

= Raid at O?balt =

The Raid at O?balt was an operation on 31 August 1944 in which 105 Allied prisoners of war (POWs) were rescued by Slovene Partisans . The majority were liberated from a work site at the village of O?balt (German : St. Oswald an der Drau) about 25 kilometres (16 mi) west of Maribor on the railway line to Dravograd in the German Reichsgau Steiermark (Styria) , now part of modern @-@ day northern Slovenia . Six of the liberated POWs were separated from the group during an engagement with the Germans a few days after their liberation , but following a 14 @-@ day trek across 250 kilometres (160 mi) they were flown out of a Partisan airfield at Semi? to Bari , Italy . The successful escapees consisted of eight Frenchmen , nine New Zealanders , 12 Australians , and 70 British POWs .

= = Background = =

Allied POWs were used in working camps for various purposes beneficial to the German side . By June 1944 there were several working camps administered by Stalag XVIII @-@ D which was located in Maribor , Slovenia (German : Marburg an der Drau) . Prisoners held in one of the work camps were used for maintenance of the railway between Maribor and Dravograd (German : Unterdrauburg) which continued through the Drava valley and into Austria . This work camp is believed to have been Work Camp 1046 / GW . At this time , railways in Slovenia were being regularly sabotaged by Slovene Partisans , who also rescued Allied personnel including aircrew and POWs who had escaped from the Germans . A work party , consisting of about a hundred mostly British POWs were transported from their camp to O?balt each morning to do railway maintenance work , and returned to the camp in the evening . There were several other work camps in the vicinity of O?balt , mostly doing agricultural work . By late August 1944 , the Partisan 14th Slovenia Division , including the 2nd Slovenia Brigade " Ljubo ?ercer " , was deployed in strength in the Pohorje mountains south of the Drava river between Maribor and Dravograd .

= = Escape = =

The raid was preceded by the escape of seven POWs on 30 August 1944 . The organisers of the escape were Private Ralph Frederick Churches , an Australian Army infantry soldier of the 2 / 48th Battalion who had been on temporary duty with Headquarters ANZAC Corps when he was captured during the Allied withdrawal from Greece in April ? May 1941 , and Driver Leslie Arthur Laws , a British Army soldier of the 127th (Dorset) Electrical and Mechanical Engineers , Royal Engineers . By August 1944 , Churches had already attempted to escape on two occasions and had learned about the surroundings from those experiences . He realised that he had to escape while the prisoners were in an environment hostile to the Germans . Churches had learned to speak passable German during his captivity , and had been the camp leader of the work camp for eighteen months when he resigned the role so he could be involved in the escape .

Through a Slovene family who provided water and some food to the prisoners working on the railway , Laws managed to make contact with an agent of the 2nd Slovene Brigade " Ljubo ?ercer " , and after discussing this with Churches , they agreed to include all the members of their 8 @-@ man accommodation hut at the work camp in their escape plans . In the mid @-@ afternoon of 30 August 1944 , seven of the eight POWs walked away from the work site under various pretexts , and met the Partisan agent , who led the group to a village , Lovrenc na Pohorju , which had been temporarily liberated from German control . The remaining member of their hut was unable to get away from his work crew to join them . The escapees comprised three British , two Australian , and two New Zealand soldiers .

= = Raid = =

Churches managed to convince the commander of the brigade to conduct an operation to free the

rest of the work party the following day , by giving him crucial information regarding the work site and the guards . Next morning Churches and Laws returned with some hundred Partisans to await the arrival of the work party by the usual train . As soon as work had begun the Partisans disarmed the eight guards and captured the four civilian overseers . In a short time the POWs , guards , and civilian overseers were being escorted south along a different route than that used by the first seven escapees the previous afternoon .

Altogether , 79 more POWs from the working camp were freed . On the same morning ten French and nine additional British POWs were freed by the Partisan brigade from two smaller working camps closer to Maribor . Churches had provided the details of one of the working camps , at a farm with a single guard , and the Partisans had freed the French POWs when they raided a different camp in error . They then corrected their error and released the British POWs from the camp Churches had mentioned . All the groups of POWs , along with their Partisan liberators , assembled in the hills of Pohorje . Altogether , including Churches and Laws and their original group of escapees , a total of 105 POWs were liberated by the Partisans during the escape and subsequent raids .

= = Trek to Semi? and aftermath = =

Progress along the evacuation route south was difficult , as German patrols were very active . A night ambush by one such patrol caused the loss of six prisoners , two of them French . Eventually , after marching approximately 250 kilometres (160 mi) over 14 days and being ferried across the Sava by boat , they reached Semi? in White Carniola , which was a Partisan base with an airfield used for communication with the Allies . After a few days delay waiting for aircraft to be available and weather conditions to be suitable , they were flown across to Bari in Italy on 21 September 1944 .

Both Ralph Churches and Les Laws were decorated for their actions in escaping and assisting the Partisans in planning the raid . Laws was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal , and Churches , the British Empire Medal . Churches was repatriated to Australia in November 1944 , where after three months leave he was posted to the staff of a prisoner of war camp in Murchison , Victoria as an interpreter . He was subsequently promoted to sergeant and was discharged in November 1945 . Laws ' movements after arrival in Italy are unknown . Churches returned to the site of the raid in 1972 and 1977 , and was accompanied by Laws on a further visit in 1985 . During these visits Churches and Laws were reunited with several of the Partisans that had escorted them to Semi? .

= = Conflicting accounts of events = =

There are two known primary sources regarding the details of the raid , and several secondary sources which drew largely on the accounts of Churches and / or Laws . There is one passing mention of the raid in the " Prisoner of War " volume of the Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War , which varies significantly from the other sources .

The first primary source is the book written by Churches , who was decorated for his involvement in the planning and conduct of the escape and raid . Churches ' book , titled *A Hundred Miles as the Crow Flies* , was written after he was relieved of his obligation to secrecy by Australian Army . The book details the events prior to the escape and the course of escape and evacuation . His book is also translated in Slovenian as *Vranov let v svobodo* (*Crow 's Flight into Freedom*) . Churches was known by the nickname " Crow " as he was the only soldier from the Australian state of South Australia in the camp , and South Australians are colloquially known in Australia as " crow eaters " . Churches ' version of events has been published , in part , by several secondary sources , including Australian television programs aired in 1985 and 2003 , and newspaper articles in 1944 , 2009 and 2011 .

An Australian POW that was freed in the raid , Private Walter Gossner of the 2 / 15th Battalion , provided an extremely detailed account of his experiences about being part of a group of 87 POWs freed by Partisans from a location near O?balt . He gives the date of the raid as 27 September 1944

, four weeks after the date given by Churches . His account has been posted on the internet by his family . Gossner states that he arrived at Semi? 21 days after the raid , and his account varies significantly from that of Churches . It is not known why Gossner 's dates and other details of his account differ so markedly from Churches ' account .

The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War states that the raid occurred at St Lorenzen (the German name of Lovrenc na Pohorju) , and that the raid was planned by two British officers . This varies significantly from all of the other sources , and it is unknown why this is the case .