

Portsoy Seaman Captured by Germans.

Researched by Findlay Pirie

From the "Banffshire Journal" Tuesday, October 15th 1940 :-

Portsoy Seaman a Prisoner-of-War

A Portsoy seaman James Pirie is reported to be a prisoner-of-war. He was Third Mate on a merchant vessel and was captured by the Germans in Norway in April. He is a son of Mr. George Pirie, 54 Church Street, Portsoy.

From the "Banffshire Journal" Tuesday, 11th January 1944:-

Repatriated Prisoner Home

The community has been much interested in the return home of one of its young men who has been a prisoner of war in German hands for three and a half years, Mr. James Pirie, third* son of Mr and Mrs George Pirie, 54 Church Street, Portsoy. A merchant navyman, Mr. Pirie, who is 26 years of age was Third Mate aboard the S.S. Salmonpool when the crew of 42 were captured in May 1940. He was imprisoned in various camps, and managed to escape for some six weeks from one of them in Denmark but was recaptured and suffered for it. He has been repatriated under an exchange of three British for three German prisoners, arranged by the Portuguese Government, and he arrived in this country via Gibraltar. Mr. Pirie expresses his belief, from what he has seen and heard in Germany, that the German people are greatly disturbed over the collapse of the Russian front and the dire effects of the bombing of their cities. Only the iron grip of the Nazi regime has so far prevented any open expression of feeling. The belief in Hitler's infallibility is far from what it used to be.

Mr. Pirie intends to go to study for his Masters certificate before rejoining the New Zealand Shipping Company. His three brothers and his only sister are all in the Services:- William in the Royal Corps of Signals ; George in the Merchant Navy ; Findlay in the RAF ; and Mabel in the WAAF.

*NOTES:- * James Pirie was the "second" son - not the "third" son.*

From the book - "Britain's Sea War - A Diary of Ships Losses 1939-1945" by John M. Young. Published by Patrick Stephens 1989 :- On the 15th, April 1940 German troops seized the steamers SALMONPOOL 4803 tons (Sir R. Ropner & Co) and the SALERNO 870 tons (Ellerman Wilson's line) at Sandafjord, Norway.

From the book:- "The Red Duster at War" by John Slader published by William Kimber London. 1988 :- Messrs. Ropners "Salmonpool" was recaptured on the re-occupation of Norway in 1945"

James Pirie, Prisoner of War

Copy of a letter sent by James Pirie of Portsoy to Gabe Thomas, author, of the book “Milag- Captives of the Kriegsmarine” published 1992

9 Forest Road
Burghead
Moray
IV30 2XL

Dear Mr Thomas

I was so pleased to get your book and to read in it so much of the life in the P.O.W. camps in Germany. I was particularly pleased to read about Wultzburg about which I have been unable to find the location, nor to hear of any of the characters that were part of the life there.

I remember well the V.I.P.'s Romilly and the Egyptian Ambassador who were kept solitary and only allowed to exercise when we were indoors. I remember Vic Hammet, Tommy Riley, Charlie Haberighter, Jack Boleswirth and all the members of the Drama Band. Our lives were greatly enriched with their musical input and I am sure that there were amongst us those whose life style never allowed so much appreciation of music and musicians. It was at Wultzburg that I met the officers of the British Petrol. I remember well the mate J.W. Lawrence and the 2nd mate Jock Thomson with whom I was very friendly. I can picture Lawrence (we always called him MATE) at lights-out time from his top bunk entertaining us with his guitar and his ditties and sea shanties. He had a sweet and gentle voice that just fitted the character of the man. I was sorry to hear of his passing. I wonder about his wife and family. Of Jock Thomson I wonder what became of him?

Of the life in Sandbostel & Milag, you have that well described and illustrated in your book. I need only mention the death of Willie Skett. He lived in the neighbouring room in the same barrack. We were all close friends in a very special friendship so was very shocked the following morning to hear that he had been killed. We lived everyday with the loss of our liberty but that morning we were simply outraged and given to mutiny.

I remember Toothie Green, it was said of him that getting scarce of clients he attended the crowds at the matches and pounced whenever he saw a mouthful of rotted teeth. I attended the hospital and the doctors A and B at their surgery with skin eruptions. It was diagnosed that I had a maldistribution or red and white corpuscles. Blood was taken in a huge syringe from my left arm and put into my right hip. This was no problem for Dr A. He said 'stand on your left leg and relax' and before the last word was spoken the dart was in before the muscle tightened. Dr B had all sorts of problems; he was a more gentle character - on his approach the muscle hardened stiff and he needed a few tries before the needle penetrated. I had 20 of these - one every week. Did they succeed? I don't know. The doctors in these conditions had a wonderful opportunity to try anything.

I was the 3rd mate in the Salmonpool discharging a cargo of Manganese ore from Takuradi in SAUDA when the Germans invaded Norway. Prior to this we had been running to NARVIC and round the NORTH CAPE to KIRKINESS. We were astonished to learn that the Germans had landed at STAVANGER but believed that any raid would speedily be sorted out by the British Navy. We soon learned however that the Germans had landed en-force and that they had occupied the whole of Norway. So there we were at the top of the Sauda Fiord with no way out and no way over the mountains, still covered in snow. The only road out was the road to Stavangar and this was occupied. Together the 3rd engineer Blackwood and I consulted with the captain regarding abandoning the ship and hoping to escape. We packed a

James Pirie, Prisoner of War

few things and headed into the hills, but we soon realised there was no way out and returned to the ship. At daybreak (*on the 15th April 1940*) the Germans arrived and with the clatter of jackboots, raucous commands and placement of machine guns we were forced to immediately vacate the ship and to fall-in on the quay.

We were a pitiful sight, a crew some of whom were old and beyond their sell-by date and others pressed into sailing on those voyages to Murmansk and the North. The German Officer in charge could well laugh and say 'If this is the cream of Churchill's Navy he doesn't have a hope in hell of winning the war'.

We were incarcerated in OPSTAD prison in Norway for 3 weeks; we were unsure if our Norwegian jailers were Quislings or were just scared. Transport to Oslo was followed by sea transport to Denmark where we were entrained on route to Hamburg. Escape was constantly on my mind and near Randers, without saying anything to my fellow Officers I went to the toilet and judging when it best suited my purpose and the train was slowly negotiating the points I simply opened the window and dropped onto the hard stone metal at the side of the rail track. So carried away with the desire to escape that I never thought of the possibility of being killed.

I must have lain there knocked out for a few minutes, then coming to myself, realising I was badly gashed on the forehead and bleeding badly, I had to decide where to go to get early treatment. I could have gone elsewhere and I could have been helped by this friendly country Denmark, to go to Sweden. I chose a small country cottage, where the elderly couple were so nice, patched up my wounds and quenched my thirst. The doctor was called, he called the local police who called the Gestapo and so I was rounded up and re-incarcerated this time in the prison at Randers in Denmark.

There I was kept in solitary for about 3 weeks then escorted by two guards and entrained to Hamburg. It was there I spent the most fearsome night of my life. In a cell on a wooden shelf without any blanket or light, the RAF decided to bomb Hamburg and such was the noise and the vibration I crawled under the bed to lessen my chances of being killed. Some time later while the bombing was going on 2 guards stormed through the door of my cell, screaming 'Rous! Rous!' and I was taken out along a corridor down steps and into an underground room, well lit and provided with chairs and a bed. I was motioned to the bed until the raid had passed and the guards left. Minutes passed, and then suddenly a racket, the door burst open and a high ranking officer bursting with apoplexy, pointed and roared. It was 'Rous! Rous!' and I was on my way again back to my cell. I wondered if it could have been a prank by the guards, but later experience showed there was little humour among the Germans.

It took a few more days before I reached Wultzburg where my shipmates were installed and there I heard the story. Arriving at the station at Hamburg they were lined up and counted, and recounted until our captain admitted that the 3rd mate had vanished into thin air, no-one knowing, how, where and at what time.

In the camps I attended the classes to prepare for examinations to make further progress in my profession towards my masters certificate on repatriation. Then on a day in September or October 1943 I was called to the Commandant's office and was informed I was to be sent home. In good health and good form fit in every way to resume hostilities neither I nor my roommates could believe this and I was warned by my mates that being an escapee it was more likely I was being shifted to another camp.

In Berlin I joined up with a Toc H.Padre and two young teenage girls, daughters of a War Graves Commissioner, interned in Germany. Together we travelled to Berlin, Paris, and Madrid. There I was handed over to the British Consul in Lisbon and there I was offered a flight home on the next available plane. Instead I jumped at an opportunity in Gibraltar to help take home the MV ESSEX damaged at the siege of Malta. Without power she was being

James Pirie, Prisoner of War

towed by the ocean tug 'Swartz Zee'. We arrived safely at Falmouth and in the final days of December I was reunited with my family.

I have wondered many times why, when the Germans were so successful in their pursuits, so arrogant and so sure of winning the war. Why, oh why did they bother with me - just a little niggling nuisance? The guards who took me all over Germany searching for my comrades could have saved themselves the bother and the expense. They only needed to say that I attacked them and they shot me in self-defence. My good fortune was that I survived the camps and the many hardships of prison life. Had I not been captured I might have been one of the 1-in-four personnel of the Merchant Navy who lost their lives by bomb or torpedo.

I was born 28th May 1917 in Portsoy a fishing village in Banffshire, Scotland, the son of parents who came from sea-faring stock, a great grandfather, master of the schooner 'EQUITY' who died and was buried at Danzig in the Baltic Sea. I went to sea before my 14th birthday on the family herring fishing boat Cynosure and continued fishing until I joined the Merchant Service and the Anchor Line passenger boat, TRANSYLVANIE. Thereafter to different vessels, doing various jobs all to provide different experiences to enable me to reach the highest pinnacle in my profession. The war intervened - I got my Master's Certificate in 1946 when I gave up the sea.

Yours sincerely
James Pirie



James Pirie, 3rd Mate, S.S. Salmonpool