**Record of Service: The Prisoner Transcript**

**Anthony Wilson-Smith:**Hi, I am Anthony Wilson-Smith, president and CEO of Historica Canada. The way we see the world today is informed a lot by our past, both the good and the bad. This is where our podcasts come in. Podcasts like “[Residential Schools](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-podcast-series)”, a three-part series created to honour the stories of survivors, their families, and communities and to commemorate the history and legacy of Residential Schools in Canada.

**Riley Burns:**“I didn’t want to be an Indian, I didn’t know who in the hell I wanted to be. I wasn’t accepted by the white man; I was accepted by my own people in my reserve.”

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**AD READ:** In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt an official multiculturalism policy. It was meant to preserve cultural freedoms and recognize the contributions of diverse groups to Canadian society. Today, multiculturalism is a defining feature of the Canadian identity, but for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Today it’s a defining feature of the Canadian identity. But for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Listen to A Place to Belong: A History of Multiculturalism in Canada, a five-part series from Historica Canada. Join us as we explore the history of multiculturalism in Canada. Subscribe to A Place to Belong on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Edward Carter-Edwards:**“So we thought, once we’re here, we will never get out alive. Nobody will ever know we had been here; nobody even knows where we are! You could hear the moans and groans and agonies of people being tortured by the Gestapo. You could hear shots ringing out.”

**Maia Foster:**Welcome to “Record of Service”, a podcast presented by Historica Canada. I’m your host, Maia Foster. In this series, we bring you interviews with Canada’s veterans—their stories of life, loss, and their time in the service. This episode, we’ll focus on the story of Edward Carter-Edwards, a Canadian airman who was shot down over France.

Just a warning to those that may be listening with young ones around, today’s story contains graphic descriptions.

**Edward Carter Edwards:**“I don’t remember this. I don’t remember pulling the ripcord, I don’t remember counting up to ten. I do remember the parachute opening and I do remember floating down.

“You hear all kinds of stories and all kinds of sad experiences, and you get to know which targets are the worst ones. The one the stuck out the most of all was the one to Berlin. It was a long haul. It was dangerous, it was probably 6 or 7 hours in flight. So, you spent many hours over enemy territory exposed to flack, fighters, searchlights. But, you always thought it wasn’t going to be you, it was going to be someone else.

“It all went quite well until number 22. We took off on the 7th of June. This was our target. It was a railway yard; our purpose was to destroy this target. We took off and we were just minutes from dropping our bomb when the whole aircraft shook, just as if someone was hitting it with a sledgehammer.”

**MF:**Thecaptain alerted his crew to prepare to abandon the aircraft. A German fighter had flown underneath their plane and fired.

**ECE:** “We had to bail out in a heck of a hurry. And it wasn’t until many, many years later that I met my navigator and he said, ‘Do you remember the night that we were shot down?’ And I said, ‘Well, kind of… I don’t remember leaving the aircraft.’ Well, he said, ‘No wonder, you were sitting in the escape hatch at the front of the aircraft and [you] froze.’ I didn’t know this, and I don’t remember, but I froze in that position, which meant I blocked Gordy’s exit, the navigator, who was behind me. He couldn’t get out. She he said, ‘All I did was put my foot on your back and shoved you out because I wanted to get out too.’”

**MF:**When their Halifax bomber crashed, the blaze lit up the countryside. He and his crew were on the ground, separated, in German-occupied France.

**ECE:** “I could see the Seine river. I could see a white church steeple sticking up. I could see what looked like a forest on the one side. Just before I entered the forest, I stopped and looked back at the burning aircraft and there was a shadow running towards me.”

**MF:**It was the bomb aimer from his crew. The two men hugged.

**ECE:**“As we ran towards the bush, it looked like a path. So, we buried our shoots under some bushes, and then we ran along this path together. We came to a fork in the path. Tom was not visible in front of me and I couldn’t hear him, so I called, ‘Tom! Tom, where are you?’”

**MF:**Edward didn’t know which path Tom had taken. Years later, he would discover that, in fact, Tom had turned left and was picked up by the French Resistance. Tom would remain with the Maquis until the allies liberated France. Edward, however, turned right.

**ECE:** “I came into a little village and I knocked on several doors. And there was a gate. And I stood there, and I looked at it and sure enough, there was two women there. And I said in my poor high school French, ‘Avez vous le pain, s’il vous plait?’ Which means, ‘Have you any bread please?’ And the one lady said to me, in good English, ‘Who are you, what do you want? What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘I’m a Canadian airman. I was shot down a few nights ago. I need food. I need help. I want to be in touch with the underground. I’d like to get back to England.’ So she ushered me into the house, took me into the kitchen, gave me a bowl of hot milk and bread and she said, ‘Now, you can’t stay here because if the Gestapo find you here, you may not be executed, but we will.’”

**MF:**Edward stayed with the women for a couple of days, until a young man and woman brought him a fake French passport. The couple promised Edward safe passage to Spain.

**ECE:**“Anyway, the driver drove through Paris pretty fast, and the last thing I remember seeing was the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. He stopped at a Gestapo roadblock, he got out and he went over to somebody with authority, and immediately six or seven of the military came over to the car. They opened up the door of the car and they basically pulled us out of the car like sacks of potatoes, threw us down on the ground and proceeded to beat the living daylights out of us with their jack boots and rifles. And we’re laying on the ground, hurt, bleeding, sore, scared. And this great big German standing over me and I got up and stood in front of him, and he pulled out his Luger and he jabbed it right between my eyes. I stand in front of him and he says, in good English, ‘Who are you, what are you doing here?’ ‘I’m a Canadian airman. I demand protection under the Geneva Convention.’ ‘You’re not airmen; you’re all spies and saboteurs and will be executed as such.’

**MF:**For more than a month, Edward and his comrades languished in Fresnes, a German-run French prison.

**ECE:**“So, the four of us were in a little cell – about 6 x 8 – and, uh, one of us slept on just, uh, a wrought iron cot that was attached to the wall. The other three of us slept on the floor and, uh, it was a horrible, horrible, horrible place. We find out in a hurry that the place is lousy with fleas and so we used to take time among ourselves, the four of us, in order to retain, maintain our sanity, to go through the seams of our clothing to see how many fleas we could kill in competition.”

**MF:**Soon their fate took a turn for the worse.

**ECE:** “So they gathered everybody up and they took us by trucks and buses down to the railway yard in Paris where we were forced into this little French cattle car, like sardines in a can; you could hardly sit, you could hardly stand, you could hardly do anything. And so, you’re almost like doubled up.

“A young French lad of about 17 or 18 happened to be looking out the window and he put his hand on the edge of the window frame. And the German guard walking by saw it and he shot at him. And the bullet went through his hand. And so, they opened up the door of the car and said, ‘Somebody in here had been hurt.’ And our boys thought they were doing the right thing, they said, ‘Yeah, this young lad got shot in the hand.’ And so, the German guard ordered him out of the car, made him march down the embankment, and as he marched down, they shot him in the back. And as he fell, convulsively, he didn’t die, and so a German officer coming along came over and put a few more rounds in the back of his head, and then they closed the doors and we took off.”

**MF:**The train’s last stop was Buchenwald. Established in 1937, it was one of the largest concentration camps built on German soil. The Allied airmen shouldn’t have been sent there. They should have been sent to a prisoner of war camp.

**ECE:** “At the beginning, we didn’t eat the bread they gave us, which was a composition of who knows what and we would throw it away. Other men hung around us, and they would dive for this bread, like a pack of hungry wolves. After a while, we ate this bread because it was the only thing we had.”

**MF:** According to camp records, some 240,000 prisoners from 30 different countries passed through its walls. It had no gas chambers on site, but 10,000 of its prisoners would eventually be sent to extermination camps, while an additional 43,000 died from malnutrition, disease, and violence at the hands of the camp guards.

**ECE:** “It’s very difficult to convince and tell people of the cruelty, the sadism, the brutality that took place in this… I call it the gates of hell because they couldn’t keep up with the dead and dying. As a matter of fact, they had a hut, one of the huts where you could see bodies piled in there, just like cordwood waiting to go into the crematorium.

“I had to go and work in the quarry for two days, which would have taken me, if it had not been for the help of a young Dutch lad who was a prisoner of Buchenwald. He said, ‘I’m going to take your name off the work list and put you down as having died. What you do with your time is up to you, but [that’s] the least I can do, just so that you would not have to go out and work in the quarry’. Because if I had, I would never have made it. The quarry was really a death sentence; it was a death sentence for a lot of Russians and a lot of the Jewish people. It was basically a place where they tortured you, not physically, but they tortured by working you to death.”

**MF:**And then, a miracle.

**ECE:** “Somehow or another, German air force found out there was Allied airmen in Buchenwald. And around the middle of October 1944, they came in and they literally snuck out of Buchenwald, roughly 152 or 154 Allied airmen. 12 of us were so sick we couldn’t be moved. As a matter of fact, we were dying. So, we were left behind until the day when a German officer stood there beside me, where I was lying on a cot, and he said, ‘I’m taking you to Stalag III.’”

**MF:**To clarify, the officer told Edward that he was going to a prisoner of war camp for Allied airmen.

**ECE:** “And it’s a miracle. It’s a miracle to think that somehow, the German air force, who was our enemy in combat, but comrades in arms, found out that there was Allied airmen in Buchenwald, and they saved our lives. We were all slated to be hung on the meat hooks.”

**MF:**“Record of Service” is a production of [The Memory Project Speakers Bureau](https://www.thememoryproject.com/) and archive, connecting veterans and Canadian Forces members with school and community groups from coast to coast. The Memory Project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. We are a program of Historica Canada, a non-profit offering programs that you can use to explore, learn, and reflect on Canadian history, and what it means to be Canadian.

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