PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN FRANCE.

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On May 20, 1940, the 13th Casualty Clearing Station, then near Domart, about 15 miles northwest of Amiens, was evacuated, making towards St. Pol. About forty of our number, who could not be accommodated in motor transport, went on foot, and by the time we reached Doullens we found ourselves cut off by German motorized units. Colonel Morris decided that our only chance of escape was to divide up into three parties, each commanded by one of the three officers. I, being the junior officer, was sent off first with two Serjeants, two Corporals and eight men. My instructions were to contact Allied Forces if possible.

As our road to St. Pol had been cut off by the German motorized units, our one chance of escape seemed to be westwards. We made across country for some two miles and then came on the Doullens-Aux-le-Château road. There we stopped a French civilian who was doing his best to cycle past without recognizing us. He was very agitated and attempted to make off hurriedly when we inquired whether there were any Germans in the vicinity. When pressed further, he merely indicated with his thumb that he had seen them along the road. There was evidently no time to lose so we made a dash across the main road, to be greeted with a hail of machine-gun bullets all of which fortunately passed over our heads. (At this time we were wearing our Red Cross brassards.) The tank which had spotted us was only about 200 yards away and covered the bridge over the River Authie, so we had no alternative but to swim.

Of our thirteen, six were non-swimmers, so we contrived to make a hand bridge with straps from our equipment. Serjeant Wilson, being the strongest swimmer, went first and was followed quickly by four non-swimmers. While the fifth was crossing, one of the buckles became undone, and the soldier found himself in difficulties. He was, however, taken to safety by the timely action of Sapper White. The rest crossed without much trouble and, in our wet clothes, we proceeded to a nearby farm where we had a meagre meal consisting of raw eggs.

It was decided to travel by night and sleep by day. At ten-thirty that night we started off on the first stretch, knowing we were surrounded by enemy motorized units whose engines we could hear throbbing in the darkness. By way of completion to this day's adventures, we were chased by quite the most vicious bull I had seen for many a long day.

At about two o'clock on the following morning, two of the men had to fall out through sheer fatigue. We took them to an evacuated farm where we made them as comfortable as possible and left them with food enough for some days.
The rest of us pushed on and during the next four or five nights made our way through woods and the Forest of Crecy, sleeping by day and never daring to talk above a whisper. It was here we came very near to being found by a German patrol which passed about twenty yards from our hiding place.

On our sixth night out we had the unpleasant experience of running into marshland which had not been shown on the one map we boasted between us. After wading in mud up to our thighs for two and a half hours we hit on a pathway which led to a railway. There we put up for the night in a small hut.

The next day we were given shelter—and incidentally a compass—by a kindly French official who assured us that Mussolini had been killed, that the Turks and Russians had entered the war and that the British were going to force their way across the Somme and would soon be in that area. For a week we lived cooped up in a hut with plenty to eat but surrounded by the Germans.

At midnight on June 3 word was brought to us by another friend that the Germans would be occupying our billet within half an hour. We set off at once and found large concentrations of German troops on all sides. Indeed, we almost ran into German guards at le Crotoy.

The following day we got in touch with a Belgian family who proved most helpful. They pointed out to us that our plan for rowing across the mouth of the Somme was quite impracticable owing to the rapid change of the tides, and that our safest way was to swim. In preparation for the crossing we equipped ourselves with the inner tubes of several motor tyres to support the non-swimmers. We also made a rope to be carried by the swimmers and held by the non-swimmers. Two things were essential for the crossing. The tide had to be as far out as possible and, in view of the fact that the Germans had machine-gun posts on both sides, it had to be a dark night as there was a mile and a half of sand all within range of the machine guns. It was decided that, rather than wait for another week when conditions might have been better, the crossing should be attempted at once, although it meant facing an incoming tide.

There were now five swimmers and six non-swimmers. Late at night we raced across the sands, carrying our equipment in sacks and bending low. There was no moon, and no one spotted us. We were almost within sight of the other bank when, with the sound of the in-rushing tide in our ears, we came on the Somme River. The tide was certainly coming in very quickly. Our first misfortune was to discover that the soldier who had been entrusted with the rope had dropped it in the rush across the sands. Then two of the men, thinking they could make the crossing more easily at a different spot from the main party, went off by themselves. What happened to our two comrades we do not yet know. The main party—nine all told—got across, the Serjeant and the Sapper doing magnificent work in helping the non-swimmers. By the time we reached the other bank we had had to discard.
all our clothes but our shirts and the current had carried us 200 yards upstream in a 300 yard crossing. For half an hour we waited on the other side for our lost comrades but they did not rejoin us.

For five or six hours we walked barefooted and almost naked. During that time we had to dive into the roadside on two occasions when our own bombers dropped flares and proceeded to bomb the bridge at St. Valery a mile or two distant. Then we came upon a hut that must have been occupied very recently by a Highland Regiment. We rigged ourselves out with jackets and great coats. Later that night, at a deserted farm, we found sufficient French civilian clothing for all nine, two of us setting rather a new fashion for hikers by resorting to "dancing pumps."

The Germans were in occupation here and the next night we had a very uncomfortable journey passing Cayeux. The clatter made by nine pairs of feet on this pebbly shore can well be imagined. To avoid detection we walked in shallow water where a new difficulty awaited us, for it seemed to us that the phosphorescent glow from our feet must have been seen for miles around.

The next few nights passed without any particular incident and by Wednesday, June 12, we had reached Mers adjoining le Treport. Serjeant Wilson and I, being the two who could speak some French, went out, as we had done on several occasions, to get provisions, leaving our comrades to enjoy a well-earned rest in an evacuated house. On returning, we were shocked to see a German sentry on guard at the door. One of our lads managed to signal from a window, waving to us to get back down the road. All seven had been captured. For seven to eight hours we two fodder hunters hid in a hen house and, at 10.30 at night, set out towards Eu, passed it about midnight and proceeded westwards. We were now making for the Seine. The Germans were to be seen everywhere but, as most of the houses here had been deserted, we had no difficulty in finding provisions on the farms.

About four o'clock on the morning of June 19, a week after losing our comrades, we reached the Seine where we lay on the bank within earshot of German sentries for eighteen hours. During that time Serjeant Wilson managed to blow up the inner tube of a motor tyre with a bicycle pump. The tube was fitted into a sack and an interlacing network of twigs worked into the sacking so that we had a fairly firm raft for carrying our clothes and what little food we had with us. We crept away from the sentry post for about half a mile and entered the water at 11.30 at night. It was almost a full moon and we were seen and fired at but not hit. The water was covered with a thick scum of crude oil from the refineries which had been fired by the Allies as the Germans were advancing. On emerging at the other side we hardly recognized each other. We were both like negroes.

That night we spent in a nearby barn. In the morning we learned from the farm people that the Germans were here also. Our plan now was to make for Jersey, for, having been house-doctor there some time before, I
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knew something about the island. All this time we made our way by night, covering between twelve and fifteen miles at a stretch, entering a barn in the early hours of the morning, sleeping there till early afternoon, having a snack from the food that we carried and then about 7.30 in the evening making our way to the nearest farm and asking for some food. The kindness of these peasant folks is beyond description. During the ten weeks we spent in the Occupied Zone we were refused food on one occasion only.

Four nights after swimming the Seine we were making our way westwards near the town of Caen when at 2 a.m. a voice ahead of us snapped “Halt!” Immediately afterwards a figure staggered out of the ditch by the side of the road. I thought it was a drunk Frenchman at first but was soon disillusioned when I found myself, a minute later, facing a German corporal sentry complete with fixed bayonet. He ordered us to advance ten paces. To our right, at the side of the road, were drawn up half a dozen German lorries and several staff cars. From one of these emerged an Officer who talked for a short time to the Corporal, the only word I recognized being “Englische.” He then turned his attention to us and, in French even worse than my own, very deliberately asked “Qui êtes-vous?” I explained that we were refugees returning to Caen. (At this time we were in civilian clothes and were complete with berets.) The officer then asked for our papers. I replied “Pas de papiers.” “Pourquoi?” I elaborated that we had had to leave home so quickly that all our papers were left behind. It was difficult for him to understand why we should be travelling by night and all my arguments did not save us from being searched. Fortunately, all he found in our baskets was eatables from the last farm and a spare pair of shoes. Obviously puzzled, he shrugged his shoulders and barked “Allez.” To my horror Serjeant Wilson, who had been silent up till now, politely asked in a pronounced English accent: “Voulez-vous un fromage?” to which the officer replied in no uncertain fashion.

On June 26 we made for the River Orne. All bridges across the river were closely guarded as was the Paris-Caen railway which runs parallel to the river at this part. At about 10.30 at night we cut our way through the thickets by the side of the railway, crawled over the rails on our stomachs, and so reached the river’s edge. We were prepared to swim across but found it was possible to wade as the water came not higher than the level of our necks. From that point we continued to go cautiously by night having our shoes muffled with pieces of sacking. At last we reached the coast opposite Jersey and I was very glad that the end was in sight as I was suffering from acute muscular strain. Imagine our dismay when we heard that the island had been occupied three days earlier! To cap our misfortunes, the people in this particular district were under penalty of death if they should help the British. After a much-needed two days’ rest we proceeded southwards, now making for the Pyrenees as our only method of escape from France.
The terms of the Armistice had not yet reached this part. Ten days later we were able to thank a Belgian refugee for the comforting news that part of France was still unoccupied. We now directed our steps towards Tours. On several occasions we narrowly escaped Nazi sentries and, as there was a curfew on all German-occupied territory, we could not bluff our way if challenged.

By Thursday, July 25, we were within twenty miles of Tours. There a kindly French artisan invited us to his house for a meal and, hearing that we intended to swim the Loire and the Cher in our bid for freedom, suggested a much better and safer way. This good friend not only offered to lend us each a bicycle but to conduct us personally through Tours, where the streets were full of German troops, and to deposit us and the machines at a farm twenty miles on the other side of the town. His plan worked perfectly. Not once in our journey were we questioned by German sentries. Incidentally the countryside here was the most beautiful that we had yet passed through. Touraine has well been described as the "Garden of France."

After taking our leave of our generous host we proceeded on foot in an easterly direction towards the zone "non-occupé," and by 4 o'clock next morning we were within ten miles of Free France. Here we slept in a deserted farm and about midday we set off again. Part of the time we played the role of peasants working in the fields, carrying forks to make our play-acting complete. Having ascertained from the peasants where exactly the frontier lay and where sentries were posted, we crossed to Free France near Loches about 5 o'clock on the evening of Saturday, July 27.

At Chateauroux an official explained to us that we would be interned "somewhere in France" and, as he himself was not interested in interning us, he advised us to make for Montpellier, 300 miles away. We had very little money left but by hitch-hiking we arrived there on July 30. Inquiries here led us to believe that our greatest chance of escape lay in Marseilles where the Americans were in charge of British interests. We arrived in Marseilles within twenty-four hours, with about twenty francs between us, and were told that we would receive money only if we gave ourselves up to the French authorities and were interned. Consequently we found ourselves in Fort St. Jean the next day.

After one month, during which time I made three attempts to escape, I managed to get clear of French Authorities and so back to Britain and freedom.