

THE FIRST GREAT ESCAPE?

via Malcolm Barrass

The following items were written by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Rathborne RAF following his escape from Holzminden Prisoner of War camp in 1918. Copies of the original manuscripts were passed to me by his nephew, after he had visited my website www.rafweb.org, on which I have a biography of Air Commodore Charles Rathborne CB DSO and are presented here with his full permission. The words that follow are those written by Rathborne himself and are taken from two documents: the first was his report on the raid, written after his return from captivity and the second a record of his time as a PoW and his escape written some years later.

PRISONERS OF WAR are a distinct type of being. This condition is brought about by a lack of mental exercise, insufficient physical exercise and in many cases malnutrition. Before one can aspire to be a prisoner of war it is necessary to go through the unpleasant state of being captured.

It happened that on the 14th April 1917, I was detailed to carry out a bombing raid on Freiburg as a reprisal for sinking one of our hospital ships.

At 11 a.m. on the 14th April 1917, I left Luxueil Aerodrome with the first formation of eleven machines (7 bombers and fighter to protect them) to bomb Freiburg. I was flying a Sopwith 1½ Strutter fighting aeroplane. Our orders were, to carry out a reprisal raid at midday and also to drop leaflets, stating that our purpose was to drop bombs as a reprisal for sinking the hospital ship *Asturias*. We reached Freiburg and bombed it, flying north.

On the return journey, when over the Rhine, I saw seven enemy scouts approaching the flank of our formation in order to attack us. We were flying at 14,000 feet. Being the left hand rear fighter of a 'V' shaped formation and closest to the approaching enemy, I forced my way ahead with the fighting machine next to mine (flown by FSL Flett DSC) so as to place myself between the enemy scouts and our single seater bombers which were only armed with a front gun. I was then engaged in an air fight, lasting about 12 minutes, during which two enemy machines were shot down by my observer and myself. A bullet then hit my engine and put it out of motion. My observer, Air Mechanic (gunner) A. Turner, was by this time also wounded in the leg. This happened at 14,000 feet. I was then forced to 'vol plane', being heavily attacked for twenty minutes by the remaining five Albatros Scouts until I landed. My observer, although wounded, continued to fight and during the 'vol plane' he shot away the propeller of a red Albatros Scout. Shortly after this another machine wounded my observer mortally.

This action drew the whole of the enemy formation of fighting Scouts on me. Had I not carried out this manoeuvre and engaged the enemy Albatros Scouts, it is certain that the more defenceless bombing machines would have been shot down one by one. The time gained by the air fight in which I

was engaged enabled the bombing machines to get away. After landing I attempted to get my observer out of his seat, but he was unable to talk and died about two minutes later.



German soldiers from a neighbouring village now came up and I was given to understand that I was a prisoner of war. I bowed to the inevitable and was taken into the village in [the] charge of an officer, where the German Flying Corps entertained me to a meal and a glass of beer. Towards the evening orders arrived for me to be taken to Colmar. We drove there in a car and I was eventually placed in a cell in the Military Detention Barracks.



Lt C.E.H. Rathborne RMLI, photographed for his Royal Aero Club certificate, No.437 dated 4 March 1913. It gave his place and date of birth as Dublin, 17 February 1886. :RAeC

Having been safely deposited in a cell I was able to co-ordinate my thoughts and being of an inquisitive nature I began to inspect my new abode. The window was barred and the bars were solid. I looked through the peep-hole in the door of the cell and soon discovered that somebody in the opposite was trying to signal to me by means of the Morse code by flashing his hand across the peep-hole. The occupant turned out to be Flight Sub-Lieutenant Edwards, a stout hearted Canadian who had also been shot down a little later than myself. I was glad to have company and most of our time was spent in communicating by means of signals when the phlegmatic warder was not about. During the next eight days we were frequently marched to the Intelligence Officer who put us through the well-known process of pumping. He was, however, unable to obtain any information

from us and, although they kept Edwards and myself apart, we always managed to communicate on our return through the peep-holes in the cell. At the end of eight days, when pumping was supposed to be over, Edwards was allowed to come into my cell during the day. My cell was larger than his and being a Lieutenant Colonel I was given a bed to sleep on whereas Edwards had the ordinary cell boards.

Having been caught in flying kit I naturally had no cap, and I therefore requested my warder to buy me one. My French money had been changed into German money at a very disadvantageous rate of exchange to myself. I gave the warder some money and he bought me a German uniform cap much to my dismay. One day when out on the Barrack Square for