



## *The Overy Papers*

### **Number 11 The Masonic Military Man**

#### **Fraternal Greetings Brethren**

If you visit most websites that lists Military Masons it gives the impression that everyone was of high rank.

Masons such as The Duke of Wellington, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, Field Marshal Lord Haig, Sir Authur Currie, Lord Horatio Nelson, Sir Samuel Benfield Steele, Major-General, commanding Canadian forces in England during WWI. Alexander Robert Dunn the Canadian soldier who won Canada's first Victoria Cross at the Charge of the Light Brigade.

So tonight I will relate the story of a little known ordinary British Soldier.

His name was Sergeant Major Charles Coward, who was a member of Camberwell Old Comrades Lodge No. 4077 of the United Grand Lodge of England.

He was born in 1905 and joined the British Army in 1937 two years before the Second World War. In May 1940 the German Army captured him as they swept through France and was caught with many others; including my Dad at they swept towards Dunkirk.

In retrospect the Germans would have been better off if they had not captured him as he probably did more damage to the German cause than he could ever have done had he not been captured.

As a Prisoner of War he launched a one-man war against the enemy and escaped nine times, including twice before he even arrived at a Prisoner of War camp!

During one escape he posed as a wounded German, soldier hiding in a German army field hospital and while there was awarded the Iron Cross.

Between escapes, Coward managed to continuously thwart the German war effort, organizing numerous acts of sabotage while serving on work details.

Once while working in a railway yard he managed to change the destination boards on various wagons ensuring those on the Russian Front got paint while those in North Africa received very much needed winter clothing.

He organized his fellow Prisoner of War to do their best to deliberately slow down and sabotage production of numerous locations that included railway repair sheds and wood yards.

In letters to his wife Florence he passed notes to his father, who just happened to be dead, to be sent via a Mr. William Orange. She was at first confused by these letters and it took a few months before she spotted the ruse and redirected the mail to the War Office.

So throughout the war he passed coded messages on troop movements and even the location of the experimental V1 rockets. Later he was able to pass information on the number of people arriving at a civilian camp at a place called Auschwitz.

His exploits, as a disruptive force, everywhere he worked, eventually come to the attention of the Germans and in 1943 he was sent to a special labour camp known as Auschwitz 3 near the infamous Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Auschwitz 3 was a factory under the industrial company of IG Farben who were building a synthetic rubber and liquid fuel plant.

The camp housed over 10,000 Jewish slave labourers, as well as prisoners of war and forced labourers from all over occupied Europe.

Thanks to his command of the German language, he was appointed the Red Cross liaison officer for the 1,400 British prisoners and in this trusted role he was allowed to move fairly freely throughout the camp and often to surrounding towns.

In this position, he devised an elaborate scheme to "buy" corpses of dead Belgian and French forced labourers, from the SS Guards by bribing them with Red Cross supplies, particularly chocolate.

To set this up he actually broke into the concentration camp for a night to explain what he was trying to do.

So at night, when Jewish prisoners deemed unfit to work were being marched to the gas chambers, selected ones that had been added would quickly jump out of the line and conceal themselves in a ditch.

Charles would arrange for some of the corpses he had purchased to be spread along the road to make up the head count. The escapees would then be smuggled away to freedom, using the clothes and identities of the

corpses. In this way, it is estimated he saved at least 400 Auschwitz inmates from death.

He also used his Red Cross position to smuggle food and other supplies to Jewish prisoners, including dynamite, which was used to good effect to destroy some of the gas chambers. This earned him the nickname "The Count of Auschwitz".

In January 1945, their Camp was closed and he with other Prisoners of War were marched to Bavaria.

The story is told how he finally escaped once more when he and another prisoner stole a fire engine from a small local town and drove it through the German lines at high speed with its bell ringing and the German army parted to let it through.

In 1963 he was awarded the title of "One of the Righteous Among the Nations" and he had a tree planted in his honour in the Avenue of Righteous Gentiles in Israel. He was also awarded the Israeli Peace medal; one of only two British citizens to be so honored, the other recipient being Bro. Winston Churchill.

Ralph Finn commented in a Jewish newspaper that, "he 'was not one of the world's great conversationalists nor was he one of the world's geniuses.

In fact he was quite unremarkable.

But, he was one hundred and one percent a real human being."

Bro. Charles Coward also testified at the Nuremberg trials against IG Farben for using slave labor and during the trial the Judge commended him for his courage and remarked:

"He did this for the mere reason he and the prisoners he helped were just fellow human beings".

I feel he was a real Military Mason to be proud of.

Credits:

A book about his exploits, *The Password is Courage*, was published in 1954, and a movie of the same name was produced in 1962 with Dirk Bogart playing Charles Coward.

Parts of the above was talk was provided by Bro. Christopher Tiplady,  
Secretary of Spokane #34, Spokane, Washington, USA!

The Holocaust Educational Trust site.

And my memories of reading his Book

Thank you and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

Bro. Bill Overy

Member of the Education Committee of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia  
and Yukon.