

## **Memoir – Cecil Duquemin**

*Bracketed text in italics is from the editor for clarity. The transcript had some text cut off at the margins, so partial words are occasionally noted with a dash and a completed word in brackets and italics. The punctuation has also been improved by the editor for clarity.*

At 11pm on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1944 I was arrested at 54 Victoria Road by two Feldgendarmerie [*German military police*], the leader, who could speak English, asked me my name and did I have a radio. It was on the table covered with a cloth, the other soldier had his revolver drawn all the time.

The leader then produced a paper and read out what I had been doing, taking down the 6pm English news and the 7am news the following morning, and taking them to Charles Machon.

They then took my radio and we walked up to 74 Victoria Road and knocked up Machon. They searched his house and found the typewriter and sheets of 'GUNS' (Guernsey Underground News Service).

We had to report at Burnam Court in Queen's Road at 9am the next day. I went back home but half an hour later they returned to take us to prison.

I was put in the drunks' cell where I was to stay until I was sent to Germany. There was no window, only a grille in the door with the light outside.

It was 1am when I went in. At 3.30am I was taken upstairs to be interviewed by a Gestapo by the name of Einert (a nasty bit of work).

Two days after I was taken to Les Val des Terres by Einert to be questioned. I had to go 6 times in all before they were satisfied, so then I signed a statement. Einert's last words to me [*were*], 'you could have done better'. They then put me to work at Granville House, Mount Durand, peeling potatoes and other vegetables.

In April I was moved to the Val des Terres to do a garden. One morning a man came to the toilet and he said he was for 'it'. I asked him what he meant; he told me he was Frank Falla and that he used to be in 'GUNS'. I told him that was what I was in for; we were both surprised, that was the first time we had met.

I learnt later from Falla that he had, with Machon, started 'GUNS', but Falla had to drop out because his mains set had 'blown'. He then recruited Ernie Legg and Joe Gillingham [*although*] after a while they gave it up.

I was drawn in by Charles Machon and we were the only ones carrying on 'GUNS'.

After being in prison for two and a half months, at least we were going to be tried in the Magistrates Court. It was the 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1944.

The Court consisted of a Judge, a Major, a German soldier, a prosecutor and an interpreter. It seems the Judge did not believe that I was capable of taking the news and present them [*the transcripts*] to Machon.

The Judge, after consulting the Court, asked the interpreter to read a section of GUNS and I had to take them down [*in shorthand*]. I did just that and I may say I came through with flying colours. It was back to prison to await whatever fate they had for us. My sentence was two years and 10 months.

On Sunday June 4, 1944 we were taken down to the Harbour escorted by two Feldgendarmerie and put on board a ship and herded down in an open hold with slave workers, Russians, Poles, French and other. We landed in St Malo the following morning and put in a railway carriage bound for Paris.

We then went to Verdun, Metz, then to Frankfurt on M [*am Main*]. We arrived at a huge prison [*Frankfurt-Preungesheim Prison*] and after donning prison garb, I was put in a cell on my own for four days. At Frankfurt I met some Jersey men, Joe Tierney, Cliff Querée and two others. All of them had been caught with radio sets. After about a month, Falla, Legg and Gillingham & I joined about fifty prisoners and were taken by train via Erfurt and Ju- [*unidentified*] to Naumburg-on-Salle [*sic, Naumburg (Saale)*].

Our work there was from 6am to 6pm fitting canvas tops onto wooden soles with nails. Gillingham and I worked at one table, my job was to put 6 nails at the toe of the boots. Joe did the rest. These boots were for civilian use.

One morning at 5.30am a guard came to my cell and hauled me out to go to the Commandant's Office where he told me that I was going to work in a factory. There were three other foreigners

with me and one guard. We went by train to Dürrenburg [*Bad Dürrenberg in Saxony-Anhalt*]. We were taken to a large hut close to a factory. In this hut there were between fifty and sixty prisoners of all nationalities. I palled up with a Frenchman who taught me the ropes. I could speak French and got to speak it almost like a native.

Half of us were on day shift for one week and night shift the next from six am to six pm, cutting, cleaning and drilling huge shell cases. My job was to clean up the metal shavings and wheel them outside.

The bombing by Allied planes was severe, they were after Leuna, Europe's biggest single factory.

I was eventually put on a machine to skim the metal off the shell cases, they had to be very accurate, mine were nowhere near it. I didn't know whether to be sorry or glad, the latter I think. I was taken to the office and was made to clean toilets; also my bread ration at 9am and 3pm was cut off for two weeks.

At Christmas 1944 the Thousand Bomber Raids started on Leuna, Americans by day and RAF by night. They were dropping land mines. After four raids in twenty-four hours they finally destroyed the factory, it was over two miles long and one mile wide. It had sixty very tall stacks and numerous smaller ones. During that raid they also destroyed our hut. The next day we were taken by road to Halle [*Halle (Saale) in Saxony-Anhalt*] prison.

This prison is huge and it is a house of correction. Up to now life had been fairly easy except for the occasional thump or kick, but now things changed, you really were in enemy territory. My job was in a room immediately above the condemned cells and the guillotine. We had to count seven pieces of paper and five envelopes and put them in one brown envelope; these were for the troops. One morning I was stacking my work by the door when a guard hauled me outside and down some stairs to get some baskets. This guard could speak French fairly well; he pointed to some black curtains and told me I was for it. He then pulled the curtains and showed me this huge monstrosity, the guillotine, a shining terrifying piece of machinery. I was glad to get back upstairs.

The first Wednesday afternoon a hush came over the room at 3pm and then I heard a thump and counted 21 thumps. I was told that they were executing, the same thing on the Friday after ten days. I was given my civilian clothes and taken to a labour camp close to Torgau. I suppose it was [*because of*] being British. I was back in prison garb but a little different.

At that time, I had a severe cold, perhaps the flu. I was put to work with others, my job was to make a brick path to the guards' hut. It was a kneeling job, bitterly cold and there I was coughing and sneezing. Just as the guard undid his sandwiches, of course I looked at his food and coughed again, he pulled out rubber hose and set about me. I took the biggest beating I've ever had. I was black and blue for a week and in severe pain, bleeding also.

We finished at dark and had to stand with our dishes for up to two hours for our meagre rations of 'soup'. We learnt to use the toilet before we went in (or else).

At the end of March, it was back to civilian clothes and up to one hundred of us were taken to a railway station and put in closed wagons, we were definitely going east. After hours of stopping and starting we arrived at a very big railway junction which had been devastated by bombing. We learnt it was the previous night - what a mess. We were let out only a few at a time to use a patch of ground for toilet purposes. How fortunate for us the bombers had done such a good job for we were told that we were all political and on our way to Auschwitz an extermination camp.

We were made to march for about eight miles where we got in some open railway trucks, nothing to eat or drink for hours.

After a long delay we finally moved off going south, away from the advancing armies. These wagons would go from station to station and the engine would go off, then back it would come to haul you to another siding, by this time we had taken some covered wagons.

Our next stop was a place called 'Lesny' [*probably Ležnice in the Czech Republic, 1938-1945 Lesnitz, Sudetenland*], and during the day four guards came to our wagon and called for ten men, as they opened the doors I was pushed out and made to walk with the guards up to a cemetery. We were given spades and picks and were told to dig a grave three metres square and three metres wide. That took some time to do. We then had to go to the gates and unload forty-two bodies, some naked, some with trousers, they were yellow and the stench was terrible, two chaps went into the grave to place the bodies criss-cross fashion as we d- [*dropped*] them with a thud, it was sickening.

Farther along to another siding some of us had to get some planks for the guards' wagon to use as a shelter from the rain, in going to and fro we passed a heap of bodies, and I noticed one or two still breathed.

Living in these wagons and scrounging what food we could was a terrible experience. A rumour got around that Hitler was dead and from then on the guards seemed to be much more lax in their duties, they didn't seem to care very much about us.

I was pally with two Frenchmen and whilst going from station to station chaps were jumping overboard so we decided to try it, so the next time it slowed approaching a station we got overboard ourselves and made our way to a village.

We were taken to the Bürgermeister [*mayor*] who asked us who we were and did we have papers. We didn't but he was not unduly worried, he gave us shelter in a barn and potatoes to boil outside. The next day we arrived in SAAZ and met French POW's who gave us shelter in a disused dance hall.

The very next day in came the Russians with tanks, armoured cars etc. They started looting. The Frenchmen and I made our National flags and pinned them on our coats, not that it did us any good. We were rounded up like cattle and put in groups, thirty to forty with four guards to each group. The Russians commandeered any vehicle that was sound enough to roll.

The next morning saw us sitting on a trailer, drawn by a tractor with a Russian soldier driving, now we had two guards with us. We left SAAZ [*Žatec, Czech Republic*] and made our way east. After about two hours the driver stopped by a farmhouse. The guards told us to get down, my two French friends and I went to the house and we met a young Russian soldier who had a smattering of French. He was overjoyed, we stayed with him for twenty minutes; he shook hands with us and wished us au-revoir.

We were just about to move on when this young soldier came running to the truck and he spoke to the guards, he was very agitated, he also had his rifle.

He then came to the three of us and told us that his officer's watch had been stolen and he wanted it back right away. He threatened to shoot anybody on the trailer if it was not returned. He meant it, he was terrified of the officer. He put me and the Frenchmen to one side, we had been with him the whole time.

He then told us to tell the rest to go in the house and put the watch back and all would be well. By now he was livid and so were the guards. It was a tricky situation when the crowd came back, he went in and came back with the watch, thank goodness for that.

We then made our way east and arrived in Leplitz [*probably Teplitz-Schönau, now Teplice, Czech Republic*] that evening with no food. We were herded into a building, some sort of old hall. Looking out of a window the next morning I saw a figure in khaki. I went outside, not a soul about, and spoke to this soldier. He asked who I was. When I told him he said 'come with me'. We walked a few yards and entered a room. In that room there were about thirty British soldiers. I was introduced to a sergeant who then proceeded to question me. 'Who are you, 'where do you come from', 'what are you doing', etc., etc.

Having satisfied him he then said 'you stay here from now on'. They then gave me a good breakfast and that same afternoon a jeep came with a US Colonel and a truck with US soldiers.

After a while the Colonel questioned me at some length. Two more US trucks arrived and then it was all go. They took us to Pilsen where I had to join some refugees. We slept in a huge stable [*which was*] very clean. I stayed there for four days and acted as an interpreter to an American doctor. I was with two 'G.I.'s' when the doctor asked if anybody could speak French. A Frenchman had been injured and he couldn't make head or tail of what the Frenchman wanted. I obliged and stayed for four days helping out.

Our next move was on to Würzburg to an International Camp, supervised by Americans. I was there for a week with about two hundred people of all nationalities, not very pleasant at all. Then it was on to Stuttgart when I received my first American food parcel, Stuttgart was so di- [*dirty*] and messy. It was supervised by the French and they made the Germans work hard.

From here it was over to Strasbourg, being interviewed and form filling. That was easy enough. After a very good meal, I was taken to the railway station and boarded a train for Paris via Nancy.

On arrival in Paris we were taken to a hostel in Neuilly. Stayed there for five days and taken to Orly airport. We then boarded a Dakota and landed at Heston Airport, then driven to Honey Pot Lane at Edgware. More interviews and form filling and given one pound. Two days after I was reunited with my wife and son in St Helens, Lancs.

*[Following are probably notes to himself]* Except for Charles Machon and Joe Gillingham who unfortunately died in Germany. I often wonder why they picked me to work away from the prison.