

## **MY PRISONER OF WAR DAYS**

**(This follows the notes of my experiences in Bomber Command which ended with being shot down over the target in Berlin at 20:00 hrs on 20 January 1944)**

### **My Capture (21 January 1944)**

Parachuting from 17000 ft. in a strong north-westerly wind, meant that about 17 minutes later I landed, luckily well away from the bombed area of Berlin, in a quiet leafy place. I had descended through cloud and crashed through trees in a small wood in a suburb to the south of Berlin. I was amazed to find that I had sustained no injuries, apart from a grazed face and a sprained ankle. I released my parachute and removed my mae-west life jacket (these I hid from sight as best I could) and made my way to the edge of the wood.

I was now on the edge of a tree-lined street of suburban houses, and I could hear the voices of two or three people as they walked along the street. Somehow I did not feel scared, but nevertheless I dodged behind trees as they passed by. I think that the enormity of the occasion, and that I had survived almost without a scratch, had filled me with some kind of elation at that time, (although I had no idea whether any of the rest of the crew were alive or dead).

I proceeded furtively along the street and then quite suddenly I felt an urgent call of nature, and had to find a spot where I could 'do it' immediately! This was in somebody's front garden: I have often thought since what would have happened if I had been discovered in this position by a local resident, especially as I had just bombed their city!

The street lead out into a country road with houses scattered along it and I decided this was the best route to follow, as I might find a farm building where I could hide for the time being. It was now late evening, in January, and although cold it was dry and I did not feel too much discomfort apart from my sprained ankle.

I walked on through the night and soon it would be getting light and I needed to 'hole up' somewhere. I turned off the road towards a barn and disturbed a dog which started to bark. Almost from nowhere an old man appeared, who apparently was 'knocking up' people (farm workers start early in Germany like everywhere else). He saw me and he said "kaputt" and I nodded. I could have knocked him down, but I decided discretion was the better part of valour. As I was near the Berlin suburbs in Germany, not Holland or France where some help from the local population was possible, any resistance here (in enemy territory) could end in disaster for me.

The old man telephoned from the farm and shortly afterwards two policemen appeared, one brandishing a revolver and a pair of handcuffs. He indicated to me that if I walked with them they would not handcuff me, but if I started to run away they would shoot me. As by now my sprained ankle was causing me

trouble, I hobbled alongside them back to one of their houses, where I was exhibited to the policeman's wife before I was taken to the police station.

### **From Police station to Dulag Luft**

At the police station I was searched and all my few possessions - my wallet, cigarette case, navigation watch, escape gear (some French francs, a map of Europe on a handkerchief and a tin of Horlicks tablets) - taken from me. They did not discover my special metal trouser button, which points north when balanced on a pencil point, and was sewn to my flies!

They opened my wallet which contained only photos and asked me quite courteously (by the odd word or gesture) whether I was married. They were quite impressed at the quality of my uniform (which happened to be almost new). They also asked me whether I was a 'Jude'. I often wondered what they would have done if I had said 'yes'! After that I was put in a cell in a yard at the rear of the station.

I spent the rest of the day until the afternoon at the police station, but it was not uneventful. Firstly a French foreign worker said, through the high cell window grill, that "sept camarades sont mort". As I still had no idea what had happened to my other seven crew members, this news was not helpful to my morale. Then an attractive German girl in high leather boots was brought to the cell door and talked to me in English. I do not recall whether she was practising her English or trying her hand at interrogation but she did restore my morale! This was followed by a police officer who appeared with my cigarette case and offered me one of my own cigarettes. I indicated that he should take one also. As these cigarettes were State Express 555 (a superior brand), it was a cordial meeting! He took me out of the cell and we walked beyond the yard to a small field, where he showed me several rows of incendiary bombs laid out, all marked with ICI lot numbers - obviously from some stricken bomber.

Some time later a sandwich was brought to me wrapped in newspaper. This newspaper showed a large photograph of an American airman who had been shot down. The words 'Murder Incorporated' were painted on the back of his leather flying jacket. These words were used by the Italian Mafia in New York who were killer squads in the 1920's. The German Press had lost no time in using this photograph, with the headline 'Terrorflieger'. I wondered at the time whether or not the newspaper 'wrapper' used for my sandwich was accidental or deliberate. If deliberate I was being labeled the same as the American, although the police behaved quite correctly towards me during my short stay at the police station.

It was late afternoon when I was moved from the police station in an old Ford motorcar, which belched smoke all the way to a Luftwaffe airfield to the north-east of Berlin. As we approached the airfield the police driver stopped to ask directions from two immaculately dressed Luftwaffe officers. One of them peered into the car and looking at me said, in perfect English, 'last night?' I nodded 'yes' and he said, "We are night fighters", with a grin of satisfaction all

over his face. In a few minutes we had arrived at the guard house of Werneuchen, a night fighter airfield, one of several defending the city.

I was soon locked in a guard house cell, awaiting the next event. Not long after, I was taken to the officers' mess and paraded like a trophy in front of the commanding officer and company. The commanding officer indicated to me not to look so glum. I suppose he was thinking that 'for me the war was over' and I should be relieved that I was ok.

I was returned to the cell and the guardhouse sergeant came in and talked to me in broken English for some time. He had been a bomber pilot and had bombed London some 60 times in the latter part of 1941. I told him I was a civilian at the time, living in that part of London, but that now we were quits!

I remember that evening, they brought in a large dish of macaroni milk pudding which seemed to me like a feast, as I had had nothing (other than the rye bread sandwich), since my eggs and bacon meal before we took off on the Berlin mission.

The following morning a corporal came into the cell. He could speak good English. He said he was in the guard house as punishment for some misdemeanour, but I think he was planted to engage me in conversation. He talked about the war. He had been in the siege of Leningrad and described the hardship for everyone. He said the Russians were almost sub-human, and were eating rats. The Russian hordes would overrun Europe if they were not stopped by the Western Nations. He also said he had been educated in England and his best friend was an Englishman. I do not remember anything controversial or anything that could be construed as interrogation.

Later this day I was moved from Werneuchan with three other RAF aircrew who had been shot down, one being a wireless operator from my own squadron. We were being transferred to a Luftwaffe station at Spandau West, which involved travelling with only one Luftwaffe guard (who was armed, thankfully) on an underground train through the heart of Berlin, crowded with civilians. It was quite a worrying experience (like travelling the whole length of the Central Line in London), wondering whether they would suddenly turn into a lynch mob and start attacking us! We were extremely relieved when we arrived at Spandau West without incident.

We spent the next two nights in a bunker, as the RAF were still active in the area of Berlin. Our number increased to 16 but still no sign of any of my crew. But I met yet another chap from my squadron who had been shot down over Magdeburg (just west of Berlin) the following night to me, and who had trained with me as a navigator in Canada.

Although up till now I was relishing the sheer joy of being alive, I now began to reflect on my position. Were all my crew killed? Would my parents have been notified by now that I was missing? If so, there would be weeks of agony before they learnt I was alive and uninjured. This was a time when all of us could talk to each other and we talked our heads off about our narrow

escapes and capture. One chap had five pieces of shrapnel removed from his back whilst we were there.

The food we received here (in the bunker) was poor and indicated the sort of rations we should expect as POWs, the rye bread almost inedible - I don't think I got used to it the whole time I was a prisoner. Several of the chaps were in need of a smoke and tried to smoke straw from the bedding, wrapped in a small piece of newspaper! They kept worrying the guards for a cigarette until one of the guards gave them one of his. I learnt later that this guard had lost both his parents in a bombing raid just a short time before.....

After two days we were taken in a Luftwaffe bus to a railway terminus in Berlin. Our journey took us through the Tiergarten area of West Berlin, This area was the largest park in Berlin and not industrialised at all, and as such did not appear to be damaged very much. (Perhaps the guards, because of this, thought it was a good route to take). As we approached the centre, the damage was more prevalent and Bismarkstrasse had certainly taken a hammering. On arrival at the railway station, our rather large party of guards hustled us directly on to the train bound for Frankfurt am Main, for which we were very thankful, as a number of Berliners on the platform started shouting and gesticulating in a threatening manner. The train reached Frankfurt the following morning and we were taken by tram to the town of Oberursel, to Dulag Luft, the Luftwaffe interrogation centre.

### **Dulag Luft**

On arrival we were all searched again and put in separate cells, with just our clothes and no possessions. The cells were entirely plain and featureless, with just bed, a straw filled palliasse, a chair and a small table. There was an electric wall heater, not for our benefit but for our discomfort, as it turned out.

So here I was in solitary confinement, more or less in a void after all that had happened since leaving England. There was nobody to talk to, nothing to write with, no noise, nothing to see, just your thoughts to review over and over again.

It was almost a pleasure when an apparent civilian came into the cell. Of course it was the 'Red Cross representative' we had been warned about on the squadron. He had come in with a bogus Red Cross form to get all my details, starting with my name etc, my next of kin, and ending up with squadron details etc. I said that, under the Geneva Convention, I was only allowed to give my name, rank and number, and after some discussion he left, having offered me a cigarette, which I took. Shortly after that the electric heater came on and the cell began to get very hot, so hot in fact that I was able to smoulder a piece of straw from the palliasse to an ember (by poking it into the heater element) but not enough to light the cigarette I had been given. The overheating was another ploy to unsettle you, because you couldn't sleep or relax at all, and the temperature could reach 120F or more. The next day I was taken to an interrogator, who was very polite and civilised. He started to talk about the war and then produced a photograph of the H2S radar

equipment I used for navigation and blind bombing runs. He asked what it was, and I said I did not know. He then tried another tack, saying that I could be a spy and they needed evidence to prove that I wasn't. I was then taken back to the cell to endure another hot day and night. During this time, the only food we got each day was just watery soup, rye bread spread with 'marg' or some sort of jam, and a drink of acorn coffee. The following day was my 21<sup>st</sup>.birthday and I was taken back to the interrogator. He started off again on me proving my identity, I still quoted my name, rank, and number, and in the end he got bored and produced a dossier of my squadron (102 Squadron), saying that it was one of their best customers. I was amazed that he had details of my squadron and I would have dearly liked to have asked him whether any of my crew were alive. It was not until after the war that I learned that Dulag Luft were able to identify squadrons by the number painted on the side of the aircraft. Obviously they were able to match the crew survivors with the close proximity of the aircraft wreckage. He was also accurate about numbers of prisoners, as 102 Squadron was the second highest squadron for numbers of POWs taken in Germany for the whole of Bomber Command. After this episode my interrogation was over, and I asked the interrogator whether I could have a shave, as it was my 21<sup>st</sup>. birthday! He arranged this for me.

I was transferred the following morning to the Dulag Transit Camp at Frankfurt am Maine and my few possessions were returned to me - except for my photographs and cigarettes which had been 'lost', and my astro-navigation watch which was confiscated under 'war regulations'. But for the watch I got an official receipt!

My interrogation period was about average, but some were in solitary confinement for many days. I can only assume that much depended on the 'intake' of prisoners. In January 1944, the losses to Bomber Command (and presumably the American Air force) were high, about 10%. Because of the increasing numbers and the limited number of cells, it may not have been possible for Dulag Luft to arrange longer periods of solitary confinement at this time.

I was overjoyed to meet John Bushell (my rear gunner) in the party transferred to the Transit Camp. John had a bad cut over his right eye, which luckily had healed up reasonably well. After we were hit, the plane had gone into a spiral dive, causing him to hit his head on his guns, so he was in a dazed state. The plane blew up near the ground, and John only survived because he was blown out and able to open his parachute in time. He landed on a searchlight battery and was taken into custody immediately. I think he was 24 hours ahead of me arriving at Dulag Luft. He told me he had met Laurie Underwood (my bomb-aimer who followed me out of the aircraft) at Spandau in West Berlin. Laurie was captured by the Wehrmacht whilst he was walking westwards through the night, away from Berlin. We also learned later that George Griffiths (our pilot) was safe, but we had no knowledge of the four remaining members of our crew. Details of George's survival and the four missing crew were not known to me until after the end of the war.

After my experience so far, the Dulag Transit Camp indicated a substantial change that would take place in our daily lives, due to the fantastic support of the International Red Cross. Without this Organisation many would have died, or at least would have suffered ill health for the rest of their lives. We were now prisoners of war but we would not be officially registered until we were moved to the next camp (although we had been photographed already with our RAF service number).

The Transit Camp, although under the control of the Luftwaffe, was run internally by a small group of RAF officers and sergeants (all aircrew prisoners of war). There were about 200 prisoners and we stayed for two days. During this time we were given essential clothing like boots, overcoats, and, almost unbelievably, a fibre case containing many items like, socks, underclothes, sewing kit, cigarettes, tobacco, pipe, chewing gum, soap, toothbrush, razor, and even pyjamas. On baling out some had lost their flying boots and had damaged clothing. It was also winter in Germany and no-one of course had any other kit. All these items were supplied through the International Red Cross. (At this time the items we received were mainly American.)

The Camp was well stocked with Red Cross food parcels and together with the basic German rations, the 'RAF Staff' was able to produce impressive meals in the communal mess. They were almost sumptuous considering we had hardly eaten for over a week or more!

We were also able to send a postcard to our next of kin, which hopefully would get home in a month or so. I wrote:-

"My Dear Mum & Dad, I am now in Germany. You cannot write until I reach a POW camp. Please keep in touch with the Red Cross. I am unhurt and quite well. Please tell Pat I am safe. Meanwhile do not worry at all. All my love, Reg"

On departure we were each given an American Red Cross food parcel. In some ways it was sad to leave the Transit Camp after such a dramatic change in our fortunes. But the Camp was within a mile of Frankfurt's main railway station and I knew the town was due for more bombing attacks soon. In fact the Camp suffered severe damage, with some casualties, seven weeks later and had to be moved out of Frankfurt.

A large party of us were assembled and moved to the railway sidings where we were put into 'cattle trucks' (presumably old French Army trucks), marked 8 chevaux 40 hommes, although there were more than forty of us to each truck. We were now in the hands of the Wehrmacht and not the Luftwaffe. These trucks, with a few bales of straw added, were to be our living quarters for the next three days. Our fortunes had come down with a bump!

John and I had not met Laurie nor George in the Transit Camp and I can only assume that they were ahead of us and were already on their way to Stalag Luft3. I might have been with them had my commission come through on

time. As it was, John and I were travelling together on our way to Stalag1VB, Muhlberg on Elbe, a town about 30 miles east of Leipzig and about 65 miles south of Berlin.

The journey to Stalag1VB was a nightmare. Each truck had an armed guard, standing by a partly opened door (for ventilation), but there was barely room to squat on the floor of the truck, let alone room for sleeping. There was one bucket for urinating in, slopping about in the straw in the centre of the truck. And occasionally the train would stop when we were allowed out in a long line, to drop our trousers and defecate beside the rail track! Our only pleasure was to enjoy some of the contents of our first food parcel (that which didn't need a tin opener!), together with a meagre portion of German black bread.

We arrived at Neuburxdorf railway sidings near Muhlberg, although we could not see the town, and we were ushered out on to the road about a mile or so from Stalag1VB. The scene looked like Siberia. There had been a recent fall of snow which had partially thawed and there was slush everywhere. Before us was a flat desolate plain and just a blur in the distance, which was our destination.

### **Stalag1VB Muhlberg on Elbe**

The road took us through the wide open space of fields to the east end of the Camp and we marched round it to the west gate.

*The Camp was constructed at the end of 1939, then mostly tented, but eventually replaced with many wooden barracks either side of a main road, some in separate compounds. Each area had a latrine to cope with 40 prisoners at one sitting! (known as 40-holers). There were various other buildings, including two cookhouses (for boiling mostly rotten potatoes etc. and producing 'skilly'- watery soup, and acorn coffee). There were showers and delousing areas, and a hospital (of sorts). Also several small compounds with solitary confinement cells to punish prisoners for breaking the rules (like trying to escape etc). There were several water 'reservoirs', (originally for supplying water for sewerage, planned but never completed) - a large one with a windmill driving a water pump. These reservoirs were often referred to as 'swimming pools' but were now stagnant and presumably retained to be available in case of fire. Two compounds had space for sports activities and exercise (walking).*

*The Camp was surrounded by a double barbed wire fence with an inner trip wire (if crossed you could be shot). There were six watchtowers, one at each corner, and one each in the centre of the two longer sides.*

*It originally housed French and Polish POWs, but by the end of 1944 it catered for the following nationalities – Americans 473, Belgians 66, British 7578 (including about 2000 RAF), French 1335, Italians 2321, Dutch 1269, Poles 2455, Serbs 736, Slovaks 652, Russians 4292 – Totalling 21177*

*Each wooden barrack was divided by a communal brick and cement-built wash and boiler house. Each end catered for up to 250 prisoners, with one inside night latrine. By 1944, as the war developed, due to the continual influx and transfer of prisoners, the barracks became dilapidated, cold and dismal, and totally overcrowded. The wooden exterior of the buildings - a dirty black/brown colour - gave a depressing effect to the whole scene, especially in the snow, slush and mud of winter.*

As we approached the west gate of the Camp, we passed through the Wehrmacht administration and barrack block of our German guards, to the formidable wooden two-tower structure, with a bridge across the road painted with the sign 'M STAMMLAGER 1VB'. On the bridge there was a sentry box with a machine gun and a searchlight on top, and two patrolling guards. As we passed under the bridge, we knew that our lives were yet again going to change to an entirely new experience.

### **Induction to Stalag1VB**

We moved into the showers and delousing block, where we were searched for the seventh time before we stripped off for a communal shower, whilst our clothing and possessions were passed through gas chambers (not lethal I hasten to say). On return of our clothing they still smelt of gas, and I found that my flying boots (almost new) were missing. They had been 'appropriated' by the German or Russian helpers and I never saw them again. Instead I got a pair of ill fitting clogs made of bits of leather upper, nailed to wooden soles. I had to clomp around in these for the next three months, in all the mud and slush, before I got a pair of army boots from the Red Cross.

After this we moved to the 'hospital block' where we were literally stabbed with blunt needles by the French medical orderlies. These were our vaccination and inoculation jabs against all the diseases that could result from poor and insufficient food, filthy conditions and overcrowding. The one disease the Germans were really afraid of was typhus, as the year before, an epidemic of typhus had wiped out many Russian prisoners who were also working amongst civilians in the fields nearby.

Now we were registered as POWs on 1<sup>st</sup>. February 1944, given a Stalag1VB number and issued with our 'dog tags'. We also received two blankets a-piece. Mine obviously had been used before, as they were very thin and had traces of being soiled with excreta. Whether they had been laundered or not I don't know, but they certainly had been through the gas chambers for delousing! Luckily, the one process that was spared us, was having our heads shaved like convicts. We were the first 'intake' to escape this indignity. (We might have been in fashion, come another generation or so!)

### **Introduction to prison life in Stalag1VB**

My first memory, now inside the camp, was the trail of British prisoners collecting their weekly Red Cross food parcel (not always a full parcel and not always every week). We were also lucky, as the camp, having had British



prisoners since August 1943, was now benefiting from an established procedure under the Geneva Convention. The International Red Cross, operating from Switzerland, were the Protecting Power (who looked after the prisoners' welfare for Britain) and dealt with the German Government, who were the Detaining Power. British prisoners were represented by an elected 'Man of Confidence', who had contact with the German Commandant about all matters arising day by day. Our Man of Confidence was a Canadian nicknamed 'Snowshoes'.

Compared with ourselves the Russian prisoners were in a terrible state. They did not have the protection of the Geneva Convention and they had no Red Cross provision or repatriation of extremely sick or wounded soldiers. Those who were not sick or limbless had to work as slave labour (arbeit kommandos) in the fields and farms nearby. They were paid in 'lagermarks' but these were relatively worthless. It was fortunate that they had the opportunity to 'trade' for bread etc. with cigarettes got from POWs and also, with various 'rackets', were able to supplement their own meagre German rations. They were almost in rags, and the limbless etc. were in a pitiful condition, reduced to begging and crawling in and out of incinerators for scraps of food remaining in tins. They were often in competition and alongside stray dogs. The German guards gave the Russians no quarter and beat them for the slightest thing. Of course Germans taken prisoner on the Russian front were in the same position as the Russians, with no Geneva Convention to protect them.

Initially we were housed with the British Army who were originally taken prisoner in North Africa before the Battle of El Alamein. They were moved from Italian POW camps in July/August 1943 by the German Army, when the Italian front line in Italy was beginning to crumble. John Bushell and I were together and we both appreciated the steadfastness of the British Army. They had been prisoners a year or two already and were attuned to the lifestyle. They were resolute and disciplined, despite the fact that they had not been liberated in Italy, and had suffered poor treatment and lack of food under the Italians in their prison camps. As we were only eleven days out of England they wanted to know all the latest news from home.

Our first impression of the barracks was abysmal. On the right hand side were three tiers of rickety bunks in blocks of twelve, separated by a small corridor between each block. These continued up the right hand side and some over to the left hand side. In the centre at each end, there was a stove and a hotplate connected by a horizontal flue to a central chimney. On the left hand side of the flue, there were 'gim-crack' tables built up from basic wooden forms, and further forms either side for seating. In this area, 83 ft. x 40 ft., (about as long, but 7 ft. wider than my back garden) up to 250 prisoners had to live, cook, eat and sleep. The overcrowding and noise could be overwhelming especially after curfew. Clothing and personal possessions had to be stored on the bunks. The bottom bunk occupant was lucky as he had some space underneath, and the top bunk occupant did not suffer from straw and dust etc. falling down from the straw-stuffed palliasse of the bunk above! The floors were like barn floors, with bricks set in earth. Lighting was supplied

by four 25 watt bulbs. Daylight was poor as many windows were broken and boarded up. There was a night latrine in the entrance - just a seat with a concrete cesspit underneath - which stank like hell day and night. The wash and boiler house that divided the two barracks had large concrete troughs with several spray jets that had long since ceased to function. Anyway the water supply was sporadic and it was a problem to keep the boiler full, for making communal brews during the day. Here we washed our clothes when we could and had our daily ablutions. Washes were often carried out with a 'Klim' tin of water ('Klim', the reverse of 'Milk', was the name of the Canadian milk powder it had contained). It required great skill to get an adequate wash with that amount of water! The drainage system was poor and leaked most of the time. As a result there was a constant trickle of dank water down the main road that separated most of the huts.

After three weeks the RAF contingent were transferred to the RAF compound where about 2000 (mostly aircrew) were housed. This compound was lockable and when we got too boisterous we were locked in as punishment. Here I met several chaps who were on 102 Squadron or previously were on the same training courses. Those from 102 Squadron wanted to know whether they had been reported as POWs. Of course we didn't know, because 1943 - 1944 was a bad time for losses, and we were missing and in Germany, before they were reported, at home, as POWs.

### **Our lives revolved around food and keeping warm**

There is no doubt these primary requirements of life are paramount in a prison camp. Under the Geneva Convention only basic provisions were supplied by Germany. We were not required to work (being officers or non-commissioned officers), thus food rations were the bare minimum and often of poor quality. The International Red Cross were the organisation to supplement the needs of prisoners of war. Operating from Geneva it co-ordinated the supply of goods and distributed them to Working Parties, Stalags and Oflags, throughout Germany. The supply was mainly food, but clothing, books, musical instruments, even correspondence courses for professional exams, were organised for some camps. Supplies were often erratic, governed by the war situation. It was obviously not the first priority in the German distribution system, especially as the war progressed, when their transport infrastructure was virtually destroyed by the RAF and the American Air Force.

The daily ration issued by the Germans consisted of about three boiled potatoes (often nearly rotten after months stored in clamps), and a ladle of watery soup (called 'skilly') made with turnips, swede, millet, barley, dried sauerkraut, or peas. These were issued at midday in skilly buckets, from the cookhouse. (There were two cookhouses one British, the other French which also catered for other nationals). The pea soup was the most desirable skilly, and many rows broke out on how the small leftover should be divided. Each barrack had an elected leader and two or three colleagues to assist him in making minor decisions and sharing out any communal chores - the pea soup share out was one of his problems. In our barracks, after a vote by everybody,

it was decided that the leftover should be shared out equally, pea by pea if necessary!

In the afternoon, a piece of black bread, about an inch or so thick, a small piece of margarine and a spoonful of jam (made from beetroot); sugar or meat paste completed the hard rations. Several pails of ersatz coffee (made from roasted acorns) were usually put into the washhouse boiler for a hot drink later.

The Red Cross food parcel was based on the requirements of one person for a week. The parcels came from various countries, Britain (including Scotland), America, Canada, New Zealand, Argentine (bulk rations), and sometimes France or Belgium. A British parcel contained a number of the following: tin of condensed milk, 2oz tea, tin of cocoa, 4oz sugar, 8oz margarine, tin of biscuits, 8oz jam, marmalade or syrup, 2oz processed cheese, pkt dried fruit or tin of fruit pudding or creamed rice, rolled oats or oatmeal, tin of meat & veg, steak & kidney pudding or other varieties, tin of sausages or meat roll, sometimes a tin of bacon or Yorkshire pudding (instead of cocoa), tin of egg powder, sometimes a carton of sweets, 4oz bar of chocolate, tin of veg (peas, carrots etc.), tin of salmon or pilchards, bar of soap, sometimes pkt of salt, pepper, or mustard. American parcels and some others contained cigarettes, but alternatively there was a separate issue of 50 cigarettes a week if whole parcels were issued. But it could be only 25 a week or none, according to the availability of parcels. (Cigarettes were used throughout the camp as the main currency for trading and racketeering!)

Together, the German ration and a full parcel every week was Utopia for us. Of course there were weeks when we had only half parcels - or no parcels - when distribution was disrupted for a variety of reasons. So 'tinned stuff' had to be saved for hungry times. Most prisoners joined together in two's or more to share and prepare their food. The term for this was 'mucking in' and groups were called 'muckers'. John Bushell and I became 'muckers' and decided that we would prepare our food together everyday.

On arrival we were given a dixie and spoon each, not much for preparing food, cooking, eating and drinking. We had to acquire knives, drinking cups and plates etc. to start up, which we got with cigarettes from fellow 'kriegies' (established prisoners of war). The kriegies would have got the knives from the Russians, the cups and plates would have been made from Red Cross tins by a kriegie skilled in 'tin bashing'. Cups were Canadian 'Maple Leaf' butter tins with a handle made from a strip of tin attached to another strip, which was clamped to the top and bottom of the butter tin. Plates and dishes for heating or frying food, were made from flattened out Scotch biscuit tins turned up at the sides and the corners folded in. Scotch biscuit tins were ideal for all sorts of things, I don't know what we would have done without them!

The cooking stoves, one at each end of the barracks, were controlled by two stokers. The ovens were not used and only the hot plates were in action. Coal dust (compressed into briquettes) used for cooking and strictly rationed for each barrack, meant that the stoves would only operate at lunch time. The

remainder of the briquettes were allocated to the washhouse, for use in the boiler for 'brewing up' during the day. Because the briquettes were rationed and were under the supervision of the guards, several attempts were made by various barracks to get more by false pretences. One barrack managed to get a spare set of keys to the briquettes store and organised a parade. By marching specially, with their familiar plywood Red Cross container, as if under the control of the guards, they got another issue. But I don't think they managed it twice! Our barrack was luckier in this respect. There was a German Jew in our barrack whose family left Germany before the war. He became a naturalised British subject, joined RAF ground crew and became a member of an Advanced Airfield Unit and was posted to the Island of Kos. He became a POW after the Germans invaded the Island in October 1943 and he was moved to Muhlberg. He could speak fluent German and was able to bribe two of the guards (who, with dogs, patrolled the camp after curfew) to stay away on certain nights from patrolling the French cookhouse. This cookhouse, adjacent to our compound and opposite our barracks, had a large store of briquettes in the cellar which could be accessed by cutting the barbed wire between our compound and the cookhouse. A group of volunteers in the barracks 'stood by' for these arrangements, and when the barrack leader announced, in true RAF parlance, "Ops on tonight", there was great activity.

Prior to the first of these operations, the floor bricks had been removed from under one of the bunks. A pit had been dug and covered up with a false floor made of plywood from Red Cross packing cases. The removed floor bricks were then put back on the plywood, and earth spread in between the bricks. In the gloom of the barracks it was almost impossible to detect any disturbance in the brick floor.

On 'Ops' night, the pit was opened up, kit bags were borrowed and half the night, kitbags full of briquettes removed from the cookhouse cellar, were unloaded almost silently into the pit. Well before daylight the barbed wire was reconnected, the floor and bricks replaced and everybody involved, back in their bunks. The pit, which also housed other things that needed to be hidden, was never discovered, despite many random searches that were carried out. This activity was carried out every few weeks and meant that we were the most 'well provided for' barracks for cooking and the warmest in the whole camp, until the autumn of 1944.

Back to cooking, the stokers maintained strict control over the hot plates so that everyone had an opportunity to heat, boil or fry their food either in the tin, dixie or dish, by moving them in progression across the hottest part of the hot plate. Nevertheless there were accidents, when dishes caught fire and tins exploded (many of the contents like creamed rice hit the roof above!), or food was cremated as the hot plate suddenly went red hot in one spot. BRC bacon when frying could spit hot fat everywhere and those near the stove had to dive for cover!

John and I, like most 'muckers', tried to add as much variety as possible to our meals. We would save barley soup for breakfast and convert it into porridge by adding sugar, or as a pudding at tea time, by adding dried fruit

etc. Biscuits could be crumbled and mixed with various things. Sometimes our meagre almost inedible bread ration would be mixed with fruit, meat or fish items to make more acceptable bulk. Most of the 'skilly' (soup items), turnip, swede, or millet (bird seed), we consumed straight away, especially if we were hungry. During the period of receiving a weekly full parcel, most of the skilly and some of the dry rations were given to the Russian amputees and later, to the Italians.

Heating water for tea and coffee was difficult. The Army kriegies from the Italian prison camps brought with them a design of a water heater called a 'blower'. It was a fan operated device which, by means of a belt driving the fan at high speed, forced air into a firebox. The firebox was filled with anything burnable (pine cones, chips of wood and cardboard) and a dixie of water placed on top would be boiling in a few minutes. 'Blowers' were made from Red Cross food tins and plywood, mounted on a bed board taken from a bunk. They were hazardous devices and confined to the wash house. Unfortunately the guards did not approve of these contraptions and they frequently destroyed them. In a short time more were made, and then there were even fewer bed boards to some of the bunks!

The more organised way of providing hot drinks, an essential requirement in cold, draughty and damp huts, was to use the boiler in the wash house for communal brews. It was agreed that the issue of ersatz coffee would be reheated this way, and everybody would give up some of their tea, coffee and cocoa ration for regular hot drinks. The boiler-man would shout out "brew up" six or seven times a day and bodies would appear from bunks and everywhere with mugs and dixies for their ration.

### **Camp roll calls ( 'Appel')**

Everyday at 6.30 a.m. the camp was awakened by guards running through the hut shouting "rouse, rouse", and in quick time we had to dress and form up in rows of 'fums' (fives), barrack by barrack in the compound. Whilst the Army in their compounds, who were well disciplined, had their count finished in no-time, the RAF were always late and virtually had to be driven out of their barracks. The guards regularly found stragglers still asleep in their bunks, or they were not all lined up in fives. The German unteroffizier in charge (a relatively young guard who had been wounded on the Russian Front, nicknamed 'Blondie' for his flaxen hair), was often at his wit's end. As a result of these events day after day, Blondie would keep the offending barrack standing for hours in the slush and the snow. On one occasion, a member of another barrack brought out a chair for Blondie to sit on whilst this punishment was in progress, which he took in good part. But when, in another situation, he drew his pistol, it was time to call this game to an end!

Although roll call was always at 6.30 in the morning, curfew was later in the summer months, up to 9.30 p.m., which made life much more pleasant as it shortened the time we were incarcerated in the huts.

Not long after I reached the camp, it was probably towards the end of winter, typhus and diphtheria broke out and the whole camp was quarantined. Typhus was to be expected at any time. It usually affected the Russians but it could break out anywhere. I can recall being bitten all over my body with bed bugs. Our palliasses were never replaced and were pretty filthy sacks of straw. Living in such overcrowded conditions, lice, fleas, and bedbugs abounded. It was one of the most depressing times I can remember.

Quarantine meant that there was no roll call in the compound. No-one was allowed outside the barracks for about a month, and this was enforced by having an armed guard posted outside each barrack entrance. Supplies were brought to the barracks and there was only the inside latrine to serve 200 or more of us, day and night.

### **The Honey Cart**

When the camp was first built, a sewer system was planned to take the sewage to the river Elbe some miles away. Camp reservoirs were dug to provide the water supply. This plan was soon abandoned, and latrines with concrete septic tanks installed instead. Each barrack had an inside night latrine and to each compound, one or more forty-seater day latrine buildings were added. Inside these there were four rows of boxed seats, each with ten holes, mounted above a large tank. No-one felt alone in a forty-holer!

With more than 20,000 prisoners, the removal of the sewage was a permanent daily task for a small 'army' of the Russian kommandos. Through a trap door on the ground outside the latrine a long pipe connected to a hand pump was inserted into the decomposed sewage. With every operation of the pump lever, decomposed sewage was squirted into the hopper of a long wooden barrel which was mounted on an ox-cart. The whole design could have been invented in medieval times and was about as labour intensive as in those days. It generated the most foul stench with every pump movement and was christened 'the honey cart'.

Many honey carts were in action daily all over the camp. They leaked and left their signature everywhere, in a trail on their way out of the main gate to the local fields, where they fertilized the crops. Some of the inferior crops we might consume in our skilly in a few months' time!

In my view the condition of the latrines and inadequate method of sewage disposal for over 20,000 prisoners, was beyond belief. The German nation, known for its discipline, thoroughness and cleanliness, had at that time a blot on its character in the way it dealt with prisoners of war in Stalag 1VB - and probably other camps as well.

There was also no provision for toilet paper and we had to resort to all sorts of solutions, Red Cross tin labels and reading books had to be sacrificed. On one occasion after a Red Cross inspection, when we complained about the lack of toilet paper, we did receive some 'toilet paper' from the Germans, in the form of propaganda booklets printed in English. One entitled 'Jews Must

Live' and the other 'The Who's Who of Jews', which listed all the prominent people in the western world and whether they were Jews or not, including Churchill (who was not listed as a Jew).

### **Activities in Stalag1VB**

With over 7500 British prisoners, there were many talented people - and those who discovered they had talents - in the camp. Some lectured on their subjects in a small hut set aside as a class room; others were actors or musicians (mostly amateur I believe) who produced fantastic shows in a theatre and in the barracks. And then there were the footballers, cricketers and rugby players, who played on pitches available in one of two compounds.

### **Studies**

There was no facility to study for professional exams, mainly I believe, because the British had come to the camp only months before and there was no opportunity to set up a facility at this stage of the war. Also the overcrowding in the barracks made it impossible for serious study, due to the lack of space, and the noise of cooking, washing and general chatter etc. This was made worse in the winter months, because of the extended length of time we were herded together between curfew at night and morning roll call.

I did manage to study several subjects, mainly to keep my mind occupied on matters of general interest to me. These were radio, intermediate maths, photography and psychology. The latter two closed down shortly afterwards, due the removal of the classroom (that is another story!) The lecturer on radio communications was an interesting person, (Robert Crawford), whom I met when I was in the army barracks. He was a BBC engineer in the army and his roll was to assist a well known BBC war reporter, named Ward. In those days, recording events for subsequent broadcasting, especially in front line conditions, needed a qualified engineer to make the records. Ward and Crawford were captured in North Africa at Tobruk in June 1942. Crawford taught me a lot about basic radio and was obviously quite involved in the construction of radios for the camp. There was always some route for getting supplies of essential parts. He told me they were worried that the camp might be overrun by the Russians, before Western Allied Forces could get here, and we might need to be able to communicate with our Allies to get urgent assistance. To prepare for such an event they had built a transmitter, and had already selected a site for it. They had also acquired a starter motor from a Messerschmitt 'plane to generate the power for it! (Fortunately, in the end, events did not require such action).

### **Theatre**

It was generally accepted that the camp theatre was a remarkable achievement. It provided first class entertainment and raised morale for everyone in the camp. A spare barrack was found for the purpose. The brick

floor was dug out and the bricks replaced in tiers for the seating, so that the stage could be seen by everyone. A dimmer switch was acquired for better control of the stage lighting.

The theatre group was in operation before I arrived and was now in full swing. With food parcels arriving more regularly, and the longer and warmer days of spring and summer ahead, our daily lives became more bearable in the dim, dismal, damp and dilapidated surroundings of the camp. The Second Front was expected soon and with an early prospect to the end of the war, spirits were high. This reflected in the energies of the theatre group, both in variety shows and straight plays, and the appreciation of the audiences.

My first 'visit to the theatre', named the 'Empire', was only a few days after I arrived. The ticket was purchased with cigarettes, but I can't remember how many. It was a variety show entitled 'Muhlberg Melodies of 1944' a totally internally written production. The female impersonations were fantastic, impressing seasoned kriegies and especially me, a newcomer to camp life. The theatre 'props' were wizards at making costumes from old blankets etc., stage scenery and furniture from Red Cross boxes and plywood crates. Even the production of suits of armour was not beyond them. The 'tin bashers' got busy with Red Cross tins, and by clever lighting with green tinted bulbs, were able to produce very realistic results.

The variety group produced several shows, some with leading camp comics, like 'Music in the Cage', 'Lets Raes a Laugh', 'Knee-deep' and 'Splash'. Musical Comedies such as 'Springtime for Jennifer' with lyrics and music both written by the leader of the orchestra. The variety shows were alternated with straight plays presented by 'The Cads'. Each one seemed better than the previous production. Such shows were 'Dover Road', 'The Man Who Came to Dinner', 'You Can't Take It With You' and 'The Barretts of Wimpole Street'.

There were light classical orchestras and more serious music, also dance and swing band shows. The latter participated in shows in the barracks providing suitable music. At leading football matches, boxing bouts and on Sunday afternoons a military band provided entertainment.

On some Sundays in the Empire, the Experimental Theatre Group presented some unusual plays based on melodrama and plays requiring 'audience participation'. One I remember called 'Waiting for Lefty' (about rebellious cab drivers) was highly successful. In this play the audience, together with members of the cast (who, unknown to us, were 'planted' amongst the audience) got involved in a trade union strike. It resulted in the whole audience, quite spontaneously, standing up and shouting 'Strike, Strike!' and 'Lefty' the ring leader being shot dead!

Also on Sundays, church services were held in the theatre, and the Padre (a New Zealander) organised entertainment and talks on some Sunday afternoons.



Another organised event that the theatre was used for was a remarkable exhibition of pendulum clocks. I presume pendulum clocks were chosen because they operated by weights and not springs. All these clocks were constructed from flattened Red Cross food tins, which were cut into the various gears and other parts necessary to produce and display the correct time.

### **Barrack (hut) entertainment**

Hut shows were very popular and were introduced in the evening in the summer months when curfew was extended. Stage sets were erected from the hut seating and structures brought in for the purpose. Such industry gave a feeling of involvement and this added to the enjoyment of the show that followed. Radio plays were very novel, being performed behind a curtain and in broadcasting style with all the sound effects. With the rest of the hut in semi-darkness (not difficult in a poorly lit hut) the right atmosphere was achieved, for such plays as 'The Tale of Two Cities', 'Ghost Train' and 'Pygmalion'.

On other winter evenings a series of talks were given on such subjects as 'Big Game Hunting', 'North West Frontier' and 'Russia'. Chaps with personal experiences such as 'HM Prisons' by an ex Prison Warder, an interesting one for us kreigies! And a talk by a former Undertaker on some of his more gruesome situations. We also had two demonstrations of hypnotism, one by a Dutch therapist who practised in an Indonesian hospital, and another who did it purely for entertainment and sent us into fits of laughter, when he got one of the audience who knew nothing about the subject, to give us a talk on 'how to paint and decorate a room'. But the most impressive demonstration of all was when two Fakirs from the Indian Army demonstrated the results of self hypnosis. They reduced their heart beats until when cut they did not bleed, then over their stomachs they pinched two thick folds of skin and pierced them with spikes. When they pulled the spikes out there was no trace of bleeding. Their second demonstration was even more amazing. They broke glass bottles on the floor and when there was enough broken glass, one laid on it, back down, and the other stood momentarily on his chest. You could hear the crunch of glass under his back! Again when he got up there was no trace of bleeding.

Another popular activity in the winter months was playing cards. This was mostly contract bridge, a game I learned to play. It became an obsession for some partners and was played almost uninterrupted all day and sometimes into the night, only stopping to eat! This was possible with the larger groups of 'muckers', as cooking etc and playing cards, was shared on a rota basis.

### **Sport**

The most active and universal sport in the camp was soccer and this was carried on throughout the day, but mostly in the evening during the summer months. I understand that football equipment was brought from Italy by the

Army POWs. Each hut had its own team named after the 1<sup>st</sup>. Division names in Britain. Our hut's team was Blackburn Rovers and the degree of interest was amazing. Our team had its own colours and was well supported by the hut inmates. When we played in the League matches discussion reached tremendous heights. I think the knock-out cup was the most exciting of all. Semi-finals and final games were played off on Saturday afternoons as it was the main feature of the weekend. Newport County was by far the leading light in this competition and eventually won the Cup. At Easter, Whitsun and August Bank Holiday there gala matches such as England versus Scotland, Army v RAF, Amateurs v Professionals. The standard of play was very high indeed, and teams selected from several thousand possible players gave a good account of themselves. Other feature matches were introduced when a number of 'Clubs' were formed for chaps living in the same area, such examples were 'London Club', 'Heather Club', 'Notts & Derby Club', 'Kent Club', 'Invicta Club' and 'Lincolnshire Poacher'. All the clubs had badges, made by Russians, out of aluminium dixies and the clubs advertised their activities on wall posters. The Germans panicked when they saw the 'Lincolnshire Poacher' and issued a general warning that anyone caught poaching could risk being shot!

### **Other sporting activities**

There was a Rugby League and they played their important games on Sundays. Perhaps the most notable members were the 'Springboks' and the 'Anzacs', and many a time blood was drawn between these two hefty teams.

During the cricket season, each hut entered a team and the matches were played off on similar lines to soccer and rugby, the main feature being a test match played between England v Australia or South Africa, over the weekend. Some of these were very close ending matches, England on one occasion beating Australia by a few runs only.

Two athletic matches were held and prior to the events, every morning and evening contestants could be seen on the track training with great zeal. (The track was the perimeter of the football pitch, an area many kreigies used every day to walk round for general exercise). Boxing also was a camp-organised sport and several times exhibitions, as well as competitive bouts, were carried out in a well built ring in one of the compounds.

The Canadians were very keen on basketball and softball, whilst volleyball was played by one and all. Others took up weight lifting and organised P.T. Many of the games were between the British and other Nationals such as the French, Dutch, Russians and Poles; the latter two excelled at volley ball, the former had a tough struggle when playing us at soccer - after all it was our national game ( in those days!).

There was no lack of exercise at 1VB. The outdoor activity during the summer months, coupled with a good supply of Red Cross food parcels and encouraging news on the war front, kept us all in good spirits at that time. But of course all this was no compensation for the abysmal living conditions and

the lack of freedom we all experienced, especially when you are only in your early twenties.

## Trading

I have already mentioned that NCO's were not paid any service pay in prison camps. The Russian working parties were paid lagermarks, but these were relatively worthless. There was a Russian canteen where items could be purchased but there was relatively nothing to buy. But items could be exchanged or bought and sold with cigarettes. Thus cigarettes became the camp currency and its liquidity. There was a rate that depended upon the amount of spare Red Cross food that was available, compared with how plentiful were the Red Cross cigarettes and cigarettes received in private parcels. In the summer of 1944 spare food was more plentiful, thus the cigarette rate was low - in the winter the position was reversed. The Russian canteen became the flea market (in more ways than one) where anything could be bought and sold or exchanged. The Italians, who became prisoners with their complete kit of clothes and utensils, were seriously short of food and were able to sell clothing, knives, scissors etc. for basic food. They even took on tailoring jobs for food and cigarettes. The Russians were in the best position to trade because they were able to contact the farm workers in the fields and farms, exchange cigarettes and coffee for bread and small items necessary for day to day living. They would conceal these in their trousers, not very hygienic for the bread! I understand that the Russians who worked on the 'honeycarts' were able to hide bread in the opening of the 'honeycart' barrel (when they were empty!), on their way back to the camp.

An event that I witnessed one evening not long before curfew: a British chap had filled an empty cigarette packet with earth, except for ten cigarette stubs at the end, to represent a full packet. He then, in the half-light through the wire of the Russian compound, exchanged it for a long loaf of crusty bread. Back in the hut he was full of his success in duping the Russian, until he discovered the side of the loaf had been sliced off, the whole of the inside hollowed out and filled with damp rags to give the loaf weight, and the side cleverly replaced with thin spills of wood to hold it in place! I often wonder who had the better deal.....

On some evenings, the same RAF (German Jewish) POW who organised the coal stealing from the French cookhouse, would bring into the hut a German guard complete with rifle, who was on patrol inside the camp. The guard would stand in the middle of the hut whilst the gasmask case on his back (now minus its gasmask) was opened. Inside he had toothbrushes, razors, razor blades, combs etc. to trade for cigarettes, coffee and chocolate. Not every German soldier was waging war to the death!

I also remember a Dutch POW, still resplendent in his uniform with tassels and gold braid. The Dutch, until the Second Front, were well served with IRC food and parcels from home. This chap obviously, like many Dutch very commercially minded, used to appear regularly in the huts carrying a large tray of goods which he was trading for cigarettes.

## Escaping

Planning to escape was a very clandestine business, and unless you were personally involved you didn't know much about it. However there was an escape committee who would assist those who wished to 'have a go'.

There was one mass escape planned in the camp by the RAF and from the RAF compound. It was a very close kept secret, only known to those involved. A hut used as a 'school' for various classes was chosen. This hut was without foundations and raised on blocks. Also it was only a short distance from the camp boundary barbed wire on the north side. The first move was to ask the Germans for permission for us to put a mound of earth around the perimeter of the hut "to prevent footballs etc. from being kicked underneath it." A hatch was then cut into the floor of one of the classrooms, from which a tunnel was dug to the outer wire. The earth dug out was packed tightly, into the now enclosed space, below the hut. As the distance from the hut to the field outside the wire was fairly short, the space was sufficient, and did not need a complicated system of distributing the earth elsewhere. Also concealment was less complicated as classes were still being carried out in other rooms as before. I for one, who attended classes there, did not know what was going on and neither did the Germans. Bed-boards were used to shore up the sides of the tunnel and the hut wiring was tapped for lighting it. The bed-boards would have been taken bit by bit from bunks in various barracks. As boards were already being consumed as firewood, or for blowers etc., it was almost accepted that this was the natural erosion of the place. Although, for those who slept in the middle and lower bunks, more and more loops of palliasse were hanging down between bed-boards from the upper bunk.

The tunnel was completed in late summer, and the day before the planned night breakout, a tractor towing a harvester, cropping the corn in this field, tipped into the tunnel exit which was just below the level of the field. Immediately all hell broke loose as Feldweibel 'Piccolo Pete' our new German compound watchdog, appeared on the scene. Piccolo Pete was a nasty, small, bow legged fellow, who took over after Blondie was posted elsewhere. He consistently made our lives a misery, making raids on our barracks without warning. He would appear with guards to block each end of the hut. We would then be searched and driven out immediately into the compound, while he and his posse of guards turned over the bunks and prodded the floor and everywhere with picks, looking for signs of tunnels, escape material, blowers, radios etc.

Well, Piccolo Pete was in his element. The following morning, he turned up with the Russians and their cavalcade of honey carts, and they emptied our latrines and forty-holer of sewage and poured it into the tunnel. Of course classes were closed at the hut and we never went near it again!

Another means of escape, usually through our own Escape Committee and sometimes with the help of the French Escape Committee, was achieved by exchanging identity with other prisoners who were on working parties. These

were usually army privates who, under the Geneva Convention, could be employed by the Germans in non war related industries. These industries around 1VB would be mostly in farming. New British POWs were often 'processed' through 1VB, as it was also a registration camp and where new prisoners could be topped up with essential clothing. These prisoners would be approached by the Escape Committee and offered exchanges. They would have the benefit of not having to work and the NCO's would have the chance to escape, which would be less risky than trying to escape from 'behind the wire' at 1VB. Both parties would of course lose their own identities during this time.

All those in 1VB who took this on, were given new identity papers, forged passes, travel documents, maps, and money etc. In my view they would have needed, as a minimum, a good knowledge of German and know how to live rough, as they would be hundreds of miles away from any territory where they could expect help from anyone. To my knowledge nearly all those in 1VB who escaped were recaptured, returned to the camp, and given 14 days or more solitary confinement in the 'cooler' on basic rations. One chap who gave us a talk on his experiences, on having reached a railway siding, found that none of the railway wagons had destinations for his chosen route. But with a bit of quick thinking, he decided it would help the British war effort if he collected all the destination cards from the wagons, gave them a thorough shuffle, and put them all back!

Geoff Taylor who wrote the book 'Piece of Cake' about prison life in 1VB, tells his story about attempting an escape by stealing a JU88 'plane from Lonnewitz nightfighter training airfield near 1VB. He and a colleague used the French and British escape committees to do an exchange with two French arbeit kommandos. They got on to the airfield and into a JU88, only to be caught red handed by a Luftwaffe guard. Luckily they were wearing French uniform and Geoff's colleague answered the challenge in French. The guard, thinking they were French farm workers from a nearby village, chastened them and told them to clear off, which they did at a rate of knots! After some time trying to find another aircraft that wasn't locked, and then running out of food, they walked back into the camp with hardly a challenge.

After the murder (on the orders of Hitler) of fifty RAF escapees from Stalag Luft3 in March 1944 became known, the Germans gave out an official warning to all camps. It said that because of increasing action of commando forces in Germany, many places were 'no go' areas and anyone entering them would be shot on sight. Escaping prisoners were at risk, and to remember "escaping was no longer a British sport".

About the same time, a message was received from the British Government via the BBC news, which said it was no longer the duty of prisoners of war to try to escape (!)

## **Our mail and news in Stalag1VB**

### **Mail**

We were allowed to write one letter and two postcards a month, so I had to ration them between family and friends over the 15 months I was a prisoner. But I received 111 letters and about 6 or 7 parcels over the period. Everybody moaned in the hut every time my name and number (098 Wilson) was called out - 'what, not him again!'

Letters to UK and from Germany took 2½. to 3 months each way, so a reply could take almost 6 months. The first letter I received after being shot down took 5 months, and the first letter from my parents took 6 months. Mail arrived fairly consistently after that, 43 by September 1944, 110 by January 1945 and then only one, before I was liberated in April 1945.

My first parcel took 7 months to reach me. It was from home and contained 500 cigarettes - a fortune either as cigarettes or currency. My second and third contained books - fiction, biographies, technical drawing and - travel! My fourth, from home, contained clothing. Two previous parcels had been sent but never received. I had two further parcels of cigarettes and, I believe, some chocolate.

I also received a parcel of books from the Red Cross in which they had sent two books I had asked for, one on meteorology and the other on astronomy. I remember that I found great interest in the astronomy book. Stalag1VB being located away from the town in flat countryside, with no lights on late in the evening, presented an ideal situation for viewing the night sky, even through the few windows available. With my knowledge of the star constellations in the northern hemisphere, required for astro-navigational purposes, I was able to identify the only star city outside our own galaxy visible to the naked eye - the nebula in Andromeda near the constellation of Cassiopeia in the north-eastern sky. It gave me a great feeling of space and freedom away from my dismal surroundings.

In my first letter home from Stalag1VB on 2 February 1944, I told my parents that our 'plane had caught fire and I had to bale out. (I did not say how or where, as this might have stopped the German censors from sending the letter on). I also told them John Bushell was with me. We knew that Laurie Underwood and George Griffiths had survived but there was no news of the others. I asked them to send me underclothes, socks, toothpaste, cigarettes, and photographs.

My letters started with mixed emotions - I was glad I had survived and without injury. Also at that time we were receiving weekly food parcels and the camp was providing entertainment with fairly frequent shows in the Empire theatre. But the winter weather was miserable with slush and mud everywhere, and with only lashed-up clogs to wear, there was no incentive to walk round the circuit of the 'football pitch'. Being incarcerated in these barracks during the long winter days was punishment indeed. Writing letters without receiving any in return, became a burden, and it was not until I received my first letter in June did I brighten up. By then the Second Front had commenced, the days were longer, sunny and warm, outside activities had started, and the parcels

were still arriving weekly. As the D Day invasion succeeded, a wave of optimism swept the camp. 'Home by Christmas' was the cry. Of course we were young kriegies and did not realise that old kriegies had made this cry for the last three or four years already!

As the year advanced, France was liberated, Italy had capitulated, everybody was at their high point and our letters home reflected this mood. But the success of the war on the ground and in the air across Europe, was having its effect on the German transport system, and our RC food parcel deliveries started to become irregular. Setbacks, at Arnhem in Holland and the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, ensured that the war would continue into the Spring of 1945 and would make worse our conditions in the prison camp.

In the autumn and winter of 1944 parcels were reduced to a half and some weeks there were none. Coal for heating and cooking was reduced and as more prisoners came into the camp it became excessively overcrowded. My letters did not mention this, and said our Christmas was fine with a RC parcel out of the blue, which enabled us to dodge up some kind of festivities with concocted mince pies (don't ask!) and Christmas pudding. Although we were able to organise 'a dance' for New Year's Day, we entered January 1945 with the worst conditions we had experienced so far in 1VB.

## **News**

News about the progress of the war was the very life blood of every prisoner. As the war moved towards its end, events around us began to coincide with the news we received.

We were lucky in 1VB inasmuch as the Army chaps had managed to bring their radios (in pieces) from Italy, concealed down their trousers, between their legs etc.! The RAF had managed to bribe the guards for parts to assemble their radio. So both compounds had radios and were able to get BBC news everyday. Despite random searches by Picolo Pete and others, they were never discovered.

The news was taken down in shorthand and transcribed so that every barrack leader could read it out after evening curfew. The leader would call for lookouts to see the outside was clear of roving patrols and the hut would remain in complete silence whilst the bulletin was read out. Thus throughout our time in 1VB we were well informed about events, except on D Day when the Germans told us first! That day everyone went wild. Many were making crazy forecasts about the date when the war would end, and when it didn't, they were unceremoniously carried to the stagnant reservoir and thrown in.

About this time Italy capitulated, but Germany continued to fight in Italy. The Italian Army, overnight became POWs and several thousand of them arrived at the camp complete with all their kit. They were in a terrible state, as the Italians were despised by every nation. Italy had declared war on England when we were 'on our knees' after Dunkirk; thus they were also enemies of Russia and all occupied nations. Now they were enemies of Germany. And

the British Army POWs in 1VB, not long ago treated abysmally as POWs of the Italians, didn't think much of them either. They were soon starving, with poor rations, trading their kit for food, begging alongside the Russian amputees for surplus skilly and scraps.

In addition to the news we got from the radio, the Germans supplied a weekly newspaper called 'The Camp'. I do not know how many they distributed but I managed to keep three copies. These did not really supplement the BBC news, as they were a week or so out of date and were really propaganda papers. Their war reports never mentioned Allied successes. They printed lots of bland articles taken from recent British newspapers and football league results. Their leader articles were loaded with propaganda. However the 30 July 1944 edition was interesting, as it covered the 20 July bomb plot to kill Hitler. It showed a picture of Hitler, apparently uninjured after the attempt on his life, talking to Mussolini. It announced "*that the plot by a criminal clique of German Officers had completely collapsed. The ringleaders either committed suicide after the outrage or were shot by battalions of the army. Among those executed was the manipulator of the explosive, Col. Count von Stauffenberg*". Incidentally he is now remembered as a hero by the German nation and a street in Berlin is named after him: "Stauffenbergstrasse".

This edition of The Camp also featured the launching of the V1 (flying bomb) weapons on London. These were followed by the V2 rockets and continued from their launching sites in Holland, mostly on the London area and Antwerp (a major Port for the British and Canadian armies on the North European Front), almost until the end the war. These weapons were totally indiscriminate and some fell in Essex, many of them in the Ilford/Romford area where my parents lived. One V2 fell in the road next to Joydon Drive, wiping out half-a-dozen houses and their occupants. Luckily my parents and two sisters had evacuated to Brighton during this onslaught. But our house was damaged and had to be patched up until after the war, when it was repaired. All this was unknown to me as my parents would not have mentioned it, and in any case mail might have been lost or arrived too late for me to receive it.

There was heavy fighting in Normandy after D Day and the German press made the most of it. At Caen, the first major city, the British and the Canadians suffered very heavy casualties, and the Americans on the Cherbourg Peninsular were held up for a time capturing the Port of Cherbourg. It was about five weeks before Caen fell, and the city was almost demolished by Bomber Command. But the fighting drew in much of the German armour. At this time the American forces made great headway in the Cherbourg Peninsular, swept around Caen to Fallaise to form a pincer movement. The Germans realising they could be trapped, started to withdraw their tanks, through what became to be known as the 'Fallaise Gap'. The RAF with their rocket firing Typhoon fighter bombers had a heyday destroying both troops and tanks. Eventually the Germans discarded much of their equipment and went helter-skelter to cross the river Seine to avoid capture. At this time the landing of Allied troops in Southern France had taken place and the Germans had decided to evacuate their troops from France.



The German 7<sup>th</sup>.Army was smashed at Fallaise with a loss of 250,000 troops (killed or captured), although a similar number managed to get away. Soon after, an uprising took place in Paris and the city was liberated by the French Second Armoured Division on the 25 August 1944, almost without damage. By 3 & 4 Sept 1944 the Allies had entered Belgium and Holland, and most of France was clear. We had followed all this news on the BBC throughout this time, and the camp was in high spirits.

Now aerial activity was recommencing over Germany. (The bombing of Berlin, Leipzig and other cities during the winter months had been suspended so that Bomber Command could assist with the Second Front. They were now released from this activity and night bombing restarted). Airfields were opened up in France and fighter and fighter bomber squadrons, British and American, moved to them. American Mustangs were fitted with auxillary fuel tanks and were able to support the squadrons of their Flying Fortresses all the way to Berlin and further east. Now, in the height of summer, we were able to see these raids at 30-40,000 feet, as hundreds of glinting specks in the sunlight and streaks of contrails in the sky. From now on the Allied air forces controlled the sky. Both strategic and industrial German cities were bombed night and day and their roads and railways were under attack from dawn until dusk.

In August 1944 on the Eastern Front the Russians were advancing on Warsaw. The Polish patriots believing that the Russians would come to their aid started an uprising in Warsaw. The patriots were not of the same 'political faith' as Stalin, and the Russian forces were ordered to hold off. Not only did the Russians hold off, they refused to allow the RAF to refuel in Russian territory and thus prevented them from dropping supplies to the Poles. The uprising lasted into September. The German SS and the German Ukrainian army perpetrated terrible atrocities in Warsaw, murdering thousands of civilians including women and children. As they murdered them they burnt their areas of the city to the ground. Eventually the whole city was virtually destroyed.

Sometime in late October or November a long column of young Polish women and children from Warsaw reached our camp and were housed in the transit compound adjacent to the RAF compound. They were in a terrible condition. These young people, many boys of 7 or 8 and girls of 16 years of age upwards, caught up in the patriot uprising, were serving as nurses, runners etc. They had been 'taken prisoner' and brought here by cattle truck and by marching westwards. They had no food or spare clothing and were desperate for help. The transit compound was filthy, dilapidated, and with few latrines. It was almost unbelievable that the Germans could treat them as they did. Most of the nationalities in the camp spent endless time along the wire between the compounds, looking at these young women who despite their condition were cheerful and sang Polish songs, often through the night. Also of course most prisoners had not seen a female form for years, and to see so many had awakened long forgotten aspirations! A number of RAF were Polish, and there was a fair amount of communication with the women through the wire, almost to the level of romance. Although at the time we were getting short of food

and had limited amount of clothing, food and clothing was given to them. After all this excitement, one morning at roll call the adjacent compound was empty, the Polish women had gone to - I know not where. It was not until January 1945 that the Russians occupied Warsaw in their advance towards Germany.

After reaching the borders of Holland, the Allies decided a rapid crossing of the river Rhine into Northern Germany would shorten the war by several months. It was planned to drop airborne troops to capture the Arnhem bridge across the Rhine in Holland, and hold it for a few days until armoured divisions from the south broke through. The 700 troops of the British 1<sup>st</sup>. Airborne Division dropped in Arnhem, were not joined by those dropped at Oosterbeek, and were thus isolated at the northern end of the bridge. The armoured divisions from the south were not able to reach the bridge in time and the 1<sup>st</sup>. Airborne fought to a standstill at Arnhem, having run out of ammunition. They had many casualties and all those still alive were taken prisoner, together with those from Oosterbeek who were unable to get back across the Rhine. The 1<sup>st</sup>. Airborne were regarded as heroes by the British and Germans alike. After several weeks walking and travelling in cattle trucks, many arrived at Stalag 1VB in an exhausted condition, but nevertheless they marched into the camp almost as if they were on parade. After a short stay for registration etc., most were moved out, to working parties, elsewhere.

The failure at Arnhem was a blow to our optimism about the rapid end of the war and we settled back in our minds to the fact we would see Christmas through in 'Kreigylant'.

December arrived and although Bomber Command had resumed its bombing deep into Germany, taking advantage of the long winter nights, not much had happened on the Western Front since Arnhem. Then to everyone's surprise General von Rundstedt's forces launched a massive strike into the American lines in the Ardennes on 16 December 1944. The 106<sup>th</sup> American Infantry Division came directly from America and had not been exposed to any action before. The Ardennes was a heavily forested area now under snow and 106<sup>th</sup> was probably thinking more about Christmas than a possible blitzkrieg. The Germans took thousands of prisoners initially, made deep inroads into Belgium, and the Port of Antwerp was under threat. It took some time for the Americans to halt the advance, and they were not helped by the bad weather, as initially air strikes could not be carried out against the German armour. Eventually the battle, known as 'The Battle of the Bulge', was won at great cost to the Germans, who had run out of fuel. There were many prisoners on both sides. As a result, Stalag 1VB was inundated with new American POWs. They arrived on Christmas Eve, the most dispirited group you would ever wish to see, suffering from dysentery and frostbite. They were starving, dirty, shivering, exhausted men. We had to sleep 2 or 3 to a bunk to accommodate the huge intake, and during the night how we dealt with men who had dysentery, with only one inside latrine, I cannot (or wish to) remember. Luckily, as for food, there was an unexpected issue of RC parcels, which to some extent 'saved the day' - it was Christmas Day after all!

Some interesting comments were made to me at this time by some American prisoners. One said "Only three weeks ago I was in California where I could eat as much chicken as I liked for a dollar". Another complained that on being taken prisoner a German frisked him and took 60 'D Bars' (60 bars of chocolate) from him! Several said that some prisoners were mown down by a machine gun after they had surrendered. (There was a German SS atrocity, when some 86 Americans were shot, at that time.)

The Americans were with us for about two weeks. Then they were moved out to various working parties and our overcrowding returned to normal proportions! BBC news about the Western Front remained quiet, but we all brightened up when we learned about the Russians' sensational advance from the Vistula to the Oder rivers. This was the only news that made life tolerable in January 1945, after extreme cold and damp in the barracks and very little food.

### **News of events inside Stalag1VB**

News was formulated by budding journalists and artists. A weekly newspaper designed like a normal broadsheet, with headlines, pictures and standard columns, was produced in manuscript. The pictures, portraits and cartoons were all hand drawn or painted. The pages were displayed side by side and affixed to a board made from a Red Cross crate which was moved from barrack to barrack each day. The content would cover outdoor sports events, the Empire theatre, and any topic of interest, gossip etc. When the RAF came from Dulag Luft Transit Camp with a Red Cross issue of pyjamas, this hit the headlines: RAF ARRIVE WITH PYJAMAS - a great source of amusement for the army POWs. A cartoon was published showing a RAF chap coming down by parachute, after being shot down, complete with his own Red Cross food parcel!

### **The French, the other major national in 1VB**

The British in 1943-45 were the greatest number of POWs in the camp, but the French were the prisoners who had been there the longest (1939-45) and were the most involved during this time. They had helped to build the camp in 1939 and were well established with the Germans (I suppose that as the Germans were occupying their country it was politic to do so).

They ran the hospital, one of the cookhouses, did all the clerical work involved in prisoners' records within the German administration, and maintained the POW cemetery at Neuburxdorf, near Muhlberg. Over the years they organised many religious parades. They had a good canteen, university, and theatre which produced plays and musicals. But their greatest skill seemed to be in producing exhibitions and models. I saw two exhibitions - 'Paris' and the other on 'Mountaineering'. Their models were the last word in craftsmanship.

They lived well on the whole, getting black market food more easily than us. Their connections were well established long before we arrived. They seemed to have an 'ownership' of 1VB

### **British casualties in 1VB**

There were about 60 British deaths. Most of these would be due to illness (a result of unhygienic living conditions and an irregular supply of Red Cross food, our mainstay for reasonable health) but there were three who were shot by guards, one suicide, and one accident.

Details of those who were shot :-

One caught stealing coal at night.

One seen trying to pick wild strawberries beyond the trip wire.

One caught at night trying to return over the compound wire to his solitary confinement cell.

The suicide hanged himself in the washhouse.

The accident was caused by a pilot from the nearby night fighter training airfield at Lonnewitz. He 'shot up' the camp at low level and hit two prisoners who were taking exercise walking round the compound football pitch. One was killed and the other seriously injured. The pilot was subsequently court marshalled.

All of these men had military funerals and were buried in a separate part of the Neuburxdorf cemetery. After the war they were re-interred in the 1939-45 Berlin War Cemetery.

### **My time ends in Stalag1VB**

At the end of January 1945 the Germans, having received confirmation of my commission from the Air Ministry, arranged for my transfer to Oflag V11B in Bavaria. I knew from the letters I had received from home that I had been commissioned as long ago as 1 December 1944 and was now a Flying Officer, having been promoted automatically after six months. I was surprised that the Germans would bother to arrange this transfer, as the war could not last much longer. I had believed the move would be to Stalag Luft 3 in Poland, but I hadn't known the Russian advance had already forced the Germans to evacuate the whole of Luft 3 and march westwards.

I was sorry that I would have to leave behind Johnny Bushell (my mucker!), as we had been good friends throughout my period at 1VB, but I knew he would join another group after I had left. We agreed that we would have a grand party for 'us survivors' after the war.

The inmates of Stalag1VB had a hard time after I had left, with few Red Cross parcels, German rations cut and little heating. The theatre had closed down,

and no doubt the outside activities curtailed during the winter period. I believe it was because of these conditions that John contracted tuberculosis after the war. In the last few weeks at the camp there had been much aerial activity at low level from American Mustangs, who were shooting up everything, including POW wood collecting parties in the woods nearby. So much so that the Germans agreed to have 'POW' painted on some of the roofs of the barracks.

On 23 April 1945 Russian Cossacks on horses, brandishing pistols and cutlasses, galloped down the main road in the camp, their tanks ripping through the barbed wire. Liberation day had arrived! The German guards, their families and some Polish POWs (who were no friends of the Russians) had evacuated the camp in buses the day before. I believe the Russians caught up with them with the ultimate consequences of being overrun by an advancing army.

The Russians occupied the German barracks and administration area, from which the noise of drunken parties could be heard for days. I understand that everything was chaotic in the camp - water and power stopped, latrines remained un-emptied, and there was no food distribution. Everybody had to forage for food etc. from the farms around, where many of the terrified German civilians were either dead (killed or committed suicide) or still hiding in their cellars.

Eventually the Russians organised a column to evacuate the camp to Reisa, by crossing the river Elbe at Strehla, alongside a general trek of German refugees and liberated workers (now displaced persons), heading west.

In Reisa, the Russians tried to register all the British ex POWs. They refused, with a display of arms, to allow some American troops with trucks to evacuate the British across the river Mulde (which the advancing American Army had reached). The British were now, in effect, 'prisoners of the Russians' whilst the Russians tried to trade them for Russian POWs released by the Americans. As a result of the general chaos that developed, from the time the camp was liberated until now, many British (including Johnny Bushell and friends) had 'made a run for it,' stealing bicycles and carts etc., in a move to get across a collapsed railway bridge over the river Mulde. The Americans were waiting on the other side with trucks to take them to Leipzig. For many British who remained with the Russians, repatriation took several weeks.

### **Departure for OflagV11B, Eichstatt, Bavaria**

On 2 February 1945, exactly one year since I had arrived, I said goodbye to 1VB with its 'not so pearly gates' and sinister blackish watchtower.

In a party of five RAF and RAAF chaps and three guards, we set out for OflagV11B, Eichstatt, Bavaria. It was a harrowing time to be travelling on the German railways. The Russians, in their rapid advance eastwards, had brought about many German refugees travelling to the west, and the railways

were heavily congested with them. To make matters worse the Allied air forces were bombing and strafing the roads and railways around the clock.

I had thought travelling like a civilian, and not in the usual 'cattle trucks', would make it a reasonable journey, especially having spent a year incarcerated in 1VB, but I was wrong. The first train we caught from the nearby junction was very late and literally crawled all the way to Chemnitz, where we waited seven hours for our next connection. We were waiting for a train to Nurnberg on a platform crowded with refugees, all with bundles of clothing and packs. Also there were many hospital cases of wounded soldiers about, looking generally very ill and in poor health, pale and thin specimens, all of them. Chemnitz was regarded as a hospital centre and had not been bombed. Up until now the junction was still intact, the station was still selling refreshments (just a watery beer), but had no bookstalls or buffet. The refugees had already waited hours for a train and now there was another delay of 70 minutes. They took it without a murmur and just moved back from the platform edge yet another time. I suppose they had given up! On the other hand, on the opposite track, military trains loaded with panzer troops were passing through, no doubt destined for the Eastern Front. I wondered where they would be in a few days time!.....

We left Chemnitz, just 10 days or so before the town was heavily bombed, alongside Dresden, for the first time. I and my four companions had certainly witnessed the current use of Chemnitz as a busy rail junction for German armour.

*I learned later, that at the Yalta Conference on 4 February 1945, the Allies (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) had agreed to assist the Russian advance by bombing important rail heads, through which the German armour would pass to the Eastern Front. These rail heads were Leipzig, Chemnitz and Dresden. Unfortunately Dresden suffered a high loss of life as a result of the heavy bombing, and the firestorm that developed due to the many medieval buildings in the town.*

After leaving Chemnitz, we continued southward at a very slow pace, and eventually reached Plauen. We arrived at midnight and our next train left at 5am. This station had taken a packet of bombing and we had five hours of very draughty waiting. The civilians (refugees) were in the same position as ourselves, and they had no shelter or anything to warm them. It seems that a youth movement, girls and boys about ten years old and resident in the town, had been recruited to help these people in their plight, with their baggage or in any other way, throughout this time. It was clear that a sense of emergency was developing, as the Russians neared the German homeland, and they were employing every measure to help their war effort. But what drudgery, and to what avail!

Hof was our next port of call. We got there about 9.30am and as there was another long wait, our guards managed to get a hut with a stove in it, on which we were able to brew some coffee with our bread. This made all the difference and we felt alive again. It was about 5pm that day before we moved

on. The train was packed and more and more people were on the move, all having waited many hours for connections. It was clear that the railways were in complete disarray. The continuous bombing had made its mark and we were lucky we had not experienced any so far. We had a quick change of trains at 7pm, but what a carriage we had! The train had been strafed, it had no windows at all, and we froze all the way to Nurnberg, which we did not reach until twelve midnight. Here the maelstrom of refugees continued and the station was almost in darkness. We were led virtually by the nose to an air-raid shelter. It was an excellent shelter with air conditioning, and plenty of warmth. Whether there was an air-raid or not I do not know but it was a joy to thaw out. It was another six hours before we moved on again.

From this point I have not recorded the details of the rest of my journey, but OflagV11B was about 50 miles further south, and only a few miles north of the Danube.

### **OflagV11B, Eichstatt, Bavaria**

We arrived at OflagV11B on the fourth or fifth of February 1945. The camp was situated in a small valley running east-west. About a mile away to the south was a road running parallel to the camp. Beyond the road were hills forested with pines and other trees. On the north side was another road, running alongside the camp. Rising from this road was a craggy area, with pine trees scattered along its ridge. It was a very pretty location. What a contrast to Stalag 1VB, with its look of 'Siberia' on my arrival there, a year before.

The camp housed about 1500 officer POWs, all army, from the British Commonwealth (plus now five RAF and RAAF), not like Stalag V1B which had over 20,000 POWs from many nations. The camp was divided into two sections called Upper and Lower camps, separated by a football pitch and an ice hockey ground laid out by the prisoners themselves. The Upper camp was a pre-war built set of barracks with good sanitation and stoves in each room. The Lower camp comprised of five wooden huts with separate room areas and brick stoves, but the sanitation was not as good as the Upper section. Nevertheless the whole camp was like a four-star hotel compared with 1VB. Tom Nelson (also a RAF navigator) and I were in the Lower camp, but when ever possible we used the normal private flush toilets of the Upper camp. I can remember that I used to make special journeys to the toilets in the Upper camp to enjoy the delights of being in a situation which was just like home!

We were in a hut with a portion divided off as a room. We had two sets of double bunks, a tall cupboard on its side which served as a sideboard, with the top as a work surface and storage underneath. There were two easy chairs and a table made from Red Cross crates and we used the services of a communal stove for cooking. The stove was a kreigie modification set into the chimney of the main stove, made up of RC tins and a German pickle tin as a firebox. It enabled us to brew up tea etc., heat up food and keep it warm. The fuel was mostly pine cones (from the wood collecting parties) kept alight by a forced draught, generated by waving a table tennis bat into the opening of the 'firebox'. I have often wondered whether it could have been patented!

Tom and I were allocated a room with two Australians (Jack Bedells and Nigel Teague) as a mess of four. Jack seemed to be in charge of the German and Red Cross food rations. He also organised a weekly menu and cooked the meals most of the time. In army parlance he was President of the Mess Committee or PMC - gone were the Stalag days of 'muckers'. I cannot recall making any meals but I did a lot of washing up. Although Jack did most of the meals, he was a bit of a hoarder. When from time to time Jack was out on wood collecting parties, Nigel (Paddy) would take over and have a bit of a bash. On one occasion he used up all our chocolate from RC parcels, which he melted down with some margarine, mixed it with a tin of biscuits and solid oatmeal (all crushed up), some Bengers Food and egg powder. When it had set it became a delicious fudge. A bit expensive but at this time it was Easter and the news on the war front was good, so we had a celebration. Another time Jack had tried his hand at making cakes but had used salt instead of sugar. As cakes they were a disaster, but used with a tin of stewed steak, became acceptable Yorkshire puddings!

Jack, and Paddy (a man of few words), obviously had elected to look after us and they were very friendly chaps, but we found that they were quiet and to some extent introspective. In fact most of the people here were like it, and I can only draw the conclusion that they had 'run out of steam'. All of them had been prisoners for four or five years, experienced the same number of Christmases 'go by' and were still behind the wire. Now that the war was almost over they were just waiting for it to 'really happen'. There were still some activities in the camp at this time and I can recall going to their theatre to listen to a recital of Gilbert and Sullivan music. Looking at some of their old programmes and magazines it had been a lively place at one time. They were in the privileged position of having all their 'literature' printed. I suppose that as they received some of their UK pay in lagermarks, they could pay for this work to be done outside the camp. (I cannot recall whether I was receiving any pay at this time, anyway it was too late to bother.)

A few incidents of note I can remember -

On the road to the south, nearly everyday you could see in the distance, a troop of Germans marching up and down as if in training, and singing as they marched. We called them 'the singing Goons'. (Germans were often nicknamed Jerries, Krauts, or Goons). I believe they were the Volkssturm, the German 'Homeguard', the Hitler youth and old men recruited to defend the homeland, now it was being invaded on all war fronts. In January 1945 Hitler ordered that, to strengthen their resolve, the Volkssturm would be regrouped with regular army units. In the Russian battle for Berlin in April many of them were killed alongside the more seasoned troops.

Another event, in this late hour of the war, occurred when we had our palliasses removed as punishment for some misdemeanor the Allies had allegedly done to Germans. We had to sleep on bare boards for about a month, not kind to your hips, which at this time, didn't have much flesh on them.



Then - On 12 April 1945 the Germans informed us that President Roosevelt had died, which was not really a surprise as he had been ill for a long time. (It was a pity that he did not live to see victory, which was less than a month away.) We all assembled as for roll call and had two minutes silence as a mark of respect.

On 9 March 1945 I received a blank book issued by the International Red Cross, named 'A Wartime Log'. It contained pages that could be used as a diary (a bit late in the day) or just to record anything; centre pages for sketching etc. and a rear section with cellophane envelopes to store small items. I spent some time catching up, by writing as much as I could remember of the last year's events, and drew pictures of my present camp and other pictures of interest. I affixed photographs I had received from home. Unfortunately I was unable to complete it, but it has supplied a substantial part of my 'POW DAYS' for which I am extremely grateful, as otherwise it would never have been written.

From February through to April we did not have many Red Cross parcels. One week we were lucky when a truck was diverted through to us, so it had been a sort of 'rags to riches' from one week to another. On 9 March we were told that the German rations were being cut by 20% and potatoes by 33.1/3%. German rations were poor, but were even more necessary in the, then, current situation of declining Red Cross food supply. We were hoping more than ever, that the war would be over soon.

There was rapid progress in the success of the war for the Allies, from February onwards. The Allies fought through the Siegfried Line in Germany, to the Rhine and took Cologne on 6 March. Then the only surviving bridge over the Rhine at Remegan was captured. From 23 to 26 March, the American armies in the Ruhr area crossed the Rhine, and the British and Canadian airborne and ground troops in the North crossed the Rhine near Wesel, in the greatest operation since D Day. More than 60 bridgeheads were established. As a result massive advances were made. The British and Canadian forces crossed Northern Germany in seven days and reached the Baltic. The American armies had encircled the Ruhr and moved east to Central and Southern Germany.

The import of these advances was that we were soon to learn, as our Commandant informed us on 13 April, that the camp was to be evacuated next day to StalagV11A, Moosburg, some 60 miles or so south across the river Danube. We would march there, with a truck to take any of us who were unable to walk the whole distance. Considering the rate of the American advance under General Patton, it beggars belief that it would be worth the effort to move us at all. (I understand that it had been a standing order from Hitler that no prisoner should fall into 'enemy' hands - but they were now losing the war!)

The 13 April was a hectic day for everybody, packing as much food as possible - luckily there had been an RC parcel delivery that week - and

essential clothing etc. into kitbags and homemade rucksacks. Some had procured old prams and others had attached some sort of wheels to Canadian Red Cross crates. A number of us had got hold of poles, so that two kitbags could be suspended between the shoulders of two people.

It was a 'motley army' that assembled on the road just outside the camp the following day. At about 9.30 am some 1500 kreigies, in a very long column interspersed with German guards, were ready to move off. Then low over the horizon from the east there swept in a flight of fighter aircraft. The army chap next to me said, "What are they?" and I replied, "They look like ME109s". How wrong can you be! In seconds the 'planes had shot up and straddled with light bombs, a German truck on the road to the south of us. They were a flight of American Mustang fighter bombers! Now it was our turn, the Mustangs wheeled around, and flying in again from the east, started to strafe our column. Pandemonium broke out as the column scattered off the road. Luckily I was in the middle of the column and managed to move off the road in time, before the cannon shells started to spurt along it. The front of the column wasn't so lucky. Then either the aircraft wheeled around again, or another flight appeared in the same run. By this time I was trying to run up the hill to a craggy outcrop for shelter. The Mustangs were barely at 50 feet and firing their cannon. My legs just folded up under me in fright and I didn't make it to the shelter of the rock. I have never felt so vulnerable before or since. The Mustangs on this run were, I believe, firing at a machine gun post on the top of the ridge. They were apparently out of ammunition then, as after this they were gone.

The results of this strafing were tragic: there were some 50 casualties, including seven killed and another three who died within 12 hours. The leader of the camp dance band and a first class pianist, lost an arm, and another chap had to have a leg amputated. Even more tragic when one considers that these chaps had been prisoners for four or five years and were within two weeks of being liberated. We all moved back into the camp and the letters 'POW' were marked out on the football field. It was decided by the Commandant, who had two guards killed and several wounded, that the evacuation would recommence the next evening. We would march by night and lie up under cover during the day. Nobody disagreed with that.

Some days after we left the camp the American army arrived and repatriated the wounded. The event was serious enough for a Question to be asked in the House of Commons as to why a motley column of POWs, in khaki just outside the wire of their camp with its watchtowers and searchlights, could be mistaken for a disciplined column of the German army. The reply was that the American air force thought they were a troop of Hungarians, whose uniforms were also coloured khaki! This was an example of the suffering from 'Friendly Fire' that took place in WW2.

### **From OflagV11B to StalagV11A**

The march took about six or seven days and unfortunately I did not record details of it. There were no serious incidents during the march and, taking place during the night, not much could be seen. It was more of a trudge along, than a march. As they were not main roads it was quiet, no German troops or armour moving north and no hoards of refugees moving south. There were no towns and only a few villages that we passed through. I don't recall crossing the Danube, but this would have been a natural defence for the Germans, as the Americans advanced south. I understand that pockets of SS troops were active in the forests around Eichstatt, but we did not see or hear any as we moved south.

In my Wartime Log, I did make a sketch of an open barn and farmyard which typified the sort place we stayed in, after each night's march. These farms would have been spread around a village and we were allowed to wander anywhere on parole status. This meant that we would not try to escape. Not that there was any point in escaping at this stage of the war, with the risk of being caught up in a local SS fire fight and the war almost over. Some of the chaps did wander around the farms and houses, trading with locals their cigarettes, for bread and eggs etc. On one occasion I went into a local church and I found a memorial card for a German soldier who was killed in 1941, 'gefallen fur Deuchland', which I kept as a reminder that, in a war, every nation's youth was sacrificed for some so-called national cause.

One event I do remember clearly, in the fading daylight as we moved off one evening. It was two old men just completing a new ornamental wooden fence around their front garden. Each pale had a cloverleaf hole, carefully cut in it at the top with a bow saw. They were so immersed in their work, they didn't notice us as we passed by. Even though much of Germany was in turmoil, the war could have been a thousand miles away, or never even happened, as far as they were concerned. They were just getting on with the remainder of their lives!

On 22 April we reached StalagV11A and it was nearly the end of the war.

### **StalagV11A, Moosburg, Bavaria**

Stalag V11A was started in September 1939 for 10,000 POWs and grew to enormous size over the war years. After the collapse of France, the evacuation at Dunkirk, and the invasion of Russia in 1940, prisoners from 72 nations had passed through the camp. Towards the end of the war there were about 80,000 POWs, 2000 guards and administrative staff, with another 80,000 prisoners with 8000 guards on outside working parties. No doubt these numbers were swollen by the intake of prisoners from other camps likely to be overrun like ourselves. In the final stages the Commandant requisitioned tents for 30,000 prisoners, but we were housed in huts when we arrived.

The huts were like those in Stalag1VB, but probably more dilapidated if that were possible and the whole place was flea ridden. This would have been a shock for our colleagues from OflagV11B having had tolerable living quarters for some years. However we only had a week to suffer until our liberation.

On the morning of 29 April we were assembled for roll call. However there were no guards to count us and no guards in the watchtowers. Then we heard the rumble of trucks and tanks getting steadily nearer the camp and pass by, a short distance away, but we could not see them. There were a few light explosions and some small arms fire as the column approached the town. This stopped, and in the distance we could see the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, go up over the Town Hall - our war was over! What a 'Holywood ending' for us to experience.

Shortly afterwards an American jeep from General Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup>.Army entered the camp with a soldier standing, holding aloft the Commandant's revolver which had just been surrendered to him. You couldn't see the rest of the jeep for people trying to climb on to it. The camp was now in a state of euphoria.

I have learned since that Colonel Burger, the German officer responsible for the defence of Moosburg, wanted to hand over the camp to the advancing Americans and for the Americans to by-pass the town. By this means Colonel Burger would ensure the safety of the camp and the town. However Colonel Burger had received orders to deport all the 15000 POW officers in the camp, and to send as many of his own men as he could afford to defend Moosburg. The local command of Moosburg was then taken over on 28 April by an officer of the SS, who was tricked into believing that Burger was going to carry out the deportation orders. When the SS officer left, Burger informed the more senior POW officers, in the presence of the Commandant, of his decision to hand over the camp en bloc to the approaching Americans. On the night of 28 April, under a flag of truce, a delegation including a Swiss delegate, two POW colonels and the SS officer, contacted the Americans to persuade them to go round Moosburg. The Americans held on to the SS officer (as Burger knew they would), declined to go round Moosburg, but accepted the plan to take over the camp from noon 29 April. The plan was carried out with only token resistance in Moosburg (as I actually witnessed) and there were no casualties in the American take-over of the camp.

(I have often thought since, that the reason the German SS wished to hold on to as many officer prisoners as possible, was to use them as hostages to trade for their own lives when the end came!)

Now we had been liberated, all we wanted was to catch a 'plane and fly home. But this was a prodigious task and some organisation obviously necessary before this could happen. The first thing I can remember, was that a number of American ladies assisting the Red Cross appeared, all highly made up as if they were going to a party. They were distributing doughnuts and white bread, which after eating the German bread for 15 months tasted like cake. It was a nice gesture, but I think we would have appreciated more, a field kitchen with some thick soup and American army rations!

The Americans were concerned that in such a large camp with so many nationalities, discipline would weaken, and the inmates would breakout and ravage the town. So we, the British officers, were required to patrol on the

outside of the wire, in pairs, in the hope that we could maintain order. We had no weapons and luckily no breakouts materialised. I was very relieved when they withdrew this operation, as we could not have prevented any trouble, and instead we could have landed up as being post war casualties.

Plans to fly us out were fairly rapid and I was scheduled to fly to Brussels on 3 May, but this was cancelled. On 6 May I wrote an American air letter home, a rather sad letter, as now I was disappointed about the delay, and conditions in the camp were terrible. Glad to say this letter didn't arrive home until I had been home several weeks!

Eventually a number of us were moved on 8 May to a grass airfield (adjacent to Moosburg town), where some 40 American Dakota transport aircraft were due to arrive to fly us to Brussels. None arrived and we spent all day in glorious sunshine on the airfield, which meant we would all arrive home sunburnt as if we had been on holiday!

*The 8 May was VE Day, the day all Germany surrendered to the Allied forces. Since we were released on 29 April, in the space of nine days, German forces had surrendered in Italy, Hitler had committed suicide, the Russians had conquered Berlin, the Americans and Russians had met, officially, on the river Elbe at Torgau (which was near Stalag 1VB), and the Germans in, Holland, Denmark and North Germany had capitulated to the British Army.*

At the end of the day on Moosburg airfield, American soldiers took us over to some houses on the edge of the airfield (which they had requisitioned at short notice), so we could 'bed down' for the night. I felt sorry for the owners of the properties, as they had been moved out at short notice and had to leave everything as it was. I for my part just slept on the floor, and at any rate there were too many of us to use the beds. The next morning, early, we had to return to the airfield, but I'm sorry to say not before some of our party had rifled the drawers and cupboards for souvenirs. I felt disgusted by this despoilment of someone's home, by apparently otherwise disciplined men who were now shortly to be reunited with their own families and homes.

### **On our way home**

We had to wait a short time on the airfield for the Dakotas to arrive, so I had my last meal (breakfast) of Red Cross food which I had saved for such an occasion. It was from an American parcel, a box of cornflakes and milk powder, which I managed to mix with water and eat in a comparatively civilised manner.

Not long afterwards I was in the air on my way to Brussels and what a feeling of elation I had! I don't recall much of the flight, but I remember noticing some of the German autobahns with their bridges destroyed. When we arrived in Brussels, the town was in its second VE Day celebrations (9 May), but all I wanted was to clean up and get a change of clothing. We were taken to a Reception Centre where we registered and had a shower. A bit like arriving at Stalag1VB, except we were all issued with new uniforms (and not our existing

ones deloused with gas!). After that we had a meal, with a band playing light music. One of the pieces played was appropriately 'J'attendrai', and then we were allowed to go into the town. As we were returning to England the next day and recent events were quite exhausting for me, I decided to sleep in a proper bed for the first time for 15 months, and save my celebrations for home.

The next day we left in small parties, only room for a few passengers in each RAF Lancaster, and flew to RAF Odiham in Surrey. We arrived to a heroes' welcome, with Squadron Leaders and Wing Commanders shaking our hands and offering to carry our kit to a hanger. This had been transformed into a large café set out with tables and chairs, with the Station WAAFs kept busy serving us tea and cakes, whilst an RAF band played light music to complete the welcome.

After our refreshment we were each given a ten shilling note (equal to about £40 in year 2004) for our journey to RAF Cosford, Shropshire. A party of us climbed into the back of an RAF open truck, which was to take us along the A30 to Paddington station in London. After some distance in open country we spied a large pub on the right hand side of the road. We thumped on the side of the driver's cab for him to stop, and directed him to the pub for a drink, the first since we were shot down. But when we got to the entrance, there was this devastating notice 'NO BEER'. Of course we had arrived home after two days of victory celebrations and the locals had drunk the place dry! Not to be outdone we charged into the pub and after explaining to the publican our plight, he pulled up some pints of ullage. It was floating with hops, but we didn't care, it was fine.

We followed this bout of 'drinking' with the invasion of a roadside café opposite the pub. We burst in waving our ten shilling notes, asking for cups of tea. When they realised who we were, just back from Germany, we had a bit of a party! Naturally we didn't break into our ten shilling notes, and it was great to be with the British people, back in our homeland again.

On arrival in London we stopped at the Endsleigh Hotel in Paddington for a meal. I took this opportunity to telephone my father from a public call box, using a free phone number. His first words to me were "Are you alright?" My father had a colleague at work, whose son was an army officer in OflagV11B (my camp). He had been wounded in the shoot up by the American Mustangs, left behind in the camp, liberated and repatriated by the Americans to a British hospital a few days later. And of course this event of 'friendly fire' had been followed by a row about it in the House of Commons. I assured my father that I was ok and I should be home in a few days.

We caught a train from Paddington to Cosford shortly after our meal at the hotel. At Cosford we were debriefed by Intelligence Officers for possible atrocities we may have experienced or witnessed in Germany. Of course some weeks before, the Allied forces had over-run the German extermination camps for Jews (the Holocaust). These had been filmed and shown in cinemas across Britain. The whole population had been reviled at what they

saw. We had not suffered such revolting treatment. Germany had followed the Geneva Convention to what I would describe as a minimum extent. In Stalag1VB, there was excessive overcrowding and lice-ridden living conditions, with no proper sewerage or waste water systems. The food was not sufficient and of low quality. Without the International Red Cross supplying food and monitoring camps, life in prison camps would have been much worse and many more would have died of illness and malnutrition.

Following our debriefing we all had chest X-rays and full aircrew medicals. I was not able to blow up and hold - I think for one minute - a column of mercury, a critical test for aircrew. We were re-issued with battle dress and basic clothing etc. (I did not have an officer's kit, my commission having been promulgated whilst I was a POW, and would have to get it from a military tailor whilst on leave.) After this we were issued with railway warrants and leave passes and free to go home! Not wanting to wait for transport to the railway station a number of us hailed a passing lorry. It was an empty coal lorry. No matter, we couldn't wait, so we climbed aboard, kit bags and all.

I arrived back at Paddington in the late evening, too late to get a train home. Paddington was not far from Park Lane, and living in a deluxe flat in Fountain House in Park Lane was Mr.Heron (the Boys Brigade captain of a company I belonged to before the war). He, his wife and daughter, were good friends of mine and between them had sent me 26 letters whilst I was in Stalag1VB. He was the Chief Engineer of the Dorchester Hotel in Park Lane and was living here because his house in Goodmayes (less than half a mile from where I lived) was completely destroyed by a bomb in 1940. Mr and Mrs Heron were surprised indeed when I knocked on their door that evening. We talked almost the night through. They were the first personal friends I had spoken to for a long time.

The following morning I was on the last leg home. We had no phone at home, and no neighbour who had a phone - not many people had the luxury of a phone in those days - so I could not tell my mother I would be home soon.

I caught a train to Ilford station and from there a taxi home. It was near lunch time, my sisters and father were at work. My mother must have had a premonition it was me knocking on the door, as she was crying buckets of tears of joy and was still holding the cabbage she was preparing, when she opened the door.

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