Before the Fall: A Chronology of Ambroise Jean Comeau, RCAF

Enlistment

June 1940 — Canada

He was twenty-one years old. The war in Europe was a year old. France had fallen. Britain stood alone.

Ambroise Jean Comeau of Meteghan, Digby County, Nova Scotia — a French-speaking Acadian from a fishing village on St. Mary's Bay — walked into a recruiting office and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. To make the paperwork easier, or perhaps to fit more smoothly into an English-speaking military, he gave his name as **Ambrose John Comeau**. The anglicized version would follow him through every record, every letter, every telegram. Only in private — a letter to his father, a diary no one was meant to read — would he be Ambroise again.

He was accepted for **standard aircrew** training. The RCAF needed wireless operators and air gunners, and the boy from Meteghan had steady hands and good ears.

Training

June 1940 – February 1941 — Canada

Aircrew training in wartime Canada was compressed, intense, and dangerous. Comeau would have passed through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan — likely a Manning Depot first, then Wireless School, then Bombing and Gunnery School. He learned Morse code, radio procedure, aircraft recognition, and the Browning .303 machine gun.

He graduated in **February 1941** as a **Sergeant Wireless Air Gunner**. The AG half-wing was sewn onto his uniform. He was now aircrew — a WOp/AG, the trade that would place him in the cramped rear turret or beside the radio set of a Bristol Blenheim.

Overseas

April 1941 — United Kingdom

Comeau crossed the Atlantic that spring. The exact ship is unrecorded, but the route was well-worn: Halifax or Montreal to a British port, in convoy, under U-boat threat.

He arrived in the United Kingdom and was posted first to **139 Squadron**, then, on **28 September 1941**, to **107 Squadron, RAF** — a light bomber squadron. 107 Squadron had seen hard service since 1939. Its Blenheims had attacked German columns in France, bombed invasion barges in the Channel ports, and struck at targets across occupied Europe. By late 1941, the squadron was operating from Malta, the island fortress under relentless Axis siege.

The Accident

13 August 1941 — RAF Upwood, Huntingdonshire

Before he saw combat, he nearly died in an English field.

Comeau was at **No. 17 Operational Training Unit**, RAF Upwood, converting to the aircraft he would fly operationally. On 13 August 1941, at 12:05 hours, he was aboard **Bristol Blenheim Mk IV, serial V5758**, on a training flight. Approximately three-quarters of a mile northeast of the aerodrome, both engines failed. The cause, according to the Accident Report filed that day, was **"failure of both engines due to mishandling of controls"** — pilot error. The Blenheim was a demanding aircraft; its hydraulics and fuel management were unforgiving.

The aircraft was destroyed. **Category E — total write-off. Salvage: yes.**

Comeau climbed out with **abrasions to his hands and right knee**. He was not admitted to hospital. The telegram to his father the next day read: *Slightly injured*.

He had walked away from a wrecked Blenheim. He would not walk away from the next one.

Malta

September – December 1941

107 Squadron was deployed to Malta in the autumn of 1941. The island — a British-held fortress astride the Axis supply routes to North Africa — was under relentless air attack. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica bombed the harbours, airfields, and towns daily. Aircrew operating from Malta had a life expectancy measured in weeks.

Between September and December 1941, Comeau flew **twenty-seven operational sorties** out of Malta. He flew **Bristol Blenheims** in two principal roles:

- **Anti-shipping strikes**: low-level attacks against Axis convoys supplying Rommel's Afrika Korps. These were among the most dangerous missions of the war — flying straight and level into concentrated anti-aircraft fire at mast height.
- **Night bombing**: precision raids against heavily defended targets in the Middle East and North Africa.

The targets were, in the language of his later medal recommendation, "heavily defended." Tripolitania. Libya. Egypt. The places the diary lists as "countries gone through since in the service" — he had seen them from above, in darkness, under fire.

He also flew **one operational sortie from the United Kingdom en route to Malta** — the ferry flight down, which counted toward his total.

His diary does not mention any of this. The twenty-seven sorties are absent — perhaps too fresh, perhaps too routine to record, perhaps simply not what the diary was for. The diary was for the march. The flying was another life.

Promotion in Absentia

1 December 1941

Twelve days before he was shot down, the RCAF promoted him to **Temporary Flight Sergeant (Paid)**. It is unclear whether the news reached Malta before his final mission. He may have flown his last sorties not knowing his own rank.

The promotion was the first of several he would receive while a prisoner. By the war's end, he would be a commissioned Pilot Officer — five ranks higher than the Sergeant who graduated in February 1941.

The Final Sortie

13 December 1941 — Cephalonia, Greece

The twenty-eighth operational sortie.

Bristol Blenheim Z7800 of 107 Squadron, RAF, took off from Malta on an anti-shipping strike against **Argostoli harbour**, on the Greek island of Cephalonia. The harbour was in Axis hands — used by Italian and German vessels supplying the Balkan front.

The crew of three:

Position	**Name**	**Service**
Pilot	Sgt. Allan John Lee	RAFVR
Navigator	Sgt. Richard Haggett	RAFVR
Wireless Operator / Air Gunner	Sgt. Ambrose John Comeau	RCAF

The aircraft was hit by enemy fire. It went down in the Ionian Sea, off the coast of Cephalonia.

All three crew survived. They were pulled from the water by Greek fishermen — local men, risking their lives to rescue Allied airmen in waters patrolled by the Axis. Within hours, they were in German and Italian custody.

A photograph was taken. Three young men in a row: Lee, Haggett, Comeau. Unsure. Alive. The photographer's shutter closed. The long march began.

The Man at the Moment of Capture

He was twenty-two years old. He had been in uniform for eighteen months. He had survived a training crash, crossed the Atlantic, and flown twenty-eight combat missions from the most bombed island on earth. He was a Flight Sergeant and did not know it.

He was an Acadian who had anglicized his name to serve. He spoke French in his head and English on the radio. He had a girl at home — Alphonsine — who could not cook.

And on 13 December 1941, he fell out of the sky near an island he had probably never heard of before the briefing that morning.

He would not see Canada again for three years, four months, and five thousand miles. He would not see Alphonsine for longer.

He wrote nothing about the crash in his diary. The diary begins later. But the list on the first page — *Places (countries gone through since in the service)* — ends with Germany. He did not know that yet.

Sources

- RCAF service records, Library and Archives Canada.
- C1 Accident Report A216, 13 August 1941 — Blenheim V5758.
- RAF Casualty and operational records, 107 Squadron.
- Promotion letters, RCAF Ottawa, 19 July 1943.
- Medal recommendation memo, No. 3 P.R.C., 23 April 1945.
- The personal diary of Ambroise Jean Comeau.
- Photograph: Acqui Museum / Associazione Mediterraneo, Kefalonia.

The Prisoner: A Chronology of Ambroise Jean Comeau, RCAF

Capture

13 December 1941 — Cephalonia, Greece

Bristol Blenheim Z7800 of 107 Squadron, RAF, operating from Malta, was on an anti-shipping strike against Argostoli harbour when it was hit by enemy fire. The aircraft went down in the Ionian Sea off the island of Cephalonia.

All three crew survived: pilot Sgt. Allan John Lee, navigator Sgt. Richard Haggett, and wireless operator/air gunner Sgt. Ambroise Jean Comeau — a French-speaking Acadian from Meteghan, Digby County, Nova Scotia, who had anglicized his name to enlist. They were pulled from the water by Greek fishermen and taken prisoner by German and Italian forces.

This was Comeau's twenty-eighth operational sortie. He had flown twenty-seven missions from Malta between September and December 1941 — anti-shipping strikes, night bombing, Coastal Command-type operations against heavily defended Axis targets in the Mediterranean. His luck had held for three months. It ended here.

Greece and Albania

13 December 1941 – 9 January 1942

For the first seventeen days, Comeau was held on Cephalonia itself, then transported by the Italian troopship *Donizetti* to the Greek mainland. He passed through a jail at Preveza, then was moved north: San Giovanni, Corfu, and finally across the water into Albania.

The diary records these weeks in fragments: Porto Edda, Porto Palermo, Valona, Tirana, Durazzo. He noted guards hunting for food — the first sign that captors and prisoners alike were living at the edge of subsistence.

Italy: The Prison Camps

9 January 1942 – 12 September 1943

From Durazzo, he crossed the Adriatic to Brindisi, Italy. He was held in quarantine at Campo 85 in Tuturano, then moved by train — Bari, Naples, Rome, Genoa — to his permanent camp: PG 52, at Chiavari, on the Ligurian coast.

Italy held him for twenty months. On 14 January 1942, one month after capture, the RCAF promoted him to Temporary Warrant Officer Class 2, effective — he was likely unaware. His deferred pay accumulated in Ottawa while he starved.

The Red Cross confirmed his whereabouts. A night letter from Geneva, 12 November 1943, listed him among eight POWs transferred from Italy to Germany: "R65203 AMBROSE COMEAU / 31613." His German prisoner number was now part of the record.

Germany: Stalag VIII-B, Lamsdorf

September 1943 – 22 January 1945

On 12 September 1943, as Italy collapsed and changed sides, the Germans evacuated PG 52. Comeau was transported north — "Left for Druohland," he wrote in his diary, spelling *Deutschland* as he heard it.

He arrived at Stalag VIII-B (later numbered Stalag 344), at Lamsdorf — now Łambinowice, in Polish Silesia. It was one of the largest POW camps in the Reich, designed for tens of thousands of Allied prisoners.

He was there for sixteen months. Very little of this period survives in his writing — the diary picks up again only when the March begins. But other records fill the gaps. On 3 October 1943 he wrote to his father: *"I have been transferred to Germany. I am sure you have been greatly disappointed, but not quite as I have."* He gave his prisoner number — 31613 — and asked his father to lobby the RCAF in Ottawa for his promotion. He was a Warrant Officer and did not yet know it.

By January 1945, the Soviet army was advancing from the east. The Germans ordered the evacuation of Lamsdorf. The prisoners would walk.

The Death March

22 January – 3 April 1945

They left at two in the afternoon, 22 January 1945, and walked into the worst winter Europe had seen in decades.

What followed was ten weeks of forced marching across Silesia, Saxony, Thuringia, and Hesse — an estimated 800 to 900 kilometres on foot, in temperatures that dropped below −30 °C, through blizzards and mud and ice, on rations that barely existed. Comeau pulled a sledge given to him by a fellow prisoner named Bolge. He walked in snow three inches deep, past thousands of civilian evacuees — Russian men and women, Jewish girls, every nationality the war had uprooted. "They were in very bad state," he wrote, "and looked starved."

The diary records the march day by day, in the barest language:

- **Jauer, 28 January:** "Blizzard all day. Largest convoys of evacuees yet. No rations from Germans. Things are very grim."
- **Goldberg, 30 January:** "Five cooked spuds and four-fifths loaf to last four days."
- **Görlitz, 3 February:** "Bloody horrible. About 400 men where no room for 100."
- **Görlitz, 6 February:** "Heard of the Hole of Calcutta, but it can't be worse than Stalag VIIIA."

Men dropped out every day. Half were gone by the first week. Some died. Ben dropped out. His feet were ringing wet for days on end. He walked through bombed-out Meuselwitz, heard shelling in the distance, and watched Allied fighters strafe the roads.

And then, on **21 February 1945**, in a barn at Bad Lausick, in the rain and mud, he wrote four words that had nothing to do with the war:

Dream of marriage with A.

Alphonsine. The girl in Meteghan who could not cook. She was the reason he kept walking.

Stalag IXA, Ziegenhain

12 March – 29 March 1945

The column reached Stalag IXA at Ziegenhain. "Under canvas," he wrote. "Looks very grim."

Cigarettes were finished. Bread was one loaf for ten men. Food was "very inadequate for rebuilding after privation undergone since Jan 22." Men were being carried out every day, dying of starvation. Air raids continued day and night. Shelling could be heard clearly. On 21 March, the camp was strafed by British fighters — eleven killed, fifty wounded. Comeau clipped his beard off and watched the bombing with what he described as grim interest. "I still dreaming of food," he wrote.

On 28 March, he was told the prisoners would march again. He volunteered. After everything, he chose to walk.

Liberation

29 March – 3 April 1945

The final leg. Good Friday — he ate meat. Easter Sunday, 1 April — "Had egg on toast at 6:30 in wood." He had bought six eggs with bartered goods and boiled three for the morning. He made tea. He and a man named Albert walked through the woods, caught between American infantry and retreating Germans, fired on twice and escaping both times. "Fighters and bombers are operating with Infantry," he wrote. The front line was moving faster than they could walk.

For two more days they survived on raw potatoes, beans, and boiled tea. A Polish boy joined them and left. Rain fell all night. On 3 April, they met twenty-seven other prisoners with bread and coffee. And then someone told them the Americans had passed.

They caught up. They were free.

"Boy it feels great to be free."

After Liberation

3 April – May 1945

He spent three days in a commandeered house in Spangenberg, "living like a king." Plenty of food, cigarettes, a bottle of whiskey on the table while two Jewish-American soldiers played guitar and violin. "Boy oh boy."

On 6 April he noted that the town held five thousand Russians, two thousand Poles, three thousand French, and a thousand Hungarian girls — the displaced population of a broken continent. "Great deal of looking going on," he wrote, with the dry Nova Scotian understatement that had survived everything.

On 8 April he returned to the camp. On 9 April he took a plane for England. "Great reception on landing."

On 10 April, a cablegram reached Meteghan, Nova Scotia: "PLEASED TO ADVISE YOUR SON WARRANT OFFICER AMBROSE JOHN COMEAU PREVIOUSLY REPORTED PRISONER OF WAR IS NOW REPORTED SAFE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM."

He sailed from England in May aboard the troopship *Ranchi*, down the Clyde and into the Atlantic. He arrived in Canada that same month. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer and awarded the 1939–45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with overseas clasp, his Operational Wings, and his Air Gunner's Badge.

He married Alphonsine. He never spoke of the war.

Sources

- The personal diary of Ambroise Jean Comeau, RCAF, transcribed and preserved by his family.
- RCAF service records, Library and Archives Canada.
- International Red Cross night letter, 12 November 1943.
- C1 Accident Report, RAF Gloucester, 13 August 1941.
- Promotion letters, RCAF Ottawa, 1943.
- Liberation cablegram, April 1945.
- *Le Petit Courrier*, Meteghan, 19 April 1945.