

Volume 2 Section 354-10

Life as a POW

9384 Cpl Albert George Gee

Introduction

Albert George Gee came from Childrey in Berkshire and enlisted in the Royal Berks 19/9/1910. He served with the 2nd Battalion in India and returned with them in 1914 going to France 6/11/1914. He was reported wounded in the Reading Mercury of 24/6/1916 and missing in the same paper 28/4/1917.

He was wounded again on the Somme during a battle for Pallas Trench in March 1917 and taken prisoner. He spent most of his captivity in various hospitals until he was repatriated in January 1918. He was one of those interrogated about the treatment of prisoners by the Germans but on the whole he seems to have been treated pretty well. He spent another six months undergoing treatment in England and was finally discharged as unfit for further service 31/7/1918 and awarded Silver War Badge 379296.

His account of his treatment is reproduced below but in the official record his regimental number is wrongly given as 2384. His address at that time was given as 60 Westcott Place, Swindon

Capture

On the morning of March 5th 1917 our battalion made an attack and we captured the front German trench which we held for 24 hours. I was one of a bombing party and early on the day following (March 6th) my party was sent out to the right to bomb. After we had thrown our bombs we returned to the trench but we found it occupied by Germans. the rest of my party ran off and I was left alone having been shot in the elbow and also in the arm I was taken at once to a dressing station where my wound was dressed.

At the time of my capture and subsequently I was treated well and I did not notice any infraction of the laws and usages of war.

Limburg March 7th 1917

From the dressing station I was taken with some wounded German soldiers in an ambulance to a hospital at Limburg, where my wounds were examined and dressed and where I received proper attention; there was no other British soldier, so far as I knew, in the hospital at the time.

Journey

March 8th 1917

On the day following, March 8th I was put into a hospital train and taken to Hanover. The journey was not uncomfortable and they gave me quite sufficient to eat on the way

Hanover Lazaret I March 8th to June 1917

I remained in Lazaret I at Hanover for four months and whilst I was there two operations were performed on my arm. The food was very good and I consider that everybody did his best to make me comfortable. In Lazaret I there were only two other British prisoners besides myself.

Lazaret V June to Aug 1st 1917

Towards the end of June I was shifted to Lazaret V where I stayed for two months and here I met a good many prisoners sent back from working parties on farms, they were nearly all medical cases. From conversations which I had with these men I gathered that the conditions on the farms were not bad and that, although the food given them was poor, it was the same that German civilians ate themselves; they also told me that the parcels reached the working parties on the farms fairly regularly. There were some French prisoners also in Lazaret V

Soltau Aug 1st to Oct 19th 1917

On August 1st I was sent to Soltau, a journey of about two hours travelling in a third class compartment and on my arrival I was lodged in the exchange barracks, and it was very crowded. A British sergeant-major was in charge at first but his place was taken shortly after my arrival by a French adjutant.

The accommodation at Soltau was good and we had bunks, straw bags each however had two rather thin and ragged blankets there were a great many fleas in barrack. We had to do our own washing. Sanitary arrangements were satisfactory. No doctor visited the exchange barrack but when a prisoner thought his wounds required dressing he went to the lazaret and he was attended by a Belgian doctor who seemed to be quite a good surgeon.

I have no idea how many prisoners were at Soltau when I was there but it is a very large camp composed of Belgians, British, French and Russians.

Those who were in the exchange barrack were free to go all over the camp and to mix with the other prisoners. Whilst at Soltau I heard no complaints about bad treatment and I think general conditions were pretty fair.

As nearly all the prisoners here were NCOs practically no work was done and the few privates who were prisoners were sent out to working camps. The guards and officials at Soltau seemed to be a very good lot.

The food was very bad indeed; the bread ration was small and the soup was quite impossible except on two days in the week when it was a trifle thicker and we could not possibly have existed without our parcels.

There was a canteen where very bad jam could be bought also watery beer as well as cigarettes, matches and the usual combs, brushes, stationery &c. The only opportunity of exercise was walking about the enclosure and playing football. Occasionally a concert was given. Smoking was allowed everywhere.

We were allowed to send away the usual number of letters and postcards and we received our letters and parcels quite regularly.

There was no visit from any representative of the Dutch Legation whilst I was at Soltau.

The hospital arrangements so far as I could see when I went to have my arm attended to, were excellent and in my opinion the exchange prisoners were treated with consideration. I was at Soltau a little over two months. On October 19th I was sent with 53 other prisoners to Constance to be examined.

Journey

Oct 19th to 21st 1917

The journey occupied 48 hours and was most trying; we were given two day's rations; 300 grammes of bread and some German tinned meat which is quite unfit for food, but we had our parcels; during the two days we were travelling we got nothing to drink except half-a-pint of coffee for each man for which we had to pay: it was impossible to obtain water at the stations where the train stopped as the windows were kept shut and no communication was allowed between the prisoners and the people in the stations: there were 10 prisoners and a guard in each compartment and we really suffered great hardship on this journey.

Constance

Oct 21st to Dec 26th 1917

On October 21st we reached Constance where all the arrangements were excellent. The food was good and although I was some time without parcels I was quite able to get on without them.

We were only allowed to walk about in the square I cannot say how many British were at Constance when I

was there but I should think about 400. I heard no complaints from the men I met there and I do not think any punishments at all were given. I was examined the day after I arrived and was passed for repatriation but I was kept waiting in the camp until December 26th. On Christmas Day they gave the prisoners a Christmas tree but we provided ourselves with food for our Christmas dinner.

Journey

Dec 26-29 1917

On December 26th I left Constance for Aachen. We travelled for 36 hours but the journey was quite comfortable and very different from that between Soltau and Constance. We were only six in a compartment with a guard and we were not watched so strictly for the windows could be opened and there was plenty to eat and drink on the way.

Aachen

Dec 29 1917 to Jan 1st 1918

On the morning of December 29th we reached Aachen and on our arrival we were put in a comfortable ward of a hospital which had formerly been a school the food was quite good and all arrangements excellent.

We left Aachen the morning of January 1st in a hospital train and got to Rotterdam in 24 hours. Food was served on the train and we received every attention during the journey.

On January 2nd we went on board the boat which brought us home.

My stay at Aachen was so short that I heard nothing about parcels when I was there nor did I expect any to be forwarded to me but there is an idea amongst the men who have gone from Constance to Switzerland that they will never get the parcels which ought to be forwarded on to them. From the information obtained from the camp commandant at Constance it seems there is a block of the parcels which have been forwarded to various camps to Constance and there is a general belief that these parcels will neither be sent on to Switzerland nor returned to the camps from which they have been forwarded. I think that this should be looked into.

Opinion of Examiner

This witness who is a man of intelligence spent the greater part of his captivity in hospital; he reports favourably of general conditions at Soltau where he spent over two months in the exchange barrack and his observations concerning the forwarding of parcels to Constance seem to be worthy of attention.

F CAVENDISH BENTINCK

Albert Hall Hospital, Nottingham

January 8th 1918