

Bonfire in the air

Alex Kerr

Wellington 1C, R1379, KO-B, operating from 115 Squadron, RAF Station Marham, Norfolk



The crew (left to right)

Wireless operator Geoff Hogg (POW); *Front gunner* Bernie Morgan (POW); *Rear gunner* Dave Fraser (POW); *Second pilot* Alex Kerr (POW); *Pilot* (not on this op.) Alan McSweyn; *Navigator* Bill Legg (POW)

Pilot (on this op., not in photograph) J. Anderson (KIA)

It was clear sky on the night of the 11 May 1941. Activity over the target area—the Blohm and Voss aircraft factory, Hamburg—had been particularly brisk, and now we were on our way home, though by no means out of the danger zone. Puffs of grey smoke from the flak guns below hung around us, seemingly motionless where their shells had burst, looking for all the world like a closely woven balloon barrage in some degree of confusion. Streams of white tracer spread backwards from the guns far below and curved over one another in graceful criss crosses, forming a colourful display such as one would expect to find on a gala night in peacetime. Tonight had, perhaps, some significance for us but not as a festive occasion, as we were soon to discover.

I had not so far experienced fear on any of my raids—apprehension, perhaps, but not fear—a fact which struck me as rather strange but nevertheless very welcome. I was musing to myself. I remembered the previous raids when I had remarked to the rest of the crew how attractive the colourful streams of tracer looked from a distance. I was right there—from a distance. I had not yet seen them close and had not felt shells and shrapnel bite into the aircraft, destroying everything they touched. Although there was always a chance of it on each trip I had not yet really been face to face with death or the high probability of death. No doubt that is why I had not yet experienced real fear.

Later, I asked myself whether it was fear I had experienced that night. My heart had missed a beat once or twice when we had received a particularly hard buffet from a close explosion, but that was all. One could merely think that we were in a severe electrical storm and that the air turbulence which shook the aircraft was caused by natural rather than man-made disturbance. My thoughts wandered to those blinking, bluish searchlights far below and the men who manned them like minute ants. I could imagine them, scurrying here and there, shouting orders to one another and whooping with grim delight when their beams of light picked up the dark outline of a night intruder.

The train of my thought was rudely broken by a sharp exclamation from Dave, the rear gunner—‘My turret’s on fire, Andy!’ There was no panic in his voice, only urgency. I didn’t look at the rear turret but kept my eyes on the searchlights, three of which had picked us up and held us, due no doubt to the fire in the rear. Five seconds later the ground became a

blaze of light as a large cone of approximately 20 searchlights sprang into life and focused on the unfortunate visitor. As I relayed this information to Andy, I felt Bill, the navigator, brush past me, extinguisher in hand to assist Dave. Almost as soon as Andy acknowledged my message, Dave's voice rapped through the intercom once more, 'Night fighter on our tail!' My heart went into my throat as I became aware of the importance of the statement—caught in the cone of searchlights, rear turret on fire, night fighter on our tail—certainly not a nice situation to be in. I swung around. There it was, a dark shape hovering expectantly and moving into position on the starboard quarter.

I was aware of a tingling sensation at the back of my neck as I realised that I might have only a few more moments of life. There was no time to lose. I rapped instructions into a mike and felt the great plane start to swing around to my directions, but it was too late. It was as light as day in that part of the sky, and as we turned slowly I saw the fighter straighten up and could imagine him lining up the big bulk of our Wellington bomber for a sitting shot. As I watched he squeezed his trigger.

Fire spat from the fighter's wings and I saw the tracer shells like fiery pinpoints flashing towards me. Before I could move I felt a heavy blow as though someone had punched me simultaneously all over my body. The shells which ripped through the fabric with a piercing noise knocked me backwards on to the canvas bed. For a few seconds I was conscious. I had no idea where I was shot although I certainly knew that I had been hit, and hit hard. At least I was still alive. I can remember feeling indignant that a German had actually had the nerve to shoot me and I cursed that pilot and his ancestors with all the heartfelt invective that I could muster. For those few seconds I also knew stark fear—the terrible fear of the helpless, for I could not move and yet barely two yards away a wild fire was raging. An incendiary shell had ignited one of our flares inside the aircraft and it was burning fiercely with a bright yellow flame. During those few seconds of consciousness my imagination ran riot as I saw, in my mind's eye, hungry flames devouring my parachute harness then my leather flying suit, then me. The flames faded out as I lost consciousness.

I came to my senses some way down the aircraft by the rear escape hatch. The flames were still there, even more intense, lighting up the interior of

the fuselage with a great yellow glare to the accompaniment of a loud crackling and hissing and the acrid smell of petrol and oil fumes. It was a huge grim bonfire. The fear that had first gripped me was gone now and in its stead was a lulling lethargic calm, a slowness of movement that could well be fatal in an emergency. I was sitting on the deck with the large, well-built form of Dave, the rear gunner, hovering behind me, parachute in hand. My own parachute was clipped to my chest. My movements were almost mechanical as if pre-occupied, as if the stark realisation that at last I had been shot, and that perhaps other members of the crew had been killed, was numbing my brain and actions. As my brain became clearer, I ripped the cover off the escape hatch, checked my parachute, dangled my legs over the edge then looked around me. The noise inside the aircraft was deafening and the interior well lit up. Perhaps the size of the flames was magnified in my eyes but it seemed to me that the entire forepart of the fuselage was afire. We were, I thought, a great flying torch. I saw the form of Bill, the navigator, half lying, half sitting by the astro hatch, evidently hit by the same burst that had got me for we had been close to one another. As I looked Bill stirred and turned towards me. So he was not dead.

I endeavoured to beckon with my left hand but it would not function. I could see the leather of my flying jacket ripped open and lots of blood. I beckoned with my right hand and was answered with a shake of the head and a gesture which signified he could not move. I turned back to Dave and tried to speak above the noise but no sound seemed to come from my lips. I looked down and could see my left leg and my torn leather flying suit with dark red blood oozing out of the rip. It was also flowing down inside my trouser and trickling into my flying boot, warm and clammy.

Dave could not understand. He smiled and beckoned me to jump. The flames were roaring with ferocious intensity and Dave was obviously getting impatient. I must jump. Every movement seemed like an hour. Then I felt Dave kicking me into space. A clip of my harness caught on something and Dave fumbled with it. Then a final shove did what my own limbs refused to do and sent me flying into the darkness. I was whipped backwards by the airflow and lost no time in pulling the ripcord. The rustling of the silk parachute, a sharp report of the big canopy opening, a hard jolt on my shoulders, and I knew I was safe for the moment. I don't remember much after that. The flaming body of our plane was

below, descending, it seemed, at a terrifying rate. I had dim recollection of seeing two other parachutes floating slowly downwards and was startled by the dark roaring shape of an aeroplane which flashed passed me, uncomfortably close. I remember ripping off my flying cap and goggles and flinging them away. Then all became quiet. The stillness which had descended on that area was undisturbed by flak or searchlights or the noise of aircraft. In the blackness nothing happened to upset the gentle swishing sound made by the wind in the silken canopy above me. I felt myself dozing, floating, floating, gently, quietly.

Bump! A hard blow on the feet and then the back of the head heralded mother earth. It was a rude awakening from my reverie. I had almost dropped off to sleep, lulled by warm blood oozing into the palm of my hand and down my leg, and had lost all sense of height, time and place.

I heard voices immediately and gave vent to a feeble call for help which was answered from nearby. The parachute had dragged me along the rough ground for several yards and I could feel it still tugging at my shoulder straps. I was relieved when several dark figures loomed up. At least the parachute would be released, to stop the tugging. I had no idea of the nature or extent of my wounds, but five minutes later, lying on a small wooden table in a wooden hut lit by one feeble bulb, I had an opportunity to take stock. I knew I had been shot in the chest for the German soldier who had hoisted me on his back to carry me to the hut had brushed some blood onto his hand as he removed my flying jacket. I thought it was a lung because I found it rather difficult to breathe. Then I caught sight of my arm. I could not make out the details of the wound but saw a bloody confused dirty tangle of skin and leather. It did not look too good, I thought, but probably it didn't matter if I had been shot in the lung.

My breathing was becoming more laboured. It was as if someone was slowly but surely restricting my lung capacity. I had a terrific thirst. I mused for a while, heedless of the whispered instructions being issued around me. I seemed to remember from first aid lessons that if internal injury was suspected the patient should not be given anything to drink, but since I was beginning to think my hours were numbered I felt that if I were going to die I would rather do so without a thirst. I called for a drink and took two greedy, full cups. It was not water but coffee and it tasted good although it was ersatz.

As I lay on the table looking far worse than I really felt (for my wounds were numb for the most part and not painful), Dave was brought in, questioned, detained for a while, then hustled out. He was shaken and very serious. Apart from the mess of my left arm, my leather flying suit was torn above the left knee and along the left thigh and here again was a mess of blood and leather. The spectacle must have been an unnerving one and no doubt Dave was quite sure that he was in the presence of imminent death. Bernie was there, too. He had been there even before I was brought in and had not spoken a word. He stared in front of him and acted as though he was in a trance. He left with Dave.

Shortly afterwards began what was for me an uncomfortable, seemingly interminable journey by ambulance to a hospital. Much of that ride has slipped into the dim mists of the past from which only the most vivid of memories can be drawn, but a few incidents still stand out boldly. I lay on the ambulance stretcher in pain. Yes, it was pain now. It seemed to me, in later months, that the type of pain I experienced then could not be compared with anything I had felt before or since. It was mental more than physical. My breath was now coming in short, very short, gasps. I felt I had not very much longer to live. I had never been surer of anything in my life.

I decided that the thing to do was to offer up a prayer before I left this world. But I had never been a great church goer and found that when I attempted the Lord's Prayer I simply could not remember some lines. I finished it as best I could and then, tortured by the peculiar type of pain I was experiencing and not being able to see any advantage from dragging it on I tried to end my life by the simple expedient of holding my breath. Fortunately, for the completion of this story and sundry other reasons I was unsuccessful. After a third attempt I gave up. I was still breathing in short gasps when the ambulance skidded to a halt on the gravel drive outside a large hospital on the Danish border. Dawn was just breaking and there was a briskness in the air as the sun started to peep over the distant hills. I was in no mood to appreciate this, however, as I was hustled to the operating theatre. There I submitted reluctantly to the sickly smelling mask that was gently placed over my face.

Fourteen hours after I had surrendered to the chloroform mask I regained consciousness. The room was dark, it was night and the blackouts had

been drawn to guard against air raids. As my eyes accustomed to the darkness I saw someone sitting beside me and decided it must be a nurse. I was in a large room and could hear the moaning and restless tossing of those who could not sleep. I was tortured by a terrific thirst and, as I look back, realise what a nuisance I must have been over the next two days with my requests for water which were not allowed. My life had hung in the balance with the weights stacked against me, but with the help of the senior French surgeon, Professor René Simon (one of Europe's leading pre-war surgeons) and his Polish colleague, I pulled through. The danger period passed, and after a week I had recovered sufficiently to be moved to a smaller room. This was managed with some difficulty as I had both my left arm and left leg in splints.

Later Bill Legg, our observer, was carried in on a stretcher. Although badly wounded like myself, it did us both good to meet up again and exchange tales. And what a tale he had to tell.

'When', Bill said, 'Dave reported his turret on fire, I grabbed the nearest extinguisher and ran down to the rear to see how I could help. Well, we got it under control and as I was coming back to you in the astro-hatch something hit me in the back. I fell forward and lost consciousness. When I regained my senses I saw you and Dave baling out at the escape hatch. I don't remember much more so I suppose I must have passed out again. When I regained consciousness you had gone and the body of the aircraft was empty although it was still flying under control. I went forward, clambering with difficulty over the main spar to speak to the pilot. Imagine my surprise! The cabin was empty with no one at the controls and the plane was flying by itself. A fierce fire was raging. A stray bullet had set off one of the flares, so I thought I should lose no time and bale out. That was all very well until I had a dizzy spell as I stood by the escape hatch and instead of clipping my parachute onto my chest I dropped it through the hatch. There went my only means of salvation as it vanished into the blackness of the night.'

'And yet, several minutes later I was being lifted out of the pilot's seat, again unconscious, by some German soldiers. How did this happen? I had climbed into the pilot's seat with the intention of diving the aircraft straight into the ground to get it over quickly. But after playing around with the controls and throttle and finding everything still worked, self

preservation decreed that I should try to land the plane. It was as black as the ace of spades but the moon did provide a little light. I chose a small field crossed by innumerable dykes and surrounded by high tension cables. After a successful wheels up landing I skidded to a screeching halt and promptly lost consciousness again. Almost immediately, German soldiers on the scene pulled me out of the cabin seconds before the aircraft exploded. Fortunately there was a civilian hospital not more than a few hundred yards away, to which I was rushed. A German doctor operated immediately and I have spent the last month convalescing. I had been shot through the intestines twice, probably by the same burst that got you. I also received splinters in my arms and legs, although not serious.'

The days and weeks dragged slowly by. Wounded POWs came and went off to camps as and when fit enough to travel. Then joy on 4 August, when Bill received his first three letters from home. On 23 August we were moved by train to another hospital at Rendesburg, a short though very tiring journey in our condition.

Professor Simon and a Polish doctor arrived from Schleswig on 1 December and, needless to say, we were glad to see them and have them to continue to treat us. All my wounds were now healed except my chest, which was still troubling me, and a stabbing pain in my right side. My arm was being massaged daily but with no definite improvement. Bill's stomach wound was in the same condition. His bowel was discharging regularly from his back and his operation had broken open again.

On 12 December, Donald Bennett, a Canadian pilot, was brought in. He was badly smashed up after a crash landing and had been left in the wreckage for eight hours. He died that night and was buried three days later. I attended the funeral. The Luftwaffe mounted a guard of honour who fired three volleys over the coffin. They provided a beautiful wreath, as did patients from our hospital.

About this time we were examined by a medical board consisting of two German doctors, the Professor and a Polish doctor. Afterwards the Professor came to our room and said, 'You are going home, to England.' This was the first of several repatriation schemes introduced towards the end of 1941. We had heard that 1,000 wounded prisoners were to be exchanged between Germany and Britain. It seemed as though we would be among the lucky ones. We were to go first to Wiesbaden, then on to

Calais. We were naturally elated, but our joy was ill-founded. The exchange never took place. Instead we were sent to prison.

A few days later we moved by train to Ober Ursel, a tiring journey with eight changes of trains. After the usual interrogation I was sent to the Dulag Luft hospital for further recuperation. During this journey we heard on the radio that Kiev had fallen. Two years later, under far more optimistic circumstances, we were to hear of its recapture by the conquering Russian armies.

Life in Dulag hospital was a welcome change from our previous existence. We were given a breakfast of bread rolls, jam and coffee. We could then spend the morning on a small open balcony, lying in the sun, reading and smoking English cigarettes, of which we received a plentiful supply. For lunch we had soup, potatoes and vegetables followed by a sweet such as ice-cream or fruit compote. Tea and cakes at 3 o'clock provided an afternoon break, then an evening meal of bread rolls and perhaps a salad and English tea. A game of monopoly or cards to finish the day before lights out at 9 o'clock.

On 27 September fifteen men were evacuated to another hospital. Not long after they'd left, Bill arrived from Rendesburg. His back had not improved since I last saw him. Seven more departed on 30 September, leaving only seven of us behind to move out that afternoon. Bill stayed back for a further operation to his intestines.

We ended up in a prison at Mainz, confined to below-ground dungeons. The food was repulsive, the cutlery rusty and the forbidding granite walls just oozed dampness and decay. Next day W/Cdr Douglas Bader (of tin-legged fame) was brought in. A spare leg to replace the one damaged beyond repair when he was captured was flown out by the RAF and dropped during a bombing raid. After vehement protests by him we were moved out two days later to a camp near Lubeck, northern Germany. For the three officers in our party this was the end of their journey, while we four sergeants carried on to Stalag III E via Hamburg and Berlin, arriving thoroughly tired and fed up with travelling.

The camp strength of Stalag III E was a mere 184 aircrew, housed in four huts with three-tiered bunks. On arrival we did a tour of the camp and found a few friends already in residence. Food was scarce until the

arrival of some Red Cross parcels. There was small library (totally inadequate), augmented later by books supplied by the Red Cross.

When lice were discovered in one of the huts the Commandant ordered the entire camp to Stalag IIIA (Luckenwalde) for delousing. On arrival we were hustled into the delouser and two hours later were dressing again with heads and beards shaven. Twelve hours later we were on our way back to our home camp and the routine of Stalag life.

Camp inspections by a member of the American Embassy on 15 November, followed a few days later by the Red Cross and an English-speaking German army officer, led to our first baths in months. With hot water scarce, however, we had to bathe two at a time, a situation not helped when three pairs had to use the same water. Later, a photographic session, sanctioned by the Commandant and paid for out of our canteen funds, provided some good snaps to send home to our folks. A sequel to the lice affair saw us all get typhus injections and vaccinations.

On 4 December a supply of Red Cross blankets, pyjamas and handkerchiefs arrived in time to help us keep warm during the winter. I can never give that body enough praise, for without their food parcels and aid, many of us might not have survived the war.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the Americans in on our side; but the loss of the British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* to the Japanese and their push through Siam to Malaya somewhat dampened our ardour.

We did the best we could to prepare for the festive season. The place of honour reserved for 'The Boat' symbolising our hopes enshrined in that well-worn phrase—'Roll on the Boat.' It was a cardboard creation, as were a silver-papered Wellington and Hurricane flying as escorts.

Snow fell on Christmas Eve. A pantomime was put on and enjoyed by all. Cpl Miller read a message from the Commandant (on leave with his family) in which he wished us all as merry a Christmas as circumstances would allow. The show finished with a sing-song of all our most popular songs. The party broke up shortly afterwards and the boys dispersed to their huts to eat their Christmas feasts. We had a special extension of 'lights out' and spent our time around the other huts wishing all a 'Merry Christmas. On Christmas Day we marched to Kirchain to hear Norman

Hennessy, a fellow prisoner, conduct a service in one of the town's fine churches.

My first personal parcel arrived on the 29th, a fitting prelude to a New Year's Eve party. We all thought the war would be over by the following June, 1942!

On 20 January I was sent to Cottbus, a town about 60 km away, for a **medical** examination, followed soon after by another brief medical at **Kirchain**. Twenty-four hours later I was on my way to Spremberg Hospital for treatment to my stomach wound, still open after ten months. **The** wound healed quickly with proper treatment and I was soon back in **camp**.

On 12 April we welcomed an army corporal parachutist to Stalag III E. **He** arrived from Frankfurt after having been captured in Yugoslavia and **interrogated** in Berlin. **He** had undergone a number of very exciting **experiences** and, being recently captured, was able fill us in on the latest 'gen.' Later he was to partner me in an escape.

A week or so later we were told that we would soon be moved to another **camp**, newly built, where we would find many other RAF prisoners. **This** was part of a scheme to concentrate all RAF prisoners in one large camp. **The** news alarmed us as it meant hastening up work on a tunnel that we **had** been constructing for the past few months. I wondered if I would **meet** up with any of my crew, whom I had not seen for over a year.

Although we did not know the exact date of the move, tunnel work parties **were** increased in an effort to complete the job before it happened. **The** **air** was so foul that one could only work for half hour shifts. Even so, the **first** hundred inmates were posted to their new camp before the work was **completed**. The rest of us pressed on and completed the task in time for a **mass** breakout before we, too, were moved. At 175 feet it was later found **to** be the longest tunnel through which a successful escape had been made. **Many** in the camp had laboured long and hard over that tunnel.

We broke through the last sod about midnight and some 52 prisoners got **away** before the breakout was discovered. **We** emerged in twos and **threes**, faces and hands blackened, to crawl across 100 yards of open field **to** the relative safety of the woods beyond.

Our small group, Chip, Wingy and I, travelled at night by the stars, holing up in whatever cover we could find for the day. The food we'd brought out with us soon ran out. There was not much to be found but we did manage to raid a garden for vegetables including some rhubarb which we should have left behind. We ended up with violent stomach ache.

During our first four days we had several narrow squeaks. One night we unknowingly made camp alongside an airfield with aircraft landing close by, and another in the middle of a practice bombing range. Not the best place to hole up in!

We were heading for Yugoslavia where Chip had a radio hidden. He had been dropped by the RAF to make contact with the Partisans but his small party had been either captured or killed by the Germans, but not before he had hidden the radio and plotted the hiding place. If we could get that far, immediate contact with London and perhaps repatriation were possible.

To expedite progress we decided to jump goods trains but almost came unstuck when one train we were on stopped in the middle of a well-lit station and a guard came to check the wagon we were hiding in. We got out of that scrape by running for our lives. On our last night out we failed to find a suitable hideaway and camped in a large hole in the middle of a ploughed field. It was just not good enough for we were apprehended by a burly forester pointing his shotgun right at my stomach. Resistance was useless. We were locked in a cell overnight and sent back to our camp the next day.

Of the 52 who had broken out, we three made the number recaptured up to 48. The following day three more were brought in, bringing the total up to 51. Unfortunately the last one was killed. Don Sugden and Calvert, two Canadians, were caught on the tenth day. Cal, standing with his hands up, had pointed to his socks and asked in English if he could keep them. His action frightened the nervous young guard who shot him, killing him instantly.

Stalag Luft III, Sagan

Soon after arrival at Stalag Luft III, I was reunited with the rest of my crew, including Bill, my observer, left behind in the Frankfurt Hospital. The only one missing was Andy, our captain, of whom nothing has been heard to this day. The camp comprised 2,000 officers and NCOs in

separate compounds, among them 33 Australians. We slept in two-tier bunks, much better than the three-tiered lot of Stalag III E. We were guarded now by the Luftwaffe, who treated us like gentlemen; quite a difference from our former camp. Sports equipment, gardening implements, two orchestras, a fire pool that could be used for swimming and an extensive library provided plenty of diversion.

A day later I received 28 letters from Australia, Canada, America, England and Scotland, followed by my first personal parcel from Scotland. We formed a combine of four Canadians, three Anzacs, one Scotsman and two Englishmen. We pooled all food and cigarettes. In this way we managed to live reasonably well while our Red Cross parcels held out, though the arrival of some invalid comforts parcels helped to fill the gap.

Tunnels were always being constructed. One was discovered on 27 May, with the would-be escapees inside digging. They were promptly marched off to gaol. Another was rumbled on 23 June, having got as far as the wire before discovery. Talking of tunnels and gaol sentences, not one of we escapees from Stalag III E had served our full time in gaol, so we were now sent down in pairs for a two-week stay inside. When my turn came I took it as a splendid opportunity for some much needed study.

There's no doubt that the tower guards were trigger happy. Freddie Woods, playing with a football, got too close to the warning wire and was shot at—luckily missed. On another occasion, Rocky was attempting to communicate with Herb in the gaol, separated from us by a wire fence, when he was shot at, but again a miss. Although a scheme had been introduced to allow us to visit the latrines and wash-house after dark, some guards were apparently unaware of the change. One of our lads wandered over to the latrines, got coned by the guard tower searchlights, ducked inside but got tired of waiting and when he stepped outside was shot in the elbow. A headlong dive back inside saved him from a second shot. He was later rescued by some 'moles' and spent the night in the cooler, to be liberated next day with an apology, in time to celebrate his 21st birthday, a party that almost didn't happen!

Our NCOs held a sports day in our compound on 14 August. It went so well that the officers sent over a team to challenge us. The lead see-sawed throughout the day until the final event was won by the NCOs, giving them a one point win overall. The Canadians introduced softball, initially

not over-popular with the English but later embraced by some of them. Boxing contests were organised. The finals, refereed by Lt/Commander Buckley, were enjoyed by an enthusiastic audience.

Bill, who had spent some months in the Sagan Lazarette, was scheduled for yet another operation, supposedly to finally complete the cure. A renowned French surgeon would operate and was confident of success. Complications set in, however, and he almost died. Some weeks later, on 21 October, he was passed for repatriation to England by a Swiss medical board.

Our 'Arts and Crafts' exhibition produced some outstanding exhibits. The Arts section comprised many paintings of still life and portraits; the Crafts section, a display of badges, needlework and a variety of models, showed a depth of imagination, ingenuity and perseverance. There was even a working model of a steam engine, used to propel a boat made from jam tins across the fire pond.

On 19 September our newly re-conditioned theatre opened with a long variety show as its premiere. The whole interior had been transformed and an illusion of striking reality was created. The Germans co-operated by providing the props. Our boys set up the lighting and stage effects. The show, which included a burlesque *Rigoletto*, took us mentally far from Sagan and the barbed wire.

Following the lifting of a ban on all mails in retribution for a perceived holdup of mail to German POWs in Canada, I received 42 letters on 11 November, enough to keep me happy for many days.

On 5 December we broached a keg of 'home-brew' wine made from raisins, sugar and yeast. The effect was far better than anticipated. We had many visits from friends we never knew we had to help us empty that keg! Fired by its undoubted success, we laid down another to mature for Christmas. It did, but as the Germans had also 'sold' us a keg of beer for chocolates and cigarettes, we started on that. After an hour, although the beer tasted OK, the awful truth was apparent—it was no good. There was only one thing to do. Our own brew, scheduled to be drunk on Christmas Day, would have to be opened. It saved the day and we finally bedded down very contented.

Some escapes were brilliant in their conception and execution. None more so than that of Grimson, who, after escaping, reportedly met his death while working with the Polish Resistance. He dressed up as a German *unter-offizier*, equipped himself with headphones wired to a little black box from which protruded a handle and two wires with crocodile clips. At lunchtime when the 'goons' went off for their meal, leaving their equipment behind, Grimson picked up a ladder, carried it to the nearest guard tower, propped it against the wire and climbed up. He explained in perfect German to the postern in the tower that he was testing for hidden electronic equipment. He then put the earphones on, twirled the little knob and listened intently. After doing this two or three times he climbed down, strolled over to another nearby guard tower and repeated the procedure, then set up once again in between the two towers. He shouted to both guards that he couldn't be bothered to go back to the main gate, pulled up the ladder and replaced it on the outside of the fence and climbed down. He carefully placed all his equipment on the ground by the ladder and told the guards to keep an eye on it while he went to lunch, and walked off, never to be seen again.

On 10 March 1943 I registered with London University for the intermediate examination of the B.Sc. (Economics), which meant more intensive study if I wished to complete the syllabus by November.

Since the soft ball season had started, I and another Aussie, Jack Connelly, had noticed a growing interest in the game among the Aussies. We therefore decided to form a team, believing that previous cricket experience would stand the boys in good stead. We were right. In fact the results were much better than expected. The boys responded to our coaching efforts and we soon found ourselves with two Australian teams and a long waiting list should we decide to form a third. The first Aussie team batted its way through the International League, losing only one match and that to the second Aussie team. This led to one of the Canadians saying that although we were OK among fellows who hadn't played much, we'd have no show against his National League (1st Division) team. Of course I could not let such a challenge go unheeded so I snapped him up and arranged a match for Easter Sunday, placing a side wager of 1,000 cigarettes on the result. I did not expect to win but thought we could show them that we could play as well as they, even though our chaps had only had a month at the game. It attracted the

largest crowd for some time and ended in an exciting win, 12–10 to the Canucks. It was played in a good spirit and was anybody's game to the last. It proved our point that we considered ourselves capable of fielding a team in the National League, which was later arranged.

On 18 June, after almost a month of rumours, we entrained in the afternoon after a cursory search in the *Vorlager*. Our destination, Koenigsburg in northern Prussia. We found to our pleasure that we were not packed in as tightly as in previous travel in cattle wagons, but went by 3rd Class coaches. The journey was a very welcome change to normal 'kriegie' life and we took the fullest advantage of it. Whenever the train happened to stop in a station, men scrambled for the best place at the window to just gaze at the German lasses. Quite understandable when one realises that some of us hadn't seen or talked to a woman for two or three years. I shuddered to think what would happen when the first boatload of ex-POWs landed on England's shores.

Stalag Luft VI—Heydekrug

This camp on the shores of the Baltic, still under construction, was divided into several compounds of 2,000 POWs. Because of the absence of cooking facilities in the huts, a communal system of messing had been instigated. It was the only workable scheme.

Here the first cricket test between Australia and England was won by Australia by three runs on a very tricky wicket. With the season now well under way, England then beat New Zealand as did Australia. The second test was won easily by England, but they lost to a combined Dominions team. The season closed with a third test, won resoundingly by England.

Sports days, theatre productions and a debating society all helped pass the time, as did some concentrated study for my exams, an economics paper, on New Year's Eve, which I finished in record time in order to participate in a 'brew', laid on by my mates, before it ran out.

On 2 February 1944 I received a letter from Bill, our navigator, who had been repatriated through Sweden and was undoubtedly enjoying his new-found freedom. June 6, D-day, was the beginning of the end for us POWs. It was just as well we didn't know when that would be as it would certainly have dampened our jubilation.

The American compound put on a two-day boxing tournament. The main attraction was the Kriegy Welterweight Championship between John Tracy (RAF) and 'The Bearded Marvel' (USAAF) who won, two rounds to one.

By 15 July the Russian offensive was closing in on our area. Rumours of our evacuation proved true. Then followed frantic packing as we could take only what we could carry. We had to leave a lot behind. All surplus food, amassed so carefully, was dumped in the two big latrines. If we couldn't take it we weren't prepared to leave it for the Germans. However, 38,000 Red Cross parcels held in store by the Germans had to be left behind, there being no available transport. We were marched down to Heydekrug railway station and herded into cattle wagons, to the obvious displeasure of a mass of civilian evacuees also waiting for transport away from the advancing Russians. We were partitioned into barbed wire cages, each holding twenty men. Our boots were removed, making escape impossible.

Stalag 357—Thorn and Fallingbostel

Some 24 hours later we arrived at Thorn, that great Polish fortress, and were marched through the town to the POW camp about three kilometres beyond, placed in a reception barracks and left there until the morning for a search of our belongings.

We stayed only three weeks at Thorn before moving out to Fallingbostel, a large camp of many thousands of French, British and Russian POW workers. We were deloused and placed in billets in a separate section of the camp. We heard of the Allied landings in the south of France on 16 August. Next day, a sight to make our hearts rejoice, a daylight raid of about 800 American Liberators complete with a fighter escort flew over our camp.

By the end of October the weather had deteriorated. The camp became a sea of mud. Red Cross parcels were almost non-existent (three-quarters of a parcel per man over six weeks), so we existed solely on German rations. At the end of November I sat a series of exams of the Oxford Diploma of Social Studies. This period before Christmas would have to be the worst three months of my three and a half years of POW life.

Von Runstedt had broken through our lines on the Ardennes front, the Battle of the Bulge, but was pushed back to where he had started. Our advances on the Western Front and those of the Russians in the East saw many thousands of kriegies on the march. The march out of Fallingbistel, in several columns totalling some 12,000 men, commenced in March 1945 in bitterly cold weather.

I decided to take matters into my own hands. It was not all that difficult to slip away from the march and hide up in the bushes on the roadside, but I was recaptured by some German troops on the second day out and returned to one of the Fallingbistel columns. Herb Crump, a friend of mine from Adelaide, was in that column. Together we planned to escape at the first opportunity. Neither of us fancied falling into Russian hands. We figured the only safe place for us was behind the British lines and the sooner we got there the better.

Next day, we were shot up by six Typhoons, who must have thought we were a column of German troops. Many POWs and their German guards were killed or injured with several Aussies among the dead, killed by our own side within a few days of freedom. What a tragedy!

After this, Herb and I decided it was time to go. We got away but moved cautiously, stealing food when we could and generally keeping away from well-used roads, often bedding down in bombed out barns. We carried a large white calico sheet for waving to our troops at the appropriate time.

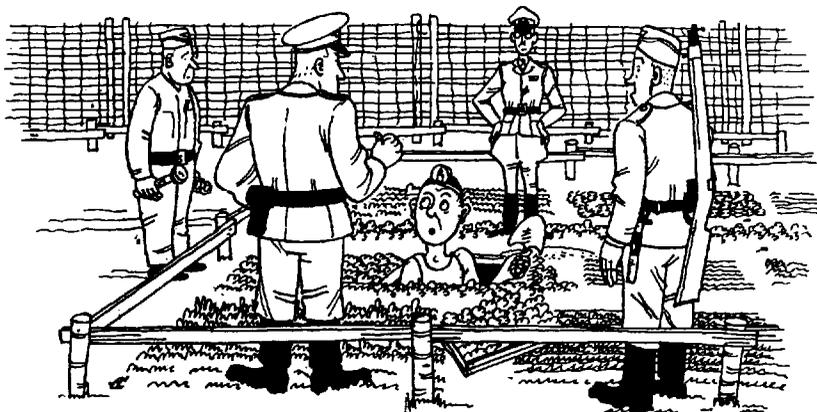
We went to ground under a small stone bridge over a creek and awaited events. When a tank rounded a corner some 400 yards away, we satisfied ourselves that it was British and brandished our white flag. Up popped the turret, then after a short inspection and identification and a briefing on the land we had just passed through, a bottle of cognac, a packet of cigarettes and two large bars of chocolate changed hands, and they were on their way. We were free at last!

We walked down the road into a village alive with British troops, and went into a large house occupied by a farmer, his wife and two daughters. Our requests for a hot bath, some clean clothes, a good meal and a sleep between white sheets were met, and after a good night's sleep came a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs. Our plan of action was to head back east towards the front line, commandeer a car from a recently overrun

village, scrounge some petrol from our troops and drive back to Paris for a bit of a holiday before returning to England.

We did the first part, commandeering an Opel 'for military purposes' but got only as far as Brussels where we booked into an American Military Hospital suffering from nausea and diarrhoea, no doubt the end result of too much good food after our sparse POW diet. After this rest, England beckoned, so we located the area Transport Officer. He won our Opel as we jumped the long queue waiting to return to England and got on the next plane home. From that point things moved quickly—hospitals, recuperation, repatriation, rehabilitation and rejuvenation.

Building on the degree I had partly completed as a POW, I finished my professional life as Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Murdoch University in Western Australia and am currently chairman of several companies. While many of my POW friends have since passed on, a special bond still exists with the handful that remain. These bonds of friendship, forged under the most trying conditions, are special and lasting despite distance and the passage of time.



'I was only inspecting the drains!'