

To Hell and Back - A Tankie's Tale

This is a story of Sergeant Harry Finlayson 5th Battalion The Royal Tank Regiment, an ordinary man who went to hell and back. He didn't see himself as unlucky, rather someone who was fortunate to have survived. If he was a hero he didn't realise it. Though he never spoke about it until late in his life, the horror clearly affected him. His family didn't know and didn't understand, never realising how his experiences in WW2 shaped him. He never used the horror of his experiences to excuse or justify.

I will share what I have pieced together from my conversations with my dad and from what I have read. There will be factual errors, which I hope you will excuse. What I uncovered is at times harrowing and quite incredible. His experiences in WW2 have reverberated down the generations in surprising and sometimes tragic ways.

Mike Finlayson

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The Eve of War

There weren't many jobs going in rural Somerset for an 18 year old in 1933. Harry Finlayson, the eldest son enquired at the army recruitment office at the Jellalabad Barracks in Taunton; to the annoyance retired Colour Sergeant Willaim Henry Finlayson his father, he had joined the Tank Corps. Armed with a Railway Warrant to Warminster, he headed to Bovington Camp in Dorset, excited at the expectation of a new life; he couldn't have imagined the horror of what was to come. Trooper 7884552 Finlayson W H loved the army, the hockey, the boxing, the mates, fixing tanks; he was in heaven.

While at Bovington, Harry met T.E. Lawrence, aka Lawrence of Arabia, at Cloud Tops, his nearby home. Lawrence had also been a 'Tankie' when, after his exploits during the First World War, he found civilian life unbearable and craved the excitement of military life. Harry would soon drive the same Crossley armoured car in battle as Laurence would have known during the First World War.



TE 'Lawrence of Arabia' on his Brough Superior



Laurence in Arab garb

Harry joined the 7th Light Tank in India in 1934, stationed at Quetta. Despite the occasional skirmish, life on the North West Frontier was hot but happy. Britain was still an imperial power and though the Crossley and Rolls Royce armoured cars were veterans of the First World War they provided shelter from bullets from muskets, homemade weapons and captured Lee Enfield 303s fired from the surrounding mountains; they provided no shelter from the heat of the day and the cold of the night.

The tribesmen could be incredibly cruel. Harry was a good shot, later he would be offered a commission at the army gunnery school, which he would turn down in favour of seeing action; as it turned out, an unfortunate decision. An Argyll and Sutherland Highlander had been captured and was being held by tribesmen across a mountain ravine just a few hundred yards away but several miles by road. The 'Tribies' were taunting the patrol as they tortured him, he was dying in agony. Harry ended his agony with a single shot and then engaged the Pathans with his machine gun. When they got to the scene Harry took the choora dagger used to slash the highlander from the now dead torturer; it remains in the family's possession.

Harry had signed up for five years which meant he could leave the army in 1939. He had met and was about to marry Ivy, the eldest daughter of retired CPO Albert E Ridout RN, publican of the Rose and Crown Inn East Lyng, a few miles across the Somerset Levels from Creech st Michael where Harry lived at Bridge House. He had been offered a job as a mechanic at Yeovilton aircraft factory (which is still in production today). He was awaiting for his leaving date to be agreed by the War Office, but Hitler had other plans for Harry; Germany invaded Poland. His request refused, 5RTR was dispatched to France as part of the BEF. Harry in his black RTR dress uniform quickly married Ivy, they would see little of each other for the next six years. Within two years Ivy would attend his memorial service and draw a widow's pension.



Ivy Ridout



Harry and Ivy get married

The fall of France

The story of the rout of the BEF and the miracle of Dunkirk is well known. The fate of the ring of steel holding off the might of the German Panzer Divisions is less well reported. Harry, commanding a light tank, was part of the ring of steel. Hopelessly outgunned only the courage of the garrison at Cherbourg diverted Germans attention away from Dunkirk. Once the BEF was evacuated from the beach it was every man for himself. Harry smashed up and set fire to his tank and jumped on the back of a commandeered truck. Dodging German aircraft they headed for St Malo and onto a commandeered pleasure steamer to Blighty. Churchill had become Prime Minister. Britain prepared for invasion.

Up the Blue

After training and re-equipping the 5th Battalion RTR, soon to be called the 'Filthy Fifth', embarked from Liverpool in a convoy of 17 ships to Egypt via Cape Town. The battalion was part of the 8th Army, 7th Armoured Brigade, the legendary 'Desert Rats'. Harry could not have imagined where fate would lead him. After some R&R in Cape Town, they headed past Mauritius to the Gulf and the Suez Canal to Alexandria where they disembarked on Christmas Eve 1940 two months after embarking.

The campaign in the Western Desert ebbed and flowed. The Italian army proved ineffective so Hitler despatched Field Marshal Erwin Rommel the famed 'Desert Fox', whose Panzers Harry had faced in France, to head the equally famous 'Afrika Korps' which would at first push the British back almost to Cairo and threaten the Suez Canal. Harry would later meet the man himself; "a little man" he observed.



The Desert Fox Fieldmarshal Johannes Erwin Eugen Rommel

Harry saw action besieged in Tobruk. Most of the 5th Battalion's A13 tanks broke down, crews took refuge in the only allied held town of Tobruk where they were given rifles and formed part of its defence. ; amazingly, in an episode of Jeremy Isaacs' TV epic 'The World at War' Harry can be seen smiling as he marches to Tobruk harbour where he was evacuated back to Egypt where they would be re-equipped with the American Stuart M3 tank they would call the 'Honey'. The smile would soon turn to a grimace.

Claustrophobic doesn't even come close to describing being confined in the Stuart M3 light tank, affectionately called the 'Honey' by crews. It's over 100 degrees in the middle of the

fly-infested, relentless Libyan Desert. Harry said that the smell of sweat mixed with cordite and exhaust fumes didn't register, it was subsumed by the smell of fear.

At the battle of Sidi Rezegh the sound of bullets bouncing off the armour was almost reassuring. "If you hear the sound of an 88mm shell it will be the last thing ever you hear"



The 'Tommy Cooker' was a rather poor performing ration's cooker from WWI. The Germans applied the epithet to British tanks in WW2 for good reason; they tended to catch fire when hit.

Harry hadn't heard the call to retreat, his radio mast had been broken, probably shot off. The shell blew the engine clean out of the tank but it didn't explode. He was taken prisoner. His war was over but the fight had just begun, a desperate fight for survival which was to last for almost four years.

Killed in Action

It's Christmas day 1941, it's Chris's 14th Birthday, Chris, Harry's brother answers the front door of Bridge House Creech St Michael Somerset,. Why would the postie call on Christmas Day? He has a telegram for Mr William Henry Finlayson from the War Office.

When Chris heard his mum scream he thought his dad had hit her. 'DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON CPRL WILLIAM HENRY FINLAYSON MISSING BELIEVED KILLED ON WAR SERVICE WITH SYMPATHY'

Back in Libya, fellow tank commander Gerry Sullivan, Harry's best mate, said a prayer for his dead comrade. Gerry was wounded in Normandy and so survived the war. For nearly seventy years he believed that like so many of his mates, that Harry was dead. A chance letter in the Tank Regiment magazine in 2008 led to a tearful reunion between the two old comrades.



When Harry Met Gerry

In Creech Ivy and his family mourned. In Benghazi Harry boarded the Italian prisoner of war ship the 'Sebastiano Venier' formerly the 'Janson', commandeered from the Dutch merchant navy, oblivious to what was to happen. He cursed being on the exposed deck in the rain wind and snow and envied the 'bloody Anzacs' down in the comparatively warm holds.

The Sebastiano Vernier

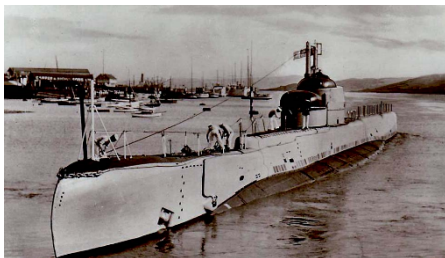
The ship is listing. How could your own side, knowing the holds and decks were stuffed with 2000 allied POWs, mainly Aussies and New Zealanders, torpedo you and leave you to drown

in a raging mid-winter storm off the coast of Greece? You are going to have to swim ashore through boiling surf and razor sharp rocks where you will be corralled in a freezing compound for three weeks with no shelter, warm clothing or food. Local Greeks risk rifle butts to bring you food when they are starving themselves.

The story of that day is told in the book 'No Honour, No Glory' by New Zealander Spence Edge, also a survivor.

On December 9th 1941 The Freighter Sebastiano Venier left Benghazi harbour with around 2,000 British prisoners of war including South African troops, New Zealanders and Australians, all captured by the Germans in North Africa. Harry was among them. Built in Amsterdam in 1939 under the name Jason or Janzen .The recently built 6,310 ton ship was requisitioned by the Italian Navy and renamed after Sebastiano the Doge of Venice in the 16th century, best remembered in his role as the Venetian admiral at the Battle of Lepanto. In a twist of fate four hundred years later the ship bearing his name was to be less fortunate not far from the site of that battle.

The next day in storm-force winds and driving snow, five miles south of Navarino on the Greek Peloponnese, the ship was attacked by the British submarine HMS Porpoise. She was not flying a POW flag but the Admiralty knew it was carrying allied POWs but kept this secret from the captain of the Porpoise for fear of alerting the German Navy to the fact that the enigma code had been broken. HMS Porpoise would be sunk by Japanese aircraft in the Malacca Straits in 1945 three years later. The last of the 75 British submarines sunk during the war.



HMS Porpoise

Hit by a torpedo between the No.1 and No.2 hold on the starboard side, the force of the explosion hurled the heavy hatchway covers of the Sebastiano Venier to mast height, the falling timbers killing dozens of men trying to escape from the hold. From the flooded No.1

hold only five men survived. Most of the panic stricken crew abandoned the ship taking all the lifeboats, leaving the POWs and the engine room crew to their fate, which would have been death had it not been for an unidentified German officer who at gunpoint forced the remaining crew to keep the engines running and steering the ship.

The Italian hospital ship Arno appeared on the scene but ploughed its way through the men struggling in the water and kept on sailing, its priority being the rescue of the crew of a German ship sunk nearby.

A total of 500 lives were lost among them 309 British POWs and 45 New Zealanders. Eleven Italian soldiers also died. The ship managed to reach the shore at Point Methoni near Pilos where it was beached. A strong swimmer Harry helped to rescue many but eventually fell exhausted onto the beach only to be beaten by Italian troops.



The Janson beached at Methoni Point 9 December 1941

Prisoners who managed to reach the shore were confronted by Italian occupation troops and were taken to a makeshift camp. During the next few months a further 200 died from frostbite and disease.

The Firing Squad

In May, 1942, the prisoners made another perilous sailing across the Ionian Sea to Italy, landing at Bari from where they were transferred to Campo 85 at Tuteurano where Harry would face a firing squad.

“You have been found guilty of sabotage and sentenced to death.” The sound of the shot causes your heart to stop and the sickening sound of laughter is actually a relief; then comes the rifle butt to the neck, but at least you are alive. When Harry returns to his regiment the

CO calls him in and tells him that there is an outstanding fine from his time as a POW which was paid by the British Government and Harry would have to pay it! The CO laughs, it's not much money, the Italian Lire has little value and the Regiment will cover it.



Harry had many stories, including a chance meeting with a local Gestapo man with a broad Somerset accent who had lived just five miles from Harry before the war took him back to his parents native home in Germany and how he and Canadians captured after the ill-fated Dieppe raid were handcuffed and made makeshift keys from bully-beef cans. The next two years found him travelling through prison camps in Italy and Germany and penultimately to Poland and hell.



In 1943 the Germans, fearful of Italian capitulation, took allied POWs into their 'care'. Harry was sent to Stalag IV-B Mühlberg in Saxony, one of the largest POW camps. Life in German camps was better organised and food, at least in the short term, more plentiful. Harry learned to play banjo, piano accordion and clarinet. He learned German and how to knit and crochet, but things would take a bad turn.

Oświęcim

Harry was a difficult prisoner. He escaped but was recaptured. Difficult prisoners were sometimes shot, others were stripped of their POW status as 'criminals' and lost the thin protection of the Geneva Convention. It is under this pretext they are sent to work in factories like IG Farben as slave labour. Their biggest factory was at a place called Oświęcim in Poland. The Germans called it Auschwitz.

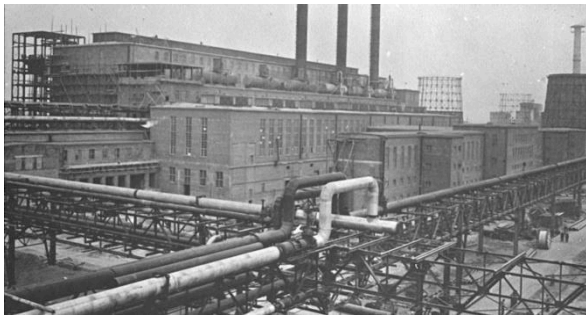
The fact that there were allied POWs in Auschwitz is not well known. 'Auschwitz' refers to three separate camps - Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II and Auschwitz III. Auschwitz I was the main camp, where most of the inmates were Polish political prisoners; Auschwitz II was the extermination camp at Birkenau where the Jews were gassed; Auschwitz III was the labour camp at Monowitz, or Monowice in Polish. Monowitz is no longer in existence but the other two camps, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II, have been preserved as a Museum, which is now referred to as Auschwitz-Birkenau. The industrial complex of camps was huge, covering several square miles. It is estimated that more than a million people were murdered there. Few people know that it held allied prisoners of war.



Work Sets You Free

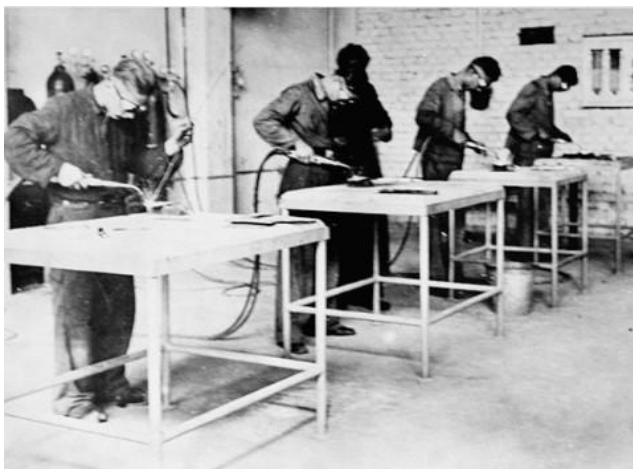
Auschwitz III, E715, was a POW camp for British prisoners which was administered and guarded by soldiers from Wehrmacht. It was a sub camp of Stalag VIII-B camp. However, as it was attached to the Monowitz concentration camp (codenamed Buna after the synthetic rubber it made or rather didn't end up making) which was one of the 28 sub-camps under the control of Auschwitz III, the SS had effective control. E715 was next to the I.G. Farben

chemical plant just a few hundred metres away from the entrance to Monowitz.



IG Farben

The first 200 British POWs arrived at Auschwitz in September 1943 but over the winter of 1943 another 1,400 British POWs (mostly captured in North Africa) were transported there. Between February and March 1944, 800 were transferred to camps at Blechhammer and Heydebreck-Cosel in Germany. After that, approximately 600 British POWs remained for the remainder of the war; Harry was one of them. Most prisoners were put to work in machine shops making pipes and repairing chemical plant equipment. As a mechanic Harry knew how to stop things working.





Photos from the camp for consumption by the outside world



The reality

Harry would have borne witness to atrocities at Monowitz, the SS made no attempt to conceal their brutality. Allied prisoners routinely saw inmates from the Arbeitslagers being hanged, pushed off buildings, fatally beaten and shot. Some POWs made contact with concentration camp inmates and passed on information about the war's progress that had been acquired using secret radios in the POW camp. One man's experience of bearing witness and helping the Jews is recorded in the biography 'The Man who Broke into Auschwitz' by Denis Avery.

Arthur Dodd, whose story was told in Spectator in Hell, went back to IG Farben in 1997 to demand 14 months back pay for his time working in the factory, they refused to let him in!

Sgt Charles Coward testified about what he saw at Monowitz at the IG Farben Trial during the Nuremberg trials:

“...the inmates who worked with us and who were unable to continue working because of their physical condition and were suddenly missing, had been sent to the gas chambers. The inmates who were selected went through the procedure of preparing for a bath, they stripped their clothes off, and walked into the bathing room. Instead of showers, there was gas. All the camp knew it. Nobody could live in Auschwitz and work in the plant, or even come down to the plant without knowing what was common knowledge to everybody.”

So it was clear that Harry and his fellow POWs knew this when they were taken to the shower block and told to remove all their clothes. He said “we were calm, we shook hands and say goodbye, but it was just a shower while our clothes were being deloused”. It’s likely this was because of a forthcoming visit by the Red Cross.

The Death March

With the start of the Soviet offensive in January 1945, Auschwitz was evacuated by the SS. The Wehrmacht closed POW camp E715 on January 21, 1945 as the Soviet armies resumed their offensive and advanced into Germany, many of the prisoners were marched westward in groups of 200 to 300 in the so-called Long March or Death March. Many of them died from the bitter cold and exhaustion. The lucky ones got far enough to the west to be liberated by the American army. The unlucky ones got "liberated" by the Soviets, who instead of turning them over quickly to the western allies, held them as virtual hostages for several more months. Many of them were finally repatriated towards the end of 1945 through the port of Odessa on the Black Sea.

The Long March was during the final months of the Second World War in Europe. About 30,000 Allied PoWs were force-marched westward across Poland and Germany in appalling winter conditions, lasting about four months from January to April 1945. Most survivors just called it "The March". It has also been called "The Lamsdorf Death March".

January and February 1945 were among the coldest winter months of the twentieth century, with blizzards and temperatures as low as -25°C , even until the middle of March temperatures were well below 0°F (-18°C). Most of the POWs were ill-prepared for the evacuation, having suffered years of poor rations and wearing clothing ill-suited to the

appalling winter. On the march they ate dogs, cats, grass, anything they could find. Stragglers were shot or left to freeze to death by the side of the road. Some people gave them food, others spat at them or threw stones. Harry found a lump of salt which he just ate; he had stomach problems for the rest of his life.

Liberation

In April 1945, the remaining British POWs from Auschwitz were liberated by the U.S. Army at Stalag VII A in Moosburg; Harry was among them. Harry's makeshift diary also survived, in it he writes about his longing for freedom, to see Ivy and home again. He fantasises that she has met someone else and forgotten him. He quotes poems, some he wrote himself. His words, from his capture in 1941 to his liberation in 1945 show the decline in his mental state, yet despite lapses into despair, he seems to pull himself back from the brink. In 1944, presumably at Auschwitz an entry reads "I can't understand why I don't hear from you. It was June when I got your last letter. Overworked, tired, too much to do? Or have you found someone better? Then New Year's Day brings a letter, I snatch it with heart running wild. My eyes flood with tears as they fix on that line married....expecting a child." Ivy hadn't found someone else, Harry was fantasising and clearly delusional. The last entries in 1945 talk of liberation and the seemingly interminable wait to be flown home. "Raining all day today weather very bad no chance of airlift, I'm longing for home. Damn the weather, better luck tomorrow".

On 4 May 1945 RAF Bomber Command implemented Operation Exodus, and the first prisoners of war were repatriated by air in aircraft. Bomber Command flew 2,900 sorties over the next 23 days, carrying 72,500 prisoners of war. On 23 May 1945, after waiting weeks for space on an American Dakota, Harry flew to freedom; he would not fly again for another 50 years. When he joined the army he was 19 and A1 fit when he returned from more than four years of incarceration he was 30, physically B1 and psychologically shattered.



Homecoming

When Harry came home it should have been a country fit for heroes; it wasn't; non-combatants simply had no concept. Veterans were traumatised or wanted to forget (but how could they?). Work was as hard to find as it had been in 1933. He had nowhere to live with the wife he hardly knew, except, ironically, a converted army hut which was the spit of Stalag 111B, including the rats.

Harry never settled, he found it hard to form close relationships; he couldn't stay in, he sought but never found peace. Eventually, when he was able to talk about what he had been through, he spoke with no emotion. Only once was there a flicker of horror on his face about the enormity of what he had been through and that was in the TV interview he gave to Mark Urban on the documentary 'Tankies'. Something deep inside was disturbed and came momentarily to the surface, to be quickly buried again.

PTSD wasn't recognised in Harry's day; shell-shock was a sign of weakness of character. Millions of men had been through hell in the war, most found ways to cope but many didn't; few spoke about their experiences. Harry had gone from heaven to hell, in truth, he never really came back. He spent the rest of his life frozen in a personal prison with the ghosts of his mates and fellow inmates.

A Butterfly's Wingbeat

Harry's story is an example of how small, apparently insignificant events can create dramatic and far-reaching effects. A thin wireless aerial on Harry's tank broke and he didn't hear the order to disengage at the battle of Sidi Rezegh. The consequences would be profound and would echo down the generations, but what would have been his fate had that aerial not

broken? Almost all members of the Royal Tank Regiment at the start of the war who were not later captured or badly wounded did not survive; chances are Harry probably would not have made it through.

From mud, through blood to the green fields beyond'

The Tank Regiment's motto is 'From mud, through blood to the green fields beyond'. Harry passed on to the 'Green Fields' in September 2013 aged 98; from hell to heaven. A plaque under a tree at the National Memorial Arboretum is a permanent memorial to an ordinary man who faced the extraordinary with courage and resilience.



Harry Finlayson - Once a Tankie Always a Tankie