

“First Word in Wessex”

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“THE ONE THAT DID NOT GET AWAY”

by LAURENCE COOMBES

On the evening of 17th (sic) March 1941, a German bomber crash-landed in a field between the parishes of Fovant and Dinton in South Wiltshire. All four occupants of the plane baled out successfully, and three of them were taken into custody within an hour of their coming to earth. The fourth, whose Christian name was Otto, and the flight mechanic of the crew, managed to evade capture on landing, and was in fact free for about a week before being eventually apprehended.

I was the senior officer of the Home Guard in the immediate area and was directly implicated in the events that led up to his capture. But it was not until the year 1974 that I was fortunate enough to read his own description of his baling out, and lying up in the neighbourhood for some days. But unfortunately his own story of his capture did not follow, though I could fill in on what took place, though obviously not what he thought or felt about it.

“The Flight Mechanic’s Story”

I was flight mechanic of one of three aircraft, all of which crash-landed in March 1941 over England, but they did not all come down on the same night. (I have since been told that the reason for their failure was due to sabotage by the French Resistance). Due to engine trouble, we were ordered to bale out over the south of England, exactly where I do not know.

It was my first parachute descent. As you know, parachute jumping was not practised by bombing units of the Luftwaffe so it was a new experience for me to jump out. With the legs, I first of all shoved myself through the exit hatch. I heard a loud rushing of air, and the next moment I was outside, and then it was quite still all around me.

For some time I had thought about how long I would wait before pulling the ripcord. However, I now pulled it at once, and received a jolt jerk, and then I was hanging on my parachute. We had been instructed that we should remove our throat microphones before baling out. I had forgotten to do this, and the cable and the throat microphone became entangled round my neck, and nearly strangled me. In the excitement I could not find the buckle, so I had to reach behind the strap. I was now swinging violently on the parachute as if on a swing. With my arms and legs I pushed against the direction of the swing, and after a while I hung there peacefully.

It was a clear night with light ground mist. As I came through the clouds, I saw beneath me a small stream, and on a field I made a soft landing. From my pocket I at once took the contents and destroyed them, also the last photograph and the smallest documents. My identification documents and the money I retained. Then I dragged the parachute towards a river, and I pushed it with a stick into the mud until it could no longer be seen. In a small wood I then sought a hiding-place, and waited for the morning.

Some distance away was a road and some farmhouses. The countryside was covered with small hillocks. During the day there was quite a lot of flying activity overhead with training aircraft. In a prison I would not get the opportunity to escape, so I formed in my head the plan to go to an airfield, and try to make a flight with a plane. It was a splendid spring day, and the sun already warm, so I removed my lifejacket, and lay on it in the warm sun. I tried to sleep without much success. In my immediate neighbourhood there were wild rabbits running about. I would like to have shot one, but that would certainly have attracted attention to me. So it remained my aim to stay free to stay in the sun.

“The Home Guard Officer’s Story”

The Nadder Valley Company of the 7th Bn. Wiltshire Home Guard at that time consisted of the Barford St. Martin, Burcombe, Fovant and Dinton Platoons. Major R.M. Woolley, head of the Salisbury firm of Auctioneers and Estate Agents, was Company Commander, with myself as second-in-command with the rank of Captain. Within the Company area was a large unit of the R.A.F. Maintenance Unit, with H.Q. at Dinton. A large proportion of the land within the perimeter was in the parish of Fovant. The unit was guarded by a small army contingent.

Shortly after midnight on the night of 17th/18th (sic) March 1941, the German bomber crash-landed near the southern perimeter of the R.A.F. unit, being actually in the parish of Fovant. The Home Guard was not at the time mounting night patrols, and it was not until the morning of the 18th that the

news became generally known. It was then reported that the four occupants of the plane had parachuted to safety, two being picked up immediately, and a third giving himself up soon after. The regular army units and police were searching for the fourth member of the crew, whom we now know as Otto.

The local Home Guard units were not asked to assist in the search until the following day, the 19th, when it was suggested that outlying areas of woodland round the villages of Fovant and Dinton should be combed. These operations were carried out without success, but units were warned to be on the alert for the missing airman. A cursory search of the large area of woodland known as Fovant Wood, this being part of the estate I owned and farmed, was carried out by members of the army guard unit, assisted by R.A.F. personnel and police, and it is apparent from Otto's later report that they must have passed close to his hiding-place during the search. There is no doubt in my mind that this operation would have stood more chance of success had the Home Guard been called in to help, especially bearing in mind [the local knowledge of the members] and that of myself as owner of the property in particular. In fact, during a shooting party in the woodland some time later, the airman's parachute and other belongings were discovered on the edge of a pasture known as Summerground in the middle of Fovant Wood.

“Story of the Flight Mechanic Continued”

After resting for a day and when it became dark. I thought would try and get on my way. By this time I had a severe thirst, and finding in a field a drain ditch with clear water, I quenched the thirst. I then continued over fields, but I did not venture on to roads. In one field there were cows, and I thought I could perhaps milk one, but as soon as I approached them, they ran off. Anyway, I had no experience of cows. The effort of crossing fields I was finding quite strenuous work, so I decided to walk along the road. If I came across people, I would at once dive into the ditch.

In one village, I met up with some people passing-by and was too late to run, so I remained bold and continued towards them. They greeted me and I mumbled something in return. That was good and in retrospect I was pleased. My disappointment that night was very great that I was unable to find an airfield. One field was covered with hen-houses, with chicken inside, but I could find no eggs. From a house there came the smell of bacon frying. I was near the house, and because of the smell I was inclined I to break in, but there were obviously occupants up and about, so I left it.

In the morning I went through a village. The farms had small milk churns on tables by the side of the road, exactly as we have in Germany. I tried during the day to find for myself a hiding-place, and I intended going back to the road. I took it that the farms would put cans with milk on the tables at dawn, however, I saw nothing. On the way, I found a field of cabbages, and took one so that I would have something to eat in a small wood where I was hiding. That morning, I saw a farmer who was ploughing his field. The thought came to me that perhaps I could take a piece of bread from his dinner bag unnoticed, but I was not able to.

I decided that I would go straight ahead, but I saw at the last minute some soldiers coming through the wood. I dropped to the ground, and remained completely motionless. One of the Englishmen ran for some distance scarcely twenty yards from me, without seeing me. From that moment, my appetite disappeared. I just remained lying there until it became dark.

Author's Note

This is the end of Otto's story, which must have referred to the fourth day of his freedom. His description is a very garbled one, due probably to the fact that was written twelve years or more after the day he baled out from his plane. He refers constantly about hiding in a small wood, but the one where he saw soldiers passing twenty yards from him was in fact a very large one of 140 acres, and adjoining one of about the same size. There is also the discrepancy about where he concealed his parachute. He says he pushed it into the mud of a river whereas it was found in the pasture called Summerground in Fovant Wood, some distance from river of any size. Of course, the parachute and belongings might have been hidden by a different German, even one of the three who were captured when the plane first landed. One thing is very clear, even though he must have been a brave man to make a decision to try and effect his escape from the country by means of stealing a plane, the time he spent on his wanderings must have been very frightening period.

“Home Guard Officer's Story Continued”

Towards the end of the week in which the German bomber had crash-landed, the Fovant Platoon of the Home Guard attended in uniform, a lecture at the Company H.Q. at Barford St. Martin, following which they were to play a friendly darts match against the home platoon in the Green Dragon Hotel. Soon after play had commenced, a civilian customer came into the bar and said he had just seen a German airman walking along the main road towards Wilton, beyond which was the City of Salisbury.

As senior officer present, I immediately organised road blocks with members of the two platoons on all roads out of the village towards Wilton. I then drove to Wilton where I contacted my opposite number of the Wilton Company and he agreed to block entrances to the town. This having been done, I started to drive back to Barford St Martin, but was in collision with a car without visible lights which was backing out of a private drive into the main road. Although my own car was out of action, I was given a lift back to Barford by a passing motorist.

Here, as a supreme anti-climax to my efforts, I was told that the German had given himself up to an R.A.F. police warden who was cycling to his night duty at the Dinton R.A.F. unit. It had been reported that Germans in such position as this man was, had been told that if captured by the Home Guard, they could expect to receive brutal treatment. Otto must therefore have been relieved to find someone from whom he had less to fear, having realised that the Home Guard were on the look-out for him.

The civilian police were informed, and the German was taken to Wilton Police Station. Here he was interrogated by the Inspector on duty. I have it on good authority that the Captain in charge of the army guard unit at Dinton arrived at the police station, and demanded that he be given custody of the airman, but this was flatly refused by the police.

As far as the Home Guard was concerned, that was the end of the incident. I was very disappointed that we had been unable to make the actual arrest of the man. But I was confident that we had taken all necessary steps to prevent his further escape towards his admitted objective – to find an airfield where he could hi-jack a plane to fly home to Germany.

In my opinion, the army Captain's behaviour from start to finish was reprehensible, first in his refusal to bring the Home Guard into the search right from the beginning. And secondly, although having had nothing to do with the actual arrest of Otto – he tried – unsuccessfully as it happened – to take the man into his own custody.