

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES
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[780]

COMINS, THOMAS BENGAMIN

402111

SURNAME *Conins* NUMBER *40200*

CHRISTIAN NAMES *T. B.*

AIR FORCE RANK AND MUSTERING *No* *P40.* *17E.*

DEGREES ETC.

DATE OF BIRTH PLACE

EDUCATED

DATE OF ENTERING SERVICE

PREVIOUS SERVICE EXPERIENCE

PLACES OF TRAINING

CIVILIAN CAREER AND ACTIVITIES

SPORT (TEAMS REPRESENTED) CLUBS ETC.

FATHER

WIFE

HOME ADDRESS *EDGECLIFFE. N.S.W.*

SIGNATURE

DATE

DATE OF EMBARKATION

AWARDS	
CATEGORY	INTERVIEWS
RADIO	OTHER REFERENCES

Aug 4, 1941 Warrent Officer Thomas Benjamin COMINS,
38 Squadron, Middle East Command.

1 Dutton Street, Yass, New South Wales.

I was the second pilot of a Wellington detailed to lay mines in Benghazi harbour on the 14 Jul 41. We had just dropped our mines when the aircraft was hit by flak in the port motor. We were flying at 800 feet at the time. We immediately headed east but experienced difficulty in maintaining height and finally crash landed about 50 miles SW of El Mekili. We decided to aim for Tobruk but shortage of food and water forced us to seek help at Kekili and we were finally captured by a roving patrol of Italians just before we reached there on the 19 Jul 41.

Camps in which imprisoned

	Apollonie	21 Jul 41 - 26 Jul 41
	Teruna	1 Aug 41 - 15 Sep 41
	Capua	19 Sep 41 - 27 Oct 41
Camp 57	Gruppignano	28 Oct 41 - 12 Sep 43
Stalag XVIII	Market Pongau	15 Sep 43 - 30 Sep 43
Stalag VIIIA	Gorlitz	2 Oct 43 - 2 Dec 43
Stalag 344	Lamsdorf	3 Dec 43 - 31 Jan 45
On march	Lamsdorf	22 Jan 45 - 3 Apr 45

Attempted escapes.

First attempt. In May 42 I, together with four others, Sgt. R.L. Head, Sgt. A. Williams, Sgt. N.R. Ross, A.I.F. and Sgt. T.E. Canning, RAAF decided to attempt escape by tunnelling. We soon found however that the ground was too hard for our purpose and we made little headway. However, in Aug another compound was opened up nearby and we had no difficulty in obtaining access to the new compound. We soon enlisted many more helpers and although the ground here was also very hard we were able to get ahead with the work by digging as much as ten hours per day. The tunnel was started under the floor of one of the huts and it was our intention to bring it up in a patch of corn about 150 feet away. We tunnelled to a depth of 12 feet. The size of the tunnel was 2'6" wide and 3'0" deep though it varied considerably throughout. During the tunnelling operations we were never suspected due probably to the fact that the Italians thought and openly boasted that escape was impossible and also because the hut from which we started the tunnel was unoccupied during the first four or five weeks of our operations.

Due to certain obstacles which we encountered it was impossible to open our tunnel exit in the corn patch as planned and we were forced to make our exit in open ground. For this reason we decided to wait for a wet night to aid our escape. We were all ready to go on the 27 Oct 42 but the weather in the early part of the night was against us so we decided to wait for more favourable conditions. However, it did actually rain later in the night, washing away the earth from the exit and when we examined it next day we could see daylight. So we made up our minds that we must make the attempt that night regardless of weather.

It had been decided by general vote of the tunnellers (now 23 in all) that a total of 19 should make a break in the first attempt as of course there were many more who wanted to go. Lots were drawn for priority in leaving and the first party of two to leave went at about 1930 hours. Canning, Head and I went together at about 2300 hours. Although the night was clear and starry the break was made undetected. All those going had assembled in the tunnel at 1930 hours and the entrance had then been closed. In order to move quietly we wore socks over our boots and as a precaution in case dogs were used in the search we impregnated our socks with garlic having been told that dogs will not follow the smell. We had managed to save up food from our Red Cross parcels, principally chocolate bars of which Head and I had about 40 each. We had a map of the district stolen from the Italians and we had procured a compass from a man in the camp who had decided not to make the attempt.

Our plan was to make for Tirano where we believed we could pick up a railway line, which, though unused, would probably lead through the passes in the Alps and into Switzerland. However it was necessary to avoid Udine so we headed north after breaking camp and then west. As we were in uniform we were forced to lie up during the day and walk at night. On the evening of 2 Nov 42 while lying in some bushes on a hillside in the area of Tremona we were discovered by some Italian Boy Scouts who were assisting the soldiers of a frontier division in searching the area. We were held by the unit who captured us until carabinieri arrived to escort us back to prison camps. All 19 were captured and I was informed by an Italian major that three Divisions had taken part in the search, so that we had little chance of making good our escape.

I together with Canning and Head escaped the beating up which the remainder of the party were subjected to. I think we were spared because of the intervention of the Colonel of the Unit who caught us. He himself had escaped from German prison camp by tunnelling in the last war and was very kind and sympathetic to us. The guard who made me strip on return to prison made his own "sound effects" of a beating by clapping his hands and slapping the wall and roaring at me. The same form of pantomime was carried out when Canning and Head were stripped. We were kept in our underclothes and handcuffed for two days as a punishment and because of the cold we were unable to sleep. In fact we had to keep constantly on the move in order to maintain our circulation. We were also put on half rations.

Second attempt. While on the march from Duderstadt to Fallingb., I escaped with two soldiers of the A.I.F. W/O J.C. Pope and W/O A.R. Beecroft about 20 Miles N. of Duderstadt. We got away on the 3 Apr 45 but were picked up again on the morning of the 7 Apr. On the afternoon of the 10th we were sent to a working camp near Wernigerode where we arrived at about 1600 hours.

Liberation

At about 1930 hours on the 10 Apr we made a break from the working camp (Pope, Beecroft and I accompanied by two British soldiers) and hid in a greenhouse on the outskirts of Wernigerode where we remained until the Americans entered the town 24 hours later.

We were liberated by the 2 Armoured Division U.S. 9 Army on 10 Apr 45.

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M.I.9/S/P.C./LID/458

The information contained in this report is to be treated as

SECRET

STATEMENT BY

A.402111 W/O COMINS, Thomas Benjamin, 38 Sqdn., M.E.Forces.

Captured: 19 Jul 41, MEKILI.

Liberated: 10 Apr 45.

Date of Birth: 14 Jun 12
 R.A.F.Service: Since 27 May 40.
 Post in Crew: Second Pilot.

Peacetime Profession: Medical Student.
 Private Address: 1, Dutton Street,
YASS, New South Wales, Australia.

1. CAPTURE.

I was the second pilot of a Wellington detailed to lay mines in BENGAZI harbour on 14 Jul 41. We had just dropped our mines when the aircraft was hit by flak in the port motor. We were flying at 800 feet at the time. We immediately headed East but experienced difficulty in maintaining height and finally crash landed about 50 miles S.W. of EL MEKILI. We decided to aim for TOBRUK but shortage of food and water forced us to seek help at MEKILI and we were finally captured by a roving patrol of Italians just before we reached there on 19 Jul 41.

2. CAMPES IN WHICH IMPRISONED.

	AFOLLONTA	21 Jul 41 - 26 Jul 41
	TARUNA	1 Aug 41 - 15 Sep 41
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Stalag VIII A CORLITZ		2 Oct 43 - 2 Dec 43
Stalag 344 LAMSDORF		3 Dec 43 - 21 Jun 45.
On march		22 Jan 45 - 3 Apr 45.

3. ATTEMPTED ESCAPES.

(a) First Attempt. In May 42 I, together with four others, Sgt. HEAD, R.L., Sgt. WILLIAMS, A., Sgt. ROSS, M.D., A.I.F. and Sgt. CANNING, T.E., R.A.A.F., decided to attempt escape by tunnelling. We soon found however that the ground was too hard for our purpose and we made little headway. However, in Aug another Compound was opened up nearby and we had no difficulty in obtaining access to the new compound. We soon enlisted many more helpers and although the ground here was also very hard we were able to get ahead with the work by digging as much as ten hours per day. The tunnel was started under the floor of one of the huts and it was our intention to bring it up in a patch of corn about 150 feet away,

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Our plan was to make for TIRANO where we believed we could pick up a railway line, which, though unused, would probably lead through the passes in the Alps and into SWITZERLAND. However it was necessary to avoid UDINE, so we headed North after breaking camp and then West. As we were in uniform we were forced to lie up during the day and walk at night. On the evening of 2 Nov 42 while lying in some bushes on a hillside in the area of TREMONTI we were discovered by some Italian boy scouts, who were assisting the soliders of the frontier division in searching the area.

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(b) Second Attempt. While on the march from DUDERSTADT to FALLINGBOMSTEL I escaped with two soldiers of the A.I.F. W/O POPE, J.C. and W/O BEECROFT A.R. about 20 miles N. of DUDERSTADT. We got away on 3 Apr 45 but were picked up again on the morning of 7 Apr. On the afternoon of the 10th we were sent to a working camp near WERNIGERODE, where we arrived at about 1600 hrs.

(c) Third Attempt. At about 1930 hrs on 10 Apr we made a break from the working camp (POPE, BEECROFT and I, accompanied by two British soldiers) and hid up in a greenhouse on the outskirts of WERNIGERODE, where we remained until the Americans entered the town 24 hours later.

LIBERATION. We were liberated by the 2 Armoured Division U.S.9 Army on 10 Apr 45.

INTERVIEWED BY: - I.S.9(W) on 10 Jul 45.

R.A.A.F. PRISONERS OF WAR MARCHED 600 MILES
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Stories of two terrible marches, one of 600 miles and the other of 415 miles, were told by R.A.A.F. prisoners of war who have just reached England.

Three men who took part in a 600-mile march from Poland in Western Germany, where they were liberated, were Warrant Officers T.B. Comins, pilot, of Edgecliffe, N.S.W.; J.S. Cameron, observer, of Burnie, Tasmania; and J.S. Holder, pilot, of Toorak, Victoria.

"We started out in the heart of winter, when it was freezing cold and the snow was on the ground everywhere," said Comins. "We marched up to 23 miles a day, but a usual day's march was 14 miles. We slept at night mainly in barns, and often in sheds or disused factories. We had no blankets, no change of clothing, only what we stood up in, and the food was terrible."

Cameron said their usual ration consisted of four or five ounces of bread and a little meat and cheese when they were lucky. They were supposed to be on German Army field rations, and to receive soup and coffee. Coffee, they hardly ever saw, and soup was given them on two days out of thirteen.

Holder said the cold did not worry them while they were marching. At night, though they had no blankets, they were warm because they burrowed into the straw of the barns, and they were crowded close together.

"We thought we were being treated harshly, but we saw one terrible sight which made us think we were not so badly off," added Holder. "Our column passed a column of 500 Hungarian Jewesses who had been on the march for five months."

"They were ragged, dirty and weary. Most of them had lost their clothing. A blanket around the waist was a skirt and another around the shoulders was a shawl. Some of them wore old army boots, but many wore clogs. There were others who had bound their feet with straw or pieces of blanket. We were feeling the effects of this march, but they were women and had been on it far longer than we had."

Holder declared that the Germans made a practice of keeping them standing in the freezing cold for three or even four hours at the end of the march before

/letting them

letting them into the barn selected as their shelter for the night.

Warrant Officers A.K. Try, pilot, of Brockvale, New South Wales; L. James, pilot, of Brisbane, Queensland, and J.F. Wood, air gunner, of Randwick, New South Wales, took part in a 415-mile march from Gross Tychow in East Pomerania to Fallingbistel, in Western Germany.

That march took 53 days.

Try flew with an Australian Spitfire Squadron. When he was shot down and captured in September 1941, "Paddy" Finucane was a flight commander and "Bluey" Truscott a pilot officer.

Try said that on the march their food consisted of half a loaf of bread every three days, four potatoes and a little margarine a day. Sometimes they had soup and twice they were given sausage. Try traded his watch, valued at £15, for four loaves of bread. He started off with three shirts and finished with none. He traded the three for food on the way.

They had been at Fallingbistel only a couple of weeks when the Germans, fearing the approach of our own troops, decided to march all the aircrew and airborne men east again. But Comins, Cameron, Holder, Try, James and Wood stayed on at the camp and were liberated.

Warrant Officer T.S. Scales, pilot, of Brisbane, Queensland, who was shot down in a Hurricane in June, 1941, and taken prisoner, did not take part in the long marches, but was marched out of Fallingbistel with the aircrew.

"All we had for seven days was one loaf of bread, a little sugar, a handful of peas, a handful of barley and half a tin of bully beef," he said. "But I supplemented that by sterling eggs and milk on the way. I became separated from the others and was finally liberated."
