Relief Amid Chaos
The Story of Canadian POWs
Driving Red Cross Trucks

Hugh A. Halliday

Early in 1945 Germany was falling apart. While the Allies could taste victory (still to be won at a heavy price), there was concern for the thousands of prisoners still in enemy hands. Bombing had shattered the German rail system, which carried foodstuffs for POWs as well as munitions for their captors. One consignment of Red Cross parcels, intended for rail shipment in September 1944, did not leave Switzerland until November and only reached its destination in the latter half of February. The POW situation was made worse in January as the Germans inexplicably uprooted their prisoners in the eastern Reich and force-marched them westwards. This affected about 30 percent of all Allied captives.

The Allies had anticipated these problems. Late in 1944 nearly 300 vehicles were made available to the International Red Cross via France and Switzerland to relay supplies into Germany; 50 were provided by the Canadian Red Cross. To their credit, German authorities cooperated as much as possible, but they could not halt the air raids or guarantee the safety of road convoys. The POW columns themselves were mixed in with flows of refugees, and the German officers were themselves confused by changing orders as to routes and destinations. Trucks painted white with Red Cross markings would still be virtually invisible to medium bombers flying at 8,000 feet.

The situation had reached a crisis point in March 1945. The International Red Cross doubled its efforts, using railway stock borrowed from liberated France and Belgium. On 6 March, a 50-car train left Switzerland, heading for Buchs in southern Germany. It required 43 hours and ten minutes to cover 330 kilometres at an average speed of 7.7 kmh. Ultimately, the train reached Stalag VII-A, Moosburg, southeast of Munich, and one of the largest centres for Canadian Army POWs.

The Camp Commandant had been unprepared for its arrival and had no idea where to store the estimated 93,300 food parcels. The prisoners themselves rapidly unloaded the train. Most of the parcels were transferred to Red Cross trucks; 3,000 parcels (ten tons) were retained as a depot.

This depot (which was restocked by trains on 28 March and 12 April) was then placed under a double guard; 16 Allied soldiers watched the provisions while a German detail watched them. Access to the depot was with two keys – one kept by the Camp Commandant, the other by the prisoners’ “Man of Confidence.” However, the final distribution to isolated or marching captives would be effected by Allied trucks in Red Cross paint. Trains that were intended for other locations were eventually rerouted to Moosburg as the German railway net became ever more chaotic.

The International Red Cross (IRC) took considerable (and justifiable) pride in its work, and subsequently reported extensively on the relief operation. However, it overstated its case in one respect. In its published accounts, only Swiss nationals were mentioned as drivers. What the International Red Cross failed to mention was that a substantial number of drivers and mechanics were Allied prisoners of war.

Chief among these was Regimental Sergeant-Major Harry H. Stinson (Lanark and Renfrew Scottish). Subsequent reconstruction of events...
was unclear on many points, but it appears to have been the principal organizer among the POW drivers. It was Stinson who screened applicants, sent men under guard to the Swiss border for purposes of accepting vehicles, arranged to have them serviced in the German compound at Moosburg, and generally marshalled the relief convoys that subsequently fanned out across Germany.1

As the relief train pulled into Moosburg, an IRC official (presumably accompanied by Stinson) visited Stalag VII-A and asked for 12 volunteers to drive trucks in search of POWs on the move or in marooned columns. There was no shortage of applicants, among them Company Sergeant-Major Walter F. Moss (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada) who virtually became Stinson’s second-in-command. On 8 March, they met Mr. Paul de Blonay, a Swiss IRC official, who explained the project in greater detail. At a time when German rail travel was barely possible, they were taken to Lubeck, on the Baltic coast, where a further 30 Canadians and 22 American prisoners were recruited, together with eight “Men of Confidence” who had arrived to draw rations for distant camps. The group then recrossed Germany – by train – to Constance, on the Swiss-German border, where they took delivery of 50 GMC and Chevrolet trucks. At that point they could easily have escaped captivity by crossing into Switzerland, but they had given their word not to do so. Ultimately, an estimated 85 to 90 prisoners participated in the task, drawn almost equally from American and Canadian compounds, but including two British captives, one of whom was expert in first aid and the other serving as an interpreter.

About two weeks after the trucks began rolling, Red Cross officials asked Sergeant-Major Stinson to divert about 15 vehicles to the Berlin area. He assigned Sergeant-Major Moss to head up this convoy which plunged into the most deadly and confused of all the closing battles. Although both men survived the war, they did not meet again during the war.

These operations were as peculiar as they were dangerous. The vehicles proceeded in groups of ten to 15 at a time, with a few Swiss drivers and guards frequently dove for shelter as Allied aircraft attacked the convoys; in one such raid, four trucks were destroyed, two severely damaged, an American driver killed and two Canadians wounded.

Above: A group of Canadian POW drivers, Swiss escorts and German guards mix while a truck is unloaded west of Berlin, April 1945. Below: A convoy of white Red Cross trucks carrying relief for prisoners of war and interned civilians leaves for Germany in March 1945.

personnel as well as Canadians. A scout (usually an IRC official, sometimes a German soldier) explored ahead by car or motorcycle, finding the POW columns. Once a group had been found, each marcher was given a parcel containing about five days’ emergency provisions. Limited supplies of soap and boot repair kits were also dropped off. Hopefully, after five days, the column would be overtaken by another convoy. Somewhere between 14,000 and 18,000 POWs were contacted during these drives.

Each truck was accompanied by a German guard. All Swiss and POW drivers carried a permit issued by a senior SS officer (and countersigned by an IRC delegate) which declared the trucks and their loads to be “the property of the International Red Cross at Geneva.” To add bite, the document stated that anyone attempting to requisition the vehicles would be in breach of both international and military law and would be tried by a German military court. These certificates saved the day on several (though not all) occasions. SS troops highjacked one truck and stole part of the load from another.

There were other hazards. In searching for marching columns, the trucks came within range of German and Allied artillery fire, especially close to Berlin where the “front” was extremely fluid.

One driver actually found himself two miles in the rear of the Russian army. Drivers and guards frequently dove for shelter as Allied aircraft attacked the convoys; in one such raid, four trucks were destroyed, two severely damaged, an American driver killed and two Canadians wounded.

Group Captain L.E. Wray, AFC, witnessed much of their work. A prisoner himself from March 1944 onwards, he was held in Stalag Luft III and participated in the forced POW marches of 1945. He was impressed by the drivers’ courage in what amounted to battlefield conditions, writing, “I have seen these drivers bring in trucks that were so shot up that it appeared only a miracle that the driver was alive.” No less moving was their fortitude, as described by Wray:

I might mention one instance that was typical of their devotion to their task. This driver reached us with a full load of food at approximately 2300 hours and after getting out of the truck, it was noticed that he was acting in an unusual manner. I engaged him in conversation and found that he was so
drove 48 hours at a stretch, ate on the move, drivers had to face hungry, hostile civilians. They was on the road again in five hours.5

fed and bedded down on straw in one of our aircraft were continually operating. I had him conditions and all of it in an area where strafing for forty hours without sleep and very little food; the POW s-turned-Battle hazards aside, the POW s-turned-

He had been driving the ten-ton truck steadily over to Swiss Red Cross drivers and departed. Below left: A group of Swiss drivers gather outside a relief truck.

exhausted that he was on the verge of collapse. He had been driving the ten-ton truck steadily for forty hours without sleep and very little food; part of this time in complete black-out conditions and all of it in an area where strafing aircraft were continually operating. I had him fed and bedded down on straw in one of our barn billets, and yet, despite his condition, he was on the road again in five hours.6

Battle hazards aside, the POWs-turned-drivers had to face hungry, hostile civilians. They drove 48 hours at a stretch, ate on the move, cannibalised derelict trucks to keep the others moving, and periodically dropped from exhaustion. One document declared:

The initiative and mechanical ingenuity demonstrated by this group in serving and rebuilding trucks from others shot up to a point of wreckage, is only exceeded by the bravery shown by daring to drive under such perilous conditions.9

Sergeant-Major Moss showed extraordinary courage when, with the help of an IRC official, he spirited nearly 800 concentration camp inmates ("human wrecks" in one report) away from under the nose of the SS, put them aboard 16 trucks, transferred them to Swedish ships, and got them safely away.7

British troops liberated Lubeck on 2 May 1945, but the relief road convoys continued for another six days. Then, the former Canadian and American POWs turned their surviving vehicles over to Swiss Red Cross drivers and departed.

The courage and contributions of these drivers might not have received recognition save for Group Captain Wray. In late August or early September 1945 he submitted a report on their actions. He described or confirmed several of the incidents already mentioned; phrases like "outstanding work" and "amazing record" ran through his text. Wray initially could recall no specific names, although he recalled the senior NCO as "a Company Sergeant-Major from Winnipeg" (Moss). He concluded his report by declaring:

The story of Canadian POWs driving Red Cross trucks has been told before, notably in Daniel G. Dankoecs In Enemy Hands (Hurtig Publications, 1983) which includes Cecil Cook's recollections. Nevertheless, it bears periodic recounting, lest it be submerged in the mass of literature generated by the Second World War.

Notes

1. The "Man of Confidence" was a prisoner, chosen by his comrades, who had direct access to IRC officials; he was assumed to be trained by both captors and captives alike. See "Les hommes de confiance," Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge, January 1943, pp.59-63.


4. Identified in newspaper accounts as "Private Charles Smith of Manitoba," this may have been Gunner Lawrence Smith.

5. Undated report of Group Captain L.E. Wray found in volume 7 of Canadian Army file 54-27-94-32, "Honours and Awards - Northwest Europe," NAC RG24, Volume 2248. Wray himself was later awarded an OBE for leadership and concern for fellow prisoners during his captivity.

6. From the MBE citation of Company Sergeant-Major F.D. McMullen.


8. Wray report.

Hugh Halliday, a regular contributor to CMH, has written numerous books on Canadian military history. His most recent, NOT IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY: CANADIANS AWARDED THE AIR FORCE CROSS AND AIR FORCE MEDAL, 1918-1966 was published in 2000 by Robin Brass Studios <www.rbstudiosbooks.com/>
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Regret deeply...”
The Second World War Experiences of Bill and Fred Tucker

Angela Fritz
Over a million Canadians wore a uniform in the fight against Hitler's Germany. The Tucker family of Kitchener, Ontario sent two brothers, Bill and Fred, to aid in this cause. Only one returned.

In May 1941, Bill Tucker enlisted in the Canadian army. He had already seen many of his neighbours and friends board the train for various destinations and he had mixed feelings when he left for basic training. It was the first time he had left his hometown and he was excited at the prospect of traveling across Canada. On the other hand, he was leaving behind a family that needed him. His father died two years before leaving behind eight children, and many household responsibilities rested on his shoulders.

Bill was serving with the Fusiliers when his brother Fred, who was one and a half years younger than Bill, came of enlistment age. They thought it would be great if the brothers could be together. Bill talked to his officers and found Fred a position as a clerk. Bill thought that this would be a nice 'safe' office job for Fred. Both Tucker boys were thrilled to be together again, and Bill could keep better watch over his 'kid brother' Corporal Fred Tucker.

Though Fred appreciated having his older brother there to show him the ropes, Bill was not the best role model. He did not see the importance of shiny buttons, polished boots and other regulations that were, in his eyes, only in place to bolster the egos of commanding officers. As a result Bill was often punished with tasks such as peeling potatoes, washing the floor in the mess hall, or being restricted to barracks. Above all, Bill had the most difficulty with being Absent Without Leave (AWOL).

Bill loved his family very much, and when he was granted a few days leave he would always go home. But a couple of days with his family often turned into a week or more. He didn't care if he was going to be in trouble when he went back, his philosophy was, "What are they going to do? Fire me?" A little extra time with his family was more important to him than a tongue lashing.

February. The boys’ mother wrote to the army Director of Records to find out more. His assurances did little to calm her worries and did not relax until she received a letter from Bill.

The family received an optimistic letter from younger brother Fred in late April. It was dated 10 April 1945 “Somewhere in Belgium.” Fred’s first thoughts were for his brother Bill who he hadn’t heard from in almost two months. Fred reported:

I wrote him (Bill) several letters and told him I thought it would be O.K. for us to get together again, now that it looks like the war is on its last days. At least we’d be sure of getting back to Canada together which would be a lot nicer than if we both arrived home separately... Surely this war can’t last much longer. Canada’s armies are completely shattered and there’s really very little to stop the Allies. It’s funny they intend to fight to the end. They’d sure save themselves a lot of grief to give in now. Sooner or later you’ll see them crack. It’s amazing the way they stood up to it as long as they have. I shouldn’t be long anymore before we’re sailing back to Canada and believe me if I can help it that will be my last boat ride.

Less than one month after Fred Tucker wrote this letter, the war in Europe was over. For Bill Tucker, the great relief and joy was highlighted by the Seaforths’ trek to Amsterdam. As the Regiment reached the edge of the city they were totally unprepared for what they were about to witness. People poured into the streets to celebrate their freedom and thank the Canadians. Women kissed them in the streets and said in their broken English “Thank You, Canadian Heroes!” Children hugged them and asked for “chokolat,” which all of the soldiers had in their packs.

The celebrations were short-lived. Just weeks after the war ended, Bill received a letter from his mother. It said that she had been sent a telegram informing her that Fred had been killed in action. She asked if he would try to find his grave and represent the family. Bill couldn’t believe it. He had last heard from Fred just weeks before, still safe and far from the front. Bill was determined to find his brother and write his mother telling her it was all a big mistake and that Fred was fine. He explained the situation to his Commanding Officer who allowed him to leave in search of his brother.

Bill headed north towards Wirdum, where his mother said Fred was temporarily buried.

On his way there he ran into someone he knew from Kitchener who had served with the Perths. The soldier told Bill that he was very sorry but Fred had been killed. Bill asked him how he knew that, and the man said that he was with him when he died. The soldier then led him to the farm where they had been. He told Bill that Fred was standing in front of a window in the barn when he was shot. Fred crumpled to the ground and the other soldier grabbed him and asked him if he was O.K. Fred replied “Ya, I’m fine” and then he died. Fred Tucker died on Sunday, 29 April 1945, five days before the end of hostilities. He was just 23 years old.

The Tucker family was devastated by Fred’s death. Bill never figured out why Fred, a clerk through most of the war, was involved in the fighting at all. Mrs. Tucker requested that Bill return home. Bill was granted an early discharge on compassionate grounds. On 2 November 1945, Bill Tucker returned to civilian life.

Bill Tucker earned the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, and the Italy Star during his hard fought efforts in the Second World War. He understood the importance of the war and shuddered to think about how things would have been if the Germans had won. In his lifetime, Bill made sure that he instilled in his children and grandchildren the importance of family, and the values of teamwork and helping others in need. He learned how quickly life can change and he savored every moment with the ones he loved. He knew first hand the horrors and
devastation that the war caused, and prayed that the atrocities that he witnessed would never again become a reality.

The people of Holland have never forgotten the brave Canadians who liberated their war torn country. In 1990 and again in 1995, Bill Tucker returned to the Netherlands with his wife Mary and sisters Rita, Mildred and Marie and her husband Noble to celebrate and remember. They were greeted with Canadian flags everywhere and banners hanging in the streets saying ‘Welcome Canadian Heroes!’ Strangers stopped veterans in the streets to shake their hand and say thank you. Bill always had a soft spot for the Dutch people because they were so good to him and because they wholeheartedly appreciated the help the Canadians gave when they needed it most. That bond must have been some consolation when Bill and his sisters visited their brother Fred’s grave in the quiet woods of Holten Canadian Military Cemetery.

Angela Fritz graduated with a BA in History from the University of Waterloo in 2001, with a particular interest in the Second World War. She wrote this article about her Grandfather and Great Uncle Fred to preserve this piece of her family history for future generations. Angela says, “I am very greatful to have heard these stories first hand from my Grandpa, and want to make sure that his story is never lost.”