

CANADIAN HERO IN POLAND

STORY OF HUBERT BROOKS, Wing Commander

Is one of only five R.C.A.F. officers awarded the Military Cross in World War II. He won the medal for his determined efforts on three occasions to escape from a German prisoner-of-war camp, the last of which was successful. For his service in the Polish Underground Army in the next two years Sqdn. Ldr. Brooks was also awarded the Polish Silver Cross of Merit with Swords. And for his "generous courage and bravery" in leading 40 fellow partisans out of a German encirclement he was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour.

This is his story of his escapes from Stalag VIII B and his years as a Polish partisan told in his own words.

PART I

THE ITEM in the Montreal newspaper some time after the end of the war was so brief I almost missed it. I did see it. I read it and I knew at once that it was a message for me. The story, cabled from London, said that a Polish officer in London received word from his daughter, a Polish partisan still in Russian-occupied Poland, requesting him to contact a certain Canadian. She knew only his undercover name, Mr. Hubert, and that he came from Montreal. That was all the information there was.

I have forgotten what the headlines were that day and I had no idea whether the editor of the newspaper ever assigned a

man to discover the true identity of the mysterious Mr. Hubert. If he did, he failed. As for me, my two years fighting in the Carpathian mountains with the Armia Krajowa (A.K.), the Polish Underground Army, were still vivid in my mind. So were the officers and men, and blonde and brunette couriers from Cracow that remained behind in Poland after the Russian occupation.

PART I

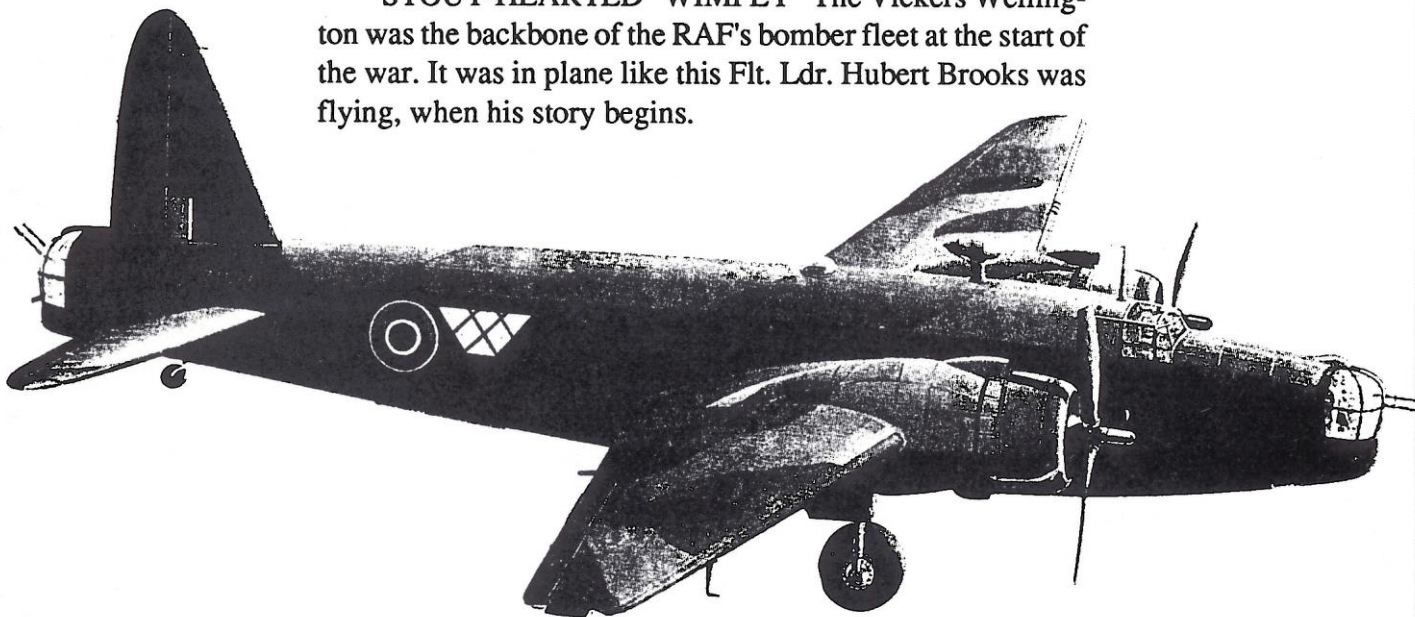
It would have taken a very smart newspaperman to link up the elusive Mr. Hubert with an R.C.A.F. navigator named Flt. Lt. Hubert Brooks anyway, for my story is full of changes in identity.

At the start it was simple. I was a

young R.C.A.F. flight sergeant bailing out of a blazing bomber over Germany. The confusion started when I switched identity with a New Zealander in prison camp and busted myself to private. Later on, I disguised myself - unsuccessfully - as a large lump of coal on a freight car - and successfully - as a labourer in a jam factory. And finally, by the time I'd met the blonde and brunette couriers from Cracow, I'd been promoted again to lieutenant in the Armia Krajowa and was busy skiing down the Carpathian mountains of southern Poland liquidating Gestapo agents.

I may as well tell you now - although I don't expect you to believe it - that I spent much more time with an indomitable old Polish school-marm of 80 than I ever did

STOUT-HEARTED "WIMPEY" The Vickers Wellington was the backbone of the RAF's bomber fleet at the start of the war. It was in plane like this Flt. Ldr. Hubert Brooks was flying, when his story begins.



with blonde or brunette couriers from Cracow. Beautiful partisan girls are a great asset to fiction. When you're fighting in the hills with a price on your head and quarter given, it is easier to stay alive without them. Women and this kind of warfare don't mix - unfortunately.

The target for tonight April 8, 1942, was Hamburg. Five hundred aircraft were to take part, among them 13 Wellingtons from the R.C.A.F.'s 419 Moose Squadron based at Mildenhall in Suffolk. It was the biggest and most ambitious night raid yet planned in the war and my second mission. I had been on one raid since I joined the squadron two months earlier - an attack on Le Havre. If I could survive the rest of the year I'd be able to celebrate my 21-st birthday the night before New Year's Eve.

Our Wimpey, N for Nuts, was slated Nr.2 for take-off but at the last minute the skipper discovered one of his flight instruments was unserviceable. By the time it was fixed and we roared down the runway, we were Nr.13. We found out it was our unlucky night as I lay in the nose readying my bomb sights for the run into Hamburg. The front gunner saw it first and called to the skipper over the intercom: "Starboard engine's on fire!"

The port engine caught fire a moment later, after I had jettisoned our bomb load and given the pilot a course for home. At first we thought the extinguishers had stopped the fires and we would make it at least to the North Sea, but both engines burst into flames again. I estimated we were close to the Dutch border when the skipper ordered us to bail out.

I landed in a field, coming down heavily on my left leg and my parachute pack landed even more heavily on my head. One of the buckles opened a gash in my skull. It was 1 A.M. and I started walking west in the darkness. By dawn my face was slashed by strands of barbed wire I hadn't seen in time and my leg was swollen too much for further progress. I knocked on a farmhouse door, hoping an answer would come in Dutch, but it was a German who helped me in.

While the farmer's wife dressed my wounds and fixed breakfast, her daughter went to the nearby village of Leer to fetch the police. By 8 o'clock that morning I was a prisoner of war. I soon discovered that the entire crew of N for Nuts had also been

captured - all but the rear gunner. His parachute had apparently jammed in the rear escape hatch and he had ridden down to his death in the burning bomber.

I thought of escape from the moment I surrendered in the farmhouse kitchen. Throughout our stay in the Dulag Luft interrogation camp outside Franfort - on - Main, I managed to conceal one item of my escape kit. It was a compass the size of a dime which I hid in my mouth while I was searched and questioned.

We arrived at Lamsdorf prison camp in Silesia (Stalag VIII B) two weeks later. It was a big camp filled with prisoners taken at Dunkirk and Crete, but there were only 500 men in the air force compound. There were 7,000 men in the army compounds and a further 13,000 registered at the camp on work parties spread around the countryside.

I soon realized that it would be most difficult to escape from the main camp. The air force compound was isolated from the other compounds. The entire camp was guarded by searchlight towers, machine-gun nests, warning wires, patrols and police dogs. Airmen had less chance to escape than soldiers, I also found out, because they couldn't be sent out on working parties and the boys in the army could.

The answer was to become a soldier! And so I started to ask around discreetly until I found a soldier who would be willing to exchange identities with me. It had to be someone roughly the same height and size as myself with the same colour hair and eyes, but the resemblance, fortunately, did not have to be too close. Many of the early prisoners had their identity-card photos taken when they were thin and haggard after prolonged forced marches and the guards could not identify them too well this way.

It was in a crowd of prisoners watching a soccer game that I finally found a man willing to make the switch. He was Pte. Frederick Cole, of Christchurch, New Zealand.

The willing Kiwi, who'd been captured at Crete, had just arrived back in Lamsdorf from a work party and was happy enough to exchange the hard grind for the leisurely life of a flight sergeant in the air force compound.

Switching identities was as easy as

changing suits. That was all we did. A few days after our first meeting we both reported on sick parade. Once inside the bustling camp hospital we dodged into a washroom. I peeled off my air force blues and put on his khaki battle dress. Five minutes later I was marching back to the army compounds as a New Zealand Private.

It was odd to think that from now on a comparative stranger would be living the life of Hubert Brooks, opening Red Cross parcels from Montreal and getting letters from my family. But the important thing was to escape, and I was on my way. There were no escape committees in those early days; you planned your own breaks.

One companion was essential for the plan I worked out, which was to escape from a work party. There were six Polish airmen in Lamsdorf and one of them, Sgt. Jozef Krawiec, agreed to join me. Men for the work parties were detailed by a British sergeant-major P.O.W., and not by the Germans, so it was easy to have Joseph and me picked for a suitable work party. As Joseph was born and raised in Cracow, we selected a work party in the village of Borek. This village was conveniently close to the pre-war Polish border. An escape from here would shorten our journey to Cracow, where we hoped to contact the underground movement. It was harder to arrange an identity switch for Joe, as guards kept a particularly close watch on the half-dozen Poles. We delayed his exchange until the night before we were due to leave camp and the switch worked perfectly.

Fortunately, Fred Cole's original P.O.W. identity card was lacking one item - a photograph. Before leaving Lamsdorf I was reprocessed by the Germans; my picture in khaki uniform now appeared on his I-card. (It was possible for some escapees to have I-cards "misplaced", thus requiring new photographs taken. Some even used photos of Hollywood film stars on forged passports or travelling papers.) The next morning we passed scrutiny at Lamsdorf gates without any difficulty. While we waited for our train at Lamsdorf station, we met the German N.C.O. in charge of the air force compound. Had he recognized us? Unfortunately, Joe's disappearance didn't go unnoticed, and a few days after we reached the work party he was singled out and taken back to camp. My real identity

remained undetected, but I was left without any contacts in Poland and only the faintest knowledge that Cracow was a good city to head for.

The prisoners at Bobrek worked in the coal mines, and I soon found myself hewing coal eight hours a day in the biggest and deepest coal mine in Silesia, the Johanna Shaft mine. I only stayed two weeks and then made a last-minute arrangement with a British soldier to escape on Saturday night. I smuggled some pliers back from the mine in my coffee can. A tiny Union Jack, off the wrapper on a mustard tin, to identify ourselves when we reached Poland, was included in our escape kits.

We chose midnight for the break because the guards were then busy checking the night shift from the mines back into camp. As it was Saturday night most of the guards on duty were wishing they were in town drinking beer, and to help us still further a violent thunderstorm started at 10 P.M. We clipped the barbed wire over our windows according to plan, wriggled out, hurdled a six-foot fence and then cut our way through two barbed-wire fences.

We were soaked and breathless, and away, and the guards had not seen us. A week later, we reached the border of occupied Poland. Our journey had been uneventful and successful so far, but that night as we crawled along of a creek, often stumbling into water in the darkness, we were both on edge. Several times we thought we saw border patrols and froze in our tracks. And we were too tense to laugh at our own stupidity when we discovered that the lights we thought were glowing cigarettes were only fireflies.

Next day we reached the centre of Cracow and wandered round the city in the rain trying to make contact with the underground. We were still unsuccessful at dusk and looked so bedraggled that we decided to head back to the outskirts of the city, pick an isolated house and try our luck.

I knew we were in bad company the moment the door opened in answer to our knock. Three men stood in the doorway and two of them wore swastikas on their lapels. We had blundered into the home of the local German brickyard controller. In a vain attempt to extricate ourselves from this predicament I turned on my best Montreal patois and told the Germans we were two French peasants working at forced

labour on a nearby farm and wanted in out of the rain.

The desperate gambit worked well enough to keep the local Nazis up all night checking on French farm help in the area, but it only enraged them more when they found our P.O.W. dog tags in the morning.

We spent the 24 hours of June 19, 1942 at Gestapo headquarters in Cracow listening to our bellies rumble with hunger and incessant questions of our interrogators; "Who were you trying to contact in the underground? What names have you? Who helped you so far?"

Again and again we replied that we had escaped from Bobrek simply to avoid the hard work of digging coal in the mines. In the end they shrugged and sent us back to the familiar compounds of Stalag VIII B at Lamsdorf. There I was sentenced to 14 days solitary confinement; but my masquerade as Pte Fred Cole of the New Zealand Army went unchallenged. I decided the Germans must have a very poor ear for Commonwealth accents. I was only too happy that they did, since it meant I would have a second chance to escape.

This time I decided I would try an escape southward across the Czechoslovak border with the ultimate aim of reaching the South of France. I met up with an Armenian, Sgt. Sidi, serving with the British Army, who knew the Mediterranean area well, and was eager to join me in the escape plan. Before leaving Lamsdorf, I was able to discuss some of the problems of escaping with a man who had already escaped once; it was Group Capt. (then Wing Cmdr.) Douglas Bader - the legless R.A.F. ace.

We selected a work party at Zwitau in the Sudetenland conveniently close to the Czech border and on August 27 started work there as section men on the railroad. It was now a full two months since my recapture and I was itching to escape again. So, it turned out, were at least 10 of the 60 men in our work party.

Our guards must have sensed this, for every night at 10 they would gather up all our pants and shoes and lock them away in a bolted room. Six of us decided to make the actual break together this time, then go our separate ways once we were on the ground. Once again, we chose a Saturday night for the break and scheduled a boxing match in the mess hall as a suitably noisy diversion.

While the gloves thudded and the boys booed and cheered, we sawed through the window bars in the all-important trouser room with stolen hacksaw blades. We left the bars in position until after our guards made their last round and gathered up our pants and shoes.

By midnight on September 10 we were decently clad and ready to go. We knotted together the traditional rope of blankets for the descent from our second-floor quarters.

Beneath one possible escape window, a street lamp gleamed brightly, and beneath the window on the far side ran a lover's lane. We chose lover's lane, and luckily romance wasn't flourishing in Zwitau that Saturday night. All six of us slipped away unnoticed into the night.

Sgt. Sidi and I headed due south across the mountains towards the Czech city of Brno, where we were very nearly caught, not by the Germans but by the irate owner of an apple orchard we were raiding. We hurriedly pulled out our mustard-tin Union Jack and explained who we were. The farmer called his police dog to heel and loaded us with so many apples that we could barely walk. The next evening while attempting to cross a railway bridge we were nearly shot by a German guard.

I had discovered while working at the Johanna Shaft mine that Germans were loading coal and lumber on freight cars in Beuthen for Italy. These freight cars were routed through Lunenburg, Vienna and the Brenner Pass to Milan in northern Italy. Our information proved correct and had only to scour the Lunenburg marshalling yards for a short time before we came across an open freight car laden with huge lumps of coal destined for Milan.

Very carefully we burrowed down into the coal, making sure not to disturb a line white washed across the top load for inspection purposes. For the next 24 hours we jolted along buried in our small cave of coal and at dawn we reached the railway yards on the outskirts of Vienna. To our dismay our car was switched to a siding. There was no way of knowing how long it might stay there. We decided to slip away and return that night. It felt wonderful to stretch but it was mistake to leave.

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