

Relief Amid Chaos

The Story of Canadian POWs Driving Red Cross Trucks

Hugh A. Halliday

Early in 1945 Germany was falling apart. While the Allies could taste victory (still to be won at a heavy price), there was concern for the thousands of prisoners still in enemy hands. Bombing had shattered the German rail system, which carried foodstuffs for POWs as well as munitions for their captors. One consignment of Red Cross parcels, intended for rail shipment in September 1944, did not leave Switzerland until November and only reached its destination in the latter half of February. The POW situation was made worse in January as the Germans inexplicably uprooted their prisoners in the eastern Reich and force-marched them westwards. This affected about 30 percent of all Allied captives.

The Allies had anticipated these problems. Late in 1944 nearly 300 vehicles were made available to the International Red Cross via France and Switzerland to relay supplies into Germany; 50 were provided by the Canadian Red Cross. To their credit, German authorities cooperated as much as possible, but they could not halt the air raids or guarantee the safety of road convoys. The POW columns themselves were mixed in with flows of refugees, and the German officers were themselves confused by changing orders as to routes and destinations. Trucks painted white with Red Cross markings would still be virtually invisible to medium bombers flying at 8,000 feet.

The situation had reached a crisis point in March 1945. The International Red Cross redoubled its efforts, using railway stock borrowed from liberated France and Belgium. On 6 March, a 50-car train left Switzerland, heading for Buchs in southern Germany. It required 43 hours and ten minutes to cover 330

kilometres at an average speed of 7.7 kmh. Ultimately, the train reached Stalag VII-A, Moosburg, southeast of Munich, and one of the largest centres for Canadian Army POWs.

The Camp Commandant had been unprepared for its arrival and had no idea where to store the estimated 93,300 food parcels. The prisoners themselves rapidly unloaded the train. Most of the parcels were transferred to Red Cross trucks; 3,000 parcels (ten tons) were retained as a depot.

This depot (which was restocked by trains on 28 March and 12 April) was then placed under a double guard; 16 Allied soldiers watched the provisions while a German detail watched them. Access to the depot was with two keys - one kept by the Camp Commandant, the other by the prisoners' "Man of Confidence." However, the final distribution to isolated or marching captives would be effected by Allied trucks in Red Cross paint. Trains that were intended for other locations were eventually rerouted to Moosburg as the German railway net became ever more chaotic.

The International Red Cross (IRC) took considerable (and justifiable) pride in its work, and subsequently reported extensively on the relief operation. However, it overstated its case in one respect. In its published accounts, only Swiss nationals were mentioned as drivers. What the International Red Cross failed to mention was that a substantial number of drivers and mechanics were Allied prisoners of war.²

Chief among these was Regimental Sergeant-Major Harry H. Stinson (Lanark and Renfrew Scottish). Subsequent reconstruction of events



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Above left: A Canadian-built truck donated by the Canadian Red Cross loads Red Cross parcels from a train car in Germany, January 1945. **Above right:** Red Cross parcels are unloaded at German POW camp Stalag MID.



was unclear on many points, but he appears to have been the principal organizer among the POW drivers. It was Stinson who screened applicants, sent men under guard to the Swiss border for purposes of accepting vehicles, arranged to have them serviced in the German compound at Moosburg, and generally marshalled the relief convoys that subsequently fanned out across Germany.³

rations for distant camps. The group then recrossed Germany - by train - to Constance, on the Swiss-German border, where they took delivery of 50 GMC and Chevrolet trucks. At that point they could easily have escaped captivity by crossing into Switzerland, but they had given their word not to do so. Ultimately, an estimated 85 to 90 prisoners participated in the task, drawn almost equally from American and Canadian compounds, but including two British captives, one of whom was expert in first aid and the other serving as an interpreter.

As the relief train pulled into Moosburg, an IRC official (presumably accompanied by Stinson) visited Stalag VII-A and asked for 12 volunteers to drive trucks in search of POWs on the move or in marooned columns. There was no shortage of applicants, among them Company Sergeant-Major Walter F. Moss (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada) who virtually became Stinson's second-in-command. On 8 March, they met Mr. Paul de Blonay, a Swiss IRC official, who explained the project in greater detail. At a time when German rail travel was barely possible, they were taken to Lubeck, on the Baltic coast, where a further 30 Canadians and 22 American prisoners were recruited, together with eight "Men of Confidence" who had arrived to draw

About two weeks after the trucks began rolling, Red Cross officials asked Sergeant-Major Stinson to divert about 15 vehicles to the Berlin area. He assigned Sergeant-Major Moss to head up this convoy which plunged into the most deadly and confused of all the closing battles. Although both men survived the war, they did not meet again during the war.

These operations were as peculiar as they were dangerous. The vehicles proceeded in groups of ten to 15 at a time, with a few Swiss

Below: A shipment of Red Cross parcels.
Right: A Canadian-made Chevrolet Canadian Military Pattern Truck donated to the International Red Cross by the Canadian Red Cross.



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Above: A group of Canadian POW drivers, Swiss escorts and German guards mix while a truck is unloaded west of Berlin, April 1945.

Below: A convoy of white Red Cross trucks carrying relief for prisoners of war and interned civilians leaves for Germany in March 1945.

personnel as well as Canadians. A scout (usually an IRC official, sometimes a German soldier) explored ahead by car or motorcycle, finding the POW columns. Once a group had been found, each marcher was given a parcel containing about five days' emergency provisions. Limited supplies of soap and boot repair kits were also dropped off. Hopefully, after five days, the column would be overtaken by another convoy. Somewhere between 14,000 and 18,000 POWs were contacted during these drives.

Each truck was accompanied by a German guard. All Swiss and POW drivers carried a permit issued by a senior SS officer (and countersigned by an IRC delegate) which declared the trucks and their loads to be "the property of the International Red Cross at Geneva" To add bite, the document stated that anyone attempting to requisition the vehicles would be in breach of both international and military law and would be tried by a German military court. These certificates saved the day on several (though not all) occasions. SS troops highjacked one truck and stole part of the load from another.

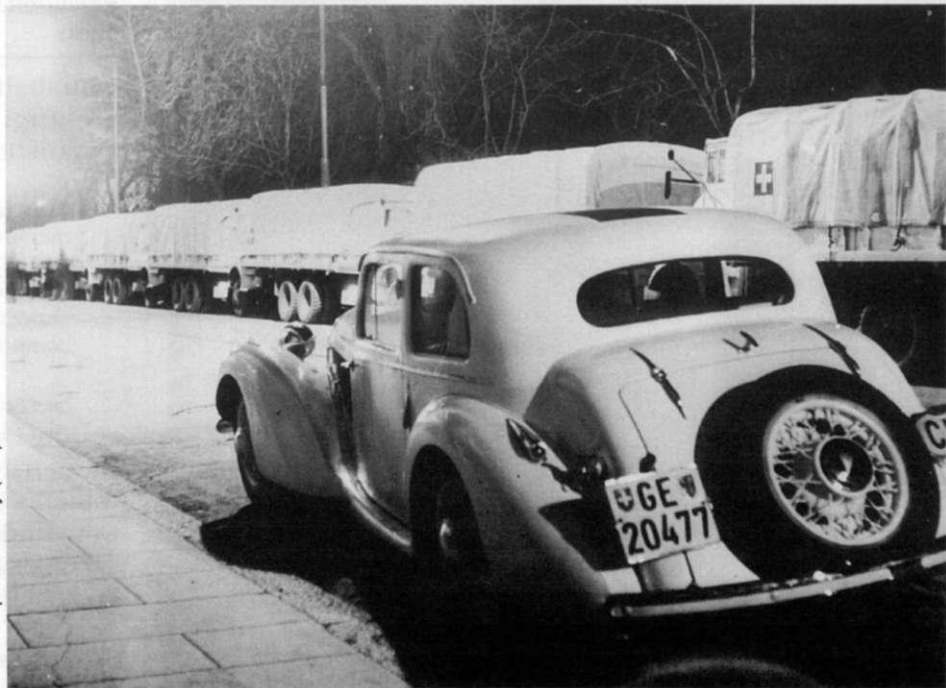
There were other hazards. In searching for marching columns, the trucks came within range of German and Allied artillery fire, especially close to Berlin where the "front" was extremely fluid.

One driver actually found himself two miles *in the rear* of the Russian army.⁴ Drivers and guards frequently dove for shelter as Allied aircraft attacked the convoys; in one such raid, four trucks were destroyed, two severely damaged, an American driver killed and two Canadians wounded.

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Group Captain L.E. Wray, AFC, witnessed much of their work. A prisoner himself from March 1944 onwards, he was held in Stalag Luft III and participated in the forced POW marches of 1945. He was impressed by the drivers' courage in what amounted to battlefield conditions, writing, "I have seen these drivers bring in trucks that were so shot up that it appeared only a miracle that the driver was alive." No less moving was their fortitude, as described by Wray:

I might mention one instance that was typical of their devotion to their task. This driver reached us with a full load of food at approximately 2300 hours and after getting out of the truck, it was noticed that he was acting in an unusual manner. I engaged him in conversation and found that he was so



Left: A Canadian-made Red Cross truck loads prisoners' parcels at a depot in Germany, January 1945. **HIST 3216-12**

Above: A Red Cross convoy loaded with relief supplies prepares to leave. **HIST 1657-02**

Above right: A POW parcel donated by the Canadian Red Cross.

Below left: A group of Swiss drivers gather outside a relief truck.

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cannibalised derelict trucks to keep the others moving, and periodically dropped from exhaustion. One document declared:

The initiative and mechanical ingenuity demonstrated by this group in servicing and rebuilding trucks from others shot up to a point of wreckage, is only exceeded by the bravery shown by daring to drive under such perilous conditions.⁶

Sergeant-Major Moss showed extraordinary courage when, with the help of an IRC official, he spirited nearly 800 concentration camp inmates ("human wrecks" in one report) away from under the nose of the SS, put them aboard 16 trucks, transferred them to Swedish ships, and got them safely away.⁷

British troops liberated Lubeck on 2 May 1945, but the relief road convoys continued for another six days. Then, the former Canadian and American POWs turned their surviving vehicles over to Swiss Red Cross drivers and departed.

The courage and contributions of these drivers might not have received recognition save for Group Captain Wray. In late August or early September 1945 he submitted a report on their actions. He described or confirmed several of the incidents already mentioned; phrases like "outstanding work" and "amazing record" ran through his text. Wray initially could recall no specific names, although he recalled the senior NCO as "a Company Sergeant-Major from Winnipeg" [Moss]. He concluded his report by declaring,

exhausted that he was on the verge of collapse. He had been driving the ten-ton truck steadily for forty hours without sleep and very little food; part of this time in complete black-out conditions and all of it in an area where strafing aircraft were continually operating. I had him fed and bedded down on straw in one of our barn billets, and yet, despite his condition, he was on the road again in five hours.⁸

Battle hazards aside, the POWs-turned-drivers had to face hungry, hostile civilians. They drove 48 hours at a stretch, ate on the move,

If the record of these men can be found, I would deem it an honour to be permitted to recommend them for an award of gallantry. The task carried out by these men voluntarily was so gallant, so worth while, and so inspiring that Canada should be proud to recognize it by decoration.

At the time and several years after the war, attempts to reconstruct a list of those POWs who had participated in the relief effort failed; only a few names could be recalled with certainty. Five Canadians were decorated for their part in this operation: Sergeant-Major Moss, Sergeant-Major Stinson, Company Sergeant-Major Samuel R. Neilly (Irish Regiment of Canada), Company Sergeant-Major Frederick D. McMullen (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada) and Gunner Lawrence Smith (Royal Canadian Artillery), who had assisted Moss. The first four were made Members, Order of the British Empire in June 1946; Smith was awarded a rare Distinguished Conduct Medal. In addition, Private William G.M. Browne (Seaforth Highlanders), Signalmán John J.F. Deans, Gunner Stanley J. Hyatt, Lance-Corporal Archibald G. Ivany (Royal Canadian Regiment), Private Gerald A. Rooke (Seaforth Highlanders), and Sapper Francis A. Tamblyn were mentioned-in-despatches; they had been among the first recruited by Moss for the job. Others known to have taken part were Gordon Elmer Appier (Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment), Kenneth Branton (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada), Nelson Clayton Burmaster (4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards), Louis Carl Enders (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada), Cecil Cook (4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards), Basil Evans (48th Highlanders of Canada), Robert William McCormick (Irish Regiment of Canada), J.D. Browne (Royal Canadian Regiment), R.A. Sauve (Loyal Edmonton Regiment), G.W. Birch (Irish Regiment of Canada), and R. McCanna (1 Canadian Special Service Battalion).⁸

The story of Canadian POWs driving Red Cross trucks has been told before, notably in

Daniel G. Dancocks *In Enemy Hands* (Hurtig Publications, 1983) which includes Cecil Cook's recollections. Nevertheless, it bears periodic recounting, lest it be submerged in the mass of literature generated by the Second World War.

Notes

1. The "Man of Confidence" was a prisoner, chosen by his comrades, who had direct access to IRC officials; he was assumed to be trusted by both captives and captors alike. See "Les hommes de confiance," *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, January 1943, pp.59-63.
2. "Ravitaillement de camps de prisonniers de guerre et d'internes civils en Allemagne," *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, April 1945, pp.285-295 and May 1945, pp.371-382. However, the presence of POW drivers is mentioned in *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its Activities During the Second World War* (ICRC, Geneva, 1948), Volume III, "Relief Activities", pp.88-95 and 190-200.
3. Canadian Army file 54-27-94-56, "Honours and Awards - Prisoners of War Northwest Europe," in National Archives of Canada [NAC], RG24, Volume 2249.
4. Identified in newspaper accounts as "Private Charles Smith of Manitoba," this may have been Gunner Lawrence Smith.
5. Undated report of Group Captain L.E. Wray found in volume 7 of Canadian Army file 54-27-94-52, "Honours and Awards - Northwest Europe," NAC RG24, Volume 2248. Wray himself was later awarded an OBE for leadership and concern for fellow prisoners during his captivity.
6. From the MBE citation of Company Sergeant-Major F.D. McMullen.
7. "How the Convoys Got Through," *The Prisoner of War* (official journal of the Prisoner of War Department, Red Cross and St. John War Organization, London), June 1945.
8. Wray report.

Hugh Halliday, a regular Contributor to *CMH*, has written numerous books on Canadian military history. His most recent, NOT IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY: CANADIANS AWARDED THE AIR FORCE CROSS AND AIR FORCE MEDAL, 1918-1966 was published in 2000 by Robin Brass Studios <www.rbstudiobooks.com/>