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ESCAPE TACTICS OF GERMAN WAR PRISONERS

William E. Kirwan

(With a nation at war the problem of counteracting escape of prisoners of war is not only a difficult one but is one of vital concern to the nation at large. In the following article, Mr. Kirwan describes a series of revealing facts about how German war prisoners have devised and engineered methods of escape. Now a few words concerning the author. He is a graduate of Fordham University and was employed as a research chemist previous to his appointment to the New York State Police in 1936. A year later he was assigned to the department's Scientific Laboratory and served as an assistant to the late Dr. Kirschberg until his death in 1941. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Kirwan was appointed director of the laboratory. The article is based in part on one which appeared in the August, 1944, issue of the New York State Police *Bulletin*.—Editor.)

In the course of scientific criminal investigation, it is sometimes the good fortune of the New York State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation to investigate a case which proves to be of great interest, not only from the scientific viewpoint but to the nation at large. Such was the instance in which our Scientific Laboratory obtained very interesting information relative to escape tactics of German prisoners of war. Our participation in the subject followed as a result of the finding of several counterfeit selective service cards by an intelligence officer of the armed forces. Later investigation disclosed the counterfeiting of selective service cards as one of a variety of techniques employed in devising systematic methods of escape. In this article I shall picture, briefly, the prison camp which I was granted permission to visit in order to secure information, the "observatory" system devised by which prisoners are supplied with salient information required for effective escape, methods of planning and supervising escape, and finally, German methods of counterfeiting and authentication of documents.

I cannot disclose the location of the German internment camp visited. But I may describe certain interesting phases of it. Some 700 German prisoners—officers and enlisted men—were confined there. About 60 per cent of the officers were of the true Nazi strain. They ranged from 30 to 35 years of age and were mostly of high rank. The adjutant or highest ranking officer was a colonel of the Luftwaffe. Area of the prison camp embraced approximately 354 acres of which seven acres was enclosed in barbed wire. This area is known as the "enclosure" or "cage" and within it are located the four story, thick-walled, stone building—which serves as a dormitory for the great portion of the prisoners—and several smaller buildings constructed of wood.

For reasons of greater security against escape, the immediate area in which the buildings are located is blocked off by three rings of barbed wire fence. The outer ring is about 12 feet high. Located about 15 feet from the outer ring is a second fence of the same height as the outer ring. Bottoms of both fences are

protected by further barbed wire entanglements which aid in discouraging attempts to crawl under the fences. Then on the inside of the second fence at a distance of about 10 feet there is a third barbed wire fence some three feet high. This is called the "verbotten" fence. No prisoner is permitted to climb over it and if he should try, he would be reprimanded by a well-directed shot from one of the six towers which protect the outer fences.

But these precautions do not imply that prisoners are prohibited from going outside the enclosure. As a matter of fact, under the honor system in force in the camp German officers are permitted significant freedom of movement outside the stockade but within the 354 acres of camp. They are free to tend their farms in the camp area and are also permitted to walk along certain paths. They must, however, return by noon for the mid-day count and by 5:00 p.m. for the evening meal. And this honor must be countersigned by the adjutant of the prisoners. That they respect the honor privilege is shown by the fact that not one attempted escape or actual escape has been made while they were on honor. However, as soon as the officer returns to the stockade his honor pledge ceases. Any violation of the honor revokes the privileges of all others and violators are severely reprimanded and punished by their own adjutant. If and when they return to Germany they will be properly punished.

The Observatory System

One of the amazing features of German escape technique is the efficiency of their "observatory" or secret service system established to find out and catalogue all information of possible assistance in aiding escape. The prisoners have their own information bureau which maintains a 24 hour observation of the activities of sentries, guards, and any action going on within their range of vision. Note the following report of a prisoner on his observation:

- 2120 hours—Sentry from 4 to 5
- 2124 hours—Stops at the shed
- 2225 hours—Express train back (A)
- 2230 hours—Into inner yard
- 2235 hours—Sentry goes to guardhouse from No. 5 tower
- 2237 hours—O. K. in the tower
- 2240 hours—Stops in the front part of the yard
- 2247 hours—Sentry goes from guardhouse to No. 5 tower
- 2255 hours—Sentry goes from guardhouse to No. 4 tower
(A running sentry?)
- 2259 hours—Two sentries go from guardhouse to No. 4 tower
- 2304 hours—Two sentries go from No. 4 tower to guardhouse
- 2308 hours—A running sentry (?)
- 2312 hours—Inner round

As may be anticipated, rather complete data is available regarding train movements in the prison locality. The prisoners know the train schedules. They can tell when and what train is scheduled to arrive, how long it stops at the station, whether it be a fast or slow freight, passenger train or otherwise.

But escape information is by no means limited to the immediate area surrounding the prison camp. Since their general plan of escape is to reach the Atlantic coast, steal a boat and sail around in the sea lanes in the hope that a German submarine will pick them up and return them to Germany to strike another blow for Der Fuehrer, they seek all available information concerning our coast patrols and regulations. Their success in acquiring information is shown in some of the papers seized in searches:

"First Naval District, U. S. Coast Guard Reserve formed June 6th, 1939, vessels became Coast Guard auxiliaries 19th February, 1941. 67 flotillas in 6 divisions in first naval district from the northern boundary of Maine to the boundary of the first and third district of the Connecticut shores."

"Coast Guard activity 3rd Naval District (from New London, Connecticut, as far as Gray House, New York) 3,000 vessels, 6,000 men. Patrol activity has expanded to a point where this past summer (1942) the entire coastal waters as well as harbors from Portland, Me., to Westerly, Rhode Island, were covered.

"In service:

273 vessels—12,000 auxiliary members
 8 flotillas—215 men—fishing and reporting
 2 flotillas—83 men standing by
 1 flotilla—60 men maintaining constant beach patrol
 Post security fleet—first naval district—300 vessels."

Whether or not this information is correct only the War Department can answer. Nevertheless, the prisoners did manage to learn these facts.

Planning and Supervising Escapes

Typical of all prisoners, the majority of their time is spent in thinking about means of escape. It is an honor for any war prisoner to legitimately escape. The German prisoners of war have very definite ideas on escape. In each camp there is an organized and powerful *escape committee*. It must approve all plans for escape. Preparations made by the prisoners are carefully studied in advance of escape. The committee determines if he has proper supplies, information, money and other details. Such escape committees also review all unsuccessful escape attempts. I shall call to your attention a document taken from a prisoner in which an unsuccessful attempt was criticized. For obvious reasons we shall call the prisoner in question Smith:

"Statement Re the Case of K. K. Smith"

"1. Concerning this case such as it is, there is nothing basically to be changed. Everybody knows my opinion about it.

2. The self-established point being helpful was not reached by K. K. Smith.

3. In order to reach his established goal he made an attempt to escape on the 31st of April, and on the 26th of June he escaped. My opinion concerning this is:

(a) The attempt to escape:

The project was tackled only determinedly and cold-bloodedly and was likewise executed, he has shown herewith his initiative. I make this statement from my own observation as well as according to information received from Captain X who was an eye witness at the beginning of the enterprise. I also had the information concerning this. The fact that the man was caught on the third fence is due to the nature of such an enterprise. This does not excuse K. K. Smith and does not mean that this case cannot be criticized but that there should not be any reproaches made.

(b) The escape:

Suddenly the chance appeared and K. K. Smith did not wait any longer. Further, he chanced it, having made a quick decision although he had not made any preparations, i. e., fitting out provisions, food, etc. All those of you knew it, believed not in the escape. I obtained the story of the escape of K. K. Smith. You will understand that in this delicate case I cannot enter upon any particulars but only give you the facts.

My criticism:

(a) The weather.

The enterprise suffered from the beginning under unsurmounting difficulties. The weather was very bad as you remember. It was raining heavily, it was a real thunderstorm. (Remember how we were anxious about our luggage, because we feared that part of our luggage was piled up in the open.)

Owing to the fact that we could not re-dress, the clothing of K. K. Smith never became dry during the undertaking.

(b) The orientation:

It was difficult and took plenty of time. As he had only rough plans about his goal, wrong ideas existed. There was no map on hand, means of transportation dared not be used (except a night freight train).

(c) The ground:

The country is very low. In parts it is marshy. The country is crisscrossed by small ditches, fences, and hedges and small parts of very thick underbrush. As he could not move along streets or roads his progress was very strenuous and robbed him of a lot of time.

(d) Maintenance:

The kind of escape did not allow him to take any necessary things with him. As the enterprise was determined as an actual fact in a very short time, he denied himself the use of maintenance. Only a Red Cross tin of chocolate served as iron rations. During the 68 hours this was the only nourishment along with some grass and herbs. Likewise during that time he could not think of a long sleep.

In spite of these difficulties I have pointed out the goal was found and approached from several angles. Necessary measures and safety precautions having been found, the break-in was not successful owing to the fact that all means of aid were so damaged by the dampness that they had to be replaced. While taking a rest during the day which also served for reconnoitering the approach to the goal anew for the following night, arrest resulted by a street patrol. Escape was no longer possible.

My decision:

The enterprise was executed with zeal and deliberation and although he did not succeed in the last attempt of reaching his self-appointed goal, we cannot reproach Smith. There was no lack of enterprise and initiative.

My conclusion:

K. K. Smith came to me on the 30th day of July. He asked me to help him start a new attempt as soon as possible. He said his previous experience would be a great help to him. I agreed with it but made the following reservations:

For the rest of the summer, that means about the end of October, there is no possibility to seek any preference from the camp committee as it had already engaged on another project with my cooperation. (I cannot give any information about this.) Except for this reservation I am ready to help him to the fullest measure anew as well as forwarding a request to the committee. I also will do anything necessary in order to prepare his enterprise. This readiness to help I am submitting to the suitable officers as before.

Once again I want to remind everybody of the order

in which it says that K. K. Smith should not be subject to recriminations. I grant nobody the right to contradict this order now much less than before. I am the only one responsible for the conception of honor of the marine officers corps and especially for the kind which we enjoy in this case. Likewise, this whole case is no matter for conversation.

(Signed)———, Frigattenkapitaen

We, the undersigned, took notice 2 August, 1943.

(Signed) (Three officers).

Communicated to the marine officers corps 2 August, 1943.

(Signed)———, Frigattenkapitaen

NOTIFICATION

To the Senior Officer Marine Corps:

I have taken notice of the above mentioned publication. The true statements contained therein concerning my escape correspond with the actual facts.

(Signed) Smith, K. K."

Use of the Mails in Receiving and Sending "Verboten" Information

German prisoners of war are allowed to receive mail and packages from Germany (and elsewhere) and, of course, to send mail. This is postage free. As to packages, perhaps the German postal authorities examine the contents before accepting the packages. But if this is done there is no indication of it on the wrappings. The packages are placed in a burlap bag and are sent here to the internment camp where each package is opened and the contents are closely examined for hidden messages, weapons, liquor and other questioned or forbidden articles.

Attempts to smuggle information into the camps are unusually clever. In one instance messages were concealed on the inside of prune stones. Someone had removed the nut from the stone and had inserted a message. The prunes were then sealed in a tin can. Other messages have been found on cigarette papers, in fountain pens, hidden in linings of clothing, in bread, and in the covers of books. Consequently, very close examination is made of every package.

As for letters, these are censored in Germany, then censored on this continent and again censored by the prison authorities. After packages and mail are all examined, the prisoners distribute the mail through their own post office system. All packages sent through the International Red Cross are receipted by the prisoners and this receipt is returned to Germany as proof of delivery.

Occasionally a prisoner attempts to send out a cryptic message or secret writing. In this instance the letters are confiscated and are held until the termination of activities at which time it is to be

returned to the prisoner. The prisoners must use a special safety paper for their correspondence. This paper will reveal any attempt at secret writings, as it is specially prepared to turn green in color whenever any moisture contacts the paper. The prisoners, however, were quick to catch on. They discovered that by making indented writings, accomplished by writing over a piece of waxed paper over the safety paper, they could conceal a message. Now the authorities are developing a newer safety paper which will eliminate this possibility.

*Preparation of Counterfeit Documents
for Escape Use*

That the prisoners prepare themselves for escape is a foregone conclusion. During any surprise search of the prisoners' quarters, there is always found many interesting counterfeit documents which have been prepared for escape purposes. The Nazis appear to have an inherent weakness for rubber stamps. They feel that if a document is rubber stamped it becomes authentic. Because of this philosophy of validity, they will resort to means without end to making rubber stamps for authentication purposes. There follow two illustrations of documents bearing the imprint of counterfeit seals made by German prisoners:

British Seamans' Mission
Lisbon

May 3rd 1941

C e r t i f i c a t e .

This shipwrecked Henryk O s s o w s k i,
steward aboard the "Empire Light", sunk by enemy
action in the Indian Ocean Febr., 28th 1941, has
been sheltered and provided with clothing and 20
Escudos by this Br. Seamans Mission.



L. Well
S. i.

TOWN OF WILLMAR

MINNESOTA

Willmar, Minn.
August 27, 1942

Birth Certificate.

On request I herewith state that Mr. Harold Spengler
was born in Willmar on July 16th, 1915.



John A. Lebell
Clerk at the mayor's office.

You may wonder how they manage to get rubber stamps. It is very simple. They make them out of raw potatoes. Some of the carvings are works of art to behold. As for letterheads, these are made from linoleum cuts. It is well to know that all of these counterfeit documents are authentic as to letterheads and signatures. Such companies, places and persons actually exist and hold the offices designated. One of the prisoners forged a military pass and signed the name of a very high ranking officer as authority. This pass gave him full authority to ride any train, examine any officer's credentials— all supposedly on a secret and confidential mission! I should point out, too, that German prisoners are very adept at making maps. One map we found was a fine detailed map of the State of Vermont. The map itself was pregated with linseed oil in order to make it waterproof.

Due to the importance of having in one's possession an appropriate selective service card, German ingenuity has reached a peak in the preparation of counterfeit selective service cards. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, our investigation of German techniques of escape began in consequence of the finding of a number of counterfeit selective service cards by a member

of our armed forces. Now, I should like to turn specific attention to this particular technique of German war prisoners in carrying out their escape. This is one of the counterfeit documents found:

Body

DRAFT BOARD No 48
MADISON, WISC.

Madison, April 15, 1943

Certificate

Harold Spengler, born .. July 16, 1915 at Willmar, Minn.
appeared to-day before this draft board giving full proof as to his personality and U.S. citizenship. After a pre-induction physical examination he was classified

4 - F. [unfit for military service]

His induction into the armed forces is being deferred according to Article 67 Selective Service Act.

He was given Selective Service order number 6/344/267

Applicant is hereby ordered to report to this board for reclassification on ... April 15, 1944.

Draft Board No 48
Madison, Wisc.

P. H. Osborne
Commissioner.

In the process of investigating the fraud, we learned that the counterfeit selective service cards had been printed in a German internment camp.

The counterfeit selective service card is very cleverly made. Close examination does not reveal any obvious difference with the genuine, except for one notable exception. If you examine your own selective service card, you will probably observe that when the card is turned over as you would the page of a book, the printing on the reverse side is right side up. On the counterfeit card, when it was turned in like manner, the printing on the reverse side was upside down. However, after we had examined some hundred genuine selective service cards, we found one genuine card to be identical in printing characteristics to the counterfeits. Consequently, we cannot, at this time, establish the "upside down" criterion as a means of detecting a counterfeit selective service card. All of which is simply another indication that we must use every possible endeavor if we are to combat and overcome the trickierous ingenuity of German war prisoners in their all-out efforts to avoid apprehension while on escape.

You may wonder how it was possible for such perfect coun-

terfeiting to be made in an internment camp where facilities for reproduction are obviously meager. This is the system the prisoners employed: For a model, the prisoners used a photographic reproduction of the selective service card which was printed in a German magazine. The magazine was passed quite innocently by our censors. For the printing process, the prisoners had engraved a plate by using a piece of linoleum and india ink. The latter was furnished the prisoners for drawing purposes. The cardboard used was apparently salvaged from some place on the grounds of the camp. Thus the prisoners were able to prepare for escape an invaluable ally.

As to powers of arrest, authorities of both the state and federal governments have the right to arrest, hold and prosecute prisoners within their jurisdiction during the period of escape from an internment camp and while outside the limits of the camp. However, it is the policy of the War Department to prosecute all such offenders by court martial. State and federal authorities, who have arrested escaped prisoners of war for crimes allegedly committed during escape have cooperated with the War Department and have returned the recaptured prisoners of war to military custody for proper action.

It should be noted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is charged with the responsibility of coordinating the search of escaped prisoners of war. It is, therefore, most important that when an escaped prisoner of war is apprehended, the Federal Bureau of Investigation be notified so that nation-wide hunt can be cancelled since the Bureau notifies all key police departments, sheriffs' offices, radio stations and newspapers of the escape. It is, therefore, imperative that these messages be cancelled as soon as possible after the apprehension of the escaped prisoners.

I recall to mind, in closing, one other striking feature of escape tactics. It has to do with methods of concealing currency while escaping. Nominally, prisoners are not permitted to possess currency. Money sent to them is simply credited to their account. Be that as it may, however, the capture of fleeing prisoners has disclosed some very clever methods of concealing currency for they resort to any means to hide any currency which they manage to get. They cut spaces in the leather heels of their boots or hide it in their clothing. One enterprising prisoner cut a small slit in the hide of his pet dog, hid some money therein and then sewed the skin. The four-legged traveling bank was only discovered when the dog rubbed his back against the leg of one of the guards. He felt a hard lump, investigated and found the money. Such in brief, is the account of some of the escape tactics of our German prisoners of war.
