



ESCAPE

THE GREATEST PRISON BREAKOUT OF THE 20TH CENTURY

ALSO BY NEAL BASCOMB

THE NAZI HUNTERS
SABOTAGE

Text copyright © 2018 by Neal Bascomb

All rights reserved. Published by Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*, in association with Scholastic Focus. SCHOLASTIC, the LANTERN LOGO, and the SCHOLASTIC FOCUS LOGO are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bascomb, Neal, author.

Title: The grand escape : the greatest prison breakout of the 20th century / by Neal Bascomb.

Other titles: Greatest prison breakout of the 20th century

Description: First edition. | New York : Arthur A. Levine Books, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Audience: Grades 9-12. | Audience: Ages 12-18.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016857 | ISBN 9781338140347 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 1338140345 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781338140354 (ebook) | ISBN 1338140353 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: World War, 1914-1918—Prisoners and prisons, German—Juvenile literature. | Prisoner-of-war escapes—Germany—Holzminden—Juvenile literature. | Prisoners of war—Germany—Holzminden—Biography—Juvenile literature. | Prisoners of war—Great Britain—Biography—Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC D627.G3 B29 2018 | DDC 940.4/72430943597—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018016857>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2018

Book design by Maeve Norton

CHAPTER 1

The sky lightened from gray to pink as the 70th Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) prepared to take off from their base. Already the din of shelling sounded in the distance. It was August 7, 1916, at Fienvillers, France, 20 miles from the Somme battlefront. “Contact, sir!” called the mechanic, his hand on the black walnut propeller of a Sopwith 1½ Strutter biplane. “Contact!” answered its pilot, Cecil Blain, from the open fore cockpit.

Blain pushed the throttle halfway, allowing fuel to rush into the nine-cylinder rotary engine. The mechanic jerked the propeller downward, counterclockwise. With a belch of blue smoke, the Sopwith sputtered to life. The rush of air from the spinning propeller flattened the airfield’s grass behind the tailplane. Seated in the aft cockpit behind Blain was Charles Griffiths, the observer, whose various tasks included radio communication, aerial reconnaissance, and manning the guns. Once they finished their flight checks, Blain waved his arm fore and aft, and the mechanic yanked out the wooden chocks securing the biplane’s wheels in place.

All of nineteen years of age, the youngest pilot in his squadron, Blain might well have stepped straight off a Hollywood silent movie screen—with his square shoulders, handsome boyish face, and sweep of blond hair. He sported a thick leather

jacket with fur-lined collar over a woolen pullover and two layers of underclothes. These were worn with heavy boots, gloves, and a white silk scarf. His face was slathered with whale oil and covered by a balaclava and goggles. He would need all that protection to withstand the cold at 10,000 feet.

After his squadron commander took off, Blain moved his Sopwith onto the runway. Following a quick look over his shoulder to check Griffiths was ready, Blain directed the Sopwith forward. Its red, white, and blue roundels struck in sharp relief against the mud-green fuselage. Throttle full open now, engine buzzing, the biplane picked up momentum. Blain fought against the crosswinds buffeting the wings and the inclination of the plane's nose to lift up too early. When they reached flying speed, he pulled back the stick, and the Sopwith's wheels lifted free from the ground.

Banking eastward, they soon left behind the bundle of ramshackle cottages and simple church that made up the village of Fienvillers. Once assembled in a V-shaped formation, the five Sopwiths set off eastward, the sky emblazoned bright orange ahead. Their mission was reconnaissance of Maubeuge, deep behind German enemy lines, to locate some munitions factories and investigate whether an airship base was housing Zeppelins.

For a moment, Blain and Griffiths enjoyed the thrill of soaring through the open air. The horizons stretched out in every direction. Mists clung to the low hollows of the hills, and chimney smoke rose from the surrounding villages. Compared to their maps—main roads clearly delineated in red, railways in black,



The young Cecil Blain's first RFC photo.

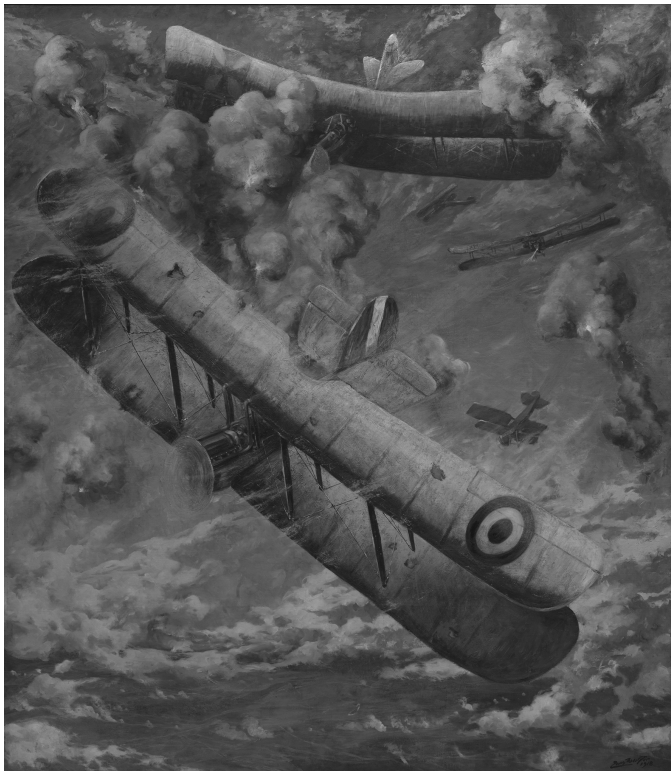
forests in green—the French countryside was an endless patchwork of colored fields threaded with gray lines and shadowed by clouds.

They approached the trenches of the Western Front, no mistaking their position. One airman described the sight: “Open for us to inspect were all the secrets of this waste of tortured soil, a barrier along which millions of armed men crouched in foul trenches . . . Below us lay displayed the zigzagging entrenchments, the wriggling communications to the rear, the untidy belts of rusty wire.” Few accounts told of the innumerable dead rotting in no-man’s-land, but they would have been visible to the pilots who passed overhead.

On July 1, 1916, shortly after Blain arrived in France, seventeen Allied divisions had begun a massive offensive to break through German lines on the upper reaches of the river Somme. At “Zero Hour,” 7:30 a.m., to the sound of whistles blowing, lines of khaki-clad British soldiers and their blue-gray uniformed French counterparts rose from their trenches and attacked the Germans through no-man’s-land, under the withering chatter of machine-gun fire. On the offensive’s first day the Allies took but a “bite” out of the enemy’s ruined line—at the cost of almost 20,000 British dead and double this figure in wounded: the greatest loss of life in a single day in the country’s military history. In the weeks that followed, wave after wave of attack and counterattack resettled the lines, largely to where they had started.

As the five Sopwiths traveled across no-man’s-land, suddenly the sky went thick with coughs of black smoke. *Archie!*

Nicknamed by pilots after a popular London music-hall song—whose refrain went, “*Archibald! Certainly not!*”—these shells delivered death in many ways. A direct hit would crumple a plane in an instant, sending it in a precipitous drop from the sky, like a bird downed by a shotgun. Simply being near the explosion could hurl a plane into an irrecoverable spiral. And Archie shells could kill entire aircrews with a 360-degree spray of shrapnel that tore through flesh and the fragile structures that kept the planes aloft.



A British and German dogfight. The British plane is in the foreground, with a German plane on its tail and three other planes visible in the distance.

A shell rocked one plane on the port side of their formation, but its pilot recovered. Another cut confetti-sized slits into the wings of Blain's plane, and shrapnel pinged against his engine cowling. The *wouft-wouft-wouft* of Archies pounding in his ears, Blain inspected his controls. Everything looked okay. He glanced back at Griffiths, and they shared a thumbs-up. As quickly as the barrage began, it ended. They flew on toward Maubeuge to continue their reconnaissance. Now that they were beyond enemy lines, Blain knew that fighter planes were likely to attack, and there was little cloud cover in which to hide. Griffiths readied at his mounted Lewis machine gun, and they both searched the sky.

Sixty miles behind enemy lines, they sighted the glint of sun off the river Sambre and reached Maubeuge. The ancient city had been besieged and sacked many times over the centuries, handed between French, Spanish, and Austrian dukes and counts almost too many times to count. But it had never suffered the kind of heavy artillery bombardment unleashed by the Germans. Its fortress walls were spilled piles of rubble. The planes broke away from the formation to begin their reconnaissance. Cutting across the city, Blain and Griffiths looked for the airship base marked on their maps. They passed the train station, puffs of steam from a departing locomotive rising into the air.

The mammoth gray sheds were easy to spot. On his first pass, Blain didn't see anything, but the Zeppelins could well be inside. He banked around and descended low for a second look, easing back on the throttle. In that moment, a spout of blue flame

burst from the engine. One of the intake valves might be jammed. Blain increased throttle again. More flames flashed out. As he tried to regain some altitude, the engine's rhythmic, continuous drone became an irregular stutter, and the plane began to vibrate. A glance at the revolutions-per-minute counter confirmed his fear: engine trouble. The best he could hope for now was to get his plane out of enemy-occupied territory. There was a chance.

He turned westward, pushing to maintain altitude. Any attempt to alter the carburetor mix or to clear the stuck valve failed. The acrid stench of hot metal soon overwhelmed, and the Sopwith bobbed slightly up and down in the airstream as it slowed. Blain continued to woo some effort from the engine, mile after precious mile. Then, with a frightening shriek, a piece of metal ripped through the engine cowling and flung off into the air behind them. Flames flared from the broken intake valve, and the propeller stopped dead. They were going down. The best he could do now was get himself and Griffiths on the ground alive.

When Orville Wright performed the first flight in a powered airplane on December 17, 1903, he declared it to be "the introduction into the world of an invention which would make further wars practically impossible." Wright was correct that airplanes would bring a revolution in war, but not in the way he imagined. Instead of an instrument for peace, the airplane became a multipronged weapon in a conflict that would envelope the world. The RFC was founded in April 1912 and was the forerunner to the British

Royal Air Force (RAF). They entered the war a fledgling force staffed mostly by enterprising, well-heeled amateurs. The aircraft they brought to France were made from wood, wire, and canvas; had only 70-horsepower engines; sped barely over 75 miles per hour; and took almost an hour to climb to their ceiling height of 10,000 feet. Pilots carried rifles for weapons and grenades for bombs. Soon after fighting began, however, many credited the RFC's bird's-eye role tracking troop movements with staving off the German envelopment of British troops and an early knockout blow in the war. A dispatch to London from the field commander praised the RFC's "skill, energy and perseverance."

In his pilots, Hugh Trenchard, the RFC commander in France, looked for "High spirits and resilience of youth . . . under twenty-five, and unmarried. Athletic, alert, cheerful, even happy-go-lucky, the paragon would also reveal initiative and a sense of humour. The greatest strength was an incurable optimism." Blain fit the bill.

The eldest son of a wealthy English cotton merchant, Cecil William Blain was born in 1896. As a schoolboy, he attended Loretto, a Scottish boarding school that had churned out its share of famous bankers, politicians, judges, and clergymen. The school was known for sport, and Cecil excelled at cricket, rugby, and golf. On graduation, he went to South Africa, where his uncle owned a large ranch and pineapple farm. There he tended fields, rode horses, and spent his days in the sun. The outbreak of war ended this free-spirited life. Blain felt compelled to return to



A recruiting poster to fly for Britain.

fight for his country. With his connections to the British elite, he easily secured a spot in the RFC. Its glamor and gallant reputation made it an attractive service for most young men.

He did his flight training at Northolt, London, where the instructors were mostly RFC airmen on leave from the front, some of them washed out from trauma. Crashes were frequent, often deadly. On a typical day of training, a cadet might witness a dozen. Sometimes the wreckage was so grisly the ambulance did not have to hurry. Planes pancaked on rough landings or overshot the runway altogether, smashing into trees. They overturned in the air and spiraled out of control. There were midair

collisions. Engines died. Petrol ran out. Wings became untethered. Rudders stuck. Of the roughly 9,000 men who died in the RFC over the course of the war, one in four were killed in training. Blain survived, and on January 14, 1916, he was issued his wings. That June, he was assigned to the newly formed 70th Squadron, responsible for long-range patrols in enemy territory. He left for France in time for the launch of the Somme offensive.

There was nothing for Blain and Griffiths to do but land. They sailed over a French village, low enough to see its inhabitants looking up at them with incredulous faces. Blain spied a level pasture, dotted with cows, and set the plane down gently. Its wheels rumbled to a stop in the high grass, and they scrambled out. Perhaps if they were able to fix the engine they could get back up in the air. One look at the shredded crankcase dashed their hopes.

Orders were that if they should come down behind enemy lines, they were to destroy their machine so the Germans could neither use it nor learn from it. In this new battlefield in the sky, every advantage in developing technology might prove the difference between defeat or victory. The two men set upon their wooden craft, putting their fists and boots through the canvas wings. Griffiths opened the fuel tank and soaked a cloth with petrol. He circled the plane, smearing petrol across the wings, then set it on fire. Flames ran across the fuselage and wings just as German soldiers appeared, weapons drawn.

The Germans brought the two men to the nearby town of Cambrai and put them in a sliver of a cell in the old stone fortress. First they noticed the stifling heat, then the foul smell. When they tried to sleep, on two straw mattresses that filled the tiny space, they found their threadbare, soiled blankets were alive with lice. In the morning, a guard brought them some square hunks of sour black bread, their first food in twenty-four hours. Lunch and dinner were a cabbage soup that looked like filthy bathwater. It was served in slop pails.

They were let out of their cell briefly and found the prison crowded with Allied soldiers and plagued by dysentery. A wounded soldier lay on a stone floor, his upper arm a fetid gob of open flesh, dried blood, dirt, and straw. Nobody was allowed to help him. Night after night Blain lay on his mattress, too troubled to sleep. Escape crept around the edges of his thoughts, but the shock of his capture overwhelmed him.