FIRST DOUGHBOY PRISONER ESCAPES FROM HUN

The first doughboy prisoner of war to escape from Germany after completing the cycle of experiences which befall American captives of the Boche is back in France. He spent two months and a half behind the German lines.

He saw men robbed of their valuables and personal effects, even to their shoes. He went days without food or water. He was beaten several times by guards for trying to pick grass from the roadside to eat.

He worked 14 and 15 hours a day for the Boche, first on military work, later on a farm, when, for the most part, the daily diet consisted of two meals of a so-called soup made from grass and horse meat, a single piece of bread, and a substitute for coffee which hardly discolored the water in which it was made.

He went through the big internment camp at Rastatt, near the eastern Lorraine border, in which were quartered several hundred American prisoners. He saw it all, and more; he saw something of life as it is today in Germany, and escaped with his story.

Russian Pole by Birth

This escaped prisoner of the Germans is a Russian Pole by birth, an American citizen by inclination, declaration and demonstration. His name is Frank Savicki. He is 24 years old, of less than average height, but sturdy and well built. He was born at Vilna, in Poland.

At 16, with a sister only a few years older, he sought a future in the United States. He arrived there, an immigrant, and joined his uncle at Shenandoah, Pa., where he got a job in a coal mine. He was a mule skinner, underground, and afterward a timberman.

He learned his English—still far from perfect—from the men about him, but before he had progressed far enough to learn the meaning of the word "bohunk," applied to many of his fellow-workers, he removed the danger of its application to him. He took the first step to become a citizen of the United States, and, afterward, when he had completed his necessary term of residence he raised his right hand and swore allegiance to the country he had adopted.

It was only a few months later that he got an opportunity to prove that allegiance. America declared war on Germany. A few weeks later, in April, 1917, he raised his right hand again and swore to defend the flag of the United States unto death.

North of Chateau-Thierry

It is a far cry from Shenandoah, Pa., to a shell hole north of Château-Thierry, France, but given a year and three months and a sacred cause to defend, fate worked it out with the same weird incongruity with which she has, in the last year, shaped so many American destinies.

In that year and three months she led Savicki through the recruit camp, through the intricacies of squads right and squads left, across the ocean, through the final training area, into the first line trenches of a "quiet sector," and, finally, in that memorable week in July when the Germans were started homeward, into the inferno of the Château-Thierry battlefied.

Savicki had been the liasion man between Company B of the - — Infantry and C Company, his own unit. With the Marne and the town of Château-Thierry behind, B Company was going ahead to maintain contact with the Boche and C Company was following. It was uncertain going through scattered underbrush.

Roar of Machine Guns

Suddenly B Company found the Boche. There was the roar of a dozen machine guns opening from concealed positions, a few shouted commands, the explosion of a score or more hand grenades. Savicki passed the signal back to C Company, and dropped into the shelter of a shell hole. A few minutes later he was joined by a corporal and a private of B Company. That company had fallen back to C Company's line, they explained, and they had been cut off. So they had crawled into the hole in what had suddenly become No Man's Land to await an opportunity to join their comrades.

This was about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. At 3 o'clock the corporal, peeping over the edge of the shell hole in an effort to locate the American positions, received three bullets in the head. He died instantly.

For two hours Savicki and the other private sat in the hole. Then the second private said, "We might as well make a run for it; we'll be killed anyhow."

Making a Run for It

Savicki agreed. They started. The second private was killed by machine gun fire before he was fairly out of the hole. Savicki dropped back unharmed.

Savicki continued his wait alone. Once he put his helmet on his bayonet and held it above the edge of the hole, to draw it back a moment later with six bullet holes in it. That decided him that escape in daylight was impossible.

He waited until nightfall, but as he was about to chance a getaway in the darkness, seven Germans surrounded his hole with fixed bayonets and took him prisoner.

Savicki was taken a mile to the rear to the support trenches, which were filled with Germans. He was turned over to an officer who spoke English.

"How many Americans are in France?" asked the officer.

"Five million," replied Savicki.

"How many American soldiers are there in the United States?" queried the German.

"Ten million," said the Yank.

The captain was impressed by these round estimates. He was so impressed that he gave Savicki a shove which sent him to the ground.

"Raus!" exclaimed the officer.

Goodbye, Three Francs

Savicki was taken two miles further to the rear. He was locked in one room of a French farm house after the Germans had searched him and taken three francs in silver, his watch, a safety razor, and his spiral puttees. Savicki had had almost nothing to eat for two days prior to his capture. His water had given out several hours before he was taken. But his requests for food from his captors were disregarded.

They left him in the farm house for two days. There was no article of furniture in the room, the only window was boarded up.

On the morning of the third day came two Germans. They made signs that the captive was to accompany them. Then started a hike which lasted all that day and all the next night, and ended at daylight of the second day at Laon.

Four days Savicki had been without food, but when he asked one of his guards for a piece of bread the latter only waved his rifle threateningly at him. They did, however, allow him water before they started. All the way to Laon the two Germans accompanied their lone prisoner.

At Laon, weak from fatigue and hunger, Savicki was put in prison barracks in which were quartered several hundred

Private Frank Savicki

other Americans, French, British and Italians. The barracks had been converted from some large public building and was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. On the morning of his arrival, three days and 16 hours after his capture, Savicki was given his first meal.

All the prisoners were lined up and every seventh man was handed a chunk of black, sour German war bread, weighing three pounds. This was the daily ration for seven men. The man to whom it was handed shared it equally with six comrades. To supplement this, half a can of liquid was given each man. Savicki thought it was hot water until it was explained that it was supposed to be coffee. Whatever ingredient it had been made of hadn't destroyed the transparency of the water.

For a month and a half Savicki was at Laon, and this is how he describes his stay there:

"There were several hundred prisoners, about 50 of whom were Americans. We worked every day from 7 o'clock in the morning until 8 or 9 o'clock at night. We were divided into small gangs of from six to 12 to work on the roads, on the railroads or unloading supplies. Always there were almost as many guards as prisoners. If they sent eight men out, they had five or six guards.

Long Walk to Job

"We had to walk one, two or three miles to our job, and usually we worked hard. Sometimes we would get a good bunch of sentries who would let us rest occasionally, but mostly we were made to work hard all the time. Those who did not work were beaten by the sentries with their rifle butts.

"Every morning we were given our bread ration—three pounds for seven men. At morning and at night we were given a can of the so-called coffee. At noon we were given soup made of some kind of grass and horse meat. There never was much meat in it, though. This noonday issue was the only pretense of a meal of the whole day. I lived on it for a month and a half, but I don't know how I did it.

"In the morning and at night, marching to and from work, we used to try to gather grass along the roadside. We would take this back to camp with us and make soup of it. The Frenchmen cooked it in the prison yard, flavoring it liberally wth salt. Salt is the only thing in Germany, so far as I know, of which they have plenty.

"But only infrequently would the guards let us gather grass. Usually, if we tried it, they would attack us with their rifle butts. Twice I was struck across the back for this offense.

No Beds, No Blankets

"Living conditions were terrible. There were no beds in the barracks and none of us had blankets. We slept on the barn floor. There was cold water in the yard, but no means for taking a bath. No one had a change of clothes and there was no means of washing those we had. In all the month and a half I was at Laon I did not have my clothes off. Everybody was covered with lice.

"The Germans issued us nothing, not even a mess tin. We ate out of old cans, and if we happened to get a piece of meat in the soup too big to drink, we had to eat it with our fingers."

From Laon, Savicki was sent to the prison camp at Rastatt to which, early in the war, many French civilians were deported. He made the trip in a box car with 40-odd other Americans. They were three days and two nights en route, during which they subsisted on one piece of bread each and two drinks of water.

At Rastatt conditions were better. It had felt the effects of the work that the American Red Cross is doing for American prisoners in Germany. A shower bath had been shipped from Switzerland and it had been installed. Savicki got a bath and a change of underwear. Many of the Americans in the camp were non-coms. Non-coms, Savicki was told, are not required to labor. The American remained 15 days in this camp and received two boxes from the Red Cross, containing each 10 pounds of canned meat, beans, tobacco and hardtack. The Red Cross forwards one of these boxes each week to every American prisoner in Germany.

From Rastatt, Savicki was sent to work on a farm. The farm was near a little town of 50 houses. It was presided over by an aged German and his wife. Their son, 30 years old, was at the front. The old farmer put his charge to digging potatoes with a fork. Savicki worked from daylight until dark, about 14 hours.

After dark he had a late supper at the same table as the German couple. Sometimes the Germans had eggs and occasionally a little milk—never any meat—but usually their sole article of diet was potatoes, and potatoes was all they ever gave Savicki.

Quartered With Russians

After supper a German soldier came for the prisoner and marched him to a sort of guard house in which were quartered a group of Russian prisoners who worked on other farms. These Russians, although peace between Russia and Germany had long since been signed, were still held in captivity despite their protests. They were treated the same as the lone American except that, whereas the latter was locked in his prison all day on Sundays, they were allowed the freedom of the farm.

Speaking their language, Savicki soon gained the confidence of the Russians. Some of them had been captives for nearly four years. All of them were restrained from efforts to escape by the rigorous punishment inflicted upon fugitives when caught. This punishment consisted of 20 days' solitary confinement in a bare room on a diet of bread and water—bread one day and water the next, alternating through the 20. You got this punishment if you were not shot, but, they explained, escaping prisoners usually were shot.

Despite this prospect Savicki decided to chance it. He learned from the Russians that a snow-capped mountain, visible in the distance, was in Switzerland; it would serve to guide him. On the fifteenth day of his stay on the farm came his weekly box of provisions from the Red Cross. He and the Russians ate it between them, all except two cans of corned beef and two packages of hardtack. This the American reserved for his flight.

One on the Guard

That night, as usual, the guard came to the farm house for his charge. As usual, the Yank started to the guardhouse. As usual, the sentry followed about 20 feet behind. In fact, the only unusual thing that happened this evening was that Savicki stepped aside at the door of his jail, and when the guard entered, as was his habit, he shut the door and locked it. Then he quietly made off.

He cut straight across country avoiding all highways. His path lay over the tops of several hills, through knots of woods and stretches of ground heavy with underbrush, across several small cultivated valleys. He traveled all night, guided by the knob of the mountain. He paused when he saw before him, glistening in the moonlight, a little river which he knew separated Germany from Switzerland.

Dawn found him in a clump of shrubbery on a hillside, less than 300 yards from the nearest of the little vine-covered German sentry boxes spaced scarcely more than 100 feet apart along the international boundary. He breakfasted on corned beef, hardtack and water.

In the Cover of the Bushes

In the cover of the bushes he remained all day. Across the valley he could see the peasants tilling the soil. They, he knew, were in Switzerland. Before him, in the foreground, too, he could see the river and the difficulties before him in crossing it. Paralleling the river was a railroad, the string of sentry boxes and a wide belt of barbed wire, obviously put there to prevent the escape of such as he. At noon he saw the sentries changed, and again in the evening.

The sentries, he discovered, did not walk post, merely maintaining a watch from their boxes. The wire, he decided, he could get through. The river, he calculated, was too broad to jump—but it could be vaulted. He stirred during the afternoon just enough to get a sturdy stick and trim it for a vaulting pole.

After dark he started. He crawled. So slowly and cautiously did he go that the trip to the edge of the barbed wire took five or six hours. There he rose and threaded his way through the strands, pausing after each step to unfasten the barbs which clung to his clothing.

He came to the railroad track and crawled over that. He could dimly discern the sentry boxes. He heard a guard cough in one of them. He crawled on, laying a course midway between two of them.

He gained the edge of the river. He stood on the bank. The other bank, ten feet away, was Switzerland and safety. He poised his vaulting pole and sprang for the further side. The pole sank four feet into the mud of the river bottom. Private Frank Savicki landed, belly deep in the water with something of a splash.

There was a tense minute. Clinging to a clump of grass on the Swiss bank, Savicki waited for the bullets he was certain were coming. But none came. Evidently the Boche had not heard him. Finally, he pulled himself on to the land. He was a prisoner no more.

By daylight he made a little Swiss village in which he met an old man who dried his clothes before a fireplace and gave him breakfast. The town received him graciously and bought him a ticket to Berne. At Berne the Red Cross fitted him out in a new uniform, and the American colony outdid itself in affording entertainment worthy of an American ex-prisoner from Germany.

His trip through the prison camps, and especially his 15 days on the farm, gave Savicki a store of information on how the Germans themselves are faring. Soldiers and civilians alike are stolid, unsmiling and miserable. They have very little to eat and they seem to have little interest in who wins the war so long as it is soon ended.

Eat Well on Line

"German soldiers actually on the line eat fairly well," said Savicki. "They all have bread, meat once a day, marmalade, coffee substitute and tobacco made of leaves. They do not have all they want, but they have enough to keep them in good health.

"The soldiers at the depots, 20 or 30 miles behind the line, however, do not get the same ration. They have meat only two or three times a week, and they subsist mostly on war bread and vegetables grown by themselves, French civilians forced to work in their gardens, and prisoners.

"In Germany itself there is little food of any kind. During the 15 days I worked on the farm I ate at the same table with the old farmer and his wife. They had chickens and cows, but only rarely did they have milk or eggs themselves, and never did they give me more than a boiled potato in hot water. With my box from the Red Cross I had a far better meal than they.

Farm Premises Searched

"Every week German soldiers came to the farm with a wagon and took off the week's accumulation of eggs and the weekly harvest of potatoes. Once they took, over the farmer's protests, two live chickens. They had a book with them which apparently contained an inventory of what he had on the farm.

"Once they were not satisfied with what he gave them and they searched the premises. For what they took they gave him a receipt, and I think the farmer exchanged this receipt for German paper money, which will be redeemable after the war in silver. There is no metal money in Germany now.

"After I had been on the farm a week the farmer's son arrived from the front for a furlough. As soon as he arrived he took off his uniform and all his equipment and sent it back to the front. This included his shoes. There is a shortage of all sorts of clothing and equipment at the front, he told me, and permissionaries have to turn back all their government issue upon starting their leave.

"Of all the persons I met in Germany, the son was the only one who had a kind word for me. He gave me apples occasionally and told his father not to be too hard on me.

"America, the son told me, had turned the scales of the war, and Germany had no hope. He complained of shortages of everything at the front. He believed, however, that the United States was fighting for the money she would make out of it and he believed that the American soldiers were fighting because they were so highly paid.

Hard Words for Hindenburg

"I heard many Germans condemning Hindenburg. Some of them said that if he were dead the war would be over and everything would be all right.

"I saw only two automobiles all the time I was in Germany. They were ammunition trucks at the front. Nearly all of the Boche transport is by horse-drawn vehicles. There are large numbers of horses behind the front. They are in fair condition. After I got away from the front I did not even see many horses. On the farms oxen and milch cows are used for hauling."

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COMRADES:

A few weeks ago a transport loaded with Anzacs bound for France arrived in New York. These boys certainly were shown the town. Last night I took one of them to a midnight cabaret—some show. The costumes of the girls imitated every uniform in the Allied armies, including not a few meant for hot-weather campaigning around Bagdad where it is never cooler than 180° in the shade.

The hit of the evening was a corporal's guard of misses—believe me, they needed a guard—that wore knapsacks with glass sides so that you could look right inside of them. But there was nothing to eat inside—not even bon bons. Instead, quantities of cold cream, paint and powder—lucky they had the powder.

My friend, the Anzac, ventured the opinion that though light to carry, he thought that the fair burden bearers would get terribly hungry when on the march. An English army officer at the next table overhearing this remark, added that when at the front his troops had always received plenty of jam and marmalade, as was the custom in their army, but those maidens certainly were well supplied with peach preserve in their knapsacks.

A veteran who had served two years in the trenches and displayed four wound stripes on his sleeve remarked that he would like to arrange a battery of the new Browning machine guns on the allied line, and then parade a few of that knapsack squad near by, and he would bet that every damn Hun on the bald-headed row of his trenches would keep his head up until those Brownings had separated every one from its shoulders. At this, my Anzac, who had not eaten a bite, let out a rousing cheer which almost stopped the performance—said he sure was coming back by way of little Old New York. We hope you all shall. I salute you!

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