

Name: James H. (Jim) Smith



Trade: Navigator, Rank: Sergeant

Squadron: - 432 Squadron, No. 6 (RCAF) Bomber Group

Country: U.K. Yorkshire

I enlisted in the RCAF in December, 1941 having spent 10 months in the army. I was then posted to the Edmonton Manning Depot on guard duty; from there on to Saskatoon Initial Training School and Regina Air Observer School, graduating as a Sergeant Navigator.

I was moved overseas in November, 1942 on the "Lizzie" to Grenoch, Scotland with 20,000 others, triple bunked in hammocks. From Grenoch we went to Bournemouth Commonwealth Receiving Centre and then on to Moreton Vallance (near Wales) an Advanced Flying Unit, finally, to Number 22 Operational Training Unit at Wellesbourne Mountford.

There I crewed up with W/C Hal. Kerby, our pilot, from Toronto, F/O "Bing" Crosby DFM, Wireless Air Gunner, from Yarmouth Nova Scotia, F/O Pat Murphy, Air Gunner from Halifax, and P/O Vic Jewell, Bomb Aimer from Sault St. Marie. We were posted to the newly formed RCAF 432 Squadron, flying Wellingtons, from Scipton-on-Swale, Yorkshire,



W/C Kerby was both Base and Squadron C.O. As a matter of interest, he had married the granddaughter of former British Prime Minister Lloyd George. After the war Dorothy Kerby moved to Toronto and I still correspond with her today.

I believe I had the distinction of being the only C.O.'s navigator with the rank of sergeant. We flew four trips to the Ruhr Valley before the fateful trip to Hamburg, July 29/30, 1943.

We had just dropped the bombs at 0115 when a big blue searchlight got us - followed by what seemed like 10 or more white ones. We couldn't see anything but corkscrewed vigorously for 10 minutes. Just as we were turning onto the first leg home, an ME-109 attacked. It was fired on by Murphy who had been credited with a kill on his first tour. The fighter strafed us good, killing the Wireless Air Gunner, F/O Bennet, from Windsor who was a substitute for that flight. It was to have been the last flight of his tour - Bad Luck! (F/L Crosby was on leave getting married - What Good Luck!) P/O Jewell and W/C Kerby were both mortally wounded. The Wellington went straight down on fire. I passed out trying to get to the escape hatch. The next thing I knew, I found myself in the air and



could see the ground when I pulled my chute. I hit the ground hard. I guess the "Wimpy" blew up as my clothes were all cut and torn and I had multiple cuts and bruises, but nothing broken – AMAZING!.

I landed in a meadow full of cows near a Luftwaffe Wursburg Radar site with a searchlight sweeping the ground looking for me. Germans were running towards me so I took off, ran a couple of miles and hid in a hedgerow. I was found early next morning by a couple of elderly civilians one of whom said in English "For you the war is over". I was then taken to a small village jail.

I was searched in the jail by a civilian - probably Gestapo. On finding a Bible I carried (my Dad had carried it through the Boer War and WW1) he exploded in rage and kept the bible. A Luftwaffe officer came for me and we walked a couple of miles to the Wursburg site. All morning, Luftwaffe personnel brought in loose equipment from the three downed aircraft. When an orderly brought the officer's dinner, he ate half and offered me the rest. I ate my first food in 18 hours - rather decent of him I thought. I was locked in a shed with windows and became the object of interest by German air force personnel - a strange feeling.

Early in the afternoon I was interrogated by a civilian who said he was from the Red Cross. We had been briefed for such an event so I refused his questions. He ranted, raved and threatened to hand me over to the Gestapo but finally left. Later that afternoon a Luftwaffe Cpl. with a rifle and fixed bayonet marched me through some woods to the autobahn where to my relief there was a German staff car and large truck, but more importantly, three other NCO aircrew - two RAF and one RCAF, Sgt. - Paul Demcoe, a Bomb Aimer from Winnipeg. Demcoe and an RAF Sgt. couldn't see as both of their eyes were closed from injuries. They rode in the officer's staff car while Sgt. Fenton, RAF and I rode in the back of the truck with fifteen dead bodies.

Some three hours later we arrived at a Luftwaffe Me-110 night fighter base at Luneburg where Fenton and I unloaded the bodies, all properly tagged as to crews. Four of them were my crew, so I was the sole survivor. Quite a shock! There were also six bodies from Demcoe's Halifax and five from Fenton's Halifax.

We spent the next three days in the base jail, served only black bread and water. I was interrogated again by the base C.O. who told me that the dead would have a proper military burial. There were now five of us including a F/O RAF Navigator who was already in jail. We were taken under armed escort by a Luftwaffe Sgt. and two airmen on a train to Hannover. The train was standing room only with civilians fleeing Hamburg. We were not popular!

We had to change trains at Hannover, a three hour wait. A German "Unterzee Boat" Captain spotted us and rushed over asking to speak to the senior person. He shouted and ranted about us "Terror Fleigers" but the RAF officer yelled back about bombing London, Coventry, etc. They both calmed down saluted each other and he went back to his train. We arrived next day at Dulag Luft, Frankfurt-um-Main, the Luftwaffe interrogation centre for all allied aircrew prisoners.

I spent two weeks in solitary interrogated by a Luftwaffe Major who, "lo and behold," was the same "Red Cross civilian" who questioned me where I was first picked up. He said, "I see you recognize me - well I was up to Hamburg getting my family out - which I did, or otherwise you would not be talking to me here now - do you understand that." I said, "Yes I could but that treatment wouldn't be in accordance with the Geneva Convention." He just shrugged.

I was interrogated about every third day for two weeks before he let me out into the main holding area where I received my first good meal and a new pair of pants which were US Army issue. Two or three days later, along with 50 or 60 RAF NCO prisoners we went by box car – with the standard load capacity of 8 horses or 40 men to Luft 1, Barth on the North Sea coast - not far from where I was shot down.

In December, 1943 the whole camp was moved by freight train which took three days with a seven hour stop in Berlin to Stalag Luft 6 at Heidekrug on the East Prussia, Lithuania border. This camp with some 5,000 air force prisoners was divided into four separate compounds - 2 Commonwealth, 1 American, and 1 Russian. The Russian camp had no buildings, just a field as Russia had not ratified the Geneva Convention.

POW life was a real mental shock, primarily because of the complete loss of freedom, anxiety about the future, thoughts about family and loved ones so far away, inadequate food and sheer boredom. The Red Cross was our only life line, intermittingly supplying food parcels, books, athletic equipment, etc. They also did casual camp inspections about twice a year. Soccer, rugby and softball were played by some and everyone just walked and walked inside the wire. Most managed to cope in some manner but a few cracked up. It was called "going around the bend."

There were two British doctors to look after everyone. One was captured at Dunkirk and the other in the North African desert. Doctors were not in the regular camp and in accordance with Allied POW rules were not permitted to escape. Our dentist was a Flight Sergeant, New Zealander – an air force POW. All medical facilities provided by the Germans were primitive.

Near Christmas, 1944 our camp leader, Flight Sergeant Dixie Deans of the RAF, asked the German Commandant if he would permit sending some Red Cross parcel food to the Russians as they were starving - he approved the request. Some months later we received a note from the Russians which read, "Comrades in Arms, Knights of the Sky - have you any more biscuits?" Everyone who had Red Cross parcels contributed something.

Dixie Deans, spoke fluent German and understood the German psychology, especially concerning POW camps, as he had been a POW since 1940. After the war he received two commendations from the British government for his leadership of the camps.

In July 1944, because of the Russian offensive in the east, half the camp was again moved by freight train to a British Army camp, Stalag 35 at Thorn, Poland, just west of Warsaw. In October 1944, Stalag 35 was moved by train to a large camp at Fallingsbostel (near Hannover) close to the infamous Belsen concentration camp. We could smell the overwhelming stench of burning bodies when the wind blew from the right direction. At the time we did not know what caused the smell.

Since being shot down, I had now traveled full circle and been in five POW camps. I estimate that between this new camp and one about two miles away, there must have been 20 thousand POWs of all nationalities. Camp conditions got worse and worse as chaos was setting in due to the Allied offensive across the Rhine into Germany. Food was turnip and potato soup and one slice of bread per day - everyone was slowly starving. Red Cross parcels understandably did not arrive. We were all in very poor physical condition and got dizzy if we sat up too quickly.

The biggest problem was how to issue the meager daily food ration which was turnip and potato soup plus German black bread. First the soup was delivered from the kitchen to each POW room in a wooden barrel

with a stick to stir it. After careful stirring it was ladled into each POW's tin. This system always had complaints because the last group always got the thickest soup. The solution to this problem was a daily rotation in the order of lading so everyone had their turn at the soup from the bottom of the barrel. Then there was the problem of sharing the bread. The daily ration was one loaf per table so it had to be carefully cut into six or eight portions depending how many POWs were at a table. After the pieces were cut each piece was identified by a playing card number then each POW was dealt a card and got the piece of bread identified by the card he held. When you are starving it is crucial to get your fair share.

In April 1945, all prisoners were marched northward in groups of about 1000 men to avoid capture by the Allied western offensive. After two weeks on the road, during which many died, some of whom were strafed and killed by our own fighters, we eventually returned to Fallingsbostel and were liberated on April 26, 1945 by British Seventh Army tanks – The famous Desert Rats. We were strongly advised by the British tank troops to stay in camp as there were plenty of German troops between us and the British main force.

Despite this warning I decided to go outside the barb wire to taste a bit of freedom along with Stan Keon, who had been in my high school class in Saskatoon. We walked about half a mile and came upon a vacated German military camp where there were dozens and dozens of motorcycles. Keon said he could drive one so we filled it up by draining some other motorcycles. We had a great ride for half an hour during which we ran into a British tank crew who couldn't believe we were so thin. They made some German civilians living in a nearby house give us some food. They just kicked the door in and told them to provide us with food. After dumping the motorcycle outside our camp we went in ate all the food then threw it all up. Our systems couldn't absorb it. Our bodies just couldn't stand the taste of freedom.

Two weeks later we were transported to Belgium standing up in the back of British Army trucks. Those who were POW's longest were flown out first. We were flown to an airdrome north of London some time after VE Day. Back at Bournemouth I found I was a WO1. I then quickly passed a commissioning board and was promoted to the exalted rank of P/O. We stayed in Bournemouth for two months gaining back our health as I weighed only 115 lbs when I was liberated. We had to eat four meals a day along with handfuls of vitamins before they would let us go on leave. After four to six weeks living like this I went on leave to London and after a great party ended up in #23 Canadian General Hospital. The body still couldn't stand the pace. The whole ward was full of ex-POWs with similar health problems.

I finally went home on the troop ship, Il de France from Grenoch, Scotland and landed in Halifax on July 13, 1945. From there, on to Lachine, Quebec, Saskatoon and, in August, home to Chilliwack, B.C.. I was released from the RCAF at Jericho Beach, Vancouver on October 10, 1945.

Per Ardua ad Astra

On returning to Canada Jim obtained a Bachelor of Commerce and a Bachelor of Science (Agriculture) from the University of British Columbia. He sold life insurance for a few years then rejoined the RCAF in 1951 as a Supply Officer. He retired as a Lt. Colonel in 1971. At that time he was contacted by the government of Manitoba to develop a military type supply management system. He retired for good in January 1985. Jim lived on Valley View Drive in Winnipeg from 1969 to 1985. Jim and his wife Doreen now live in Victoria. BC.

