

Kriegies: The Australian Airmen of Stalag Luft III

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Chapter One: Capture

‘Suddenly hell broke loose.’ Charles Lark stood in the middle of the Wellington bomber, tracer streaming all around. Shells exploded. Incendiaries set the fabric on fire. The 24-year-old ‘felt myself hit in several places’. He fell to the floor, ‘wondering when the bullets would stop ... the plane seemed out of control’. Assisted by a crew member, Lark jumped.

From the moment they baled out of or crawled from burning, crashed or sinking aircraft, many airmen suffered intense shock. Their disorientation was often compounded by physical debility. Lark, who splashed into a Dutch lake, ‘felt quite helpless and cold’ as he bobbed in the water, growing weaker. The pain was intense, his right arm was numb. The young man was appalled to realise that the thing flopping about on his cheek was his right eye. He made it to shore, then collapsed, exhausted. Pilot John Dack’s response to the accumulated shock of flying through flak, holding a burning heavy bomber steady while his crew baled out, searching for his parachute, half drowning before he remembered to inflate his Mae West, spending hours in the water before rescue, followed by being told that his captors had shot his crew, was, ‘for some inexplicable reason’, to laugh. ‘I laughed, and laughed, and laughed myself into hysterical oblivion.’

Despite any personal fear, sense of helplessness, or shock, an airman’s first duty was to his fellow crew members. This was particularly the case for captains of bomber aircraft who, like Dack, stayed at the controls until everyone who could had parachuted out; some lost their own lives by doing so. Other crew looked to the safety of their comrades. The able-bodied tried to help the wounded, like Lark, to abandon out-of-control aircraft, pulled comrades from

flames, or hauled them into dinghies. When duty to crew had been satisfied, the airmen fulfilled their obligations to King and service. They destroyed papers, secret devices, and intact aircraft to ensure they did not fall into enemy hands. They disposed of silken canopies. The injured hid escape kits. The hale tried to evade so they could return to Britain and active duty. Paul Royle's responsibility to his crew overrode any thought of evasion, however. After force-landing in a field at Fontaine-au-Pire, southeast of Cambrai, France, Royle and his gunner carried their observer, who had broken his leg, to a nearby village, leaving him in the care of a local priest. Despite being injured himself, Royle returned to his Blenheim to destroy it. He hiked back to the village then passed out from his wounds. When he regained consciousness about two hours later, the gunner, who was unscathed, went in search of an ambulance. Royle stayed with the injured man. Before their gunner returned, the Germans arrived; the priest had informed on his unwelcome guests.

Most evaders seldom remained at liberty for long. *Cedric Brandon* was free for three days but became 'blinded by burns and captured'. Reginald 'Reg' Giddey dodged the enemy for weeks, established contact with operatives who could get him to Spain, but was then betrayed. Often wearing civilian clothes, evaders were treated as spies or saboteurs. Without the protections of the Geneva Convention they were more vulnerable than the majority of airmen entering German custody, often receiving harsh treatment in civilian prisons. Many betrayed on the escape lines were tortured by Gestapo. Nine Australian airmen were brutally abused in Buchenwald concentration camp.

Most downed airmen fell directly into enemy hands, or 'in the bag'. Many others, like Royle, were turned over shortly afterwards. Capture, Alec Arnel recalled, was 'a knockout blow'. The loss of freedom was almost too difficult to articulate; he could barely acknowledge his new status as a POW because it was 'too crushing'. Emotions were still raw four months later when, writing to his sweetheart's mother, he asked her to imagine a fighter pilot's

‘thoughts when his free, vital life is suddenly exchanged for that of a prisoner of war’. The burning shame at being removed from the air war flared in interview over 70 years later as Arnel relived the experience. He remembered feeling ‘very low emotionally’, so overwhelmed by ‘the awfulness’ of the end of his flying career – the utter humiliation of it – that he hardly noticed his wounds. The 24-year old’s depression worsened when he was paraded through the streets in front of jeering civilians. He laughed maniacally during his preliminary interrogation.

Arnel was just one of many captured servicemen throughout the history of war who was struck by shame. It was still apparent decades later as they recalled their ‘downfall’, ‘that regrettable day’, or their ‘fateful day’. Still bewildered by it, some queried their competency. ‘Why didn’t I fly lower? Could I have weaved more? If only ...’ Others were miserable at what they saw as their failure or dreaded that loved ones would be disappointed in them. Mixing his tenses suggests that Rex Austin stepped from the present and, like Arnel, returned to that emotional moment: ‘what’s Mum and Dad going to say about this? I had a girlfriend in England, what’s she going to say?’ Shame, however, often mingled with an almost embarrassing relief. ‘I think I was pleased to be alive to be honest’, recalled Cy Borsht. Even despite his deep mortification, an unsettling ‘sense of relief at having my feet on the ground’ washed over Arnel.

Capture was a turning point. Justin O’Byrne recalled the ‘horrible thought’ that ‘passed through my mind, My God, I am a prisoner of war!’ ‘It was at this time that my career as a prisoner of war began’, Thomas ‘Tom’ Wood acknowledged. They also recognised their powerlessness. ‘You no longer have any control over your life. You are at the mercy of your captors’, Wesley Betts realised. Others vividly remembered hearing in either English, German, or French ‘the usual taunt’ offered to POWs, ‘For you the war is over’. Geoffrey ‘Geoff’ Cornish, also known as ‘Cherub’ because of his baby face, recalled with wry humour that the words were uttered while a loaded, fully cocked pistol was pointed at his head.

Even as they grappled with the thought that their flying careers were over, some pondered their immediate future. Still dazed from being under fire and a crash landing, Ronald Baines watched the disappearing African coast through the window of a German transport aircraft. He ‘fell into a dark black hole of the deepest misery as the reality of the situation sunk in’. Baines turned his thoughts towards his bride of only a few weeks. ‘I could no longer contact my beautiful wife. Would I ever see her again?’ He tried to contemplate his fate but it was useless. ‘My future [was] a complete blank.’

Rapid removal from the scene of their downing resulted in a strong sense of dislocation. *Marcus Myatt* was ‘shocked and confused’; time had little meaning. Jock Bryce and his fellow captives ‘felt ourselves at the start to be strangers in a queer world’. Everything was totally alien to their normal environment of well-apportioned and -provisioned British-based RAF stations or the dirty but convivial tented accommodation on desert landing grounds. Their dislocation was not just geographical. It also emanated from disbelief. While they accepted that they might die in action and had been briefed about the possibility, the idea of surviving as prisoners of war had never occurred to them.

Disorientation, dislocation, and disbelief robbed some of the physically able of the desire to escape before transferring to permanent POW camps. Jock Bryce admitted the ‘sad truth’ that his failure was because he had ‘suffered from what the R.A.F. calls lack of moral fibre’. ‘Lack of moral fibre’ (LMF) was a disciplinary term which was applied to aircrew of both the RAF and RAAF who refused to carry out operations without a justifiable medical reason. LMF was not a psychiatric diagnosis: it reflected diminished operational effectiveness and efficiency. There is also an affective dimension to LMF because of its connection to service duty and efficient crew relationships such as in bomber and coastal commands: those who balked at operations strained a crew’s close ties even as they imperilled their fellows’ lives. Fighter pilots could also put other squadron members at risk by not playing their part in attack

or defensive sorties. While a compassionate commanding officer might quietly organise a non-operational posting, the guidelines were clear: airmen deemed to have LMF were to be sent to a disposal centre ‘in disgrace’, where they were subject to ‘unsympathetic treatment’. The unfortunates ‘had their rank and flying brevets taken from them and were given ground jobs’, recalled Alexander ‘Alex’ Kerr. As well as public acknowledgement that they had let down their comrades, airmen dreaded the taint of cowardice, the perception of character flaw, and the ‘absolutely terrible’ consequences. Even in 1995, LMF remained ‘a sensitive subject’ for Jack Morschel. It was ‘a stigma you feared you’d have to live with forever’, Cy Borsht admitted. Accordingly, operational airmen wrestled with genuine flying fatigue and stress in order not to be designated LMF. Jock Bryce explained that, while he had at first tried to gauge his chances of escape, he soon realised ‘I had not the will to make the attempt’. The ‘shock of being taken prisoner of war had robbed me of sufficient initiative to escape alone’. Bryce – who had barely passed his 21st birthday – was wrong in his self-diagnosis. He did not have LMF. Lassitude, arising from disorientation or perhaps linked to depression, was a common ‘symptom’ of early captivity. Many airmen experienced it, including those whose final operational sortie and aftermath had been particularly harrowing.

The Geneva Convention provided that captives were to be handled humanely and with respect. This, however, was not always the case. While some were treated well immediately after capture, several Australian airmen recorded deficiencies of medical treatment. Ken Carson reported shortages of drugs and bandages. He denigrated the care he received in three Italian hospitals, including at Caserta where a field dressing embedded in his thigh had to be surgically removed. Alan Righetti, however, received good care in that hospital; he commended the nursing nuns’ kindness. The quality of German medical attention also varied. Frankfurt’s Hohemark clinic was often so full that those suffering shock and minor wounds were neglected.

Drugs were in short supply. *Sean Hanrahan*, who had been trapped in the wreck of his aircraft for five hours with wounds to his leg that resulted in numbness for nine months, ‘had no medical attention at all’.

After August 1943, *Volksjustiz* (peoples’ justice) was an officially sanctioned form of civil vengeance throughout German-held territories. ‘*Luftgangster*’ ‘gangster commandos’, ‘terror bandits’ and other derogatory terms used to describe allied airmen and soldiers often featured in German propaganda, including in a circular addressed ‘To all Prisoners of War!’ which was distributed in September 1944. ‘Air Gangsters, the Terror Fliers, or the Murderers, as the air force was called were not very popular’, Ken Carson recalled. Many airmen experienced the full gamut of fear-inducing violence. An injured Carson tried to stop his captors stealing his watch, but a German soldier put his boot on his face. He surrendered the timepiece then passed out. Before he was transferred to hospital, a wounded Geoffrey Coombes was taken to a guard house. There, a German, ‘who looked like a bloody gorilla’, threw him and the camp bed on which he was reclining against the cell wall. *Lynchjustiz* – lynching of downed airmen and summary execution in some instances – was also a condoned form of *Volksjustiz*. Alan McInnes was accosted by civilians shortly after landing. They beat him so badly a rib was broken. His attackers ‘had just brought in a coil of rope when police arrived and took charge of us’.

Some airmen were able to look back on their mistreatment with sardonic humour. Ronald ‘Ron’ Mackenzie, who was ‘scared stiff’ when threatened with torture at a local gaol, ‘lost the working part of one tooth to a rifle butt’. When describing his capture by the Gestapo, Kevin Light noted they were a ‘nice set of boys who are very handy with their feet’. Light may have been able to retrospectively joke about his kicking, but few found interrogation a laughing matter.