

AirVibes

Vancouver Island

Aircrew Association

Under the Distinguished Patronage of The Honourable Steven L. Point, OBC,
Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia



LEW FERGUSON

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Lew was born in Vancouver on March 27, 1921. formative years were spent on Pender Island where developed a keen interest in fishing and marine life applied to join the RCAF and after a season's whaling the North Pacific was accepted for aircrew training. He graduated as a navigator in late 1942, was posted to Britain and following OTU, joined 433 Squadron. Shot down Schweinfurt in February 1944, he evaded capture for days before being apprehended by the Germans. After the war he returned to the coast and worked for Shell Oil until he retired. He and his wife Nancy have three daughters

How many times in the last twenty years have you a been asked, “Dad, when are you going to put it all down paper?” “Dad, you should record your story.” “Dad, I’ll type it up if you’ll put it on tape.” etc., etc. “Okay, Okay”....

So I volunteered for aircrew in December ‘41, just after Pearl Harbour. Trained as a navigator in Canada. Went over at the end of ‘42, and ended up on 433 Squadron - the last to be formed in the Canadian Group of Bomber Command.

Oh what a glamorous life we led, in our dashing Air Force Blues! The cream and elite of the Empire’s youth (or so I thought)! So what if bomber casualties verged on unacceptable. You came home to a tot of rum, had eggs for breakfast, and then off to bed between clean white sheets! Some didn’t make it. Well, as our flight leader was heard to say, “You didn’t join aircrew and expect to live, did you?” Underlying this facade of dashing derring-do lurked a real awareness of the urgency and desperation of our chosen assignments. Seventy-five out of one hundred would never get through a full tour of operations. The secret of survival - stay in the remaining 25 %. The smart ones, who figured the odds, went LMF (and who could blame them?).

February 24, 1944 was our turn. Jumped by a nightfighter over Schweinfurt at twenty thousand feet, just before midnight, we had three men killed. Four managed to parachute out, although our replacement wireless operator (our original one had gone LMF after the last

trip) broke a leg on landing and crawled through the snow for thirty hours.

From then on for fourteen months the tale gets to be a yawner. You’ve read it all before, countless times - three days and nights on the loose - eventual capture after a few episodes - confinement and interrogation at Dulag Luft, then “side-door pullman” across Germany and Poland to Stalag Luft VI, away up by the Lithuanian border. This is when we first learned about indignities, and man’s inhumanity to man. Maybe we even learned to hate a little.

Entering prison camp we gradually realize that this is at last a permanent posting, and where we will eventually be reunited with many of our comrades-in-arms. Months go by. The war progresses and our captors abandon their existing perimeters and herd us by foot, boat, or train to more secure locations. This forces us into an ever-diminishing spiral, with hiatuses in places such as Tarun, Poland, finally ending up at Fallingbastei, Germany, midway between Hamburg and Hanover, on the edge of the Belsen Forest. All this took place in a little over a year, and involved a maximum of discomfort and stupidity, balanced on the flip side by inventiveness, pride, stubbornness and determination to screw the bastards.

April 1945 was a beautiful month. After a long miserable winter, alternating between snow and cold rain, we prisoners at Stalag 357, Fallingbostel, were shaking off our seasonal lethargy and growing more aware of the situation developing on the Western front. A spirit of optimistic anticipation was growing throughout the camp. What would the Deutschers do as the Allies advanced? Would they steal away in the night? Would they make a local stand, using the prisoners as a shield? Would they abandon the camp and march us like straggling cattle to the east? We were soon to find out. Orders came through, directing a systematic evacuation. Compound after compound was marched out in columns of five hundred prisoners carrying only whatever they could. Naturally, emphasis was placed

on food, clothing, boots, and blankets. Weird and wonderful were some of the backpacks and survival kits assembled for the march.

By this time, after our experiences of forced marching across Northern Europe, we had become expert at culling the nonessential items still remaining in our possession. The majority of prisoners had become conditioned to the inevitability of these evacuations, and offered little opposition to the schedule of events leading up to their departure. Others scurried around like fish in a rapidly-draining pond - hoping to avoid being marched. But inevitably, most were rounded up and forced into a departing column.

Our turn finally arrived. The morning of April 7th, Jim, George, Frosty and I were led out with three hundred or so other reluctant Kriegies, and headed north-easterly, escorted by veteran Volksturm troops and some of our own camp guards.

What a sight! Rag, tag and bobtail! Progress was slow. We could write the book on passive resistance, dumb insolence, non-cooperation, vocal complaining and plain stupidity. Anything that would delay movement!

We had often discussed amongst ourselves the options should we ever end up on the march again. Taking off from the column at the first opportunity was favoured. All day long we moved in a north-easterly direction, pausing occasionally to rest and to munch our scant rations. There was a feeling of relief and exhilaration among the men, just from being outside the confinement of the barbed wire compounds! This, of course, would diminish rapidly over the days to come as the lack of food, the discomfort of blisters and sore feet, the unsanitary conditions, and other undesirable events made themselves felt. The guards, although old men by the standards of our extreme youthfulness, kept a watchful eye, and were fast at rounding up any stragglers. It would be impossible to get away from the column in daylight.

We reached our destination for the day - a farm with several barns and outbuildings. After an hour's stand down, when we were able to brew up and refill our canteens for the following day, we were formed up and counted once more; then herded into the barns for the night. For some reason, Jerry preferred to count in fives. Accordingly, we were set up in columns of five and marched down an enclosed lane past the checkpoint, prior to entering the barn.

By this time the April twilight had turned into semi-darkness. As we passed the counting guards and before we entered the barn, I gave George a nudge, with a sideways glance at the barn door protruding out from the wall at an angle of 60 degrees or so. That's all it took. "Carpe diem," and in a movement so rapid that not even the three prisoners on our right noticed, we

had decamped! Around the door and back to the barn! There to lie in the weeds until total darkness gave us the confidence to take off as fast as we were able.

It was a beautiful spring night. Made all the better because although we were not yet out of the woods, we were free! A feeling of exhilaration! For the first time in over a year we were able to move in any direction we liked. No goons watching our every step. No one but ourselves in any direction. We felt as though we could travel all night, and into the next day, and the night and day after that!

The country was reforested with evergreens of varying sizes, depending upon when it had been logged and replanted. In between the treed areas were open meadowlands, swamps and heaths. Occasionally we were startled by the sharp cry of a fox. Otherwise all was quiet. So quiet that we conversed in whispers. Polaris was high and bright over my starboard wing. I kept it there all night as best I could, although because of the lay of the land, we were making some progress to the south. We kept on through the night, pausing occasionally for George to have a few drags on a cigarette.

Over the years I have read accounts of evaders and escapees. Always I have been amazed at the distances they claimed to have made through the night over strange and hostile territory. Better than thirty or forty miles in some instances - night after night! George, in peace time was a logger on Vancouver Island, much used to travelling through the bush. He was a tough, wiry chap and apart from being quite thin from our winter on scant rations, was really in pretty fair condition. I was also from the west coast. Raised on one of the Gulf Islands. Used to bush travel, and conditioned to the hard life of a whaler and fisherman. Nevertheless, in our ten nights on the loose, I doubt if we ever made more than twelve miles on any given night. There were many reasons for this; unexpected wet areas (marshes, streams, canals etc.); roads where one had to stop, look and listen; things that go bump in the night (foxes and owls; noises caused by startled horses and cattle turned out to pasture); patrols and watchtowers to be spotted and avoided; dogs barking in farm yards. Above all, the necessity to scrounge for food and then to find a concealed safe area in which to light an early morning fire while the mist still lay low over the land.

Constant vigilance was the key to survival. Finally, just before dawn, we bedded down in a wooded area, hoping to rest throughout the day and to plan our progress for the night to come. Around 10 a.m. by the sun (neither of us had a watch), we became aware of traffic on the east-west road, close to where we were camped. We crept forward through the trees to get a close look. Civilians, some riding in carts piled high with possessions; some pushing wheelbarrows; others

herding cattle and horses. All heading east. They were escorted by German troops. It was obvious that many of the marchers were not German, but foreigners and slave labourers, compelled to drive the livestock further into the Third Reich.

When the convoy had passed we turned about to retrace our path to our bivouac. There, through the trees we spotted what looked like a clothed body lying on the ground, some yards back from where we had been watching. Quietly we observed the body for three or four minutes. There was no movement. George, who was running low on matches, whispered, "Let's search it." We moved up and went to turn the "corpse" over in order to get at its pockets, when suddenly it came to life! Boy! Did that make us jump! It was a "Ruski" farm worker who had taken off from his assigned farm the previous day. How do you communicate with a Russian peasant in a German forest when he doesn't speak English and you don't speak German? He had been working with French labourers for three years. Both George and I had high school French. "Pas de problème!" He had "l'allumettes", George had "tabac." A deal was struck. We made our friend a cup of ersatz coffee and he took off.

Later that afternoon we were itchy to get going again; and as we were still in the cover of the forest, we decided to break camp and head west. Around four o'clock we were running out of cover, so we sneaked up to the edge of the forest, bounded by a north-south road, and took a look at the terrain ahead. The woods ended fifty yards before the road. We were lying at the verge, and could see the road following the crest of a low sloping ridge facing to the west over open country. As luck, either good or bad, would have it, we were directly behind an area where French workers, supervised by German sappers, were digging excavations to bed down tanks or artillery in order to command fire over the area to the west. There were roughly twenty Jerries and fifty Frenchmen.

We watched intently for half an hour. Finally the Jerries, considering the entrenchments completed, ordered the Frenchmen to gather grass and tree branches, to camouflage and cover the evidence of fresh excavations. They sent the French back into the bush, where we were caught lying face down on the ground! The German soldiers advanced only far enough towards our position to keep an eye on the workers. God bless those Frenchmen! They would advance to within a body's length of us in their gathering then upon spotting our prostrate forms, would turn aside without batting an eye or pausing in their chore. Believe me, we did not stir! Nothing moved but my bowels, until the Germans, satisfied with the amount of gathered material, called

the workers back and marched them off down the road. Vive La France!

On toward midnight we came upon a farm with barns and outbuildings. This seemed a likely spot to scrounge for provisions. Carefully we watched, noting that all was dark and quiet, indicating that the farmer and his family had retired for the night. A root cellar located on the higher ground, with an entrance cut into the side of the sloping earth, was our starting point. It was black as a pit inside. George, down on his hands and knees, came up with a few potatoes and a large onion. These immediately went into our sack (the bottom half of a trouser leg sewn shut at one end, and with a draw string at the other). Next we tried the barn, which in the European manner was an extension of the farmhouse. The cattle were in for the night. The air was warm and sweet with their breath and the aroma of hay that had been forked into the mangers. One pen held several small calves - no more than a month old. Already we could taste delicious fried veal cutlet! But how do you go about converting live calf into schnitzel? I had a sheath knife, with a six inch blade, honed to a razor's edge. A bloody calf could be easily traced to the bush. We decided that we would strangle one bare-handed. We had both been through a school for unarmed combat! Accordingly, we straddled the animal and attempted its demise by choking it to death. The calf and all its relations put up a strenuous objection. Bedlam reigned! Cows and calves, all bawling and stomping and shitting, were enough to wake the dead, let alone the farmer at the other end of the building! We'd had enough of attempted murder. A dim light appeared in the doorway and a voice called, "Vos is los?" or whatever. We huddled down inside the barn, holding our breaths and anticipating a sudden burst of bird shot from both barrels. But the farmer, aware of such "strangers in the night" in these troubled times considered it prudent not to pursue the matter further.

We stole off into the darkness and continued our westward trek until the first hint of dawn. Setting up camp near a small pond, we breakfasted on boiled potatoes and onions, deciding that on the next foray we would endeavour to locate the rabbit hutch or henhouse as sources of fresh meat. Then, with the sun up and warming the day, having covered the remains of our fire, we retreated into a clump of willows, there to catch a few hours of sleep. Prior to dropping off we rehashed the events of the last twenty-four hours. Life was still a great adventure, and we had a good laugh over the episodes of the Frenchmen and of the farmer's barn.

Several days passed in the same manner. Thank God the weather held. Frosty and cold at night but beautifully sunny rough the days. By this time George was getting a little twitchy. At times he seemed to confuse

the past and the present; put it down to “nerves,” as we were all a little “wire-happy” the time. Later that night, before midnight, we reached another farm. We stealthily approached the area near the barns and outbuildings, with foraging in mind. Good God! Before we knew it we were on the edge of an army encampment! Vehicles and artillery were dispersed throughout the area. Troops were bedded down around them. Needless to say we backed out of there in no time flat! This was our second close encounter with the enemy. The woods were full of them.

Still later, prior to dawn, we ran across yet another farm. I was eager to have an immediate go at it, as it would soon be Ring light. However, George became most upset; almost hysterical. He insisted that this was the farm with the Wehrmacht “soldaten” encamped around it. If we got any closer we sure as hell would be caught! No way could I reason with In. We were at least six miles beyond that first farm. Seeing that he was adamant in this belief, I gave up any thought of providing breakfast; putting the incident down to just more nerves. “ But it was beginning to bother me. George was really great comrade—as brave and stalwart as you could wish. No one was more dependable. We carried on until daylight, then halted for a scanty breakfast well back in a wooded area.

On the eighth night we realized we were nearing the active front. The sky was becoming increasingly filled with our aircraft dropping flares and ground-strafting. Around eleven, wishing to cross a north-south road, we approached the “borrow ditch”: flanking the road and paused prior to making our crossing. A motorized column was approaching from the north. We huddled down in six inches of water waiting for it to pass by. No such luck! The vehicles, loaded with troops, came to an abrupt halt - within thirty feet. Fortunately, we were down a steep six foot bank. But God! What if one of us should sneeze? An order was given that the men could smoke, but not to get out of the trucks. Obviously they were waiting for further orders. They appeared to be in good spirits, in spite of progress of the war - laughing and joking among themselves. An intruder aircraft could be heard approaching the area. The order, “licht aus,” “cigaretten aus” was shouted by a feldwebel. A flare lit up the western sky, seeming to expose the whole countryside to the light of day. The quiet was deafening! No one breathed until the flare subsided and, in concert, everyone came back to life. Some joker wisecracked that soon the war would be over. Then someone else sang the first few lines of “God Save the King.” This dwindled away into laughter, to be followed by others singing “Tipperary”.

How would you explain such behaviour? They surely knew that they were on the brink of defeat; but

sure as hell their spirits had not been broken. I had encountered such valiant spirits among the so-called “defeated” German troops once before, when a hospital train loaded with wounded “Totenkopf” troops pulled into a station at Torun, west of Warsaw. They had withstood a Russian advance across the steppes east of the Vistula for as long as their ammunition lasted, mowing down the relentless Russians until they were on the brink of being overrun. The survivors were on that train - a travelling abattoir - bloodied but not beaten. God forbid we ever have another war. But if or when we do, I hope that they are on our side.

Finally an order was given, and the convoy moved on. We continued on until daybreak, then as usual we made camp. Around mid-morning we became aware of activity fairly close ahead, near the edge of the cover. It sounded as though artillery as setting up. Much shouting of orders and movement of machines. Then after a time, all became quiet. Curiosity was eating at our insides. We decided to sneak forward to find out just what was happening. Like a couple of Indians we inched ahead until we could make out an artillery piece hidden just back from the edge of the trees. Up until now all had been quiet, although we continued to hear aircraft and explosions in the distance. Then as luck would have it, just what we needed! A flight of four Typhoons appeared from the west, flying low in echelon right, making a sweep to the south of our position.

The gunner must have been an eager beaver as he opened up on the nearest aircraft. What a mistake! He never made another one! The Tiffys circled around behind us, making a full 360 degree turn, and came in low, line astern on the poor bastards manning the gun. All hell broke loose! Rockets blasted the area like you only see on TV. After the first pass, nothing more was heard from the gun. The smoke, dust, and fire that erupted beggars description. George and I were belly down in the underbrush, scratching for cover, as earth, rocks, trees, and metal hosed down on us from every direction. Next moment all was quiet again. Sounds seemed to be cut off by the thick soup of smoke, dust, and explosives that saturated the air entering our concussed lungs. We got up and took to our heels in panic, gasping and choking as we ran blindly back from this doorway to hell.

In a matter of seconds, from close by, someone yelled, “Hey, Kriegie.” It was two other chaps on the loose who, not quite as curious (or stupid) as George and I, had by coincidence, also holed up for the day but had declined to check out the gun emplacement. Although not knowing them personally, we recognized them as Canadians from Stalag 357. They had aped about the same time as we had. We decided to join forces.

Throughout the day the aerial activity became heavier. Night fell and we set off once more. Now that

it was dark, we could [make out fires burning across the heath and in the forests. Low smoke and mist hung in the still air. Aircraft were dropping bombs, and the staccato rattle of machine guns continued in the night. We were marching along line astern the four of us on a narrow track over the heathland, when all of a sudden a German soldier appeared out of nowhere. He obviously took us to be Germans, as we had our grey blankets draped over our backpacks in the manner of German troops. He was disoriented and had become separated from his unit. He stopped our 1 man (a Canadian from the Edmonton area whose parents were German and who fortunately spoke the language fluently) and asked him for directions. Our man told him that we had passed his unit some little way back, then turning to the rest of us, the Canadian spoke, again in German, to the effect that we were already late, and must hurry along. With this, the first three started forward, but Tail End Charlie (myself), failing to get the message, hesitated for a moment. The little Deutscher wanted more information and grabbed me by the left arm. He was only 5'4" with his hands in the air and weighed 130lbs even with his German boots on—no rifle—but a pistol in a waist holster. I thought, "You poor little asshole! If you figure out who the hell I am, you're going to have six inches of my knife in your guts, sure as hell." Fortunately for him, I pointed back down the road and said, "Zwei kilometers," and shook his hand off my arm. With this, he looked at me with a puzzled expression and moved off at the double, while I took off at the same pace in the opposite direction.

Things were really heating up. Fires burning, troops everywhere. Passing through a small village we walked right through a unit of troops. Vehicles of all types parked at random under the trees and alongside the road. Troops were engaged in all kinds of activities. Some checking their equipment, some eating, some sleeping, some just standing around. They were looking sort of beat up, possibly awaiting orders concerning their next movement. None paid the slightest heed to us as we passed among them and continued on the road out of town. We had those German blankets over our shoulders like ponchos.

As we cleared the village we could hear talk and laughter a short distance ahead. Two young lads had met up with a couple of the village girls. They were chatting them up on the side of the road. The girls each had bicycles, but were dismounted. They appeared to be enjoying the encounter and were in no hurry to move on. We in turn were becoming impatient, so decided to 'walk through. As we drew abreast of them one young soldier gave us a "Guten abend." We replied in kind as we passed by. End of encounter.

An hour or two later we found another likely farm. Our two new friends were hesitant about raiding it, but

I guess George and I were hungrier. Anyway, we found the root cellar. Remember that this was now April. Most all potatoes and vegetables that had been stored for the winter had been used up. It was black as hell inside. Straw on the ground, but not a trace of a potato or turnip. We were feeling around in the dark. Suddenly George says, "I've got a chicken!"

"You're crazy, George," I answered. "Chickens don't sleep on the ground, they roost."

"No, this one's sitting on eggs."

"Oh, wring its neck and shove it in the sack."

"What about the eggs?"

"They're no good, George. She's been sitting on them."

"I'll take them anyway."

So in the sack they go with the scrawny hen. We continued on until we found a camp spot in some willows alongside a drainage canal. We were eager to get at that chicken so we lit a small fire in order to boil up our bird. It was just skin and bones - impossible to pluck, so we ended up skinning it. We cut it up and threw it in the pot. George said we may as well boil up the eggs at the same time. After ten minutes of boiling we cracked open an egg with some trepidation. This was the youngest chicken I had ever eaten. Well, I guess we really didn't eat the embryonic chick, but picked it out and ate what was left of the egg. How hungry can a person get? After our egg course we had boiled fowl. Then chicken soup. Delicious!

By now it was daylight. We had extinguished the fire were laying back on our packs, halfway between tired sleep wakefulness, when we heard noise across the canal. Two German soldiers were making their furtive way along the canal bank not forty feet from where we were. They were armed with rifles. Deserters, obviously.

Within hours a full retreat developed along a road south of where we lay. All afternoon the sound of trucks and tracked vehicles could be heard fleeing to the east. Allied aircraft were having a turkey shoot as the day progressed but by late afternoon all had passed by and the sound and fury subsided. We broke camp and headed towards the highway. On the way we encountered a field kitchen that had been abandoned. Boiled potatoes, canned bacon, and army bread had been left behind. We had quick feast and carried some potatoes along with us. The highway was like a scene from a demolition derby. Destroyed and abandoned equipment everywhere. A newspaper lying in the ditch caught George's eye. It was the Daily Mirror. Turning to the comics, we were relieved to find Jane was well, as usual almost naked and fleeing from the bad guys.

We continued into the night until we came to the Aller River. The bridge was blown. There appeared to have been a battle for the bridgehead. Many slit trenches

and abandoned equipment on the east side. As we were most conscious of mines and booby traps we decided to sit tight until daylight. Around 6:00 a.m. a British 4x4 approached from the east. A corporal and his driver stopped fifty yards away and took cover behind the vehicle, at the same time shouting at us to approach, hands up, and identify ourselves. This we managed to do, and in short order, were driven back to their unit for breakfast. Hot sugary tea, porridge, fried eggs, and toast. I was never so sick in my life.

EPILOGUE

Three days later we were billeted in the Royal Bath Hotel in Bournemouth, where it all began nearly three years earlier. We were given a special ration card issued to expectant mothers, which entitled us to extra and more nourishing rations. The great weather continued beautifully, or in our euphoric state, it seemed, The royal treatment from all concerned! Nothing was too good for our returning heroes. It was one long leave, with no parades and very little routine. Every day brought joyous unions with past buddies long given up for dead, although moments of sorrow came with the confirmation of the passing of those who will remain forever young.

V. E. Day arrived. I was there in Piccadilly! An event I had dreamed of for years. The memory will stay with me all my days. We volunteered for the Pacific and returned to Canada on the "Louis Pasteur." This time as "officers and gentlemen." What a contrast! Later the A-bombs were dropped. The war was over and real life began.

Editor's Note: This article was scanned from Listen to Us so there could be errors from scanning or editing..