

I escaped from Ruhleben through bog and swamp into Holland by A.E. Keith

The author was in business in Germany when war broke out, and was interned in the civil prison camp of Ruhleben. Here he describes a valiant escape over bogs and swamps into Holland. After his return to England he was discouraged from joining the British army in the belief that an escaped prisoner would not be allowed in the front line. He was given permission to join the American army, with whom he fought in 1918.

It was in 1917 that I escaped from Ruhleben and got safely to London; but that was my third attempt, and I must say a few words about my failures before I tell the story of my success.

On the first occasion my starting point was not Ruhleben but Dr. Weiler's Sanatorium, a convalescent home on the outskirts of Berlin to which Ruhleben invalids could be transferred if they were able and willing to pay the fees; and getting out of that sanatorium was as easy as falling off a log. I got up in the small hours of the morning, dressed, came downstairs in my socks, carrying my boots, opened a French window and issued forth, unseen and unheard by anyone, travelled by tram to Berlin and thence by train to Leipzig, where I bought a compass and some maps, and thence in other trains took a cross-country journey to the neighbourhood of the Dutch frontier, which I hoped to cross by night.

I nearly crossed it. Indeed, I believe that I actually did cross it and that the soldier who arrested me had followed me into Holland. Still, arrested I was, and then, after being given a good dinner, I was locked up in some small official building, the precise nature of which I did not know, and left to my own devices.

Looking about me carefully-there was nothing else for me to do- I discovered the weak points of the stronghold. It was not as easy to get out of as the Sanatorium, but there was a way. I managed to knock a hole in the ceiling and roof, scramble through, and drop into the road at a time when nobody was about. But after a brief spell of liberty, I was caught again, and that was the end of the first adventure.

Punishment followed. I was not sent back to Ruhleben. I was sent instead to the Berlin prison known as the Stadtvogtei, and that prison was the starting point of escape number two. But I was not alone this time. Wallace Ellison [author of 'Escapes and Adventures' -Ed.], who had escaped from Ruhleben and been recaptured, was with me. He had friends in the prison- German as well as English friends- and some of the latter helped us. Exactly who did what I do not think I have any right to tell; but the means of picking a lock were procured, and a lock was picked, and, in the end, we had nothing to do but open the door when nobody was looking and walk out.

Once more I got close to the frontier. Once more I came very near to crossing it. But once more the chapter of accidents defeated me. It was November. The weather was trying. The cold and the exposure were more than Wallace Ellison could stand. The day came when he could hardly drag himself along. We had to knock at a farmhouse door and ask for help. We were given help, for which we paid, and were allowed to warm ourselves by a roaring fire. We even picked up some topographical information which seemed likely to be useful. But we had no chance of using it. Our appearances at the Farmhouse had aroused suspicions. There had been talk. People were looking for us. A Lieutenant caught us. His manner was friendly. Our enterprise seemed to have struck a sympathetic cord in his bosom. But, of course, he did not let us go, but merely made us as comfortable as he could before an escort arrived to take

us back to the Stradtvogtei, where, for a season, we had to endure what was colloquially called 'solitary'...

My term of 'solitary,' however, was not a long one. As soon as it was over I mixed again with my fellow prisoners in courtyards and corridors and laid my plans for a third attempt. Tynsdale and Kent promised to join me, and, while still in the Berlin prison, I succeeded, by bribery and corruption, in procuring a much better and more detailed map of the frontier region than I had been able to get hold of before- a map, indeed, which suggested an important change of route.

What the map showed me was that there lay, at a certain point between Germany and Dutch territory, a formidable swamp, twenty-five miles in length and between five and seven miles in width. What I gathered from information received was that this swamp was generally regarded as impassable except in very dry summer weather. In that case, I reflected, this part of the border was hardly likely to be patrolled, as I had learnt that some of the other parts were, by cavalry and dogs; and I gathered from information received that it would not really prove impassable to men whose determination to cross it was as imperious as ours. So we decided upon that route; and that was the stage which we had reached, in consequence of the representations of the Dutch Minister, who had succeeded the American Ambassador as the protector of British interests in Germany, we, together with sixteen other prisoners, were sent back to Ruhleben on August 23, 1917. So, this time, it was from Ruhleben that we had to start- without Wallace Ellison, who was not in the best of health and was making arrangements of his own.

Getting out of the camp was not really very difficult. There were means of crawling under the barbed wire, used by man after man, and apparently well known to everybody there except the soldier who was guarding us. So, on September 16, we availed ourselves of those means, taking with us, as food for each man, a bar of chocolate, two small cabin biscuits with dripping, one oatmeal cake specially baked for us by a friend, two or three pieces of sugar, and half a dozen raisins, together with a tin of Horlick's malted milk tablets and a small flask of brandy. Other food, of course, we expected to buy en route.

First, as before, we travelled by train, taking a circuitous route which we were not likely to be suspected of having taken, passing through Hanover, Bremen and Oldenburg, and ultimately arriving at Copenburg. We had money- enough even for emergencies- and small leather handbags in which to carry our indispensable luggage.

So far we had been lucky, but we still had a long way to walk- walking by night and hiding by day in copses and spinneys or even ditches- and we still had two lines, presumably well watched, to cross- first, the river Ems, and then the frontier itself. It was not easy to find our way in the dark; but we had a compass, as well as our map, to help us, and our electric torches enabled us to check our progress by inspecting signposts when we came to them.

There were inaccuracies in the map which misled and delayed us, but, at last, we reached the Ems and carefully moved along the river path in the dark until at last we perceived a barge with a boat by her side, riding on the water and without cargo, opposite a tiny pier of earth which ended about twenty yards from the boat, while, in a house, some distance farther up, one lighted window winked into the night. We were standing on the pier.

One of us obviously had to get that boat. We drew lots for the job, and the lot fell on me. I took off my clothes and slipped cautiously into the water, braced myself against the cold and pushed off, clambered into the boat, fumbled with the hawser,

shoved off, and, using as a paddle a pole which happened to be lying in the boat, paddled it to the pier.

‘Here’s the brandy,’ said Kent, handing me the flask, and I took a pull at it before I dressed.

Then we embarked, and Kent, who had found an oar lying about, rowed us across the river in proper Waterman’s style, and made the boat fast, so that we could not be accused of stealing it if we were caught. But could we cross the swamp, on the edge of which we were now standing, before sunrise? We held a council of war on the question. At first we thought we could, scrapped our luggage and strolled some distance along the riverbank, looking for a good point at which to enter the swamp. Then, having found one, we decided that we had better not take the risk, as we had a good hiding-place close to us, and might be unable to find one if we missed our way in the morass. The one drawback was that we had left our overcoats behind, and should be very cold without them.

‘Let’s see,’ I said. ‘Four hours till daylight. We’ll go and fetch them. We’ve heaps of time, and there’s nothing else to do.’

But we did not fetch them. We could not find them, though we spent half an hour in looking for them. The impedimenta which we had shed while searching for a starting point were irretrievably lost. We had no clothes except those we were wearing. So we went back, and, at about 3.30, stretched ourselves on some dry leaves among the oak saplings and fell asleep.

It was bitterly cold, however. The wind rose and the rain fell, and we soon awoke with our teeth chattering. But we stuck it, making a kind of arbour with the oak saplings which gave us partial shelter through the rest of the night and the whole of the following day. Then, at half-past five, we ate our last meal, divided the malted milk tablets which we had kept for emergencies, cut staves which we thought likely to be useful, waited as patiently as we could for darkness, and at half-past eight started on our last lap.

It was difficult going, though we were, as yet, only on the fringe of the swamp. Two or three wide drainage ditches were crossed with the help of their sluice gates, and we jumped the smaller ones with the help of our staves. Then came marshy meadows and open patches of water where, for about an hour, we were always in water above our ankles, frequently much deeper, taking our zigzag way through the shallowest places.

Then we came to the swamp proper. It was as flat and as black at first as a congealed lake of asphalt, covered with an exceedingly short growth, like very tiny heather plants, or their densely intertwined roots, and very springy with the concealed bog underneath. No sentries, I felt sure, would be standing in that trackless waste. So we had time to take notice of our surroundings, which were very eerie- a black circle surrounding us, and some white patches ahead. But then we had a surprise- just about midnight.

‘Pfatt,’ said a rifle far to the north, and we stared intently in the direction of the sound.

‘Pfatt, pfatt,’ it repeated spitefully. The sound clearly came from the wood to the north of us, so, without a word to the others, I turned away, due west. The swamps- and we were now being driven on to the worst part of them- might be kindlier than German rifleman.

The ground was now very unstable all about us. I could feel slow waves rolling sluggishly under my feet, caused by our footsteps on the thin carpet of vegetable matter covering the morass. It was an area of slime on which we were walking, and

these areas of slime increased in number, flowed together. I lost my balance, and nearly fell into a bog from which I probably could not have extricated myself, but Kent threw an arm round me and jerked me back.

The ground got worse and worse, and presently we found ourselves in the peat cuttings- great yawning holes and ditches, running mainly from north to south, black, with sometimes a star or two mirrored in the foul water a foot or so below the edge. The passage had to be made across bridges of standing peat, hardly ever more than two feet wide, which swayed as we shuffled over them. Kent fell, pretty much as I had done, but his staff fell across the gap into which he was slipping and he succeeded in scrambling out.

‘West,’ I called.

Westward we went, and by degrees the going got better. The slimy patches seemed a bit firmer. We came at last to a flat, unbroken, springy surface, and then to a canal, seemingly in course of construction, bridged by a large tree trunk. Kent walked across the tree trunk. Tynsdale and I crossed it astride. Then, in two-hundred yards, we came to another full grown canal.

‘We must be in Holland,’ I remarked; but Kent wasn’t so sure.

We argued the point, and finally turned south along the canal bank until we saw a house, a hundred yards or so to the east, towards Germany.

The whole character of the cottage, for such it was, struck me as un-German. I pulled out my torch and inspected it.

‘This isn’t German,’ I decided. ‘Look at the front door. It is painted with flowers.’ Then Kent spoke.

‘This can’t be Germany. Why, there’s a big dish full of potatoes on the table in the front room. You’d never see that in Germany.’

‘Very well. Let’s knock.’ I said.

We knocked, but had no time to ask questions. Before the sound of the last rap had died away, we heard a male voice calling from within:

‘Holland, Holland.’

‘Hip, hip, hip,’ I started; and we gave three cheers with tired and feeble voices, and then turned to make our way to the nearest village...

We had only gone a few steps, however, when the Dutchman came running after us. He spoke Dutch, and we spoke German, but we could understand each other.

‘Prisoners of war?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Russian?’

‘No, no. English.’

He gripped our hands and shook them warmly and insisted on our returning with him to his cottage, where he ushered us into the room in which Kent had seen the big dish full of potatoes. His wife, in picturesque undress, fired a volley of questions at her husband, clasped her hands, shook ours, and began lighting the kitchener. Her daughters emerged from cavernous cabin beds, let into the wall, and shyly dressed in front of us.

Then the table was loaded with things to eat. We had fried veal, bread, butter, and plenty of milk and hot coffee- all this offered to us spontaneously in a farm labourer’s cottage at half-past two in the morning; and after the meal was over, our host guided us to a village, where everybody asked us to breakfast, and thence were taken by the village policeman to a military station at Ter Appel.

There we were given a wash, another good meal, and a bottle of port, and were questioned by a friendly sergeant, who apologized for his inability to offer us more luxurious accommodation.

‘Did you meet any sentries?’ he asked.

‘Not one.’

‘Where did you cross over?’

‘North of Sellingen.’

‘You came over the swamps, then?’ with elevated eyebrows.

‘Yes, right across.’

‘You were lucky, Up to a fortnight ago, sentries stood along the frontier at one hundred metres’ intervals. Then they were withdrawn because the swamp became impassable. You were fortunate, too, in getting across the Ems. A great many fugitives got drowned in it.’

Three weeks later, after a spell in quarantine, I was in London. Six weeks after that I received a telephone call.

‘Who is it?’ I asked.

‘Don’t you recognize my voice?’

‘No.’

‘It’s Wallace Ellison, speaking from Hackney. I got through last night.’