

# BARBED WIRE MEMORIES

KINGSLEY BROWN\*

## I

UNLIKE most veterans from overseas I have extremely few souvenirs. I have no Leica camera, no P-38 automatic pistol, no pieces of Dresden china or jolly German beer steins. As a matter of fact I have only two souvenirs of any significance at all. One is a metal plate stamped with a number. The other is a piece of white cardboard. It carries a photograph of myself, looking rather tired and dirty, my fingerprints and, in addition to some other routine information, the same number as that stamped on the metal plate.

These two souvenirs served to identify me during the three years I spent as a prisoner-of-war in Germany. Every once in a while I take them out of the bureau drawer where I keep them, sit down on the edge of the bed and look at them. Each time I take them out I handle them more carefully, more fondly. For I find that they make me very happy, a thing I could never have believed possible of them in the days when I wore the metal plate on a string about my neck while an endless succession of dawns and sunsets cast upon us only the shadow of barbed wire.

They make me happy, I have found, because they are the only tangible link I have with the finest hours of my life. They stir in me to-day a feeling of genuine gratitude for those grim, grayish years in which I saw the Spirit of Man at its radiant best, saw it triumph over every material limitation, over death itself. They make me humbly thankful, not that I was spared to survive the experience, but that I was granted the privilege of having it—and enjoying it.

To say that I enjoyed my three years as a prisoner-of-war will naturally invite the suspicion that I am exaggerating in retrospect, but it is true. This doesn't mean that there weren't many dark days when I was very miserable indeed, both physically and spiritually. Dirt and monotony, hunger and uncertainty, humiliations and indignities comprised a not very picturesque back-drop to the drama of prison life; yet I find that while I recall eagerly every line of the drama, I have almost forgotten the sordid hues of the scenery. Perhaps it is better that way. Even in the filthiest, most over-crowded prison camps life can be beautiful, and it is the beauty one should remember most.

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In those three years it was given to me to know my fellow human beings, friend and foe alike, as I had never known them before. A prison camp, like Death, is a great leveller. Once a man has been ushered roughly through those barbed wire gates he becomes part of a unique society in which there is neither wealth nor property, where a man is judged not by what he has or by his ability to get, but solely by the Christian yardstick of what of himself he can give to the community about him.

Nowhere but in such an environment can a man really get to know his fellows for what they truly represent. To confound the cynics—and previous to my imprisonment I was notoriously of their number—I can assure them that nine out of ten of their fellow men are genuinely noble creatures, although the cynics will probably reply that a prison camp is no place to judge—a view that may or may not be true.

If prison camp society is to be compared with anything at all it might best be described as a "civilization" in itself. Like the civilization of the Toynbee concept it is a homogeneous group facing a distinct and pressing challenge, or rather a whole series of challenges, and it is the response to these challenges that determines the character and vitality of the civilization. Prison camp society as I found it responded to all its challenges with a vigor, flexibility and verve that must have amazed the captor as much as it did the captive, and must have given an indelible cast to the personal character of all who shared the experience.

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## II

The primary challenge to our society was, of course, the enemy about our gates, and to this pressure we responded with an equal pressure from within. The enemy might deprive us of our arms, but it was impossible to deprive thousands of men living in a single community, of a militant organization still capable of striking not insignificant blows for the cause in which they had enlisted. The work of harassing the enemy from within held top priority in the activities of the camp. From his first day as a prisoner the captive was given to understand that his usefulness to his country, far from being ended, had perhaps only just begun.

Escape activities were the principal means of striking at the enemy. Few civilians I have ever met, or even a majority of service personnel, appear to estimate correctly the tremend-

ous value of escape work in tying down enemy forces that otherwise might have been deployed to more active duties on the front.

To give an instance, the escape of a single American prisoner from our camp at Sagan, in Lower Silesia, in the autumn of 1942 resulted directly in a sweeping change in the security system at all prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. The new sentry system required the services of an additional 12,000 German troops. By his single-handed effort that young American pilot, one of the RAF's Eagle Squadron, pinned down for the remainder of the war the equivalent of an entire division of enemy troops.

Two mass escapes from the same camp, one in the fall of 1943 and the other in March of 1944—the tragic Sagan tunnel escape, following which fifty of our number were shot by the Gestapo—both resulted in an almost incredible snarling of rail and road traffic throughout Germany after near-hysterical Nazi security authorities clamped down a rigid road-block net over the entire country in an effort to round up the missing officers.

Only a tiny percentage of prisoners who succeeded in breaking loose from their compounds ever reached home. Nine out of ten were picked up within a few days or at the most a few weeks. Some were shot on recapture; others simply vanished and have never been heard from since. Most served a term of solitary confinement and then returned to their camps. But the value of the escape efforts was out of all proportion to the scant number who succeeded in getting home and rejoining their units.

For those fortunate enough to have received the camp organization's authority to attempt an escape, and then to have succeeded in breaking loose from the compound the subsequent drama was a thrilling adventure never to be forgotten. Quite apart from its service aspect as a duty, escaping had all the exhilarating verve of a spine-tingling sport. It was a sport that I tried for myself.

I was accompanied by Flight Lieutenant Gordon Brettell, a gallant young English fighter pilot who was later executed by the Gestapo in a subsequent escape attempt.

We took leave of Stalag Luft 3 on the night of 27 March, 1943, and headed for the French frontier. We had been equipped by the organization with civilian clothes, passports identifying us as Bulgarian steelworkers travelling on a transfer from one

steel plant to another, plenty of German currency and the memorized addresses of two members of the French Resistance. One was a hotelkeeper in Mulhausen; the other a Sister in a Roman Catholic hospital at Strasbourg.

I have never known the pure sweet joy of living, tempered so deliciously by the sense of danger, as during the four days between our escape and our recapture.

The first night, steering by stars and compass, we made a sly back-tracking circuit through heavily wooded country to the south of the camp. The night was sharp and clear, and the straight giant German firs, in sharp silhouette against the starry sky, made us think of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, "The Babes in the Woods" and "The Magic Forest."

Twice we hid in the brush at the side of the narrow wood-hauling road while police patrols on bicycles wheeled quietly by. The quiet was broken only by the solemn rumbling of bombs somewhere far west of us.

After a further day and night spent traversing woodland or sometimes boldly walking on a secondary highway where German girls mischievously smiled at us from cottage doorways, we penetrated into the town of Sorau, found the railway station, bought ourselves third-class tickets and set off in comfort for Kottbus, some forty miles westward. Here we de-trained, made a meal of unrationed soup and beer at the station restaurant, and caught a later train for Leipzig.

An amusing incident occurred during this trip to Leipzig. Besides ourselves our compartment held some five or six German soldiers. Along the route we were joined by another boy from the Wehrmacht. This lad, instead of being dressed in the olive-green the others wore, was turned out in the smart sand-colored drill of the Afrika Korps and carried on his arm the brassard of the SS-Herman Goering Division.

Encouraged by the openly envious glances he received from the other "run-of-mine" soldiery, the lad from the Afrika Korps could not restrain himself from telling them all about himself and his famous division. Not content with describing their superlative equipment, he threw all caution to the winds and confided to them that his division, after resting up in garrison duty on the French Atlantic coast, had been ordered to Tunisia and that he was rejoining his unit at Rome.

Quite naturally Brettell and I were keenly interested in picking up this information about the disposition of enemy forces, but the thing that amused us was a big colored placard

plastered on the wall down one side of the compartment. The placard showed two soldiers chatting together in a railway train. By their side an evil-looking civilian, ostensibly buried in his newspaper, cocked a vastly over-developed ear in their direction. The caption of the poster read:

*Beware The Third Person! The Enemy Has Ears!*

"You know," said Brettell to me softly, while we rustled our newspaper in front of our faces, "I have a damned good mind to tap that lad on the knee, point to that sign and say: 'Be careful, old boy, for all you know we might be British officers'." It was probably just as well that he didn't! It was only a trifling incident, but I shall never need to be told again, in the unhappy circumstance of any future war, about the importance of keeping one's mouth shut. I know for myself just how close the enemy ears can be!

Recapture is as bitter as escape is sweet. Our freedom was ended at Chemnitz when we were tripped up by a routine police check at the railway station. Since we were in civilian clothes and travelling on forged papers we were not a little concerned over our possible fate when we were told we should be turned over to the Gestapo for interrogation. We had heard about Gestapo "interrogations" before. They were frequently of a highly permanent nature.

Our interview with the Gestapo boss of Chemnitz was the strangest surprise of all. Tommy-gun-toting guards herded us into a palatial office with all the Hollywood trimmings: potted palms, deep piled carpets, period piece furnishings. A distinguished looking man of about fifty smoked a cigar at us from behind a vast desk littered with a whole battery of telephones.

We quickly gathered that the Gestapo was concerned primarily with the question of what we had been up to during the four days we had been loose. Espionage and sabotage lurked behind every question mark. Maps and railway timetables were produced. We were asked to state the places and times we had boarded our trains, what we had done between trains, what we had seen en route. Since there was no point in our doing otherwise we told a straight-forward story of our peregrinations.

The Gestapo man's next step was to parade into his office, one by one, a whole series of German soldiers and officers. As each one entered the room and came to attention we were asked to look at his rank badges and identify his rank. The

purpose of this pantomime has never been quite clear to me, unless it were to satisfy the Gestapo that we were actually the military personnel we claimed to be and not civilian saboteurs. At any rate we knew all the ranks and passed with flying colors. A few further questions of no great import followed, and then the Gestapo boss looked at us gravely for several moments and blurted out: "Well, what did you escape for?" The answer to that was simple and we told him. It was the duty of every prisoner, we said, to seek to rejoin his own unit. At this the Gestapo man jumped to his feet, hammered his fist on the desk with a great thump. "Correct," he snapped. "It is your duty to escape."

A playful smile lit his face and there were mischievous crinkles about his eyes. "Now let me tell you something . . . I was a prisoner once, too. In a camp in France, during the First World War . . . I, too, escaped. I was more fortunate than you, for I succeeded in getting back to my unit in Germany . . . Excuse me a moment."

Leaving the office, he returned in a moment or two with another man of about his own age. Both had that look of enjoying some happy secret between them. "This man," he said, "was my comrade in that prison camp in France. He, too, escaped but like you he was recaptured." Both of them seemed immensely pleased with both themselves and with us. We chatted for a few minutes about prison life, then the Gestapo boss gave his orders to the guards, and we prepared to depart.

"You are very lucky boys," he said. "I have decided to send you back to your own camp." We thanked him. Then as the guards unslung their tommy-guns and ushered us towards the door he waved his cigar at us, gave out a little chuckle and said: "Better luck next time!" Whoever he was I hope that he escaped the War Crimes Trials. He was probably the only nice Gestapo man who ever lived.

Later that same year, in company with a Czech officer named Joe Rix, I was involved in a further escape attempt. Although it ended disastrously almost as soon as it had begun, it is associated with one of the most pleasant memories of my sojourn in Germany.

We were shipped back to our home camp on a night train, accompanied by three armed guards. It was Christmas week, and the train was packed with people going happily on their way to spend the holiday with the folks at home. In our com-

partment were a lean sallow member of the Hitler Youth, three young women who turned out to be schoolteachers, and a friendly Wehrmacht officer going home minus one leg. The other leg was somewhere on the Russian front.

Except for the tiny blue black-out lamp the compartment was in darkness. The guards were in friendly mood and didn't object when we got into conversation with the others. We talked for a while, then someone started to sing. There were some solos. I sang *Bombay Troopship* and what I could remember of *Waltzing Mathilda* and *Alouette*. Joe got off a Czech folk-song or two, and then the three girls opened up with Christmas carols.

*Holy Night, Silent Night* . . . The snow-draped forest slipped by us in the darkness as we sang. We forgot we were prisoners. The German officer seemed to have forgotten his one leg and the horrors of the Russian front. For all of us that night, the war was forgotten. We talked of families and children and of happier Christmases gone, and happier ones to come.

That brief, exquisitely beautiful hour of comradeship is my most treasured memory of Germany. In that hour there were no guards or prisoners, or friends or foes. In that delicately suspended hour we were humbly happy human beings enjoying the songs of Bethlehem. Under the gentle spell of Christmas the Spirit of Man had triumphed.

### III

The thrill of escapes and escape attempts came only too rarely, however. Most of our days were spent at the task of reconciling our resistance to the "detaining Power" with efforts to eke from him as much as we could in the way of food and the other animal comforts. It was a bitter struggle. The German people had little enough themselves and were not inclined to share what they had with men who so recently had been employed in the job of laying waste German cities and towns.

New prisoners continued to arrive, and after the Invasion of Normandy in ever increasing numbers. The camps very soon became unbearably overcrowded. As the war began to draw to a climax the German rations commenced to be reduced, and the Red Cross parcels, upon which we had depended so much, dwindled to a tiny trickle that stopped altogether about January, 1945. From then until our liberation, life as a prisoner of-war became progressively worse, but was brightened, of

course, by the certain knowledge that salvation was just around the corner.

The period from January, 1945, until victory was the Gethsemane of every prisoner-of-war. For us it began that night late in the month when, with the thunder of the Russian guns rolling at us from the east, we were herded by the Germans out to the highway and started westward on the journey that has come to be known in war annals as the "Death March." It was upon the personal instructions of Hitler himself that the Germans dragged the Allied prisoners with them as they retreated westward before the Red Army. Presumably our hostage value prompted his decision.

For a week, in the coldest weather we had known in Germany, we trudged the snow-choked roads. Since the autobahns and main highways were reserved for the use of the retreating German Army we were kept for the most part on the secondary routes. By night our column was herded into farmyards, and we were left to shift for ourselves. Some of us bedded in hay-lofts, others with the cattle in the manger, or in abandoned wine-cellar or chicken-coops. We were cold, hungry and footsore. Undernourished for years, many prisoners fell sick and were left behind; some were never heard from again.

But in our misery we were not alone, since our column was only a tiny fraction of a vast tide of tormented humanity flowing westward across the German plain. In trucks, wagons and mostly on foot the German population from the eastern provinces pushed painfully through the bitter cold without knowing where it was going. The crying and wailing of children and infants mingled continuously with the bawling of the cattle that accompanied the evacuation.

The kindness of the German women in the villages through which we passed is something I shall never forget. Time and again, as the guards herded our ragged line along wintry streets, women and girls came out into the road with jugs and buckets of water, hot water, and sometimes even milk and a morsel of food. That we were enemies didn't seem to bother them. They knew only that we were men in distress, and they gave what comfort they could.

One bitterly poignant scene stands out above the others. In one of the villages a pretty German girl of 'teen age came out to the street curb with a jug of hot water. A particularly unpleasant guard, sticking rigidly to his orders not to permit any civilian contact with the prisoners, roughly knocked the



jug flying from her hand. We plodded by silently through the dirty snow while the girl stood there, with her empty hands held out to us in a hopeless gesture, and with tears rolling down her face.

There was another scene. We were billeted one night at a farm that was already overcrowded with women and children evacuees from the bombed cities in the West. Five or six of us found shelter in a cellar, where we bedded down on a pile of straw that protected a heap of potatoes. A single candle broke the darkness. A German woman of about thirty came looking for the potatoes, and while she filled her basket she kept up a running stream of invective about "terror-bombers", "baby-killers" and "air gangsters". By the time she had finished gathering potatoes and had left she had made us feel just about as ruthless and brutal as she had made us out to be.

Imagine our surprise when several hours later the same woman returned, set down before us a great steaming pail full of hot stew, the first meal we had smelt in days. "Baby-killers," she snapped. Then she smiled at us rather foolishly, said something we didn't catch, and fled up the steps before we could even stammer out our thanks. We never saw her again.

Journey's end to that march was a stinking, over-populated mad-house of a camp at Luckenwalde, twenty miles south of Berlin, where we were thrust among twenty thousand French, Russian, Italian, Norwegian and Yugoslav prisoners living in conditions literally worse than the doomed cattle enjoy in the Chicago stockyards. Only the statement that the camp's private graveyard embraced more than 5,000 corpses—one-quarter of the current total of prisoners—will give the reader any idea at all of just what Luckenwalde was like.

At Luckenwalde we slept 200 to a room, packed in three-tiered shelves like cordwood, kept warm only by pure animal heat and the lice-infested sacking and straw, into which we crept for comfort. There was no reading material of any kind at all, no sports facilities, no Red Cross parcels, not even enough water to wash in.

Yet it was in such surroundings at Luckenwalde that I attended the most magnificent, most inspiring church service that I have ever known. It was Easter Sunday High Mass, held in a sandy space between the wretched barracks where the prisoners gathered shivering in a raw, east wind before an altar constructed of old packing cases.

Highlight of the Mass was a choir of Polish prisoners. Never before or since have I heard the human voice so gloriously triumphant, so spontaneously joyous, or felt the material stuff of this world shrink into such puny insignificance before the vanquishing Spirit of Man. I was in that hour convinced, as I had not been before, that nothing could ever destroy us, not even Death itself.

#### IV

Fortunately our physical miseries were overshadowed by the exciting noise of history all around us. The last great offensive was under way before the snow had gone. The Russians were across the Oder, and in the west the British and Americans were over the Rhine.

In Luckenwalde we had a grand-stand seat for the Battle of Berlin. Vast armadas of Allied bombers, escorted by weaving swarms of long-range fighters, droned daily in tight formation across the camp on their way to the German capital, and by night the sky came to be almost permanently lit by nervously fingering searchlights, the red, green and yellow target indicators, the steady flicker of photoflashes, the staccato bomb-bursts, and the ominous orange glow of burning buildings.

Then came the exciting moment when the German doctor attached to the camp hurried in long after midnight to inform the Senior Allied Officer that the Russians had broken through at Kottbus to the south-east and were pushing rapidly towards Luckenwalde. We scarcely dared to believe it, but by the following morning it was confirmed that the Russians were at Dahme, only about twenty miles away.

The excitement was almost more than prisoners' nerves could stand, but it soared to an even higher pitch that evening when the Russians pushed into Juterbog ten miles to the south and we could see for ourselves the gun flashes and the glow from the burning city.

The next day was "our day."

Those of us who could dare to sleep were awakened about six o'clock that morning by an ear-splitting roar of artillery. The Russians had commenced to pour their prodigious fire into the town of Luckenwalde itself. It was as if the end of the world had come. Hour by hour the awful barrage continued. There was never a pause of even a few seconds. We could see bricks, stones, steel girders and pieces of timber flying high into the sky as one direct hit followed another. There was no

sun that day. It was blotted out as soon as it had risen by an enormous mushrooming pall of smoke.

The Germans quit the camp shortly after noon. A runner brought a message to the senior guard on duty at the main gate. The guard heard the message, looked in at the group of prisoners standing expectantly behind the barbed wire. Then he unhooked the keys from his belt, gave a big grin, tossed the keys over the fence to the prisoners and shuffled away.

All that day and evening, while we remained within the camp on orders from the Senior Allied Officer, the Russian barrage continued. About ten o'clock it stopped as suddenly as it had begun. For the remainder of the night we were engulfed in the silence of the dead. Not even a rifle shot broke the terrible stillness. Nobody slept. All of us waited for the dawn. For the prisoners of Luckenwalde dawn came that day, 22 April, 1945, at 6.15 a.m. At that moment a tiny, two-man armored car, little bigger than a jeep, braked to a halt outside the main gate. An unkempt, hatless man with a tommy-gun in his hands stood in the turret. He brandished the gun and shouted at us to open the gate. The moment he opened his mouth to speak a great shout went up: it was Russian he was speaking. Here, after all these years, was a man with a gun, and he wasn't a German!

In the half-hour that followed men behaved as they had never before. As the armored car crept slowly through the streets of the camp the whole population of prisoners went crazy. Time and again the little vehicle came to a full stop in a solid mass of yelling, laughing and crying humanity.

I saw men patting and stroking the steel sides of the armored car as if it were some beloved animal. Men kissed the cold metal plates, affectionately pinched the tires. All round, prisoners were hugging one another and dancing in crazy abandon. Everyone was laughing, or crying, or doing both at once, without ever realizing it. A few hours later the mad, delirious performance was repeated when the armored spearhead of the regiment that had taken Luckenwalde rolled victoriously through the camp, the great tanks smashing down the hated barbed-wire fences as they rolled along.

Thrill followed thrill. The first women some of us had seen in years were riding on those big, grim Stalin tanks. They were girls with tommy-guns resting in their laps and big revolvers thrust holsterless in their belts. Some wore bandages covering

their wounds from yesterday. Side by side with their menfolk they had fought their way from Stalingrad, and a few hours later they would be rolling into Potsdam for the final assault on Hitler's empire.

That was our day of Liberation.

## V

There was another day still to come that vied with our day of liberation in terms of high emotion. It was the day a few weeks later when a fleet of 120 transport 'planes arrived to carry us home to England.

I never got to meet the pilot of the 'plane in which I travelled, but he must have been a man of imagination and great feeling. As we approached the edge of the European mainland the aircraft steadily lost height until we found ourselves flying at a height of only a few hundred feet along the beach of Dunkirk.

It was like being at a movie and seeing the part where you say to yourself: "This is where I came in." For this was Dunkirk. The beaches were still strewn with burned-out vehicles and litter of every description, and hundreds of shattered hulls lay awash in the shallow waters beyond . . . Here, too, the Spirit of Man had triumphed.

There was one more thrill that pilot gave us. From Dunkirk, flying still at low level, he headed the aircraft westward across the sea. A short time later there was a gentle roll and a dip of wings, and we saw the White Cliffs of Dover towering straight ahead. To me they seemed blurred a little, perhaps, but actually they hadn't changed a bit.