

Meanings of Military Service

Learning Resources KS3

Transcript of Account of L/Cpl. Loman's Escape from German Hospital in Belgium

The Following is a short account of the experience of No.4147 L/Cpl. Loman, "A" Squadron 9th Lancers, who, after having been wounded on August 24th 1914, in the retreat from Mons, was captured by Germans, but made good his escape from a German Hospital in Belgium, and eventually succeeded in reaching England.

"Subsequent to the charge by the Regiment on the 24th of August at AUDREGRIES, whilst on the retreat I was hit in the back by shrapnel, and taken prisoner by Germans belonging to the 36th Foot Regiment. Owing to my wound I was put into a German Hospital at WIHERIES, where like myself there were about forty other British soldiers, including a Colonel of the Cheshire Regiment.

I was in this Hospital four weeks and a few days during which time a plan of escape had been thought out by the Colonel of the Cheshires. Whilst the sentry was having his breakfast on the morning of the 25th of September, twelve of us including the Colonel escaped over the walls of the Hospital. We immediately broke up into parties of twos and threes, the one in which I was being composed of Sgt Rothwell and Cpl. Chapman of the Cheshire's, and myself. One of those who escaped, Bombardier Wiseman, R.F.A, 117th Battery, was unable to continue the flight on account of his wound, and sought refuge in the house of a civilian in the village, and he was still there a month ago, being tended by a Belgian Doctor. Amongst those who remained in the hospital were Sgt. Barnard, 9th Lancers, wounded in the left foot, Cpl. Datlen, 9th Lancers, wounded in the chest, Pte. Ackehurst, 9th Lancers, wounded in the left foot, with two toes missing, Pte. Barlow, 9th Lancers, taken off the field sick, and Pte. Dodd Cheshire Regiment, unwounded. There were also some men from the Norfolk Regiment.

Whilst in Hospital, Belgian Civilians having heard that it was our intention to try to escape had contrived to smuggle in civilian clothes for us to put on, and it was thus dressed that we escaped. Having got clear of the Hospital our party made headway for a large forest about a mile distant, where we hid for about five to six weeks, being fed by Belgian Civilians, who brought food to us at night. Having learnt of our escape, the Germans made search for us and stated that if any attempt was made by the inhabitants to assist us they would kill them and burn the villages. In spite of these threats however, the Belgians still brought us food, but we heard from some of them that three of their number had been killed whilst attempting to succour us.

On one occasion the Germans sent a party of men about a hundred strong to search the forest, but notwithstanding this did not succeed in capturing us, although once whilst I was separated from my companions and surveying the situation from a tree-top, a party of six Germans passed underneath.

The next morning I came across Cpl. Chapman, who had in turn become separated from Sgt. Rothewell, and we decided to try to get through the German lines back to our own. Accordingly the next day we set out and crossed the French frontier, but found it was impossible to break through the German Lines, although we were then only about 1000 yards distant from our own. We therefore had to return, and duly arrived at a farm house where we had something to eat. A party of about 6 Germans visited the farm house whilst we were eating and we had to escape through the back window, and then we made our way to a small village called DOUR. There I was taken ill, being attended by Dr. D-----. From this village we proceeded to MONS, walking part of the way, and taking the tram at BOUSSU as far as MONS; there were three German soldiers on this, car, but as we were continually passing German sentries on our way, this was no novelty. We were able to pay our way, as a farmer gave us 10 francs, and we were continually receiving money and aid from civilians.

At the terminus two Officers were stationed with an escort, asking for passport, but we managed to get through by pushing our way to the midst of the civilians. I may say that the tram route ends at MONS station, and this accounts for our being able to mingle with the rush from the Station as well as from the cars.

We made our way to the centre of the city; picquets and sentries were to be seen in every street. I was informed that there were about 5000 soldiers all told, mainly young men of about 16 years old.

Whilst in Hospital it had been arranged that if we were unable to get back to our own lines we were to make for MONS and enquire at a certain ----- shop situated in the poorer part of the city. We accordingly went to the address we had been given by the Colonel of the Cheshires, and entered the shop, 10 yards from which a sentry was posted. We got into conversation with the young Belgian lady who was staying with the proprietors of the shop, and who spoke very good English. She took us to a ----- house, where we were given a good supper and a night's rest. At 7.30 the next morning, in accordance with instructions left by the Colonel, who had already passed through, we started out with the intention of reaching Brussels, where the Colonel had friends. A Belgian civilian went with us as guide and accompanied us all the way to Brussels. Sentries were also stationed on the outskirts of MONS, but

nevertheless, we managed to get through. The first day we walked about 25 miles, and eventually arrived at a village called TUBIZE, where we stayed the night putting up at the house of friends of the guide. The following morning we started off again at 7 o'clock, passing a sentry on the Main Railways we made our way to the Canal that runs through TUBIZE to BRUSSELS, and walked along the side until we reached the capital, passing numerous sentries on bridges and railways. Having in our possession the address of an English lady in Brussels, a friend of the Colonel, we proceeded at once to her house; we were hospitably received by Miss C-----, and put up for the night. The next day our guide, Monsieur A. D---, after receiving our most grateful thanks, returned to Mons. Miss C----- told us that we should have to stay in her house until she could provide us with another guide, but as she found some difficulty in getting one she endeavoured in the meantime to obtain a Belgian Passport from a certain lawyer, but this was refused. Amongst other things she told us that the Colonel had arrived and left again, but that she had learnt he had been taken prisoner before he was able to get clear of Brussels.

According to the plan of escape mapped out by the Colonel whilst in Hospital, we were to endeavour to get to Antwerp and from thence Holland and having done this to pose as British Civilians, and thus get a passport home. At last on the 23rd January Miss C----- informed us that she has secured a guide. We were taken by her on a car through Brussels and at a certain place we alighted and entered a café. Having ordered three beers, Miss C----- placed the half of a card on one of the tables. Some minutes later a man entered and upon noticing the half card on the table, placed a corresponding half beside it. This manner of procedure must have been arranged by correspondence, as the guide was unknown to Miss C-----. Just outside the café there was a kind of outpost of Germans, who appeared to be billeted in the next building to the café.

After wishing us goodbye, Miss C----- left us in charge of the guide, who conducted us to a small village south of Antwerp. From there we had to cross the river Schelde which we did by appropriating a boat. Having crossed over we went to the right, but found that the Germans were asking for passports, so we had to turn on our tracts, and try to get round the left, which we succeeded in doing. We passed through Antwerp, and on our way came across three German Cyclist Patrols. One of the officers of the last patrol stopped our guide and asked for passports; whilst he was talking to the guide we walked on, the Officer taking no notice. The guide satisfied him as far as he himself was concerned, and afterwards caught us up. We continued on our way and arrived at 7 o'clock at night at a village about four miles from the Dutch frontier. We found however, that the way was barred by a strong infantry patrol, and had to return to a Public House; we went through this house and out through the back door, crossing some fields on to another road. After walking for about three miles and a half we came very close to the frontier. About $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the frontier a large number of Germans was billeted in a Public House, but we eventually got past them, and after passing through several gardens and orchards we came to within 20 yards of the German sentries who were posted on the frontier. One of them upon hearing us approach challenged us, but not receiving a satisfactory answer fired three shots in our direction, but happily without success.

We ran as fast as we could for about 20 minutes until we were sure that we were safe on Dutch soil. At this juncture Cpl. Chapman was taken with cramp in both legs, and the guide and I had to carry him between us. Eventually we arrived at an Inn and went inside to get a drink. We had only been there about half an hour, when one of the Dutch Military Officers came and told us that he would have to take us prisoner as he suspected that we were British soldiers. He took us away to the Military Barracks, where we passed the night, the guide staying at the Inn. The next day we were taken before the Colonel, but we told him that we were English civilians, I stating that I had been a brewer's assistant at Bavay in France for the last nine months, whilst Cpl. Chapman said he had been a labourer at WIHERIES. Fortunately the Colonel believed us, but sent us to another town where we had to go in front of a Captain, of course, repeating our story to him. This officer however, said that unless we were out of Holland by 8 o'clock the following morning we should be imprisoned and kept in Holland until the end of the war. He then let us go.

From this town we made our way to the British Consul in Flushing, arriving at about 6p.m. the same day. Mr F.C.B. Wood the British Consul made us very welcome, giving us tea and a free passage to England with passport (the latter now in my possession) and 6/- each for our pockets, and told us that there was no fear of our being taken prisoner as we could leave Holland at once. He saw us on board a "Zeekand" boat at 9.30, and wished us goodbye. The ship sailed at 8 o'clock morning, and arrived at Folkestone at 4.30p.m. the same day, where we reported ourselves to the Colonel in charge. After explaining our case to him, he sent us to Shorncliffe, where we were for two days attached to the Northamptonshire Regiment. On the 15th February I received a railway warrant to Tidworth, and reported at Orderly Room at 4p.m. Cpl/. Chapman proceeded to Birkenhead to join the depot of his Regiment.

Whilst at the British Consulate at Flushing I met a gentleman whose name was, I believe, Captain Drooner, who told us he was an officer of the 9th Lancers."