

ESCAPE OF MERT THOMAS



Henry Lamert (Mert) Thomas was born in Orange, NSW on 17 October 1897. In 1915 he was accepted into the army and became an infantry gunner with the 30th Battalion. On 1 July 1916 the first battle of Somme began and Mert took part in his first combat. A week of intense bombardment of German positions gave ample notice of Allied intent and the attack failed to gain an immediate penetration of the German defenses. The 5th Division, of which the 30th Battalion was part, was ordered to attack at Fromelles, north of the Somme river, as a diversionary tactic. On 19 July the signal to begin the attack came and a tide of soldiers surged out of the trenches.

Until we reached the German front line we came under severe machine-gun fire and artillery bombardment. The wire had not been cut by our own artillery fire so our casualties were increased because we had to find passages in the wire and go through in single file. We jumped over the German front line, according to instructions we had previously received, and ran on in search of the second line, but failed to find it. Instead, we found a drain as wide as a trench with water in it, about two feet deep. There were no Germans, and somehow we became to split up into small groups with no officers or NCO's. darkness set and we didn't know what to do, so we spent the night where we were under severe artillery fire.

The Germans kept out of the way until first light when we found them behind and in front of us, and our flanks, trying to drive us out with hand grenades. There was nothing to do but try to get back to our own lines, even though the small group I belonged to did not know in which direction we should go. The machine-gun fire was so heavy that we took refuge in a large shell hole.

After a while the fire ceased and we found the place swarming with German soldiers. We were rounded up and taken prisoners. I had a wound in the leg, but it was not serious. We later learned that in our sector the order was given during the night to fall back to our own lines, but we were so far forward the order did not reach us.

On just one terrible night in that bloody conflict, 5533 Australians from the 8th Brigade had been lost, including 400 taken prisoner. It was the highest loss sustained by any Australian division in any one day during the entire war. Following their capture the badly wounded were placed in hospitals for treatment, the officers were sent directly to Germany, and the rest were taken by train to Fort Macdonald near Lillie, where they were joined by other recently captured prisoners. After a short, uncomfortable time in the cells at Fort Macdonald, the men were sent to prison camps.

Mert Thomas, his wound considered too minor for hospitalization was part of a large contingent sent to Dulmen camp in Westphalia. Here the Germans attempted to break their prisoners' spirits by a systematic course of near starvation, but most stood up well under the strain, relying on the mateship and good humour of their friends for strength. Situated in a desolate area of the Rhineland, to the north of Essen and 25 kilometers south-west of Munster, Dulmen prison camp was enclosed by a stiff barbed-wire fence nearly three meters high that could be easily cut were it not for the sustained vigilance of heavily armed guards. However, food rations were so meager and unsustaining it was difficult enough to simply remain fit, let alone entertain thoughts of escaping.

Before long Mert Thomas was sent to a working camp at Erkrath, near Dusseldorf, where the prisoners were forced to labour in a local factory. Bilateral agreements undertaken during the course of the war permitted the use of prisoners in the workforce, but only in specified industries. The food at Erkrath was somewhat better than at Dulmen and, in accordance with the terms of

the Geneva Convention of 1906 and the Hague Convention of 1907, the prisoners were permitted to receive food parcels from the Red Cross.

Mert Thomas devised a means of getting out of the prison compound and was setting things in motion when he was unexpectedly called out at rollcall and sent to another camp at Munster on a charge of passive resistance ♦ an offence punishable by a term of imprisonment. Determined to dodge the trial associated with his removal to Munster, he discovered that the Germans would set aside the charges against any man who volunteered for placement in a working party. He quickly applied, and was subsequently listed for outside duties. Munster was a punishment camp, full of British POWs, sentenced to a term in the cells, but as there were very few cells there was quite a long waiting list for their use. The camp was well enclosed, and closely guarded. The first barrier encountered by the prisoners was a low wire fence, beyond which stood another, which was electrified, and then a third, higher barbed-wire fence. As at Dulmen, sentries constantly patrolled the circumference of the outer fence.

In laying the groundwork for a possible escape, Thomas and an Australian friend named Horace Holmes began quizzing the British inmates about Germany and its borders. "The result was that e knew almost perfectly the country between the Rhine and the Dutch frontier."

While thoughts of escaping occupied much of Mert's time, opportunities could be found to frustrate and harass the rather rigid and humourless German contingent. At one stage an order was issued stating that prisoners failing to salute German officers would be subject to further punishment. Soon after, the prisoners began forming groups of about six men, who would form into a line and then go in search of officers. As they filed past their victim, each of the men would salute the German, who was required to return each salute. This meant in effect that any officer appearing in the camp had to undergo a continual process of saluting. Before long there was not an officer to be seen in the camp and the order was repealed. The men felt they had won a small victory.

The working party for which Thomas and Holmes volunteered was dispatched to a tar distillery at Duisberg-Meiderich, a large town on the east bank of the Rhine. Almost 20 prisoners were held in the ancillary camp nearby, comprising Russians, French, Belgians and British - and the two Australians.

At Duisberg-Meiderich the two men were in position to develop their escape plans. Getting out of the camp presented few difficulties, but the task of crossing the Rhine, travelling through a thickly populated part of the country and sneaking past the frontier guards into neutral Holland was a different proposition. As they soon learned, many prisoners had managed to get away from the camp, but none had reached the frontier. A successful escape would call for careful planning and a few essential items.

The list Thomas and Holmes drew up was short, but difficult to fill. They were aware that any escape would be virtually impossible without a good map, a reliable compass and clothing which would not attract attention. On arrival at Dulmen they had been kitted out in dark uniforms with bright yellow ribbons around the sleeves and down the outside of each leg, but these conspicuous outfits could be modified with little trouble. The map and compass would prove difficult to secure, but fortune soon began to smile on them.

Mert Thomas had been learning French, and his studies enabled him to form a friendship with a French prisoner who happened to possess a detailed railway map of Western Germany. The fellow lent map to Thomas, who persuaded another of his French friends to make a copy of it while on night work at the factory. The Frenchman finally produced a postcard-sized map, showing the ground they had to cover to reach the Dutch frontier. Securing a good compass was a more difficult job. One of the French engineers had secretly manufactured one, which he generously gave to Thomas, but test proved it to be quite unreliable. However, Mert Thomas soon noticed that a German youth in the factory had a small compass dangling from his watch chain. A little bribery managed to secure the compass.

Obtaining suitable civilian clothing was the next obstacle to be overcome. A little secret tailoring on their prison suits made them less military in appearance, while it was a simple matter to unpick the thread of the yellow ribbons on their sleeves and trouser legs. The brass buttons were replaced by more conventional ones. Despite their clumsy stitchwork, they felt the converted uniforms would pass muster on a dark night.

By international agreement, prisoners of war employed in civilian industries were entitled to receive a wage for their labours. After working hard for a couple of months Mert Thomas had saved sufficient money to purchase a collar, cap and tie from another factory worker. The map, compass and civilian clothing were then hidden in the ticking of their beds. Thomas and Holmes had worked in such secrecy that none of their immediate friends knew of their plans. However, these were complicated when it became apparent that a Russian prisoner had learnt of their intended escape, possibly from the worker, who had sold him the compass, and demanded to be taken along. Two friends reluctantly agreed to take the Russian.

Waiting for the big day would now become a more harrowing experience as they feared the unreliable Russian might tell some of his friends. However, he kept his own counsel and the plan proceeded. The tar distillery at Duisberg-Meideich was a large concern, fully enclosed by a high fence, and directly across the road from the prisoners' camp. A wide canal ran around three sides of the camp, while the front was patrolled by sentries. To a great extent, any plan for escape was governed by the time between the break and its detection by the guards. Given the layout and situation of the camp, the easier escape option was from the factory, although this could not be attempted in daylight. The best plan, Thomas and Holmes determined, was to break out of the factory grounds at around 6 p.m., when darkness had begun to set in. The main problem was that their absence was certain to be noticed within two hours. They then fixed the date of the attempt as 26 October.

Thomas and Holmes had foreseen that one of the essentials for success lay in having themselves regarded as a pair of dimwitted oafs with no thoughts of escape. One afternoon they deliberately walked through the main gates of the factory in full view of the workers and guards, and ambled quite nonchalantly down the center of the road towards the camp. The incident caused considerable excitement amongst the two prisoners, feigning surprise at all the fuss, were berated for disregarding strict regulations on where and when they could go. Apparently humbled, they protested that they had not entertained any thoughts of wrong doing. The Germans came to treat the two as witless and harmless drones. From the next few weeks they kept very much in the background and worked hard at their menial tasks.

The knock-off whistle blew at 6 p.m. each day, following which all the prisoners had to walk down to a large locked gate opposite the camp, where they were counted. Once they were in the camp another group of workers would be assembled for the short journey over to the factory. The sentries were under orders to remain at their posts around the perimeter of the fence until the count had been completed, but there had never been a successful escape and they had become quite lax, sauntering off towards the gate as soon as the whistle blew. If the Australians were to hide in the factory grounds near the wire at six o'clock, the fence would be unprotected long enough to allow them to dig a hole and get away. The count at the gate would probably reveal a shortfall, but this count was usually a perfunctory one and the only effect any irregularity might have would be to hasten the full rollcall, which was held two hours later.

On the morning of 26 October 1917 Mert Thomas and Hec Holmes rose at five and put on their civilian clothes. Over these they pulled their dungarees, and then their heavy overcoats. The map, compass, food belts, collars, ties and caps were stuffed into the pockets of their overcoats. Never did a day seem to pass more slowly from the two Australians. At lunchtime they carefully ran over their plans once again. A great deal of difficulty had been experienced in communicating with the Russian, who could not speak any English and had very little German. Through words and gestures they patiently explained that he was to meet them near the fence at 6.15 p.m. and to leave everything else to them. Fortunately he was already wearing peasant clothing.

At 6 p.m. the knock-off whistle blew. The darkening sky was overcast, so they anticipated a cold and wet journey, but they felt this might work in their favour, by keeping nosy civilians indoors. The three men quickly set about scooping out handfuls of wet soil from beneath the fence. It was an awkward task, crawling out beneath the iron fencing, but soon all three were through. They brushed each other down, then set off at a fast pace towards Duisberg-Meiderich, which was in darkness by the time they passed through. They did not sight any police or soldiers.

At about ten o'clock we reached the Rhine, and saw before us a river about two kilometers wide. During the war "The Watch on the Rhine" was something more than Germany's National Anthem; all bridges were so closely guarded that we had decided a stolen boat was our only means of crossing. There was such heavy boat traffic up and down the river that an undetected crossing seemed impossible, even should we be fortunate enough to secure a boat. We agreed to turn north in our search for a boat, as the Ruhrort bridge was only a short distance to the south.

Rain soon commenced to fall, and before long we were wet through. After a couple of hours walking we discovered three boats drawn up on the bank, chained to a post. We found a couple of stones and had settled down to the long job of breaking through the chains when a fox terrier dog appeared on the scene. His barking threatened to wake all Germany, so we departed at express speed.

The following hour after hour trudging through the rain, but to the escapers' mounting disappointment there was no sign of any boats along the river bank. Around three o'clock they finally came across a large ketch, anchored about 50 meters from the shore in a little bay off the main river and secured by a solid rope tied to a post. They were in the process of untying this rope when a man appeared, saw what they were up to and began shouting. The three men quickly fled the scene. About a kilometer and a half to the south they turned away from the river and headed north once again. A watery dawn would soon be upon them, and their desperation increased. With very little prospect of finding a suitable boat before daylight, they sought shelter and security in a thick hedge. They ate two biscuits, and waited impatiently for darkness. As evening finally fell they emerged from their refuge and headed once again for the Rhine.

They trekked on for hours, but once again could not find a boat and their position was becoming quite grave. They knew the town of Wesel was not far away, but the prospect of venturing through another heavily populated area was a daunting one. Then around midnight their spirits at a low ebb, Holmes cried out with relief. He had spotted a rowing boat, although it was sitting well down in the water. Suspecting it might leak, they dragged it ashore and tipped it to one side. The dark water gushed out and they anxiously scanned the bottom for any holes, but those they found were minor. With fingers crossed and prayers in their hearts they refloated the boat and watched as it bobbed up and down.

There were no oars to be found, but a house stood nearby, and they decided to have a look around. Mert Thomas found some feeding tins in a fowl yard which he emptied out, knowing they would come in handy for bailing out the boat as they crossed. Nearby, the other two had found a crop of runner beans planted at the foot of some stout rectangular poles which would do as oars. The three men then returned to the shore and stepped gingerly into their boat. Once they'd settled down there was barely an inch of freeboard.

We then pushed off and started on what we afterwards admitted was one of the most confused hours of our journey. The Russian had never handled an oar. We showed him what to do, and he and Hec Holmes were to row while I steered and gave the boat as much as possible from the stern. The river was flowing at the rate about five kilometers an hour; ten meters from the shore we became caught in an eddy, which turned us round and round, and began to take us back to the shore we had just left. I changed places with the Russian, and we two Diggers managed to get the boat pointed in the right direction. We set off again, and after some time learned that by steering diagonally across the river we could make the fullest use of the current. Our progress

was painfully slow - the bean sticks were poor substitutes for oars. We were soaking wet, and the fear of detection had our nerves on edge.

The boat was leaking badly but the Russian kept working with the feed tins, and after battling for an hour the three escapers set foot on the west side of the river and set off for the frontier. As they had traveled so far north, it was decided they should now proceed south-west, towards the frontier between the small towns of Walbeck and Straelen.

The countryside between the river and the border was bristling with German patrols. Several times they had hair-breadth escapes, and on the second evening they camped in a wood. Just as dawn was breaking, and for no apparent reason, Hec Holmes became uncomfortable with their position and they decided to shift elsewhere. They subsequently discovered that their earlier position had been in the center of a gamekeeper's beat. This gamekeeper actually passed them several times during the day, as did a number of people on their Sunday stroll. The bad weather undoubtedly saved them from discovery, as comparatively few people were out and about.

On Sunday night we were kept in a graveyard near Issum for two hours by bicycle patrols continually moving up and down the road. Later on the same night we had to dive into a roadside ditch half full of water to avoid another patrol.

On Monday, with the weather clearing, they camped in a hedge near Walbeck, about 14 kilometers from the frontier. By dawn the six biscuits each of them had carried were gone and they had to depend on turnips picked from the fields for food. On one side of their hedge a farmer spent the whole day harrowing his field, often passing within a few meters of the three apprehensive escapers. On the other side, dozens of people, mainly soldiers, moved along a path between to villages, again within a few meters. Fortunately no one bothered to glance into the hedge as they passed, but it was a long and tension-filled day. On the fourth and final evening of their journey they did not stir until darkness was well advanced. At about nine o'clock the trio crossed the rail way. An hour later they came across a block of huts which Thomas and Holmes believed to be the barracks of German border guards, at about eleven o'clock they came upon a sentry box manned by an armed guard. Moving back into the shelter of a small wood in the center of a field they kept the sentry box under observation, then spotted another 100 meters further on. At irregular intervals the Germans left their boxes and moved towards each other.

Thomas and Holmes discussed their predicament and finally decided to crawl through the trees until they were about 50 metres from the frontier. They would watch for the changing of the guard, and then wait until the new guard became drowsy. Three hours later they felt that the nearest guard had become noticeably less diligent in his duties. He and the other sentry spent a lot of time talking as they met during their patrols, and on one of these occasions Thomas and Holmes decided it was time to attempt the crossing. Their moment had now arrived. On elbows and knees they crawled ahead for a couple of hundred metres until they entered the shelter of a coppice. Then they rose and, bent double, ran until they fell from sheer exhaustion. Daylight found the three escapers at the River Maas in neutral Dutch territory, and it was here they were arrested by Dutch soldiers.

Following a period of quarantine and an injection of smallpox, the three men were handed to the Belgian only at Venlo. Their Russian mate was then taken to a different authority and the Australians never saw him again. The British Consul took over and returned them to England. Holmes had seen enough of the war and was pleased to be told he would be repatriated to Australia.

While in England, Mert Thomas was awarded the Military Medal for his daring escape. He chose to return to France in 1918 and was sent to the Somme as a member of the 1st Division Field Artillery. He returned to Australia in July 1919.

Mert Thomas re-enlisted the Army in 1939 and served in Syria and New Guinea in a field workshop unit, which maintained and repaired armaments and vehicles along the front line.

He died in November 1988 at the grand old age of 91.

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