

“Dieppe” and my POW experiences

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We left Portsmouth Harbour, England on August 18, 1942, on a tank landing craft, under cover of darkness. On board was a 45 Ton Churchill tank, a naval gun on the deck above us, our platoon #9, A Company, Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, Toronto Scottish heavy machine gunners, engineers, support troops, and of course, naval personnel.

We crossed the channel during the night, and arrived offshore around dawn. We were greeted by heavy enemy fire, and were hit many times, especially the naval gun above us, and also the machine gunners, who suffered many casualties. Murray Bleeman, next to me, was hit in the head and killed. Tommy Howe and I attended to him as best we could. Our boat hit the beach, and down went the door. The tank went out first, and the men after. We went through wire, and I got caught, but eventually got free.

The Germans had raised the beach so that we were in the direct line of fire crossing the wire. We headed for the seawall, and took shelter there. I don't know what our casualties were, as I was late getting through, and lost my section. The beach was covered with stone, and the tanks threw their tracks and were mired on the beach. They acted as fill boxes and protected us to some extent. We were pretty well pinned down, under heavy mortar and artillery fire. Above the seawall was a wide promenade, and facing the promenade, buildings, which were full of machine gunners.

You didn't dare look over the seawall, as you would've been fair game for snipers. Boats had a tough time getting in, and a worse time getting out. A lot of them were hit on the way out. I'm sure that the Germans had everything ranged. They were very accurate with their fire. They would hit a boat, you would see heads bobbing around, then nothing. A large German bomber came over and bombed the boats. The tide came in and washed a lot of bodies into shore, and the water was red along the beach, a terrible sight. Some of the mortar and artillery fire sounded like an express train going through. It was pretty scary and I said many a prayer that day. We didn't have much of a chance, with about 65 miles of water on one side, and machine guns and artillery fire on the other.

We got word to evacuate to a T.L.C. on the beach. I crossed the beach to the boat, seeing a lot of people and few boats. The tide coming in squeezed all of us into a smaller area. The Germans were firing away, and the casualties were heavy. I went back and holed up behind a tank. Things were hopeless, and the flag finally went up. If it hadn't, we would have all been killed, I'm sure, as the Germans were just above the seawall.

It had lasted a long nine hours.

We were marched off the beach, and had to dump our ammunition. I felt in my tunic, and had a grenade in my pocket. I thought I was going to be shot for sure. The Germans looked, and nearly flipped, when I threw it on the pile. I met a priest on the way to the

hospital, gave him some money I had, and asked him to pray for us. I doubted that he knew what I had said, but he took the money.

Another fellow from my platoon, Fred Engelbrecht, and I helped a wounded soldier up to the hospital. I met Bill Bridgewater from my company, at the hospital. He was wounded in the face. All of the seriously wounded were left at the hospital, and the rest of us, were marched out of Dieppe. We went through a lot of villages, and there were a lot of tears shed on our behalf. The villagers tried to feed us, but the Germans chased them away.

We finally arrived at a place called Envermeau. We were put in a large factory, and were given black bread and ersatz tea. (mint). We bedded down for the night on a cinder floor. I understood that our guards were Hitler Youth. I don't remember anything until the next morning. We were roused out early, and again marched through many small places. Many of the French villagers gave us the victory sign. We eventually reached a place called Verneulles, which was a holding camp and an interrogation centre. It was very crowded and not very comfortable. I remember the first night, you grabbed whatever place you could find, and it stank to high heavens. We were there for some time, and I don't remember too much about it.

On August 29, 1942, we were loaded into train boxcars, given a loaf of bread, some water, and a bucket for a latrine. It was crowded, hot, and not very comfortable. You could not lie down. There was a small window with barbed wire, in each end of the car. We were four days in it, through France, Belgium, part of Holland, through the Ruhr valley to Stalag VIII B, Lamsdorf, near Breslau, Germany between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Through Belgium, people tried to give us food, but were, again, chased away. On the side of our train they had written, "The Second Front".

We marched into Stalag VIII B, and put on a bit of a show for the Germans. There was a huge Swastika flying over the camp. This camp was British, and home base for about 25,000 P.O.W.'s. The Brits cheered us as we marched through the gates. A lot of fellows had dysentery when we arrived. It was tough for some time, but we survived. The Brits were good to us, and made life bearable. I'll never forget the cup of tea they gave us, on our arrival. It was like "Manna from heaven". This was from their own parcels, and was real tea.

We had arrived there on September 3, 1942. Our N.C.O.'s got us organized, and we settled in. One day, after we had been in camp for some time, German troops marched into our compound. They set up machine guns, put us into groups of twenty, and marched us into the huts. We thought that they were going to shoot us, but instead, tied our wrists with Red Cross rope. Later that night, they got us up, and untied our hands.

After that, we were tied up from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. everyday for the next two months. We were then chained up for the next year. If you got caught with your chains off, you were punished by having to stand with your boots and nose against the wall for two hours. (Our people found a way to open the chain locks; a key from a sardine can). The reason given for this was that they had found the remains of some of their captured troops with their hands tied. They were killed, with some of our boys, on boats that were sunk by German fire.

We weren't sent out on work parties at this camp. This was a British camp. There were British, New Zealand, Australian, South African, Indian, Palestinian and of course Canadian troops at this camp. There was lots of talented people in these camps; artists, musicians, actors, tailors, who made clothes, (and uniforms for escapees) and reputedly, forgers and thieves; a lot of ingenious people.

Our German rations consisted of black bread, potatoes, tur nip, bed board soup, fish cakes, very little meat, ersatz jam, so called tea (mint), and coffee made out of chicory and roasted barley. We got Red Cross parcels sometimes, but you couldn't depend on them. We had some hungry times.

Our compound had four long buildings with an "A" and "B" end, with about 140 prisoners in each end. Washing facilities, which looked like horse troughs, were in the middle of each building. In each building were bunks, a stove, tables and benches. On the bunks were bed boards with a palliasse (straw mattresses). We got one blanket each.

The camp was surrounded by a high double wire fence, with barbed wire in the middle. There were guard boxes all around the camp. There was a low warning wire inside the fence. If you touched that wire, the guards would shoot you. In the camp, there was a hospital, jail, fire department, cookhouses, bakeshop, soup kitchens, showers, and gardens, outhouses, and lots of roads. All were looked after by P.O.W.'s, except the jail, hospital and administration. Each compound was separate, and locked, sometimes opened, but not very often.

There were fields for sports, but they were not always available. We got sporting goods from the Red Cross. In the equipment, were hidden maps and compasses, which were used by the escape committee, for the escapees. They said that there were approximately 10,000 prisoners on the loose from all the camps. Two tunnels were dug in our compound, but the first one was discovered. The second one was successful. About 40 people escaped and most were caught, but we heard a couple made it to Sweden. The German Commandant was quite impressed. The tunnel was very exclusive, and only people with the proper credentials could use it. All hell broke loose when they found that people were missing.

The tunnels were dug by our Canadian engineers. They rigged up lights, and blowers, to pump air into the tunnel. A lot of work and time was put into these projects.

You couldn't get out of your building after dark. We had a 40 "holer" in our compound (outside). The Germans would sometimes shut off the water and the lights - not very nice.

We had roll call every day outside in every kind of weather. We'd stand there forever it seemed, sometimes in a lot of mud. One time, one of our men disappeared, and after searching the compound, we found no trace of him. We suspected that he went over to the Germans. They tried to get us to join them and fight the Russians. They called it the St. George Brigade.

One day, one of our guys got hit in the head with a hardball. He went from bad to worse, and became quite belligerent. The Germans took him away, and the next thing we

knew, he was dead. It was quite a shock to us. He was a British commando, and a real nice chap. We felt pretty bad about that.

When we were hungry, we talked about food. When we had lots of food, the talk was about women. We had a great bunch of guys from all over Canada. Self-discipline was good, and I'm sure a lot of character was formed here.

We had little stoves called blowers that we did our cooking on. They were made out of tin cans, quite an ingenious gadget. For fuel, we burned bed boards, which was against the rules. I got caught one day, and got three days in jail, which meant bread and water, and no comforts of home. I was up before a German officer, who gave me a good tongue-lashing. I didn't know what he said, but it didn't sound very complimentary. The Germans used these tactics to scare you.

We got mail in bunches, with big lapses in between. The same with parcels, books, and comfort parcels. We got cigarettes from friends and organizations at home. All of this was very nice, and really boosted our morale. I got mail, books, and cigarettes from Mary. One of our chaps got a Dear John letter, from his girlfriend - he took it very hard.

Growing beards was very popular there, I grew one, and rather enjoyed it. I wish I had kept a diary in Stalag. I have forgotten so many things that happened there. I made a lot of new friends, but, unfortunately lost track of them later on.

We finally moved from Stalag VIII B, to Stalag IID, STARGARD-POMERANIA, which was about 25 miles from the Baltic Sea, across from Sweden, and the same distance from Stettin, a port on the Baltic. We left on January 25, 1944 and arrived IID on January 29, 1944. I was the only one with a beard when we arrived. I got orders to shave it off by the Germans, which I did, pronto. We did all kinds of farming jobs, including planting, hoeing, and grading potatoes. We were there about five days, when 30 of us were sent on a work party, to a place called Rensin. It was a large state potato farm, with a Nazi civilian in charge. We did all kinds of farming jobs, including planting, hoeing, and grading seed potatoes.

We had a few problems here. The Germans got a bit rough with the guys. One day, while planting potatoes, the Germans wanted more speed, and walked behind the boys with bayonets on their rifles. It didn't work, as the boys stuck together. It took a bit of courage, believe me. We also had a bed bug infestation one night. They sure knew how to bite. Our quarters were fumigated, and that took care of the bugs.

We got word of a Second Front here, and the next day after that, hundreds of American Flying Fortresses came over us. The German's fighters tried to get at them, but were held off by armed B29 Bombers. What a racket they made. At night, we heard the British and Canadian planes bombing Stettin, it was very loud and the ground was trembling. One day, the Gestapo called, and just about tore the place apart. They were evidently looking for maps and compasses. I don't know if they found anything.

We had some Poles working on the farm and living next to us. They took two of them away with them, a man and a woman, reputed to be brother and sister. God knows what happened to them, but we suspected the worst. If any of their people got caught out of their area, they were hung at a crossroad as a warning.

The Germans didn't like the way we worked, so we were replaced by some Italians. We were sent to a sawmill at Plathe, on June 24, 1944. We made rough lumber, peeled logs, etc. While here, a couple of our guys escaped. We never had what happened to them. It was a dangerous time to be on the loose. The Germans were getting nervous, as the Russians were coming from the east. We weren't getting much food at this time. We lived on potatoes, but they didn't stay with you for long. One day, our Padre, Major John Foote, visited us. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery at Dieppe - a great and good man. I will never forget his message and prayers. I felt very close to the Lord that day.

Everything in Germany had pretty well ground to a halt at this time. We finally got word to leave for the west. The Germans confiscated our cigarettes, except for a couple packs each. We packed what we could carry, and dressed warmly, took a blanket each, and on February 25, 1945, we headed out. It wasn't too warm. We marched toward Stettin, but before crossing the bridge, we met some German troops going east toward the Russians. They looked like boys 15-16 years old, and very scared. I felt sorry for them. We could hear the Russian guns in the distance. We marched all day, every day, and stayed over on farms at night. We didn't get much food from the Germans, and scrounged and stole what we could. The Germans hollered loud and long. We ran into other groups from the east, crossed the Oder and Elbe rivers, went past Rostock, a port on the Baltic, around Berlin, past Hamburg and Bremen. We finally crossed the Elbe River again near Brunswick, headed south and all the roads were packed with P.O.W.'s. Some columns were strafed by our own planes, with some casualties. We bumped into the Russians, gave them what we could, and they gave us lice - not a good experience. They were in very bad shape, wore rags, and some had no shoes. We couldn't do much for them, as we had to move on.

One night, a German guard asked me for a good conduct pass. I refused, and sent him to an Essex Scottish corporal. I don't know how he made out, but I suspect not very well.

Finally, our guards got the wind up, and took off. We all took off in different directions. Three of us got together and went looking for food and a place to sleep that night. We got fed in one house. I'll never forget the woman giving me a blast, because I used marge and treacle on my bread. We slept in the barn that night, and the next day, hooked up with some of our boys. We got into groups of about 30 men, and spread out, so that we could take shelter if attacked. We got word of President Roosevelt's death as we marched, quite depressing news. We finally ran into the American 9th Army, moving up the Elbe River. We spotted an American tank at a crossroad. What a welcome sight it was, with handshakes and cigarettes all around. This was on April 21, 1945, and we had been on the march for two months. We were taken to a staging area, fed, and then taken by transport (American) to a large airport about two hours from our staging area. We passed through a lot of Dorfs, with all kinds of white flags in the windows. We passed a large group of Negro soldiers, heading to the Elbe River. When we got to the airport, we were pretty much on our own. We got lots of American K-rations. They weren't supposed to give us too much food. A few of us went to the Cookhouse, and got a pretty good feed. The cooks were American Negroes, and they were very good to us. This was a large airport, and the planes were flying the P.O.W.'s back to England on a shuttle service. We were there for three days. On the third day, at 9:00 pm at night, 25 of us were loaded on a Dakota plane, and flown back to England, and we arrived about midnight, north of London.

On our plane, was a mixed bag - Aussies, Indians, South Africans, and Canadians. We were deloused, fed, and taken to our home camps. We had a British sergeant in charge of us, and he was great.

I must mention that when we hit the coast of England, all the lights were on - what a beautiful sight. We were allowed to send a cable to our parents, and I sent a telegram to my fiancée in Aberdeen.

So ends my story of Dieppe, and my P.O.W. experience. I was married in Aberdeen, Scotland, on July 6, 1945. I arrived home in September, 1945, and my wife arrived in the spring of 1946.

I would like to pay tribute to the Paris boys killed at Dieppe. I will give their names and ages:

ALF GIBBONS - 18 YEARS

BILL PRINE - 23 YEARS

HARRY GIBBONS - 21 YEARS

BILL SHARPE - 22 YEARS

GEORGE CRUIKSHANK - 22 YEARS

HARRY PILLEY - 22 YEARS

Two others, TEDDY JENNER, 24, and GERALD ARTHRELL, 26, got back from Dieppe, and were killed in France, in 1944. We should never forget their sacrifice. Our flyers, sailors, and soldiers were put in some terrible situations, and paid a heavy price in killed and wounded. Remember, we were all volunteers, and were very proud to serve our country.