

# In the Bag

By

Colonel G T G Williams

who served with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

FRANCIS TRELAWNY WILLIAMS (1915-1977), the elder son of Harcourt Williams of Pencalenick, was educated at Eton and New College, Oxford.



Last year, I had republished 'In the Bag', his younger brother Gerald's story of his 3 1/2 years as a Prisoner of War (POW). This was an amazingly detailed account of his life 'in the bag'. Sadly, Francis left no such account of his 5 years in Germany, having been captured in May 1940 with the fall of Calais. But in some astonishing way he did write a detailed account of his platoon's action which he sent from his Oflag (an officers' prison camp) to his mother.

Francis's father, Henry Harcourt Williams (1869-1927) married late and died at 58. Francis inherited the Pencalenick and Arrallas estates, and the bulk of his father's money, when he was only eleven years old. Like his uncle Arthur Basset of Tehidy, and possibly influenced by him, he was very keen on racing, and once he came of age he went into

owning his own horses. His Trustee, a first cousin Ronnie Basset, ran his affairs, and horses, over the time he was a POW (1940-1945). Racing continued throughout the war years on a few courses. Without going into too much detail, he owned some 20 horses between 1937 and when he gave up in 1954. He only had three horses in training during the war years. He qualified three horses for the Derby. Fairy Prince and Raincheck were the best. Both were well favoured to win. His horse, Nick la Rocca won five races for him. He won some 20 races in all including the Northumberland Plate, and dead-heating in the Doncaster Cup.

In 1939, Francis joined the London Rifle Brigade, a Territorial Regiment. One amusing incident he told me occurred on a training weekend on some 'Downs.' He was a member of the squad and the Corporal said 'We will do some judging distances'. 'How far do you think it is to that gorse bush?' Various estimates were given, and Francis said: '-It is exactly 440 yards, Corporal'. '-What makes you say so?' '-Well, that gorse bush is a furlong mark, so it is that post, and also the one we are standing by that is two furlongs, or 440 yards - we happen to be standing on my gallops.'

On mobilisation on the outbreak of war in September 1939, Francis was posted to the 2nd Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps (2 KRRC). He commanded a platoon in D Company.

Dated 21st May 1940, he wrote to his mother from Bury St Edmunds:-

*Dear Mother,*

*We are just off, we don't know ourselves yet, but we can all guess where to! Why we weren't sent in the first place. I don't know. Maddening, with colossal difficulty we got leave to go to Newmarket tomorrow. Red Riding Hood is running. Will write when I can,  
Love Francis.*

Chronologically, the 1939-45 War opened up as below:

1 Sep 39	Germany attacks Poland.
10 Sep 39	Lord Gort's British Expeditionary Force (BEF) arrived in France. The 'Phoney War' followed with

	both sides glaring at each other across the Maginot and Siegfried Lines.
17 Oct 39	Russia attacked Germany.
9 Apr 40	Germany invaded Denmark and Norway.
May 40	German Panzer Divisions outflanked the Maginot Line and invaded neutral Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg.
Late May 40	Gort had to decide whether to keep fighting or try to evacuate the BEF and French Army across the Channel.
26 May to 6 Jun 40	335,000 BEF evacuated through Dunkirk.
14 Jun 40	Paris fell without a fight, and France asks for an armistice.
21 Jun 40	France signs humiliating surrender.

In the meantime, Francis' brigade comprising: 3rd Royal Tank Bn, Queen Victoria's Rifles (TA), 2KRRC, 1st Bn Rifle Brigade and an Anti Tank Battery left England on 23rd May to hold the Port of Calais to find themselves almost immediately facing 10th Panzer Division. A four day battle ensued with Calais falling on 26th May. All those not killed or wounded were taken as Prisoners of War.

The first 'Red Cross' postcard that his mother received was written from his Oflag Officers POW Camp in Germany dated 1st June (only a week after he had been taken prisoner):-

*Dear Mother,*

*Don't know whether this will reach you, but I am a prisoner of war and quite alright. Address:*

*Prisoner of War Germany c/o The Red Cross*

*Please send Fortnum's hampers through them*

*Love - Francis*

That was either a joke or he had a lot to learn!

Shortly after, he somehow managed to get the following detailed report of his platoon battle from an officers POW camp (Oflag VII B) together with detailed maps home to his mother who duly received

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben

Offlag VII C

Beschriftung der Erkennungsmarke

Nr. 676

Lager: Offlag I 4 Kanton 1940

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammregister:

Woe  
11. 10. 1941

Name: *Williams* Staatsangehörigkeit: *engl.*  
 Vorname: *Francis* Dienstgrad: *Leutnant*  
 Geburtstag und Ort: *Truro (Cornwall)* Truppenteil: *K. P. R. C.* Komp. u. stro.:  
*6. 2. 15* Zivilberuf: *Grundbesitzer* Berufs-Gr.:  
 Religion: *K. K.* Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates): *98971*  
 Vorname des Vaters: *Henry T* Befangennahme (Ort und Datum): *Calais 26. 5. 40*  
 Familienname der Mutter: *Trelawny* Ob gesund, krank, verwundet, eingeliefert:



Bild		Nähere Personalbeschreibung	
Wachse	Haarfarbe	Besondere Kennzeichen:	
<i>182</i>	<i>brunne</i>		
Fingerabdruck des rechten! Selgefingers		Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen	
		<i>Mrs. Colonel The Lady Penair Penair</i> <i>Truro (Cornwall)</i>	

Wenden!

*Living*



Bezeichnung der Erkennungsmarke Nr. *676* Lager: *Offlag VII C* Name: *Williams*  
 Bemerkungen: *Offlag. V B 11 W 1941 a. H. XXI D, Post. W.H. 22. 12. 34*  
 Die Bekanntgabe des Verbots des Verlehrs Kr.-Gef. mit Deutschen (Freuz. vom 10. 1. 42) ist erfolgt.  
 46 Offlag 53 Wasi gemeldet: 10. X. 41

them. The originals were on pretty scruffy pieces of paper. How he got them out of his Prison Camp to his mother I cannot imagine.

Francis' son Trelawny has added the two stories below recounted to him by his father:

While in Calais when his platoon was defending a building (presumably the hotel referred to on the 26th May), there was a French soldier sitting in the corner taking very little part in affairs. Various efforts were made to encourage him to help and a string of excuses were forthcoming such as no gun, no ammunition, no officer etc. until eventually he simply said "J'ai peur" which everyone thought was rather a good reason and he was left alone at that point.

I don't know how Daddy managed his racing from POW camp but I know he had the stud books sent out. There was one occasion where he had been helping with a tunnel when a sudden search was announced and there was no chance to hide the incriminating evidence he was carrying. When he got to the front of the queue it transpired that the German who was conducting the search had been to Yale and he recognised Daddy and asked him whether he was the man who had been receiving all the racing material and what a nightmare it was because he had to read it all and it was driving him mad. They started talking about racing and meanwhile the queue behind was lengthening. Eventually the German asked Daddy whether he was concealing anything and Daddy replied 'What do you think?' He was waved through with a laugh.

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The following is the detailed account of his platoon battle, and fall of Calais.

Sadly, it is too late to discover how this ever reached his mother. It would never have got through the German censors.

Originally on scruffy pieces of paper, I can only imagine it 'got out' in the bandages of some non-combatant or neutral individual being repatriated by the Red Cross. However, it was a unique achievement.

Oflag VII B

Property of

FRANCIS WILLIAMS  
PENAIR  
TRURO

Please send to:

THE LADY RENDELSHAM  
PENAIR  
TRURO  
CORNWALL  
ENGLAND

CALAIS, MAY 1940

On arrival at Oflag VII C in June 1940, I was the only officer of D Company there, with Godfrey Cromwell, [Major, in command of D Company] the only other survivor, being in hospital. As best I could I have given an account of D Company's doings in Calais. This is not so much therefore a personal diary as a semi-official record.

**CALAIS. 23rd-26th May, 1940**  
**2/Lt F.T. Williams, D Company 2/KRR**

Thursday 23rd May and Friday 24th May

On Thursday afternoon my platoon took up a position guarding the bridge over the outer canal on the St. Omer road. We were I think the extreme left hand platoon of the 60th and out of touch, except at odd intervals, within the rest of the battalion.

Claude Bower [Captain, second in command of D Company] was in charge and we had a large motley force with which we held our position without much trouble until Friday evening when we received a general order to withdraw. We failed to locate the rest of the battalion that evening, the traffic all along the dunes being chaotic, and spent the night on the dunes by the water tower.

I am completely in the dark as to the history of the rest of the Company during these two days. Godfrey came out to see us on Thursday afternoon and again Friday morning (I think Major Owen was with him).

On Friday morning Claude Bower went out on patrol

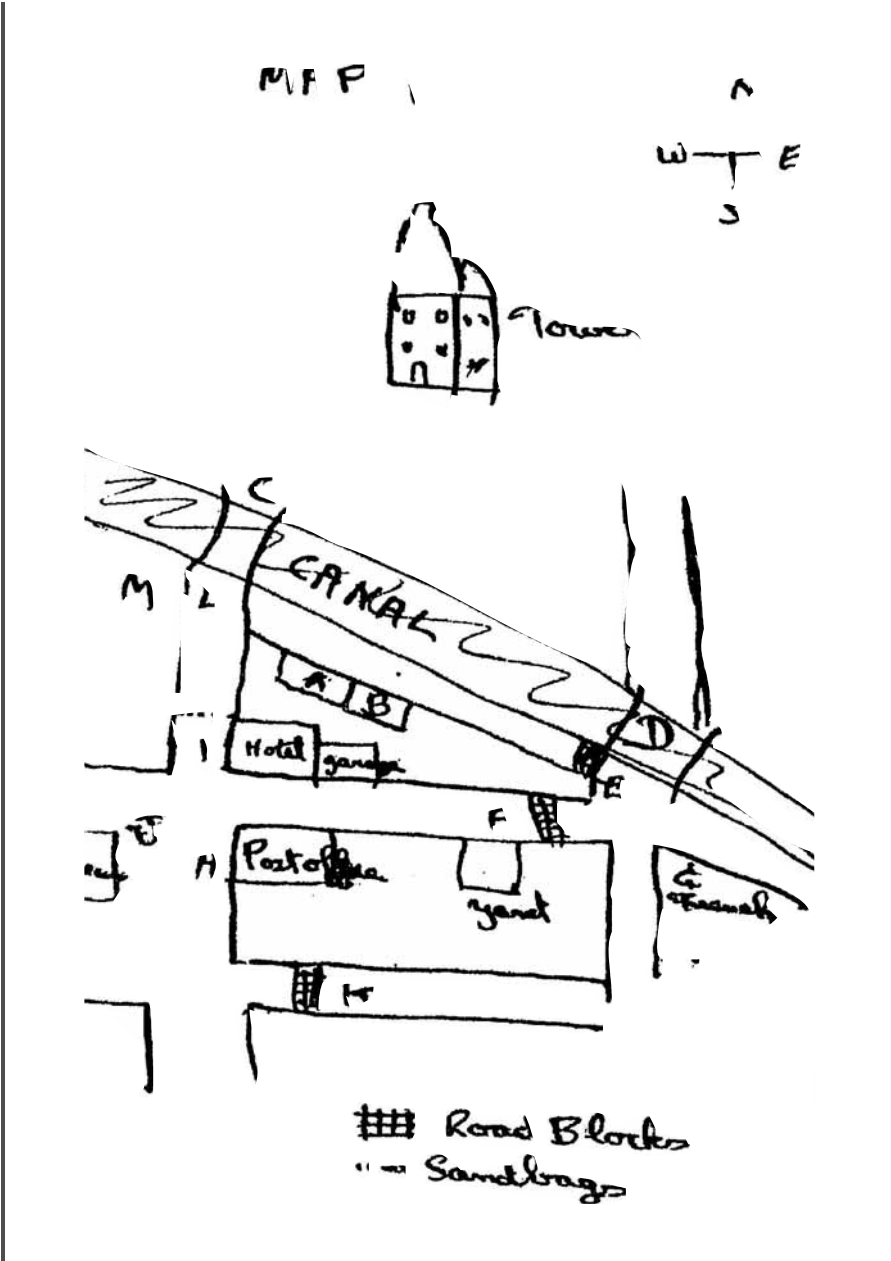
and returned with two German prisoners. Later in the day two enemy tanks attacked our bridge but we drove them off setting fire to one. Except for sniping and local fire these were our only adventures worthy of note. Claude went back to Company headquarters once or twice but he did not say what had occurred there.

### Saturday 25th May

After spending the night on the dunes, Claude Bower, myself, my platoon of 29 men complete (less one truck) reported to Col. Miller [Lt. Colonel in command of 2/KRR], and thence to Godfrey Cromwell at the post office (Old Town) [corner of Place Richelieu and Rue Edison].

For map of position see Map I. I was put in charge of the upper floors of the hotel [corner of Place Richelieu and Rue Edison] and posted my men accordingly. We had with the Company many odd 'other ranks' as well as at least four outside officers, three 2/Lts and one Lt (later killed). During the morning there was sniping particularly from the Big Tower across the canal and sporadic fire. As morning wore on, however, mortar and shellfire became hotter. I had two posts in houses A and B (Map I) [on Quai de L'Escaut] and they had a very warm time as they faced directly out over the canal. During the morning the Mayor of Calais and a man with him came across the canal and were held in the post office for about 2 hours. From here they went under escort to British Headquarters. Also, during the morning, a deputation with a white flag (one or more German

IN THE BAG

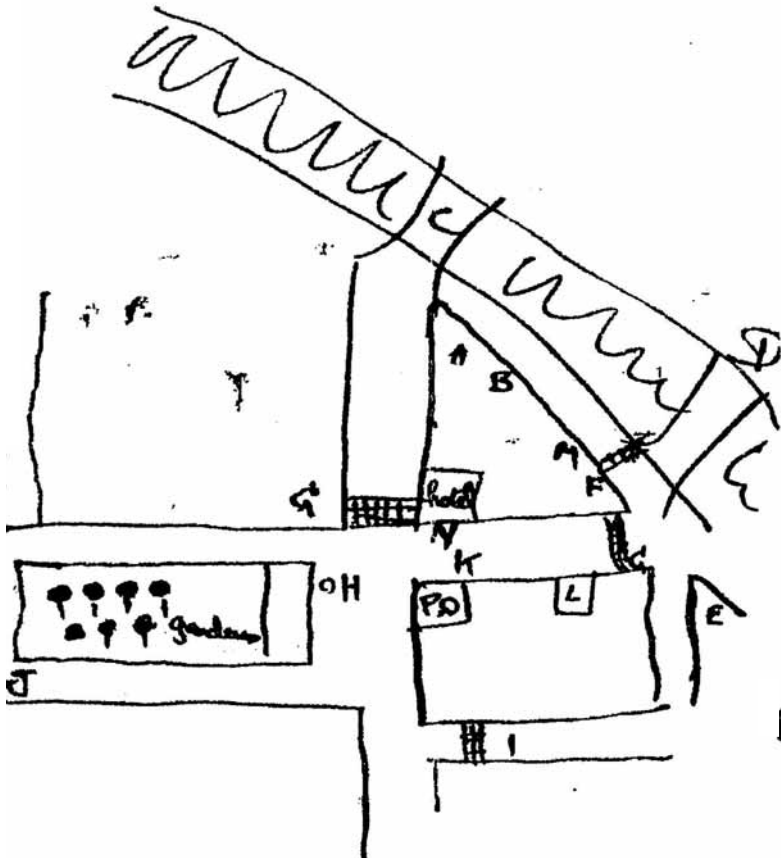


officers) came across bridge C [Pont Georges V] and returned later by that route, still under flag of truce.

I was busy all the morning visiting my posts (about a dozen). In the afternoon we were bombed and a very heavy barrage came down on us. During these barrages as many men as possible would shelter and rush out to man the barricades when it lifted. Captain Bower was a wonderful example on these occasions. As afternoon wore on we were enfiladed from the flank and our position was three sides of a square, G K and H (Map II). For no apparent reason our men started firing from H [the war memorial] in the direction of the gardens. Hot fire was at this time coming down the road from direction of C [Pont Georges V] and we were behind vehicles and sandbags at G (Map II).

Alan Wigan [Lt. A Company] and I were not satisfied with what the people on the left were firing at and accordingly we went out to investigate. Alan went off into the gardens and I saw no more of him. I went off down the road towards it with a small patrol, not knowing whether I should meet German, French or British troops. In point of fact I met no one, only a lot of French trucks. Whether their occupants had just gone and if so where I do not know. I pushed on further eastward and still found no one. I accordingly posted a few men east of J, sent a message back by runner to Company headquarters and went on to make contact. Some way further on I found Richard Warre and his platoon and just beyond them B Company. Some time about now there was an air raid which sent us

Map II  
Sat PM & Sunday May 26



to cover.

By this time evening was coming on and things quietened down. After a rest I returned to D Company, a process which took considerable time as I contrived to lose my way. Except for the fact that the post office was burnt out the situation was more or less the same.

### Sunday May 26th

'Stand to' at dawn on barricades. Godfrey was at G where we now had a fairly good barricade of trucks and sandbags. I was at F [Quai de L'Escaut] with Claude Bower and some of A Company. Mike Sinclair [2/Lt. A Company] and Alan Wigan were there, also I think, Norman Philips [Lt. A Company].

At about 4.30 a.m. a tank approached the block from across the canal at D [Pont Freycinet] and on the word from Claude Bower we opened fire and destroyed same. Unfortunately it proved to be a French tank which had no business to be there. D Company headquarters were at this time in the yard at L [Rue Edison] but later in the morning were moved back to the post office.

As morning wore on, shelling and particularly mortar fire increased in intensity and accuracy. We had a mortar but no ammunition. We also had a few hand-grenades kept in the hotel for an emergency.

The main body of the company was still at G. My platoon [15] was in a house at M [Quai de L'Escaut];

a very warm spot indeed. Eventually this house became untenable and I had orders to withdraw to Company headquarters. I went to the yard (now under heavy fire) but found it deserted so went back to the post office and found headquarters there. As I got there a terrific barrage came down and soon afterwards the dive-bombing started.

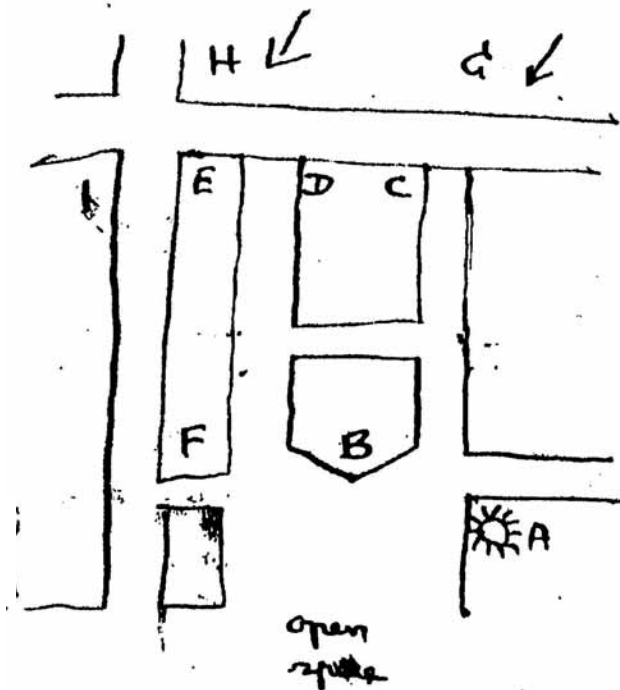
Godfrey Cromwell was behind the barricade at G. I engaged the dive bombers from between the post office and the hotel, using a Bren and assisted by an unknown sergeant. Results not observed. The hotel at this point was very crowded with odd troops, many of them unarmed and extremely loath to take part in operations. These were not KRRs. I put them on to filling magazines.

The bombs did not do much important damage on my side, most of them falling more around the yard where headquarters had been earlier in the morning. Just before the bombing Alan Wigan was wounded and I helped carry him into the cell of the post office.

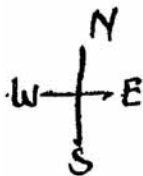
About this time I found Claude Bower very badly wounded. I told Godfrey and he sent me back to Battalion headquarters [Rue des Maréchaux] to tell the Colonel he was holding out all right at the moment and also to get a stretcher party for Claude who was shot through the chest and unconscious.

I saw Colonel Miller and he told me to tell Godfrey we were holding on all fronts and that he still had a few men in reserve if things got desperate. I collected a few French stretcher bearers and

map III  
 Sunday PM May 26



to sheds, railway & canal



↓

A Light house  
 B Bomb  
 C } D Company  
 D }

returned to Godfrey to report. When I reached the firing line the French bearers ran away, but in any case I found Claude Bower dead when I got back.

We managed to get several of the badly wounded out of the post office into a truck during a lull and sent them back to the regimental aid post.

Snipers were getting bad, one especially was very accurate from the direction of C [Pont Georges V] and hit Godfrey Cromwell more than once. About now I got a bit of blast as the next thing I remember is being in the cellar of the post office and being told we were retiring. How long after this was I do not know (1/2 - 1 hour I should guess). I found the barricade at G deserted so I took all the remaining men I could find (about 20) back through the ruins to Battalion headquarters.

Here we took up a hollow square position in conjunction with various other troops. We did not stay here very long and my next order was to collect all D Company I could find. This I did and we went back to the square on the quay near the lighthouse A (Map III) [Place de L'Europe].

We took up a position in the bank at point B and the situation as I heard it was that we must hold out as best we could till dark when the navy would try and take us off. We did not stop long in the bank but moved forward again to take up the last position of D Company (Map III).

Godfrey took half the men and took up positions in the houses around C. I did the same with the other

half around point D. Shelling and mortaring increased and the house I was in got a direct hit which set it on fire. My positions were mostly facing in an easterly direction towards E and the enemy seemed to be coming in the direction of the areas G and H. I accordingly moved some men down to F and up the parallel street to I. Before much could happen however, I got word it was 'every man for himself' We went back to B, the bank, where I saw Godfrey who confirmed this order. This was the end of D Company as a unit.

I got over to the railway tracks where I was captured an hour or so later in company with Jack Poole [Major, B Company], Martin Gilliat [Lt. Signals Officer] and Peter Frazer.

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