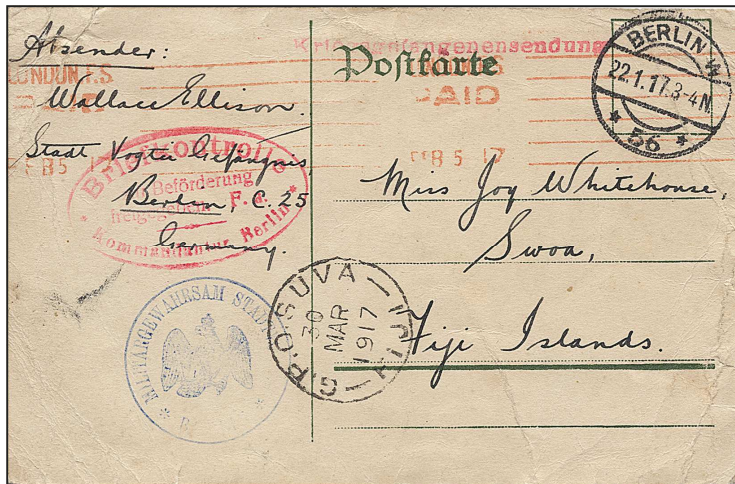


David Alford

Prisoner in Ruhleben to Fiji in 1917

Although unable to fight for our King and country on the battlefield, we endeavoured to maintain the British ideal of patriotism, patience, courage and usefulness through four years

(Inscription on Union Flag presented to the King at the Ruhleben Exhibition in February 1919.)



Wallace Ellison, a Lancastrian, was interned at the start of World War One while working in a shoe factory in Frankfurt. He was sent to Ruhleben Camp. The racecourse at Ruhleben, Spandau, near Berlin, became an internment camp for, mostly, British civilian internees during WWI. Estimates of confinee numbers vary but it is suggested some 4,000 to 5,500 prisoners were held there from November 1914 to the end of the war.

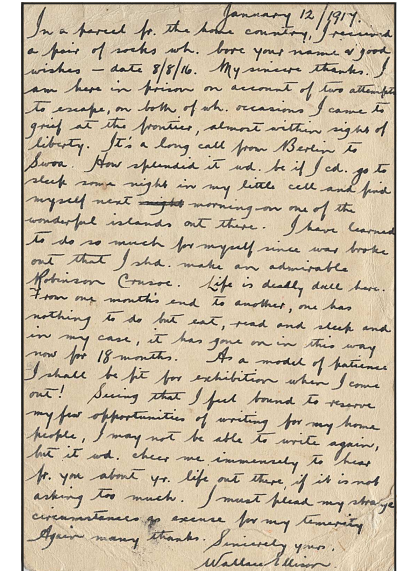
The conditions were basic, with near-starvation rations especially at the start, but improved as the occupants became more organised. Owing to its geographic location, the winters were especially harsh. By the end of the war, the site was a virtual 'town' in its own right including a postal service, a newspaper, shops and many societies.

Ellison escaped from the camp in 1915, again in 1916, and finally and successfully in November 1917. He later became a British spy on the Dutch border. The postcard illustrated is from Ellison while in prison after the second escape attempt. The text of the card reads:

January 12/1917. In a parcel fr. the home country, I received a pair of socks wh. bore your name and good wishes – date 8/8/16. My sincere thanks. I am here in prison on account of two attempts to escape, on both of wh. occasions I

came to grief at the frontier, almost in sight of liberty. It's a long call from Berlin to Suva. How splendid it wd. be if I cd. go to sleep some night in my little cell and find myself next morning in one of the wonderful islands out there. I have learned to do so much for myself since war broke out that I shd. make an admirable Robinson Crusoe. Life is deadly dull here. From one month's end to another, one has nothing to do but eat, read and sleep and in my case, it has gone on in this way now for 18 months. As a model of patience I shall be fit for exhibition when I come out! Seeing that I feel bound to reserve my few opportunities of writing for my home people, I may not be able to write again, but it wd. cheer me immensely to hear fr. you about yr. life out there, if it is not asking too much. I must plead my strange circumstances as excuse for my temerity. Again many thanks. Sincerely yours,

Wallace Ellison



The markings

1. Circular stamp in purple: **Militärgewahrsam Stadt V[ogtei] Berlin** (Military custody, Berlin city prison).
2. Oval red censor stamp of Berlin: **Briefkontrolle | zu Beförderung | freigegeben. F. a. | Kommandatur Berlin** (Letter control office: released for despatch. F. a. Berlin Command)
F. a. = Frist abgelaufen (Storage period expired).
POW mail was held for a 10-day period before being posted.
3. Straight-line red **Kriegsgefangenensendung** (POW mail). Applied in the same office as the oval stamp. Purpose to indicate from POW, therefore exempt from postage.
4. **Berlin W | 56 | 22.1.17.3-4N**. datestamp. Berlin W 56 post office was in Französicherstraße.
5. **London F.S. | Paid | Feb 5 17** Krag machine postmark applied in London Foreign Section on much POW and military mail to prevent possible surcharging as unpaid. Probably received via neutral Netherlands.
6. **G.P.O. Suva | 30 | Mar | 1917** cds, in use from 25 June 1914 to 12 September 1919 (Rodger 106a).

References

Rodger, J. G., *Postal History of Fiji 1911–1952* (Pacific Islands Study Circle, with assistance of the British Philatelic Trust, 1991).

The Liddel Collection at Leeds University has a vast amount of material related to Ellison's time at Ruhleben, held at RUH 20.

This article first appeared in Pacifica (April 2012) and is reproduced (with minor corrections) with permission. The author acknowledges the assistance of Alistair Kennedy with the philatelic information.