

Volume 2 Section 354-14

Life as a Prisoner of War

220010 Pte George Tooley

Introduction

George Tooley came from Rockferry in Cheshire and first joined the Cheshire Regiment as 200985. He transferred to the 2nd/4th Royal Berks in late 1917 along with a number of other men from the Cheshires. He had been a shop assistant in civilian life and would have joined up when he reached 18 in mid 1916.

He was with the 2nd/4th when they had been moved to near St Quentin to hold the line to give respite to first line troops after the battle of Cambrai. After some front line duties they had retired to a rear zone near Ugnay when the German offensive began. They were put under the command of 183 Brigade and ordered to mount a counter-attack near Marteville. They promptly lost their CO, Lt Col Dimmer VC, and next day were successful in holding the line and inflicting heavy casualties on the Germans. However in late afternoon they were completely overwhelmed after their flanks disintegrated under the German onslaught.

George Tooley was captured by escaped shortly afterwards and made his way back to British lines where he was questioned about his experiences. The report is held at the National Archives under WO161/100 pages 2870 and 2871. It read:-

Capture 22nd March 1918

I was captured about 5 pm on 22nd March 1918 with about 30 others, including three officers of my unit, two of whom were wounded. They were Captain Hinchliffe, wounded, 2nd Lieutenant Lawrence, wounded, and 2nd Lieutenant Tollet, unwounded. The other ranks were unwounded.

Bohain 23-25 March 1918

We were then marched to a place 10 kilometres from St Quentin, called Bohain, marching through the night except for a spell of a couple of hours and reached there between 9 and 10 next morning, the 23rd March. The officers marched with us; they were not seriously wounded, but they received no medical treatment up to the time they left us on 23rd March. We received nothing to eat or drink that night. The camp at Bohain was a temporary prisoners' camp which appeared to have been a printing works. We found other prisoners here on our arrival – men who had been taken on the 21st and 22nd March. The officers were detached from us on our arrival and I saw no more of them. Here the wounded were also taken away, but there were very few of them.

There was no sleeping accommodation. We lay on the floor; we had no blankets or straw. We received our first meal since capture about 6 pm on the 23rd. It consisted of a sort of gruel, no meat or bread or coffee; each man received about a quart. On the 24th about 5 am or 6 am, we had breakfast consisting of one loaf between six, a quarter of a round of sausage about ½ inch thick and about a quart of coffee substitute.

Levergies 25 March to 18th April 1918

On the 25th March we were marched from Bohain to Levergies, leaving about 6 am and reaching there about 3 pm. We had the same breakfast before leaving as we had on the 24th. We received nothing to eat or drink on the road. I remained at Levergie from 25th March to 18th April. There were 500 of us and we were all placed in a farmyard and occupied the farm buildings. There were some wire beds, but not enough for all of us and we had no blankets or straw.

With regard to food, instead of sausage for breakfast we had some jam and we had this all the time we were there. We never received any sausage. The bread ration was one loaf to six men; sometimes we had pickled cabbage and boiled or dried vegetables instead of the gruel. We had two meals a day, one at 6 am and the other at 6 pm.

Our work here was laying a light railway. Our hours of work were from about 6.30 am to 5 pm or 6 pm or even as late as 9 pm. We had no spell of rest at all during these hours. There was a German sergeant-major in command of the camp. I saw no German officer. We did the work we were set to do and I saw no ill-treatment. We were kept hard at it. There was a prisoners' latrine, just dug and left; no attention was paid to it. The cooking was done by our own men. There were some RAMC men among the prisoners and there was also a German RAMC man at the camp. I do not know of any British prisoner reporting sick. There was one of the British prisoners who could speak German; he acted as interpreter. About a fortnight after reaching Levergie he instructed a sergeant to get particulars of the prisoners, that is name, rank, regiment, whether English, home address and where captured, how captured, whether by storm or surrender and if we had any marks on our bodies for identification. After this we each received a postcard to write home. These postcards had on one side the words in English "Limburg. Do not reply to Limburg; await further information" The word "Limburg" was placed where we ordinarily have put our address. Underneath these words we put our name, rank, number and regiment, also whether wounded, sick or sound and also date. On the other side we put our home address. We were told not to put anything else. These postcards were collected from us but I have discovered since reaching England that my postcard has not yet arrived. I received no letter or parcels while a prisoner and the above was the only postcard I was allowed to write. There were no

religious services and we worked seven days a week.

The German guards appeared to have the same kind of food as we had, but more in quantity. The guards who came to our work had no food during the day, the same as we. There was no means of warming ourselves or drying our clothes. If we got wet we had to wait until the next day on the chance of there being sun to dry us. We received no clothes from the Germans. When we were captured the gas masks were the only things we were allowed to bring away. I threw mine away when I got behind the German lines; some of the others did the same.

These camps were not within range of British shell fire, nor were they bombed by aeroplanes. There were no washing facilities at all. We had to keep the camp as clean as we could ourselves.

Journey

18-20 April 1918

On the 18th April the whole camp was marched to St Quentin and stayed one night there. Next morning we started out to Haim. Here we stayed one night and the next day, the 20th (the day of my escape) we went on to Curchy. We were not hurried on the march there; we were allowed to take our own time and given a quarter of an hour's rest every now and then. We received food before leaving in the morning and again on arriving at our destination at night

Curchy

April 20th 1918

The food was similar to that which we received at Levergies. We received no ill-treatment at all. There were about 12 infantrymen as guards and they did not interfere with us in any way. I had a conversation with one of the German guards, an RE man. He told me he had been fighting for three years the Russians, Romanians, Italians and on the western front and had never had leave. He said this was quite the usual thing. Judging by his manner and ideas he was still quite confident of the result of the war. There were no young men amongst the guards.

My chief complaint about my time of imprisonment is on account of the lack of food and the non-provision of washing facilities. I saw no physical ill-treatment. I did not come in contact with any other prisoner of war other than those I have mentioned. I saw some French but did not speak to them; they looked as if they had received about the same treatment as ourselves. At St Quentin, Haim and Curchy we were put into buildings for the night without beds or blankets or straw.

I escaped from Curchy on the night of 20th April 1918

Opinion of Examiner

This witness was somewhat below the average in intelligence, but gave his evidence well

J W CAMPBELL