

Ernest Ronald ('Ron') Bowley was born in 1921 into a working class family in Grantham, Lincolnshire. In 1938 he lied about his age to join the army in order to support his family, after his father lost a leg in a factory accident. Captured near Dunkirk in May 1940, he spent more than four years as a prisoner of war.

Private Bowley, Army Number 4802342 (right), was a driver in the 2nd Battalion, the Lincolnshire Regiment. As part of Montgomery's 3rd Division, the 2nd Lincs were among the first elements of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to arrive in France in September 1939. Ron drove a water bowser as part of a transport echelon, tasked with keeping frontline troops supplied. In May 1940, he was captured during the Battle of Dunkirk when his convoy, having lost touch with their battalion in the confusion of the retreat from Louvain, was caught up in a huge traffic jam around the Belgian town of Poperinghe.



The Luftwaffe bombed this area almost constantly and many men died where they sat in their vehicles. Eventually they received orders to abandon and destroy their vehicles, and to head for Dunkirk. For many, including Ron, the order was too late. A German pincer movement closed around Poperinghe on May 29th and anyone who was not already further north was either captured or killed. He was one of more than 60,000 British troops who did not make it back to England at Dunkirk. For a long time, his parents believed him to be dead after a friend from his unit came to tell them that he had seen Ron's vehicle blown up. It would be many months before they found out that he was alive, but even then, they still received telegrams to say that he had died.

Ron was forced to march through Belgium into Holland in hot weather and with little food or water. In Maastricht, they were given bread and water by the Dutch Red Cross, before being marched to the railway station and herded into cattle trucks. They spent several tortuous days in appalling conditions on a journey through Germany into Poland. Many men went down with dysentery and some died en route. When they arrived at Stalag VIII-B near Lamsdorf (now Lambinowice), Ron was fingerprinted, photographed and given a disc inscribed his POW number (15570). Later he was assigned to a work camp, as the lower ranks were put to work during the war, often in contravention of the Geneva Convention.

More than two months after his capture, Ron arrived in Gleiwitz (now Gliwice), a small town fifty miles to the south-east of Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia. The Oehringen Bergbau coal mine was located between Gleiwitz and Sosnitz (now Sosnica), and was served by a number of work camps including E22, where he was to spend the next four years.

Ron spent a couple of years working 12-hour shifts with only one day off a month alongside a Polish civilian, watched by a German guard. He later wrote that "our daily rations were mainly potato soup and a portion of black bread. This was insufficient to sustain us in the heavy work we were engaged in, but was supplemented by food parcels from the British and Canadian Red Cross." He always said that he owed his life to the Red Cross. Being a coal miner did have one benefit not normally afforded to POWs – hot showers. The German guard was kind to them, sharing his cigarettes when they were below ground, but out of the mine he could be quite brutal. This was dangerous work and sadly a couple of prisoners were killed in mine accidents. Private Frederick Harry Houseman of the Gloucestershire Regiment died on June 4, 1941 and Fusilier John Wain of the Royal Scots Fusiliers on May 9, 1942.

In March 1941, according to Ron, "two lads... did not relish the idea of coal mining, so they escaped with the intention of giving themselves up to the police. They thought that they would be sent back to the main Stalag at Lamsdorf, but they were returned to Sosnica and duly shot." These men were Corporal Samuel Green of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders and Lance Bombardier Joseph Anthony Reid of the Royal Artillery. After they were executed, their bodies were left on show for two days as a warning to the others.

There was little for POWs to do when they were not working, as sport was forbidden. However, using a crystal from a carbide lamp, a length of wire and an earpiece from an old telephone, Ron made a crystal set on which he could listen to the BBC World Service and find out how the war was progressing. To

avoid detection by the guards, he used to hide it in a tin of Klim (powdered milk from the Canadian Red Cross).

Later, he would spend a couple of years driving a compressed air schale to move wagons between various levels in the mine. Conditions were gradually worsening for Allied POWs, many of whom had to work in their uniforms and wear unsafe wooden clogs, due to a shortage of suitable clothing. However, towards the end of 1944 a New Zealander, Corpsman Alastair Dunbar, took over the Red Cross stores at the camp. Through his efforts, the quantity and quality of clothing and supplies gradually began to improve both in and out of the mine. Although he did not know it at the time, this meant that when the camp was evacuated in January 1945, men were better able to withstand the rigours of one of the coldest winters on record, when temperatures below -30 degrees were recorded.

Throughout 1944, Allied air raids had increased in frequency to several times a week by December. By then, the distant sound of Russian artillery could be heard in the east, and it was clear that the camp was soon going to be in the line of fire. The decision to evacuate came on January 22nd, 1945 when 280 men joined a column of British and Russian POWs heading in a south-westerly direction towards Czechoslovakia and the Carpathian Mountains. As other work camps were evacuated en route, they became part of a ragged column of more than 2,000 men by the time they reached Jagendorf (now Krnov) near the Czech border. From there, as the terrain became more hilly, and the weather deteriorated, men were reaching the limits of their endurance through cold, exhaustion and lack of food. When they had no overnight shelter, men would sometimes go to sleep and never wake up. The lucky ones were with friends who would make them get up and keep walking, but others either froze to death where they sat or were shot by their German guards. For days and weeks, they marched (or rather shuffled) onwards, and Ron did not take his boots off for three months, knowing that he would not get them back on again.

As the weather improved and they entered Bavaria, they heard rumours of POWs being executed or held as human shields. One day, some of their number were killed by friendly fire when they were strafed by RAF Typhoons, but they were able to prevent further casualties by arranging Red Cross boxes in the road, before they came back for a second attack. Ron was liberated by Patton's tanks on a bridge over the River Ins on May 1st. He must have thought that he was safe at last, but when an American GI heard him speaking fluent German to a local, he would not believe he was British. Only the swift intervention of one of his comrades saved him from being shot.

Ron was flown by Dakota to Reims in France, where he was deloused, fed and clothed in an American uniform. From there he was flown by Lancaster to an air base in the east of England, where he was able to contact his family. He arrived home on May 8th (VE Day) to a street festooned with flags. He weighed less than seven stones, and spent a long time recuperating in a hospital in Derby. Eventually he was able to return to active service, finally leaving the army in 1946, shortly before getting married to Maureen, a nurse in the ATS.

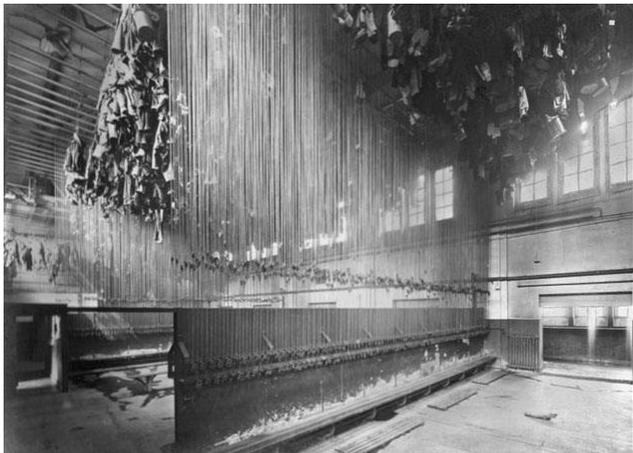
Sixty-four years later, Ron returned to Upper Silesia with his son Ian and grandson David. They were taken to a couple of locations that were known to have been the sites of POW camps. Neither of them looked familiar to Ron, so he thought that perhaps there was simply nothing left to see after such a long time.

They are pictured (right) looking towards the entrance of a site on Wladyslawa Sikorskiego, the main road between Sosnica and Zabrze, where their guide believed E22 to have been located.

When they turned to face the tall building in the background, Ron said "That's the bathhouse where we showered every day for four years."

The back of the building was fenced off from a wooded area beyond. The mine, now closed, was located to the west, while the camp, according to Ron, had been a ten-minute walk into the woods to the east.





Inside what was now a furniture warehouse, things had changed little since the 1940s. Their guide arranged for them to go inside, where Ron led the way to the huge room where POWs used to shower.

As pictured (left) in the late 1930s, POWs would hang their clothing on hooks, and a pulley system would hoist them up into the rafters until they returned after their shift.

Ron had been escorted to and from the bathhouse every day for more than four years, so he knew the place well. In 2009, there was almost nothing left of the camp, apart from a few brick foundations.

The picture below was taken in the late 1950s before the camp was demolished.



The location of E22 can be seen on Google Maps at [50.2883080\(N\), 18.748193\(E\)](https://www.google.com/maps/place/50.2883080,N+18.748193,E).

When he passed away in September 2009, Ron's funeral was attended by representatives of the British Legion, his coffin was draped in the Union Jack and the Last Post was played.

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RON'S ROUTE HOME FROM POLAND

Former Name	Modern Name
Gleiwitz-Oehringen	Gliwice-Sosnica
Schonwald	Bojków
Bilchengrund	Pilchowice
Rauden	Rudy
Klein Buchenau	Mala Nedza
Buchenau	Nedza
Oderbrucke	Ciechowice
Lohnau	Lany
Grzendzin	Grzedzin
Bauerwitz	Baborow
Wernersdorf	Bernacice
Sauerwitz	Zubrzyce
Jagensdorf	Krnov
Braunsdorf	Brantice
Freudenthal	Bruntal
Mahrish Kotzendorf	Moravsky Kocov
Deutsch Lodnit	Horni Lodenice
Sternburg	Sternberk
Babitz	Babice
Krockersdorf	Krakorice
Hliowitz	Hlivice
Muglitz	Mohelnice
Alt Moletin	Stary Moletin
Wotes	Borusov
Altstadt	Stare Mesto
Nikl	Mikulec
Leitomisohl	Litomysl
Osik	Osik
Leitomisohl	Litomysl
Hermanitz	Ceske Hermanice
Chotzen	Chocen
Oberjellen	Horni Jeleni
Chwojno	Vysoke Chvojno
Vysoka	Vysoka nad Labem
Konigratz	Hradec Kralove
Leipau	Lípa
Unter Gutwasser	Dobra Voda u Horic
Luschan	Luzany
Libun	Libun
Thadelow	Unknown
Suboiru	Unknown
Buuson	Dolni Bousov
Jungburrglau	Mlada Boleslav
Kropalicy Wrutitz	Kropacova Vrutice
Obrisewi	Obristvi
Bukol	Bukol
Shislitz	Zizice
Schlan	Slany
Jedomielitz	Jedomelice
Rensch	Řevničov
Krischan	Chrást'any
Holleschowitz	Kolešovice

Former Name	Modern Name
Liebkowitz	Libkovice
Bohentsch	Vahaneč
Lunigruben	Liemgruben
Trossau	Dražov
Petschau	Bečov nad Teplou
Emsiede	Mnichov
Unter Gramling	Dolní Kramolín
Haid	Bor
Pfraumberg	Primda
Lohuik	Unknown
Vohenstrauß	Vohenstrauß
Lentzau	Letzau
Weiden	Weiden
Wilkenrenth	Unknown
Obernankau	Unknown
Wenklarn	Winklarn
Wettenfeld	Wetterfeld
Rodang	Roding
Leugengellenwe	Unknown
Stranding	Straubing
Rinkam	Rinkam
Schwimmbach	Schwimmbach
Hiengelbach	Hinzlbach
Neidewichbach	Neiderviehbach
Luntenburg	Unknown
Yilsburg	Vilsbiburg
Yangberg	Zangberg