

THE QUEEN'S BOOTLEGGER

A biography of Eric Sherbrooke Walker

Chapter One

One of our aircraft is missing

Soon after half past three on the morning of 4 July 1915, Lieutenant Eric Sherbrooke Walker of the Royal Flying Corps took off in darkness from 16 Squadron's airfield at Choques, in northern France, and headed past Béthune towards the front line. A few minutes later, climbing all the time, he and his new observer – Captain John Leech of the 8th Hussars – had left the British sector behind and were in enemy territory, still climbing as they flew over the German trenches and continued south east towards the old mining town of Douai.

It was a routine patrol for Eric, one that he had done many times before since gaining his pilot's wings at the beginning of the year. He was prepared for trouble as he crossed the German lines in the gathering dawn, but he was not expecting it. All was quiet on the Western Front that morning and had been for several weeks as both sides eyed each other warily across No Man's Land. The British were short of men, desperately awaiting reinforcements from the new army being trained in England. The Germans were fully occupied on the Russian front. Nobody was looking for a fight that day if one could be avoided, least of all Eric Walker.

The fourth of July was his birthday, for one thing, his twenty eighth birthday. He was going on leave, for another. He was due for a week's well-earned recuperation in

England, beginning as soon as he got back from his patrol. A pretty girl had sent him tickets for the theatre the following night. They were going out to dinner afterwards. 'Tall, curly-haired, blue-eyed and very good looking', according to a pre-war admirer, Eric was greatly looking forward to dinner in London with a pretty girl.¹

First, though, he had to complete his patrol. It was uneventful to begin with, just another sortie across the front line to be written up in his log book when he got back to base. They were attacked by a French pilot at one point, but shook him off by banking steeply to show the markings on the wings of their BE-2c fighter plane. It wasn't until they were approaching Douai, at a height of several thousand feet, that the German flak opened up and a birthday that had started with so much promise for Eric began to go seriously amiss.

They had reached their operational ceiling of 6,000 feet when the BE2's engine suddenly cut out and died. Eric moved quickly to restart it, but without success. The engine had lost all power and was refusing to respond. They were on their own, a mile above Douai, without a parachute between them as Eric struggled to keep control of the aircraft and prevent it from going into a spin.

Luckily for him, the BE-2 was sturdily built, easily capable of gliding down to earth and making a safe landing somewhere. Eric kept a firm hand on the controls as the aircraft began to drift downwards. They were too far from home to glide back to the British lines. He decided to land in the open fields around Douai instead.

The town's ancient belfry lay beyond his port wing tip as he searched for somewhere to come down. Eric just had time for a glimpse of a canal and a long, narrow wood near the town before coming in over a field of ripening corn. It wasn't ideal for a forced landing, but it was all there was. The plane hit the ground with a bump and cut a swathe through the corn before finally coming to rest near the end of the field.

Eric and Leech scrambled out. Petrol was pouring from a hole in the aircraft's fuel tank. It was the work of a moment to set it alight before the Germans arrived. They were already on their way as the plane burst into flames and the two British officers began to run, heading for the safety of the wood at the edge of the field.

'You look the sort of Englishman whose ancestors for several hundred years have shot partridges and ruled natives, but never done any work or earned any money,' a kind American once told Eric, in a fruitless attempt to dissuade him from a life of crime. 'How can you hope to compete with the cleverest brains in the American underworld?'²

The advice was well meant, but the American could not have been more wrong in his assessment. Eric Walker was certainly a gentleman, to the manner born, if not the actual manor. He was perfectly at ease in the world of the English country house, at which he had been a frequent and welcome guest in the lazy, lotus-eating days before the First World War. But he was also a good man in a fight, more than capable of seeing off a few American gangsters with a revolver, if the occasion demanded it. His long and sometimes rickety life saw him through two world wars and the Bolshevik revolution. It took him from bootlegging in Prohibition America via marriage to an Earl's daughter to pioneering Kenya, a historic night at Treetops with Princess Elizabeth, the hosting of innumerable Hollywood stars and the filming of *Born Free* at a house on his land. In the course of an extraordinary career, Eric found himself in more tight spots than he cared to remember, not least escape from prison camp with the help of a German girlfriend, a cutlass fight with Yankee pirates and a shootout with a crooked state trooper that necessitated Eric's hurried departure for Canada with the forces of the law in close pursuit. Yet he was always equal to the challenge. English

gentleman he might be, but Eric Walker was well able to compete with the best brains in the American underworld or any other gangsters either.

Yet there was little in his early years to suggest the remarkable future that lay in store for him. Eric Sherbrooke Walker could hardly have been more respectable when he was born in the leafy suburb of Edgbaston in July 1887. He was the eldest of five children of the Reverend George Sherbrooke Walker, late of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and his wife Jesse Elizabeth Carter. George was a Church of England clergyman and Eric grew up in a series of well-appointed rectories, in Birmingham first and later at March, in Cambridgeshire, where his father was rector of St Wendreda's. It was a world away from the life that Eric later knew as an adult.

George's father was a clergyman too, a former rector of Doddington, descended from an old Worcestershire family. The Walkers had a coat of arms, a family crest and a modest livery for their servants of black coat and silver buttons, but they were not particularly grand by the standards of the time. With five children to educate, the Reverend George was certainly not rich. His children all understood from an early age that they would have to make their own way in the world as soon as they reached adulthood.

Eric was educated privately for a while, then at Oakham school in what was then Leicestershire. Oakham was in dire straits at the time, a minor public school with fewer than seventy pupils at its lowest point, struggling to survive in the shadow of its near neighbour and traditional rival, Uppingham. Eric didn't stay there for long. In June 1902, when his father was vicar of Christ Church at Summerfields in Birmingham, he moved closer to home and became a pupil at King Edward's, the ancient school in Edgbaston, founded by the boy king Edward VI in 1552.

King Edward's was a very different proposition to Oakham, a strongly academic school for the children of Birmingham's burgeoning middle class. Among Eric's

contemporaries was J.R.R. Tolkien, later Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford and author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But where Tolkien enjoyed a stellar career as a bright scholarship boy, Eric's progress through the school was more steady than spectacular. He won a medal for gymnastics and played rugby for the First XV in his final year, but he was not a particularly distinguished scholar. The school remembered him more for possessing 'plenty of dash' on the rugby pitch than for his academic prowess off the field.³

Eric went up to Oxford nevertheless in the autumn of 1905. His plan was to become a clergyman in due course, like his father and grandfather before him. He enrolled at the Queen's College for a pass degree in Theology, with the intention of becoming a missionary thereafter. Insofar as he had any real idea of what to do with his life at the age of eighteen, it was to work for the Church of England in some far-flung corner of the British Empire and see something of a world that was still largely coloured pink on the map.

Queen's College noted on his arrival that Eric wasn't musical and couldn't sing, but was strong and healthy and enjoyed rugby: a 'hearty', in other words.⁴ Rooms were found for him in Front Quad and he was awarded the college's 1905 Archbishop's Exhibition for Missionary Candidates, a useful source of income for a cash-strapped rector's son. Electric light had reached Queen's in 1902, but tin baths were still the norm and the college remained very Victorian in many ways. Eric was required to furnish his rooms at his own expense when he arrived, buying most of what he needed from the previous occupant.⁵

His time at Oxford was uneventful. Eric persevered with his studies in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Philosophy, but it didn't take him long to decide that a career in the church was not for him. In the summer of 1907, at the end of his second year, he went to Canada and spent the long vacation working as a labourer on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. He returned in the autumn with only a few pence in his pocket, just as broke as when he had set out. But he had seen Canada and acquired a taste for open spaces and far-off

lands that remained with him for the rest of his life. Eric was determined to see more of the world after he had graduated, yet not as a missionary or anything to do with the church. He had decided that he was too much of a sinner to make a go of the church.

All of which left him with a problem when he graduated from Oxford in the summer of 1908. Eric was not the first young man to wonder where he went from there as he left the university for the last time. He wasn't the first to be short of money, either. But that didn't make it any easier as he set off for London with no clear idea of what he wanted to do with his life, beyond not being a vicar. His first priority was to find a job of some sort, any sort, so that he could cease to be a burden on his father. After that, he would have time to take stock and decide just what it was that the future held for him.

Fortunately for Eric, he found a congenial job almost at once. In September 1908, after attending a summer camp at Humshaugh in Northumberland, he joined the newly formed Boy Scout Association as the first Scout inspector for the south of England. The job was based at Covent Garden in London, but Eric's task insofar as it had been defined was to travel around the southern half of the country liaising with local committees and showing them how to set up troops of Boy Scouts. The job began officially on 1 October and paid three pounds a week plus expenses.

These were early days for the Scout movement. The idea of scouting had begun to gather momentum after the success of the first camp on Brownsea island in 1907 and the publication in May 1908 of Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*, a sensation when it first came out and now one of the best-selling books of all time. But the movement was in its infancy in 1908, with no proper supervision or coherent financial strategy. Nobody knew how the movement was going to develop over the next few years or where it was going to go. Eric's task was to bring order out of chaos and impose some sort of structure on the various Scout troops being formed all over the country.

He was shocked by the lack of organisation when he paid his first visit to the Boy Scouts office at 33 Bedford Mansions, Henrietta Street, on 21 September. He was even less impressed when his first task as the new Scout inspector was to arrange a display of camping equipment at Gamages department store in High Holborn. 'Mr Eric Walker is acting as my representative in the organisation of the Boy Scouts' Movement in England. He knows my ideas and intentions with regard to the same, and is willing to give any advice or suggestions that may be desired on the subject,' Baden-Powell had written, when Eric was appointed.⁶ Window dressing at Gamages was not what Eric had had in mind when he had taken the job.

Despite his misgivings, however, he was impressed by Baden-Powell, the Scout movement's leading light. Baden-Powell was still a serving officer in 1908, albeit on half-pay. He was a Lieutenant-General in the British army, one of the few national heroes to have emerged from the debacle of the South African war. His defence of Mafeking against a vastly superior Boer force had captured the British imagination at a time of humiliating defeats everywhere else. As such, Baden-Powell was the right man for the Scout movement, an inspirational figure who commanded respect wherever he went. He had little talent for office administration and often irritated Eric with his vagueness about financial matters, but was easily forgiven when he led from the front in so many other ways.

Baden-Powell in turn was equally impressed by Eric. Still a bachelor at fifty one, he took a keen interest in the young and was longing for children of his own. Nice-looking and personable, the young man just down from Oxford shared Baden-Powell's enthusiasm for cold baths and sleeping in the open and was in many ways the son Baden-Powell had never had. The two men took to each other at once and remained good friends until Baden-Powell's death with Eric hurrying to his side in 1941.

Eric had originally contracted to work for the Scouts for only six months. In the event, he remained for almost six years, operating from Covent Garden at first and later from

Victoria Street in Westminster, where the Scouts moved in April 1909. Towards the end of his time there, a rather prim office manager complained of Eric's very mild drinking and swearing, but the girls in the typing pool had happier memories.⁷

Eric had his own room some distance away, but was in and out all day with sheaves of papers. He was somewhat vague and dreamy in his manner and we wondered how he managed to get so much work done. He was fond of whistling hymn tunes, and one of the girls remarked caustically one day, 'For those at sea, I hope.' He had all the worry and we had all the fun and no great responsibility.⁸

Given the quality of Eric's whistling, it was probably fortunate that he was away from the office as often as not. The window dressing at Gamages had only been a temporary measure. His real brief was to travel the country on Scout business, sometimes on his own but often accompanying Baden-Powell as they went from place to place, attending Scout rallies and Town Hall gatherings, meeting local dignitaries and listening to interminable speeches at patriotic dinners. Eric's life over the next few years was one of constant travel: catching the train to the west country one day, then Cheltenham the next, then on to the midlands and East Anglia the following week, always on the move from one destination to the next.

It was an exhausting process and Eric was more than once admonished by Baden-Powell for working too hard. But it was also very exhilarating to be part of a movement that had so captured the popular imagination. The Scouts had caught on in Britain almost from the word go. The idea quickly caught on elsewhere as well: the British Empire first,

then the United States, South America and a host of other countries around the world. It wasn't long before Sir Robert Baden-Powell – knighted for his efforts in 1909 – was presiding over a global movement with Eric as one of his indefatigable lieutenants.

The work was rewarding in other ways as well, particularly for a sociable young man like Eric. Britain's great and good had rallied en masse to the Scout movement. Aristocrats and local worthies all over the country welcomed the hero of Mafeking into their houses and often invited him and Eric to stay the night. Eric's social life during his years as a Scout inspector embraced a veritable *Who's Who* of Edwardian society, everyone from the Duke of Rutland and the Earls of Albermarle, Dartmouth, Meath and Mount Edgumbe to Lord Wynford, Lord St Leven, Lord Willoughby de Broke, the Master of Burleigh, the Master of Downing College, Cambridge, the Oppenheimer family and General Sir Charles Warren, metropolitan commissioner of police at the time of the Jack the Ripper murders. Lady Scott Moncrieff warmed to him and Lady Cuninghame, ever short of suitable young men, invited him to a dance. White tie and tails were always a part of Eric's baggage when he travelled.

He formed a particular friendship with the family of the ninth Earl of Denbigh, who lived in a vast Victorian pile near Rugby. Among the Earl's ten children was the Honourable Henry Feilding (the author of *Tom Jones*, who spelled his surname differently, was descended from a previous Earl). Through Henry's interest in scouting, Eric came to know the rest of the family well enough to dine with them and go out to the theatre when they were in London.

He was also an occasional guest at Newnham Paddox, the family seat at Monks Kirby. The house dated from the 1870s, but the Feildings had lived at Monks Kirby for almost five hundred years. The first Earl had died fighting for the King in the Civil War. The second had been a Parliamentary general. The grounds of the previous great house on the

site had been landscaped by Capability Brown after completing his work at Stowe. Henry and his siblings had a treehouse on the estate, a secret hideout that could only be reached by ladder. Grown-ups could just about reach the lower part of the house, but the ladder to the upper branches had been deliberately made so rickety that only children could climb it. They sat up there out of adult reach, looking at saucy postcards of a kind that nowadays would not even merit a glance on the internet.⁹

No country estate in England is complete without a pile of mangelwurzels somewhere. At Newnham Paddox, it stood eighteen feet high and was covered in earth to form a steep mound. On one of his visits to the house, Eric was treated to the sight of two of the Earl's daughters trying to ride a Shetland pony to the top. They wore white dresses and sun bonnets and looked to be seven or eight years old. One had almost reached the summit when the pony lost its footing and fell backwards, rolling over and over with the little girl as they tumbled down the slope. She got up and laughed at the bottom.¹⁰

The other little girl was Lady Bettie Feilding, the sixth of Lord Denbigh's seven daughters. Eric thought no more of her at the time, or of the family's secret house in the trees. It wasn't until long after the Great War, when he met Bettie again at a party in London, that he began to see more in her than just Henry's little sister.

At the end of July 1910, Baden-Powell went to Canada as a guest of the Canadian scout movement. He took Eric, Captain A.G. Wade and sixteen prizewinning English scouts with him, one of whom was Henry Feilding. They sailed aboard the *Empress of Ireland* and stopped at Quebec on 4 August before disembarking at Montreal. From there, they travelled overland to Calgary, where they parted company. Eric and Wade took the boys camping in the Rockies for a couple of weeks while Baden-Powell continued his train journey to the Pacific before returning to Toronto for a national gathering of Canadian scouts.

This second trip to Canada confirmed Eric's enthusiasm for the open air and the outdoor life. The purpose of the camp was to introduce English boys to the life of a Canadian rancher or backwoodsman at a time when young men in England were being actively encouraged to emigrate and populate the dominions. The camp had much the same effect on Eric, who was beginning to tire of his work at the Scouts. It had always been a job to him rather than a vocation. He returned to England in September half-inclined to give his notice and emigrate somewhere, although not necessarily Canada, when there were so many other parts of the Empire that he had yet to see.

By 11 November 1911, after another year of scouting and the interminable office politics that went with it, Eric had had enough and was determined to go:

It's no good me staying with the Scouts. I can't agree with the way they run the show, and there is no chance of promotion as there is nothing to promote to! I wandered into the Colonial Office yesterday and found out about the East African posts... I shall get B-P to give me a chit to the Secretary for the Colonies, and get a job in East Africa.¹¹

Eric was also toying with the idea of a career in the City. He had found a job in Fenchurch Street with Chance and Hunt, a midlands chemical manufacturer, only to change his mind when the Scouts came up with a better offer rather than lose him. Eric's job was hastily upgraded to keep him happy. For the rest of his time at the Scouts he divided his work between fund-raising for the movement and acting as Baden-Powell's private

secretary. The change evidently suited him, because he was still working for Baden-Powell at the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914.

There was of course no chance of Eric remaining at the Scouts any longer when there was a war to go to. As a former public schoolboy and member of the Officers' Training Corps, he qualified automatically for a wartime commission in the army. He volunteered at once and was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in the Border Regiment on 29 August. He left the Scouts the same week and reported for duty to the civilian flying school at Brooklands, near Weybridge, where candidates for the Royal Flying Corps were being taught how to fly.

His progress thereafter was astonishingly swift by modern standards. As early as 9 October, the Royal Aero Club recorded that Lt Eric Walker had been granted an aviator's certificate on 4 October.¹² On the same day, the Scouts awarded him a leaving gratuity of £200 in appreciation of his 'high sense of duty, exercise of considerable tact and organising ability' while working for the movement.¹³ With more than a year's pay in his pocket, Eric left Brooklands on a high note and proceeded to the Royal Flying Corps' central flying school at Upavon, on the edge of Salisbury Plain. He spent the rest of the year learning to be a fighter pilot and was awarded his wings on 1 January 1915.¹⁴

He kept in close touch with Baden-Powell throughout his training. The Chief Scout had got married in 1912, at the ripe old age of fifty five. He was living with his young bride – two years younger than Eric – and their new son at Ewhurst Place in Sussex, a large country house with a view across the valley towards the moated battlements of Bodiam Castle. Baden-Powell was now officially retired from the army, but he was taking a keen interest in the war and followed Eric's career closely. He wrote to him on 3 December inviting Eric to drop in and see them any time he was passing.¹⁵

Eric took Baden-Powell at his word. One morning in February 1915, as a newly-fledged fighter pilot, he dropped in over the treetops and landed his flying machine in the field beside Ewhurst church. Then he strolled over to Ewhurst Place and invited himself in to breakfast, an event recalled many years later by Olave Soames, Lady Baden-Powell, in her memoirs:

Despite the dreadful slaughter in Flanders, there was still a certain gaiety in the attitude of young men to the war. Eric Walker, the Secretary of the Scout Association, had joined the Royal Flying Corps. With the same panache that characterised the Battle of Britain pilots in the last war, he 'parked' his aircraft by Ewhurst Church on his way over to France one morning in February 1915 and popped up to the house to have breakfast with us.¹⁶

The young man had passed his driving test and wanted to show off his new wheels. But the gaiety didn't last long. Eric's younger brother Basil was killed in Flanders on 18 April while serving with the Royal West Kents. For Eric, as for so many others, what had begun as a big adventure rapidly became something much more personal as the war progressed and the casualties began to mount.

Baden-Powell followed him to France in March 1915, ostensibly to inspect his old regiment, in reality just for an excuse to wear military uniform again. He inquired after Eric at RFC headquarters and looked for him at St Omer, Hazebrouck and Merville without success. They still managed to keep up their correspondence, however. Baden-Powell sent

his condolences on Basil's death and commiserated with Eric on what was evidently a continuing problem with his aircraft:

You seem to be a bit of a Jonah with your engines, but it is better to have a lot of small breakdowns rather than one big one, so I hope by now that you are immune.¹⁷

Eric's squadron was stationed at La Gorgue initially, before transferring to Choques at the end of May. He saw action several times and was nearly killed on 3 May after getting into a fight with a pair of German Albatros fighters. He forced the first to land near Orchies, but came under ground fire as he chased after the second. Eric survived unscathed, but Lieutenant Master, his observer, was hit in the leg and had to be taken to hospital when they returned to base.

Eric had a succession of observers thereafter – Corporal Bennett, Sergeant Jenkins, 2nd Lt Crabbie, Lieutenant Ackroyd, Lieutenant James, Captain Cairnes – before teaming up with John Leech on 4 July.¹⁸ But their flight that day didn't last very long. It was still only early morning as the engine failed again for at least the sixth time in a month and they came down in a hurry over Douai.

Eric and Leech ran for the wood as soon as they had set fire to the plane. Their first instinct as they vanished into the trees was to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the flames before the Germans arrived. After that, their plan was to hide up somewhere until evening and then somehow find a way back to their own lines under cover of darkness.



Baden-Powell welcomes Eric to Ewhurst for breakfast

Chapter Two

Behind enemy lines

The wood was several miles long and a few hundred yards wide. Beyond it lay a canal. Beyond the canal lay the medieval town of Douai, still relatively unscathed after coming under attack from both sides earlier in the war. According to Allied intelligence, there were 20,000 German troops around Douai. They were using the town as a rest area before returning to duty in the front line.

Eric and Leech reached the treeline without mishap and vanished into the undergrowth. The wood was the first place the Germans would look for them, but there was nothing they could do about that. They pressed on regardless and came after a while to a shallow stream running the length of the wood. Anybody familiar with *Scouting for Boys* knew what to do next. The Germans were almost certainly pursuing them with tracker dogs, so Eric jumped in with both feet and led the way along the bed of the stream in his fleece-lined flying boots to throw the dogs off the scent.

He and Leech splashed southwards for several hundred yards before arriving at a wide stone wall that ran down to the water's edge. To confuse the dogs still further, they transferred to the wall and continued precariously along the top until the trees began to thin out and they caught a glimpse of a row of workmen's cottages beyond. The cottages had evidently been commandeered by the Germans, because the area at the rear was full of troops performing their morning ablutions at wooden washstands.

The Germans were about forty yards away, by Eric's calculation. The vegetable garden between them and the edge of the wood included several rows of green peas on climbing frames. It wasn't the obvious place to hide, so close to the German billets, but it was probably the last place the Germans would think of looking. Hiding in plain sight was a

better bet than remaining in the wood, which the Germans were certain to search. Emerging cautiously from the foliage, Eric and Leech crawled forward and concealed themselves in a double row of peas about twenty five yards from the nearest German, where they settled down uncomfortably to wait for nightfall.

Their plan was to escape as soon as it grew dark. The British lines were only a few miles away, but there was no chance of getting back that way. If the Germans didn't shoot them as they tried to cross No Man's Land, their own side certainly would. The only realistic option was to head for neutral Holland, seventy miles to the north. Travelling by night, hiding up by day, there was no reason why they shouldn't reach the frontier within three or four days at most and find a way of getting across. Others had done it before them. Eric and Leech could too.

Like all RFC aircrew, they were well equipped for the journey. It was routine for pilots to carry a map, compass and supply of gold sovereigns in a leather belt when flying over enemy territory. Eric had a couple of theatre tickets as well, which were no use to him any more. He and Leech were in enemy-occupied territory, but the natives were all on their side. The French would help them escape, given the chance. So would the Belgians as they proceeded northwards. It was only the Germans who stood in their way.

The hours dragged interminably until darkness. They could hear dogs barking and soldiers shouting as they searched the wood. From time to time enemy aircraft flew low overhead, apparently looking for them. Eric and Leech grew peckish as the day wore on and shelled a few peas, which they ate raw, but could find nothing more substantial to eat. They had been lying in the vegetable garden for almost eighteen hours before the night quietened down and they judged it safe to emerge at last.

They didn't get very far in the darkness before discovering that the area around Douai was surrounded by canals – a defensive measure in the 17th century – and that every

canal bank and crossing was guarded by German troops. There were patrols all over the place, blocking their every move. It was impossible to strike out for the north, as they had intended. They were forced to abandon the attempt towards dawn. They retreated into a cornfield instead, rearranging the stalks behind them as they lay in hiding for another day.

Aircraft came looking for them again as the sun came up, but no more soldiers until just before dusk. These ones had tracker dogs on leashes as they advanced. They were about a hundred yards away when Eric heard an animal rustling in the corn. Assuming that it was a tracker dog, he decided to lie low and play dead in the hope that it would go away again:

I lay flat on my face, and when the animal seemed to be within about two yards of me, I took a deep breath and lay still. He came and smelt all over me, beginning with my feet and ending by breathing down my neck. It was the longest one and a half minutes of my life. My lungs were near to bursting when he rustled away again and my breath came whistling out like a burst football bladder. I never saw him and he may, of course, have been merely some stray dog, but whatever he may have been, it was a relief when he went.¹

They tried the canals again that night, but with no more luck than before. There were German sentries every fifty yards, clearly visible against the night sky. Yet the Germans couldn't man every crossing for ever. They would surely have to give up after another day or two, if the British flyers hadn't been found by then. Eric and Leech decided

to sit tight for a while before making another attempt at a breakout. They spent the next day lying up again in a cornfield, waiting quietly for night to fall before trying their luck once more.

They were desperately hungry by then. After almost three days without food, they knew they couldn't survive much longer without something to eat. They had spotted some labourers' cottages at the edge of the field. Taking a chance, Eric tiptoed up to the nearest one as soon as it grew dark and knocked on the door.

The old Frenchman who opened it was not pleased to see him. He begged Eric to go away at once. The place was swarming with troops and there were Germans in all the other cottages. Not only that, there were notices up everywhere announcing that anyone caught helping the British flyers would be shot at once and their house burned down.

Eric apologised, but he had *faim*. He had to eat. To get rid of him, the Frenchman agreed that he might perhaps drop some food at the edge of the cornfield next morning, if Eric was lucky. Then he scuttled back inside and closed the door again before Eric could argue any further.

Dawn found Eric and Leech keeping a close eye on the edge of the field. True to his word, the Frenchman appeared shortly before first light with a scythe over his shoulder. He dropped something just inside the field before setting off to work. Creeping forward, Eric and Leech discovered a bottle of wine and what appeared to be the hind leg of a dog. It looked as if it had been cooked, but with French cuisine it was difficult to know. They ate it anyway and were sufficiently refreshed to spend the rest of that day avoiding the Germans as they made their way eastwards around Douai, trying to find a way across the canal that wasn't closely guarded.

By the evening of their fourth day on the run, they had abandoned all hope of finding an unguarded crossing. They had concluded that the only way to get across was to swim for it. And for that, in their condition, they needed help.

There was a cottage next to the towpath. Seeing a chink of light, Eric knocked on the door. He barged in as soon as it opened, to prevent it being slammed in his face again. A startled old man and his wife surveyed him without enthusiasm as he stood there in his Royal Flying Corps uniform explaining who he was and asking if he could borrow a wooden washtub to float his clothes across the canal.

The old couple weren't keen. Eric told them that his uniform and fur-lined boots were already heavy enough, without getting them wet. He and Leech had a much better chance of fording the canal if they swam naked with a wooden tub in front of them to keep them afloat. They could run much faster too, if their clothes weren't sopping wet.



Douai canal

The French still weren't keen. Eric produced a couple of gold sovereigns to change their minds. At that, patriotism overcame their reservations. Of course Eric could have a tub! For France!

Shoving the tub into his hands, they insisted that he leave at once, pointing out that the barge on the opposite side of the canal was full of sleeping Germans. A few minutes later, after hiding stark naked in the bushes as a horseman trotted past, Eric and Leech dragged the tub down to the canal and launched themselves onto the water.

Choosing an aiming point on the opposite bank equidistant between two sentries, they set off, pushing their clothes in front of them. To their relief, no one spotted them as they swam. They reached the other side of the canal without mishap and crept ashore. They were across the canal at last! Another few hundred yards and they would be in open country, on their way to Holland and freedom.

Eric and Leech got dressed again behind some reeds. There was a railway line at the top of the canal bank. Creeping forward along a row of freight trucks, they were just heading around the engine at the front when they heard a cry of 'Halt!' Turning round, they found themselves looking down the business end of a rifle as a German sentry invited them in no uncertain terms to put up their hands.²

Chapter Three

The Skeleton at Mainz



Mainz citadel and rampart

A few days later, Eric was sent to the prison camp at Mainz, the big old fortress town on the Rhine near Frankfurt. The citadel at Mainz was several hundred years old and had been used as a barracks before the war. Since then, it had been transformed into Oflag XII-B, a detention camp for Allied prisoners of war.

It was a forbidding sight on the march up from the station. Some officers remembered being called ‘schweinhunde’ by women who spat on them as they passed.¹ The citadel was surrounded by high walls and entered by an ornate main gate leading into a gloomy tunnel with another gate at the far end. The outer gate clanged shut behind the new arrivals before the inner one was unlocked. It opened onto a giant quadrangle, about a hundred yards square, which was the citadel’s main courtyard. It was there that the prisoners paraded for roll call and took their daily exercise. The courtyard had evidently been used as a rifle range before the war, because there were still dummy targets painted along the walls.²



Main gate, Mainz citadel

The usual procedure for new arrivals was a grilling by an intelligence officer, followed by a meal and then a bath. The newcomers were allowed to keep their underwear

and boots, but the rest of their clothes were taken away for disinfection before they were permitted to wear them again. Some of the British at Mainz had been prisoners since Mons and Le Cateau at the very beginning of the war. Without fresh uniforms, they were already beginning to look shabby when Eric arrived, not nearly as military as they would have wished.

The barracks' pre-war facilities remained available to the new occupants. There was a modest canteen for the prisoners and a billiard room with several tables. The prisoners slept in wooden bunks in the old barrack rooms, some of them light and airy, others narrow and dark with bars over the windows to prevent any attempts at escape. The overall effect was deeply depressing. Evelyn Waugh's elder brother Alec, who arrived at Mainz some time after Eric, remembered his barrack block as being 'like a dungeon' and complained bitterly of the claustrophobia he felt in captivity.³

Mainz itself was lovely. The citadel stood on a rise at the edge of the old town, with a magnificent view of the cathedral from the upper windows, the Rhine beyond and the hills in the distance. But the effect was spoiled for the prisoners by the barbed wire in the foreground, and the sentries patrolling the walkways. They might as well have been on the moon for all the enjoyment they got from looking at Mainz from their windows.

There were several hundred prisoners in the citadel: French, Belgian and Russian officers, as well as British. Most of the British were former public schoolboys for whom prison camp was simply an extension of boarding school. They had adapted cheerfully to their new environment and were making the best of it when Eric arrived. Opportunities for sport were limited, but there were books to read, and amateur theatricals, societies and hobbies. Even so, time passed with agonising slowness. Every new arrival was surrounded at once and bombarded with questions about the progress of the war. Nobody was enjoying life at Mainz, not even the ones who were secretly glad to be out of the fighting.

It did not take Eric long to decide that he had to escape. It was his duty to do so, as a British officer, but it was also his pleasure. He did not have the temperament for prison camp. Eric was an escaper, if ever there was one, a restless spirit for whom any confinement was a challenge. Some people might be prepared to sit out the war in Mainz's grim citadel, passing the time as best they could until the peace, but not Eric. As a valuable pilot, he was determined to escape at the first opportunity and get back to England as soon as he could.

Others were of the same mind, but they knew it wouldn't be easy. Nobody had ever escaped from Mainz. The citadel's main buildings were surrounded by the stone ramparts of the old star fort, fifty feet high in most places. Between the ramparts and the barrack blocks ran two fences of wire netting patrolled continuously by sentries with fixed bayonets. A few escapers had managed to penetrate the first fence but nobody had got through both, not least because the sentries didn't hesitate to use their bayonets at the slightest provocation. They routinely beat up anyone caught trying to escape with rifle butts and were not restrained by their officers. Some of the officers actively encouraged the use of physical violence to control the prisoners under their command.

Eric remained undeterred. He soon made friends with Ian Fairweather of the Cheshire Regiment and an Irish aristocrat named Leo Graham-Toler, both of whom shared his yearning to be free. Fairweather reminded Eric of a newly caught zoo animal as he wandered the length of the wire fence, endlessly looking for a way out. Graham-Toler, heir to the Earl of Norbury, joined Eric in his first serious attempt at escape: a plan to walk out of the gate disguised as German officers which foundered at the last minute when the Germans abandoned the greatcoats that Eric and Graham-Toler had so painstakingly prepared and switched to capes instead.

Eric also got in touch with the Baden-Powells soon after his arrival at Mainz. Initially, he just wanted to let them know that he was all right and still in one piece. The

Baden-Powells responded by writing to ask if there was anything he needed from home.

With escape on his mind, Eric needed all sorts of things, as an early letter from the *Offiziergefangenlager MAINZ* cryptically revealed:

6 September 1915

Dear Lady Baden-Powell,

You kindly promised some jam, butter or conserve; I do not dare to remind you! Probably it's not necessary, but if any should come, like everything coming from you it would be opened and eaten with more enjoyment than things from other sources.

You have not mentioned in your letters the one and only Douggie. I trust he is wounded superficially only? The optician you recommended me examined me and gave me the best monacles I have ever used. It was plain those I had used before had glass of inferior quality. I have had no other as good and find his lenses are certainly the best.

At the end of my last flight my glass was broken, and as that eye is troubling me I should be so grateful if you would order me another. I forget the address hence me troubling you. He knows the lens but not the exact size, so perhaps you would tell him to send two each of several sizes. As you know, I wear a small black cord attached.

The letter was puzzling, even by Eric's eccentric standards. Duggie was the Baden-Powells' spaniel, in perfectly good health, so far as anyone knew. Olave Baden-Powell had never had any discussion with Eric about opticians that she could recall. She wondered what he was driving at as she read on.

Miss Nugent tells me that Sir R's secretary has gone abroad
- when is he expected back?

Many congratulations to Peter on reaching his seventh year. I suppose when I return he will have arrived at the stage when he demands fairy stories from all comers - in which case I fear I shall come off badly as the only one I can remember at all is the one about Jack the Giant Killer and his famous boots! But there is plenty of time here for thinking out some more.

Do you know that our mutual friend Professor Smythe Stephenson has written a book on butterflies? Just before my capture I had waded through it from a sense of duty. Please tell him when you meet him and say I hope he will think that I have benefited from it - but you will find this letter like the design on the cover of that book dull and uninteresting, so I will stop before I bore you... By the way, things sent out here get bumped about a good deal, so a wooden box is advisable for packing.⁴

Olave understood now. Eric was writing in code to fool the Germans. Sir R's secretary was Eric himself, evidently contemplating escape from prison camp. Peter was the Baden-Powells' son and heir. He was two, not seven, as Eric well knew. There had to be some significance in the deliberate mistake, since Eric had also alluded to Jack the Giant Killer and the seven league boots. Their mutual friend Professor Smythe Stephenson was Olave's husband – Sir Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell – who had indeed just written a book with a butterfly on the cover. *My Adventures as a Spy* included a fanciful account of trips to Dalmatia and the Straits of Messina in the early 1890s, when Baden-Powell claimed to have mapped coastal fortifications by disguising them as butterfly markings in his sketch book.

Olave showed the letter to her husband, who agreed that it was in code. Perhaps there was a hidden message in every seventh word, commencing with the word 'begin'? At any rate, Eric clearly wanted a map, if he was so interested in butterflies, and probably also a prismatic compass, if his talk of monocles and black cords meant what they thought it did. And he would be examining any pots of jam the Baden-Powells sent him with more than usual interest.

The Baden-Powells set to work. Their first task was to crack the code that Eric was using, so that they could read between the lines of his letters and know exactly what he wanted from them. It didn't take them long to establish that it was indeed based on reading every seventh word, with occasional variations to keep everyone guessing ('Congratulate young Peter from me on this, his eighth birthday. I always thought he was seven until I looked it up in my little notebook today').⁵ After that, all the Baden-Powells had to do was send Eric whatever escaping equipment he needed hidden in Red Cross parcels from home.

It wasn't that easy, of course. The prisoners' parcels at Mainz were carefully searched before being handed out. A list of parcels went up at eight thirty every morning.

The recipients had to report to the Ausgabe, where the guards opened the parcels in front of them and emptied packets of tea and cocoa into baskets to make sure nothing illicit had been hidden. All tins were opened too and no papers could be taken away. British officers who complained were told that the precautions were the fault of the French, whose families were smuggling knives and metal files to them in presents from home. French officers were told that they were the fault of the British, who were receiving corkscrews in their bully beef.⁶

Knowing that the parcels would be searched, Eric compiled his shopping list with more than average care ('Please don't send tinned food').⁷ His first request to the Baden-Powells was innocuous enough: an inflatable air cushion for use as a pillow, to which the Germans could have no objection. He remarked how cheerful it would look if one side was covered in material of hunting pink and the other in Oxford blue, without mentioning that these were the exact colours of the facings he needed to transform a Russian prisoner's greatcoat into one resembling a German officer's.

The Baden-Powells duly obliged and sent him an air cushion in February 1916, the first of many similar parcels from home. The parcels took weeks and sometimes months to arrive, but the Baden-Powells kept them coming and managed to supply Eric with a steady stream of contraband throughout the war. All went well until Eric asked for a packet of cigarettes drugged with a powerful narcotic to knock out the prison guards. Perhaps mistaking Eric's interest in seriously spaced out reefers, Baden-Powell responded with a warning against drug abuse, as Eric later gently chided Olave:

He sent me some dried meat and a box of crystallised fruit
the other day – the dear old man! Also a letter warning me
solemnly against using narcotics, all because I told

Dougie I smoked cigarettes to send me to sleep at night!⁸

Eric persisted with his request, but Olave Baden-Powell was unable to oblige:

I was so awfully sorry not to be able to send you those cigarettes that you wanted, but though we asked at several shops we found that they can't be made now anywhere.⁹

Even more difficult was Eric's next request. At a time of increasing shortages in England, he decided in December 1917 that what he really needed to get out of prison camp was a pair of insulated wirecutters ('cut hers') concealed inside a deboned ham.¹⁰ He wrote to tell Olave so:

Has Uncle sent you the usual Christmas ham this year? I hear he has a bone to pick with you about one or two trifling, but annoying events that occurred the night he took you to the theatre, but come what may, you'll get the ham!... Next time you go down to the Haymarket, would you go into Hill and Sons and order me a 'Little Giant' ham? They've sent them here before and very good they are. It will be a pleasant change after tinned food.¹¹

The Baden-Powells were stumped this time. Wirecutters were still freely available in England, but ham? No one could remember when they had last seen a ham. Eric evidently didn't realise there was a war on, if he was asking for ham.

Baden-Powell gave the problem some serious thought and then did what all great commanders do in a crisis. He delegated the task to his secretary:

Miss N. Please get a ham, remove bone and put wire-cutters
in its place.¹²

Miss Nugent rose enthusiastically to the challenge. She had been in the typing pool when Eric worked at the Scouts, a big admirer of his from behind her typewriter. If Eric in prison camp needed a ham, Eileen Nugent was the woman to find him one from somewhere.

Now I was up against it. But something had to be done. My brother's father-in-law in Yorkshire bred pigs, and it was through him that I eventually ran a ham to earth and got it safely through. Only to get another demand: 'A compass inside pears'. Here again the compass was easier than the pears.¹

Yet compasses and wirecutters were not what Eric needed to get out of Mainz. After the failure of his plan to walk out of the gate dressed as a German officer, he had teamed up with Ian Fairweather to find an alternative exit instead. In the spring of 1916, after discussing and rejecting several other proposals, they decided to escape by way of an old shed perched beside the rampart overlooking the town below.

The rampart was inaccessible, but the prisoners were permitted to use the shed for table tennis. On one side of the table, a bored guard sat against the wall selling glasses of hock and seltzer to his captive audience at outrageous prices. On the other, a group of

equally bored prisoners watched the table tennis from several tiers of boxed-in wooden seats. Eric's plan was to prise up one of the wooden planks at the rear of the seats, squeeze through the gap and start digging a tunnel from underneath the platform.

It didn't need to go far. Nine feet down should clear the foundations. After that, they could strike out horizontally towards the rampart wall. Once they breached the rampart, they could shin down the rest of the wall on a home-made rope. Neither of them had any idea how far it was to the bottom, but that was a problem they would solve when they came to it.

Eric and Fairweather carried out a feasibility study before work began. It took them two days to loosen one of the seats in the hut without the guard noticing. On the third day, shielded from view by some fellow prisoners, Eric dropped through the hole and waited quietly until the plank had been replaced over his head. Then he turned to the concrete floor and began gently chipping away at it with a stolen chisel.

Almost immediately, a slip of red paper appeared between two of the planks above his head. The danger signal was accompanied by a discreet knock on the wood to say that he was making too much noise. Eric tried again, less noisily, only to receive another red card. Abandoning the attempt, he pushed a piece of yellow matchbox up through the crack. It was the prearranged signal for *I am under the loose plank. Let me out.*¹⁴

Next day, Eric was back again with a sock, a hammer, a pair of nail scissors and a candle stolen from the Russians' chapel. Wrapping the scissors in the sock to muffle the sound, he began to attack the concrete again. Several hours later, after working like a demon, he had managed to chip a hole in the floor about half the size of a small matchbox.

History does not record whether the Count of Monte Cristo's attempts to dig himself out of the Château d'If formed any part of Eric's prison reading, but both were determined men. Where the Count kept digging, so did Eric. After several weeks, he and

Fairweather had managed to drill through six inches of concrete and make a hole in the floor as big as a fist. After that, they came to bare earth and found the going much easier. It wasn't long before the hole was two feet square and they were able to begin the serious task of sinking a vertical shaft down through the foundations before turning horizontally towards the rampart overlooking Mainz.



Mainz cathedral from the ramparts

Graham-Toler had joined the escape by then. So had two other officers: Captain Willie Loder-Symonds of the Wiltshire Regiment and 2nd Lieutenant Montagu Brocas Burrows of the 5th Dragoon Guards. Between the five of them they made good progress on the shaft, two of them taking it in turns to dig out the earth and redistribute it underneath the seats while the other three sat watching the table tennis and noisily encouraging the players. They were joined at one point by a mildly inebriated German officer who sat on the loose plank discussing his English wife while Fairweather and Graham-Toler, alerted by a double knock and a red card, crouched quiet as mice right underneath him.

As soon as the shaft was nine feet deep they turned outwards and began to dig towards the ramparts. They hadn't gone very far when they came to some enormous slabs of sandstone that were impossible to shift. There was an eight inch gap between two of them. Scooping the soil out with his fingers, Graham-Toler found himself staring into what appeared to be a stone chamber beyond. In the middle of the chamber, lit only by the flickering light of his candle, lay the headless remains of a skeleton.

It wasn't a story book skeleton, fully assembled with gleaming white bones. It lay in bits, dingy and grey, covered in minute particles that shimmered in the candlelight. Its age was hard to determine. There had been a citadel at Mainz since Roman times and a Benedictine abbey in the middle ages. The current citadel dated from the 17th century and had seen action against the Prussians in 1793. Graham-Toler had no idea how long the skeleton had been lying there, but it certainly wasn't a recent arrival.

After enlarging the hole, he inserted a poker bent into a hook at the end and fished out a thighbone first, and then most of the rest of the skeleton. The pieces were passed up the shaft to his companion, who solemnly stored them underneath the wooden seats while the table tennis continued unabated. The hole was still too small to get through and Graham-Toler had no hope of shifting the sandstone. He began to dig around it instead, shoving the spoil into the hole to save carrying it up the shaft. A little later, he struck something hard with his poker which turned out to be the skeleton's missing skull.

That afternoon, the five escapers met to discuss the find. Three of them thought that the tomb – if that was what it was – might form part of a buried chapel, with stairways and passages and perhaps a secret way out. The Benedictines might well have needed a secret way out with Martin Luther after them. Eric disagreed, but the others voted three to two to break through the sandstone somehow and see if they could find an alternative exit that would save them the bother of continuing with their tunnel.

The work was done next day by Graham-Toler and Loder-Symonds. They managed to dig the slab out and force a way into the tomb, only to find that Eric was right and there was solid stone all around. They had no chance of escaping that way.

Disappointed, they returned to the tunnel. It was a race against time as they continued to dig. They could hear the guns on the western front from Mainz, the same guns that the Baden-Powells could hear from their Sussex garden. It seemed to the prisoners, in the spring of 1916, that the guns were coming closer all the time. The war would be over soon. They needed to move fast if they were to rejoin their own side and do their bit while they still had the chance.

The work continued without further interruption. When not tunnelling, the prisoners were quietly gathering food, maps, compasses and homemade rucksacks for the breakout. They had made civilian clothes out of khaki uniforms dyed with ink or coffee and they were assembling a rope from sheets, blankets, cloth and whatever bits of string they could find. They had no idea how long it should be, but they guessed a hundred feet to be on the safe side. All was going according to plan as they burrowed forward towards the rampart wall and prepared to make their exit. Then disaster struck, just as they were almost ready to go.

The prisoners were assembled for Appel, morning roll call, in the courtyard. Instead of being dismissed after they had been counted, as usually happened, they were addressed by the camp commandant, who had an important announcement to make. He told the British that they were leaving next day. The entire contingent was to be moved to another camp in Germany. They should start packing at once.

Eric and the others were thunderstruck. Leave Mainz? Now? Just when they were ready to escape. It was out of the question. They couldn't leave Mainz now.

Yet they could hardly tell the commandant that. Instead, they had a hurried discussion as soon as Appel was over. Two of the five were determined to go ahead with

the escape, come what may. Rather than waste all that effort, they decided to hide overnight in the tunnel with food, water, rope, candles and everything else they needed to make their escape, lying low until the British had left and all was quiet again. Then they could finish digging the tunnel, slide down the rope and head for Holland or Switzerland before anyone knew they were missing.

The plan depended on their absence being covered up next morning as the rest of the British departed for their new camp. It might just work, if someone else answered their names at the final roll call and then quietly shifted from the middle rank to the rear to be counted again as the guard went down the line checking the numbers. Eric was sceptical, but two of the others thought it worth a shot. They wanted to try, anyway.

Accordingly, the British were two officers short when they assembled for the march to the station next morning. Several hundred officers carried their meagre possessions in sacks or suitcases as they paraded in the courtyard, waiting to answer their names at Appel. All went well to begin with. The missing prisoners' names were answered loud and clear, but the head count was more of a problem. Suspecting that something of the sort might happen, the Germans posted guards at the end of every rank to prevent anyone from switching ranks and being counted twice.

The German Hauptmann ordered a recount when the numbers didn't tally. After a third count, he called out the guard. The prisoners were forced to remain standing in the courtyard for several hours while the citadel was searched from top to bottom. It took the guards forever to find the tunnel under the ping pong table, but they got there in the end.

The two escapers were hauled out and taken to the punishment cells.¹⁵ The rest of the British picked up their bags and departed for their new camp. Eric went with them. He still had his air cushion in his case as they marched out of the gate and set off down the hill

for the station. Eric knew just what to do with it if the opportunity arose and he was able to make his escape before reaching the new camp.

Chapter Four

'Try, try, try again'

Eric was sent to Friedberg after Mainz, and later to Weilburg, Ströhen and a whole string of other camps across Germany. Over the next two and a half years, he was sent to at least seven camps in all, some of them more than once. No sooner had he arrived at a place than he was planning to escape. According to *The Times* obituarist at his death, 'this freedom-loving man escaped over 36 times' during the 1914-1918 war.¹ Eric himself put the figure at a much more modest eleven escape attempts, most of which ended in failure.² But he never gave up trying, not even towards the end of the war when the Germans were beaten and deliverance was at hand.

The escape attempts took a variety of different forms. At Friedberg, he dug a tunnel from underneath a rabbit hutch near the wire – a precursor of the wooden horse escape of the Second World War – only to be dragged out and taken to punishment camp by an amused guard. At Friedberg also, he and the famous Canadian escaper Shorty Colquhoun built a chute out of deckchairs and tried to toboggan across the fence from an upstairs window. Others contemplated building a pulley along the same lines and sliding to freedom down a power cable that ran from the roof of the Kommandantur to a pylon outside the wire.

Elsewhere, Eric persuaded four British orderlies to carry him out with the camp rubbish one day and dump him on the tip outside the gate, there to remain hidden until nightfall. The Germans usually poked the rubbish container with a bayonet before letting it through, but Eric arranged for a diversion at the crucial moment. It was pure bad luck that an off-duty sentry happened to come around the corner at the wrong time and spot Eric's face in the tip just as the orderlies were piling rubbish on top of him.

His other schemes included a boxing match to divert the guards while he cut the fence with Miss Nugent's wirecutters, a plan to build a raft and windsurf to neutral Denmark, and another to hike to the Baltic port of Rostock with a Scotsman named Hamilton, whose mother had bribed a neutral fisherman (identified by his red cap and the password 'natürlich') to take them both to Scandinavia.³ 'My friend's mother will pay' was essential German vocabulary for an escaper. Eric was impressed too by a Russian officer who contrived to fake his own death and have himself sent to Sweden in a coffin. He tried all sorts of wildly imaginative ideas to get away from prison camp, but it wasn't until the summer of 1917, after innumerable previous failures, that he managed to make his first successful escape from captivity.

The camp was a former hotel at Augustabad, a village near the Müritz lake district north of Berlin. Details are sketchy, but Eric got away on 6 July and headed west at once, walking at night and lying up by day, aiming for Rostock. He avoided recapture for an unprecedented fourteen days before bumping unexpectedly into a sentry on a bridge in the dark, as he later ruefully recounted to the Baden-Powells:

23 December 1917

I heard from the Professor's late secretary not long ago. He had indefinite leave granted him – or rather he took it – but was forced to return after two weeks to his irksome job. But he hopes for better luck next time. He tells me he is asking the Professor to help him in one or two little speculations he is making.⁴

Eric was taken to Parchim after his recapture. It was an enormous work camp for the other ranks, south of Rostock. Some fifty thousand Allied prisoners of war worked the surrounding farms and factories in conditions of indescribable squalor. Eric spent a month under punishment arrest at Parchim for trying to escape. He was forbidden to talk to the other prisoners without a German present, but he made contact nevertheless and was horrified at what British NCOs and privates had to tell him about the conditions in the camp.

Rags, disease, starvation. Prisoners casually bayoneted or tied to stakes and beaten, sometimes to death. Others dying at their work and buried where they fell. Men with open wounds, crippled by frostbite, forced to push trucks and pump water far beyond their strength. Filthy bandages, broken limbs wrongly set. Food parcels routinely plundered, soap and tobacco stolen. Protesters punished if they complained. Eric saw enough with his own eyes over the course of a month to realise that something was seriously wrong at Parchim.

The camp was inspected regularly by Dutch diplomats, but they rarely saw anything that the Germans didn't want them to see. The guards 'lied fluently and convincingly' when questioned and the prisoners had little redress: 'If they succeed in getting a visit from a neutral official the men who complained get seven bells knocked out of them afterwards.'⁵ The men were utterly at the mercy of the German guards, without any British officer to protect them.

Eric counted four hundred and thirty seven graves in the camp cemetery. He himself officiated at two funerals in August 1917, since the camp had no clergyman. Private Albert James Reynolds of the Machine Gun Corps died in the prison hospital of causes that the Germans refused to disclose. Private Sydney Welch of the Royal Berkshire Regiment was crippled with rheumatism and left to die without treatment.⁶ Eric the parson's son buried

them both with a proper funeral service and a German interpreter standing over him to prevent secret messages from being passed at the graveside.

Outraged at everything he had seen at Parchim, Eric sent a report to Baden-Powell at the first opportunity. He had already managed to get a photograph to him of a Russian soldier tied to a stake and beaten by a German guard. He followed it up with a long screed in microscopic handwriting about the disgraceful conditions in the camp. Dated 1 September 1917, the manuscript was smuggled out through Holland and did not reach Baden-Powell for several months. Eric began with a few details of his escape and recapture before launching into a denunciation of the indignities suffered by the other ranks at Parchim:

I don't think that any officer has been in a men's camp and been able to send an uncensored report of it, so if the account below is any use I hope you will put it in the hands of people who will *do* something and not 'file it for reference' like similar documents...

Nothing can exceed what has happened and is happening... We officers can raise Cain when we get impolitely treated. The men are completely at the mercy of the German NCOs and men. 'Complaints to the Dutch ambassador', 'arrangements with the British government' and such are pure eyewash as far as the men are concerned...

The men were evidently unwilling to speak freely before the German officer. They seemed neglected and one man who I saw stripped was very dirty... Feet often frostbitten and

men suffering from starvation, exposure and every form of ill treatment, in the last stage of raggedness, having lived in clothes they were captured in for several months, and covered with vermin... Neutral ambassadors and their representatives only see what they are intended to see by the Germans and it is very difficult for NCOs and men to get at them.⁷

Eric himself was treated with wary respect by the Germans at Parchim, but they were mightily relieved to see the back of him after he had served his sentence. Rather than return him to his old camp, where he might get up to his old tricks again, they decided to send him to Weilburg instead, a camp full of French and Russian prisoners east of Koblenz. They thought a camp for French and Russians would keep him out of trouble, as the only Englishman in the place.

The camp was in a former barracks on the outskirts of the town. No one was around when Eric arrived after lunch, so his German escort left him to make his own way to room 17. He found it full of Russians having an afternoon siesta. They crowded around at once to salute him and shake hands as they welcomed him to his new quarters.

None of them spoke English, so Eric quickly had to learn Russian, a language that turned out to be very useful to him in later years. The Russians told him about a particularly sadistic guard who had been lured into a barrack block and beaten unconscious. A former medical student had quickly dissected the body while the other prisoners fed it piece by piece into wood-burning stoves, hammering the bones into powder. Within twenty minutes of entering the room, the guard had vanished for ever.

The Russians were also digging an escape tunnel and invited Eric to join in. As an experienced tunneller, he reported for duty, as all Englishmen must, in vest, pants and a handkerchief knotted around his head to keep the earth out of his hair. He worked three hour shifts for several weeks, only to be frustrated again when he was removed to yet another camp before the tunnel was finished.

The war was beginning to take a turn for the better by then. The German offensive of early 1918 had brought their troops so close to Paris that they had been able to see the Eiffel tower through their field glasses before their advance ran out of steam. The tide had turned decisively thereafter. As spring turned to summer and German losses continued to mount at the front, it was obvious even from prison camp that the war could not last much longer. Eric decided that it was now or never if he was to make his escape and get back into the fighting before it was all over.

His friend Willie Loder-Symonds had already made a successful home run from Schweidnitz camp. Escaping in March 1918, he had got back to England less than a fortnight later. After an audience with the King at Buckingham Palace, he had then joined the Royal Flying Corps, only to be killed in a flying accident in May, the fourth Loder-Symonds brother to die in the war.

Eric didn't want to be killed, but he did very badly want to rejoin the fighting before it was over. Like many prisoners, he hated sitting helplessly in prison camp when so many others were fighting and dying for their country. He took some comfort from having tied up numerous German troops in their searches for him around Douai and other places, but it wasn't the same as active service. Eric was racked with guilt too about asking the Baden-Powells and others for food when he himself was doing so little for the war effort, as he recorded in his prison diary:

Every time we open a food parcel from home we have a feeling of guilt. They are short of food, but send good provisions here to feed our useless mouths. We might as well be dead for all the good we are to our country.⁸

Above all, though, Eric was bitter about his experiences at Parchim. After seeing the callous way the other ranks had been treated, particularly the Russians, he was determined to get back into the war before it ended and extract revenge for all the atrocities he had witnessed:

I always felt very angry when looking at the vast prisoner-of-war cemeteries with their thousands of graves, mostly Russians, who had died of starvation or ill-treatment, and thought of the pale, emaciated and starving men I had seen dragging themselves about the camp at Parchim. I longed more than ever to get back to the front to have a chance of killing a few of these soulless Germans.⁹

Eric had friends who felt the same. In the summer of 1918, he teamed up with two of them to make one final attempt at returning to the front line before the fighting stopped. Their plan was to escape through the wire with the help of a compliant guard and then head for Holland, from where they could quickly get back to England and rejoin their units.

It was easy to find a compliant guard at that stage of the war. Most were old men and reservists with families to feed. Thin soil at home and a Royal Navy blockade abroad had left millions of Germans desperate for food by the summer of 1918. Deprived of

essential nutrients, little children were growing up deformed for life as a result of the blockade, a tragedy that their embittered parents blamed squarely on the British. Older children routinely begged British prisoners for something to eat if they saw them. Eric and his friends didn't have much themselves, but they had been stockpiling what little they could save from their Red Cross parcels in preparation for an escape attempt. The tinned food could be used to bribe guards with children to look after as the blockade took an increasingly severe toll.

Eric had identified one guard in particular who could help them. The man patrolled a section of dead ground outside the wire that led straight to the forest a few yards away. He would be the only one who could see them if the prisoners cut the wire and crawled through on their bellies towards the treeline. And he had a wife and six hungry children to support.

'How would eight tins of beef, eight tins of dripping, a kilo of sugar and a thousand marks help?' Eric asked him.¹⁰

The guard was naturally suspicious. What, he asked, did he have to do for so much largesse?

Eric explained that if the guard happened to notice Eric and his friends escaping through the wire just before dusk one evening, he should either look the other way as they ran into the forest or fire at them and miss. If he did that, and nobody got hurt, then he could collect his reward from another of Eric's friends who had remained behind in camp.

The guard remained suspicious. It took a great deal of negotiation in broken German before he grudgingly agreed that he might perhaps be amenable. Eric was pleased to hear it. He reported back at once to his friends Tubby Ward and Aubrey Dudley-Ryder, both of the Buffs, and told them the escape was on.

It would not be easy. Even if they got away from the camp, three wide rivers – the Elbe, Weser and Ems – lay between them and the Dutch frontier. From past experience,

Eric knew that all the bridges would be heavily guarded and that any boats along the bank would be chained to their moorings. The Germans were being particularly vigilant at that time because of all the deserters from the German army who were either living rough or surreptitiously making their way home rather than stick it out at the front. With the whole country on the lookout for deserters, their chances of getting across all three rivers and the Dutch frontier as well did not look promising.

But they had to try. Talking it over with Ward and Dudley-Ryder, Eric decided that if they were going to start bribing people, their best chance was to bribe someone on the outside, someone like the prison guard who could meet them at each of the three river crossings with a boat and a resupply of food as they headed for Holland. It was an idea born of desperation, but it was all they could think of as they prepared to escape. They were astonished when another guard's wife proved receptive, after they had put the idea to her NCO husband. She agreed to help them in return for a fee in advance and the promise of ten thousand marks from each of them, on their word as British officers, as soon as they reached Holland and could draw on their back pay from Cox's, the army bank in London.

The prisoners still couldn't quite believe it, not least because the woman might easily take the advance fee and then report them to the authorities, as any German should. They were very dubious about going ahead, although the idea of getting outside help had taken root. They were wondering what else they could do when Eric suddenly had a brainwave, something that he should have thought of in the first place.

Eric had an old girlfriend on the outside. Her name was Gretchen, a lost love of his from before the war. She lived in Berlin and could easily help if she wanted. He would much rather trust her than a guard's wife who might take their money and never be seen again.

Ward and Dudley-Ryder went along with the idea, far-fetched though it sounded. Eric couldn't write to Gretchen from the camp without compromising her, so it was agreed

that he would send her a letter as soon as they escaped asking her to meet them at the place suggested by the German NCO on the banks of the Elbe. Apparently the railway crossed the main road in the forest just south of a village near Wittenberg that Eric remembered as Lenz. It was as good a place as any for Gretchen to arrive with food and advice as to how they might get a boat to cross the river – always assuming, of course, that Gretchen had got Eric's letter and was willing to help.

The escape was fixed for the evening of 29 July 1918. There was no moon that night, which made it easier for the prisoners to get away. Allowing thirty days to reach the Dutch frontier, there would be no moon either when they tried to cross into Holland. Armed with this information, the three prisoners drew cards to decide who should cut the wire and be the first to escape. The honour fell to Tubby Ward, with Eric second through the wire and Dudley-Ryder third.

All three installed themselves in deck chairs near the fence as the light began to fade. They smoked pipes and read their books as the guards were changed outside the wire. To their relief, the bribed guard was allotted his usual beat patrolling the dead ground leading into the pine trees. The man knew what he had to do if he wanted to get his reward, although there was no guarantee that he would do it. But beef, dripping, sugar and money would not be his if he didn't.

Eric had a rucksack hidden under a cushion on his deckchair. He had never been in the infantry or sat in a trench waiting for the order to go over the top, but he could imagine what it must feel like as he watched the new sentries taking up their stations. He recounted later that he could not have been more keyed up as two prisoners created a diversion to distract the other sentry, who wasn't in on the plot. A furious boxing match had the man's full attention as Tubby Ward darted forward towards dusk and cut five strands of barbed

wire, one after the other. They parted with what sounded to Eric like a terrible crack as Ward climbed through and set to work on the outer fence.

The sentry didn't notice. He was still watching the boxing as Eric followed. Everything went without a hitch until Eric caught his clothes on the wire. Ward turned back to help. He was just cutting the wire to set Eric free when the shooting started.

Chapter Five

The Girl from Berlin

For the rest of his life, Eric never knew if the guard had been shooting to kill or whether he had just been aiming wide, as arranged. All he could say for certain was that the bullets seemed uncomfortably close as he and Ward ran for their lives. They didn't stop to look back. They didn't even know if Dudley-Ryder was following them as they put their heads down and bolted for the protection of the trees.

They had arranged a rendezvous at a lake in the forest about two miles ahead. Eric and Ward split up as they ran, to make it harder for the Germans to pursue them. Eric had kept himself fit in prison camp, but he found it hard going as he raced through the pine trees with forty five pounds of food and escaping equipment on his back. He was forced to take a breather after a quarter of an hour, lying down in a thick part of the forest and panting like a dog until he had got his breath back.

He remained there until it was completely dark. After an hour, the shouts of the soldiers searching for him died away and it seemed safe to come out. Eric emerged cautiously and made his way through the darkness to the rendezvous at the lake.

He bumped into a returning search party on the way. They had lanterns and Alsatians on leashes as they passed Eric's hiding place. The delay meant that he was late for the rendezvous when he arrived. Concealing himself in a bush near the water, he cupped his hands to his mouth and hooted like an owl, the agreed signal for making contact with the others.

He hooted again after a while, and then again a little later. It would be wonderful to record that a fine specimen of *Aegolius funereus* (very prevalent in those parts) flew in from a neighbouring tree and became amorous, but it would not be true. No owls replied, not

even one in the unmistakable shape of Tubby Ward. Deep in the German forest, with no one to turn to and every man's hand against him, Eric hooted alone.

The escapers had arranged a second rendezvous further on. Eric steered his way by compass and hooted again, to no avail. Ward and Dudley-Ryder had either been shot or recaptured or else were lost somewhere, just as Eric was. They wouldn't be able to link up again for the long trek to the Dutch frontier. Eric would have to make the journey on his own.

He was disheartened at first, daunted by the prospect of travelling by himself. His gloom deepened as he pressed on through the forest. His face was whipped by endless branches and he stumbled over one fallen tree trunk after another as he followed his compass needle through the darkness. He would have been a lot happier if he had had Ward with him to share the strain, or Dudley-Ryder.

But a Scout smiles and whistles through all difficulties. Eric had Baden-Powell with him, in spirit at least. Throughout his life, it was his habit whenever he was in a tight spot to ask himself what his mentor would have done in the same situation. Sir Robert would certainly not have been daunted by a lonely trek to the Dutch frontier. He would have pressed on regardless.

Dawn found Eric hiding up in a little fir plantation for the day. He got lost again the following night: a maze of woods, streams, rivers and bogs that seemed to go on for ever. His immediate priority, now that he was free, was to send a letter to Gretchen in Berlin, asking her to meet him at Lenz and help him get across the Elbe. He had brought pen and paper with him from prison camp. It didn't take him long to write the letter and put a stamp on the envelope with her address. The hard part was finding somewhere to post it.

On the third night, Eric came to another lake and stole a rowing boat from the shingle. He rowed west for an hour and found it much less effort than pushing through the

forest. For several days he pushed on, through what appeared to be the wettest August on record. Eric had planned his escape for summer weather, but it poured down almost every day as he trudged westwards, soaking his clothes and his food, adding considerably to the weight that he had to carry as he struggled through the forest towards the river.

From time to time he emerged from the pine trees and walked across country, enjoying the unaccustomed freedom as he strode forward in the darkness. The roads were too risky, and all buildings had to be avoided, but he occasionally walked along the railway line too, until he noticed that the railways were regularly patrolled by German sentries. After that, he simply walked parallel to the line, a hundred yards away in the darkness.

At some point in the first few days Eric also plucked up the courage to post his letter to Gretchen. He spotted a little group of houses that seemed a likely place for a mailbox. Eric waited until midnight before tiptoeing down the village street in his socks. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a parked steamroller, still full of steam, hissed at him without warning. But there was a mailbox set into the wall of the post office. Eric popped his letter in and was out of the village again before he put on his boots.

He had asked Gretchen to meet him on 11 August. Eric headed for the rendezvous without delay, averaging about eighteen kilometers a night as the crow flies, although he often covered twice as much in avoiding towns and villages. He spent the days asleep in a fir plantation if he could find one, otherwise in gorse, bracken, drainage ditches or any other cover available. He had a bad scare one morning when the only cover he could see as the sun came up was a fallen pine tree in a sparse forest close to a little village. He had barely fallen asleep when he was woken again by the sound of some women and children chattering to each other as they came walking towards him through the wood.

Eric feigned sleep as they approached. He had almost got away with it when an old crone in black caught sight of him. After having a good look, she tiptoed away and hurried

back to tell the others. Two children were sent running to the village to raise the alarm.

Everyone else spread out and surrounded Eric from a distance of a hundred yards, keeping a close eye on him until help arrived.

Eric was forced to make a run for it. Pulling on his boots, he grabbed his rucksack and shot out of the forest like a hunted stag. The women shrieked at him as he burst through their cordon and took off across the open fields. He ran east, back the way he had come, aiming for another patch of forest several miles away. His chances of reaching it seemed remote as the pursuit gathered pace behind him, but there was nothing else he could do. Eric ran for his life, with the women in full cry after him.

It wasn't raining, for once. The green fields and the red-roofed village looked idyllic in the sunlight as Eric sped past. The church bell was ringing for Sunday matins. A fat old churchgoer in a frock coat failed to spot Eric as he tiptoed across the road behind him and picked up speed again down a cart track leading to a potato field. It occurred to Eric that the man was probably on his way to church to pray for a German victory in the war, just as Eric's own family in England were doing the opposite.

A woman spotted him and gave a view halloo, but couldn't stop him on her own. Eric ran into the field and took cover behind the hedge. Ditching his heavy rucksack among the potatoes, he marked the place with a stone and felt much lighter as he took off again, determined to shake off his pursuers and remain free until nightfall.

What would Baden-Powell have done in this situation? He wouldn't have run in a straight line, that was for sure. Eric's pursuers were about half a mile behind him as he continued to sprint towards the east. As soon as he was temporarily out of sight, he turned sharply south and doubled back towards his starting point, heading for the village. A long detour brought him eventually to a patch of gorse very close to the nearest house, the last

place that anyone would think of looking for him. Eric lay there for the rest of the day and did not emerge again until after dark.

His rucksack was still lying where he had hidden it. Eric grubbed up a few potatoes in the gloom and then continued on his way, heading through the night for Lenz and his appointment with Gretchen.

He reached Lenz on 10 August and made his way to the level crossing in the forest, the first of the two rendezvous places that had been agreed in prison camp. It was deserted when he arrived. No sign of Ward or Dudley-Ryder. No sign either of the guard's wife from prison camp. She had been paid her upfront fee of five hundred marks. Wearing a white sash around her waist for identification, she was supposed to be waiting with food and help for the escapees in getting across the Elbe. But she wasn't there, or anyone else either.

There was a stream in the forest. Eric had his first proper wash for a week and filled his air cushion with drinking water. He slept for most of the day and woke again towards evening. As the light faded, he hid behind a bush and kept watch on the level crossing, hoping to see Ward or Dudley-Ryder coming along the road. He waited until two o'clock in the morning before giving it up as a bad job. They would have been there by now, if they were coming.

Shouldering his rucksack, Eric set off for the second rendezvous. He headed south, following the railway line until he came to a deserted copse beside the road, three kilometers short of Wittenberg. He had asked Gretchen to meet him there early on 11 August.

It was almost dawn when Eric reached the appointed spot. He wasn't optimistic as he settled down to wait. The chances of Gretchen appearing seemed remote. They had been close before the war, but she was a Prussian girl of good family and he was an escaped

enemy flyer. He could hardly expect her to help him now, with their two countries embroiled in an increasingly bitter fight to the death.

Eric needn't have worried. Biology marches to a different drum. The apprehensive figure which appeared on the road a little later, with a heavy rucksack on her back, still had strong feelings for Eric Walker.

Gretchen had received his letter in Berlin. It had been very cryptic, so as not to incriminate her, but she had guessed that he was a prisoner of war and needed help. Her immediate instinct was to come to the rescue. Gretchen's sister was married to an Englishman, a civilian interned at Ruhleben, the camp by the racetrack in Berlin. Gretchen wanted to help Eric if his prison camp was anything like her brother-in-law's in Berlin.

Eric remained hidden as she walked past him, waiting to see if she was being followed. When no one else appeared, he gave her a whistle. Gretchen turned back, looking very scared, and joined Eric in the safety of the wood.

They sat down beside a stream. Gretchen had brought some food in her rucksack, but not much: four hard-boiled eggs, some butter in a tiny jug, and a third of a loaf of bread. It made for a meagre breakfast as they sat beside the stream catching up on each other's news.

Gretchen was delighted to see Eric again, but terrified of being caught with him. Opening her purse, she produced a newspaper cutting about some British prisoners at a railway station who had waved to the German girls watching from a window. The girls had waved back, only to be hauled in front of a magistrate and sentenced to two months in gaol. Gretchen had no idea of the penalty for helping a prisoner to escape, but it was bound to be a lot worse than two months in gaol.

Eric brushed her misgivings aside. There was food in Berlin. He needed her to fetch it for him from a secret location where a clandestine organisation provided help for Allied prisoners on the run.

Gretchen wasn't pleased to hear it. The last thing she wanted to do was get involved in helping Allied prisoners. Her uncle was on the general staff in Berlin. Gretchen was a patriotic German, not a traitor to her country.

But Eric's eyes were very blue. Slowly, reluctantly, Gretchen allowed herself to be persuaded. She agreed at length to go back to Berlin, collect the food from the address that Eric had just pressed into her hand, and return with it in five days' time. She wasn't at all happy at the idea, but she agreed to do it.

The hours dragged slowly as Eric awaited her return. Retreating deeper into the forest, he made a little clearing among the bushes and hid there for the next four days, while the rain continued to pour down. Whenever it stopped, he hung his clothes out to dry and paced up and down in the nude, reciting poetry and fantasizing about the enormous breakfast he would have when he reached Holland. At night, he raided potato fields and explored the banks of the Elbe, looking for a way across. The river was several hundred yards wide at that point, too far to swim. Eric needed a boat, if he could find one.

Gretchen brought good and bad news when she returned. There was no food at the address Eric had given her, but she had managed to find some elsewhere, in part by raiding her sister's private store when she was out. Opening her rucksack with a flourish, she produced bread, jam, sugar, eggs, salmon and sardines, a tin of Nestlé's and some home-made biscuits. By the standards of wartime Berlin, it was a feast.

Eric was suitably appreciative, but it still wasn't enough. He needed much more to get to Holland. Gretchen took a great deal of persuading, but eventually consented to meet him once more, for positively the last time, at Verden, on the banks of the Weser near

Bremen. Eric suggested that their next meeting should be in the dark, to be safer, but she refused, pointing out that girls of her class didn't go out alone after dark. They compromised on sunset instead, on the road between Verden and Walle, in just under a fortnight's time.

Gretchen had a request to make before returning to Berlin. As they said goodbye, she asked Eric to promise her that if he did escape to Holland, he would not return to the fighting in France. She wanted his word of honour – his Ehrenwort – that he wouldn't go back to the front.

Eric shook his head. The whole point of escaping was to get back to the front. He assumed that Gretchen didn't want to be responsible for any Germans he might kill. In fact, she feared for his safety. After some coaxing, she confessed that Germany had a new secret weapon, according to her uncle, a weapon that could blind people en masse from a distance. It wasn't a gas – Eric didn't understand the German word she used instead – but it was highly effective. It had been tested on animals first, and then on some black English prisoners who had later been shot.

According to Gretchen's uncle, the weapon was so awful that the Kaiser had forbidden its use except in case of dire necessity, and then only if all else had failed. Gretchen was worried that all else *would* fail and it would be used on Eric.

He was sceptical. The weapon sounded a bit far-fetched to him. Nevertheless, if Gretchen was so worried, he ought to report it to the War Office as soon as possible. That meant getting to Holland without delay.

Gretchen bade him 'Auf Wiedersehen' and set off for the station. Eric wondered if he would ever see her again as she disappeared down the road. Slipping back into the forest, he lay low until dark and then made his way to the Elbe with the food in his

rucksack. His plan was to hijack a boat from somewhere and be safely on the other side of the river by morning.

In the event, it was another twenty four hours before he managed to find a boat that he could steal. He had walked a dozen miles along the bank without success when he came at last to a barge beside a ferry. Next to the barge lay a little rowing boat complete with an oar, secured to the shore by nothing more than an anchor and chain.

Eric could hardly believe his luck. The boat was just lying there with its oar. All he had to do was take it and row across the river! He did, at once.

With infinite care I picked up the anchor and, gathering the chain, link by link, in my arms, carried it to the boat. It was impossible to avoid a few little clinks while doing this, any one of which might have woken up the ferry man who was probably asleep in the barge only a few yards away.

However, it was eventually lowered gently into the bows of the boat, and I pushed her off from shore. She drifted some way in the current before I dared to row gently with the oar. It all seemed too good to be true, and I was on the alert for an armed man to pop out from under one of the seats, or to have the boat pulled back to shore by a cable attached to the keel, but nothing happened. The current was running at about three or four knots and it carried me some way downstream before it grounded on the opposite shore in about two feet of water, some little distance out from the

beach.¹



The Elbe

Eric was across the Elbe! Now all he had to do was get to Verden, more than two hundred kilometers to the west, in time for his last meeting with Gretchen.

He proceeded as before, walking across country by night, lying up by day. As before too, he was spotted once or twice and had to escape across the fields, using the scoutcraft

he had learned from Baden-Powell. His rucksack grew steadily lighter as he consumed the contents. He was so lonely that he kept talking to himself as he trekked westwards, sometimes deliriously reinventing himself as two different people in order to have a conversation with someone, rather than always being alone. At one point he was taken sick, so damp and waterlogged with all the rain that he couldn't walk more than a few hundred yards at a time as he struggled on, determined not to be late for Gretchen. He was eventually forced to admit defeat and seek shelter in a cowshed, a very risky thing to do with farmers everywhere on the lookout for deserters as the Allies in France began their final push of the war.

The shed was chained and padlocked, but Eric removed a plank from the wall and replaced it behind him after he had slipped inside. Climbing up to the loft, he lay hidden in the hay as the rain lashed down on the tiles and the wind whistled through the cracks in the walls. The farmer's wife milked the cows next morning, but neither she nor her children saw Eric in the loft. He lay there for twenty hours before he felt well enough to climb down and resume his journey to Verden.

The town's lights came into view twelve nights after he had left Lenz. Eric lay up in a wood east of the suburb of Walle for the rest of the night and slept until noon the following day. He was due to meet Gretchen that evening on the road between Verden and Walle.

It was almost dark as he made his way to the place. He found it full of girls out for an evening stroll. With men in such short supply, some of them giggled and propositioned him as they spotted his male form in the gloom. Eric retreated discreetly to the bushes, from where he had a nice view of their legs as he waited for Gretchen to put in an appearance.

She came at last, singing the song that they had arranged as a recognition signal. She was wearing brown brogues and a tweed skirt as Eric whistled in reply. Gretchen joined him in the bushes and proudly tipped out the contents of her rucksack on the ground.

Eric examined everything she had brought with his torch. Nestlés, pilchards, tins of this and that. Most intriguing of all was a huge tin that must have weighed five pounds at the very least. His heart leapt. If it contained meat or fish, he would have half a pound of protein every day for the ten days he still needed to reach the Dutch frontier.

His spirits fell again when Gretchen told him it contained asparagus. She hadn't been able to get anything else.

'This is our last meeting,' she announced firmly, as they parted company. 'We will never see one another again. Write and tell me when you get home and please, please, do not go back to the French front.'²

They parted sadly, but on excellent terms. Gretchen didn't want to be out alone after dark, so Eric agreed to escort her back to Verden, following fifty yards behind as she traipsed along the road. She came to the street lights after half a mile and gave him a wave before vanishing in the direction of the railway station. Eric was very sorry to see her go. As she had forecast, they never saw each other again.

Yet now was not the time to brood about it. Eric needed to be across the Weser by morning. He reached the river after several hours of trudging through the rain and was delighted to discover a rowing boat almost at once. By daybreak he had managed to cross to the far bank, only to find himself in flat agricultural country with lots of houses dotted around the fields but nowhere for him to hide as the sun came up. Eric remembered feeling like an owl in the Sahara as it grew lighter and he searched in vain for a safe place to spend the day.

He settled eventually on a ditch running between two farmhouses. The bottom was reasonably dry and bushes met overhead in one or two places. Crawling along it, Eric concealed himself among some foliage just yards from the nearest farmhouse. He was so close that he could hear the clatter of pots and pans as a woman gave someone a good scolding. A dog was barking too, probably because it had scented Eric and wanted to be let off the leash.

The asparagus had weighed a ton as Eric humped it across the Weser. Draining most of the juice to reduce the load, he ate a couple of sticks with a piece of bread for breakfast. He had the same for lunch before settling down for an afternoon nap, only to be interrupted by a cow eating the bush above his head. Eric poked its nose with a stick to drive it away.

He had another alarm towards evening as five small boys decided to play hide and seek around him. Eric covered himself with his oilskin coat, so sticky that the earth, twigs, leaves and pine needles clinging to it gave him some camouflage. He kept dead still as two little boys jumped into the ditch. The nearest, with brown hair and red cheeks, was only four yards away as he crouched down with his friend. Eric thought he was done for until the other three found them and dragged them away.

The boys were called in to supper later. Eric had asparagus for his. Whatever else could be said about asparagus, it certainly wasn't fattening. That was doubtless why Gretchen had brought it.

Eric was feeling good, nevertheless, as he emerged from the ditch after dark. He was on the last lap now. It was just a few days' march to the Ems ship canal and only a few miles from there to the Dutch border. There was no reason why he shouldn't make a home run, just so long as his meagre supply of food held out for the journey.

He got rid of the asparagus can as soon as he could, and a lot of other stuff as well. Eric's rucksack was made from the bottom half of a kitbag and a pair of braces. He had

filled it with everything he thought he would need when he broke out of prison camp: bootlaces, soap, razor, shaving mirror, linseed oil for waterproofing, spare socks, string, a file, a tiny hacksaw and a billy can made from an old jam tin and a piece of wire. Also Baden-Powell's air cushion, a map, torch and compass exchanged for Red Cross parcels with hungry Germans, a tin of pepper to cover his tracks if he was chased by dogs, and a large amount of food for the journey, including five pounds of chocolate to be eaten at the rate of not more than two ounces a day. Most of the food had gone, but the rucksack was still a dead weight in his weakened condition as he started out for the ship canal. By discarding all but the bare essentials, he lightened his load considerably as he set off across country through the darkness.

Hunger was his main concern over the next few days. Eric became increasingly delirious as he stumbled on, desperate for something to eat. He consoled himself with the thought of the enormous breakfast he would have when he finally reached Holland. It wouldn't be a Dutch breakfast, all cheese and cold meat. It would be the full English: porridge and cream, bacon and eggs, thick cut marmalade. Eric drooled at the thought.

It seemed to him that his stomach was flapping against his backbone as he reached the Ems river, now widened into a ship canal. His clothes were tattered and torn: he looked like a scarecrow as he sneaked down to the bank in the dark. The lights of Lathen twinkled not far away, but Eric was too late to cross the canal that night. He waited until the following evening before setting out to swim the closely-guarded waterway and get himself across to Holland before first light.

His plan was to strip naked for the swim and camouflage his white body with boot polish to confuse the sentries. In the event, it proved too cold and wet for boot polish, so he stuffed his clothes into his kitbag instead and added Baden-Powell's air cushion, inflated to help him float the bag across the water. He put his money, watch, map and compass into an

empty cocoa tin and tied the tin to the top of his head with an old handkerchief to keep it in place. Thus attired, stark naked except for a tin on his head, Eric plunged into the canal in the middle of a thunderstorm and swam quickly to the other side with his rucksack between his teeth.

Nobody was more surprised than he to reach the far bank without being shot at. He got dressed at once, but was so cold that it took him ten minutes to lace up his boots with shivering fingers. He had had to leave his oilskin coat behind to lessen the weight, so he had no protection against the weather as he set off at a brisk clip for the Dutch frontier. Eric had been thirty five days on the run from prison camp. It had rained for all but three of them. It was still raining as he took a bearing on his compass and headed off across a bleak and windy moor towards Holland.



Ems ship canal

There were no signposts to guide him. As in Britain during the Second World War, the road signs near the border had either been removed altogether or turned around to confuse the enemy. Eric trusted to his compass as he headed west. He would have liked to steer by the stars as well, but they were invisible in the murk. Drenched during the canal crossing, the compass was all he had as he struggled on, determined to reach Holland by morning.

He fell into a dyke at one stage, sinking up to his waist in liquid mud. He was so weak that it took an enormous effort to haul himself out again. Eric pushed on regardless, knowing that the border wasn't far away now. The terrain changed from boggy moorland to fences and fields and he found himself staggering along a farm track, still heading west, according to his compass. Eric continued along the track until he came to a sentry box beside a bridge over a stream. The sentry box was painted in unfamiliar stripes and appeared deserted. The houses the other side of the stream were in Holland. Eric was free!

He raced across the bridge in a flash. Free! He had made it. Made it all the way across Germany from prison camp. He was in Holland, a free man at last. Eric Walker, a Captain in the Royal Flying Corps, back in business. Back in the war.

A sentry appeared in the darkness. Eric bounded forward to tell him all about it. Disappointingly, the sentry appeared less than pleased to see him. Instead of welcoming Eric to Holland, as he ought to have done, he produced a rifle with a bayonet on the end and pointed it squarely at Eric's stomach.

'Halt!' he yelled. In German.

Chapter Six

Free at last



Dutch and German border guards 1918

Eric's wet compass had led him astray. He wasn't in Holland at all. He was still in Germany, although the border wasn't far away.

The Germans were very decent about it. They searched him first, stripping him to his underpants in their hut and making a thorough examination of his clothes. Eric handed over his boots one at a time, taking the opportunity to transfer his map, compass and money from one to the other without anyone noticing. After he had dressed again, he was given bread, honey and a cup of coffee from the Germans' own rations before being allowed to spend what remained of the night asleep on a bench.

Next morning, the guards pointed Holland out to him through the window: a line of trees three hundred yards away across a ploughed field. So near and yet so far. Eric thought

briefly of making a run for it, but knew that he would be shot down before he had gone more than a few yards. In any case, his legs could hardly support him any more.

He was taken to the town of Meppen, several miles to the south, and had to march all the way in the company of a pair of Russian prisoners who had also been trying to reach Holland. At Meppen, he was kicked into a filthy cell by a bullying gaoler who left him with nothing to eat or drink for twenty four hours. He was transferred to Osnabrück the following day, from where he was collected by two guards from his old prison camp who had travelled across Germany to fetch him.

The under-officer and the private knew Eric well. They were all smiles as they entered his cell: 'Ah! Herr Hauptmann, we thought we had really lost you this time!'¹ They made a great show of escorting Eric to the railway station, the under-officer barking out orders while the private held a bayonet at Eric's back. As soon as the gaol was out of sight, however, the private shouldered his rifle and the under-officer jerked a thumb at his knapsack. 'Biscuits! Tins! Shirt! Soap!' he told Eric cheerfully. 'Your friends sent them. Don't say a word to anyone.'²

They took the train to Berlin. Eric asked to go to the lavatory on the way, in the hope of escaping through the window, only to be closely watched through the open door as he washed, shaved and put on a clean shirt instead. With food inside him, he felt a new man as they arrived in Berlin and wondered where to spend the night before continuing their journey next day.

The proper place was the arrest barracks, but Eric rather fancied a night in a hotel after everything he had been through. He put the idea to his guards.

'Can you pay for it?' asked the under-officer in astonishment.³

Eric could. He had the cash in his pocket, recently transferred from the toe of his boot.

They found a very nice hotel. A surprised reception clerk told them a room was available. It had a bath, two beds, two marble washbasins and three bell-pushes labelled *Mädchen*, *Dienster* and *Dienst Mädchen*. Eric pressed the bells one after another and sat back happily as a serving girl took away some of his tins to heat up, a valet went off to clean his boots and a chambermaid ran him a hot bath, the first hot bath he had had in three and a half years.

The only drawback was that the room was on the fifth floor, with no chance of escape. Eric slept in one bed, the NCO in the other, with a revolver in his hand and the key to the locked door under his pillow. The private stretched out across the doorway and slept on the floor, where Eric had no chance of stepping over him without being caught.

Next day, Eric returned briefly to his old prison camp before being sent to the punishment block at Parchim for the third and last time. With nothing to read at Parchim, and only one meal a day, he had ample time to reflect on the near-success of his escape as he paced up and down in his cell and counted the hours to his release.

The irony of it, the really bitter irony, was that Eric could have been in Holland anyway, entirely legitimately, without any of the bother of escaping. As the war dragged on, a repatriation scheme had been introduced for long-standing prisoners on both sides. Under the auspices of the Red Cross, British and German PoWs with more than three years of captivity could be exchanged to neutral countries on the proviso that they took no further part in the fighting. The Germans were being exchanged to Switzerland, the British to Holland. All they had to do was give their word to remain there, accommodated in hotels, until the war was over.

Thousands of prisoners had taken advantage of the scheme. Among them was Brocas Burrows, Eric's old friend from Mainz. A stalwart of the Eton XI before the war, he

had spent the summer teaching cricket to the natives, as Olave Baden-Powell hinted obliquely in a letter to Eric of 2 November 1918:

Mr Burrows from Oxford has been having a very interesting time in Holland where he saw his son a lot.⁴

Eric had been sorely tempted to join him. As an old lag, he was certainly eligible for the exchange. The Germans had taken it for granted that he would accept repatriation when it was offered. Instead, he had refused, reluctant to give his parole that he would play no further part in the war:

It would mean giving up all hope of escape and having another crack at the Germans. I was called up to the German Kommandantur and questioned by an officer: 'Why are you not going to Holland?' he asked. 'Because I have good friends here whom I do not wish to leave', I replied. He gave me a nasty look and said: 'We know perfectly well your real reason. You intend to try to escape, but you will never get away again!' From that time they paid special attention to my movements.⁵

Instead of Holland, Eric was sent to a new camp after completing his sentence at Parchim. Holzminden lay on the banks of the Weser, thirty miles south of Hanover. It had recently been the scene of a spectacularly successful escape by twenty nine British officers,

organised by Eric's other friend Shorty Colquhoun. Ten of them had managed to reach Holland after tunnelling under a wall. The hole was still being filled in when Eric arrived.

He had only been there a few weeks when the war came to an end at last. The eleventh of November 1918 found Germany in chaos as the Kaiser fled and Bolshevik revolutionaries attempted to take over the country. Rather than wait for a repatriation that might take weeks or months, Eric decided to go home under his own steam. Breaking out again, he set off across country for Holland, a much shorter distance from Holzminden than from his previous camp.

He passed the German army coming the other way, tens of thousands of smartly dressed troops marching home in perfect order. Under the terms of the Armistice, they still had all their weapons with them as they withdrew from France. Every German village had a banner across the street to welcome the heroes' return. Eric watched discreetly from his hiding place in the fields:

It was an interesting sight: men, guns, transport, pouring past me within fifty yards, in disciplined array as though they had a victorious army marching into a conquered country. I could not help contrasting this with the last retreat I had seen – the black French colonial troops straggling westwards in disorder from the first gas attack of 1915.⁶

Eric soon reached the Dutch frontier. There was no one to stop him this time. He was free at last, and this time it was for certain.

He was whisked at once to a Dutch village with shining door-knockers, whitened doorsteps, a profusion of flowers and a general air of peace and prosperity - a marked contrast to the Germany he had just left. Almost the first person he met when he arrived was Brocas Burrows, delighted to welcome him back to the land of the living. A whole new chapter of Eric's life was beginning as he put the war and prison camp behind him and went off to have breakfast with his old friend. In the circumstances, it seemed only right that Burrows, later a Lieutenant-General, should stand Eric the full English breakfast of his dreams.

(Author's note. These chapters are only an uncorrected draft. They contain a few deliberate errors to discourage plagiarism).