

# The Secret Maps by R W Frazier

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## THE SECRET MAPS

ON the 4th of July, 1918, certain officers of the R.N.A.S. at Philippopolis received some bogus post-cards from people they did not know and referring to things they had never done. I, myself, received a post-card from some address in Cadogan Square, and signed "Lily." It was something to this effect:

"DEAR ROWLAND,—How are you enjoying your stay in Bulgaria? We often think about you, particularly last week, when we went up the river as far as Runnymede. How different from last year! Donald is rapidly improving in his tennis, but will never approach you at your best. Well, cheer up, old boy, Aunt Marian sends her love and all the girls want to be remembered to you.

"Yours ever,  
"LILY."

Now the significant things about this post-card were: that I was a prisoner in 1917, so could not have gone up the river to Runnymede in that year at all; that I did not know anyone called Donald, and that at that time I was not a tennis player; that I never had an Aunt Marian, and that I did not know anyone who signed herself "Lily." In normal times, on receiving a post-card like that, one would probably make some exclamation of astonishment, show it to the nearest person and ask him or her what on earth it meant. A prisoner-of-war camp, however, has an atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue, which makes a different course of conduct advisable. Therefore, after reading the post-card through several times I merely put it into my pocket without saying anything.

At that period in the history of Philippopolis Camp the officers were as a rule grouped in twos and threes in separate cubicles made of rush-mat partitions. On that particular morning, after the excitement caused by the arrival of a mail had died down, I walked along to the "cabin" (our name for a cubicle) occupied by Viscount Torrington and Greig. After a few minutes' conversation I mentioned casually that I had received a mysterious post-card, couched in affectionate terms, from an unknown lady. Torrington and Greig looked at me as if to make sure that I meant what I said, and then disclosed the fact that

they had a joke on of their own over something of the same sort. They had kept it dark, however, as I had done, assuming that there might be more in it than met the eye. Up till then probably each of us thought he had been singled out, as a man of known resource and intelligence, to play the part of hero in a sort of spy drama. Then the discovery that as many as three of us had received similar communications gave the impression that the post-cards were being scattered broadcast, and that it was a practical joke on the part of somebody at home to give us something to think about and keep our spirits up. We therefore exchanged post-cards, and the effect of reading messages in such intimate terms from unknown senders was so ludicrous that we burst into laughter over them. Our laughter and some of our remarks were heard by Marsh, an R.N.A.S. officer on the other side of the partition, and he came in and announced that he also had had a post-card he could not make head or tail of. This discovery caused fresh merriment, the noise of which reached the ears of Cooper, an R.N.A.S. officer, who shared a cabin opposite with Blandy of the R.N.A.S. and Owen of the R.F.C. Cooper came in, and recommended silence as to the cause of our hilarity. A suggestion of mine that the post-cards would probably furnish a means of getting out of the country caused a fresh outburst, as every post-card seemed like an effusion of a Whitehall flapper writing to a lonely soldier.

For curiosity's sake we began to see what we could make of them, taking the first letter of each word, for instance, to see what they spelt; then reading the first word of each line downwards; then the last word of each line. In no case could we arrive at any intelligible result, so we tried heating in front of the fire to see if any invisible writing (made by using onion-juice instead of ink) would appear between the lines. This method failed to furnish the key, so as a last resort one of the post-cards was put into water. We waited until it was soaked, then we all crowded round in breathless expectation while the layers of paper, of which it was composed, were pulled apart. Sure enough, as the top surface was pulled away something coloured underneath appeared to our wondering eyes; and dead silence fell on the group, everyone present realizing that this was the most dramatic moment since we had been there. We fell back a little, so as not to interfere with the delicate task of unmasking the real message, whatever it might be, and soon the word was whispered that it was a map!

A few minutes later it lay revealed for us all to see—a map of a stretch of country to the south of Philippopolis, showing some villages we knew by name, also the roads marked in red, the streams in blue; woods and mountains, names of places, and heights of hills all shown clearly as on a military map. We all stood silent in front of this revelation; things were happening now with a vengeance! The languor, the lassitude, the boredom consequent on months of stagnation in a prison camp, all vanished in contemplation of the stupendous possibilities opened up by this new development. What new chain of events had been started by the unnoticed arrival in camp of these innocent-looking post-cards? What would it lead to? Would it result in our triumphantly escaping, and so avoiding three or four years' possible further captivity; or would the whole plot be discovered, and the officers to whom the post-cards were addressed become the objects of the Bulgars' vengeance? These were some of the thoughts which passed through our minds at the time, and in view of the leakage of information which had taken place in the case of previous plans to escape there was no need to impress upon anyone present the need of secrecy.

After the arrival of the first batch of post-cards there was nothing to do but possess our souls in patience till some more arrived, as the disconnected nature of the first lot showed they were part of a larger scheme. We had to decide first of all as to the ownership of the cards, as it was not apparent at that stage whether this was a scheme launched by the Admiralty for the benefit of any naval officer who cared to avail himself of it, or whether the cards were being sent out in response to requests by individual officers.

The question was: Were the cards common property, or were they being sent to one but addressed to several so as to prevent suspicion falling upon any one officer by his receiving numerous epistles of the same nature? It now became known that Owen and Cooper had both sent home requests for aid in escaping. Owen had cashed a manuscript cheque, written on a large piece of notepaper, with Monsieur Kalcheff, a wealthy civilian in Philippopolis, who occasionally consented to accommodate us in this manner. Owen's cheque had got home to his bankers through Switzerland or Holland, and on the back of it was written a long message in onion-juice, which would be invisible until heated in front of a fire. The bankers were ignorant of this, but Owen had also written to a friend of his who

was interested in photography. By skilful wording of the letter, and the use of the word "development" in connection with his cheque, now in the bank's possession, Owen had hoped to convey to his friend that he wanted him to get the cheque from the bank and to develop it. Many months later Owen told me in Salonica that his friend had gathered his meaning, had persuaded the bank to part with the cheque, and had succeeded in revealing the hidden message, which stood out perfectly clearly. As a result of this the R.F.C. had a scheme ready to put into execution, under which some machines were to land near Philippopolis Camp in October, pick up Owen and any companions he might have with him, and fly back with them to the British lines in time for breakfast. Thasos Island, from which I had made my last flight, was only about one and a half hours from Philippopolis by air, though by train it took about thirty-six hours to reach the coast by the quickest route.

Before October came, however, the Bulgars had asked for an armistice, and we were all liberated and sent to Salonica in the course of that month.

Cooper's method of communicating with home was somewhat different. He knew a Commander, R.N., and had written to him a bogus post-card similar to those which we had received at Philippopolis. This would naturally put the Commander on inquiry, and further observation would show a trained investigator that the post-card was in code, the key to which was contained in a given page of a certain Gunnery Manual in use in the Navy. Cooper's theory was that his post-card had been received and understood by the Commander, and that the mysterious post-cards now arriving at Philippopolis were being sent out in pursuance of an Admiralty scheme to enable us to escape. This explanation seemed the most plausible one, and all the officers agreed to hand over their post-cards to Cooper without much demur.

That period happened to be a good one for mails, which came in two or three days a week. Every time about half a dozen post-cards came, of the type which we soon learned to recognize. There was nothing suspicious about them, though our anxious eyes did notice that not one of them bore an English postmark. All our letters were post-marked in England, Geneva, and Sofia, so that in this conglomeration of postmarks the fact that *the* post-cards were only stamped "Geneva" and "Sofia" would probably pass unnoticed.

Our chief anxiety was to take care that none of these

post-cards got into the hands of one R.N.A.S. officer, whose mind had become unhinged through privation. His mental condition was not known at home, so post-cards came addressed to him as well as to the rest of us. We had no scruples about waylaying the postman and intercepting all cards addressed to this officer, as we soon learnt to tell real from bogus post-cards, and for one of the latter to have got into his possession would have been fatal. The mind of the officer in question was full of plots and counter-plots, one of his delusions being that Lloyd George was the arch-Hun. To have received one of these bogus post-cards, addressed to himself, would have confirmed his worst suspicions that he was encompassed about by the hosts of evil. We therefore had to tell off an "officer of the day" to watch for the mail, and we kept a sort of roster for this purpose.

Not only maps were contained in the insides of these post-cards. Before very long a card came which revealed very small writing when the top surface was scraped off. This proved to be a passport, written in Bulgarian, and bearing a purported reproduction of the official seal of the First Army Headquarters at Sofia *and* the signature of the chief of police! Truly, we thought, the marvels of the British Secret Service organization were beyond belief. We had already thought, on seeing the minute details of the maps which they had sent out at first, that the Secret Service at home knew more about the country already, than we should find out in ten years. The completeness of the details in this imitation passport struck us as a masterpiece of organization in face of most difficult obstacles. The directions on this card were to reproduce the writing and seals, about three times as big as they appeared on the post-card itself. In order that we should not be in the dark as to the nature and contents of the passport, in case we ever had to use it, they had the foresight to supply a translation also, which was something to this effect:

"To the authorities in the district of Philippopolis and on the coasts of the Ægean Sea:

"Please give safe conduct and every facility to Lieutenant Fritz von Arnst, of the Imperial German Navy, and companions, who are passing through the country on a tour of inspection."

The audacity of this document, and the mixture of foresight and sense of humour in addressing it to the very

people by whom we were most likely to be caught, struck us dumb with admiration of the master-mind which conceived the idea. We gathered from this that we were meant to travel in uniform, which in any case was advisable, to avoid being shot as spies—a likely occurrence in Bulgaria if we were caught in disguise. A later card, however, contained full directions as to what we were to do. We were to travel on foot in naval uniform, and were to time our journey so as to arrive at the coast, near the mouth of the River Nestos, during a fortnight when there was no moon.

For our guidance a card was being sent, giving the times of moonrise and moonset, and the hours of moonlight, on all the nights of August, September, and October 1918. We afterwards received both the cards giving this information, for it is a noteworthy fact (showing the thoroughness of the Admiralty organization) that all the cards were sent in duplicate, so that there should be no chance of a missing link through a card going adrift. There were two fortnights when there would be no moon—the last fortnight in August and the first fortnight in October. Every night during each of these two periods, agents would be landed, with khaki armlets and rifles, at a point near the mouth of the River Nestos, and marked on our maps. The passwords were to be: for the officers, "Stavros"; for the agents, "London." (Stavros was a small harbour at the head of the Gulf of Orfano near the point where the Entente right flank rested on the Ægean Sea, and was a British base.) Motor-boats were to be in waiting, and parties of not more than six officers could be dealt with at a time. The first thing that struck us about this scheme was that it placed the lives of the Secret Service men in great peril. However, if the Admiralty cared to risk their lives like that it was no concern of ours.

Once the scheme had unfolded itself before us, and we understood it in all its bearings, we held a secret meeting in Torrington's cabin and had a low-voiced consultation as to how many should avail themselves of the chance of returning to duty. The largest number of naval officers that were ever in the country was ten, and on one celebrated occasion, with the aid of an ex-stoker from among the privates in the camp, we had played the Army Officers at Soccer. Flight-Lieutenant Brady had escaped in January 1918, however, and at the time of which I am writing was away at Sew Liejwo for punishment. Excluding the R.N.A.S. officer who was mentally deranged, the number of possible entries

under the present scheme was eight. A vote was taken, with the result that everyone present volunteered to go, and the meeting was adjourned to a later date for the discussion of arrangements.

I myself had not much faith in that unanimous vote in favour of escaping, as I thought that what is known as the "psychology of crowds" had something to do with it. It seemed to me that no one could have hung back and faced the accusing eyes of the rest at that meeting without appearing afraid, and that it was the unconscious realization of this fact which had caused everyone present to volunteer as a starter. I remember it cost me a sleepless night thinking over the pros and cons, and I took the earliest opportunity afterwards of canvassing the opinions of the individuals who had composed that meeting. I realized quite well that it was no good engaging in a desperate adventure like that unless one went in for it wholeheartedly and with no doubts at the back of one's mind, or in the bottom of one's heart, as to the wisdom and practicability of the undertaking. I thought of a tale by O. Henry, the American short-story writer, which I had read not long before. In it he mentioned that among the mounted police in the Wild West, where they are often engaged in hunting bandits or outlaws who are crack shots, a man chooses his stirrup-companion with more care than he chooses his wife, as his life may depend at times on the man riding next to him. I thought we, in our escape, were somewhat in the position of those mounted police, and that there was no room for doubtful starters in our party. I found, as I expected, that several of those who had so willingly volunteered had private doubts which they had not cared to mention. A frank discussion of these doubts and fears, however, had the effect of banishing them, as the arguments in favour of making the attempt were stronger than those against, so that in the result our determination to carry out our previous decision was strengthened. The great thing to be said in favour of supporting this scheme was that it did offer a very efficient means of getting out of the country once one had reached the coast.

The great objection to escaping (and one which rendered all schemes futile) had always been that even if the coast was reached one was just as much a prisoner as ever, as all boats had been burnt and there were numerous patrols along the shore. With regard to the present scheme, also, *esprit de corps* urged us on to take advantage of it. After the Admiralty had gone to all this trouble, and obviously



spent so much money on our account, we felt that the least we officers could do was to second their efforts by seizing the opportunity they were giving us. It was as if we were all out in small boats at a distance, and the flagship had hoisted our pennants as a recall signal.

The details of our preparations for escaping are too long to give here. We had not much time to get ready—about five weeks—and the first party (Cooper, Blandy, Owen, and Marsh) left on the 14th of August.

Owen was an R.F.C. man, but was entitled to a place in the first party as he had been as active as Cooper in securing aid from home, but his plans had not matured quite so soon. They had a quantity of khaki, which they had to get dyed blue in the town, the excuse they made being that the clothes were wanted for camp theatricals. Their enterprise was nearly wrecked at the outset. They had to get from the officers' quarters to the men's in the afternoon. They were then to dress and put their packs on in the store-room, but had no opportunity of slipping through the sentry-cordon the first night, so were imprisoned in a very confined and verminous space for at least twenty-four hours. We were horrified, the morning after they had disappeared, to hear from our servants that they were still in the camp. They got safely away the second night, however, though they had an agonizing few minutes when a search-party of Bulgars was looking for them. The Bulgar corporal actually knocked on their door, then remarked: "Ah, that's only a store-room," and walked away! They were caught at Chepelari ten days later and brought back to the camp. On the 28th of August, Beare and I went. We were also caught at Chepelari ten days later, and brought back about the 10th of September. Torrington and Greig then escaped about the 12th of September, but Greig (who was my pilot when we were shot down nearly two years previously) was unfortunately wounded by a shot from a sentry's rifle the first night out. To our great sorrow he died in hospital the next day, and was buried in Philippopolis the same afternoon.

Seven of us were then undergoing twenty-one days' close confinement for escaping, but we were allowed to go to Greig's funeral with the other officers—British, French, and Italian. In that corner of the cemetery there are many British graves—soldiers who died in captivity in Philippopolis during the years 1915-18.

I believe the secret maps, and the post-cards on which they came, were all destroyed before the attempts to escape

began. We made copies of them on tracing-paper, which were handier to use, and would not cause such awkward questions to be asked if they were discovered. We thought it best for the origin of our maps, and especially of that wonderful passport, to remain a mystery. We need not have been so careful, as it happened, for with startling suddenness the Bulgarian armistice was announced less than a fortnight later—on September 29, 1918. In another fortnight, by the middle of October, we were all on our way to Salonica, and our imprisonment was merely an evil memory.

One interesting question remains to be answered—who were the writers of those post-cards, couched in such intimate terms and signed "Lily," "Kathleen," "Dorothy," etc.? Were they charming lady clerks at the Admiralty, or members of the W.R.N.S., and did any of the officers get into touch with their unknown correspondents, with romantic results? Unfortunately, the experiences of real life rarely follow the lines of the popular novel. Those post-cards were another illustration of the occasions the "handy man" can rise to.

They were all written by the same Commander, R.N.

R. W. FRAZIER