

PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Approximately 9,000 Canadian soldiers, airmen, naval sailors and merchant seamen were captured by the enemy and held as prisoners of war (POWs) during the Second World War. Imagine how difficult life as a POW must have been.

CANADIAN PRISONERS OF WAR

Most Canadians who were captured during the Second World War, including the 1,946 who were captured during the raid on Dieppe in 1942, were held in German POW camps. The conditions in these camps were difficult but, for the most part, many prisoners of the German camps had adequate food and were treated relatively humanely. However, as the war continued and Nazi Germany began to collapse under the Allied onslaught, conditions worsened. POW food rations became more scarce. Many POWs had to make long, forced marches.

Some of those captured Canadian servicemen tried to escape the prison camps, braving the armed guards, barbed wire and watchtowers to make a bid for freedom. A Canadian Flying Officer, Clarke Wallace Floody, was called the 'architect' of the "Great Escape" – perhaps the most famous POW escape of the Second World War in which 76 Allied prisoners escaped Stalag Luft 3, a German POW camp in 1944. After he was shot down over France, Floody was captured and put in the camp. While imprisoned, he used his pre-war mining experience to help survey, design and engineer three tunnels, nicknamed Tom, Dick and Harry, which were built as possible escape routes. 'Harry,' the tunnel the men eventually used for the escape, was more than 100 metres long and was 10 metres underground.

The Canadians who became POWs in Asia faced an even harsher ordeal. The Japanese camps were often run with great brutality. The food rations provided for the prisoners were particularly meagre. The vast majority of the almost 1,700 Canadians who were captured in Hong Kong in late 1941 would suffer as POWs for nearly four years – all except two Nursing Sisters who were released and returned home in 1943. Many Canadian POWs would be forced to toil in mines and shipyards in Japan, where

working conditions were terrible. More than 40 other Canadians serving in Asia would also be captured by the Japanese in Java, Burma and Siam (modern-day Thailand).

CANADIANS IN BUCHENWALD CONCENTRATION CAMP

One group of Canadian prisoners of war had a very different experience than most. These were the 26 Canadian airmen who, along with 142 other British, American, Australian and New Zealand airmen, spent several months in Buchenwald Concentration Camp in eastern Germany in the summer and fall of 1944.

Of the many horrors that would emerge from the Second World War, few could match the cruel concentration camps established by Nazi Germany. Buchenwald was built in 1937 to imprison opponents of the Nazi regime and others seen as 'undesirable' by the Nazis. This included groups such as Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the intellectually challenged. With the onset of the war, it was also used to imprison people from other countries. More than 250,000 people were held captive in the camp between 1937 and 1945, with more than 50,000 of them losing their lives there.

The Allied airmen who were sent to Buchenwald had been shot down over occupied Europe and had made contact with the French Resistance in an effort to escape from the Germans. They had been issued false papers and were dressed as civilians to help in their escape. A traitorous member of the Resistance betrayed them. They were rounded up and arrested as spies rather than as military POWs, which meant their rights were not protected under the Geneva Convention. They were questioned, beaten and subjected to other forms of cruelty. In the summer of 1944, as the Allies advanced on the Germans occupying France, the Allied prisoners (and many other political prisoners) were jammed into overcrowded boxcars and sent to Buchenwald. It was a harrowing five-day train trip to the camp, during which they received very little food or water.



One Canadian Veteran who had been held in Buchenwald recalls the airmen's arrival at the camp: "As we got close to the camp and saw what was inside the camp, a terrible, terrible fear and horror entered our hearts. We thought, what is this? Where are we going? Why are we here? And as you got closer to the camp and started to enter the camp and saw these human skeletons walking around – old men, young men, boys, just skin and bone, we thought, what are we getting into?"¹

During their first three weeks at Buchenwald, the Allied prisoners were totally shaven and forced to sleep outside, without any shoes or shelter. Eventually they were moved into a very overcrowded hut where they were forced to sleep on wooden 'shelves.' They were so tightly packed that in order for one person to turn over in the bunk, the other four people in the same bunk had to turn over at the same time. While in Buchenwald, they experienced inhuman conditions, including starvation, disease and the constant threatening presence of cruel guards. The prisoner's food included a little bowl of soup made from grass or cabbage leaves, and an inch of bread and three little potatoes. One pilot lost more than 29.5 kg during his six weeks there. The men witnessed horrific beatings, hangings and torture. Buchenwald was also a 'death camp,' used by the Nazis to systematically murder those they wanted eliminated. The Allied airmen imprisoned there would often see the piles of corpses stacked up, awaiting the crematorium. It would be October 1944 before the Allied POWs would finally be transferred to a regular German POW camp for downed airmen. That is where they stayed until the end of the war.

SACRIFICE

The experiences of the Canadian POWs during the Second World War were difficult, and, sometimes deadly – especially for those captured by the Japanese. More than 9,000 Canadians spent time in enemy POW camps and hundreds lost their lives

while in captivity. Many of the POWs who were liberated were left with physical and emotional traumas that would last a lifetime. The Canadian POWs from the Defence of Hong Kong suffered a particularly heavy toll, as more than 260 did not survive the harsh conditions of the Japanese prison camps. The Allied POWs held in Buchenwald were also greatly affected by their experiences in the camp. Several fell ill, two died – but all were left with the lasting emotional impact of their harsh experiences.

LEGACY

For the most part, the Canadians who became POWs during the Second World War were airmen captured while on bombing raids, soldiers captured during combat, or seamen captured when their ships were sunk by the enemy. They were some of the more than one million Canadian men and women who served in uniform during the Second World War. The efforts of all these Canadians helped ensure that victory in the Second World War was achieved. The sacrifices of those who suffered as POWs are not forgotten. We honour those who sacrificed so much to restore peace and freedom around the world.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada's Veterans, during times of war, military conflict, and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. To learn more about Canadians' experiences as POWs, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at: www.vac-acc.gc.ca

¹ From *"The Lucky Ones: Allied Airmen and Buchenwald"* (National Film Board, 1994, directed by Michael Allder)

