

GEORGE SPENCELEY

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George (far right) with aircrew and ground staff in the Middle East

George Spenceley, a Sergeant Pilot rising to Warrant Officer, joined the RAF in September 1939 shortly after leaving his school's Sixth Form, neglecting plans for higher education. He had earlier been registered for the RAFVR. He was accepted for flying training initially in Cambridge, finally gaining his wings at Advance Flying Training School, South Cerney, flying Airspeed Oxfords. From there he was posted to Operational Training Unit Bassingbourn before joining 214 Squadron Stradishall. Flying as second pilot with a pre-war trained career crew, George flew 20 operations in Wellingtons 1Cs over Germany before being posted to the Middle East flying non-stop to Malta. After loss of aircraft in bombing raids the squadron reformed in Egypt where George flew a further 20 operations, most with a new crew, the captain being Flight Lieutenant Hammond DFC and Bar, also pre-war trained. George suggests that his survival of 40 operations may be due to flying with a highly-trained experienced crew.

George volunteered to convert to Liberators in readiness for a posting to the Far East. Returning to the UK on a civilian flight via West Africa, George and two others were posted to Liberator Conversion Unit, Polebrook, but while awaiting a vacancy on a course, was sent to Operational Training Unit, Steeple Morden, as an instructor. It was from there that George was shot down on the second Thousand Plane raid returning from Essen. He was the sole survivor and suffered severe head injuries involving a long stay in a Catholic Hospital in Rheinburg. In recent years George, seeking to gain further information, received a translated extract from the diary of a Sister Bernhild. It said 'One night two planes were shot down near the hospital. All personnel died except for one English pilot. He had a gaping wound in his forehead. This one was fed for five weeks by our sisters.'

George was then confined for three years as a PoW, first at the infamous Stalagluft III at Sagan, later at Stalagluft VI at Heyderkrug, now in Lithuania. On the advance of the Russians, the camp was evacuated and the prisoners sent to what has been described as the 'Hell of Fallingbostel'. Red Cross food had failed to reach the camp and German rations were grossly inadequate. For some survival was uncertain and there were several deaths. But even in the midst of war and mutual hatred an act of selfless kindness can bring some enlightenment. It was Christmas Eve 1944. For no particular reason George was standing at the open door of the barracks prior to it being locked when the postern came round to do his nightly duty. With a quick look left and right and with the words 'glücklich Kristmas' he thrust a small parcel into George's hands. It was a piece of home-made cake, the product of wife or mother.

During the three years of his captivity the morale of those in George's camp was kept up by a reading each day of the BBC News taken down in shorthand from a secret radio receiver which, in spite of many Gestapo searches, was never discovered. Particular joy was expressed when, on 25 March, news was received of the British crossing of the Rhine. They hoped that they would be peacefully liberated but this was not to be, at least for the RAF. They were to be marched, rumour said, into a redoubt to be held as hostages. Other rumours suggested that they were to be handed over to the SS for an uncertain fate.

Taking what little comfort then available, and an apology for a blanket, the RAF contingent was marched out in columns of 300 to 500 men, sleeping for the most part in the open, determined to make it the slowest march possible. In their weakened state it could not have been otherwise. Some collapsed on the way. It is difficult to know what happened to them but some found refuge with Russian or French work camps, others managed to cross the British lines. They crossed the Elbe just before the bridge from Luneburg to Lauenburg was blown.

It was on 19 April that tragedy occurred as they approached the village of Gresse when one of two columns marching in parallel lines was attacked by a flight of British rocket-firing Typhoons. Fifty were killed, more injured. This was within two weeks of release. The march continued east until Russian guns could be heard when there was an immediate reversal of direction. George, like many others was suffering dysentery and also had a swollen septic foot.

The war ended for George and his column at the village of Salem when, after a few days of waiting, a British armoured column arrived to the delight of the prisoners and to the relief of the many German women evacuees fearful of Russian rape. With all German discipline and control gone, some of the women had sought protection in their homes from the British prisoners, a strange reversal of loyalty.

George was evacuated to Luneburg for an operation on his septic foot and three weeks recuperation in an RAF hospital.

Full details of some of these events can be found in the book *The Last Escape* by John Nichol and Tony Rannell, Viking, 2002 in chapters entitled 'The Hell of Fallingbostel' and 'Friendly Fire'.

George and his wife Sylvie have in recent years visited the site of Sagan, now in Poland, where there is both a museum and a memorial for the 50 shot after the Great Escape, and also the site of Heyderkrug. They have also retraced as far as possible the line of the march ending in the village of Salem.