"Outwitting the Hun"

By LIEUTENANT PAT O'BRIEN

FROM THE WINDOW OF A TRAIN RUNNING 35 MILES AN HOUR, O'BRIEN MAKES LEAP FOR LIBERTY.

Synopsis.—Pat O'Brien, a resident of Momence, Ill., after seeing service in the American flying corps on the Mexican border in 1916, joins the British Royal Flying corps in Canada, and after a brief training period is sent to France. He is assigned to a squadron in active service on the front. He engages in several hot fights with German flyers, from which he emerges victorious. Finally, in a fight with four German flyers, O'Brien is shot down. He falls 8,000 feet and, escaping death by a miracle, awakes to find himself a prisoner in a German hospital, with a bullet hole in his mouth. After a few days in the hospital, he is sent to a prison camp at Courtrai.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

One man—and I think he was the smallest eater in the camp—won it on three successive days, but it was well for him that his luck deserted him on the fourth day, for he probably would have been handled rather roughly by the rest of the crowd, who were growing suspicious. But we handled the drawing ourselves and knew there was nothing crooked about it, so he was spared.

We were allowed to buy pears, and being small and very hard, they were used as the stakes in many a game. But the interest in these little games was as keen as if the stakes had been piles of money instead of two or three half-starved pears. No man was ever so reckless, however, in all the betting as to wager his own rations.

By the most scheming and sacrificing I ever did in my life I managed to hoard two pieces of bread (grudgingly spared at the time from my daily rations), but I was preparing for the day when I should escape—if I ever should. It was not a sacrifice easily made either, but instead of eating bread I ate pears until I finally got one piece of bread ahead; and when I could force myself to stick to the pear diet again, I saved the other piece from that day's allowance, and in days to come I had cause to credit myself fully for the foresight.

Whenever a new prisoner came in and his German hosts had satisfied themselves as to his life history and taken down all the details—that is all he would give them—he was immediately surrounded by his fellow prisoners, who were eager for any bit of news or information he could possibly give them, and as a rule he was glad to tell us, because, if he had been in the hands of the Huns for any length of time, he had seen very few English officers.

The conditions of this prison were bad enough when a man was in normally good health, but it was barbarous to subject a wounded soldier to the hardships and discomforts of the place. However, this was the fate of a poor private we discovered there one day in terrific pain, suffering from shrapnel in his stomach and back. All of us officers asked to have him sent to a hospital, but the doctors curtly refused, saying it was against orders. So the poor creature went on suffering from day to day and was still there when I left—another victim of German cruelty.

At one time in this prison camp there were a French marine, a French flying officer, two Belgian soldiers, and of the United Kingdom one from Canada, two from England, three from Ireland, a couple from Scotland, one from Wales, a man from South Africa, one from Algeria, and a New Zealander, the latter being from my own squadron, a man whom I thought had been killed, and he was equally surprised when brought into the prison to find me there. In addition there were a Chinaman and myself from the U. S. A.

It was quite a cosmopolitan group, and as one typical Irishman said, "Sure, and we have every nation that's worth mentioning, including the darn Germans with us whites." Of course this was not translated to the Germans, nor was it even spoken in their hearing, or we probably would not have had quite so cosmopolitan a bunch. Each man in the prison was ready to uphold his native country in any argument that could possibly be started, and it goes without saying that I never took a back seat in any of them with my praise for America, with the Canadian and Chinaman chiming in on my side. But they were friendly arguments; we were all in the same boat and that was no place for quarreling.

Every other morning, the weather allowing, we were taken to a large swimming pool and were allowed to have a bath. There were two pools, one for the German officers and one for the men. Although we were officers, we had to use the pool occupied by the men. While we were in swimming a German guard with a rifle across his knees sat at each corner of the pool and watched us closely as we dressed and undressed. English interpreters accompanied us on all of these trips, so at no time could we talk without their knowing what was going on.

Whenever we were taken out of the prison for any purpose they always paraded us through the most crowded streets—evidently to give the people [illegible] that they were [illegible] lots of prisoners. The German soldiers we passed on these occasions made no effort to hide their smiles and sneers.

The Belgian people were apparently very curious to see us, and they used to turn out in large numbers whenever the word was passed that we were out. At times the German guards would strike the women and children who crowded too close to us. One day I smiled and spoke to a pretty girl, and when she replied, a German made a run for her. Luckily she stepped into the house before he reached her, or I am afraid my salutation would have resulted seriously for her and I would have been powerless to have assisted her.

Whenever we passed a Belgian home or other building which had been wrecked by bombs by our airmen our guards made us stop a moment or two while they passed sneering remarks among themselves.

One of the most interesting souvenirs I have of my imprisonment at Courtrai is a photograph of a group of us taken in the prison courtyard. The picture was made by one of the guards, who sold copies of it to those of us who were able to pay his price—one mark apiece.

As we faced the camera I suppose we all tried to look our happiest, but the majority of us, I am afraid, were too sick at heart to raise a smile, even for this occasion. One of our Hun guards is shown in the picture seated at the table. I am standing directly behind him, attired in my flying tunic, which they allowed me to wear all the time I was in prison, as is the usual custom with prisoners of war. Three of the British officers shown in the picture, in the foreground, are clad in "shorts."

Through all my subsequent adventures I was able to retain a print of this interesting picture, and although when I gaze at it now it only serves to increase my gratification at my ultimate escape, it fills me with regret to think that my fellow prisoners were not so fortunate. All of them by this time are undoubtedly eating their hearts up in the prison camps of interior Germany. Poor fellows!

Despite the scanty fare and the restrictions we were under in this prison, we did manage on one occasion to arrange a regular banquet. The planning which was necessary helped to pass the time.

At this time there were eight of us. We decided that the principal thing we needed to make the affair a success was potatoes, and I conceived a plan to get them. Every other afternoon they took us for a walk in the country, and it occurred to me that it would be a comparatively simple matter for us to pretend to be tired and sit down when we came to the first potato patch.

It worked out nicely. When we came to the first potato patch that afternoon, we told our guards that we wanted to rest a bit and we were allowed to sit down. In the course of the next five minutes each of us managed to get a potato or two. Being Irish, I got six.

When we got back to the prison, I managed to steal a handkerchief full of sugar, which, with some apples that we were allowed to purchase, we easily converted into a sort of jam.

We now had potatoes and jam, but no bread. It happened that the Hun who had charge of the potatoes was a great musician. It was not very difficult to prevail upon him to play us some music, and while he went out to get his zither I went into the bread pantry and stole a loaf of bread.

Most of us had saved some butter from the day before, and we used it to fry our potatoes. By bribing one of the guards, he bought some eggs for us. They cost 25 cents apiece, but we were determined to make this banquet a success, no matter what it cost.

The cooking was done by the prison cook, whom, of course, we had to bribe.

When the meal was ready to serve it consisted of scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, bread and jam, and a pitcher of beer which we were allowed to buy.

That was the 29th of August. Had I known that it was to be the last real meal that I was to eat for many weeks, I might have enjoyed it even more than I did, but it was certainly very good.

We had cooked enough for eight, but while we were still eating, another joined us. He was an English officer who had just been brought in on a stretcher. For seven days, he told us, he had lain in a shell hole, wounded, and he was almost famished, and we were mighty glad to share our banquet with him.

We called on each man for a speech, and one might have thought that we were at a first-class club meeting. A few days after that our party was broken up and some of the men, I suppose, I shall never see again.

One of the souvenirs of my adventure is a check given me during this "banquet" by Lieut. James Henry Dickson of the Tenth Royal Irish Fusileers, a fellow prisoner. It was for 20 francs and was made payable to the order of "Mr. Pat O'Brien, 2nd Lieut." Poor Jim forgot to scratch out the "London" and substitute "Courtrai" on the date line, but its value as a souvenir is just as great. When he gave it to me he had no idea that I would have an opportunity so soon afterward to cash it in person, although I am quite sure that whatever financial reverses I may be destined to meet, my want will never be great enough to induce me to realize on that check.

There was one subject that was talked about in this prison whenever conversation lagged, and I suppose it is the same in other prisons too. What were the chances of escape.

Every man seemed to have a different idea and one way, I suppose, was about as impracticable as another. None of us ever expected to get a chance to put our ideas into execution, but it was interesting speculation, and anyway one can never tell what opportunities might present themselves.

One suggestion was that we disguise ourselves as women. "O'Brien would stand a better chance disguised as a norse!" declared another, referring to the fact that my height (I am six feet two inches) would make me more conspicuous as a woman than as a man.

Another suggested that we steal a German Gotha—a type of airplane used for long-distance bombing. It is these machines which are used for bombing London. They are manned by three men, one sitting in front with a machine gun, the pilot sitting behind him and an observer sitting in the rear with another machine gun. We figured that, at a pinch, perhaps, seven or eight of us could make our escape in a single machine. They have two motors of very high horse power, fly very high and make wonderful speed. But we had no chance to put this idea to the test.

I worked out another plan by which I thought I might have a chance if I could ever get into one of the German airdromes. I would conceal myself in one of the hangars, wait until one of the German machines started out, and as he taxied along the ground I would rush out, shout at the top of my voice and point excitedly at his wheels. This, I figured, would cause the pilot to stop and get out to see what was wrong. By that time I would be up to him, and as he stooped over to inspect the machine, I could knock him senseless, jump into the machine and be over the lines before the Huns could make up their minds just what had happened.

It was a fine dream, but my chance was not to come that way.

There were dozens of other ways which we considered. One man would be for endeavoring to make his way right through the lines. Another thought the safest plan would be to swim some river that crossed the lines.

The idea of making one's way to Holland, a neutral country, occurred to everyone, but the one great obstacle in that direction, we all realized, was the great barrier of barbed and electrically charged wire which guards every foot of the frontier between Belgium and Holland, and which is closely watched by the German sentries.

This barrier was a three-fold affair. It consisted first of a barbed wire wall six feet high. Six feet beyond that was a nine-foot wall of wire powerfully charged with electricity. To touch it meant electrocution. Beyond that, at a distance of six feet, was another wall of barbed wire six feet high.

Beyond the barrier lay Holland and liberty, but how to get there was a problem which none of us could solve and few of us ever expected to have a chance to try.

Mine came sooner than I expected.

CHAPTER VI.

A Leap for Liberty.

I had been in prison at Courtrai nearly three weeks when, on the morning of September 9th, I and six other officers were told that we were to be transferred to a prison camp in Germany.

One of the guards told me during the day that we were destined for a reprisal camp in Strassburg. They were sending us there to keep our airmen from bombing the place.

He explained that the English carried German officers on hospital ships for a similar purpose and he excused the German practice of torpedoing these vessels on the score that they also carried munitions! When I pointed out to him that France would hardly be sending munitions to England, he lost interest in the argument.

Some days before, I had made up my mind that it would be a very good thing to get hold of a map of Germany, which I knew was in the possession of one of the German interpreters, because I realized that if ever the opportunity came to make my escape, such a map might be of the greatest assistance to me.

With the idea of stealing this map, accordingly, a lieutenant and I got in front of this interpreter's window one day and engaged in a very hot argument as to whether Heidelberg was on the Rhine or not, and we argued back and forth so vigorously that the German came out of his room, map in hand, to settle it. After the matter was entirely settled to our satisfaction, he went back into his room and I watched where he put the map.

When, therefore, I learned that I was on my way to Germany, I realized that it was more important than ever for me to get that map, and with the help of my friend, we got the interpreter out of his room on some pretext or another, and while he was gone I confiscated the map from the book in which he kept it and concealed it in my sock underneath my legging. As I had anticipated, it later proved of the utmost value to me.

I got it none too soon, for half an hour later we were on our way to Ghent. Our party consisted of five British officers and one French officer. At Ghent, where we had to wait for several hours for another train to take us direct to the prison camp in Germany, two other prisoners were added to our party.

In the interval we were locked in a room at a hotel, a guard sitting at the door with a rifle on his knee. It would have done my heart good for the rest of my life if I could have gotten away then and fooled that Hun—he was so cocksure.

Later we were marched to the train that was to convey us to Germany. It consisted of some twelve coaches, eleven of these containing troops going home on leave, and the twelfth reserved for us. We were placed in a fourth-class compartment with old, hard, wooden seats, a filthy floor and no lights save a candle placed there by a guard. There were eight of us prisoners and four guards.

As we sat in the coach we were an object of curiosity to the crowd who gathered at the station.

"Hope you have a nice trip!" one of them shouted sarcastically.

"Drop me a line when you get to Berlin, will you?" shouted another in broken English.

"When shall we see you again?" asked a third.

"Remember me to your friends, will you? You'll find plenty where you're going!" shouted another.

The German officers made no effort to repress the crowd, in fact, they

I Confiscated the Map.

joined in the general laughter which followed every sally.

I called to a German officer who was passing our window.

"You're an officer, aren't you?" I asked, respectfully enough.

"Yes, what of it?" he rejoined.

"Well, in England," I said, "we let your officers who are prisoners ride first class. Can't you fix it so that we can be similarly treated, or least be transferred to second-class compartment?"

"If I had my way," he replied, "you'd ride with the hogs!"

Then he turned to the crowd and told them of my request and how he had answered me, and they all laughed hilariously.

This got me pretty hot.

"That would be a d—— sight better than riding with the Germans!" I yelled after him, but if he considered that a good joke, he didn't pass it on to the crowd.

Some months later when I had the honor of telling my story to King George, he thought this incident was one of the best jokes he had ever heard. I don't believe he ever laughed harder in his life.

Before our train pulled out, our guards had to present their arms for inspection and their rifles were loaded in our presence to let us know that they meant business.

From the moment the train started on its way to Germany, the thought kept coming to my head that unless I could make my escape before we reached that reprisal camp I might as well make up my mind, as far as I was concerned, the war was over.

It occurred to me that if the eight of us in that car could jump at a given signal and seize those four Hun guards by surprise, we'd have a splendid chance of besting them and jumping off the train when it first slowed down, but when I passed the idea on to my comrades they turned it down. Even if the plan worked out as gloriously as I had pictured, they pointed out, the fact that so many of us had escaped would almost inevitably result in our recapture. The Huns would have scoured Belgium till they had got us and then we would all be shot. Perhaps they were right.

Nevertheless, I was determined that, no matter what the others decided to do, I was going to make one bid for freedom, come what might.

As we passed through village after village in Belgium and I realized that we were getting nearer and nearer to that dreaded reprisal camp, I concluded that my one and only chance of getting free before we reached it was through the window! I would have to go through that window while the train was going full-speed, because if I waited until it had slowed up or stopped entirely, it would be a simple matter for the guards to overtake or shoot me.

I opened the window. The guard who sat opposite me—so close that his feet touched mine and the stock of his gun which he held between his knees occasionally struck my foot—made no objection, imagining no doubt that I found the car too warm or that the smoke, with which the compartment was filled, annoyed me.

As I opened the window, the noise the train was making as it thundered along grew louder. It seemed to say: "You're a fool if you do; you're a fool if you don't—you're a fool if you do—you're a fool if you don't"—and I said to myself "the hoss have it," and closed down the window again.

As soon as the window was closed, the noise of the train naturally subsided and its speed seemed to diminish, and my plan appealed to me stronger than ever.

I knew the guard in front of me didn't understand a word of English, and so, in a quiet tone of voice, I confided to the English officer who sat next me what I had planned to do.

"For God's sake, Pat, chuck it!" he urged. "Don't be a lunatic! This railroad is double-tracked and rock-ballasted and the other track is on your side. You stand every chance in the world of knocking your brains out against the rails, or hitting a bridge or a whistling post, and if you escape those you will probably be hit by another train on the other track. You haven't one chance in a thousand to make it!"

There was a good deal of logic in what he said, but I figured that once I was in that reprisal camp I might never have even one chance in a thousand to escape, and the idea of remaining a prisoner of war indefinitely went against my grain. I resolved to take my chance now at the risk of breaking my neck.

The car was full of smoke. I looked across at the guard. He was rather an old man, going home on leave, and he seemed to be dreaming of what was in store for him rather than paying any particular attention to me. Once in a while I had smiled at him, and I figured that he hadn't the slightest idea of what was going through my mind all the time we had been traveling.

I began to cough as though my throat was badly irritated by the smoke and then I opened the window again. This time the guard looked up and showed his disapproval, but did not say anything.

It was then 4 o'clock in the morning and would soon be light. I knew I had to do it right then, or never, as there would be no chance to escape in the daytime.

I had on a trench coat that I had used as a flying coat and wore my knapsack, which I had constructed out of a gas bag brought into Courtrai by a British prisoner. In this I had two pieces of bread, a piece of sausage and a pair of flying mittens. All of them had to go with me through the window.

The train was now going at a rate of between thirty and thirty-five miles an hour, and again it seemed to admonish me as it rattled along over the ties. "You're a fool if you do—you're a fool if you don't. You're a fool if you don't—you're a fool if you do. You're a fool if you don't."

I waited no longer. Standing upon the bench as if to put the bag on the rack and taking hold of the rack with my left hand and a strap that hung from the top of the car with my right, I pulled myself up, shoved my feet and legs out of the window and let go.

There was a prayer on my lips as I went out, and I expected a bullet between my shoulders, but it was all over in an instant.

I landed on my left side and face, burying my face in the rock ballast, cutting it open and closing my left eye, skinning my hands and shins and straining my ankle. For a few moments I was completely knocked out, and if they shot at me through the window, in the first moments after my escape, I had no way of knowing.

Of course, if they could have stopped the train right then, they could easily have recaptured me, but at the speed it was going and in the confusion which must have followed my escape, they probably didn't stop within half of a mile from the spot where I lay.

I came to within a few minutes and when I examined myself and found no bones broken, I didn't stop to worry about my cuts and bruises, but jumped up with the idea of putting as great a distance between me and that track as possible before daylight came. Still being dazed, I forgot all about the barbed wire fence along the right of way and ran full tilt into it. Right there I lost one of my two precious pieces of bread, which fell out of my knapsack, but I could not stop to look for it then.

The one thing that was uppermost in my mind was that for the moment I was free, and it was up to me now to make the most of my liberty.

From a Photograph Taken in the Courtyard of the Officers' Prison at Courtrai, Which Lieutenant O'Brien Preserved Throughout His Perilous Journey. O'Brien is Shown Standing Behind the German Guard, Who Sits at the Table in the Center of the Group.

Traveling at night and hiding by day, subsisting on raw vegetables stolen from gardens, O'Brien crawls through Germany and Luxemburg toward Belgium. Some of the terrible hardships that he endured and the perils that he encountered are described in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Spanish Cedar Sawdust.

Some curious uses are found for the better kinds of sawdust. One of these pertains to the Spanish cedar sawdust, which is of extreme lightness. It is employed for packing cheap chemicals contained in glass and shipped for long distances. In this relation there must be taken into consideration the question of weight and freight charges, and so Spanish cedar sawdust enters the equation.

Vibrations Ear Can Detect.

The ordinary human ear can detect a tone whose vibration rate is at least 25,000 vibrations a second, while the whistle will produce 50,000 a second. This upper limit varies with the age of the individual to such an extent that, if the upper limit at sixteen years of age were 50,000 vibrations, at sixty years of age it would be about 25,000 a second.