Canadian Military History

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 9

1993

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Andrew Cox

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Recommended Citation
Cox, Andrew "Five Years as a Prisoner of War." Canadian Military History 2, 1 (1993)

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PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Five Years as a Prisoner of War

Andrew Cox

It was late evening on the 8th of September 1940. We had just set course for Germany—our target, the oil refinery at Hamburg. Our Hampden bomber was carrying four 500-pound bombs and 500 pounds of incendiaries. After two and a half hours flying over the sea, we approached the target. The anti-aircraft fire, especially over Hamburg, was intense. There was a thunderous noise from a nearby shell burst and our starboard engine began to vibrate so violently that it was impossible to fully control the aircraft. It became only a matter of minutes before it would fall from the wing. With the permission of the pilot, I sent a very brief message to England, letting them know our difficulties. It was "S O S - hit - on fire - jumping for it over Germany." This was the message passed on to my wife.

My parachute was in very poor shape. The small spring-loaded pilot chute, which pulls the main canopy from the parachute pack, was damaged. As the pilot chute was virtually useless, I decided to rely on the slipstream from the aircraft to pull the canopy from the pack, which meant lowering myself out the bottom hatch, hanging on with one arm to the aircraft and pulling the rip cord. Surprisingly the effort to hang onto the aircraft was less than expected. The main danger with this method of abandoning the aircraft was that the chute could become entangled in the tail. However, I was lucky and the parachute developed nicely.

I left the aircraft at about 6,000 feet and shortly thereafter hit the ground with some force and lay on my back for awhile completely dazed. I soon recovered, disconnected myself from the parachute and realized I was in a field of frightened cattle. With the noise of thundering hooves in my ears, I took off at high speed and cleared a four foot hedge without touching it, to land in a ditch filled with water.

I decided to break into a farmhouse to try and acquire about three weeks' supply of food and then find a hiding place for a few days until the search for me had died down. I then hoped to move at night, working my way down the coast to find a small boat.

My attempt at break-and-enter proved a dismal failure. I made a very poor burglar. After a short chase down a country road followed by an irate farmer with a shotgun, two sons and a German Shepherd, I had to surrender. Although it was dark, the dog made it difficult for me to find a hiding place in the hedges.

Once inside the farmhouse I was made to sit in the centre of the kitchen (a very large room) and the father kept his shotgun on me. After a while I was allowed to go to the sink and clean the blood off my face and hands, a result of my parachute landing. They then offered me a bowl of porridge which I accepted. There was more an air of curiosity rather than hostility. After all England was taking an awful pounding from the Luftwaffe at this time.

Class of 7B9 — Initial flying training, 1937. Only two airmen of this group survived the war. The airman kneeling on the left and the author kneeling on the right.

A German police officer arrived and demanded in broken English details of my aircraft and crew. I refused to answer. He then hit me across both sides of the head and with his pistol pressed against my stomach made further threats. Not getting any answer, he pushed me into a chair and said, "What does it matter. We shoot you in the morning anyway."

I was then driven to Hamburg aerodrome and placed in a cell. High up on the wall was a small, barred window. The bed consisted of three wooden planks and the steel door had an aperture for observing the prisoner. In the morning I was escorted down a long corridor by six guards and an officer. To me, this was a firing squad and I anticipated being placed against a wall in the courtyard. At about ten feet from the wall we made an abrupt left turn and proceeded towards a bus. I wasn't going to be shot after all!

On the bus was the rest on my crew. Hence the reason for the six guards. After further interrogation, we boarded a Junkers 52 transport aircraft for Hanover. From there we went by truck to Dulag luft near Frankfurt on Main. Dulag luft was a processing centre for captured Allied airmen. Later in the war it was to become infamous for the methods used to extract information from prisoners.

After about five days we went by passenger train to Stalag luft 1 on the Baltic coast. My prisoner of war number was 270. On arriving at Stalag luft 1, I met quite a number of airmen I had known in England and joined up with two members of my squadron to form a combine.

The idea of a combine was to pool all our resources and share any chores. If any one member of the combine could acquire extra food by stealing it from the Germans, then it

would be shared equally. The combine formed a very important part of P.O.W. life, and was especially useful when Red Cross food parcels arrived as it enabled us to vary our diet.

On being told that a tunnel was being constructed under our room, I requested permission to join the team involved. After removing the stove and floorboards, I descended down a ladder into a room about seven feet square, where there was a workbench and various tools and equipment, such as fans for driving air into the tunnel, etc. Most of these had been contructed out of tin cans, although some items had been stolen from German workmen. An electric light had also been installed. At the entrance to the tunnel a little sign stated, "England, 350 miles this way."

We kept the tunnel very small, about two feet high and two feet wide, sometimes going to thirty inches high and thirty inches wide. This was to keep the amount of excavated earth to a minumum. In some camps it was difficult to dispose of the earth. We used wooden bed boards to support the roof and coal briquettes for the walls. It made for a strong tunnel.

With the spring thaw, water seeped into the tunnel and we had to work dressed only in shorts, digging away at the face lying in a couple of inches of very cold water. We decided to contruct four large tanks under the building and with pumps made from old tin cans kept the water level down.

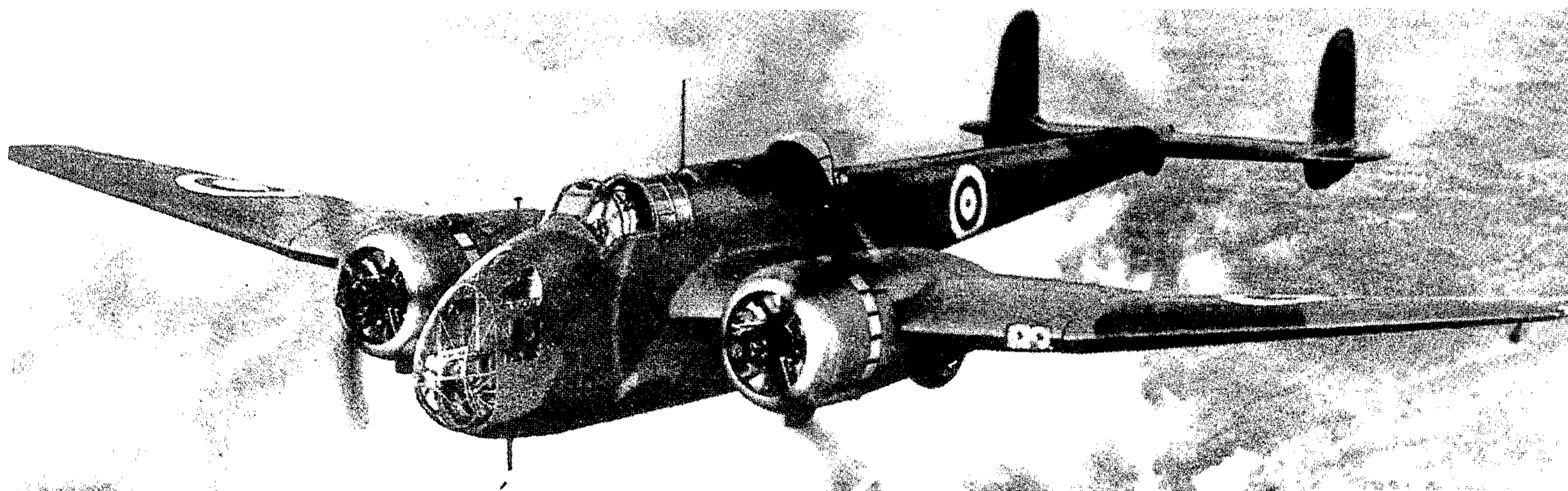
The wet earth increased the danger of cave-ins. However, we supported the roof for every six inches of progress so any cave-in was minimal. It must be realized that the person doing the tunneling was unable to turn around and dig himself out if a cave-in should occur. He had to rely on those behind him to get to him before he had used up all the oxygen in his small space. To my knowledge, no one ever perished this way although there were plenty of scary incidents.

Light in the tunnel was provided by a lamp consisting of a piece of cloth in a tin of margarine. Not everybody could work in the tunnel. The confined space caused claustrophobia. Even looking back from one hundred feet into the tunnel, the entrance looked like a pin point of light and seemed so far away.

Two French prisoners, acting as informers, caused the tunnel to be discovered in May 1941.

The summer of 1941 was very hot and prisoners would bask in the sun with maybe just a towel over the pelvic area. With no women around there was no cause for embarrassment. However, on one occasion the Camp Commandant and some high-ranking officials, accompanied by their wives, were walking around the outside of the camp. As they approached, our airmen jumped to attention and saluted. In doing so, their towels fell to the ground. The surprised and

Handley Page Hampden



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embarrassed officers and their wives walked by as quickly as possible. That afternoon Dixie Deans, our Camp leader, sent over a message which stated that, "During the hot weather when saluting a German officer, John Thomas must be covered at all times."

A prisoner in our room, Sergeant Pilot Peter Waring, managed to escape by being detailed for a work party working near the docks. He stowed away on a ship to Sweden and eventually reached England. He was killed a year later in a flying accident en route to an Air Force station to lecture on escape and evasion. We had one prisoner shot attempting to escape. He was given a military funeral by the Luftwaffe.

One of my friends who had been shot down in April 1940 appeared. He had been badly burned. He had no eyelids and part of his nose and ears had been burned off. He also had other injuries. He occupied the bunk below me. I recall climbing down to the floor at night to go to the washroom when suddenly a shaft of moonlight moved across his face. Having no lids, the pupils of his eyes had receded and I was looking at completely white eyeballs—a weird sensation.

Another prisoner had a large portion of the skin covering his abdomen torn away with a shell blast. He suffered great pain with the bandages sticking to the wound. A couple of enterprising prisoners were able to acquire through the German Luftwaffe some plexiglass from a crashed Junkers 88 aircraft and constructed a cover for his wound. This had two advantages; his progress could be monitored visually and contamination from airborne microbes was minimized. It took many months but he recovered.

My wife sent me a number of records which included songs by Bing Crosby and Deanna Durbin. I was very fortunate to receive them for so many parcels were stolen at Lisbon,

Photo taken at Stalag Luft 1. P.O.W. Camp. The author is second from left (back row). The airman shown centre (back row) was a Spitfire pilot, Sgt. Peter Waring who was shot down during the Battle of Britain. He escaped in 1941 and returned to England. Tragically he was killed in a flying accident shortly thereafter.

This photo shows the lying in state of a Sgt. Pilot who was shot and killed while trying to escape by a Luftwaffe guard. It is of interest to note that the centre wreath with its swastika and Maltese cross, was given by the Luftwaffe. The other two wreaths were from the RAF. As this was early in the war, a spirit of chivalry existed to some degree between the two opposing air forces. The airman was given a military funeral by the Luftwaffe.

Portugal to feed the black market. The records were a never-ending joy to me and my fellow prisoners and were loaned to other parts of the camp. They must have been played thousands of times. Sadly, towards the end of the war when I was on the march I had to discard them as I wasn't strong enough to carry the extra load.

Three months before Christmas 1941, we decided to brew our own alcoholic beverage. The Germans provided us with a wooden barrel and some yeast. All the men in our room pooled their sugar and dried fruit from the Red Cross parcels to get the fermentation going. After a while we ran out of sugar and then put just about anything into the barrel—turnip peelings, potato peelings, so long as it kept the mixture active. The room smelled like a brewery and by Christmas we had about two litres per man. It was dynamite. Everyone had a monumental headache the next day and two prisoners were blind for over twenty-four hours. However, we saw the world through rose-tinted glasses for a while on Christmas day and sang the old servicemen's songs with gusto.

Early in 1942 a typhus epidemic struck the area. We were fortunate in our camp. The Geneva Red Cross supplied us with the necessary vaccine and all of us were innoculated. When a bottle of vaccine was opened, a German guard was innoculated first. This was to be sure we weren't being given a lethal liquid. In those days we were all innoculated with the same needle. They just kept on filling up the syringe until the needle got too blunt and had to be replaced.

A nearby Russian camp was not so lucky. Out of a population of 11,000 prisoners, only 900 survived the epidemic. Some Russians had been brought to our camp for delousing. Typhus is caused by body lice. Shortly after they left we went over to the shower which was part of the delousing unit. I was taking my clothes off and hanging them on a peg in the corner above what appeared to be a pile of sacking, when the sacks slipped under my foot and I was looking at a dead Russian. I quickly vacated the spot for the lice would be looking for someone warm to hop onto, which was me. He had obviously collapsed and died in the

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dressing room, and to save time, as it was getting dark, the guards covered him up and escorted us to the showers.

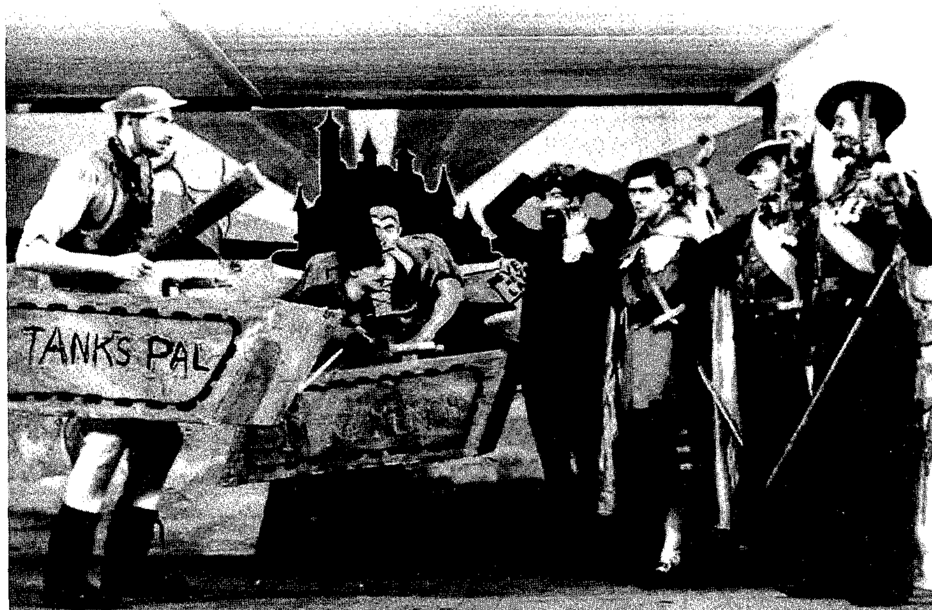
I was transported to Stalag luft 3 by boxcar in April 1942, sixty prisoners to one car. The car was divided into three sections by means of barbed wire. The two guards were in the centre section separated from the prisoners by barbed wire. Conditions were very cramped and primitive. After a couple of days confined in this manner it was quite a relief to reach our destination and stretch our legs.

Stalag luft 3 was a new camp in Silesia, Poland. The Great Escape occurred at this camp. I worked on three tunnels; one from the recreation compound, one from a garden and one from a newly-built latrine. Fortunately this facility had not been used when we commenced construction of the tunnel. To our disappointment all of these tunnels were discovered before completion.

We left Stalag luft 3 for Heydekrug, near Lithuania, in June 1943. There was a terrible food shortage at this camp. Daily rations were one-tenth of a loaf of black bread, three potatoes and ersatz coffee. Sometimes we were given a small amount of sugar and margarine. Some of us would line up outside the cookhouse window, starting at 8 a.m. and wait for the potato and turnip peelings to be thrown out at 11 a.m. This was in the winter when the temperature could plummet to -40 degrees.

At Heydekrug, there was an explosion of the rat population. They would crawl over your blanket and nibble at your feet and hair. These creatures were extremely bold and dangerous when cornered. We launched an all-out attack, seeing who could get the highest score and killed hundreds of them.

We had twelve cats in the camp and they all disappeared into the cooking pot. Hungry as I was, that particular stew had no appeal to me and I couldn't touch it.



A concert given by the prisoners of war at Stalag Luft 1, 1941.

The Gestapo were active at this camp, making frequent searches. They were the scum of the earth.

In September 1944, we were transported in boxcars to Fallingboestle Stalag 357, after a short stopover in Thorn, Poland. The Germans weren't satisfied with the treatment their soldiers were receiving in the Middle East at the hands of the British and decided to take reprisals at Stalag 357. Our mattresses were taken away. Some of us were left with only six bed boards, just enough to make a seat, so I slept sitting upright for at least three months. It was winter and the stone floor was too cold

to sleep on. Our rations were reduced and all reading material and playing cards were taken away. It was difficult to get through the twenty-four hours of each day. Some attempts at suicide were made. None was successful as there was always someone nearby to foil the attempt.

On the eighth of April 1945, Stalag 357 was evacuated and the prisoners marched off in columns of 500 men. The Germans wanted to keep us ahead of Montgomery's 21st Army Group. On April 19th our column was caught on an open road and mistaken for German troops. We were attacked by four fighter bombers, Typhoons, each equipped with rockets and cannons. A total of 32 rockets hit the column; then two cannon runs added to the carnage. At the time of the attack we were all lined up with five men in each row. This was to done to allow the guards to carry out a roll call. From the air we looked like a precision military column. The German army used to march five men to the row.

The first salvo of rockets struck when we were all standing. After that I crawled on my stomach between each salvo until I reached a tree on the side of the road. With my head against the tree and my shoulders in line with the trunk of the tree, I had a certain amount of protection except for a direct hit. After the first cannon run there was a lull of about thirty seconds, just enough time for me to plunge though a hedge into a field. Fifty yards into the field I noticed three Typhoons turning onto the road for another attack. The lead aircraft had overshot his turn and, unable to line up with the road, headed for the prisoners in the field. With no cover available, the chances of surviving this final run were pretty slim so I continued to stand up and wave my arms, similar to a wave often used by the navy when telling an aircraft to abandon its landing.

Holding my breath, I watched for the flashes of light which would indicate he had opened fire. None came. He was about fifteen to twenty feet off the ground when he swerved to one side of me. I could see him quite clearly. He was in shirt sleeves. He saluted and then made a steep climb, waggling his wings to indicate he understood the situation. The four aircraft then circled overhead for about five minutes, no doubt wishing they could communicate with us and offer some sort of apology.

When it is realized that one rocket can knock a heavy truck off the road, the casualty figures, although high, could have been much worse. Ninety-two were killed and two hundred seriously wounded. Fewer than one hundred escaped unscathed. I received only two small shrapnel wounds; one across the forehead, the other across a finger, although my overcoat had a big hole in it.

I was able to escape from the column shortly after this and accompanied by my good friend Buffy Jame attempted to walk south to reach the British lines which were easily identified by the gun flashes against the dark sky. We had to run for a ditch when some tanks moved towards us in the darkness but they passed us by about fifty yards.

We had got to within two hundred yards of the river Elbe, just south of Luneburg, when Buffy whispered, "Hold it, Dan," and pointed to the ground which had just been turned over. Only when the moon was not covered by cloud were these patches visible. We figured we were in a minefield. It took us some time to retrace our steps as we could only move when the moon gave sufficient light to avoid the turned over patches of earth. I've never experienced such tension before or since. Every move was a potential step into Eternity.

We were eventually recaptured and placed in the local mortuary for the night. We were given some straw to place on the cold stone slabs which formed our bed. During the night a lone aircraft, flying low over the village, dropped his bombs on the railway junction nearby. The mortuary shook and plaster fell from the ceiling.

We were marched out in the morning and saw that the damage to the railway line was considerable. At Luneburg another three prisoners joined us, making a total of five. From here we set out on a march to Lubeck forty-eight miles away, accompanied by two guards. Allied aircraft were out in full force,

shooting at anything that moved, so we travelled using the trees for cover whenever possible. At one point we had to leave the tree- lined road and proceed across an open field. Within a minute three Lightning fighter-bombers were wheeling in for a low level attack. Throwing off our back packs we sprinted for the nearest hedgerow. My overcoat was very long, causing me to stumble and fall flat on my face. As I did so the bullets hit the ground just ahead of me. We all made it to the hedgerow which provided the necessary cover and the attack was abandoned. I began to wonder if I should ever get home.

I was liberated at Lubeck by a unit of the Eighth Army attached to Montgomery's 21st Army Group and returned home on the 10th of May, 1945 after nearly five years as a prisoner of war. Shortly after my arrival, my wife and I decided to have a second honeymoon in the English Lake District. With the money she had saved up for my eventual homecoming and my back pay, we bought a house there. I was a little over eighty pounds when I landed in England. However, the care and attention my wife lavished on me soon restored me to full health, both physically and emotionally.

CMH is grateful to the Bruce County Historical Society for permission to print this account, which originally appeared in their 1991 yearbook.

Andrew "Danny" Cox was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia and enlisted in the RAF in 1936 at age 16 as a boy entrant for training as a radio operator (aircrew).

He was on active duty from the first day of the war and after one year and six days of operational flying was shot down over Germany. He was presented the Distinguished Flying Medal by King George VI in 1945.

In 1958, Mr. Cox returned to Canada following 22 years of aircrew service in the RAF. Mr. Cox is currently seeking to publish a book on his wartime experiences entitled *A Breed Apart.*