

ESCAPE FROM LIMBURG

**Lance Corporal Robert Rollo Paul
(1888-1962)**

In the cold darkness shortly before dawn on Thursday November 15, 1918, after an 11-day 200-kilometer cross-country odyssey, Lance-Corporal Robert Paul, crawling on all fours, within meters of a German border guard, slipped across the Dutch frontier and regained his freedom after 18 months as a Prisoner of War. During the First World War approximately 3,300 Canadian soldiers were taken prisoner on the Western Front. Many attempted to escape but Robert Paul was one of only about 200 men tough and wily enough to succeed.

Born on April 20, 1888 near the hamlet of Lavant at Robertson Lake, Lavant Township, Lanark County, Ontario, Robert was one of 12 children¹ born to John L. Paul (1845-1920), born in County Antrim, Ireland, and Agnes Robertson (1850-1932), born in Lavant.

Robert Paul enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) at Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on October 26, 1915. Like so many young men from Lanark County, especially those from the highland townships, he had 'gone west' a few years earlier seeking new and better opportunities. He was living at Davis, Saskatchewan,² working as a stationary engineer, when he volunteered to fight in Europe.

Assigned to the 28th (Northwest) Battalion, Private Paul trained at Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the men were quartered in the horse show building that proved very poor accommodation, breeding many illnesses and several deaths attributable to the cold, drafty, leaky, poorly ventilated structure. After completing work-up training at Winnipeg, the 28th entrained for Halifax where they boarded the SS *Northumberland* on May 28, 1915 and sailed for England, landing at Plymouth June 10th. The effects of the Winnipeg horse barn put Robert Paul in Otterpool Tent Hospital³ with an attack of influenza, but after a week of treatment he rejoined the ranks and continued training at Shorncliffe through July and September. Following a final inspection by King George V, the Battalion left for France, landing at le Havre on September 16, 1915.



¹ John Robertson Paul (1869-1944), Margaret Barr Paul (1871-1939), Sarah Blair Paul (1873-1957), Isabella Galbraith Paul (1876-1954), William Paul (1878-1959), Joseph J. Paul (1880-1973), James Arthur Paul (1882-1963), Clara Agnes Paul (1884-1956), Alatheia Jane Paul (1886-1970), Robert Rollo Paul (1888-1962), Ernest Moses Victor Paul (1890-1981), Herbert Francis Paul (1892-1964).

² Southeast of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Davis was a village in the early 20th century but has faded away.

³ West of Folkstone, Kent.

Private Paul and the 28th were marched directly to the front and went into the line at Neuve Eglise and Kemmel, Flanders, Belgium, on September 25th. In their first taste of combat, on October 8th, they managed to hold that line, despite two mines exploding beneath their trenches, followed by an artillery bombardment and an infantry attack. Casualties, however, amounted to 19 killed, 30 wounded and seven missing.

On December 19th the Battalion was in reserve, in the rear of Wieltje in the Ypres Salient, when the Germans launched the first phosgene gas attack. Even at a distance of seven miles the gas still caused coughing and burning eyes among soldiers of the 28th.

A week later the Battalion was back in the line when, on Christmas Day, about 20 of its men spontaneously participated in the famous 'Christmas Truce', exchanging cigarettes and souvenirs with the Germans. Although only a few ventured out of their trench into no man's land, most of the Battalion joined the enemy soldiers in singing Silent Night.

On January 31, 1916 the 28th Battalion staged its first trench raid, killing 39 Germans for a loss of two officers and eight other ranks wounded.



CEF Colt-Browning Model 1892 Machine Gun

In mid February, when the Battalion was shifted eastward to Scherpenberg, Private Paul spent a week at machine gun school and, on his return to the Battalion, was promoted to Lance-Corporal and posted to the Machine Gun Section. At the end of March, the Battalion moved further west to Mettern where it suffered a heavy and continuous artillery bombardment through April 4-5th. Later that month they moved to Dickiebusch and then to Zevecoten.

Overnight on June 5-6, 1916, the 28th Battalion relieved the Royal Canadian Regiment on the knoll known as Mount Sorrel, at the shattered village of Hooze, four kilometers east of Ypres. At 7:00 a.m. the following morning a heavy German artillery barrage commenced. It continued until about 3:00 p.m. when an enormous explosion of four mines obliterated 200 yards of the Battalion's frontline trenches, killing 168 men outright. When the German infantry attack came, *"... the first rush was easily squashed by the Imperial [British] troops on the Canadian left but overran the 28th Battalion who in the front line were wallowing in death".*⁴

⁴ Eyewitness account from the diary of a Private Fraser, 31st Battalion.

The Germans, attacking with bayonets, rifle grenades and flame-throwers, quickly captured the forward trenches but were stopped by fire from other companies of the 28th manning the support line, and from men of the Canadian 31st Battalion on the right flank in Zouave Wood. The Canadians also held on to the support trenches beside the Menon Road and blunted the German assault with rifle and machinegun fire, despite significant jamming problems with their Ross rifles. Three hundred men were killed, and many others wounded or went missing, reducing, in a few hours, the effective strength of the Battalion by 50%. A Battalion history records that,

Two companies, 'A' and 'B', were all but wiped out; the former being victims of German mines, while the latter came under one of the most terrific enemy bombardments of the war. The 6th was the blackest day in the history of the unit, and while the casualties in the ranks were exceptionally high, some of the noblest and most experienced officers were lost.

The Germans attacked in overwhelming force and carried the Canadian line, despite a most gallant and heroic resistance during which the Battalion machine gunners inflicted heavy losses upon the advancing masses until they were finally surrounded, overcome, and taken prisoners.⁵

One of those machine gunners taken prisoner was Lance-Corporal Robert Paul.



⁵ *The Story of the 28th (Northwest) Battalion 1914-1917*, by G. E. Hewitt (1918), printed and published for the Canadian War Records Office.

A week later, preceded by a heavy artillery barrage, and with support from the 2nd Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) and other Canadian units, the 28th Battalion counter-attacked. They recaptured most of the Mount Sorrel positions and by June 13th both sides were back to where they had been eleven days earlier.⁶

In late June the unsettling news that Private Robert Paul had gone missing in the fighting around Mount Sorrel reached his family at Lavant.

John Paul, Lavant, received a cablegram informing him that his son, Private R. R. Paul, had been missing since June 9th [sic]. Private Paul was in the machine gun section of the 28th Northwest Battalion and went overseas with the 2nd Canadian Expeditionary Force in June 1915.⁷

With the passing of another week, reports that Private Paul had been killed began appearing in the British and Canadian press,

Lavant Man Missing – Mr. and Mrs. John Paul, Lavant, received a cablegram informing them that their son Pte. Robert Rollo Paul, No. 73119, had been missing since June 6th. Pte. Paul's name has since appeared in the Canadian Honour Roll under the heading 'Killed in Action' in several different papers, but particulars of his death are unknown.⁸

In mid-July, more than a month after the Battle of Mount Sorrel, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) finally informed the Adjutant of the 28th Battalion that Lance-Corporal Robert Paul had been located among the inmates of Dülmen Prisoner of War Camp in Germany. On July 21st that welcome news was relayed by the *Lanark Era* and *Perth Courier*,

Robert R. Paul, gunner in France, who was reported killed, is a prisoner in Germany. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Paul of Lavant, received a card from him last week telling where he is.⁹

Robert Paul remained at Dülmen, in the District of Coesfeld, North Rhine-Westphalia, until September when he was transferred to a POW camp at Wahn, in the Rhineland district of Porz southeast of Cologne, and then, in January 1917, he was sent to another camp near Limburg an der Lahn, in Westphalia.

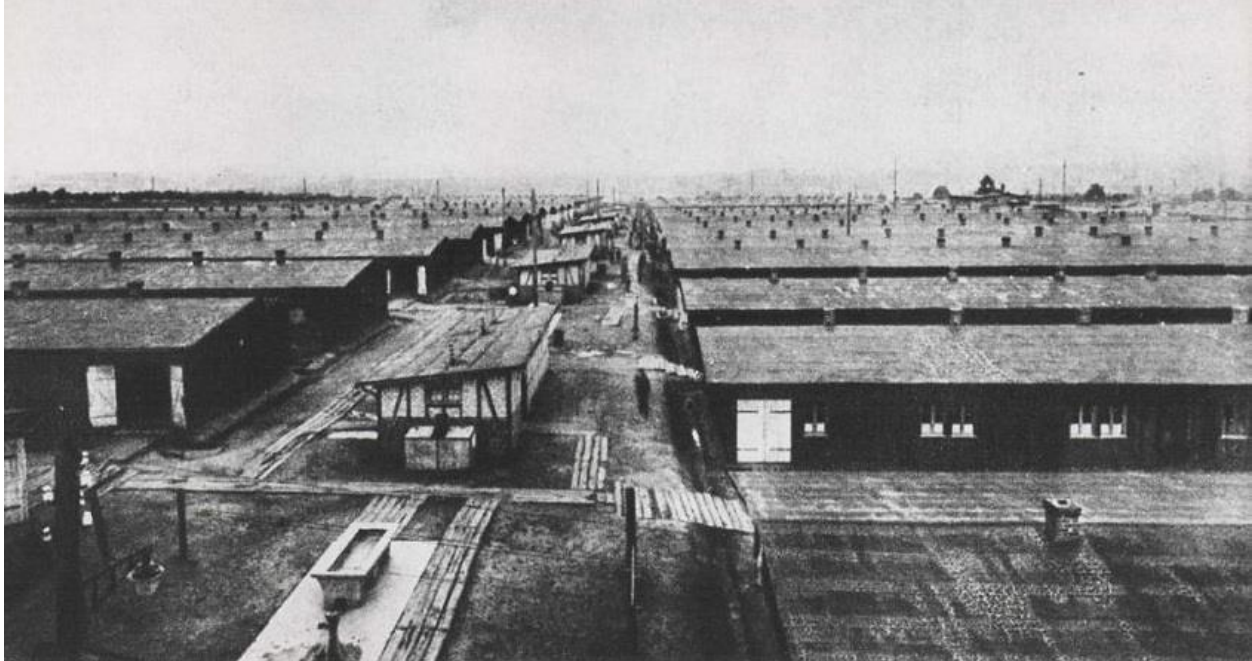
During the war Germany was divided into military districts, each corresponding to an army corps, and prisoners were sent to camps in the area administered by the corps that had captured them. Corps Commanders acted as military governors of their home district and, among their duties, administered the Prisoner of War Camps. The central government's Ministry of War had no jurisdiction at all in the matter of POWs and the result was that conditions varied enormously from camp to camp.

⁶ The 28th Battalion was awarded the battle honor, Mount Sorrel.

⁷ *Perth Courier*, July 7, 1916.

⁸ *Perth Courier*, July 14, 1916.

⁹ *Perth Courier*, July 21, 1916.



Wahn POW Camp

The camps at Dülmen and Wahn, where Lance-Corporal Paul was held through the latter half of 1916, were generally considered very good. The camps located at Limburg were reported to be among the worst. The difference between Dülmen or Wahn and Limburg was, according to one camp inspector¹⁰, *"the difference between day and night, between heaven, relatively, and hell absolutely"*.

Neutral inspections in 1915 and 1916¹¹ reported finding Dülmen Camp to have a capacity of about 5,000 men with British prisoners occupying large huts housing 120 to 140 men each.

The huts are airy and clean, and there is the usual disinfection apparatus to remove vermin (lice) from the prisoners and their clothing, as men who come in from the trenches are apt to bring vermin with them. The mail, parcels, and banking arrangements are good. The work given to the prisoners in the main camp is quite light, and consists of digging, grading, assistance in erection of barracks, etc.

Other prisoners at Dülmen were employed in the nearby forest felling trees,

... working parties leave the camp about 7 a.m. and return for the midday meal, going out again after two hours rest, and returning again at sundown. Parties who work at some distance from the camp have their midday meal brought to them, but they are also allowed to rest for two hours.

¹⁰ Until the United States entered the war in April 1917, POW camp inspection was conducted by a team established by James Gerard, United States Ambassador in Berlin, who became Chief Inspector of German and British prison camps, leading a team, drawn from U.S. embassy staff and elsewhere, comprised of John B. Jackson, Dr. Karl Ohnesorg, Lithgow Osborn, Charles H. Russell and Ellis Dresel.

¹¹ October 1915 and April 1916.

Relations with the authorities in this camp are unusually satisfactory, and the ranking non-commissioned officer stated, out of hearing of any Germans, that the men had no cause for complaint on account of their treatment, and that the behaviour of those in charge of the camp towards them was entirely as it should be.

Wahn POW camp, located about 25 kilometers southeast of Cologne, was considerably larger than Dülmen. By 1916 it housed as many as 50,000 men in the primary 'parent' camp and numerous 'working' camps surrounding it. Before the war the camp site had been the Wahner Heide artillery barracks and range. Accommodation and conditions at Wahn were roughly similar to those at Dülmen, but Wahn did have a special barracks where those who had attempted escape from other camps were incarcerated. Conditions in the Wahn satellite work camps, however, were arduous. *"They made the worst slaves they could out of us",* one Canadian prisoner¹² recalled, *"compelling us to work from 5:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. and punished us severely. Some 100 of us English¹³ prisoners were building a steel bridge on the Rhine at Engers¹⁴".*

As the war dragged on, placing an ever greater strain on German resources, conditions for prisoners held at even the 'good' camps like Dülmen and Wahn deteriorated greatly until, in 1918, POW Private Frank MacDonald of Winnipeg described digging *"through garbage pails in the Dülmen POW camp, where he discovered that the inedible meat in that day's soup had come from a dachshund"*.¹⁵

When, shortly after new-year 1917, Private Robert Paul was transferred to Limburg Camp he found himself in circumstances a great deal more difficult than he had experienced at Wahn or Dülmen. An exchanged Australian soldier described conditions at Limburg;

All last winter we had no lights and as it was dark by 4:00 p.m. you can guess what it was like? For the greater part of the winter there was only one tap running for nearly 2,000 men, and of course the food given us was absolutely unfit for consumption. This is a typical day's menu. Breakfast: 1 bowl of coffee (the latter made from acorns and burnt barley); Dinner: 1 liter - (1¾ pints) of mangel-wurzel¹⁶; tea: 1 liter of the same, with one slice black dry bread. We saw our men dying of pure starvation. At one time we were burying an average of 30 men per day — all caused by making them work behind the lines on vegetable soup.¹⁷

¹² Sapper John Alexander Chisolm (1873-1926), enlisted January 1916, served with #2 Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers. Also captured at the Battle of Mount Sorrel, Chisolm escaped from Limburg POW Camp three weeks before Robert Paul and William Weeks.

¹³ At this point in the war Canadian and all Commonwealth troops are always included in references to English or British troops or prisoners.

¹⁴ Across the Rhine between Koblenz and Neuwied.

¹⁵ *McLean's Magazine*, October 21, 2016, 'Newly Discovered Letters Show Darkness WW1 POW Camp'.

¹⁶ A root crop of the beet family. Large white, yellow or orange-yellow swollen roots developed in the 18th century as a fodder crop for feeding livestock.

¹⁷ Letter from Private T. C. Lee, Australian Army 13th Field Ambulance, published in the *Illawarra Mercury*, Wollongong, NSW, Friday July 12, 1918.

Limburg central camp, 80 kilometers northwest of Frankfurt, was established at the end of 1914 along both sides of the road from Limburg to Dietkirchen. Barracks were built to hold 12,000 inmates and the camp reached its occupancy limit in May 1915. Accommodation consisted of two-roomed wooden huts, each containing about 50 men. The first prisoners were mainly English¹⁸, Irish¹⁹, and French, while toward the end of the war there were also Russians, Poles and Italians. Cramped conditions, combined with poor nutrition and a lack of proper medical services, created health issues and tuberculosis became a serious problem resulting in a high number of deaths.



Limburg POW Camp

From the spring of 1916 The Hague Convention prohibition on employing prisoners on tasks connected to their captor's war effort was increasingly ignored. Two-thirds of all POWs employed in Germany worked in agriculture, but prisoners at Limburg (and elsewhere) also maintained roads and railways, constructed or improved drainage systems, cut timber, quarried stone and worked in local factories. Limburg was surrounded by smaller work camps and Robert Paul was assigned to a satellite camp tasked with building a bridge across the Rhine River, near the mouth of the Lahn River between Lahnstein and Koblenz, about 50 kilometers west of the central Limburg camp.

¹⁸ And associated Commonwealth nationalities.

¹⁹ The Germans concentrated Irish POWs at Limburg from December 1914 in order to give Irish nationalist Roger Casement (1864-1916) the opportunity to recruit men for his Irish Brigade to fight the British in Ireland. Out of 2,200 Irish soldiers who were moved to Limburg, Casement managed to recruit only 55.

The fact that Limburg and its satellites lay to the east of the Rhine and more than 200 kilometers from the nearest 'neutral' border (Holland) engendered a somewhat laxer security routine than at many camps. Escapes, therefore, were frequently attempted, but very few succeeded. Several escapees died and those who were recaptured alive received 14 days in solitary confinement, a punishment that increased to 21 days for a second offence. The incarcerated were held in small cells with a plank bed but no bedding other than their great coat, food was limited to bread and water for three days, with a regular meal (such as it was) provided every fourth day.

Despite the odds against success, shortly after arriving at Limburg in early 1917, Robert Paul joined with his 'chum' William Waters, and two unnamed co-conspirators, and began making plans and caching supplies for an attempt to reach the Dutch border. Like Paul, Private William Waters²⁰, a native of Kingston, Ontario, had been captured at the Battle of Mount Sorrel. Serving with the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, Waters had fallen into enemy hands during the counter attacks of June 11-12, 1916 that had recaptured most of the positions lost by the 28th Battalion on June 6th. Whether Robert Paul and William Waters had met and become friends in Belgium, or at Dülmen, Wahn or Limburg camps, is not known. The events of their escape were later dictated by Waters to another Canadian soldier, James Boon²¹, who set down a written account²².

We decided that the 5th of November 1917, should see us embarked upon an enterprise which might prove either the happiest of our lives or an unfortunate memory. The attempt had been postponed until this date, chiefly because the Germans were in the habit of having their crops guarded by armed sentries and dogs until the harvesting of the potatoes late in October; a fact which would render our travelling by night (and, of course, by day) quite impracticable.

In other respects, also, this time was right for the execution of our plans. We had recently completed the storing and secreting of provisions for our journey. These we had saved from the food parcels we had received from Canada²³. As we were allowed to take some food of our own to the works to supplement the German rations for dinner, we continued to live on the latter, while we hid the former in the ground, cement sheds and other places.

²⁰ Private William O'Driscoll Waters, #226747, born 1888 at Kingston, Ontario, son of Michael John Waters and Margaret Isabella Reid, enlisted with the CEF (2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles) at Kingston on April 22, 1916 (although he seems to have been a resident of Toronto at the time). The details of Waters' war service and capture are unknown as his LAC army file contains only his Attestation Paper. Written across the face of that paper, however, are the words "Discharged, 31/8/1918, Physically unfit, wounded". After the war he married Susanna Dorothy Baird and lived in Regina, Saskatchewan. They were the parents of at least one son, Dr. William Reid Waters (1931-2017), a prominent plastic surgeon.

²¹ Private James 'Jimmie' Hamilton Boon, #177079, born 1892 at Limavady, County Derry, Ireland, son of David Boon and Sarah Ann Hamilton, enlisted with the CEF (87th Battalion, Canadian Grenadier Guards) at Montreal on October 4, 1915. Boon served throughout the war in France and was never a POW. In 1923 James Boon married Muriel Clyde Lattin (1898-1976), daughter of John Alexander Lattin and Margaret Barr Paul, at Montreal. Boon's connection to Robert Paul and/or William Waters is unknown but does not seem to have been military in nature. Rather it is noted that Boon's mother-in-law had the maiden name was 'Paul' and Boon and his wife apparently later lived in Lavant or Dalhousie Township as both are buried in White Cemetery at Poland. James Hamilton Boon died in 1982.

²² The Canadian Letters & Images Project, <http://www.canadianletters.ca/content/document-17649>

²³ Red Cross parcels and/or parcels sent by family back home.

After thus completing our stock, it took us some time to collect them into one spot, and, after this was accomplished, we had to wait for others who had started their plans for escape later than we did. It was nothing short of a miracle that the stores of corned beef, biscuits and condensed milk, which we had accumulated, escaped detection all this time, as probable hiding places were ransacked daily.

Fortune, at the very outset, well-nigh played havoc with my own plans. On the morning of the 5th, instead of being sent out to the left [i.e. west] bank of the river as usual, I, along with another fellow, also bent on escape, was left on the right bank while our respective chums [including Robert Paul] crossed as usual to the left where our provisions were hidden, and we had to continue to join them, after breaking away from our guards.



British POW Work Detail

In escaping the guards and crossing the river, Waters and his companion of the moment came very close to being “*caught at the very outset*”.

In the evening, as the work detail was being mustered for the march back to camp, they managed to slip away from their sentry, who was “*an exceptionally good soldier; so vigilant, in fact, he had earned the cognomen of ‘Memorize’*”. They collected their great coats, stashed behind a nearby building, and “*ran off into a field with all speed and did not stop until, owing to dusk and distance, the work yard was no longer visible*”.

After lying low for several hours, they made their way to the river bank and stole a boat. That boat, however, proved to be large, built of steel and so heavy that the two men alone were not strong enough to row it across the swift current of the Rhein. Although they had started the crossing well upriver, the current quickly carried them back to the bridge where they were spotted by a sentry. As a motor launch set out after them, they passed under the incomplete bridge and managed to grab a hanging scaffold and pull themselves up and out of the boat. As the launch pursued their empty boat down the river, Waters and his companion hid atop a bridge pillar. After about an hour they slipped out and, on their second try, stole a lighter more easily managed boat tied to the bank below the bridge and made it to the west bank.

"We found our respective chums on the point of giving us up", Waters recalled. Among those 'chums' was Robert Paul with whom Waters had originally planned the escape.

... [Robert] Paul, to join whom I had been so anxious to cross to the left bank of the river, had been working all the afternoon sifting sand at a gravel pit near the above-mentioned bridge. To allay all suspicions, they had devoted themselves most assiduously to their task. At the proposed time, they continued to put the sand pile between them and their guard and make a dash for an orchard nearby.

Finding a place of concealment in a clump of trees at some distance, they lay still until eleven at night, when they crept back to the neighborhood of the sandpit, where our provisions were hidden. These they collected, and placed into four packs, then lay down and awaited our arrival. The caution they exercised in performing their part can be realized when I mention that this was all done almost under the nose of the night watchman on the bridge.

Having thus happily rejoined our respective chums, and equipped with maps and compass previously obtained from a Pole, Paul and I pursued our journey together, the other two making off by themselves, as we thought it unwise to travel in as large a party as four. It may well be mentioned here that we have not been able to ascertain the fate of these two, but hear that they were recaptured.

As the hour was late, we could not travel far this night, so we made for the nearest hills, where we found cover in a strip of bush. Here we made for ourselves what was the first in a series of shakedowns. Going into the neighboring fields, we collected as many potato tops as possible, some of which we spread on the ground, the rest we used for covering. Here we passed our time in a more-or-less undisturbed condition until the following evening.

As soon as it was dark, we resumed our travels. We avoided towns and villages, keeping almost entirely to open country. All night we had the lights of the Rhine in sight, assuring us that our course was in the right direction. This night was rather uneventful, and at dawn we again sought concealment in bush, using the same covering as the night before, only that this morning we had an additional covering of a coat of hoar frost. Our situation was not altogether monotonous, as it was occasionally relieved by the unwelcome visits of children and dogs, who came dangerously near to our hiding places.

On the third night, after leaving our place of shelter, we struck across country until we came upon a road leading north-easterly and to the main auto road between Coblenz [Koblenz] and Cologne. We followed this for some distance until to our dismay we saw before us a large town²⁴. As there was no way of going around, we had to make the attempt to pass through, and succeeded without interruption owing to the rain, which was falling in torrents. We continued to follow the banks of the Rhine until about six in the morning, when we thought it advisable to make for the hills for cover.

In getting out of the valley we passed a line of houses and while crossing one of the main streets a man came out of a house, the lights of which were full in our faces. We lost no time in dodging this dangerous intruder, passing through barbed wire and garden patches and the din made by the barking of dogs, and making for the hills. Meanwhile, the rain had ceased falling and hard frost had set in. We looked for covering, but the only thing in sight was a woodpile which afforded us but little protection from the cold. There was but little sleep for us that day until the afternoon, when the sun came out and it was no longer necessary to stamp and jump to keep up our circulation.

On the fourth night, we had to resort to considerable cross-country travelling and other contrivances to avoid the valley of the Rhine and keep in our North-Easterly [must mean North-Westerly] direction. We passed through pine forests in the Western Wold Hills²⁵, also the beautiful city of Abiviller, and crossed the River Ahr²⁶. In the morning, we did not succeed in finding cover until about day-break, when we came upon an agricultural village and discovered that blessed haven of all tramps, a comfortable barn. Taking proper precautions, we entered and buried ourselves in the straw, removing our boots for the first time since starting. Here we slept the sleep of the weary all day, undisturbed, save by the laughter of children from a school nearby.

On the fifth night, we were unsuccessful in finding any road save leading into the valley of the Rhine. Such as we followed led us through a city of considerable size called Godesburg [Bad Godesburg]²⁷. Before arriving here, while crossing a siding leading to a large factory, we were not a little disconcerted by the night watchman, who had evidently heard us coming and turned a light full in our faces. We turned and disappeared into a neighboring garden and pursued our course through what appeared to be innumerable gardens hedged in with barbed wire.

Regaining the valley, we pushed in along the car tracks of the city. Here, at a street corner, we almost fell into the arms of a Hun policeman who was either too surprised or lacked courage to arrest our progress. We hurried on, and at approach of daylight took ourselves once more to the hills. After a long search for cover, we had to content ourselves with a small hollow sparsely covered with spruce, the branches of which we used for bedding, and lay for the day without interruption, although several people passed close by.

²⁴ Possibly Bassenheim.

²⁵ 'Wald' in German or 'Wohld' in old German means Forest.

²⁶ They seem to have crossed the River Ahr at the spa town of Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, so "Abiviller" may be Boon's rendering of 'Ahrweiler'. The Ahr flows eastward and spills into the Rhine near Sinzig, about halfway between Koblenz and Bonn.

²⁷ A short distance south of Bonn on the west bank of the Rhine. Now a suburb of Bonn. In 1917 Bonn was a small town.

The sixth night proved to be the most disagreeable and disappointing of all. At the very outset, we were all but re-captured. As we were walking through a village and rounding a street corner we came upon several mischievous boys who were playing with a flashlight. As we passed, they turned on the light and one jumped on a wheel²⁸ and followed us. It was not enough to have this cursed imp drawing attention to us from behind, but just then, we spied a German policeman coming up to meet us. The situation was as complicated as the climax of a great tragedy, and its solution was as independent of human ingenuity as that of a great plot. Without any apparent reason, the policeman turned off on a side street just before reaching us, while the boy, after following us for some distance, desisted as we reached the outskirts of the village.



But this incident was only the beginning of our trouble that night. Determined to avoid this dangerous Rhine Valley, with its numerous villages and guarded factories, and unable to find any other road leading in the right direction, we were reduced to cross-country travelling over the hills. What followed beggars description, at least by any pen other than of a John Bunyan²⁹. We were soon swallowed up in large tracks of bush and underbrush which grew denser until at last it became an almost impenetrable thicket. The words of Bunyan in describing the process of a Christian up the Hill of Difficulty and afterwards through the Valley of the Shadow of Death could here be quoted almost without alteration.

²⁸ A bicycle.

²⁹ John Bunyan (1628-1688), Puritan preacher and writer best known as author of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

At this point Paul and Waters may have been struggling through the most easterly reach of the Hurtgen Forest, located along the border between Germany and Belgium and across the southwest corner of the German province of North Rhine-Westphalia. It covers about 50 square miles (130 km²), within a triangle outlined by the German towns Aachen, Monschau and Duren.³⁰

From running, we fell to going, and from going to crawling on our hands and knees. Frequently lost; frequently compelled to retrace the distance we had so painfully covered, inch by inch, ever endeavoring to keep our faces towards our Bonlet[?], which lay in the distant north-west, we at last emerged from the thicket only to find ourselves in a swamp so boggy and interspersed with deep holes that we had to hold hands to avoid being quagmired. In the deep darkness, drenched through and through, uncertain of our way, weary to the stage of acute pain, peevish to the extent of abusing one another, chilled in spine and to the point of resolving to give ourselves up to the first authorities, we crawled about for hours, until, just on the verge of complete exhaustion, we suddenly found ourselves in a farming country and soon beheld a sign which those alone who felt as we felt can appreciate. A little way before us, near a farmhouse, was a very large barn filled with straw almost to the very top. Ye Gods, if your Paradise can afford you a continued state of comfort and bliss keen as that afforded us by our hospitable barn on that memorable morning, you're indeed blessed.

Awakening from a deathlike sleep on the first and only Sabbath of our journey, we were able to see the people pass to and from Church. The day passed peacefully, and the night which followed, proved to be as encouraging as the night before was desperate. All night, our road left nothing to be desired. We indeed passed through several farm villages and small towns, but, beyond the barking of the ever-watchful dogs, we suffered no annoyance. Towards daybreak, we found without difficulty, a farm yard covered with large straw stacks, between two of which, built side by side, we crawled and slept on the ground under what covering we could pull out of the stacks, and thus passed an uneventful day.

The eighth night was also uneventful. After we had walked for some distance we began to discern ahead of us what seemed to be a large city. While still on the main road heading to a place, we met a man who accosted us and proved to be a Hun soldier equipped with pack, rifle and bayonet. He appeared to be in a hurry, but asked us for a light for a cigarette. This we were able to furnish him, and in return, he offered us each a 'Belgia' cigarette, which we gratefully accepted. After he wished us a good evening and was proceeding on his way, it occurred to us to ask him what town we were approaching, and we were told it was Duner³¹. The information given by this good-natured German, no doubt home on leave from the Western Front (and, after some refreshment in a beerhouse, too charitably disposed towards all men to trouble himself with our business), proved to be most valuable as, since we left Godesburg [Bad Godesburg], we had not been able to ascertain our exact location. We were agreeably surprised to find that our progress had been better than we thought, and in the right direction.

³⁰ A series of bloody WWII battles between American and German troops was fought in the Hurtgen Forest between September and December 1944.

³¹ Possibly Düren.

Shortly after leaving the soldier, we met a man whom we judged, from his manlike stride, to be an officer, but who, fortunately for us, proved to be neither observant nor inquisitive. We did not think it wise to approach too near what might prove to be a fortified city, and in attempting to find a bridge across the river³² before we reached the outskirts we lost considerable time. After a futile search, we decided to turn in for the day, and had no difficulty in finding a straw stack, in the top of which we slept. The day passed quietly, the sight of the passers-by in the road to Duner affording us something by way of diversion.

On the ninth night, we began to feel footsore, but we made good time keeping at a safe distance from the towns or the banks of the rivers and that night passed the city of Dulica[?]. After passing this city, it was time for us to look for our usual cover for the day, but we were not successful until about daybreak. As we were burrowing and talking as we worked, a girl on an ox came along close by. The inquisitiveness of her sex might have proved more dangerous to us than any obstacle we had heretofore surrounded, but we slept uninterrupted until late in the afternoon.

When we awoke and peeped from our hiding place we discovered to our dismay that a German sentry was at his post within a stone's throw of us. Waiting till night had fallen, we slipped down on the side away from the sentry and continued our journey. That night we pushed on persistently, determined to reach the soil of Holland (at a distance of about 20 miles) before morning. We passed through several small villages and towns, avoiding the large places and any semblance of a factory.

About five in the morning, under the delusion we were in Holland and comparatively safe, we boldly approached the first man we saw. He happened to be a rustic of the farm labour type, and, on being questioned in German if we were in Holland, he looked at us rather strangely but answered that we still had several miles to go before we reached the frontier.

This interrogation of the farmer "in German", and the earlier exchange with the soldier who gave them cigarettes and told them where they were, suggests that Robert Paul or William Waters, or both, had some command of spoken German. In fact, their language skills must have been rather good as neither the soldier nor the farmer seems to have realized they were escaped Canadian POWs. Apparently during a year and a half in captivity they had learned enough German to be convincing.



While talking to this man, several patrols passed by but, strangely enough, paid us no attention. Expressing no outward surprise, we pursued our journey. As a result of being footsore and weary, to say nothing of the rain which had fallen in abundance, we had considerably overestimated the distance we had travelled that night.

³² The Roer River.

Well after daybreak, having lost considerable time in trying to find a straw stack, we were forced to seek a precarious refuge in a sparse patch of willows. Here, we sat upon our packs as the ground was so wet. During the day, we were considerably alarmed by the presence in our neighborhood of a huntsman accompanied by a lady and his dog scouring the fields for partridge. As if by a miracle, they seemed to explore every inch of the ground except the spot which we occupied, and finally passed by.

Early on the eleventh night, a good knowledge of our direction obtained from a sign post pointing to a town shown in our maps to be four miles from the frontier³³, we started out, knowing that before morning we should be either in the land of freedom or again in the hands of the military authorities of Germany, doomed to days of imprisonment, starvation and cruelty, and, afterwards, to work far more severely than that of the slave at the galleys or in the cottonfields. All night we struck across country, experiencing nothing deserving particular notice, until between one and two in the morning.

Our progress had been indeed slow, owing to our being in the last stages of exhaustion, but through the inky darkness of a starless night we were steadily approaching the frontier. We had, as it proved, just reached this much-longed for goal, when our progress was sharply arrested by a sound which, in the words of Virgil, sent a shiver through our very bones.³⁴

Directly in our path, and only a few yards away, stood a German sentry, endeavoring to keep circulation by stamping on the ground. If ever we had reason to bless the inclemency of the climate of northern Europe which so frequently makes a man too intent upon his own discomforts to be keenly alive to outward sounds, it was then. Had his ears been so sharp as the intenseness of the situation had rendered ours, we would have shared the fate of many a poor fellow, who, after getting thus far, had been caught on the very frontier by a sentry and his ever-near patrol.

Noiselessly, we retreated, then dropped to the ground and crawled around and past him. In so doing, I lost my friend, Paul, who was a little ahead and swallowed up in the darkness; so, after waiting a little while in the hope of finding him, I went on alone. As I was looking for my chum, well in reach of the sentry, I stumbled against a small stone pillar and immediately thought it might be a border stone, and almost affectionately I passed my hands over it in the hope of feeling some writing, but although I could feel none I felt sure I had passed the frontier.³⁵

Exhausted, Waters stumbled into a small Dutch village and “... lay down on the stone steps of a crucifix erected at the end of a street” and slept. When he awoke in the cold dawn of November 15th he “... stumbled along a road” until he saw the light of a house. A Dutch woman took him in, nourished him with a bowl of warm milk and let him sleep for several hours in an armchair before he proceeded on his way to a nearby town, where he gave himself up to the Dutch authorities,

³³ Apparently Wassenburg, Germany.

³⁴ Quoting Virgil's *Aeneid* Book IV: *The Visit to the Underworld* - “A cold shiver ran through the bones of the Teucrians, and their king poured out prayers from the bottom of his heart ...”

³⁵ Entering Holland at or near the village of Rothenbach.

... who treated me with kind courtesy and took me to a military hospital, where, to my infinite delight, I found my friend, Paul, who, needless now to say, had passed the frontier and experienced the same kind of considerate treatment at the hands of the Hollanders that I had.

The rest of our story is soon told. We were taken to Roermond, meeting everywhere with evidence of the good will of the kind-hearted Dutch people who judged from our broken-down condition that we were not only escaped prisoners, but wounded as well. The next day we were taken to quarantine camp³⁶, where we met with great kindness, especially at the hands of the nursing sister - the only woman of this type we had seen for over two years.



Roermond, Holland, 1917

After we left this camp, we were sent to Rotterdam to await embarkation for England. Here, we realized with a feeling of pride, amounting to exultation, what a country we belonged to. The British consul treated us as if acting on a theory that a country's citizens are her princes and gave us a taste not only of the goodness, but magnificence of our nation. After being clad, they supplied us with money and we were given a day's pass to The Hague, then placed on board and in due time sighted the fair shores of England.

³⁶ They were quarantined for 14 days.

By January 8, 1918, Private Robert Paul was a patient in the Military Hospital at Bramshott, England³⁷ being treated for minor injuries sustained during his escape. These had led to an infection of the “connective tissue, right hand/thumb”. He was “*progressing favorable [but] will have to undergo operation*”. He was discharged from hospital on February 2nd and on February 23rd sailed from Liverpool for Canada. In mid-March, the Lanark *Era* reported that;

The people of Lanark and vicinity will have the pleasure of meeting a returned soldier and hero, Lance-Corporal Paul of Lavant. He was one of the first to respond to the call to the colours. We are all familiar with his capture by ‘our friends, the enemy’, and his subsequent escape. It is with great anticipation that we look forward to hearing the story of his experiences and of the work being done ‘over there’ by the Red Cross.

Robert Paul had become a hometown hero and returned to a rapturous welcome.

On Tuesday morning, March 19th, the glad tidings were received at Lavant Station that Lance-Corporal Robert R. Paul had reached Kingston and would arrive at the village the following evening. A large arch, bearing a banner on which were to be seen the words ‘Welcome Home’ was erected at the station.

On Wednesday evening a large crowd from all parts of the surrounding countryside gathered at the depot to meet the returning hero. At five o’clock the train pulled in, and after rousing cheers of welcome and a hearty hand shake from everyone, a brief address was given by Lance-Corporal Paul. He was conveyed to his house where a large banquet had been prepared in his honor and was presented with a purse of gold by his parents, bothers and sisters. After supper he gave his account of his thrilling experiences.

The following evening the people of Lavant gathered, and reading an address, presented him with a gold watch and chain. The presentation was made by Mr. Robert Barr and the address was read by Mr. John Browning. Lance Corporal Paul made a very fitting reply. He thanked the people for the welcome which had been accorded him and also for the many parcels which they had so generously sent him when in France and Germany.³⁸

When Robert Paul reached Lanark County, he was still accompanied by his escape partner, William Waters, who joined him in presenting a series of fund-raising lectures sponsored by the Red Cross.

These two young men have been addressing audiences at Lanark, Lavant and Poland, and addressed a crowded hall in Perth Wednesday evening under the auspices of Perth Red Cross³⁹. Both young men were together in the German prison camps before their escape. Last December they arrived in England, and since then relatives and friends in Canada have been eagerly awaiting their arrival home.

³⁷ A temporary army camp set up on Bramshott Common, Hampshire, England, Camp Bramshott was one of three facilities in the Aldershot Command area established by the Canadian Army.

³⁸ Perth *Courier*, April 5, 1918.

³⁹ On May 25, 1918 they gave another lecture at Gibson’s Hall in Harper.

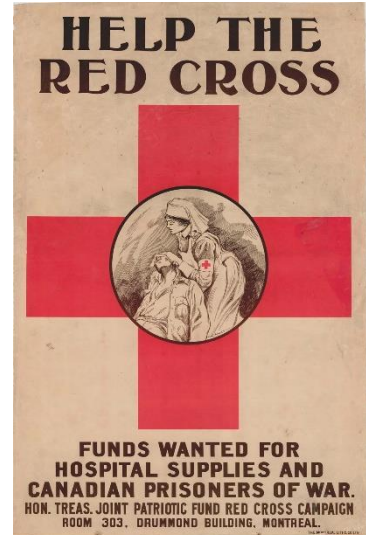
Corporal Paul was heard with rapt attention by the large audience in the hall. He was in fine spirits and possessed of a keen sense of humor, which he employed to excellent advantage. The vivid experiences of a prisoner of war from the time of his capture up to and including his escape were recounted very impressively.

Private Waters of Toronto, in addition to relating his experiences, referred to the grand work done by the Red Cross. The soldiers were deeply indebted to this noble organization for many comforts and, indeed, life at times in a prison camp would have been almost unbearable but for the thoughtful remembrances which the Red Cross sent from time to time.

The addresses of these two young men were among the best along this line heard in Perth and the Courier would like to reproduce them in full, but censorship regulations in connection with the addresses of escaped prisoners of war render such publicity prohibitive.

Lance-Corporal Paul is a son of Mr. and Mrs. John Paul, South Lavant. He has seen much active service, but on account of his escape to a neutral country [Holland], he is not allowed to take up arms again in the present war. Private William Waters is also under the same restriction.

At this meeting, as at all the others addressed by these young men, a silver collection was taken up in aid of the Prisoners' of War Fund. The collection amounted to \$66.⁴⁰



On April 25, 1918, Robert Paul was officially discharged from the Canadian Army at Kingston, Ontario, and awarded the Military Medal. No specifics were cited for the decoration beyond the fundamental criteria of 'Bravery in the Field'.

Robert Paul married Leah Beatrice Headrick (1889-1957) at Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, on January 1, 1919. They were parents of a stillborn son born in 1919 and a daughter, Maude Paul (1926-1988). Robert Rollo Paul died at the age of 74 years at Kingston, Ontario, on July 14, 1962, and was buried beside his wife in White Cemetery, Poland, Dalhousie Township, Lanark County, Ontario.

- Ron W. Shaw (2018)

⁴⁰ Perth Courier, April 5, 1918.