IT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT

Reminiscence by J E Thomas, Lancaster Pilot

With our ordeal over Berlin behind us, the trip home was almost uneventful. It was only another 40 miles to the coast and we would be on our way home. But ..... and that "but" came in the shape of a Junkers 88[1] that appeared out of nowhere, fired a burst which severed our elevator control wires and ensured that our airborne days were over.

The control column waggled uselessly in my hands and immediately I gave the order to 'Bale Out'. The drill had been practised at every stage of our training – everybody knew what to do. We clipped on our parachute packs. Jimmy Edwards, the Bomb-aimer, jettisoned the floor hatch and jumped. He was followed by the Flight Engineer Robson, then Bill Bell, the Navigator and then myself. The Wireless Operator Eddie Davies went to the rear and jettisoned the main door. He was joined by Vic Collins, the mid-upper Gunner, but Bill O'Malley, the Rear Gunner was trapped in his turret unable to free himself.

When it was my turn I sat on the edge of the hatch, gave a momentary glance back and jumped into the blackness beneath. Our practice sessions had usually been in a hangar, jumping from the rear door on to a mat.

This was different. Before leaving my seat there was no need to throttle back or switch off engines. As I dropped, I counted up to 10 and then pulled the rip-cord, holding the bright shiny handle tightly. In training there had always been an implied threat about the handle, of having its cost docked out of your pay[2]. Without realising any dramatic jolt I found myself floating down and was very conscious of the quietness of that little world. I cannot remember even looking up at my white canopy and, at the same time, realising the futility of holding on to that handle, which I promptly threw away into nowhere.

How quiet and still it was. What a beautiful night! The earth below was mostly shadows and only at the last moment did I realise I was only feet from the ground, and I was there loosely crumpled up.

You knew the drill – get rid of your parachute – its whiteness was too obvious. "Easier said than done!" There was a lot of silk to gather up and those lines were endless. It was done and as I was close to a hedge, I went there to hide it as best I could. It seemed that I was in a field next to a farm from which I could hear dogs barking.

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[1] May have been a different type of plane
[2] That is, if you lost it

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As I looked up into the lovely autumn sky with its myriad of shining stars, I could hear our own aircraft passing way up high.

There were lots of trees about, but I did not feel like approaching the farm. Instead, I went down a bit of a country road and soon saw a faint light close by. Moving closer, I could see it was like a gypsy caravan raised up on big cart wheels. It had a set of steps and with a great deal of trepidation; I climbed up and very quietly knocked on the door. The door opened slightly and a young lady carrying a baby peered out. I tried to whisper "RAF", when a man came and again I tried to indicate that I was "English – RAF". And in clear English, he said "Come in". Yes, he could speak English. I went in quickly and the door was closed. We all stared at each other, and then I explained.

They gave me a cup of coffee and we talked about my predicament. They were very afraid – there was no underground movement in existence. The Germans were not against shooting collaborators. The situation was not very nice. There was no way that I could stop with them. After about an hour, Tom – his name was Tom Masyrk and he had worked in England – took me back to one of the farm's huge barns. It should have been full of hay, but that day, the farmer had cleared it out. The only cover was against a wall and I drew up as much hay as I could find. It was dry and I could rest.

When it was daylight I saw a thin line of hay down the middle of the barn and moved into this to gain a little cover – and waited.

As the farm came to life, I could hear movement in the barn with voices from two men and the sound of a horse and cart. It became apparent that they were tidying up the barn and were gathering up the remnants, and were slowly coming towards me. I realised that they were loading up the hay with pitchforks. I hesitated to stand up in case of frightening both the horse and men, but when I felt the hay moving to an advancing pitchfork, I stood up. The men gave muttered works of astonishment and I tried to explain – "English RAF."

Fortunately, Tom came into the barn and began to talk to the farmer and the other fellow. The upshot was much the same as with Tom – there was no-one to help. The unfortunate aspect of this was that two more people knew of my existence. The farmer had found my parachute and had hidden it.

The dangers and fears of going on raids from your own airfield was now being replaced by the fears of reprisals, if caught.

That evening, at dusk, Tom came for me. He had two bikes and he took me probably two or three miles away by various paths to the edge of a canal. There were many big barges moored along the bank. He knew the owner of one and we went aboard. The living quarters were beautiful – all mahogany and very spacious. I

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was to stay there – keep under cover – no walking about. The sense of danger was very apparent.

That evening, Tom came again and the message was still the same – no help available. We cycled back through the woods and along devious paths until we were on the outskirts of Coevorden.

In the darkness he pointed out a blue light way up in the distance. It was the local hospital. There was no way he could help me, the local fear was too great – with much emotion he said – "Go there and give yourself up – you will be a Prisoner of War, but, at least you will be alive, even if it is for a couple of years."

My left foot was giving me trouble but I thought this was a sprain. I still had my flying boots on. When I did get up to the hospital some nurses put me in a separate room and shortly afterwards the local Policeman came. He was almost apologetic with having to take me. He sat on my bed and tried to show me he was friendly, even to the extent of taking his pistol and dismantling it on my bed to show his friendliness. Obviously, he had to inform the German authorities and it was not long before a small truck with German Soldiers on board collected me and took me right up to a hospital in Leavarden.

As a parting gift some nurses gave me a new vest and a pair of long johns.

(retyped 12 November 2023)

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RUMOUR, GEN, NEWS – Jack Thomas's account of escaping POW Camp

"Rumour, Gen, News" – These cryptic words need a little explanation. This account refers to a week during our march away from the Prisoner of War camp at Fallingbostel in April 1945.

"Rumour" needs no explanation amid the uncertainty in which we lived.

"Gen" was the knowledge we knew immediately around us.

"News" was BBC bulletins as mentioned below.

These notes were taken from a piece of paper in my POW Wartime Log. In my previous recollections it had been overlooked, but on examination, I realised it contained notes which were definitely dated.

Our original Camp at Heydekrug (Stalag Luft VI) Lithunania had been moved to Thorn in Poland because of the advancing Russians, and again from Thorn to Fallingbostel for the same reason – the "Russians are coming."

Fallingbostel was on the Luneberg Heath in the west of Germany and away from the Russians, but closer to the Allies who had already landed on D-Day. We had always been supplied with the contents of the 1 pm BBC news by a secret receiver which had been used for many years before I got to Heydekrug. As there were 3 other Air Crew in our compound, it was easy to realise there must have been some very intelligent and resourceful men there. There was an Escape Committee but its composition was never publicly known. It was because of them there we were able to get the 1 pm BBC news in its entirety. Men surreptitiously moved from hut to hut reading out the complete bulletin within half an hour of its broadcast. This we knew to be "pukka" news irrespective of whatever the Germans gave out. When we were moved the apparatus was dismantled and distributed amongst us. I was given a hammer head to smuggle in a tin of KLIM. This happened again at Thorn and into Fallingbostel.

It was in this way that we knew of the D-Day landing and its subsequent advance. So here we were again in April 1945 on the move, but this time it was away from the Allies. Our Camp was marched away on the Sunday or Monday at the beginning of April.

It is from this time that the "Rumour, Gen and News" becomes apparent. It must be remembered that were surrounded by German soldiers from the Wehrmacht, all with loaded rifles.

Tuesday: Rumour that 50,000 Paratroops had dropped at Munster. "Jerry News" – fighting east of Dusseldorf. Gen - fighting in Frankfurt. Dixie Deans, our own RAF Commandant under escort had returned from Lubeck with cigarettes, 48 per man.

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Wednesday: Rumour - telegram from Lubeck – 2 wagons of parcels (Red Cross) attached to passenger train. Munster had fallen. Government had gone west. News - Tanks between Frankfurt and Nuremburg, ex BBC. Gen - Pep talk to German soldiers by Commandant – "I take a dim view of [his German] men acquiring Civvies. I expect every man to stick to his post."

Thursday: Rumour - Government out – Hitler out, saying German people had let him down. News – Danzig, Konigsberg, Kassel and Nuremburg had fallen. Gen – Wehrmacht had given control of Camps to individual Commandants. More Rumour – 6,000 parcels were in.

Friday: Parcels arrived – issue of half a new Canadian parcel per man. Rumour – Camp XIB Commandant spoke to the Kriegies [POWS] – "behave like gentlemen and we will hand you over to the Allies safely". News – Tanks in Hanover. From Paris radio – POWs in Hanover can expect liberty tomorrow.

Saturday: News – Hush-hush from Paris radio – a 72 hour ultimatum.

On leaving Fallingbostel:

After sleeping out in the open, the daily regime was to march until midday. Men who had dysentery, of whom there were countless, just had to pull their trousers down and go in the grass at the side, and then catch up.

At midday on reaching a wood, we would stop to eat what we had. When we march off, the dog handlers would send their dogs into the woods to search out any would-be escapees. Each day the odd two or three would vanish.

One evening, 4 of us decided to go. We swopped our RAF great coats for khaki coats hoping to be less conspicuous.

That next day when we reached the midday stop, everyone dashed into the bushes to relieve themselves, but we 4 went into the wood and kept on walking through the trees until we could hear no sounds. The dread of the dogs was very real. Eventually, we retraced our steps and crossed the road we had been on and began to walk, hopefully towards the west.

It must be remembered that the weather that year in April was sunny and generally beautiful. We did not accurately know whether there were any towns or villages ahead of us, so we continued westwards. Being on a heath we walked through a variety of terrain – gently rolling countryside with an absence of roads and lanes. It was a mixture of open grassy land, shrubby patches and occasionally big fir three woods.

On our first night we stopped near a clump of fir trees and covered ourselves with spruce branches until we were completely camouflaged, and went to sleep with the lovely pine smell all around us.

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Once we walked along a wide open gap between some high Douglas firs enjoying the quietness and the dappled sunshine that shone through the tree trunks. Very soon, this came to a stop when we saw high railings ahead of us and reckoned this could be a military establishment. We went straight into the wood and carried on until we came to one edge of the wood with open land beyond.

This particular stretch was made up of fields with very paltry hedges. The real danger though was the Farmer ploughing the field to our right. We knew we could not stay there indefinitely. There were a few stunted shrubs and big tussocks of grass going up our side of the field.

For ages we watched this man go up and down his field and decided we had to move. So, when the Farmer turned his plough at the bottom of the field, we started moving individually from one tussock to another. This is where we were lucky having khaki coats. Although, this man was only about a hundred yards from us, he had no idea of our predicament. We knew there was a road at the top of this rise because sometimes a motor would come along.

When we did get to the top there was no hedge and, therefore, no obvious cover. We remained in this position wondering how best to get over to a big wood probably two or three hundred yards to our right. We were far too vulnerable to stay where we were. We made up our minds to get on the road, get in single file and march towards our wood. For most of the way we were crossing our fingers that no vehicle would pass. In this, we were very lucky. We reached the wood beside which there was a farm cart, and much to our dismay was an empty potato clamp. All that was left were potatoes the size of big marbles. With no food left we put some of these into our pockets without any idea of how we were going to use them, because by this time our own food had run out.

I cannot now remember much about my companions except that one was a New Zealander. We disappeared into the wood still hoping that we were going in the right direction.

We came to one part where we left the trees and found ourselves walking in open, undulating land. In all of this time, other than the man ploughing we had met no-one, but suddenly coming up a slight rise was a group of men. They were in uniform – our hearts missed a beat or two. We sank to the ground together and waiting. They were coming our way, and we realised they were a bunch of Hitler Youth led by a young man, with one of the group carrying a bazooka. As they came abreast of us, about ten feet away, we waved feebly, all the time trying to give the impression that we were foreign workers that had been drafted into Germany. Their youthfulness caused us our biggest worry. If that bazooka had been turned on us it would have been the end. They stayed in line whilst the leader spoke to some of them, but never to us. We remained still, trying to be calm and nonchalant, which really belied our state. They stayed in this hovering position for possibly only four or five minutes

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– but to us it was an eternity. We didn't dare move until they were out of sight, and then, only then, did we move.

In the far distance we could hear the rumbling sounds of explosions, but it was all very vague. Soon after this we went down a slope with a country lane at the bottom. We crossed this and went up to some trees at the top of the field. This is when we decided to eat our raw potatoes.

It was about mid-morning and we began to hear sounds of machinery as against gunfire. Two of our group went down to the thin hedge at the bottom and soon we saw tanks going along this road. It was only minutes before a tank stopped and our two began to wave to us. We ran down to join and within minutes we were sitting on a British Tank joining up with its Unit – the 117th Northumberland Fusiliers.

The hatch opened – "Who were we? Where had we come from? And have you had anything to eat?" When the Tank man heard us say "No", he handed us up a fresh white loaf and butter. We must have scoffed the food quickly because a short while after we were all sick. But by this time we had reached a rendezvous place. They were getting rations before carrying on. We were put in charge of the cook who produced an enormous frying pan and slung in bacon and eggs. What a meal that was!!

It was obvious our tank crew were part of the front line and we could not stay with them. Someone spotted a Volkswagen Beetle over by a hedge. It was filled with fuel and we were told to make our own way back. We were free and we had food.

One of our four, a Londoner, could drive and the others of us climbed in. The only direction we were given was "follow that road". We only had the vaguest idea of where we were. At that time of year, the trees were in leaf and some of them in blossom. Our road seemed to be bordered by damson and apple trees. With a lovely blue sky, the sun shining and this beautiful scent of blossom, it was both ironic and idyllic. As we drove further on in Allied territory, we began to meet other traffic and we realised we were going towards Brussels.

The memory of our arrival there is very vague. We had got back into the system and were soon gathered into large groups of POWs and Army personnel ready to return to England.

Within days some of us were put into a Stirling and flown back to Hednesford. We were all given compassionate leave and travel warrants. I managed to get back to Tenby before VE Day, 6 June 1945.

J E Thomas, transcribed and edited by Hilary Herrick, November 2023

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