

New Zealander Escapes Brutal German Captivity in WW1

Northern Advocate 8/12/2012

A Ngunguru soldier one of only two New Zealanders to successfully escape from captivity on the Western Front during World War 1.

The trench warfare experienced by New Zealand soldiers in World War 1 produced a horrific casualty rate; 16,302 dead and 40,362 injured. But unlike World War 2, where there were 8,453 servicemen taken prisoner, only 356 New Zealand soldiers were captured in World War 1.

While prisoners of the Germans, many of the New Zealanders planned, or attempted to escape from captivity. However, only two men were recorded as being successful; Private H. Wallis-Wells, who escaped in occupied France in 1918, and Company Quartermaster Sergeant Bert Hansen who escaped in occupied Belgium in 1918.

Bert Hansen, was born on 24th January 1896, and grew up in the small Northland coastal settlement of Ngunguru. His father Henry was master of the river tug *Lena*, which towed coal barges from Kiripaka to waiting scows at the Ngunguru river mouth. Bert attended school in Ngunguru before leaving, aged 14, to start work as a baker in Tauranga.

With the outbreak of World War 1, Bert was one of three brothers who, along with thousands of other young New Zealand men, saw it as their patriotic duty to enlist in the Army. He underwent training at Trentham Military Camp before embarking on the *SS Maunganui* and arriving in France in May 1916. Hansen was posted to the 2nd Battalion, Auckland Infantry Regiment, where he rose rapidly through the ranks to hold the rank of Company Quartermaster Sergeant by September 1917. During this time, Hansen fought in several major actions on the Western Front.



**The Hansen family at Ngunguru 1904.
Standing: Theo, Percy, May, Arthur, Lulu.
Sitting: Henry, Bert, Delia, Wes**

It was in the German Spring Offensive of 1918 that Hansen was captured. The 2nd Entrenching Battalion, to which Hansen had been transferred, had been rushed forward to Meteren, in northern France, in an attempt to stem the German advance. On 16th April, Hansen was commanding a platoon that found itself cut off and surrounded by the Germans. Almost out of ammunition and with no hope of re-joining their own lines, they had no option but to surrender.

Hansen, along with the other captured New Zealand soldiers, was marched to Armentieres, and housed in the cellar of a disused cotton mill. Into a fetid, filthy space measuring 60 x 40 feet,

were crammed 282 New Zealand, British and Portuguese soldiers. All windows were boarded up, and when rain set in, the cellar floor was quickly covered in two or three inches of water.

Prisoners were expected to rise at 4.00 am. After 15 minutes for breakfast, they were marched to the railway station to unload trains. After marching back for a 30 minute lunch break, they continued working until 9.00 or 10.00 pm. In addition to these hours, they could be called out at any time of the night to unload ammunition trains. Daily rations were: Breakfast - Coffee. ¼ pound black bread. Lunch – a soup of barley and mule or horse meat (depending on what had been killed by shellfire), water. Dinner – ¼ pound black bread, one spoon of jam, water.

The long hours of physical work and poor rations resulted in many prisoners, Hansen included, becoming ill. He was taken to a military hospital in Lille, before being transferred in mid-May to the prison at the Citadel of Lille. Soon after, he was transferred yet again to Fort McDonald, better known since the war as the “Black Hole of Lille”.



Bert Hansen in 1916

In this infamous prison, the prisoners were crowded into dark underground rooms; over 100 men in rooms no more than 22 x 50 feet. There were no latrines or water for washing supplied to the prisoners. Only the lucky few managed to sleep on the small number of bunks provided. The rest sat on the concrete in amongst the filth. Here there was no question of breakfast lunch or dinner.



**POW military hospital in the church of St Pierre in Leuze.
(Bert Hansen circled)**

There was only one meal each day. It consisted of cabbage or nettle soup, ½ pound of black bread, and a bowl of barley coffee. No reading material, no exercise, no recreation. The soldiers would just sit on the floor and spend their time talking, mostly about food.

Hansen soon became ill with severe influenza. Fortunately for him, one of the German guards was also named Hansen, and he arranged to have Bert

Hansen transferred to a POW military hospital in the church of St Pierre in Leuze. Without this help, Hansen would have most likely died.

Upon recovering, Hansen's thoughts soon turned to escape. He discovered that the lock on a side door of the church could be jammed open. Choosing a night when most of the guards were at a concert, Hansen quietly eased his way through the door and escaped into the countryside.



The door through which Bert made his escape

At daybreak Hansen realised that he needed to change out of his khaki uniform if he wanted to avoid being recaptured. Fortunately, Hansen could speak French, and was able to seek help from local farmers. He was provided with clean civilian clothes and was assisted by a secret network of Belgians to travel to Brussels. Here he was provided with a room in a safe house and was looked after by his new Belgian friend, Auguste.

Hansen spent several weeks in Brussels. By now he was speaking French well enough to pass himself off as a local, and he was able to travel around the city with relative freedom.

In early September, Hansen was asked to escort two British escaped prisoners of war across the border to Holland. Because of the poor health of one of the British soldiers, the trio were forced to stay on the main road rather than travel across country. It was only a matter of days before they encountered a German patrol and were arrested.

The Germans sent them to Leige, where they were interrogated. It quickly became apparent to Hansen that, as they were captured in civilian clothing, the Germans considered them to be spies, and it was quite likely that they could be shot.

After seven weeks of imprisonment in the Fortress of Chartreuse, Hansen was taken to the railway station in the early hours of one morning, to be transported to Germany. He was guarded by two elderly German soldiers. In the pitch black and foggy conditions, the guards were distracted by an incoming train long enough for Hansen to make a break for freedom. He sprinted across the rail yard and over a brick wall. The elderly guards were unable to keep up with him and soon gave up the chase.

Hansen made his way back to Brussels without incident, and contacted his old friends in the Belgian Underground. He was sheltered once again by Auguste. As it was clear that the war was drawing to a close, it was decided that Hansen would remain in Brussels, and it was there on 11th November 1918 that he heard the news that an Armistice had been declared, and that the war was over.

By the end of November, Hansen had made his way to Dover where he was hospitalised with debility. Hansen was discharged from the Army in 1919, and, after spending four years in France studying the baking trade, returned to New Zealand to continue his work in the baking industry.