

Playing card, backed with a map of the German Lower Saxony region, with a portrait of the Queen Consort.

A POW’S TRUMP CARD

[Playing Card with concealed escape Map]

Author
[ANONYMOUS]

Publication date
c1945].

Publisher

Publication place
[England,

Physical description
Playing card, backed with a map of the German Lower Saxony region, with a portrait of the Queen Consort.

Dimensions
90 by 60mm (3.5 by 2.25 inches).

Notes
Extremely rare British World War Two POW escape playing card map.

During the Second World War Germany had in excess of a thousand POW camps, holding (it is estimated) some 11 million prisoners (some 6 million Soviet, and 5 million non-Soviet). Although the

treatment of the captors varied greatly between camps and theatres of war, they were supposedly governed by the Geneva Convention of 1931, which stipulated that prisoners should be treated in an honourable way, protected from violence, and provided with decent living conditions, food, clothing, and medical care.

The lofty ideals of the Convention were often not adhered to, and prisoners' needs were frequently supplemented by parcels sent by the Red Cross. These parcels contained tinned food, powdered milk, tea, and chocolate to help bolster their often meagre rations, together with soap, cigarettes, and sometimes sports equipment, games – such as a pack of playing cards – and books to help pass the time.

These packages, that could be brought into the camps, with few checks, piqued the interest of both the the American Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the CIA) and the British Special Operations Executive, who saw an opportunity to smuggle contraband to the restless POWs. The Americans contacted the United States Playing Card Company – the majority of whose factories had been converted to make parachutes during the war – to produce a special set of cards. These cards consisted of an escape map sandwiched between the face and the back of the card, that was revealed when soaked in water. The deck could then be laid out to make a detailed map of the country surrounding the camp. The cards produced by the USPCC bore their traditional Bicycle deck backing – still used by magicians across the world – and had a crooked cellophane seal to mark its secret contents.

The present card, which bears the portrait of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (wife of George VI, and later Queen Mother), by the royal portrait photographer Carl Vandyk, was produced in England, originally to celebrate the coronation of George VI in 1937. The face of the card bears the King of Hearts, a romantic allusion of the love been King and Queen. The escape map which has been partially revealed, shows part of Lower Saxony, where the POW camp of Marlag and Milag Nord was based, which housed British and Canadian seamen.

Rarity

Due to the secret nature of these decks, it is unknown how many were produced by either the Americans or the British, or how many survive. The only two known complete decks produced by the USPCC are housed in the Spy Museum, Washington. We are unaware of any complete British decks having survived, with individual cards, such as the present example, rarely appearing on the market.

Bibliography

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 24047

© Daniel Crouch Rare Books Ltd | 2025