

EXTRACT FROM NEWSLETTERS 82 AND 83 – SEP AND DEC 2005

THE THEATRE GROUP AT STALAG LUFT III AND AFTERWARDS.

Not long ago I told you about my Dutch friend who collects data about Stalag-Luft III. (see N.L. 79). Here is a little more about that camp where the Great Escape took place.

After about a year of operational flying I finally got shot down. My last air combat could not end otherwise. I was alone over Belgium in the Renais region flying a Spitfire V.B and I attacked a Fw 190 faster, with a better climb and better armament. But I soon got under fire of four other Fw 190 s. I claim that first one as "Damaged" because he just disappeared. It was time to get back to U.K. The combat started at 25,000 feet and lasted twenty minutes about. During that time I must have hit another of the 190's as one more went away. But I also managed to pull the fight westward in a series of dog-fights. And finally we were over the North Sea, when eventually, while I was shooting at one of the enemy the other two got me from astern. Bits were flying off both my wings and a cannon shell exploded in my fuel tank. Within seconds my beautiful Spitfire was on fire and I had to bail out which I did at 900 feet. After a very short descent by parachute I hit the water and managed to open my dinghy and climb aboard. I drifted for three days, being slightly wounded (a flesh wound) in the leg; and eventually was in sight of the Belgian coast. A German small boat picked me up about one kilometer off shore and brought me to Nieuport where I collapsed through loss of blood and sheer exhaustion. After three days at Coxyte airfield I was well enough to travel by train as a POW and taken to Stalag Luft 3 located in Silesia (now Poland) in Sagan.

For details of the RAF Fighter Command's intentions that day of 1st June 1942 refer to my article called : Circus 178 page 9 to 12 in N.L. 62 May-June-July 2000.(Extracts from Peter Caygill's book: Spitfire V.B. in action.)

Apart from my active participation in the Great Escape of which I wrote an article several years ago (I can't remember in which Newsletter it was printed (Ed note No 79)), I also got interested in the theater, the Germans allowed us to run. They thought that while playing on the stage and making music with the various bands and orchestra, we wouldn't do naughty things

Ace trying to escape. Our compound was the officer's camp. I was a Flying Officer when shot down and our S.B.O. (Senior British Officer) Gp Capt Lassey told us that for us the war effort was to continue as " this was an RAF station behind enemy lines ".

Having told you before about the escaping business. let me now say a few words about the theater. Apart from the Great Escape where 76 officers got out and 50 were shot on recapture, another very well-known escape took place at Stalag Luft 3, and that is the one known as the "Wooden Horse Escape" of which also a British film was made.

There were only 3 officers who got out of the camp, and all 3 got back home.

The theater section was a busy one. We did stage plays from Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw to Blythe Spirit by Noel Coward, and St. Joan by Bernard Shaw. We also had Oscar Wilde plays and Arsenic and Old Lace. To one new POW who was being questioned by the X committee (our own security) who said he had a ticket to see "Arsenic and old lace" in London, when his leave was cancelled to go on Ops, the X--man replied: "Don't worry old chap, you can *see* it here, it is just coming on our theater next week". We also had concerts, as we had got musical instruments through the Red Cross.

Mind you, some of us had to play female parts in the shows. I played some parts as a man, but also some female parts. In fact in "Arsenic and old lace", I played the role of Elaine. There were also variety shows with singing and dancing. And I had a role in a Roman operetta called 'Messalina'. It had been completely written by two POWs both navigators, both RAFVR. The script and lyrics were by David Porter pre-war BBC producer and all the music written by Wylton Todd, who was an architect. By the way, he was the architect who designed the memorial to the "50 escapers shot by the Gestapo".

The new German Commandant who replaced Oberst von Lindeiner, court martialed after the Great Escape, was so ashamed of the massacre of the 50 officers, that he allowed us to build that memorial. The Germans provided the stones and we provided the design and labour. The monument still exists and is taken care of and maintained by the actual Polish Army.

'Messalina' was a fun show to put on. As an operetta it was all sung and told the action of real historical people, but the story was completely mad and invented. Great fun to play in. I took the part of Agrippinilla.

As I am a bit of a musician, I also played "first viola" in the classical orchestra, "second violin" in a gypsy band, and the double bass in the jazz band. I also designed one of the stage sets, and wrote the Choreography of a modern ballet, that was part of a variety show. Next time I will tell you about a fantastic idea one of us had If we came through this ordeal, it was thanks to the Red Cross (British, American and Canadian), who sent us parcels via Switzerland and allowed us to survive. So when we got back to U.K.in May 1945, this chap said: "let us do something for the Red Cross ". We were allowed by the Air Council to do that and below I will explain how we managed to find a professional producer who'd work for free, a theater that would cost us nothing and so we could GIVE all the proceeds to the Red Cross. !!!

A few of the Sagan theater world people got the idea through to the Air Council that it would be a great gesture toward the Red Cross to repay a small part of what it had meant to us to benefit from Red Cross food parcels in Germany while we were POWs. We soon got permission from the top brass to put on a show. We would remain RAF officers on special duty (the Japan war was still in progress) for maximum three months, receiving normal officer's pay (that wasn't much!).

So we set out to find ourselves a producer who'd work without pay, and a theater of good reputation in central London, that would not cost us one penny, so that all the proceeds from the sale of tickets would go to the Red Cross. And we were lucky. The main people who worked on that were Kenneth Mackintosh, Peter Butterworth, Rupert Davis and Talbot Rothwell. All became professionals in show business after the war. They found Jack Hilton, pre-war very famous big-band leader, who would produce the show for free and get us two top-class theaters, also costless. The first was the STOLL in Kingsway (now demolished) a very large variety theater, where we played for several weeks. Then we moved to HIS MAJESTY theater just down from Leicester Square, in Haymarket. Could not have been more central: a few months ago I was in London, and stopped in front of the stage door, still the same one I used so many times in 1945. (nostalgia);

We decided, (I was in organizing committee) to take the best numbers and sketches from several variety shows performed in Sagan and make it a wonderful show. Of course here we would benefit from professional theater outfitters for clothes and dancing shoes and the theater's set. The stage hands would also work without money, and were proud to do so.

After having performed in London six nights a week plus a matinee on Saturday for several weeks, we took the show up North and were billed in Newcastle, Carlisle, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, a week in each city. Then, coming back to London, we did one night in the American Canteen in Piccadilly.

Every performance was to a packed houses; never a single seat left vacant. And every night we had a long standing ovation, in the Finale, when the whole company, now all dressed in our own uniforms, did a special clever routine on full stage, marching to the sound of the March of the Royal Air Force. It was fantastic: I still have tears coming to my eyes now thinking about it.

As you can see from the reproduction of the programme, I was a bit of a star, taking part in five numbers, several solos, and having made the choreography of "Dream Bogie", stated as "very good" by the Evening News. They were mainly singing and dancing numbers and I had very good press reviews. My wife and I made the front page (big photograph) of the Daily Mail, when we got married. Several impresarios contacted me and I had even two contracts written out with fantastic figures ready to be signed, but I had to continue as a female impersonator and I didn't want to become a Danny LaRue and so I left the stage, to go back to my aeroplanes and never put on another dress since then. My wife said: it's safer to fly than to get into that business, and so leaving the RAF in 1946, I went on flying for around 20,000 hours in thirty years with SABENA. Now they too have packed up. The last ten years of my flying career I was Chief-Pilot of the B.747 fleet... a long way from my beautiful little Spitfire.

Here are a few cuttings from my press scrap-book. I have several more and it all remains a wonderful memory.

Harold Turner from the SUNDAY MAIL writes:

You'll get a shock when you see this show, just as I did in London. I wouldn't have believed it could be done. They exhibit a thoroughly modern taste in ballet. There is an excellent Polish quartet and Bobby Laumans, a young Belgian pilot, is an impersonator who has the sparkle of Carmen Miranda.

Paul Holt of the DAILY EXPRESS, writes:

One small star at least emerges from the Prisoner of War show "Back Home" at the STOLL, staged by air crew repatriated from the infamous Stalag Luft 3: Bobby Laumans, a Belgian boy, who flew with the RAF, shows a Jean Sablon quality, if he will give up flying for the stage.

from the SCOTTISH DAILY EXPRESS :

It is a little unusual to have the "leading lady" sing in a rich baritone, but that's all part of the fun. Bobby Laumans the "glamour girl" is one of the hitswhen you look at the exquisitely gowned leading lady "Danielle" it is difficult to believe. As an oomph girl Bobby Laumans is a wow!

from the BULLETIN Glasgow :

It is of course an all-male effort. The public has just seen the best revue to visit Glasgow for years. Yes, the best. Every member of the cast is an amateur. They made many professionals, I've seen recently seem very un-professional. Leading lady Bobby Laumans behaves as though she (sorry he) had been groomed in a girl's school, and drilled in the chorus.

