

# Escape

## FROM STALAG LUFT I

HOW ONE P.O.W. BAFFLED HIS GERMAN CAPTORS



AS TOLD TO

*William L. Cerveney*

BY

*Donald L. Brownell*

**I**T WAS a cold and drizzly Baltic fall day, but we hung around our south fence, waiting for more news about Burke's escape. We rehashed what little we knew with the fellows in Burke's compound. There were no warning wires here so we could gather at the fence to talk.

Although escape from Stalag Luft I was considered impossible, Lieutenant Burke was gone, and the Germans were up in the air about it. You could see there was a little something extra in everything they did. The guards in the towers, jockeying their machine guns and floodlights, were always alert, but they made a special point of it now. The road to camp headquarters had twice as much traffic as usual.

Stalag Luft I was on a little peninsula running out into the Baltic, near Barth in Pommerania. How Burke had ever gotten off the peninsula was almost as big a mystery as how he escaped from the camp. This German P.O.W. camp for captured airmen was composed of five nearly-square compounds. They ran in line—south to north—and were called One, Two, Three, Four and North Compound. I was confined in No. 3. Burke had escaped from No. 2.

What stirred us all was reasoning like this—if Burke had managed to do what he had, then anything was possible. The idea was quite disturbing.

We followed Burke's supposed progress with great interest. Maybe he could mingle right in with the Prussians and eventually reach France. But Burke had left no trace. The guards went (Continued on page 44)

Illustrated by Blaine Morris

Editor's Note: Donald L. Brownell, 1st Lt., Air Force Reserve, served with the 325th Fighter Group, 318th Fighter Squadron, 15th Air Force. He was a prisoner in Stalag Luft I at Barth, Germany, from Dec. 9, 1944 until May 20, 1945. Cerveney served in the U.S.N.R. during World War II aboard the U.S.S. Coral and the U.S.S. Endicott, and also in the Korean fighting.

# ESCAPE FROM STALAG LUFT 1

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over Compound Two with a fine-toothed comb for some clue to the mystery. The camp commandant, a colonel, came in with his flunkies. Gradually we began to realize that perhaps we, too, had a chance to escape.

But none of us could figure out how a man could get out of a place where you hit water after digging down two feet, and where two parallel barbed-wire fences, ten feet high, five feet apart, and ensnared with barbed-wire entanglements in between, stood between you and freedom. You couldn't even get close to the fence where it would do any good. Thirty feet in from the double fence and two feet off the ground was an electrically-charged warning wire. To step beyond that wire was to get shot.

I had an old friend in Compound Two with whom I had become acquainted at an air base in England. We exchanged our viewpoints through the fences.

"Nobody over here seems to know how Burke did it," he assured me.

"Did they go after his friends?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied, "but that wouldn't get them any place. They know that."

As it was, nothing came to light about the great escape until Burke himself was captured by the *Volkstrum* about 15 kilometers southwest of Barth. It was in the most likely escape area—one with low hills and many pine trees. Burke seemed to be okay when he was returned to Compound Two after questioning by the guards.

"I just told them I went over the fence," he said, "and they don't know what to make of it."

"How does it heppen dot you are not skretched?" Burke quoted the Colonel.

"I flew low," Burke quoted himself.

The Germans were terribly chagrined. They were proud of their guard-tower system and found it hard to accept the fact that there was a flaw in it some-

where. The guard towers were about 100 yards apart. Each was about 20 feet in height and held one guard, with a machine gun and floodlight. In the daytime the guard maneuvered his machine gun constantly. At night he moved both the floodlight and the machine gun. It had been established that Burke escaped at night.

The floodlights were moved in a systematic pattern. We had learned to live with the creeping, flashing lights as we did with the quiet, fishy smell from the sea. Only the smell was blown away once in a while by the wind from Sweden. The familiar pattern of the floodlights was always with us at night. The Germans probably looked upon their master plan of floodlight operation as something wonderful. That someone had escaped, despite their vigilance, was an affront to the calculating thoroughness of the Teutonic mind.

When Lieutenant Burke stuck to his story of escaping over the fence, it put the next move up to the Colonel. He called Burke in and pinned him down to an iron-clad statement that he had escaped over the fence.

"I am prepared to dismiss this matter," he challenged, "if you can offer some proof."

From somewhere beyond a grey world of misery and hopelessness, Burke summoned the courage to say, "I can do it again."

By this time many of us had come to believe that Burke was a stool pigeon or worse, but such notions were shortly driven out of our heads. We saw the commandant muster Compound Two. It was mid-morning. There were no firing squads or special guard details. The Colonel and his staff marched into the compound. The camp adjutant called for First Lieutenant Burke. What took place was relayed to us later.

The line of prisoners faced west toward the low pine-covered hills. Burke stepped forward. He had on coveralls

and, possibly, that helped him. No one ever found out what he wore when he went over the fences the first time—if that was really the way he had escaped.

"You will prove that you can escape over the fences at this time!" the camp adjutant announced. "Everything will be the same as on the night you say you escaped. You have 60 seconds to prove this assertion that you can do it again."

Burke was a big, gangling boy with blonde hair and thickish lips. You had to be young to take P.O.W. camp in stride. He was probably a track man. He took the warning wire like a hurdler, then ran at the first fence in springy strides. He jumped to within two or three feet of the top, then clung with his bare hands to the barbed-wire. His G.I. shoes caught places in the wires. He freed his hands like taking meat off hooks and grasped the top wire. Up! Up! He was caught by his clothes. He freed himself and flung a leg over the top of the fence.

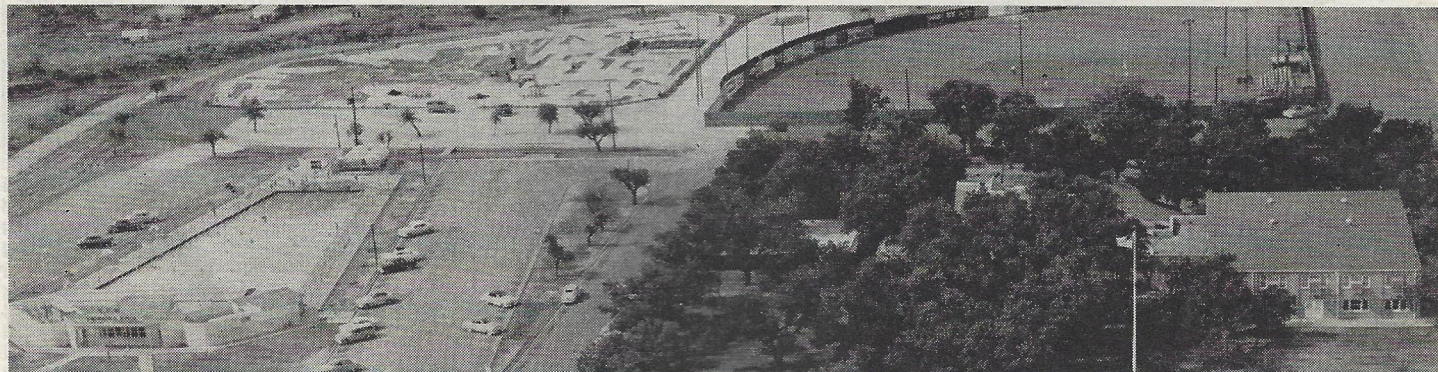
The five-foot space between the two fences, with its barbed-wire entanglements, was cleared by Burke in a leap from the top wire of the first fence to the bottom wire of the second. He started climbing again with the same awful freeing of the hands. All the while the floodlights were turned away from him. If they turned back on him before he got over, it would mean disciplinary action of some severe kind.

Burke climbed to the top, looked to see if his legs were free, and jumped. He made it. A terrific cheer went up as he ran along the outside of the compound and reappeared among us with his hands and wrists all bloody. The Germans accepted Burke's explanation that he wore heavy gloves the first time. They saluted and marched out of the compound.

Among the prisoners the final impression was that Burke's "second" escape over the fences was in reality his first attempt. We decided that he had done it as a "cover-up" for a different means of escape as well as to protect other men, possibly including some of the guards, who may have helped him the first time.

All we ever heard Burke say about his adventure was:

"I didn't see any women." [The End]



A few of the reasons for the prestige, community good will and large membership (one of the 10 largest V.F.W. Posts) enjoyed by Post 2012, Abilene, Texas, are evident in this aerial view of the Post's property. The spacious grounds contain one of the most delightful play areas to be found in any community in the country. Visible in the photo are the Post home (extreme right), the swimming pool, miniature golf course and the baseball diamond.

OFFICE OF THE SENIOR AMERICAN OFFICER  
Main Compound  
Stalag Luft I, Barth, Germany

July 30, 1944

Subject: Treatment of Prisoners  
To: Senior American Officer

~~Stalag IV - Steirn Germany~~  
1. Following is statement of Lt. Verbruggen:

I was recaptured near Stralsund, and was returned to Barth, where Major Von Maller questioned me and conducted a personal search. I told him nothing regarding my escape. Upon completion of the interrogation and search he turned me over to the local police and told me that I was being sent to another camp.

The next day at 11:00 a policeman took me from the cell, handcuffed me and took me to Stettin on the train.

Enroute to Stettin the policeman told several civilians that I was an escaped prisoner and a flyer. One civilian became angered and attacked me. The policeman with the aid of another civilian managed to keep him from inflicting any serious bodily harm.

Upon our arrival at Stettin we proceeded to the local city jail. I was searched and then put into a cell with was 4 feet wide and 12 feet long, with five other prisoners of war (French privates).

The next day I was again questioned in regards to my escape. Upon completion of the interrogation I asked them where I was going and when I was going to get out of the jail. My interrogator just shook his head and said he couldn't tell me. He had in his possession a letter which the policeman who accompanied me had turned over to him the previous day.

I was then returned to the cell with no assurance of what they were going to do with me, or how long I was to stay in this jail. The next ten days and nights I witnessed some of the worst types of privation which my cell mates and fellow prisoners were subjected to.

The prisoners consisted mostly of French, Russians, and Polish civilians ranging in age from 14 to 60 years.

Our food consisted of 2 slices of bread and a half bowl of soup each day. (The soup consisted mostly of water).

It was impossible for six men to sleep in that small space at night, yet sleeping during the day was strictly forbidden. The usual punishment for sleeping during the day was three days in the cellar on bread and water.

We were awakened at 05:00 and were allowed three minutes to wash (without soap). At that time we also emptied our toilet, and filled our 2 quart pitcher with water. The stench which would pour forth from the open doors of the cells each morning was enough to make me vomit. I later found out that the prisoners never were given baths. Some of the prisoners were infected with sores because of the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.

On the morning of that eleventh day, a guard opened the cell door and informed that I was leaving. I was then turned over to a guard who had come from Stalag Luft I the previous day. He returned me to Barth.

A week later I was again summoned by the German authorities and sentenced to the cooler at Stalag Luft I for an additional eight days on severe punishment (German ration).

(Signed)

~~W~~  
G. J. VERBRUGGEN  
1st Lt., A.C.

rlg

~~RECEIVED~~  
Jm

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WD