

Chapter Seven

Concentration Camp to POW

We arrived at a rough looking place, a very well-guarded concentration camp. I believe that was the Kruisberge at Doetinchem. It was late at night and very dark. We were tossed in a cell with a concrete floor but without our piece of bread. This often happened, you just didn't get fed. There was nothing in the room. It was black, cold and damp. It was the end of January and they were not going to waste heat on us. I was put in the same cell as Wilf. We half sat and half lay on the hard cold floor. As we got thinner and lost all the fat around our behind and hips, the cement floor got harder and harder. We heard a noise all night and didn't know whether it was mice, rats or something else. It went, "tap, tap, tap". There was no way we could figure out what it was but in the morning we found out. It was so damned cold and muggy, our breath was condensing on the ceiling and some big drops were dropping on the hard cement floor!

When I was on Squadron, before I was shot down, the dentist had been working on my teeth and

Concentration Camp to POW

had put a bunch of temporary fillings in them. The night I got shot down, with the shock of it all, my temporary fillings had come out. My teeth were really beginning to bother me now. Wilf used to put his false teeth on the floor and say, "Ache, you buggers, ache." This did not help me much, except it put a little humour in our lives. I couldn't go to the guards to ask for something for a tooth, ache, since they would have just laughed.

We just had to sit on the cement floor and talk. There were no books or cards. Imagine a concrete cell, concrete floor and a bucket in the corner and nothing else.

As the days went on, we ran out of things to talk about. We used to divide the day up by different subjects, with food the main topic. We could always find something to talk about on that subject, but it did not help our hunger. We would talk about what food we would eat when we got home. Another favourite topic was about the little house we wanted after the war, if we ever got out of this place. A house with a white picket fence, flower garden and vegetables. What would we plant? This would sometimes take a couple of hours. Women often got into the conversation. There were lots of things we would talk about, but always pleasant things. Neither one of us was interested in politics at that time, so it didn't come up. We would talk about before the war and before I was shot down. However, we never talked about Holland or about knowing each other before being captured. We were very careful about that, feeling we were being watched or listened to. If we

"THE LONG RETURN"

were given two pieces of something to eat, we always ate it right away. Wilf used to say, "It's better to be little bit filled once than hungry twice." The odd time we would try to talk about religion but neither one of us had very much religion in us to start with. If there was a God, how could he let these horrible things go on? They had been going on for many years. We just couldn't understand how the Pope and the other religious leaders could let these horrible things happen.

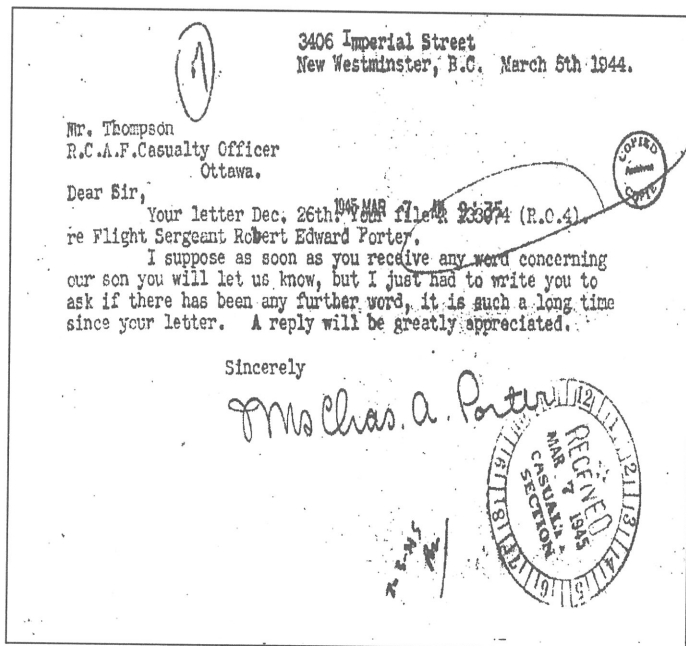


Fig.7a March 5 1945. My mother wrote to Ottawa trying to find out something

Concentration Camp to POW

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

OVERSEAS HEADQUARTERS

73-77, Oxford Street, London, W. 1.

24th February, 1945.

SECRET

The Secretary,

Department of National Defence for Air,
Lisgar Building, Ottawa, Ontario, CANADA

Attention: R.O.4.

R.113074 F/Sgt. R.E. Porter.

1. Further to my message E.664 December 1944, it is advised that Canadian Military Headquarters here have forwarded the following statement by Captain Vilhelm Roger Schjelderup and Sgt. Gri, A Canadian Army personnel who recently returned to the UK, regarding the above mentioned airman:

"He was shot down in the North of Holland in July. He was last seen on the night of January 2nd when he was shot while crossing the ice. He was not seen since. He was in civilian clothes at the time."

2. Upon receipt of the above, Captain Schjelderup and Sgt. Gri were contacted with a view to obtaining further details, and the following statements were received:

Captain Schjelderup states:

"On the night of 2nd/₃rd January 1945, F/ Sgt. Porter, myself and others set out to cross through the lines to freed Holland. The party was badly shot up, and on the second shooting, F/Sgt. Porter and others panicked. I last saw them crashing out across the ice in a badly flooded area under fire from three German machine gun posts. I never saw them again. I did not see F/Sgt. Porter shot. There is a slight chance of him having been taken prisoner. He was dressed in civilian clothes and his only means of identification was one of his identity discs which he was wearing at the time."

Sgt. Gri stated: -

"At approximately 23:30 hours on 2nd January 1945, I was one of 13 people making their way back to the British lines between the Maas and the Rhine Rivers. We were fired on, and all took cover. With the exception of myself and two others in the party, the remainder moved off, and we were unable to locate them after that.

Sgt. Porter, R., of the R.C.A.F. was a member of that party."

3. No other information has been received regarding this airman.

4 The above information will be forwarded to this airman's wife on the 10th March, as per attached letter, if no further information is received by that time.

E. Gibb F/L

For Air Officer Commanding
For J.S.Harris Wing Commander, in Chief,
R.C.A.F. Overseas.

**Fig.7b Feb. 24th (A copy of a letter) from the
RCAF to Ottawa, but not to my mother**

"THE LONG RETURN"

How could the people in England, Canada, the United States plus all the other Allied countries be praying to God for their victory and all the Germans praying to the same God, through the same religions, for their victory? Maybe we were stupid but it didn't make any sense to us. Both sides couldn't be right. The days were long and the nights even longer, as this was February. It got dark very early and daylight seemed a long time coming. We had no lights or candles. I don't think the Germans had many candles themselves and practically no electricity. Although even if they had any, I don't think they would have shared them with us, since we were still very low on the totem pole of life. We had a little window. We could just manage to look out of it if we stood on our toes. Once, when we heard a noise outside our window we found a bunch of girls out in the exercise yard. We knocked on the window and waved. We wrote on the glass, but I can't remember what with, "We are Canadians," and waved at them again. We thought we were quite bright. It didn't take very much to give us a little thrill. They didn't wave back as they were prisoners too and I guess they were frightened. Pretty soon guards came around and painted the outside of our window with black paint. So that was the last of our socialising. We couldn't look out the little window even to see if it was raining or not. But maybe we gave some of the women prisoners something to talk about. They would be wondering what Canadians were doing in a concentration camp, since only civilians were imprisoned there. We had so little food. Our diet was a cup of

Concentration Camp to POW

ersatz coffee (a poor imitation of coffee) in the morning, a small piece of black bread for lunch and a bowl of watery cabbage soup for supper. That was what we were supposed to get, but sometimes they would forget or just didn't come! With this lack of food, we became very weak.

If we got up too fast, we would pass out. We would have to get up slowly, sometimes hanging onto something, otherwise we would pass out and wake up lying on the floor.

"88 V OIT"

FROM AIR MINISTRY KINGWAY
TO RCAF HQ
PCX486 2MARCH H357 237 T
YOUR H9799 2MAR

REQUEST YOU WITH HOLD ALL INFORMATION FROM NEXTKIN R113074 F/SGT
R E PORTER PENDING RESULTS INVESTIGATION BEING MADE. NY BINXX BOMBER
MAIL LETTER C R/248 2AFEB LXX ALSO REFERS --091742Z

S: (332// 381/2MARCH) 090156Z

*no action
noted
W.D.S. 5/1
14/1/1945*

RECEIVED
MAY 6 1945
CASUALTY
BRANCH

Fig. 7c Air Ministry to RCAF "Withhold all information" on R. E. Porter

They knew with this diet we would just exist and that was all. We did not have anything like bathroom privileges.

"THE LONG RETURN"

AIR MINISTRY

73-77, Oxford Street, London, W.I.

10th March 1945.

CAN/ Re 133074 / P.4. / CAS/C.4.

Dear Mrs. Porter,

Further to my letter of the 21st December, 1944, I wish to inform you that further information has been received concerning your husband, Flight Sergeant Robert Edward Porter, but which, unfortunately, does not establish whether he is now alive.

A report has been received to the effect that your husband was with a party of Allied servicemen who were making their way back to Allied territory on the night of the 2nd /3rd January 1945. The party was subjected to considerable fire by the Germans; at this point the party was separated and your husband and others were last seen running across the ice in a badly flooded area.

A further report has reached us which states that two members of the party were killed. No further information has been received concerning your husband, and in view of the lapse of time, grave consideration must be given to the possibility that he may have lost his life at that time.

You may be assured that immediately upon receipt of further news, you will be informed.

Please accept my deepest sympathy with you during this trying time.

Yours sincerely,

E J Figg J/L

Mrs. R.E. Porter
18, Lewyn Helyg Nantybwh
Tredegar, Mon. S Wales

for (J.S. Harris), Wing Commander
for Air Officer Commanding in chief,
R.C.A.F. Overseas.

**Fig.7e (A copy of the Letter) March 10th from
Air Ministry to my wife. Saying I was with a
party of soldiers January 2nd 1945**

Concentration Camp to POW

ADDRESS REPLY TO:

THE SECRETARY,

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR AIR,

OTTAWA, ONTARIO.



OUR FILE Re.133074(R04)

REF. YOUR.....

DATED.....

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

OTTAWA, Canada, March 16th, 1945.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

A I R M A I L

Mrs. C.A. Porter,
3406 Imperial Street,
New Westminster,
British Columbia.

Dear Mrs. Porter:

I wish to acknowledge your letter of recent date concerning your son, Flight Sergeant Robert Edward Porter.

I am indeed sorry but since my letter dated December 26th, 1944, no further information concerning your son has been received. Your very great anxiety for further word is fully realized and I wish to assure that just as soon as it is received you will be at once advised.

May I again extend my sincere sympathy during this anxious period of waiting.

Yours sincerely,

R.C.A.F. G. 32B
300M-1-M (1778)
H.Q. MF-G-31B

R.C.A.F. Casualty Officer,
for Chief of the Air Staff.

Fig.7e March 16th 1945 letter from Ottawa. No news from her letter

“THE LONG RETURN”

We had a bucket in the corner of the cell and that was it! It was almost two months now since I had my clothes off, washed or had a bath.

I wore a zipper sweater and would keep it zippered up. I couldn't smell myself by then. I don't remember others smelling that much either. I guess it is like eating garlic: if you both eat it, you can't smell the other. They put me in solitary to think it over about telling them the truth, of where I had been in Holland and what I had been doing. I was put in a black room in the basement: cement floor, no windows, no lights, not a thing in the room. You didn't know if it was day or night. If you fell asleep, you couldn't tell if you slept for five minutes or five hours. The small amount of food I got was slid under the door and came at all different times. It was also dead quiet, without a sound. As a result, I had no idea how long I was in there. I finally got out one night but was taken directly to interrogation.

The Germans liked to take prisoners to interrogation in the middle of the night, probably because that was when they would be tired, the most vulnerable to pressure, and would give in to their questions more easily. The interrogator was a big fat SS officer. He was on one side of the desk, eating a big meal. They liked to do that. He said, "You could have nice things to eat if you would co-operate with me and tell me the truth." I stuck to my story, as I hadn't any other choice. After he had eaten, he opened a big book and started writing down everything I said. Always the same questions over and over. He would try different angles, or tell me a little something, hoping

Concentration Camp to POW

I would carry on and tell him a little more. They would check in the book to see if I had given the same answers as before. Later into the night he closed the book and said, "That's all for tonight, the interrogation is over." I thought to myself "Hey! what's your new angle?" He took a package of American cigarettes out of his pocket, (God knows where he got them from) and said, "Have a cigarette."

That was very unusual, so I took it. We sat there for a moment or two, smoking, and then he said, "When do you think the war will be over?" I thought for a minute. Just what should I say? Then I said to myself, "Hell why not?" It was almost the end of March. I said, "I think it will be all over by June." He just sat there and didn't say anything. Then I thought I had gone this far, so I asked, "When do think it will be over?" He sat there again, thinking for a bit and then said, "It will be over before that, it will be over by May." We sat there for a while, then he turned around to me and asked, "And who do you think will win?" I thought for a minute and thought, well there is no use being a liar about it so I said, "The Allies." We sat there for another minute, just looking at each other and I didn't have a clue what he was thinking. I thought, if he is asking me, so to hell, I am going to ask him and I said: "Who do you think will win?" Again, we sat there silently for a time. He did not seem to be in a hurry to answer. He eventually replied, "the British and the Americans will win on the battlefield, but they will never beat the Russians." That was all that he said that night and I was

"THE LONG RETURN"

taken back to my cell. That was the last time I saw him. It was the first time I had ever heard a German officer even hint that they would not win the war. These interrogators spoke perfect English. Some of them had gone to Universities in England and in the States. Funnily enough, for many years we didn't beat the Russians.



Fig.7f German war time travel. 50 to 60 of us in a small boxcar. Jewish people packed so tight they could not sit down.