

View through the fence

Did obligatory Canadian hospitality open eyes?

HITLER'S CANADIANS
Sun, Mar 11, 6 pm, History Television

IN 1957, CAUGHT BETWEEN TRAINS and with nowhere to sleep, Canadian traveler Bill Biggs found himself roused in a German train station by a belligerent policeman.

When his papers and passport were presented the man suddenly had a complete change of attitude.

"I spent the war near your home as a POW," exclaimed the now friendly officer, who chatted with Biggs about his sojourn as a prisoner in Northern Ontario—the natural beauty of the landscape, the friendly people, and his desire to go back.

"They ended up talking for more than a few hours," relates Ted Biggs, son of Bill and co-producer of *Hitler's Canadians*, which makes its

debut on the History Channel this Sunday. "This was a real surprise to my dad."

It was also the impetus for the younger Bigg's documentary, which looks at this unusual and little known episode in our WW2 history. During the war years there were over 40,000 German fighters and 26 POW camps across Canada, the result of an agreement with Great Britain. If Bill Biggs was taken aback, this also came as a shock to small town Canadians who were suddenly presented with the unnerving sight of Nazi officers marching under the watchful eyes of their Allied guards. "Hitler's Canadians" was the sobriquet these prisoners bestowed upon themselves.

Hitler's Canadians uses interviews with surviving German POWs,

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PRODUCER TED BIGGS

archival footage, and dramatic recreations shot at the only two remaining camps. Much of the film focuses on the entertaining escape attempts by some of the more adventurous prisoners—"Escape Kings" like Ulrich Steinhilper.

"Ulrich was constantly running around southern Ontario and Montreal," Biggs laughs. "He almost made it to the States—he was on a train in a switching yard, but he

wasn't sure where he was so he waited and it rolled across. It ended up he'd rolled back into Canada."

"These guys were tough," Biggs notes. "Ulrich was trying to escape to alleviate his depression—what he referred to as his 'morose southern German nature' was kicking in, and he was trying to escape to buoy his spirits. He also wanted to get back into the fight, of course."

It wasn't all light-hearted variations on the German version of "The Great Escape"—there were secret trials and killings within the camps for those the more zealous Nazis thought of as traitors.

"In Western Canada there were a number of murders because of this. The more die hard Nazis didn't like the fact that one of them was reading and translating local newspapers to the prison population, and they killed him because of it."

Biggs says that many of the interviewees for the film could have used the alibi that they were simply following orders, or were ignorant of the death camps back home, but instead many of them express regret and shame for their country.

"Quite a few of the POWs were overwhelmed by the memories we dug up—we left many of the emotional reactions we got out of the

final product. At the end of the war when films of the death camps were shown it was a revelation. Some of them may have thought it was propaganda but the more perceptive realized it wasn't."

Former prisoners all acknowledged the fair treatment they got at the hands of their Canadian captors. The famous German pilot Franz von Werra took it one step further—after escaping into the United States and then Mexico, he returned to Germany a hero. Brought to inspect a German POW camp he remarked that he would much rather be held captive in a British camp—a comment that apparently shamed the Germans into upgrading their own.

"Well, that was one of the more important reasons for making the film—we wanted to show the contrast between Nazi propaganda and the reality of it," Biggs notes. "The idea was 'once you take them out of that propaganda, how are they affected?' Canada presented an entirely different world to them after close to a decade of Nazi propaganda. Some of them may have known they were being exposed to propaganda, but they didn't know how different the world was outside of it."

TOM MURRAY

