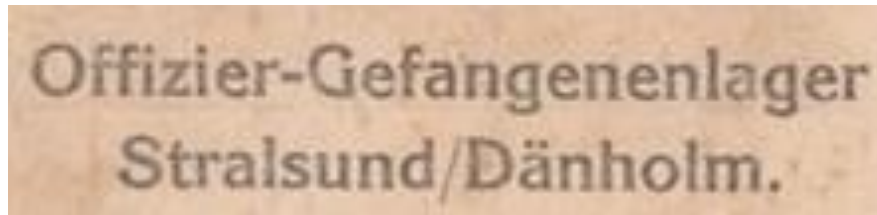


## A bread parcel for Private Barnes

Dorothy 07.11.15



The Marinemuseum Dänholm exhibits a single “British” artifact amongst the WW1 memorabilia of local families. It is a label from a parcel sent from “The Bread Bureau” in Copenhagen to Private William Robert Barnes. It had been found during building work done on site. Pte. Barnes was an orderly at the officer prisoner of war camp on the island of Dänholm, in the straights between Stralsund and Rügen. The Dänholm camp, emptied of Russian officers<sup>1</sup>, reopened to accommodate British pows, the first groups arriving on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1918. These groups consisted of 400 officers taken prisoner in the Ludendorff spring offensive, and 89 other ranks who were a mixed bunch, including veterans taken prisoner in the autumn of 1914 and those taken prisoner on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1918. Other groups of officers and other ranks arrived over the next two months until the camp housed approximately 900 officers and 340 orderlies. During the latter half of 1918 only British<sup>2</sup> pows were held in this camp.



William Robert Barnes was born in 1897 in the tiny village of Cowbit, near Spalding in Lincolnshire. His parents were James, a farm labourer, and Ellen who worked in a dairy. He had two sisters, Susannah being a year older while Ethel was 12 years younger. It seems most likely that he lived with his parents and was working as a farm labourer when war broke out. He turned 19 on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1916 and would then have become eligible under the new scheme to be conscripted to military service but he had actually enlisted by that time. The young man did so on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1915. The Derby Scheme was a voluntary program to encourage men between 18 and 40 to volunteer. Barnes appears then to have chosen “deferred service” which meant he had been accepted and then sent home with one day’s pay and a grey armband with a red crown to show he had volunteered. Barnes was mobilized to the South Staffs. on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1916.

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<sup>1</sup> And a few British

<sup>2</sup> And a very small number of other nationalities



Pte. Barnes

On his Service Medal and Award Roll he is listed as having been in the 2nd South Staffordshire regiment, 9<sup>th</sup> Devonshire regiment and finally 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire regiment. Pte. Barnes "A" coy 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire regiment was taken prisoner at Roucy on 27<sup>th</sup> May during the battle of Bois des Buttes. This is known as the regiment's bloodiest action during the war; between 26<sup>th</sup> May and 8<sup>th</sup> June 1918 552 members of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Devons died or were taken prisoner here.

	Barnes	Soldat	2. Devons	Roucy	23.2.97. Combat.
12	William		1. Coy.	27.5.18.	Wife: Mrs. Ellen Barnes, Stone Gate
	Robert			Stendal.	Wombitgear Spaldin, Lincolnshire Engl

It isn't straightforward finding mention of Pte. Barnes in the on-line records held by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Barnes' are listed under a name variation of Burns. Apparently having not been wounded during capture Barnes was moved a number of times by the Germans before ending up at Dänholm. On the first German POW list he appears on, together with four other 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons other ranks taken prisoner on the same day, he was transferred from Langensalsa to Zerbst. On the second list he was transferred with 117 other ranks from Stendal arriving on Dänholm on 4<sup>th</sup> August. In all 122 orderlies and 45 officers arrived at Dänholm that day. Barnes' family was told he had been subjected to a gas attack and suffered shell shock. Perhaps this was taken into consideration in his being amongst those lucky few chosen to be orderlies.

It generally took between three to eight weeks after the event for the next of kin to be officially informed that their loved one was killed or missing in action. Taken prisoner the soldiers sent field post cards home to their families but these could be many weeks in the "post". Further information could subsequently be forwarded to the next of kin when the person in question turned up on a POW list given to the Red Cross. These lists were of the utmost importance, not only to reassure the family that the soldier was still alive and interned, but so they knew which camp they could send parcels to.



All registered pows were sent their own personal Red Cross bread parcels from either Berne or Copenhagen, usually organized by their regimental pow Care Committee. The first private initiative in April 1915 to send white bread to a few British pows in Germany had expanded to cover them all. The idea behind it being to supplement the German rations; many found the German *kriegsbrot* indigestible and white bread would give the men a taste of home. This system underwent a massive reorganization as of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1918. After this date "The Bread Bureau" in Copenhagen sent bread to all other rank pows in Northern Germany and all officer pows with a few exceptions.<sup>3</sup> They also sent first bread parcels. This was a month's supply of bread sent to the camps for those newly captured who were not so far along the registration process as to be receiving their own personal bread parcels. One week's supply of bread was 4½ lb.

Biscuits were sent as a better option than bread in the hot summer months, especially for prisoners of war in work commandos where the time taken to deliver the parcels was extended. While the bread was baked in Copenhagen, the bureau imported large quantities of biscuits from Messrs. Huntley and Palmer from England.



When 21 year old Pte. Barnes arrived at Dänholm, 9 weeks after having been taken prisoner and via 3 other camps, one can only imagine that he must have been somewhat undernourished. The Germans supplied food but it was lacking in quantity and quality, leaving the pows weak and prone to illness. (The pows were aware that German civilians lived on as little or less). At Dänholm, as part of their food ration, bread coupons were given to the pows so they could themselves buy and administer their weekly supply of black bread. The camp had a canteen where they could buy a limited range of overpriced foodstuffs. Barnes may have been given emergency parcels of bread and food en-route but these must have been few and far

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<sup>3</sup> See "The Copenhagen Bureau" for more detail.

between. It must have been a relief for him to arrive at Dänholm to be an orderly. The work was light, the surroundings beautiful and the huts comfortable, there were plenty of social activities up and running and the first parcels with bread, food and clothes had arrived in the camp.



Pte. William Robert Barnes

Barnes' family in Cowbit should have been informed that he was a POW by the time he arrived at Dänholm. They were a low-income family and sending food parcels to their son would have been a financial burden. Regimental POW Care Committees sent food parcels and other voluntary help committees also stepped in and sent parcels to individual POWs. Barnes may have had a food parcel sent to one of the previous camps he had been at, the parcel would then have been sent on and hopefully caught up with him in the end. At the earliest it would have been well into August before Barnes' family knew he was at Dänholm.

Capt. Wilkinson bought a sketchbook and enjoyed drawing what he saw around him. On 9<sup>th</sup> July he wrote in his diary *"At tea I ate lots of my weekly bread ration and drank much lemonade – the day was very warm. I was feeling rather weaker than usual, which was only natural when nourishing food was never seen – we longed for parcels, but none came to buck us up."*

He started drawing a still-life which he called "Our fare". In his diary entry for 11<sup>th</sup> July he mentions finishing the still-life and *"finished my bread rations which meant no breakfast on the morrow!"* A couple of days later he heard rumours of bread from Copenhagen. He had to wait until the 25<sup>th</sup> when he had an excellent supper *"even had white Copenhagen bread – so stale that it had to be toasted, but still a luxury. One third of a loaf each had been issued."*





The POW Help Committee at Dänholm had telegraphic contact with "The Bread Bureau" in Copenhagen from the day after their arrival i.e. 28<sup>th</sup> June. It seems reasonable to assume that they would have contacted Copenhagen with the new arrivals' data on 5<sup>th</sup> August so they could be correctly registered in the bread parcel system as quickly as possible. POWs at the camp were receiving first bread/biscuit parcels, and a week earlier the first biscuit parcels for named prisoners had arrived from Copenhagen, however supply at that point in time did not cover demand at the camp. More biscuits arrived and a few days later most of those who had arrived in Dänholm at the end of June had received named parcels with biscuits. Details of the situation relating to the supply of Red Cross bread, biscuits and other parcels can be found in Lt. Col. De Renzy Martin's diary entry for the 10<sup>th</sup> August:

*"Got 1 parcel bread yesterday. It left Copenhagen on June 29<sup>th</sup> for Rastatt, so of course was mouldy, but we soaked it & squeezed most of the green & yellow mould out & then dried it & ate it! Also got 2 private Red X parcels, also been to Rastatt; they left England on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> June. I hear there are more for me & am to get them on 12<sup>th</sup>. The German organisation for issuing is so bad that they can't compete with the numbers now getting parcels, so there will be a bad block when everyone is getting them."*

Capt. Esler RAMC wrote in his memoirs of receiving his first Red Cross parcel at Dänholm *"I forget the exact contents but I remember the first things that we dealt with, a loaf of white bread, a packet of tea, condensed milk, sugar and cigarettes. When Aladdin's cave was opened gold, emeralds and pearls of great price were discovered but that was nothing compared to our first parcel. Pearls of great price are not edible. We hacked a slice of bread from our loaf and brewed a cup of strong tea with plenty of sugar. We ate the bread dry, we did not want to spoil its flavour. Never can I remember enjoying a meal so much. After the meal we lay on our beds and each lit a cigarette and smoked in complete silence. The magic of the moment was too great to have our concentration disturbed. Even the greatest gourmet cannot savour the delight of eating unless they have, first, experienced a period of enforced starvation."*



As time went on the pows didn't solely survive on their German rations. But the flow of parcels, bread and food, was unreliable. Forming syndicates, where food was shared amongst small groups of pows, along with careful "housekeeping" was necessary to eke out supplies. By September with the bread from Copenhagen and good food from home the pows were regaining their strength and optimism. Most of parcels got through and pilfering from them was not widespread. There was a problem however with the letters sent to the pows at Dänholm. These letters had to be censored by "interpreters". They were undermanned and this caused great delay in the letters from home being passed on to the pows. The interpreters could be bribed with food to "find" long awaited mail. Asked by one of the interpreters for them, one of the officers gladly gave him his coupons for the German black bread he didn't need any more.



The label on Pte. Barnes' bread parcel doesn't have a date stamp. A card was always sent with the bread parcel so the pow could see when the bread was sent and coded so the prisoner could check if any bread sent to him had gone missing. The pow then returned the card to Copenhagen with information about the date they received the bread and it's condition. Once the flow of bread parcels from Copenhagen to Dänholm was up and running it seems to have been delivered without much delay. The system with bread parcels for named pows was stopped in mid-October. From then on, the amount of bread sent to each camp depended on the number of British pows registered at that camp, plus an extra 10% for stock. Bread parcels were no longer sent to individuals. So the existing label from a bread parcel sent to Pte. Barnes can only have been from the two month period between mid-August and mid-October.

Many camps had a POW magazine. Only one issue of "The Outlook" was published at Dänholm, but it is noteworthy for its entertaining stories and poems and charming illustrations. At the end of October with peace in sight they looked even more towards north;

*"What do you think of the Denmark rumour, then?" Asked the R.M. unmoved. "Don't know it." "Well the Copenhagen people have wakened up to the fact that we shall want to recultivate the whisky habit before going home. So all our bread in future is going to be soaked in the stuff." "That's more like it now" cried Cramp visibly brightening "though the expression stuff is rather sacrilegious."*

Major Basil K. Barton

Bread was delivered after the armistice too, though not soaked in whiskey. Indeed Major Barton took the POW surplus bread and food to the hospital in Stralsund on the 18<sup>th</sup> November. A week later a new collection of spare bread and biscuits was made to be given to a "Committee" in Stralsund to be distributed amongst the most deserving. Three wagon loads of bread and biscuits were sent from the camp to Stralsund, but only a portion reached their destination as a hungry mob helped themselves whilst the wagons were en-route. Only 60 boxes got to the needy. Presumably the last delivery for the POWs arrived on the afternoon of 30<sup>th</sup> November. That very morning the first group had left Dänholm for repatriation via Denmark. 12 officers were detailed to go to Stralsund post office to deal with a large consignment of parcels that had just arrived. The parcels proved to be bread parcels consisting of 8000 loaves which one officer remarked *"we could very well have done without"*.



Batches of POWs left Dänholm on their journey home to the UK travelling via Denmark. Lists survive of the POWs in some of these groups, but Barnes is not mentioned on them, so we cannot know the dates he travelled, which camp in Denmark he stayed at for a short time, or on which boat he travelled back to the UK. However, the printed letter from the King and Queen welcoming the former POW home is still in the family's possession. It is probable that he would have celebrated New Year at home with his family in Cowbit. Pte. Barnes was transferred to the reserves on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1919. His medical category was B II which meant "able to walk 5 miles, see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes". His family has documents relating to his receiving a small pension for "war wounds". William Robert Barnes married Margaret Prest in 1921. They lived on the outskirts of Cowbit, William working as a small farmer, and had two daughters, Miriam and Joyce. Joyce remembered her father as *"a very kind and gentle man, who would make the two-mile walk to church three times on a Sunday"*. William Robert Barnes suffered from TB in the 1930s and died in 1938, 41 years old.



## Illustrations

1. Robert Speirs Robertson family archive, pow at Dänholm. <http://robertson-gray.org.uk/world-war-one/>
2. Postcard of Stralsund.
3. Group photo, "Barnes" family archive
4. Pow list ICRC, <http://grandeguerre.icrc.org/>
5. The Copenhagen Bureau, autumn 1917. Royal Library Copenhagen, KB DH0 13933.tif
6. William Robert Barnes, "Barnes" family archive
7. Capt. Henry Wilkinson sketch book, pow at Dänholm. Durham County Record Office D/DLI 7/773/3 Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the former DLI and Durham County Record
8. Biscuits taken home by Lieutenant Frank Cameron, 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, pow at Schweidnitz. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30087164>
9. Postcard of Postburo at Dänholm, from Burkhard Koop
10. Bread parcel label. MarineMuseum Dänholm <http://marinemuseum-daenholm.beepworld.de/>
11. Photo from Witherington archive, Beamish Resource Collection