

Volume 2 Section 354-11

Life as a Prisoner of War

9545 - Pte Charles Waters

Charles Waters was a reservist who was called up in 1914 to be a stretcher bearer with the 2nd Royal Berks. His home was at 59 Egmont St, Mossley, near Manchester although in a casualty report he was stated as being from Kilburn.

He was captured, un-wounded, at Acheville on the 24th August 1918 although no indication is given in the battalion's war diary of any losses that day. George Ansell (14286) who was captured with Waters was with the 8th Battalion who were engaged that day near La Boisselle. Acheville is just to the east of Vimy.

He escaped from captivity on the 9th September and reached British lines on the 13th. He was returned to England and debriefed by J W Campbell on the 20th. The report of this debriefing is to be found in WO161/100, report 2533. A few of the paragraphs have been slightly rearranged.

Capture

24-27th August 1918

I was captured at Acheville, near Arras, on the 24th August 1918 with Corporal Ansell of my unit who is still a prisoner. I was captured by Prussian Guards and they treated me a lot better than I would have expected them to.

After being taken I was marched to an interrogation centre between Lille and Douai and there questioned. I was not searched but this was because, being a daylight patrol, I had a camouflage suit on, and had no equipment except a rifle. No food or drink was given us until we got to this centre after marching from 11 am till 7 pm, then we had some bread and jam and coffee. Treatment on the way up was nothing to complain about.

On the day I was captured I was given a postcard to write home. I addressed it to my home address but it has not yet reached there.

I remained there three days and was accommodated in a room next to the interrogation office. I was interrogated during these three days. We had the same food as the troops. The food consisted of coffee, bread and jam (black bread). 12.30 a bowl of soup one day, barley next day, and oatmeal and the next day dried vegetables - no meat. 4.30 the same as the morning. That is what the German troops here were having - no sugar or milk. Treatment here was all right and no work.

Lille

Aug 27 - Sept 7 1918

Three days after capture we were taken to Lille and stayed there a fortnight. We were accommodated in a receiving station - a lot of barracks - usually about 40 prisoners here, all British. No work here. They were French barracks; a blanket (filthy) and a straw palliasse on the floor - barracks very filthy too. Food here was - for breakfast, one pint of coffee, nothing to eat; about 11.30 half a bowl of soup made out of horsebeans, very poor stuff; 4.30 tea made out of beech-leaves and a quarter of a loaf of black bread; sometimes a little jam or fat, about 2 lbs between 40 men. The Germans here were getting two loaves each for five days, coffee only for breakfast and some soup for dinner and supper, also some meat, no fat in it at all.

We were not allowed outside the barrack rooms. The 40 prisoners had all been taken recently; I did not see any prisoners who had been taken before March, most of the prisoners had been taken while on patrol. There was no washing accommodation and no soap or towels; the Germans have no soap themselves. We could get a shave from the German barber for 2d. Our boots puttees, overcoats, razors &c were forcibly taken away or exchanged for theirs.

The German Commandant was an Ober-Leutnant, but I never saw him; under him was a corporal who treated us all right. A sergeant in charge at Lille, a British sergeant, told me that a man who had tried to escape from Lille had been recaptured and shot. We were not told what punishments would be inflicted for any offence.

Fort Macdonald

Sept 7-9 1918

After a fortnight here I was taken to Fort Macdonald on the eastern outskirts of Lille; I was only here two nights and then I escaped. Here we were shut up in cells. There were 400 Italians here, a working party who had been working at Merville. They were allowed to walk about and asked us what we had been doing that we should be shut up in cells. The Italians were being treated all right. The food was the same as at Lille, but the soup was better, tasty but not very nourishing. 130 British were with us here, all brought from Lille. I was outside shelling area except from very long range guns. Our aeroplanes used to be over every day, but I did not see any British casualties from bombing.

At Lille the guards treated us all right, but at Fort Macdonald they used to kick and shove us about, we were bruised and sore but not actually physically injured. The day I got to the Fort a number of NCO's were sent off to Germany; the privates were kept to work behind the lines; a number is given to each man and he is registered and attached to a working party.

The guards seemed all to think that they were beaten, and wondered what the feeling in England would be towards them after the war. The officer who interrogated me had lived in England and had a cotton business in Manchester. Most of the guards had been in England. They troubled chiefly about the Americans and tanks; also we were asked if we had seen any japs on the Western Front. They seemed to get their newspapers all right.

J W Campbell

20th September 1918

Escape Sept 9 1918

I escaped from here on the 9th September 1918 with two other men, Private Kitson and Rifleman Marshall (the latter was wounded) and reached our lines on the 13th September. I saw very few German troops when coming through after escape.

Further thoughts

All the guards we had were either young men of 18 or under or old men of 50. At Lille it was the 12th Home Service Battalion

I was not in hospital at all but some of my fellow prisoners had been or were in hospital, mostly with dysentery; they seemed to be treated just the same as the wounded Germans. The German bandages were made of white tissue paper; very small supply of medicines. They seem short of everything one can think of.

I did not receive any clothing from the Germans, some of the men were really all in rags. I had no khaki and no cap at all. The Germans would give us no clothes and the German troops seemed to have very bad clothes. We were allowed to smoke if we could get any tobacco, but even the Germans seemed to be very short of tobacco which was all herbs. I saw no prisoners except the British and Italians I have already mentioned.

The sanitary arrangements all through were very bad. They do not seem to bother about them. This and the poor food causes so much dysentery. If a man has dysentery he is sent to a hospital.

As for general treatment, I was treated right through just as I expected I would be treated.

Opinion of Examiner

This witness was a man of ordinary capacity with only a short experience of the treatment of a prisoner of war