My World War Two Journey

By Ross Henry Whittaker

Airman Wellington Bombardier, POW and Survivor

World War 2 began for me in August 1942, just after my 20th birthday when i was enlisted Into the RAAF and sent to Victor Harbor to the RAAF initial training unit.

Ten months late, in June 1943, it was considered that we were trained enough to be sent to the United Kingdom as replacements for the RAF.

When we arrived there, we went to a pool at Brighton in southern England for three months, before going on to an operational training unit for another three months. We were given two weeks leave and then some familiarisation training with a new Wellington bomber which we then flew around Spain, to North Africa then across North Africa to Foggia in Italy.

Early in March 1944, we began operational life which in our case did not Last long, as we were shot down on our sixth operation. We were sent to Budapest in Hungary on 4th April 1944, which had just been taken over by Germany. We had dropped a Bomb load and had gone about 30 kilometres when we were attacked by a fighter plane and set on fire. Both engines were alight, plus the main fuselage in the centre, making it obvious that we had no alternative to bailing out.

Of the five crew members three of us bailed out, the other two having been shot up and killed. As per our parachute drill, my duty was to go first in order to clear the way for the navigator and the pilot.

The exit was a small door in the floor, just a bit ahead of the pilot's seat. I sat on the floor Facing the rear and let my legs dangle out into the slipstream. Almost immediately I found myself floating in air about 2 miles up. After counting to three to ensure that the ‘chute would clear the plane, I pulled the ripcord and the parachute opened. It was then that I discovered that I was in the middle of the bomber stream and there seemed to be hundreds of aeroplanes with whirling propellers all aiming at me. As it was dark I could hear them, but couldn't see them. It seemed years before I finally dropped through them. Aircrew were never given any prior parachute experience as one had to get it right the first time.

The pilot who was an officer and the Sergeant navigator were captured by the Germans not far from the aircraft, but because of their different rank they were sent to separate Prisoner of War camps. Because the pilot and navigator were on their seats in the plane, it took some time for them to get out. As a result I landed several miles away from them.

After I landed I buried my parachute, as I had been told to do, and began the long walk to Yugoslavia as we had also been advised. At the time of landing it would have been just after midnight local time. The Yugoslavia border was about 150 kilometres away though I did not realise that at the time. After walking five or six hours as dawn was breaking I found a dinky little thatched A shaped hut half full of straw so I holed up there for the day.

After a while I woke up very cold, so I burrowed down deeper into the straw and went to sleep again, Waking up again later colder than ever, so I dug down deeper and found what I thought was rock salt until I tasted it, and it tasted like water. I had hidden in the farm refrigerator 50 metres from the house. Not liking the climate much, when it was nearly sunset and there seemed to be no activity on the farm, I took off again. But I had only gone a few humdred metres when the farmer came out to see what his dog was barking at, and saw me

He followed for a while but it was getting dark and he soon gave up. That night I walked for around 8 hours, frequently sitting down for a rest when I would go to sleep, waking when I got too cold. Then I found a haystack burrowed into it and went to sleep. At sunrise I woke to find that the haystack was barley hay and I had barley beards all through my clothes and I was one big itch.

The farmer came out at this time. With all day ahead there was no chance of getting away so I gave myself up to the to him and he delivered me to the Hungarian Air Force. I later discovered this was probably fortunate as it seems the Yugoslav partisans used to take allied servicemen with them on raids, then when it got too hot, withdraw leaving the allied servicemen behind to detain the Germans.

I spent the next seven weeks being shuffled around five prisons, one of them twice, while the Hungarians decided what they were going to do with us, as we had now grown to a mob of about 20. The Hungarians then handed us over to the Germans, one of whom told us “for you the war is over”,. By this time I had managed to lose about 2 stone, so if anyone wants to lose weight I can thoroughly recommend a Hungarian gaol.

We were then crammed into cattle trucks for the long and unpleasant trip to the POW camps. After three days, we stopped at a railway junction and I was given the option of staying at an officer's POW camp nearby as an orderly for the officers. By this time anything seemed preferable to the cattle truck so I took that option.

The POW camp was Sagen Luft 3 in what is now southern Poland. This is where “ The Great Escape” took place, not all that long before I got there. The film was very much the way it actually happened.

Life as a POW was not so unpleasant, apart from the fact that we were shut up in a camp with little to do. The Germans did not supply enough food, but when we got a full Red Cross parcel a week we did not lose anymore weight.

When we were reduced to half parcels or one every two weeks, it was not too good. We orderlies had two of the officers’ rooms each to clean and tidy after the morning parade where we were all counted. We also had the food supplied by the Germans to distribute to the officers’ rooms. The rest of our time was spent reading (we had a reasonably good library courtesy of the Red Cross), playing bridge and walking the perimete( the British played soccer and the Canadians played softball) on the parade ground where they counted us every morning.

Later, in the winter, water was run over part of the parade ground which turned it into a skating rink. The Red Cross had also sent skates which clamped on our boots, this allowed tmm he Canadians to play ice hockey. There were 8 huts to a compound and each Hut formed a Team and of course we barracked for our own Hut team.

After about 8 months the Russians were coming and we were told to pack up what we could carry to go walking on January 28th 1945. Before we left we burnt about a million cigarettes so that the Germans could not have them. We walked for over 100 kilometres during the next four days before being loaded into some more cattle trucks and railed to the west of Germany to another POW camp near Bremen.

 The train only travelled at night because by this time the mosquito fighter bombers were ranging all over Germany shooting at everything that moved. During the daytime the trains stayed under bridges or in tunnels. This camp was much more crowded but was very much nearer Lubeck where the Red Cross parcels were landed so at least we were less hungry.

We stayed in this camp for a couple of months. Then we were out put back on the road again because the British Army was coming. This time we were on the road for about 3 weeks until we were overrun by the British and my 13 month imprisonment was over. A group liberated an Opel car and toured around that area of Germany for a week, when we were moved by army truck to an airfield, the day before VE Day, and flown back to England the day after.

Here we were thoroughly dusted with DDT. The Australian Red Cross girl who greeted me told me that approximately 10,000 Australian airmen had gone missing over Europe and approximately 1,000 came back. We knew that about a third of us would go missing in action when we went into operations.

See letter of 11 May 1945 of the post camp life.