

THE LONG MARCH

By early January 1945 the Soviet Army was advancing from the East and this led the Germans to plan to move all POWs to the West, and on 17th January we were given one hour to be ready to leave but, as it happened, we did not leave until the 19th.

Some spent the time making sledges out of bed-boards to carry their goods, but I settled for a rucksack made from some spare material I found.

The two days respite allowed time for sixty-eight sick and wounded to be moved to a nearby civilian camp at Kreuzberg. At 03.30 we were given the order to move; it was dark and it was snowing as we trudged along the road, the temperature.. was below zero. As the day wore on the strength of many of the Kregies began to diminish and surplus baggage, including some of the sledges, were discarded.

After 28 km (17 miles) arrived at Winterfeld where some spent their first night on floorboards in an unheated school while other

slept in a barn. We were served a breakfast of thin watery soup before we moved off at 05.00: progress was slow, it took five-and-a-half hours to cover 12 km (7 miles) at the end of which we were billeted in a disused brick factory. Here two soup-kitchens were provided, capable of coping with 400 men, not the 1500 who were there.

We were ordered to move off at 20.00 hours: to SBO Thomson and the medical officer, Capt. Howatson protested but in vain. That night the temperature dropped to minus 13 degrees centigrade, it snowed heavily and there was a bitter wind, Transport, by way of a horse and cart, was provided for the sick but it could not hold them all and the remainder were told to march or die.

It was a punishing walk of 30 km (18 miles), with no stop until 9 am when we crossed the river Oder, then a further 8 km to Schonfeld where we were put up in cow-sheds and old barns. Some of us managed to brew some coffee to add to the food provided, approximately 1/4 pound of biscuits.

At 3 am the order was given to move again but it was 5 am before all the POWs were on the road. Some of the sick were evacuated to Lamsdorf and left there. We covered another 30 km before we reached Jenkowitz where some more food was provided.

We left there at 6 am on 23rd January and did another 29 km to Wangen where again we were lodged in barns for the next 36 hours. No food was provided until the following day when 400 loaves were distributed.

Another early start at 4 am on 25th January and a further 30 km to Kindersden where we had another rest day and a further 600 loaves were distributed to feed some 13400 men for the next two days.

Pfaffwendorf was reached at night on 27th January (19 km) and after a brief rest we covered another 21 km to Standorf where a some further food was distributed.

When we left there, there was a promise that we would get transport from at our next stop at Peterwitz some further 25 km away. This was the worst part, as a blizzard blew up, so dense it was difficult to see the man in front of you.

Arriving at Peterwitz at 4 am on the 30th January, we rested for two days but were then told there was no transport and we would have to move to Goldberg where there would be a train; this involved another walk of some 20 km. Some more bread and margarine was distributed, and when we reached Goldberg we were put on the train – 55 met to a cattle wagon, and three days later we reached our destination at Stalag 11A, Luckenwalde, some forty miles to the south of Berlin.

Luckenwalde proved to be an ex-army camp, holding thousands of prisoners of different nationalities. Some 200 of our number were badly affected by dysentery and frostbite, and other ailments but there was little in the way of medical attention. We were near starvation

and it was learned that the French POWs had a large stock of Red Cross Parcels which they refused to give up; further negotiations and pressure by the Germans did eventually result in some parcels being released, probably about one third of a parcel per man.

Luckenwalde was a filthy camp; within 24 hours we all had body lice. We were crammed in to large huts, some three hundred to a hut in three tier beds. After two or three weeks our hut was told that we were to be moved and we were taken down to the station and again loaded on to cattle trucks. We stayed there three days and were eventually taken back to the camp. Seemingly the Americans had bombed the railway lines thereby preventing our being moved. I learned later that we were to have been taken to Berlin and held there as hostages. If that had happened I don't think I would have been here today!

Food here was totally inadequate; one fifth of a loaf per day, half a litre of watery soup and a few potatoes did not keep the wolf from the door.

The Russians were gradually moving Westwards; the Germans were aware of that and by 21st April our guards had gone. At 06.00 on the 22nd the first Russians arrived at the Camp; they expected us to join them in the fight and when we declined we were simply left and we began to realise that we were now prisoners of the Russians.

Negotiations for our release continued. An American news reporter had discovered the camp and the Americans sent in trucks the next day to take out the sick and the wounded but the Russians drove them back. It was not until the 19th May that we were told that we would be taken to the Elbe the following day by the Russians and be handed over to the Americans who then took us to a former Luftwaffe airfield where we were fed and rested.

Two days later we were flown to Brussels in a fleet of Dakotas.