

## THE BATTLE OF BOWMANVILLE



# The Shackle Scrap

Eighty years ago, what began on the beaches of Dieppe concluded violently some 6,000 miles away in Ontario. **Alex Bowers** explores Canada's so-called 'single land battle of World War Two'

In October 1942, a three-day revolt swept through No. 30 Camp at Bowmanville. Months earlier, on August 19, 1942, the Allied assault against the French port town of Dieppe resulted in almost 3,000 killed, wounded or captured, a significant proportion of whom were Canadian. But, in addition to high casualties, victorious Germans searching washed up bodies and burnt-out vehicles discovered papers that both shocked and bemused.

The orders stipulated that German POWs were to be handcuffed to prevent them destroying seized documents. It was the start of the 'Shackling Crisis', and was further exacerbated in October 1942 when a British raid on Sark led to not only the binding but also the killing of (fleeing) German POWs.

Infuriated, Hitler ordered 1,376 Allied POWs, primarily Canadians captured at Dieppe, be manacled. In turn, Winston Churchill matched the act. The stage was set for the Battle of Bowmanville, a bloody, if bizarre, event about to grip Ontario.

### Plush digs

A well-established agricultural community that boasted approximately 3,600 inhabitants in 1939, Bowmanville had received a sizeable boost to its population with the arrival of German POWs.

No. 30 Camp had previously been a boys' training school but now catered to hundreds of captured Germans enclosed by a double-wire fence and guard towers. The Veterans Guard of Canada – a Home Guard-type formation

ABOVE: WOODEN BARRACKS UNDER CONSTRUCTION AT NO. 30 CAMP LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA.  
RIGHT: ALLIED POWS MARCHING THROUGH DIEPPE. THE TREATMENT OF BOTH ALLIED AND GERMAN POWS FROM DIEPPE LED TO AN ESCALATING SCANDAL THAT INCITED A RIOT IN A CANADIAN POW CAMP DPA/ALAMY

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*“Brent strolled around to greet Kretschmer, who returned the gesture with a fist in the face”*

tasked with guarding industrial sites, infrastructure and POW camps – oversaw day-to-day security.

Generally, Canadian treatment of POWs in Canada tended to be lenient, though at least 137 died, mostly through illness or accidents.

Despite grumblings from interned officers that Bowmanville was underdeveloped, in reality it was one of the plusher facilities.

POWs were paid for work and received promotions. They were free to purchase goods and had access to activities ranging from gardening and games to lectures and playing in a symphony orchestra.

Those keen for exercise could venture to the gymnasium or indoor pool, and they could even take part in cross-country skiing outside the confines so long as they gave their *ehrenwort* (word of honour) not to escape.

Medical and dental services were available, provided by German doctors, and high-quality food such as potatoes, eggs and asparagus were sourced locally. With across-the-wire banter, the relationship between guard and prisoner was best described as cordial. However, that would change once Churchill's order reached the Canadian government.

Though hesitant, dominion authorities were pressured into participation: Select POWs were to be shackled at No.20 Camp in Gravenhurst, No.21



Camp in Espanola, No.23 Camp in Monteith and at No.30. Generally, the reaction was that of passive resistance. At Gravenhurst, prisoners tossed the restraints into stoves, rendering them useless.

But, at Bowmanville, the guards had a full-blown riot on their hands on October 10.

### Bottles and broomsticks

The POWs' most senior officers, Generalmajors Georg Friemel and Johann von Ravenstein, Oberstleutnant Hans Hefe and Korvettenkapitän Otto Kretschmer, who was the highest-scoring U-boat ace, refused to comply with the shackling of 126 men. Boycotting roll call at 3pm, POWs readied the mess and other buildings for the inevitable siege.

They wielded any rudimentary weapons they could muster: broom handles, hockey sticks, table legs, bricks, bottles, crockery, jam jars, even pepper.

The Canadians squared up to them with similarly makeshift items and truncheons. Aware that serious confrontation was inescapable, and in an attempt to bring the riot to a swift conclusion, Lieutenant-Colonel James Taylor MC, the camp commander, called in troops from a nearby training area.

The struggle ebbed and flowed over the next few hours, slowly the Canadians cleared building by building in a series of exhausting melees, yet the cafeteria remained a POW stronghold by nightfall.

In the officers' barracks, House V, where other Germans had cloistered, a fire hose was fed into the structure, flooding the space and forcing those inside to yield by 1am on October 11.

Outside, they were antagonised by Canadian Lieutenant George Brent, who was said to strike them with his swagger stick as they left.

The move was poorly received by the surrendering rioters, at which point Kretschmer suggested Brent make himself scarce to prevent further furor. Kretschmer's advice was ignored. With a corporal at his side, Brent strolled around to greet Kretschmer, who returned the gesture with a fist in the face.

A companion managed to knock down the accompanying NCO before apprehending Brent. They then strode into the open, intent on parading their captive in an act of defiance, only to be challenged by Corporal J E Morrison, stationed in a tower overlooking their position.

A quick retreat was in order, but as one POW, Volkmar König, flung himself back into the building from whence the group had exited, a round from

LEFT: THE MAIN SCHOOL BUILDINGS INCLUDED A GYM AND SWIMMING POOL, WITH OTHER PERMANENT STRUCTURES HOUSING HUNDREDS OF GERMAN OFFICERS IN RELATIVE COMFORT LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

## THE ESCAPE OF HANS KRUG

One man to escape Bowmanville was Leutnant Hans Peter Krug, a 22-year-old airman shot down in the Battle of Britain.

Krug escaped on April 16, 1942, and stole a boat from Windsor, Ontario. He paddled to Belle Isle in the Detroit River and crossed into Detroit on April 18. Once in the United States, a German-born restaurateur and former policeman, Max Stephan, aided Krug, feeding him and paying for his hotel. Krug was also assisted by Margareta Bertelmann, a German immigrant whose address Krug knew as she sent packages to POWs in Bowmanville.

The next day, Stephan drove Krug to a bus terminal and purchased a ticket to Chicago. Krug boarded a Greyhound with the intention of reaching Mexico, onto South America and eventually Germany, but was picked up by the FBI in San Antonio after a clerk became suspicious. He turned on Stephan and Bertelmann, implicating them at the former's trial. Stephan was convicted of treason and handed a death sentence. Bertelmann, who was not a citizen, was instead interned.

Stephan's sentence was commuted to life. There is still debate as to whether he was a bumbling sympathiser or part of a 'fifth column' in the Midwest. He died in of cancer while in prison in 1952.

Returned to Canada, Krug escaped from No.20 Camp (Gravenhurst) in October 1943 but was quickly caught.





ABOVE: GERMAN POWS IN CANADA COULD VOLUNTEER TO WORK, AND WERE REMUNERATED AROUND 20C A DAY. THESE POWS HAVE BEEN ROAD BUILDING  
OTTO KRETSCHMER  
THREE LIONS/GETTY

LEFT: ONE OF THE MOST SENIOR AND BEST KNOWN POWS IN BOWMANVILLE WAS U-BOAT EXTRAORDINAIRE OTTO KRETSCHMER  
ALAMY

Morrison struck the door frame and another hit the masonry, the splinters wounding him. A third passed clean through his left thigh. He was taken to hospital.

### Bats over their shoulders

By Canadian Thanksgiving on October 12, it had become apparent the guards required greater assistance to quell the revolt.

The Germans were undeterred and rejected an exchange of captives. Cuts and bruises aside, one guard had suffered a fractured skull from a flying jam jar.

An additional contingent arrived to subdue the prisoners. Even so, their light-handed response was a surprise to some.

Kapitänleutnant Horst Elfe, commander of U-93, recalled: "We were determined, but a little frightened. We thought the Canadians would come in with machine guns, tear gas and grenades, because that is what would have happened in Europe. So, we were shattered when we looked from our windows and saw the Canadians marching in with no guns, no gas – just baseball bats over their shoulders."



However, this could not continue. The blunt implements were replaced by something a little more to the point – rifles with bayonets, albeit with orders not to open fire in any circumstance.

Fresh from their recent exercises, the new arrivals stormed the barricaded buildings, brought the POWs under control, and ended the ordeal.

The Canadians were now able to fulfil their orders, shackling the required 126 prisoners. Reports indicate that over the next few weeks, policing the policy proved haphazard, with sympathetic guards loosening the restraints or "dropping" keys during inspection to afford POWs a degree of movement when no one was looking, so long as they replaced the shackles for roll call.

With pleas of ignorance from both sides, it was a system that delivered duty, practicality and, to a certain extent, humanity.

On December 12, the entire action was ended as a supposed 'Christmas present'. The former mutineers could enjoy the festive season, but Bowmanville wouldn't stay quiet for long.

In the months that followed, Kretschmer and other U-boat captains hatched a daring plan to



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RIGHT: THE CAMPS WERE SECURED BY THE VETERANS GUARD OF CANADA, COMPRISED MOSTLY OF WORLD WAR ONE VETERANS AND TASKED WITH PROTECTING SENSITIVE SITES IN CANADA AND A FEW IN BRITAIN  
HULTON/GETTY



escape. The elaborate scheme – Operation Kiebitz – included tunnelling beyond Bowmanville’s perimeter, travelling on foot to Pointe Maisonnette in New Brunswick and rendezvousing with the U-536, which would be waiting to return them to France. Unfortunately for the plotters, their coded messages were intercepted and cracked.

The tunnel was unearthed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and their getaway was ambushed. The submarine fled, and was sunk a month later.

### Preservation

Camp 30 closed in April 1945, its purpose-built barracks dismantled and fences removed, the lumber reused to construct houses for veterans.

The towers that once took aim at POWs amid the revolt were also torn down.

Only the old school buildings had extensive

repairs carried out ahead of the educational institute’s re-opening in 1947.

The property was equipped for academic uses until 2008, when it fell into disrepair.

Today, the site of what has been debatably called Canada’s ‘single land battle’ of the war is an overgrown scattering of graffitied walls, boarded windows and blocked doors.

Even designation as a National Historic Site of Canada has so far done little to preserve it.

Nevertheless, hopes are high that the Jury Land Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation tasked with conserving the facility, can rejuvenate the remains of Canada’s last known surviving POW camp.

Todd Tremeer, of the Jury Land Foundation, told *Britain at War*: “This former school campus, now called the Jury Lands [after the family that once owned it], is a group of architecturally significant buildings with a unique tie to history.

”We tend to think that history happens somewhere else and overlook our local history. Camp 30 is the last of several important wartime military sites once found along the shores of Lake Ontario”.

Supported by the Municipality of Clarington – the community Bowmanville belongs to – the vision is to repurpose the buildings while simultaneously preserving their unique history. ●

*“We tend to think that history happens somewhere else and overlook our local history”*

BELOW: THE DILAPIDATED CAFETERIA AT BOWMANVILLE AS IT STANDS TODAY. THIS WAS AT THE CENTRE OF THE RIOT AND NEXT TO VICTORIA HALL, THE ‘GENERAL’S HOUSE’, WHICH ACCOMMODATED SENIOR OFFICERS, A HOSPITAL AND DENTIST  
TODD TREMEER

