



Isolated situation of the camp at Angler, Ont., was one of its protections against breakouts. But over 100 men planned to escape through tunnel at right

## THEY TUNNELLED TO FREEDOM IN WARTIME CANADA

First Of Three Parts

# WHEN THE GERMANS BROKE OUT OF CAMP X

By Peter Desbarats

**T**HE German prisoners held a council of war in Hut 5-B at 10 o'clock in the morning. It was an emergency.

Unless an immediate decision were made, the plan to liberate more than 100 prisoners of war might have to be cancelled. Three months of plotting and back-breaking work would go for nothing.

The trouble was the weather. For the past few days, early spring rains had drenched Camp X and the tiny settlement of Angler on the main C.P.R. line 180 miles east of the Lakehead. Now the rain had stopped but the temperature still hovered above the freezing mark.

Lookouts posted at the windows of Hut 5-B noticed that the snow in the camp compound was beginning to sag. They could almost make out a shallow trough leading straight from the hut to the barbed-wire fences and beyond.

How could the guards miss it? It was like a neon sign advertising the 150-foot tunnel directly underneath. Four to six feet below the surface of the snow, water was pouring through the wooden ceiling

and walls of the tunnel. Already the floorboards and wooden "railroad tracks" at its deepest point were under two feet of icy water.

In another 24 hours the tunnel might be useless. But the escape was not supposed to occur for 48 hours. It was still two days before April 20, 1941, when Hitler would celebrate his 52nd birthday. The escape was planned to be the Fuehrer's biggest birthday present.

The whole camp was tingling with concealed excitement. But if the lookouts in 5-B that morning had been able to see into the future, they might have had second thoughts. If they could have seen Angler as it is today, they would have noticed a small snow-covered cemetery and two wooden grave markers with swastika borders.

This was the Fuehrer's birthday present — the lives of two young U-boat crewmen, Herbert Loeffelmeier and Alfred Miethling.

Most Canadians have forgotten today that one of the classic escapes of World War II occurred right in their own country. But for seven days in 1941,

the country seemed to be alive with escaped Germans. Canadians across half a continent saw Nazis around every corner. It was not all imagination. Two of the prisoners got as far as Medicine Hat, more than 1,200 miles from the camp at Angler.

I talked to one of them recently in Bremen. All told, I contacted six of the escapers in a matter of days. They covered almost the entire length of Germany [see page 39]. In their homes and over coffee, beer and bottles of Rhine wine, they related the story of the escape in minute detail.

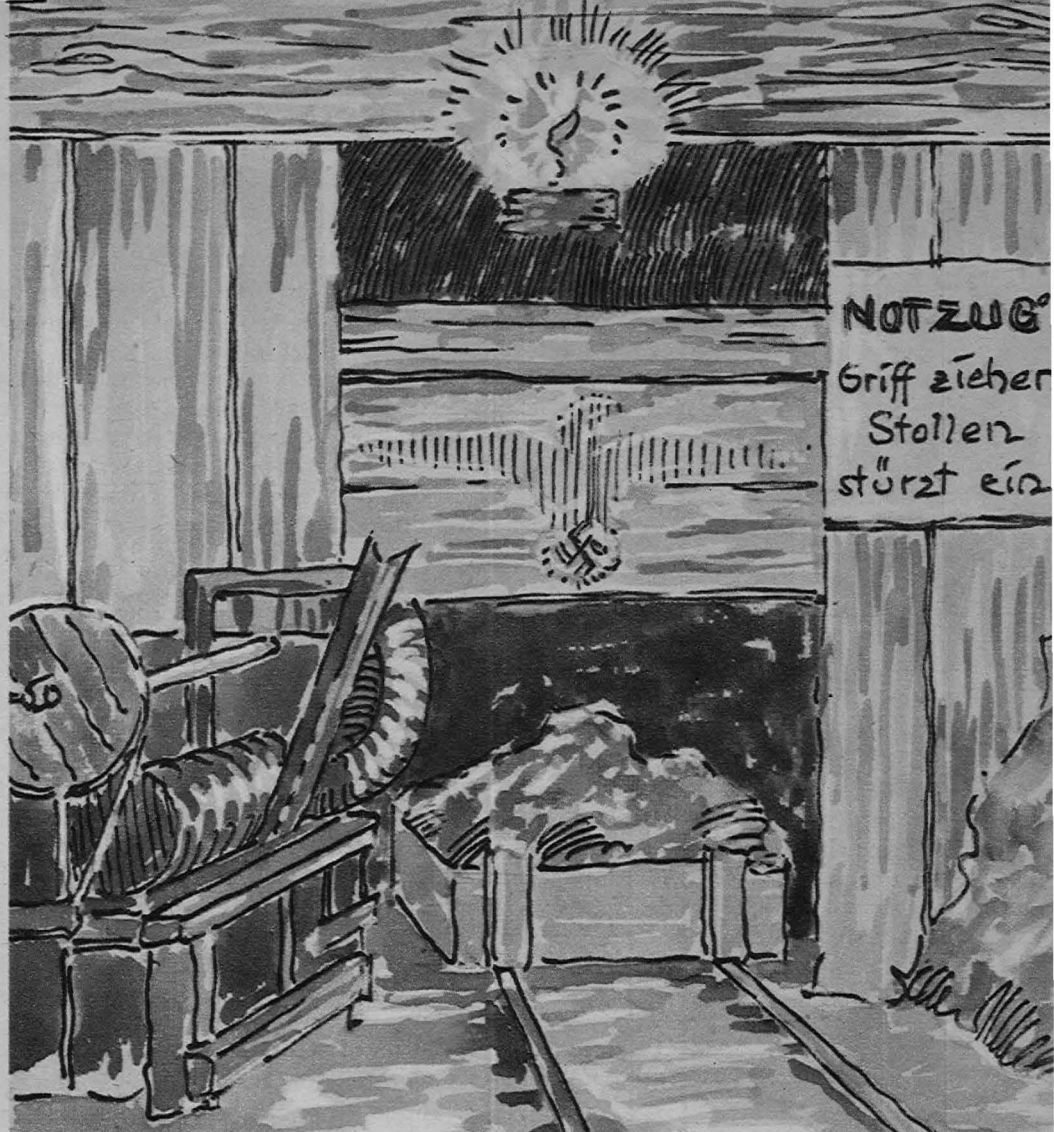
This is the first time the prisoners' story has been told in Canada. And the official Canadian version remains hidden, after all these years, in a secret inquiry report in Ottawa.

Today the escape is history. But on that April morning nearly 23 years ago, its success or failure hung in the balance. Some of the prisoners wanted to break out that night. Others said the water in the tunnel would drop and they should wait for the birthday target date.

Everything else was

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on night of April 18, 1941. This sketch of entrance was drawn by an unknown prisoner. Light-hearted notice tells the diggers to pull cord if tunnel falls in.



Some of the men who tunneled to brief freedom sat for this picture six months after escape. Front row, seated, L to R: Wilhelm Erdniss, unknown, Willi Bauer, Helmuth Ackenhausen. Second row, seated, Rudolf Lichten-

hagen, Paul Stuetzel, Kurt Rochel, Erwin Genssler. Last row standing: unknown, Horst Liebeck, Hans Hauk, Hermann Frischmuth, Wilhelm Raab, unknown, Oskar Broderix, Georg Wolff, Karl-Heinz Grund, Heinz Ettler.



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ready to go. Everything had been prepared with typical German efficiency. More than 100 homemade rucksacks were crammed with food. Meatballs. Sausage. Even portable stoves. More than 100 outfits of civilian clothes were concealed in the camp. Compasses. Maps. Knives.

One of the prisoners at the meeting in 5-B turned to Oskar Ans. "How's the boat?"

The submariner shrugged. "With all that water in the tunnel, I don't know if we can get it out. I guess I should have made a U-boat."

Beneath the floor of the hut, at the entrance to the tunnel, was a 12-foot kayak in two sections.

Helmuth Ackenhausen, an escaper who is now a wholesale soup merchant in Hanover, told me the kayak was made out of wood, flattened tin cans, oilcloth and wax.

"The oilcloth stolen from the mess-hall tables was full of holes," he said. "We collected the wax used to stiffen thread from hundreds of housewife kits to waterproof Oskar's boat."

Ans and another U-boat veteran were planning to take the boat to nearby Lake Superior and paddle to the United States, more than 150 miles due south.

The council of war dragged on. Prisoners arguing against an immediate break-out claimed they had picked up an adverse weather forecast that morning on their hidden radios. Snow was predicted for that night, followed by a drop in temperature. If the weather turned colder, they said, the tunnel would be in much better shape by Sunday.

The meeting never reached a formal decision. It became apparent that some of the prisoners intended to go out that night come hell or high water in the tunnel. And of course once the tunnel was opened, everyone would have to go.

**S**UDDENLY one of the lookouts, Karl-Heinz Grund — today a prosperous real-estate dealer in Bremen — sang out: "Fifteen!"

It was the usual warning signal, adopted from German tradesmen who "take 15" when they knock off work for coffee or beer. As guards approached the hut, the prisoners filed into the compound and began to walk about. Within a few minutes, the tell-tale depression in the snow had been obscured by footprints.

That afternoon, prisoners crawled through the rising water in the tunnel, carrying rucksacks to a storage space near the face.

By any standards, it was a masterpiece of a tunnel.

One of the reasons for building the camp at Angler was the apparent impossibility of tunnelling through the soil. The nine frame buildings inside the compound were perched on pilings driven into sand, part of Lake Superior's shoreline.

"When the first prisoners arrived at the camp in January, it seemed as if tunnels were being started under every hut," recalled Erwin Genssler, now a government engineer living near Bonn, the capital of West Germany.

"But you couldn't handle that sand. As soon as

you got started, the frozen sand on the roof of the tunnel would melt and collapse."

Just to make sure, the guards would drive a bulldozer over the compound to break any tunnels that might have been dug.

Karl-Heinz Grund recalled an officer of the guard coming up to him, only a few days before the escape, and saying: "Well, have you tried to make a tunnel? It's impossible, eh?"

The main tunnel project was started in January by a group of about five prisoners. There was a rule at first that a prisoner could bring only a personal friend into the group. But after a few weeks, as the men grew to know each other and the possibility of planted spies was ruled out, the group increased by leaps and bounds.

Rudolf Lichtenhagen, a prisoner with some architectural training, designed the tunnel. The construction was planned by a remarkably versatile prisoner, Wilhelm Erdniss, who is now a foreman for a coal company in Dusseldorf. Erdniss not only was a gifted carpenter but also one of the leaders of the camp's orchestra.

He and Lichtenhagen decided that every inch of the tunnel would have to be lined with wood to support the sand and withstand the weight of the bulldozer.

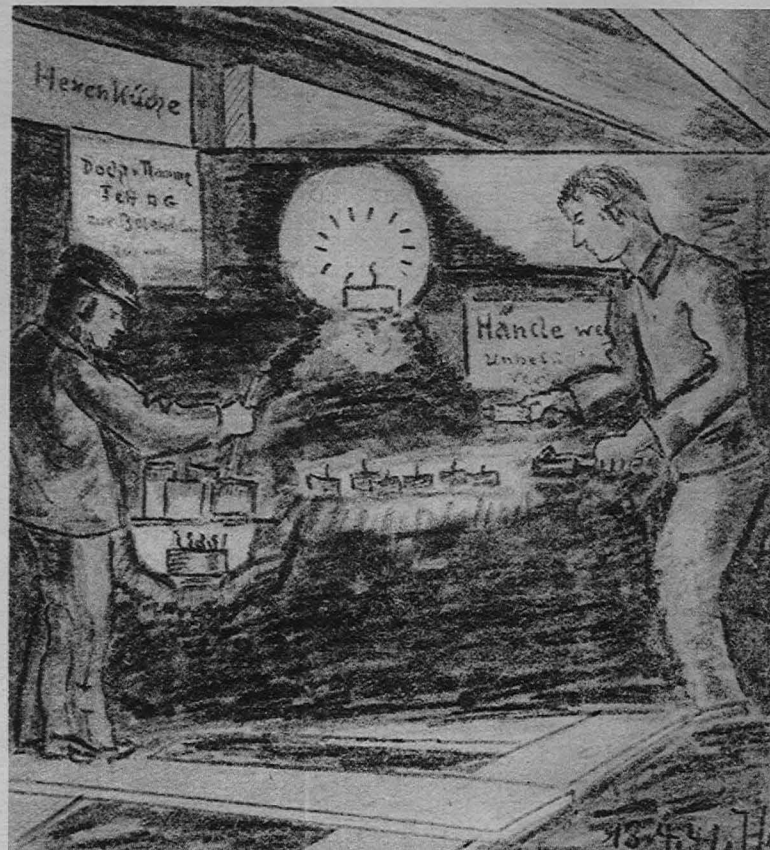
Once the plan was accepted, there was no shortage of willing hands. By early February there were between 200 and 300 men in the camp — an elite group; mainly non-commissioned Luftwaffe (air force) officers and a small number of tough U-boat veterans.

Nazi Germany was still on the march in the winter of 1940-41 and the men in isolated Camp X yearned for action. Apart from the few who worked in the kitchen or as orderlies in the guards' quarters, the prisoners were left to their own devices. The tunnel absorbed all their time and energy.

"We built the tunnel simply because we wanted to get out; there were certainly no complaints about conditions in the camp," said Phil Hess, a former Luftwaffe gunner-observer who is now in the parts promotion division of General Motors' Opel factory at Russelsheim, not far from Frankfurt.

"We had rarely been more comfortable in our lives. We had so much extra clothing that our tailor, Willi Benderich, was able to make more than 100 civilian outfits by ripping the red POW circles from surplus jackets, pants and overcoats.

"They fed us mountains of food. There was so much bacon that we used to burn it to heat bath water at night, when it was too cold or we were



The candle factory, known to the prisoners as "The Witches' Kitchen," was located under the floor of Hut 5-B. Here prisoners made lanterns for the escape out of tin cans and fat from the kitchen. Wicks were drawstrings from long winter underwear.

too lazy to go out for firewood.

"The bacon was a big joke. One of the boys wrote a song about it for a show we staged in the camp."

Twenty-two years later, Hess sat back in the living room of his apartment in Russelsheim and roared out the song without missing a line. My interpreter, Gerd Fiegweil, a serious young law student from Munich, winced at the crude verses and produced a watered-down translation:

"Deep in the bush the prisoners live . . . they do nothing all day . . . twice a week there are films . . . that's a record in our lives . . . and when we see the films . . . we even forget the bacon."

Supplied with enough musical instruments for a small symphony, the prisoners made beautiful music together, particularly when they were drowning out the noise of digging, hammering and sawing.

"The guards used to think we were nuts," recalled Grund, laughing.

"Even in early April, when it was quite cold, we used to practise outside, as close as possible to the place where the tunnel was going under the fence. The guards used to open the windows of the watch towers to listen to the music."

To make certain the men were warm enough, camp authorities banked snow against the walls of the frame huts. This prevented anyone from seeing what was going on beneath the huts. There was plenty to see.

**T**HE six dormitory huts were joined in pairs by lavatory-washroom units in the H configuration familiar to Canadian bush and construction workers.

The prisoners first built two short "subways" so all huts were linked either by tunnels or lavatory units. These tunnels were used later to transport wood and earth. But their main purpose was to enable prisoners who remained behind after the escape to bluff their way through one or two roll calls inside the huts by dodging quickly from one to another. This routine actually was practised before the break-out.

According to prisoners, the guards rarely interfered with the rigid tunnelling schedule. There were roll calls inside the huts during the winter at 6 A.M., noon and eight in the evening. None of the prisoners could remember a surprise roll call which might have caught some of them in the tunnel.

Relations with the guards were friendly — so friendly that the first commandant of the camp, Maj. P. V. Torrance, and his successor, Maj. C. B. Lindsay, appeared before a

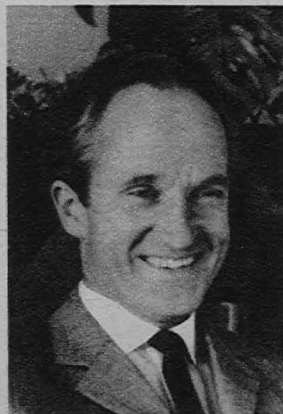
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Phil Hess was a gunner-observer with Luftwaffe when he came to Camp X. Today (R) he works in the General Motors' Opel factory in Russelsheim.



Erwin Genssler, who also made the escape, was a Luftwaffe pilot during the war. Today he is a government engineer, makes his home near Bonn.







Graves of two prisoners, Herbert Loeffelmeier and Alfred Miethling, shot during recapture, stand in Angler cemetery.

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general court-martial after the escape on three charges of "neglect to the prejudice of good order and military discipline." They were acquitted, but there is no doubt that life at Camp X was something of a routine grind for World War I old-timers who formed No. 2A Active Company, Veterans' Guards of Canada.

Phil Hess told me one of the prisoner-orderlies blackmailed a guard into giving him a small radio. The prisoner threatened to inform the camp commandant that the guard was being visited in barracks by his "wife to be."

When the prisoners discovered a broken radio in the camp hospital, they removed the parts one by one and re-assembled them inside a model of the German battleship Bismarck in the recreation hall.

"The guards were very impressed with the model, especially the way the turrets moved," recalled Kurt Rochel, now manager of a youth hostel near Bonn. "They didn't realize the turrets were the knobs on the radio."

**G**RUND told me that prisoners detailed to haul supplies from the railway station at Angler smuggled a live piglet into Camp X in a paper bag. They bottle-fed it for several weeks before the guards discovered it.

"It was quiet during the day," he said, "but sometimes one of the boys would forget to feed it at night and the thing would start squealing."

"We loved that pig. There was almost a riot when the guards suggested butchering it for us. None of us could have eaten a mouthful."

Meanwhile the tunnel was progressing in a beeline — one of the prisoners was a surveyor — toward the barbed-wire fences. It was reached through a trapdoor in the floor of Hut 5-B which was at the far end of the compound, away from the entrance gate and administrative buildings. Wilhelm Erdniss cut the trapdoor irregularly so that it harmonized with the pattern on wooden planks on the floor. It was secured by turning a wooden key through a knothole.

There was no shortage of wood. The floor of each hut rested on stout crossbeams. At first prisoners made crude saws from knives stolen from the kitchen. Later they tempered and filed springs from donated gramophones and attached wooden handles to them.

Two men would sit beneath a hut, brace their feet against a beam and start sawing while the orchestra overhead launched into a noisy rendition of Wagner. Cymbals clashed and drums rolled as the beam was kicked away from the nails that secured it to the floorboards. Eventually the demand for wood became so high that the prisoners were taking out every second beam. Floors developed a noticeable "bounce."

Grund recalled one of the camp officers saying: "Shoddy wartime construction! The contractors received good money for this job and just look at the result!"

Beneath the trapdoor there was a sizable workroom at the tunnel entrance, at least six feet high and nine feet by nine feet. It was decorated with a large wooden Nazi eagle and swastika carved by George Rauwolf, who later carved

grave plaques for the Angler cemetery and who sculpts tombstones today in suburban Munich.

Oskar Broderix, now with the Bavarian state police in Weissenburg, told me that signs in the workroom advertised the location of the "sawmill" and "The Witches' Kitchen — Wick, Flame and Fat Ltd." This was the candle factory where prisoners made lanterns out of tin cans and fat from the kitchen. The wicks were drawstrings taken from extra sets of long winter underwear.

"We had so much extra underwear," grinned Broderix, "that we used to take out the drawstrings and burn the rest so nobody would get suspicious."

Hundreds of these lanterns were used in the tunnel. Special cooking models were manufactured so escaped prisoners could enjoy hot meals on the road.

The worst job of all was excavating the face of the tunnel with pilfered coal scoops, frying pans and large forks used in the kitchen for turning meat. Some of the diggers developed painful hemorrhoids as they worked in the freezing tunnel and wrestled with prefabricated wooden sections. As the job progressed, the diggers began to pass out from lack of oxygen. This was remedied by constructing a ventilation pipe out of milk tins covered with a papier-maché insulation made from toilet paper, flour and water. Air was forced through the pipe by a hand-operated fan at the entrance of the tunnel.

When it was no longer practical to haul out the sand by hand, the prisoners built a small cart that travelled through the tunnel on wooden tracks. It was drawn from the face of the tunnel by a two-man winch in the workroom. The cable for the winch was made by splicing together sections of bed-spring wire.

The sand was taken from the workroom in fire buckets or large milk cans, carried through the lavatories and shorter tunnels and spread beneath various huts.

Warning signals were changed from time to time. At one point the "Fifteen!" cry was replaced by a code of foot-stampings on the floor of 5-B. A number of stamps signified an alarm; a subsequent series meant "all clear."

**O**NE day when the workroom was particularly active, Grund spotted an unexpected delegation of European Red Cross officials walking across the snowy compound to the hut. He stamped frantically. Silence below.

The Red Cross officials entered the hut and immediately began to stamp the snow from their boots. Grund froze in horror as sounds of hammering and sawing seeped through the floor. Then he and the other prisoners in the hut descended on the Red Cross party with loud cries of welcome. The boys below finally got the message.

In the camp kitchen, prisoner-cooks not only stole food but concocted special "escape packs." One was a protein-rich mixture of meat balls and fat packed in coffee cans. Another was a "pemmican" of compressed bread crumbs and fat. The escapers told me — and insisted when I obviously didn't believe them — that they accumulated enough food in less than three months to supply each of more than 100 possible escapers with at least 50 pounds

of meat, bread, biscuit, tinned food, sausage, condensed milk, powdered eggs, chocolate, tea, sugar, salt, pepper — and vitamin pills.

Other prisoners made compasses by pivoting magnetized slivers of razor blade on phonograph needles inside cardboard boxes or carved wooden cases. Glass covers were made by scraping the silver backing from pocket mirrors. Fish hooks were made by hammering out heated darning needles.

Each "team" of escapers was given a detailed map of the Great Lakes area. Oskar Broderix told me that the original map was stolen from the commandant's desk by prisoner-orderlies using a pass key they had manufactured. The map was stolen one afternoon, copied and returned the next morning. The copies were traced so accurately on onion-skin paper that Canadian authorities, after the escape, at first believed they were engraved maps smuggled into the camp by pro-Germans.

Pucks stolen from the hockey rink were turned into crude printing plates in an unsuccessful attempt to forge identity cards.

Now and then, schemes backfired. Grund recalled damaging a sink one day to lure a plumber into one of the huts. He needed a screwdriver.

The plumber arrived with a screwdriver sticking out of the back pocket of his overalls. It was deftly removed while he gaped at pin-up pictures painted by a prisoner.

The next day, the plumber returned to inspect his repairs. Another screwdriver protruded from the same pocket. Once again the artist brought out his pictures.

"But this time the screwdriver was attached to the plumber by a large chain," laughed Grund.

"We all had a good laugh. But we had to give back the other screwdriver."

**B**Y mid-April, the tunnel had almost reached the gully, about 60 to 70 feet beyond the barbed wire. The gully could be seen clearly from a guard tower but the prisoners hoped it would offer them some cover when they emerged from the tunnel at night.

As the time approached, they began to discuss what they would do with their "freedom." This was the toughest part of the project — how tough none of them fully realized. Angler's only access to the outside world was by rail or water. The Lakehead was 180 miles to the west. To the east, more than 250 miles of bush lay between the prisoners and Sault Ste. Marie. The ultimate target was the United States, still technically a neutral country.

"We received the names of Germans in the United States who might help us," said Rochel.

"Whenever I received a letter from my wife with the name 'Emil' in it, I knew that a message was coming in the next food parcel. This was a code we had worked out before I was shot down over England.

"The parcel would contain a box filled with dried apples. These boxes always had secret letters concealed inside the bottom."

Prisoners were still discussing escape routes when spring arrived suddenly and the precious tunnel began to fill with water. The time for talk was over.

Immediately after roll call on the night of Friday, April 18, the first groups went through the trapdoor in Hut 5-B and crawled toward the face of the tunnel. Their boots were tied to their shoulders. Their civilian clothes were bundled into fire buckets or large frying pans and floated through the water in the tunnel. Working by candle light, the first group located its rucksacks. Then they began to excavate the final few feet.

It took much longer than expected. In the darkness behind them, some of the prisoners began to grow hysterical with excitement and claustrophobia. Rumors circulated that the escape had already been discovered.

In the centre of the tunnel, Helmuth Ackenhausen felt his legs growing numb in the freezing water. He heard a stifled gasp behind him. Erhard Scheidt, another Luftwaffe veteran and the son of a millionaire German industrialist, had lost consciousness and was lying face down in the water.

Ackenhausen propped his head above the water. They waited for more than an hour. Then there was a scuffling ahead and a sudden blast of cold fresh air.

The line of prisoners began to wriggle toward freedom — and disaster.

**NEXT WEEK: Two of the fugitives, bound for Japan, are arrested at Medicine Hat after travelling more than 1,200 miles in six days.**