

ALLEN, Frederick James 4728

This is the report of Private Allen's capture and eventual escape from Germany as a prisoner of war in WWII. See his file under 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion WWI.

*Died 26/3<sup>a</sup>*

C O N F I D E N T I A L .

Statement by ESCAPED Prisoner of War.

Administrative Headquarters,  
Australian Imperial Force,  
"B" Records Section.

16th October, 1918.

Reg.No. 4728.

Rank. Private.

Name. ALLEN, F.J.

Platoon. No.8.

Company. "B" Company.

Battalion. 53rd Battalion.

Circumstances of Capture.

(a) Date. July 20, 1918.

(b) Place. Fleurbaix.

(c) What happened immediately before Capture.

The 5th Division, of which my Battalion formed a part, made an attack on the enemy trenches near Fleurbaix at about 6.0'clock on the evening of July, 19, 1918. The first of the enemy lines would be about 350 yards from our own first line. After leaving our own front line trench we lay out in "No Man's Land" for about 10 minutes, waiting for our own artillery barrage to lift. As soon as the barrage lifted we advanced. We cleared the enemy front line and advanced on his second line of trench. When we had got about 200 yards beyond the enemy first line we began to "dig in". Throughout the whole of the night the enemy artillery heavily bombarded what had been his old front line, but the shells were not falling near where we were, but during the night the enemy somehow got in behind us with bombs, so that, in addition to awaiting an enemy attack from in front we had to deal with these bombing operations from the rear. We put up as good a fight as we could but found when daylight came that we were heavily outnumbered in the rear.

I became a prisoner of war after daylight on the morning of July 20. We were ordered to surrender by Captain Murray of the 53rd Bn. We managed to stop the enemy from bombing further toward us, but we could see that they had re-secured possession of their old front line.

OFFICERS SEEN DURING ENGAGEMENT.

Captain Murray. - He was Company Commander of my Battalion. It was he that ordered us to surrender on the morning of July 20. In fact this officer went forward himself, to surrender. I took it that he was setting an example. I never saw him again.

Captain Ransome. - He was Second in Command and he and Captain Murray held a consultation before we surrendered. It was Captain Murray who gave the order to surrender.

At the time Captain Murray ordered us to surrender there would be about 20 of us all told. The men protested against the suggestion of surrendering and some very strong language was used. At the time

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we were occupying a shell-hole. A German soldier advanced toward us bearing a white flag. Some one fired at this man, and as soon as he was hit he dived into a shell-hole, bursting into flames as he did so. I cannot say why this should have been nor do I know who shot him. We had been instructed to "hang on till relieved", but no relief came and our stock of bombs had run out. After Captain Murray left us - we understood he was going out to surrender - we dribbled out at intervals into the open. We found the Germans in full strength in their old positions and we became prisoners of war.

#### What Happened Immediately after Capture.

Private Sharkey of No. 8. Platoon of my Company and I were together prisoners in the charge of German soldiers. We found a man of the 54th Battalion who was wounded, but could walk. We assisted him along the trench. At this time all the enemy communication trenches were under the fire of our artillery. Eventually we reached a field hospital on a roadside. Here a German officer who spoke English ordered us to turn out our pockets. He examined any papers we had but those were then returned to us. We then took our wounded comrade to a large hospital further on, where we left him. I do not know who this wounded Australian was. He was an elderly man and mentioned Riley-street, Sydney. He had been shot through the shoulder and back. We left our field dressings with the hip.

We were then taken across country under the escort of German sentries. We eventually encountered a uhlan who having first "screamed us up" and the guards also, had us placed in a barn. In this place there were about 150 British prisoners of war, <sup>mainly</sup> Australians and Royal Warwicks.

We were some days later marched to Lille where we put in some terrible days in the dungeon known as Fort McDonald.

#### Transferred into Germany.

From Lille we were taken by tram to Dulmen in Germany. There were about 30 men in the van in which I travelled. At Dulmen we were placed in the quarantine section of the lager.

I left Dulmen on August 20 for Gladbach. Here I was one of a labor gang working at a big sawmill. We had been sorted out alphabetically, and the crowd here were "A's" and "B's". As near as I can remember there were there:-

Ashcroft. Allen. Amey. Atkins and Alford ( the last two being Warwicks).

Bartholomew and Bayes (both South Australians ), Lance Cpl. Balcombe (54th Bn), Bennett, Barrett, Lance Cpl. Bilbow. There may have been an odd few whose names I have forgotten.

I remained at Gladbach during the whole time of my captivity. The work was heavy and the rations light. We were loading and unloading waggons in the yard. The timber we were handling was mainly mining timber - props and boards. Now and again we were sent into the bush to fell timber and dress it. The ration was poor. We were given a Dutch ration of bread, vegetable "soup" twice a day, <sup>but meat</sup> ~~potatoes~~ very rarely. We were quartered over a granary or stable.

#### STORY OF THE ESCAPE.

On the 11th September 1918, in company with two others I succeeded in escaping from the saw-mill yard at Gladbach. My comrades were:-

W. Sharman, of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles.

A. Metcalfe, of the Royal Munster Fusiliers.

We had been working on night shift at the mill and in the yard, the whole 12 of us. We went into barracks at 9.p.m. and a quarter of an hour later were being passed out again into the yard. At the gate through which we had to pass there was a corporal and two sentries.

The three of us, who had already planned the details of our escape went out ahead of the rest of the party and passed the sentries considerably in advance of the rest.. It was very dark and we managed to get clear of the sentries with a good start. We knew that our disappearance would very soon be reported and it was noticed that we were not still with the working gang. We were wearing mill dungaree trousers. From these we at once ripped off the tell-tale dangerous broad red stripe that adorned the seam of each trouser leg.

We had a map and a compass and we struck off in the direction of Haltern, passing through a wide coal-field area. Our English comrade had some idea of the country here for he had been working in the area before coming to Gladbach. We reached Haltern after dark on September 13. At Haltern we crossed the River Lippe. We "bluffed" our way across the bridge whistling "The Watch on the Rhine" while the sentry was busy swapping compliments with a young woman. He must have heard us and possibly have seen us, though it was dark. However, he never halted us. We were "got up" as German miners. We had picked up hats and had also the coffee pots habitually carried by the coal miners of this region. We dare only travel at night and had to keep clear of the main roads. We were very short of rations having set out with merely a few biscuits. From lads who had previously attempted to escape but had been recaptured and brought back to Gladbach, we had learned that the River Lippe between Haltern and the railway line running onto Holland, was very closely patrolled.

When we had crossed the Lippe at Haltern we struck to our left and eventually picked up this railway line near Dueten. While working at the saw mill at Gladbach we had daily seen goods trains running along this line. Furthermore I had been doing forest work in the neighbourhood of Dueten. We followed the line to Rhade, when we struck off to the right through some fen or marsh country.

The Germans called this area the swartz (black) fen. Continuing our flight towards the Dutch frontier we passed another town whose name I never knew. We found a cart track through the fen country that eventually led us to Velon. Thence we struck in a N.E. direction to Stadlohn. In the end we crossed the frontier line about four kilometres from the Dutch town of Winterswik. We crossed within 10 yards of the sentry. We rushed past him into some farm buildings where we separated, rejoining one another later on. We encountered no electrified wire. I understand that this exists only on the Belgian frontier. We reached Winterswik at about 9.a.m. on the 17th September. Toward the end of the journey we had been in a bad way for food, in fact all we had was "smokes". The Dutch farmer who first interrogated us in Holland and whose son took us into Winterswik gave us a satisfying meal. We were first placed in quarantine at Didam and after a period there were taken to Rotterdam where we reported to the British Consul. We reached Gravesend by the S.S. "Kilkenny" - one of a convoy - on Saturday, October 12.

My Canadian comrade still has a brother imprisoned at Gladbach. I estimate the distance covered during our flight from Gladbach at from 80 to 100 miles.

On arrival at London I was quartered in the Wellington Barracks where I did not find the treatment either comfortable or kindly.

Signature.

Witness.