

## CHARLES SAUNDERS

On 21st May 1940 I was with the 2nd Battalion of the Welsh Guards when we arrived in Boulogne with the 2nd Battalion of the Irish Guards, to evacuate the British headquarters staff (including the Duke of Gloucester, whose job was liaison with the French forces).

We landed in Boulogne harbour but found that the staff and the Duke had left the day before we arrived. Our company established a temporary headquarters, and I was one of the guards outside. We were told that we would be taken by boat back to Britain as soon as it could be arranged. There was a lot of fighting going on in the town. The next day I was sent to try and find a stretcher for a wounded soldier. I found some stretcher-bearers, but they wouldn't come with me. When I returned to the headquarters I found that everyone had gone – except the wounded soldier and two other soldiers who were looking after him. We made a stretcher from some sacks and some pieces of wood and I told the other two to take the wounded man to the hospital in the town. I then went off to find my company again. I found them elsewhere in the town. We were sent back to the harbour to get the boat back to Britain. However, there was only room on the boat for 800 men: 1,200 were left behind in Boulogne.

We were marched away from Boulogne, south along the coast. But we soon found we were marching towards a German machine gun post. We had to escape and hide. Eight of us hid in a building, and later four went off to see if they could find a way back to the harbour. We didn't see them again. The four of us who remained (Charles, Arthur, Richard and William) spent the night in the building and in the morning we decided to go down to the harbour ourselves. As we approached the harbour someone began firing at us and we took shelter in a large building – a house - belonging to a transport firm. Fortunately the door was not locked. The house was empty. After a while we tried to leave, but we saw Germans coming around the corner. We ran back into the house and locked the doors. We expected the Germans to come after us, but nobody came.

We were in the house for about eight days. All we could find to eat and drink was sugar, some wine left in the bottoms of bottles we found, and rainwater. On the eighth day the water came on in the house. We lit a fire. Someone outside saw the smoke and knocked on the door. We saw that it was a Frenchman and we let him in. His name was Jean Abras. He had about three colleagues with him. Jean sent one of them to fetch a young schoolboy who could speak a little English. With the boy's help they told us that they would get some food and civilian clothes for us. Jean took us out of the back of the house. We walked to Le Portel and then to Outreau. In Le Portel we walked right past the German headquarters! We then arrived at Jean's mother's house. Jean's mother made us welcome. Somehow she managed to feed all of us. It must have been difficult for her as food was rationed, but she was helped in this by the great generosity of her family and friends.

Sometimes we used to walk through the fields down to the beach to collect shellfish to help with the food rations. If we saw any Germans we would walk the other way!

We stayed with the family until 8th August. It was quite a big house. Maman Abras lived there with Jean and his wife Maria and five children: Marie Christine, Jeanne, Jean, Pipette\* and another small child who was very ill and unfortunately died the next year, I think. There were also Jean's cousins Coco and Ninis (I think they were cousins). Downstairs were Maman Abras's niece and her two daughters.

[\*I think I have the right names, though the spelling might be wrong.]

We lived as part of the family. I used to get up first in the morning and make the coffee for everyone. The family taught us some French, and we tried to teach them a little English. We had a good time with them. Sometimes we would all sing together.

One of us would always sit near a window to watch in case any Germans came near the house. One day it was my turn to be on watch. Someone spoke to me and I looked away from the window. At that moment a German car stopped at the house. I gave the warning as soon as I realised, but it was too late. We tried to escape from the back of the house, but a German soldier had already reached the back door. We then went up to the roof of the house and hid in a cupboard. We were there for about two hours before they found us.

We (and the Abras family) were taken to the gendarmerie as prisoners, and then we were moved to Arras. Originally we soldiers, Jean, Coco and Ninis shared the same cell, but later we had individual cells. The soldiers were taken to the German Field Police headquarters for interrogation. Each of us was questioned alone and we were not allowed to talk to each other. But when we arrived back at the gendarmerie a very friendly gendarme said "Would you like to have a conference together now?". He opened the five cells (there were five because there was another British soldier who was a prisoner there) and we could walk into one cell to talk together. The gendarme shut the door but did not lock it. He said that if he told us to come out quickly, we should go back to our own cells as quickly as we could. We could then talk about our interrogations. We made sure that we all told the same story to the Germans whenever we were interrogated.

I didn't find out what had happened to the Abras family until Jean wrote to me after the war.

From Arras they moved us to Lille, then back to Boulogne. We were eventually put on a train – in cattle trucks – and taken to a prisoner of war camp in Poland, first a transit camp and then to Stalag 8b at Lamsdorf, near Opole. I was only there for three days when they told about 20 of us that we would be sent to join a mining group. However, we arrived at a place called Birkentahl (I think) where our job was not mining – it was helping to widen and deepen a river. This was in November or December 1940. Just after Christmas they moved us to Buchenlost near Gliwice, to do forestry work. I was there for the rest of the war.

The Abras family were wonderful people, very kind and very brave. I have always been extremely grateful for all they did for us in 1940. I am so pleased that our friendship remains to this day, so many years later!

Photos taken at E149 Buchenlust



Charles (centre, back row)

'Busty' (front row extreme right)

Robinson (behind Busty)

In the forest near Buchenlust – taken by German guard.



Charles – 6<sup>th</sup> from left  
Billet at Buchenlulst for forestry working party



Charles (left) Robinson (on piano)  
Violinist 2<sup>nd</sup> from right was also camp cook.  
Outside billet in Buchenlust.  
The 'Silver Crochets'.

The piano was bought in Gliwitz for about 200 marks from a music shop and brought back on the back of a horse-drawn cart. On the way back Robinson was playing the piano on the back of the cart, but the guard stopped him from playing when they went through villages.



Charles 5<sup>th</sup> from left. Two men on extreme right are New Zealanders, the two next to them are Australians. 4<sup>th</sup> from right is Bill Whaland (not sure of spelling). In forest area near Buchenlust.





Charles on extreme left.  
Outside temporary billet in Buchenlust area 1941.



Charles 5<sup>th</sup> from right.  
Near Buchenlust.