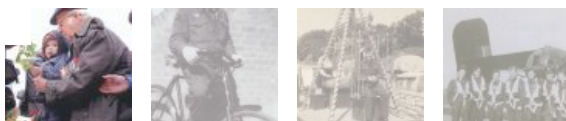


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Edward Carter-Edwards

Home Town: Hamilton, Ontario**Conflict:** World War II**Branch:** Air Force

Edward Carter-Edwards

Thomas Cossitt
WWII

10:18

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We were just minutes from dropping our bomb when the whole aircraft shook, just as if somebody was hitting it with a sledgehammer. And then suddenly, we got the command from our pilot, "Prepare to abandon." Because what had happened, a German night fighter, unseen by our mid-upper gunner or our rear gunner, came underneath us. And as he passed underneath us, he fired and set the whole left wing on fire. So we had to bail out in a heck of a hurry. And we had never ever practiced this before, so it was a pretty frightening experience.

I don't remember pulling the ripcord, I don't remember counting up to ten. I do remember the parachute opening and I do remember floating down. And you're waiting for the impact of the ground to hit you and it hits you, it, yeah, it's quite strong and my knees came up, hit

my chin and I hurt my back, and I gathered up my chute and I ran away from the burning aircraft towards what looked like an, a forest as I was coming down. I came into a little village and I knocked on several doors. And there was a gate. And I stood there and I looked at it and sure enough, there was two women there. And I said in my poor high school French, "Avez vous le pain, s'il vous plait?" Which means, "Have you any bread please?" And the one lady said to me, in good English, "Who are you, what do you want? What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm a Canadian airman. I was shot down a few nights ago. I need food. I need help. I want to be in touch with the underground. I'd like to get back to England." So she ushered me into the house, took me into the kitchen, gave me a bowl of hot milk and bread and she said, "Now, you can't stay here because if the Gestapo find you here, you may not be executed, but we will."

A young man and a woman came to see me, and they wanted me to prove that I was an airman. And they went away and came back a couple days later, they said, "Thankfully, we were able to identify you as who you are. If not, we would have shot you. But here's a new passport." So they had brought with them a fake identification passport. And in the middle of this passport was my little black and white picture that I had brought from England. And it was made in England of the same material, same texture that the Germans were using to make pictures of Frenchmen. So, and now my name was changed, it was now Edward Cartier and they said, "In a couple days' time, we're going to go come pick you up and take you to Paris where you meet another contact that's going to take you to Spain by car."

They came, and of course we went by the regular train from Achères to Paris and that was kind of a scary experience because at the gate of the doorway into the coach where we entered was a huge German soldier. Oh, he was big. And he had the 'potato masher' [Model 24 Stielhandgranate, a German hand grenade] stuck in his belt, the jack boots and he had a huge firearm in his arm. And as I walked by him, he just sort of looked at everybody and probably growled at everybody. He really looked like he had a lot of hate in his eyes and his, and his attitude. And so they advised me and they warned me, "When you get on the

coach, pretend you're sleeping so as not to draw any undue attention to yourself." But I had trouble with this person. I kept looking at him and thinking, "Man, we'll never win the war if they're all like this." And they kept kicking me and motioning with their eyes, to close them, which I did.

And so when we got closer to Paris, they said, "Now look it, you've got to go through identification check. Normally all you do is just take out your passport, show it and that should be okay. If there's any problem, we will create a diversion. And if you can get away, you get away, don't you worry about us." The train stopped and we got out and we went through a security check. And this couple kind of stayed in the background, they kept their eye on me, and as soon as they got through, they slowly caught up to me, and then we went by the regular underground in Paris to a hotel, downtown Paris. Now, I'm not sure where the heck it is, but they said, "Okay, stay here. In a couple days' time, your next contact will come."

Anyway, a couple days later, a knock came and I answered the door and the man said, "I'm taking us to Spain by car." The driver drove through Paris pretty fast, and the last thing I remember seeing was the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. He stopped at a Gestapo roadblock, he got out and he went over to somebody within authority, and immediately six or seven of the military came over to the car. They opened up the door of the car and they basically pulled us out of the car like sacks of potatoes, threw us down on the ground and proceeded to beat the living daylights out of us with their jack boots and rifles. And we're laying on the ground, hurt, bleeding, sore, scared. And this great big German standing over me, and I got up and stood in front of him, and he pulled out his Luger and he jabbed it right between my eyes, and I looked at the trigger, I thought, "Oh, this is it." Then he proceeded to hit me over the head with it, knocked me down on the ground, yelling and screaming at us all the while. Finally, I get up and I stand in front of him and he says, in good English, "Who are you, what are you doing here?" "I'm a Canadian airman; I demand protection under the Geneva Convention." "You're not airmen; you're all spies and saboteurs and will be executed as such."

Well, now we're in the hands of the horrible, horrible Gestapo, and so they took us by truck to a prison in Paris called Fresnes. You could hear the moans and groans and agonies of people being tortured by the Gestapo. You could hear shots ringing out. It was really a torture chamber for the Gestapo, torturing us. So we put up with it, we heard this and witnessed this and experienced this for over a month in Fresnes Prison.

So they gathered everybody up and they took us by trucks and buses down to the railway yard in Paris where we were forced into this little French cattle car, like sardines in a can; you could hardly sit, you could hardly stand, you could hardly do anything. And so you're almost like doubled up. And the only toilet facilities for five days that we spent in these cruel little monster cattle cars was an open bucket.

A young French lad of about 17 or 18 happened to be looking out the window and he put his hand on the edge of the window frame. And the German guard walking by saw it and he shot at him. And the bullet went through his hand. And so they opened up the door of the car and said, "Somebody in here had been hurt." And our boys thought they were doing the right thing, they said, "Yeah, this young lad got shot in the hand." And so the German guard ordered him out of the car, made him march down the embankment, and as he marched down, they shot him in the back. And as he fell, convulsively, he didn't die, and so a German officer coming along, came over and put a few more rounds in the back of his head, and then they closed the doors and we took off.

And as we get out of our boxcar and listened to the screaming of the German guards who were yelling at us and pointing in a certain direction, we moved in that direction to avoid being hit or being bit by the dogs. And it was to your advantage to stay in the centre of this mass of humanity, moving along in the direction that was pointed. Because the ones on the outside were the ones that were getting bit by the dogs or hit by the sticks or the whips or the rifle butts.

And as we moved in the direction that we were ordered to move into, we could see what looked like a camp, looked like low lying black buildings. We could see barbed wire, we could see towers. And the other thing that kind of ... But what we did see was terribly frightening, but really, really didn't know what it was because we'd never been exposed to the information. It was this tall chimney with black smoke pouring out of it. And as we entered this area, we could smell the contents of the smoke was horrible. And as we entered the gates of this compound, then we could hear the word, Buchenwald [concentration camp in Germany]. We were entering a very deadly, a very notorious concentration camp. As we entered the camp, we could see the people inside. And were greeted not physically, but surrounding the camp, walking around, and in the camp, were 45,000 walking skeletons.

At the beginning, we didn't eat the bread they gave us, which was a composition of who knows what and we would throw it away. And big mistake was that men, other men hung around us, and they would dive for this bread, like a pack of hungry wolves, they were hungry. And so after a while, we ate this bread because it was the only thing we had. They couldn't keep up with the dead and dying. As a matter of fact, they had a hut, one of the huts where you could see bodies piled in there, just like cordwood waiting to go into the crematorium.

I had to go and work in the quarry for two days, which would have taken me, if it had not been for the help of a young Dutch lad who was a prisoner of Buchenwald. Somehow or another he said to me, he spoke good English, he said, "I'm going to take your name off the work list and put you down as having died. What you do with your time is up to you, but the least I can do, just so that you would not have to go out and work in the quarry because if I had, I would never have made it." The quarry was really a death sentence; it was a death sentence for a lot of Russians and a lot of the Jewish people. It was basically a place where they tortured you, not physically, but they tortured by working you to death.

Anyway, by a miracle, somehow or another, German air force found out there was Allied airmen in Buchenwald. And around the middle of October, 1944, they came in and they literally snuck out of Buchenwald, roughly 152 or 154 Allied airmen. When a German officer stood there beside my, where I was lying on a cot, and he said, "I'm taking you to Stalag 3." And it's a miracle. It's a miracle to think that somehow, the German air force, who was our enemy in combat, but comrades in arms, found out that there was Allied airmen in Buchenwald, and they saved our lives. We were all slated to be hung on the meat hooks in Buchenwald.

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