



Prisoners of War in the Second World War



Approximately 9,000 Canadian soldiers, sailors and aviators were captured during the Second World War which raged from 1939 to 1945. These prisoners of war (POWs) would be interned in camps behind enemy lines and faced great challenges before finally being liberated at the end of the conflict.

CANADIAN PRISONERS OF WAR

Most Canadians who were captured during the Second World War—including the almost 1,950 who were forced to surrender during the Dieppe Raid in France in 1942—were held in German POW camps. The conditions in these facilities were difficult but, with some notable exceptions, many of these Canadian prisoners had adequate food and were treated relatively humanely. However, as the war dragged on and Germany came under increasing Allied pressure, conditions worsened. Food rations were reduced and, in the conflict's closing months, many POWs were forced to make long marches away from the front lines as the Allies continued to advance.

Some captured Canadian service members would try to escape the camps, braving the armed guards, watchtowers and barbed wire to make a bid for freedom. One Royal Canadian Air Force POW, Flying Officer Wally Floody, would even become the architect of the “Great Escape”—perhaps the most famous POW prison break of the Second World War. After he was shot down over France, Floody was interned in Stalag Luft 3, a German camp in occupied Poland. While locked up there, he used his pre-war mining experience to help survey, design and engineer three tunnels (nicknamed “Tom,” “Dick” and “Harry”) for use as

possible escape routes. “Harry,” the tunnel that 76 Allied POWs ultimately used for their escape in March 1944, was 10 metres underground and more than 100 metres long.

The Canadians who became POWs in Asia faced an especially harsh ordeal. The Japanese camps were run with great brutality. The food rations provided for the prisoners were very poor, with a starvation diet that was sometimes only 800 calories a day even though the men were forced to perform heavy labour. The food was typically just some rice, a bit of vegetables or bread, and the occasional scraps of spoiled meat. It was of such low nutritional quality that the POWs often suffered from serious diseases caused by a lack of essential vitamins.

The almost 1,700 Canadian soldiers who were captured in Hong Kong in late 1941 would not be liberated until the war came to an end more than three-and-a-half years later (except for two Nursing Sisters who were released in 1943). Many of these POWs would be forced to toil in enemy factories, mines and shipyards, where working conditions were terrible. More than 40 other Canadians who had been deployed to East Asia were also taken prisoner by the Japanese in Java, Burma and Siam (modern-day Thailand). Some of these unfortunate individuals would lose their lives in the harsh camps as well.

Canadian POWs captured during the Dieppe Raid.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada C-014171



CANADIANS IN BUCHENWALD

One group of Canadian POWs had a very different experience than most of our service members who were captured during the Second World War. These were the 26 air force personnel who—along with 142 other British, American, Australian and New Zealander POWs—spent months in the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in eastern Germany in 1944.

Of the many horrors that would emerge from the bloody conflict, few could match the cruel concentration camps established by Germany. Buchenwald was built in 1937 to imprison opponents of the Nazi regime and others they saw as "undesirable." This included groups such as Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the intellectually challenged. With the onset of the war, it was soon 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 aviators who were sent to Buchenwald had been shot down over occupied Europe and then made contact with the French Resistance to try to return to Britain. They had been issued false papers and were dressed as civilians to help avoid arrest by the Germans. Unfortunately they were betrayed and soon rounded up. However, they would be arrested as spies rather than as regular 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 in occupied France, these prisoners were jammed into overcrowded boxcars

and sent to Buchenwald. It was a harrowing five-day train trip, with the POWs receiving very little food or water.

One Canadian Veteran who was there recalled their arrival: *"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?"*

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 had to sleep on wooden shelves. They were so tightly packed that in order for one person to turn over, the other four people in the same bunk had to turn over at the same time. While in the camp, they endured starvation, disease and the constant threat of the cruel guards. The prisoners' food was often just a little bowl of soup made from grass or cabbage leaves, a bit of bread and three little potatoes. One pilot lost almost 30 kilograms during his time there. The Canadians witnessed horrific beatings, hangings and torture, as well.

Buchenwald was also a Nazi "death camp" where the Germans systematically murdered those they wanted to eliminate. The Allied POWs interned there would often see the piles of corpses stacked up, awaiting the crematorium. It would be October 1944 before these Canadian and other Allied prisoners would finally be transferred to a regular German POW camp for downed air force personnel. That is where they stayed until they were finally liberated at the end of the war.

A Royal Canadian Air Force POW in Stalag VIII-B prison camp.
Photo: Imperial War Museum HU 47157



SACRIFICE

The conditions endured by Canadian POWs in the Second World War were very difficult and sometimes deadly. Some 9,000 Canadians spent time in enemy prison camps and hundreds of them lost their lives in captivity. Many of the POWs who were liberated were also left with serious physical and emotional wounds that would last a lifetime.

The Canadians taken prisoner during the Defence of Hong Kong suffered a particularly heavy toll, with more than 260 of them not surviving the harsh conditions of the Japanese camps, factories and mines. The Allied POWs held in Buchenwald were also greatly affected by their experiences. Several fell ill and two died, but all were left with the lasting emotional impacts of what they had been through.

LEGACY

More than one million Canadians served in uniform during the Second World War and these brave individuals made many important contributions to help the Allies to victory. The challenges were great and the sacrifices high, however, with more than 45,000 of our country's military personnel losing their lives.

The Canadians who became POWs during the conflict—aviators shot down over occupied Europe, soldiers taken prisoner during battle, and sailors captured after their ships had been sunk—also paid a steep price for their service. Denied of their freedom, interned under difficult conditions and separated from their families and comrades for long periods, the stresses our POWs faced were severe. Their great service and sacrifice will never be forgotten and we honour all those who did so much to help restore peace and freedom around the globe.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war, military conflict and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about the experiences of Canadian prisoners of war, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

This publication is available upon request in alternate formats.

Canadian and British POWs in a Japanese prison camp.
Photo: Veterans Affairs Canada



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