIIIB, who if anything were in worse shape than us. Even so, it cheered both parties to pass the time of day before going our separate ways.

26/1/45 Another rest day, notable only for the issue of 600 loaves of bread which, unfortunately, had to last two days. However, we the camp cooks had a field day. We were able to put on two soups as well as a ration of coffee. Every little helped, but scarcely enough for 1500 men.

27/1/45 Marched 19 km to Pfaffendorf, arriving at night.

28/1/45 Left at 5 a.m. for Standorf, 21 km away, where we were issued with 24 cartons of knackerbrot, 150 kg of oats, 45 kg of margarine and 50 kg of sugar. Another 22 sick evacuated.

29/1/45 Left Standorf at 6 p.m. and marched 22 km to Peterwitz, arriving at 4 a.m. This was by far the most debilitating section of the entire trip, carried out in blizzard conditions in darkness. We arrived utterly exhausted, only to be left standing around in freezing conditions while our guards found somewhere for us to bed down. Not many of us would want to recall that night. We were eventually turned loose into yet another farmyard and left to fend for ourselves. I got myself a place in a barn but when I tried to take my boots off, found that my socks were frozen to them even though my feet were still inside. It took a long time to get the circulation back. Rations issued for this stop were 104 kg of meat, 1 sack of salt, 25 kg of coffee and 100 kg of barley. Before we left Standorf we were promised that this was to be our last march. Transport would be provided for the remainder of the journey.

30/1/45 We were issued with 296 loaves of bread, 350 kg of oats, 75.5 kg of margarine and 50 kg of coffee, but were also given the bad news that we would have to march to Goldberg to get the promised transport. We found a cellar full of dehydrated potatoes. I've never seen sacks emptied so quickly. Mashed up with hot water they made a real 'belly-filling' meal. I know, but I guess the farmer was not amused when he found out. It was during this two-day rest that I saw men fighting like animals over a heap of ensiled sugar beet tops. Anyone with a farming background would not have touched them with a barge pole. Those who partook were very sorry later when violent dysentery resulted.

1/2/45 We marched from Peterwitz to Prausnitz, a distance of 12 km, where we remained until 5 February. Rations for the period were 1180 loaves of bread, 150 kg of margarine, 100 kg of sugar, 200 kg of flour and 150 kg of barley. After one day in the farmyard, dysentery spread

like the proverbial bush fire. It was obvious that something must be done about latrines. The promise of double rations of whatever was available produced enough volunteers to dig trenches in record time. For some unknown reason the German Kommandant announced that five POWs were to be released at the first opportunity, no doubt as a sop for all the hardships endured on the march. He needn't have bothered as it proved to be yet another broken promise.

5/2/45 The distance from Prausnitz to Goldberg was only 8 km. Before leaving we shared out an issue of 500 loaves of bread, 530 tins of meat and 95 kg of margarine which was to last three days.

8/2/45 The train journey from Goldberg to Luckenwalde was a nightmare. Even so, it was better than walking. We travelled in a special train of cattle wagons each listed to hold '8 chevaux/40 hommes' (8 horses/40 men). With 56 men in my wagon there was not enough room to lie down. We were shoved in, locked in and left to our own devices. We had to get some sleep somehow so we sat five men down with their backs to the front of the wagon, legs outstretched and spread, then sat another five in similar fashion between their legs and so on down the wagon until everyone was seated. It was the best we could do to try to get some rest. We had our first drink of water after 35 hours cooped up in that wagon. Our waking hours were regaled by an ex-London pastrycook, telling us at great length exactly how to make chocolate eclairs—one chocolate éclair after another—to this day the mere thought of a chocolate éclair makes me sick.

Toilet arrangements were non-existent. The showers we had on arrival at Stalag IIIA were, to say the least, essential to wash off all the muck and filth we'd been sitting in for three days.

Stalag IIIA Luckenwalde, 8 February 1945 to 5 May 1945

The barracks at IIIA were reminiscent of those of earlier days in VIIA way back in 1941-42, except here we were sleeping on a concrete floor instead of three-tier bunks in blocks of 12. We were lucky to have a roof over our heads, as one lot of GIs was under canvas. Another section housed RAF officers and yet another compound was full to overflowing with Russian POWs.

The forced march from Luft VII had left us all tired out and hungry. Some wag, way back in 1942, said that a POW had only two topics of conversation—women and food—but only one if on short rations when the former didn't get a look in. All we could think about was food, we must have been very hungry! When some American food parcels came into the camp, they only stretched to a parcel between ten people. We drew lots and I won a tin of oleo margarine. We didn't have any bread to put it on so I ate it spoonful by spoonful.

Rumours of a last ditch stand by Hitler and his SS in his Berchtesgarden redoubt were flying around. The Air Force officers and some NCOs were actually marched down to the station to be sent there as hostages, but failed to leave as all railways in the region had been put out of action.

The battle for Berlin (only 20 miles away) had started. Our release, when it came, was a bit of a non-event. The German guards pulled out to be followed soon after by a Russian tank driving down the camp main street. The driver didn't stop to open the gates or for that matter halt for the hated barbed wire fence at the other end. He just drove right through.

Mail—lifeline to loved ones

Our captors complied with the Geneva Convention and allowed us one letter card and two postcards per month, outward mail. This brought my total allocation for my three and a half years of captivity to 42 letters and 84 postcards. However, as a non-smoker, I was able to 'buy' some extras for cigarettes from my Red Cross parcels and ended up sending 110 letters and 183 postcards.

Restrictions were less onerous on incoming mail in that I received 714 letters from friends and family together with 73 personal parcels comprising 11 clothing, 23 books, 33 private food parcels from the Christian Science Relief Agency in USA, 5 lots of periodicals and 1 of cigarettes.

Clothing parcels from home were allowed at the rate of one every three months, and to have received 11 out of a possible 14 says a lot for the tenacity of the Red Cross in getting them through and the honesty of the German postal services.

Scotty and Bill were not so lucky, as mail from Australia and New Zealand took much longer to arrive and was most irregular. They did, of course, share in my good fortune as the parcels I received were always split three ways.

Going home 22 April 1945 to 12 May 1945

As far as we POWs were concerned the war was over. Foraging parties were sent out into the surrounding countryside with orders to commandeer and bring in anything available to feed the camp inmates. Cattle, sheep and pigs all went into the stew pots, making some of the best meals of my incarceration. Three of us broke out of camp and went foraging on our own account. At one of the local farms we made ourselves known to a squad of Russian soldiers in residence. I trotted out some Russian I had learnt phonetically from Tad Baronowski:

‘Tavaroich ya yetsum lottchik anglichanski’ (Comrade I am an English airman)

They caught a dozen hens for us to take back to eat later, and regaled us on cold salt pork and vodka (their iron rations) for which we were very grateful, as were our circle of mates back in the camp when we cooked and ate the chooks.

Radios were now out in the open. We had up-to-the-minute news of the dying days of the war in Europe, that the American forces were holding back to give the Russians a free hand and that they were about to pull back to the West bank of the river Elbe. Meanwhile our liberators still kept us locked up, and several attempts by the American forces to repatriate us came to nothing.

Frustration built up to the point where about twenty of us decided to take things into our own hands and walk out to the American lines, not more than about 50 miles to the West. We set off on 5 May 1945, got tangled up with a company of Russian soldiers mopping up Germans in the vicinity, survived a pitched battle and eventually made Treuenbitzen, about half way to the front line. That night we slept in the Town Hall, being used as the Russian Command Post. Next morning we split into smaller groups and our party of three met up with a group of five GIs (POWs like ourselves) and scrounged a ride on the horse-drawn wagon they had commandeered.

At the top of a hill we came across a Red Army burial site for troops lost in battle, a bit of a shrine resplendent with red stars and their hammer and sickle flag, while close by three dead Germans lay unburied in a ditch. We stopped to have a look, then our GI driver laughed as he pissed all over one of those dead faces. A sickening thing to do. Some mother had lost a son and no one ever deserved such treatment.

We spent that night in a slave workers' *Lager*. When the French workers realised we were RAF POWs on our way home they brought out a bottle of the most delectable peach brandy from under the floorboards and feted us with a right royal feast.

In the morning we again joined forces with the five Yanks, and shortly after, the eight of us were picked up by a US Army jeep. That made a total of eleven (including the crew of three), with the three RAF riding the bonnet of that bucking bronco.

We crossed the Elbe by a pontoon bridge into the American sector on 7 May 1945. At last we could consider ourselves free. The jeep drove another 50 miles or so, passing through what was left of Magdeburg, travelling over roads of bulldozed rubble at window sill height. What a mess! We were transferred to an army truck and taken to Hildersheim airfield for repatriation. Here we were given packs of US army 'K' rations with real white bread which, on its own, tasted just like cake.

Flying was at a standstill due to inclement weather so we didn't get back to England until 11 May. I returned via a Dakota of the USAAF and, being the only pilot of this particular mob of homecoming POWs, I got the chance to fly it to Le Havre where we had a refuelling stop. Then on to Westcott in Buckinghamshire, England, home and beauty after three and a half years away. I am not ashamed to say I went down on my knees, patted the ground and gave thanks for my deliverance.

A quick light meal in the marquee set up for the arrival of we homecoming POWs, a cursory debriefing followed by a bus trip to the local station to catch a train to Cosford in the Midlands, where I was divested of my POW rags, issued with a complete new uniform, a rail pass home and six weeks' leave on double rations; very necessary with the UK still in the grips of severe rationing.

That night remains a kaleidoscope of jumbled impressions. Apart from forty winks on the train it was go-go-go all the time. I'd managed to phone home to say I hoped to reach Rhy1 at 2.30 p.m. on 12 May. Could they meet me there?

They were there when I arrived. The long parting was finally over. But not quite. On the way home we stopped to pick up Mair, the girl I'd left behind. Three years older but just as pretty as ever. We took up where we had left off and were married in February 1946. I had survived my years as a POW only to be shot down again. This time by cupid's arrow, into a lifetime of voluntary captivity. The best money I will ever spend was to buy that marriage licence.

Return to Norderney

On the morning of 10 November 1941, Hauptman Karl Born, Kommandantur of the Deutscher Seenotrettungsdienst (the German Air-sea Rescue Service) commiserated with me as he stood by my hospital bed on the island of Norderney. His words, 'For you the war is over', were to haunt me over the years, until finally laid to rest following my return there in 1995. He later informed me that my two dead crew members had been buried with full military honours in the local cemetery.

For the next fifty years I got on with the life that had been granted to me, ever mindful of the fact that I owed my life to that German seaplane crew and the Norderney doctors. It rankled me that I had never been able to say 'thank you' to them. I reckoned I owed them a beer or two!

Through contacts with the Royal Air Forces ex POW Association in London I was able to get in touch with Karl Tubbessing, *ex-Uberfeldwebl* navigator of the German Air-sea Rescue Service based on Norderney at the time of my rescue. He vividly remembers one live (me) and two dead airmen (my crew) being brought ashore. We have been corresponding for a number of years and although he has been unable to trace any of the crew involved in my rescue he has located the graves of my Skipper and navigator who now lie side by side in the War Graves Cemetery at Sage, near Oldenburg, North Germany.

Karl Tubbessing and Irmgard, his wife, invited Mair and me to spend a couple of weeks with them prior to our attendance at the final Royal Air

Forces ex POW Association reunion in London. We accepted with some trepidation, which proved to be totally unfounded.

On 2 July 1995, my 73rd birthday, I along with Mair returned to Germany as an invited guest as distinct from my previous status as 'uninvited guest of the Führer' in 1941. We flew to Frankfurt, then by train to Idar-Oberstein to be met by Karl and Irmgard. That first warm handshake set the scene for the rest of our stay. We were made to feel welcome and very much at home. 3 July was a rest day and a 'get to know you better' day. Karl's English being much better than my German eliminated any language problems.

Next day we travelled by road to Sage where I paid homage to my fallen crew, laying a single red rose on each grave. Karl joined me in this act of remembrance. He, too, had lost crew during the war. We each in our own way said a little prayer and left with a final heartfelt 'R.I.P.'

We spent the next four nights at the Landhaus Rippen at Marx where we were joined by Karl Born (the aforementioned *Kommandant* at Norderney), Fritz Becket, Werner Schultz (two more of his Air-sea Rescue Squadron) and their respective wives, Ilse, Lucie and Annemarie.

Karl Born had suffered a stroke a few years back and was now confined to a wheelchair. Even so, his handshake was both firm and friendly and his sense of humour none the worse for it. That evening when a fly landed in his coffee he quipped, 'Another job for the Air-sea Rescue'!

On 4 July I returned to Norderney and stood on the spot where I had been stretchered ashore. There is nothing left of the sea plane base, and the hospital where I languished is now a kindergarten.

Mine hosts of the German Air-sea Rescue Service laid on a magnificent luncheon at 'Forsthaus Bohnens', a delightful restaurant tucked away in the forest about eight miles from Marx. I took the opportunity to toast the *Seenotrettungsdienst* without whose help I would not be there. Karl Born responded graciously with, 'Lieber Brian und liebe Mair, we are very glad we could rescue you Brian.'

They truly appreciated my visit, particularly so as up to that time I was the only one of the many rescued throughout the war to have returned to say 'Thank you!'

I reminded Karl Born of the words he had said by my bedside way back in 1941—‘For you the war is over’—and was very happy to be able to tell him that for me the war was finally over.

We may have been sworn enemies during hostilities but the hand of friendship has been extended and accepted by both sides.

We parted as friends.

Postscript

It took me quite a while to settle down to civvy street, which I suppose after five years in the RAF was understandable. Mair and I got engaged on 1 July 1945 and then tied the knot on 2 February 1946. In between I had a three-month rehabilitation course (on full pay) at Harrogate close to my 51 Sqdn base at Dishforth. My father tried his best to get me settled down by offering me the manager’s position of Denbighshire Dairies, a milk retailing venture in Denbigh, North Wales. However after flying real aircraft, and my sojourn in the land of the Hun, I just could not see myself as piloting a ‘mahogany bomber’ for the rest of my life!

So, I returned to my roots and took up farming. My first migration overseas across the Menai Strait to the Isle of Anglesey. Here our five children were born and reared. However, I still felt that I had some flying left in me and rejoined the RAFVR to get it out of my system, flying Tiger Moths and Chipmunks.

Friendships seared in the adversity of the POW camps have stood the test of both time and distance. After selling the farm in October 1963 I took off on a six months’ holiday to renew some of them. After all, the Canadians, Kiwis and Aussies had had three and a half years in which to indoctrinate me on the many good points of their respective countries.

In a nutshell I found Canada charming but too cold. To have suffered from frostbite was enough for me! New Zealand is as lovely a country as I had been led to believe, but the economics at that time were no better than at home, which left Australia, a wide open, sunburnt country, just as my Aussie mates had described it. I was neither under- nor-over impressed. In the end I returned to Anglesey and bought a farm a mere ten miles from where I had started.

Three years later we took the plunge and migrated to Western Australia. I bought into one of the 'new land' farms near Munglinup on the Esperance sandplain. It just didn't work out. There was I living in one end of the machinery shed, returning home to be with my family in Mosman Park one weekend a month. The children had to be in Perth to complete their education.

I came home for a spell between seeding and harvest and took a temporary job as a field assistant with a mining company. I liked the work so much that I got out of the farm and rapidly gained promotion to field supervisor-cum-property office manager. I later formed my own company to undertake general mineral exploration work until 1984 when I retired, only to take on a part-time job selling dip to Western Australian sheep stations. A job that took me onto every WA sheep station on several occasions and lasted until 1990. I have now finally and fully retired and am happy with my lot.



Now I wonder if I packed my toothbrush?