

'ONE MAN IN HIS TIME - - '

David A. J. Griffin^{*1}

*All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely Players:
they have their exits, and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts.'*

*AS YOU LIKE IT
ACT II, SCENE VII*



SYNOPSIS

“I -INK”, the four-engined Halifax bomber had hit hard. Its bombs had cascaded down on the German target, and now it was home to an eggs and bacon breakfast.

However, the terse warning, “Look out” Skipper: Fighter to Starboard” is the beginning of the end for the gallant old Lady and six members of its crew: Pilot John Farmer, Wireless Operator Eric Springett, Mid Upper Gunner Alf Stewart, Rear Gunner William Musson, Bomb Aimer Jack Wilson, and Flight Engineer John Satchell.

The aircraft, a flaming torch, explodes and the only survivor is David Griffin its Welsh navigator, who lands in Holland and becomes a prisoner of war.

David, with other unfortunates, becomes human flotsam, and during his nineteen month’s captivity is cattle-trucked hither and thither in search of a home, the prison camp.

In East Prussia, he is introduced to the raw life: the complete lack of privacy; the thousand and one rumours and prophecies which are believed, because they are desirable, the indomitable Allied airmen in adversity; the effect of letters or lack of them from loved ones; the gnawing hunger and perpetual cold, life in the Lager with its humour, pathos, repartee and longing for freedom; and the illicit daily BBC News bulletin, and David finds himself in an army camp in Poland with Dunkirk veterans- the forgotten men of yesterday. He meets McLeod, a grizzled veteran who has soldiered all over the world, and whose stock-in-trade is relating sexual experiences.

The summer of 1944 is hot, the hunger pangs are assuaged, and one feels that freedom is near.

However, the Russian enigma, halting their advance in front of Warsaw, when they had urged the Poles to rise and kill the German garrison was hard to fathom.

Again, they are forced to move westwards into the heart of Germany. The winter of 1944/45 is spent without Red Cross food parcels, without cigarettes and showers, assailed by the biting cold and slush mud, and the confiscation of the Paillasses, the last vestige of prisoner comfort, when the Gestapo swoop in the morning dark. However, humour and optimism still prevail and the fluctuations and vicissitudes of war are eagerly discussed and analysed by the prisoners. Finally, Montgomery’s armies cross the Rhine at Wesel and the camp takes to the road on foot. Trials and tribulations beset the marchers, and the problem is to survive. Finally, David accompanies by his friend, Wellings, escapes from the column and endeavours to make his way to the “front”, and link-up with the advancing Allied armies.

They are recaptured near Belsen, but regain freedom and finally security when they live with Polish slave workers in a big barn. Freedom is theirs when the 11th British Armoured Division overruns the area and David meets Sergeant Bill Woodward, Military Medal, who had fought in the North African Campaign and helped to liberate Brussels.



HANDLEY-PAGE HALIFAX B.MK II SERIES I (RAF*)

AUTHOR: WARRANT OFFICER DAVID GRIFFIN (~1945)





Referenced Locations



Referenced Locations as located within 2017 international borders.

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CHAPTER I

It was just before midnight on 27th September 1943. Crump! Crump! Went the bursting venom of the anti-aircraft shells, and the Halifax bomber seemed to buck and leap several feet in the air as the explosion reached upwards to claw it from the sky. This sudden, feverish burst of activity subsided almost as soon as it had begun, as if the German range finders, 21,000 feet below, now disclaimed all interest in their target.

'Christ! That was close,' exclaimed Alf Stuart, the mid-upper gunner, 'If that was their first attempt, I'd hate to be around for the second.'

'Me, too,' chimed in the bomb aimer, Jack Wilson, 'the sudden racket frightened hell out of me.'

'Okay, let's settle down then,' commanded the skipper, 'we've just crossed the Dutch coast and that was the welcoming committee. So stay off the intercom! By the way, navigator, what's our ground speed?'

'One hundred and seventy-eight knots, Skip. We have a headwind and a full bomb load, but I estimate we're bang on track.'

Communication and the cackle of the intercom were turned off by the clicking of a switch, and everyone went back to his appointed task of keeping the ship airborne. The gunners, mid-upper and rear, scanned the darkened skies for possible attack; the wireless operator, Eric Springett, fiddled with the W/T knobs and slowly turned the direction-finding loop antenna for a bearing; the pilot, John Farmer, and flight-engineer, John Satchell, carefully scrutinised the dials of the aircraft's controls; while the bomb aimer, Jack Wilson for the umpteenth time, checked the bombsight to ensure all was in readiness. The navigator, David Griffin, meanwhile, was on his hands and knees looking for the transparent, celluloid 360° protractor, which had slid off the chart table when the aircraft had been uplifted.

'Bloody thing,' muttered Dave, 'it's always slipping and sliding, and in this black hole it's impossible to find.'

His fingers groped along the aircraft's floor until contact was made, enabling him to slide his fingers under the elusive protractor and return it to the table on which the Mercator's projection was pinned. By the faint beam of light, he viewed the table's unholy mess: the once blank map now rapidly filling with straight lines, figures and E.T. As, the highly gleaming dividers for measuring distances; the pencil perched on the edge and ready to do a vanishing trick; and the ICAN computer which provided most of the answers to the problems besetting him. However, something was missing.

'Where's the bloody rubber?' he asked himself. He knew the answer and was just about to seek it out in the darkness below the table when he heard the clicking of the intercom.

'Captain to Navigator, what's the E.T.A. target, and give me a course for home when we've dropped our bundle.'

'Okay, skipper!'

Dave went to work with feverish energy. He drew straight lines on the map, measured distances meticulously with the dividers, worked out the new wind speed and direction and then, with the aid of the computer, arrived at an answer.

'E.T.A. target, 2325 hours, skipper, and the course home will be 278° magnetic.'

The captain acknowledged, and then there was silence save for the steady drone of the aircraft's four powerful engines drawing them irresistibly towards the target.

Dave checked his calculations for possible error and then transferred the findings to the log sheet. Everything was shipshape so far and going smoothly. Once the bombs had gone and they'd cleared the target area, the danger of plummeting earthwards would slowly recede and the odds of getting back to base and an egg and bacon breakfast would look rosier. Still, there was many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, as Dave knew only too well, and the homeward path would be fraught with difficulties, especially the German night fighters who'd be waiting for them.

At briefing, the navigation officer had told them that the actual bombing of the target area was to be completed within forty-four minutes - saturation bombing they called it - allowing each wave of 150 aircraft 11 minutes to perform its task. Dave's squadron had been allocated to the third wave, and as the first wave was due to commence at 2300 hours, Dave knew he was bang on time and would be away before the fourth and final wave did their destruction. In the early days of the war, raids had dragged on interminably as solitary bombers found their way to the target area only to be overwhelmed by the ground defences. Now, however, saturation meant that the greatest number of aircraft was over the target at one time and the defences could not cope with the avalanche that swept down upon them. The intensity of the attack would ensure that the ground defenders would be unable to leave the shelters to extinguish the incendiaries and so the target would be well ablaze and, hopefully, out of control by the time the fourth wave departed.

Dave tried to adjust the thin pencil-ray of light above the navigator's table so that it would reveal the elusive eraser, but failed. He bent down to commence a square-search of the blackness and his efforts were immediately rewarded.

'Got it!' he exclaimed triumphantly, and then his short-lived joy was abruptly terminated by his knee coming into hard contact with the sextant.

'Jesus Christ!' he groaned, 'My bloody knee'. He sat on the seat and nursed the hurt, feeling very sorry for himself.

'Only birds and fools fly', he mumbled, and then added as an afterthought, 'and birds don't fly at night.'

However, his feelings of self-pity were short-lived when the cackle of the intercom was immediately followed by: 'Navigator, I can see the PFF flares going down, and the target is ahead and slightly to starboard. Well done!'

Dave knew that the Path Finder Force, the elite of Bomber Command, always went ahead of the bomber force to ring the target with different coloured flares. The following bomber force bomb aimers were instructed to bomb on a particular colour. I for Ink, the aircraft in which they were travelling, was still thirty minutes away, but at 20,000 odd feet one could see for miles.

'Good stuff', we won't get lost now,' he mused, then laughed at himself for being self-congratulatory. Then it was back to the Mercator, groundspeeds, tracks, courses, airspeeds and the ever-fickle wind speed and direction. It was feverish and painstaking activity, but Dave knew from experience that the hairline between life and death depended on Lady Luck and the vigilance and dedication of each member of the crew.

CHAPTER II

Dave checked his figures and calculations. Everything was correct. In two minutes they would arrive at the turning point, ten nautical miles north of the target, and then head due south to perform their night's work. All aircraft had to obey this ruling so that the bomber stream would be flowing in an orderly direction and collisions in mid-air would be minimised.

The cackle of the intercom broke the silence, 'Okay, skipper, navigator here. New course 184° magnetic, ready, now!'

The aircraft wheeled to starboard as if it were a winged mallard avoiding a fusillade of shot, and then settled down for the run-in. There was silence for about thirty seconds and then the bomb-aimer took control: 'Two degrees to starboard, skipper, steady, steady, bang on, hold it!'

Dave estimated that they would continue this straight and level run for six minutes and in that time the bombs would have gone, the target cleared and then they could turn for home, so at 2328 hours they would steer 278°. He left his seat and peered over the crouched back of the bomb aimer through the perspex domed-nose of the Halifax. The night was literally on fire and the red, lurid glow of the holocaust below was doing its best to banish the enshrouding darkness. The target was festooned with flames and the glow of the tracer bullets was like lianas creeping up from below to entwine and squeeze the marauders from the sky. The descending coloured flares of the Path Finder Force made the area a veritable fairy-ground, but the crump! crump! of the exploding ack-ack shells reminded the intruders that this was hell on earth and the beckoning fires were waiting to envelop and consume them.

'Steady, skipper! Hold it! Hold it! Bombs gone.'

The Halifax seemed to lift upwards as if relieved of a weighty problem, but still continued on its straight and level run.

'Christ! Did you see that Lanc?' exploded Jack Wilson, excitedly. 'It almost crashed into us.'

'The bloody fool was going the wrong way,' chorused Bill Mussen, the rear-gunner.

'Keep off the intercom!' commanded the skipper, and then there was silence.

'Get ready to steer course 278° magnetic, skipper—now!' commanded Dave, and the four-engined bomber slewed once again to starboard and hurried into the night away from the inferno.

'Thank God for that,' whispered Dave to himself, 'and now let's get home to those bacon and eggs. Bugger this for a lark!' He settled down to his charts and navigation, plotted a few loop bearings to determine position and discovered that for once the wind speed and direction were constant and no course change was necessary. So it was going to be a piece of cake and another op nearer the magical twenty-eight and 'screening'. Each crew member, excepting the skipper, had to complete twenty-eight operational flights before being rested as an instructor at an Operational Training Unit, and this was the Mecca everyone strove to attain because it meant a well-earned lull where relative safety and longer life expectancy existed. Not that any member of aircrew felt that he was going for a burton. The consensus of opinion was that it just couldn't happen to them, and Dave thought, like every other member of his crew, that he was luck personified and untouchable. The gods would always smile in his direction, even if they were angry at times and vented their wrath on others.

'I for Ink' stooged on unmolested, although both to port and starboard the luckless ones were trapped irretrievably in the bright glow of the spider's web weaved by the German searchlights. The bomber force was on its way home, but there would be many an airman missing when breakfast was served. The rules of the game were being observed. The invaders had hit hard and relentlessly, and the German night fighters would do their utmost to wreak vengeance.

'Look out, Skipper! Fighter to starboard!' excitedly warned Bill, and then, almost immediately, from Jack: 'another coming in from port. Look out!'

The rattle and clatter of machine gun bullets ripping and tearing their way through the fuselage were so sudden and unexpected that Dave stood as if movement would help avoid destruction. Then there was quiet, a deathly quiet, and Dave thought that he must be the only one alive, and was just about to click on the intercom, when, 'Skipper here. Are you alright, navigator?'

'I'm okay, skipper.'

'Are you alright, bomb aimer?'

'Okay, skipper.'

So the roll call was carried out, and the seven members of the crew were all unhurt.

'Well done! We're all still hale and hearty so let's get our heads down and get this ship back to base. By the way, rear gunner, which fighter attacked us?'

'Both, skipper. The attack was simultaneous - the starboard fighter came across the rear, while the one from port struck underneath at the belly. Bloody miracle that we're all still alive and airborne.'

'Don't underestimate I for Ink, Bill, she's a tough old girl. Engineer, check for damage! Now let's keep quiet. We've still a long way to go. Keep your eyes peeled for fighters!' So the excitement was over, and it was back to work. Dave glanced out of the astrodome and, although they were miles away from the target, the fires were plainly visible and the distant sky was suffused with a reddish glow. The incendiary bombs had done their work and the explosions would go on all night as the conflagration spread.

'I'd hate to be down there,' thought Dave. 'The farther I can get away the better. God help those who bale over the target area, they'd get curry.'

His thoughts and feelings of smugness and security were rudely shattered with, 'Skipper, the port outer's on fire.' It was Jack's voice and sounded so matter of fact.

'Flight engineer, skipper here, see what you can do with the fire extinguisher! Do you think I ought to dive her to see if we can blow it out?'

'Hang on, skip! I'll give it a go first.'

Dave switched off the light above the table, pulled aside the small blackout curtain and peered into the night. Flames from the port outer engine were being swept back by the slipstream but, although this was a dicey situation, there was no need to panic as the engineer might be able to come up with an answer. However, Dave couldn't understand how the fire had started. Some time had elapsed since the attack, and it seemed that the aircraft was functioning efficiently. Still you had to be prepared for all eventualities in this game.

'I've tried the extinguisher, skipper, and it doesn't seem to have any effect. You'd better dive.'

The big bomber seemed to lurch forward, and Dave held on tightly to his seat as the aircraft's nose dipped and the rapid descent began. However, the flames just wouldn't disappear and were still licking hungrily around the engine cowling and being swept backwards by the force of the slipstream when they attained, once again, the straight and level position.

'I'll give her another go, engineer,' and immediately the rapid downward motion began again, but to no avail. The flames were determined in their resistance.

'What's our position, navigator?'

'We've just crossed the Dutch border, skipper, and within ten minutes we'll be over the North Sea.'

'What about 'ditching'? Engineer, do you think the kite will hold together until then?'

'I don't think so. She could blow.'

All the crew heard the conversation, and Dave knew that ditching would be preferred to baling out. They had practiced baling-out drill when the aircraft was on the ground, but all had voiced the opinion that they wouldn't be keen on the real thing, believing that pancaking into the sea would be preferable, although they had never experienced the latter.

'Let out the trailing aerial, wireless operator, so that we can transmit an SOS before ditching. Then they'll know our position.'

I for Ink, still fully operational, relentlessly ploughed its way homewards, but now the flames from the engine were leaping and dancing their way backwards in the slipstream current, seeming to reach half the length of the aircraft.

'Okay, skipper here. Bale out!'

The terse and dreaded command struck home forcibly. This was it, the real thing. It was to be obeyed immediately.

Dave knew the drill: he clipped his 'chute to the snugly fitting harness; upended the navigator's table, fastening it to the fuselage of the aircraft; then kicked the fallen navigational instruments out of the way so that he could get to the escape hatch in the floor of the aircraft. He bent down, grasped the ringed handle and tugged upwards, but it failed to budge.

Looking up he saw the bomb aimer, wireless operator and other crew members lined-up in the correct order for baling, then heaved once more. The hatch door shot upwards and he fell back on his arse with the wind whistling in, twirling and twisting the small navigational slips and the paper log. Holding firmly to the floor of the fuselage, he lowered himself out feet first, his back facing the direction in which they were heading. His legs hit the full blast of the slipstream to move upwards and adhere to the underside of the fuselage. Then his knee-length suede zip-up flying boots slid off into the darkness, and he was left in the ticklish position of having his head, shoulders and arms inside the Halifax, while the lower portion remained outside. Taking a final look at his oppos, he heaved upwards with his arms and was out into the night, sliding below the fuselage and hitting and taking something with him. Feverishly, his hand sought the handle of the ripcord, pulled hard, and within seconds it seemed that he was going upwards towards heaven rather than earthwards. The quiet and calm of the night surrounded him and it seemed as if nothing stirred. Perhaps this silence and serenity were accentuated by the tremendous contrast between being a prisoner of the noise, tension and unceasing, feverish activity of the aircraft for so long and then being suddenly liberated from it all. He was safe.

The sky, the clouds and the filtering moon were his, but way below him, to his surprise, was the flaming torch, 'I for Ink'. How it had got there was beyond him, because he thought his rapid descent would have taken him below the Halifax. The blazing aircraft riveted his attention as if mesmerised, and then the spell was broken by an explosion, accompanied by a sheet of flame, and 'I for Ink' plunged relentlessly earthwards.

Dave closed his eyes. 'Jesus!' he whispered. 'What an end!' He knew that the bomb aimer would have had time to bale, but the other five members of the crew would be trapped in the flaming hell by gravitational force and would be incinerated before they reached the ground. The German defences had done their work ruthlessly and efficiently.

The parachute oscillated in the cold September air and Dave placed one stockinged foot on the other for warmth. Claspings his hands, he realised that something was amiss as they felt sticky and wet and

on examination, he discovered they were bloody. His right knee felt cold and as his hand slid down to succour it, it contacted the bare, sticky flesh.

'Christ!' he blurted, 'My trouser leg must have ripped. How the hell did that happen?' Then it dawned. It was the trailing aerial which he had hit and carried away and the flesh of his hands and knee must have been cut in the process. Still, that was nothing. He was alive and kicking and that's what counted.

The descent seemed long and so he had time to ruminate upon the situation. He had no boots and no escape kit, having left the latter in the Halifax, and would be landing in Holland. The Germans were there as in every other occupied part of Europe, so it would be a long walk home. But he felt he could do it, such was the confidence of youth.

Suddenly a group of trees became discernible and the ground came rushing to meet him. He was going to land on his back, so frantically pulled on the parachute's silken lines to gain control.

Then bang! He hit, not the ground, but what seemed a tall, wired fence. It held him for a moment, and then he crashed to the ground.

'Oh, my bloody ankle! My ankle!' he moaned.

Releasing himself from the harness, he hobbled around in small circles and realised he wasn't alone, but had a spectator. On the other side of the fence was a large bull, which snorted away and was most angry because his nocturnal quiet had been shattered by the billowing, white angel from the skies. 'Piss off!' cried Dave angrily, and then, 'Jesus, my bloody ankle!'

The bull moved away but Dave still kept moving around in circles as if movement would alleviate and banish the pain. Finally, he gathered his life-saving silk and moved to a spot a few hundred yards away to bury the evidence of his arrival. It was hard work and a sense of dissatisfaction existed with his handiwork on completion. Still, it would have to do, as he couldn't afford to linger.

He set off in a westerly direction, keeping the Pole star to his right, hobbling and favouring his left foot, the stars, the clouds and the night his companions, and the quiet and stillness making their impact.

'So this is Holland,' ruminated Dave. 'It could have been worse.'

CHAPTER III

He had only walked about a 100 yards and already his busted ankle and feet were killing him. His ankle pained his every step, while the soles of his feet, were cold and sore. Then he neared a clump of trees surrounding a small cottage. Nothing and no-one stirred and, thus, emboldened, he approached the front door, paused for a few moments and then knocked loudly. The sound reverberated in the still night, but no-one answered the summons, save the shadows of the nearby copse which seemed to jump in the flickering moonlight. Dave knocked again, but it seemed that the whole world was asleep and oblivious to his plight. He was just about to knock a third time, when he heard movement from within and muted voices as if they were discussing a course of action concerning their nocturnal visitor. Then there was quiet and Dave, fearing that they thought he had left, knocked loudly.

A voice called out in Dutch, and Dave, not knowing the language, interpreted it as, 'Who are you, and what do you want?' So he set about giving an explanation: he was a British airman who had been shot down and wanted a new pair of shoes. It sounded ludicrous, almost like a music hall joke, but there was no response from within so obviously they didn't understand what he was trying to convey. The humour of the farcical situation was lost on the inmates. Mutterings continued to filter through the door, and so Dave knocked again and repeated his requirements. Finally, the door opened slowly and a powerful, middle-aged man carrying an oil lamp emerged. He thrust it at Dave's face, blinding him temporarily, and then lowered it to scrutinise the rest of him. Having satisfied that all was correct, he motioned the airman to enter, closed the door behind, and then turned up the wick of the lamp to reveal the other occupants: a stoutish woman - whom Dave assumed was the mother - and two children, a girl, aged about thirteen and a boy about sixteen.

The mother motioned him to sit and there was silence as he became the cynosure of all eyes. They examined him closely; the children his navigator's brevet and sergeant's stripes; the man staring intently at his face as if trying to recall recognition, while the woman seemed to be fascinated by his trousers. He thought something was amiss and glanced down to rectify and button up, only to see his protruding, dried, bloody knee. He moved his hands to close the gaping rent in the cloth and noticed his hands were of the same red hue. No one moved, and for Dave the quiet and intensity of the observation was both unnerving and unsettling. He moved his feet to create a noise and lessen the tension, which created a stabbing pain from his injured knee causing Dave to gasp in pain.

The emission of sound broke the trance and created a stir. The mother moved into the next room and returned with a bowl of warm water and some soap and, with the aid of the daughter, proceeded to wash and cleanse the flesh around the right knee and also the hands. Then she removed Dave's left sock, revealing a very swollen, puffed, blue-mottled ankle. A few words were exchanged, but communication was difficult because of the language barrier and it was left to gesticulation and signs. Then there was food, a glass of milk and two slices of darkish coloured bread with honey.

It was now the early hours of the morning and Dave could hardly keep his eyes open. He was sick with tiredness and every part of his body hurt, from the soles of his feet to his aching head. His host, realising this, beckoned him to follow and he hobbled and limped in his wake to an adjoining room containing an alcove, where a makeshift bed existed. It belonged to the boy and it was indicated that for the next few hours it was Dave's also. The lamplight was removed, and Dave stripped to his vest and pants, climbed in beside the boy and within minutes, despite the aches and pains which plagued him, was fast asleep.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of voices and dressed hurriedly. The pain from his ankle was intense and, in the light of day it looked as if it had been painted blue. The clock informed him that it was almost eight. So he'd made a late, bad start to the day and his resolve to be a successful evader would come to naught, unless he left the present scene immediately.

In the next room, Dave was introduced by his host to three strangers, one of whom spoke a little English. This person informed him that they were neighbouring farmers who had come to see him.

'No bloody good,' ruminated Dave, 'the whole neighbourhood must know I'm here.'

He pointed to his feet and asked for shoes, for it was time he went. If he stayed much longer he was a goner. The woman brought him a gaily painted pair of Dutch wooden clogs which fitted fairly comfortably, despite the swollen ankle. However, when he stood it was difficult to move freely as the shoes seemed to want to stay in one spot, and his ankle hurt like hell. Nevertheless, he had to go and so extended his hand in farewell. However, the woman placed an arm around his shoulders and pointed to the food on the table, insisting that he partake.

Dave was so grateful for her kindness, and, also he realised that the next meal may be a long time coming.

He sat down and was just about to commence breakfast when two Dutch policemen were ushered in by the boy. They motioned Dave to finish his meal, and then carried on an affable conversation with those present.

The meal over, the police stood and motioned that he should accompany them, but before he could do so the visitor, who could speak a smattering of English, grasped his hands and began to apologise, 'Gestapo, shooting, concentration camp, in the night, finished', were words mentioned and from the explanation Dave arrived at the conclusion that during the night the Dutch farmer, his host, had gone to the local police station to tell of his whereabouts. He had done this not for himself, but for his family. Harboursing or helping an evader was punishable by death and his host had to put his family first. Dave understood the predicament as he would have done exactly the same thing if positions had been reversed, so as he moved towards the door, he stopped, looked his host straight in the eye and proffered his hand. The farmer grabbed and wrung it warmly, and Dave thought he detected a tear in the eye. It was as if he were pleased to be forgiven. He was no Judas, but a man, who, rightly so, placed the welfare and safety of his family above all else. Dave smiled at the mother and nodded his head in appreciation for what she had done, then threw a friendly salute at the two children before moving outside to the waiting car.

A friendly atmosphere pervaded the local Dutch police station and Dave was extended every courtesy, being allowed to sit in the office with the policemen on duty, drink coffee with an acorn flavour and carry on a conversation in sign language. Then the ringing and answering of the telephone brought the euphoria to an abrupt end. The word Luftwaffe was mentioned and Dave was bundled into a cell and the door clanged behind him. Within minutes, the cell corridor resounded with approaching steps and Dave, for the first time, was confronted with the greyish-green uniform of the Luftwaffe.

'Bloody good communication system these Dutch have', reasoned Dave. 'they knew these bastards were on the way'.

The cell door was unlocked, and the German officer motioned Dave to follow him to the office, where a Luftwaffe *feldwebel* awaited. A canvas bag was produced, emptied, and Dave was asked to examine the contents - the pitiful, charred remains of five members of 'I for Ink'. It would have been impossible to identify anything or learn to whom they belonged, except that Dave knew what he was looking for and on the blackened, burnt 'dog-tags' was able to trace a few letters, fill in the ones that were obliterated and so make a name which represented a member of his crew. It was as if he were completing a crossword puzzle. The officer informed him that five airmen had been incinerated in the plane crash, while the sixth member had been found dead in a garden about a mile away, the parachute open and surrounding him. Dave was shown the patch of leather on which the airman's name was printed and worn by aircrew as easy identification on the squadron. It was the wireless operator's, Eric Springett. No reason was given for the cause of death, save that the airman had a large cut on his forehead.

One of the policemen exchanged words with the Luftwaffe officer, and the latter instructed Dave to remove his clogs as they were to be returned to the owner. Then he was conducted, bootless, to the waiting truck, placed in the back with three Luftwaffe members - part of the crew that had been examining the remains of 'I for Ink' - and driven off.

The journey lasted about three-quarters of an hour, and Dave tried to fathom the reason for the wireless operator's death. He had baled successfully as evidenced by the open chute, so what could have caused it? The only conclusion he arrived at was the exploding bomber must have been responsible as the luckless airman would have been in close proximity when the blast occurred. What a way to die! Five of his oppos burnt alive and the sixth also dead. These crew members over the past three months had been like a family. They had lived together in their Nissan hut. They had flown eight previous missions all without incident. He thought of the Irishmen, Jack Wilson and Bill Mussen, the Londoners, John Farmer and Eric Springett, Alf Stuart from Northern England and his close friend John Satchell, with whose family he had shared a meal and the last words John's mother had said to him, was "Look after John". The thought made him shudder and realise that but for the grace of God and that he was the navigator, first in the baling order, he would be dead too

The journey terminated with their arrival at an aerodrome, and from the number of M.E. 109s and 110s, at dispersal points and sprinkling the runways, it was easy to conclude that here was the home of several fighter squadrons, which battled with RAF bomber hordes at night and then cut swaths in the marauding American B17s during the day. Dave was taken into the administrative block and given a pair of RAF flying boots, identical with the ones he had lost. However, when putting them on found that they were both left-footed. He stood and felt like Charlie Chaplin doing the 'can-can', as both his feet pointed in the same direction.

A voice in German drew his attention from the lower half of his body and looking up, he saw a young, fresh looking Luftwaffe pilot observing him. The pilot spoke a few more words and Dave believed he was commiserating with him on his misfortune of having been shot down. Dave just smiled, shrugged his shoulders, then pointed to his two left feet. The German laughed and, as he walked away, said, in an impeccable French accent, 'C'est la guerre', and Dave, who had a smattering of French in his education, knew that although the fortunes of war had been unkind, the gods had smiled upon him during the last twenty-four hours.

Escorted by two guards, he duck walked his way to the cooler and was locked in a cell. Strangely enough, a sense of security came over him with the shutting of the door, as this was a haven from the recent, violent vicissitudes which had stormed around and over him. Here was a refuge where one could rest and recuperate for the gales and tempests ahead. He removed his two 'left feet', lay on the narrow bunk, pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and within minutes was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IV

The train rattled its way across the tracks, and the uneven motion caused Dave to sway against the burly, armed guard sitting next to him. The movement produced a smile on the face of the German soldier sitting opposite, and he, for the umpteenth time, produced the remark, 'For you the war is over'. Neither of Dave's custodians could speak a word of English, but this saying had found its way into the German's vocabulary at some time or other and now he loved using it. Perhaps it was to show his command of the English language or to impress on the prisoner the futility and hopelessness of his situation. The carriage had seats on either side and an aisle running down the middle, so the passengers could walk freely to and fro. Consequently, the RAF navigator attracted much attention and the Dutch passengers wanted to converse with Dave and offer him cigarettes. The burly one, however, wouldn't allow this and gesticulated with his machine gun for the gathering onlookers to disperse and go back to their seats, while his comrade-in-arms just sat and smiled benignly on all and sundry.

The train made several stops along the way, but finally the terminus was reached - Amsterdam. Here, Dave was hustled through the commuter crowd going their divers ways and into a room at the end of the platform, where three Luftwaffe personnel, one of whom was a feldwebel, waited. The burly guard produced an envelope containing three forms, all of which were duly signed. Thus, Dave, was signed, sealed and delivered. His two former guards, their task completed, left, leaving him in the custody of the new arrivals. Then, escorted to a waiting car, he was whisked through the streets of the city to his destination.

Dave was never really sure where the Royal Palace of the House of Nassau-Orange was actually situated, in Amsterdam or The Hague, but in late September, 1943, it was the Headquarters of the German Luftwaffe in the Low Countries and it was to this place that he was driven and incarcerated. Although only there for a day and a night, his stay was uneventful, save for a chance meeting with Ray Bolland, a Canadian fighter pilot. After about three hours' imprisonment, he was taken to the urinal by a guard and encountered the indomitable Ray, who was relieving himself. Dave sidled alongside the big Canadian, undid his fly and commenced pissing.

'What the hell brought you here, for Christ sake?' demanded a Canadian voice, half-humorously, half-sarcastically. Dave, turned to view the speaker. The left side of his face was badly burned and part of his battle dress had been charred. His left arm was in makeshift sling and he looked in bad shape.

'Bloody shot down. That's what happened to me,' informed Dave. 'I'm not here by invitation. What happened to you? You look like you've had a rough time.'

'Shooting up trains, when I bought it and crashed'.

One of the guards yelled out something like 'Shut up' or 'hurry up'.

'Fuck-off, you son-of-a-bitch!' was the Canadian's immediate reply. Then he finished his toiletries, carefully and deliberately buttoned up his fly with his good hand, and then shuffled off to his cell.

The next morning, they were off early and on the train before 7.30 a.m. The party consisted of Ray Bolland, Jack McDonald, three guards and Dave. Ray and Jack were both Canadians who had been shot down a few days previously while shooting up trains. They belonged to the same Typhoon squadron, which made, weather permitting, daily sweeps of Northern France and the Low Countries. Jack was unhurt, but Ray was in constant pain from the burns he'd received when his aircraft had caught fire. Nevertheless, he was always cheerful and uncomplaining, and one had to admire his spirit and courage. The guards were fairly decent and although in their forties and seemingly too old for active service, were afraid of being sent to the Russian front. Every time Ray would mention 'Ruskies', they would throw up their hands in horror. A stint on the Russian front was the last thing that any of them wanted. It was a fate worse than death.

The train was now ploughing its way through the wreckage of the Ruhr Valley. Germany's life-blood as far as the sinews of war were concerned. Here nearly everything was made for the German war effort, from the largest cannon and shell to perhaps the coloured pins placed on maps to indicate the various fighting fronts and the progress the German armies were making. All Royal Air Force flying personnel were familiar with the dreaded Ruhr, nicknamed 'Happy Valley', because it was a spot revisited time after time by Bomber Command and its thirty thousand antiaircraft guns had exacted a heavy toll of the invaders. Now, however, the rubble and wreckage on both sides of the railway line were ample evidence of the special treatment meted out to it by the bomber boys. The crews of the Lancasters and Halifax's performed their work of destruction in darkness and never saw evidence of their handwork, and it pleased Dave that it had not all been in vain.

The engine maintained its pace until it came to a large junction, where the lines criss-crossed to such a degree that their train was forced to lose momentum and click-clack its way along, finally stopping at a fairly large station. Everyone disembarked and gravitated to the platform on the other side. There was a big crowd and, as the waiting minutes ticked away, the three airmen and their guards became the centre of attention. The hostility was very much in evidence as, in all probability, these onlookers had been subjected to aerial bombardment and some had lost relatives and friends in the almost nightly holocaust. The mutterings and threats increased so the guards moved their charges against the wall and then took up protective positions on the outside.

'Christ'. They'll lynch us if that train doesn't come soon', stated McDonald. 'These bastards follow each other like a flock of sheep - they don't think for themselves.'

Then to the fore came a grizzled, old, railway worker carrying a large hammer. He was obviously a wheel-tapper and looked menacingly at the prisoners of war.

'If he comes at me with that hammer, I'll be over those tracks like a two year old', stated the irrepressible Bolland. 'He's a mean-looking son-of-a-bitch.'

The arrival of the 'old one' seemed to give the crowd direction and purpose, so two of the guards pointed their machine guns at the menacing crowd, while the third drew his pistol

Things looked dicey, then the long awaited train puffed its way into the station and so the crowd had somewhere to go and something else to do and so dispersed. The six of them clambered into a vacant carriage and slammed the door shut.

'I hope my stay in this goddamn country improves!' exclaimed Bolland. 'Bugger a mob which doesn't make you welcome,' and with that he plonked himself in the corner seat, stretched out his long legs and closed his eyes.

The journey terminated at Frankfurt on Main at about ten p.m., and they were exposed immediately to the military might of the Third Reich. The station, with its huge domed-glass roof, was seething with uniforms as army, air force and naval personnel were either catching trains to the far-flung outposts of the expanding or contracting Greater Germany, or disembarking for well-earned leave. No-one took any notice of the newly arrived POWs, for everyone was intent on going about their business and getting to their destination. Then the banshee of the air raid sirens was heard and the momentum increased. It seemed to Dave that he was watching an old silent movie and the actors, the milling throng, flickered on screen momentarily and then disappeared. The guards prodded their charges into a canter and they went down several flights of steps, reaching a sort of basement where there were bunks equipped with palliasses. This, then, was their resting place for the night.

For the next fifty-minutes or so it seemed that all hell was on the rampage. The scream of bombs could be heard as they hurtled earthwards, chilling the marrow of the bones and squeezing the innards until they felt like water. Then there was the crump of the bursting ack-ack shells and the roar of exploding bombs. Twice the whole building seemed to rock and then gently settle down as if annoyed at such rude awakenings. Dave lay on his bunk and thought of how his position had been reversed. Previously, he had always been above dishing it out, but now he was on the receiving end and wasn't too keen

about it. Only about ten days ago, he had been over Frankfurt hitting shit out of it, but now it was he who was getting lambasted.

'Bloody, stupid war!' he thought, 'But for me the war is over', and then immediately queried this assumption, for it seemed that it was beginning all over again, but this time he was on the other side of the fence. Finally, the all-clear sounded, and so it was to sleep and let tomorrow look after itself.

On the morrow the three of them were taken to an interrogation centre for aircrew, situated a few kilometres outside Frankfurt. Dave was searched, stripped of all personal possessions - one solitary Parker fountain pen with gold nib, and then placed in a small, monastic-like cell. The quiet of the surroundings contrasted sharply with the bustle, turmoil and ceaseless activity of the last seventy-two hours or so. It seemed that a thousand years had passed since being shot down, not just a few days. The endless and feverish movement from place to place had prevented him from contemplating his present position or thinking of the anguish his disappearance must have caused to his family, especially his mother.

It was his mother who counted. His father was soldiering somewhere in India, while his only brother was deep in Burmese jungles grappling with Japs. It was his mother who would receive the dreaded telegram, 'MISSING IN ACTION' from the Air Ministry, and would have to sweat out the weeks, until she received news that he was a POW. He felt dreadfully sorry for her, as she had borne, uncomplainingly, the brunt of everything. She was indestructible, but the pain and worry of it all must surely take their toll. He remembered the end of his last leave, when she had insisted on accompanying him to the railway station, over a mile away, to catch the 4.30 a.m. train. They had walked in the cold, dark starlight morning, not saying very much, but she occasionally reiterating the phrase, 'Take care of yourself, David and he, in his youth and exuberance, feeling that there was no need for worry as nothing could harm him. Then the train had pulled away from the platform, and she had been left, a deserted and very lonely figure filled with thoughts of apprehension and trepidation for the future.

In the afternoon he was conducted to the administrative block and interrogated by a Luftwaffe officer with an American accent, who began the session with a request for name, rank and number. Dave replied: David Job Griffin; Sergeant; 2711131. Then there were further requests for information: such as squadron number, how many planes involved in the raid, where were you trained etc. Dave knew that the only information he had to supply was name, rank and number and so remained silent in the face of further questions. The interrogator was skilled and couched the same questions in different ways, but Dave volunteered no enlightenment. After half an hour, Dave was returned to his cell, fed, locked up and left to wrestle with his thoughts, sweet and wonderful. The image of the beautiful, vivacious Joan, came flooding to his mind, cascading and sweeping all other thoughts away. Her dark, long hair framed her face and he wished fervently that he could be with her now, instead of in this bloody, miserable cell. She'd know now that he was missing, but he always told her that no harm could befall him and together they'd laughed away the fears that tried to mar their happiness. During his leaves, Joan and he had tramped the Welsh mountains enjoying the grandeur of the rugged scenery and happy in the knowledge that they were together. Life on the squadron was just too hectic and to be away from it all, safe, body whole, secure and Joan at his side was perfect. Then there was a sense of peace and permanence, for on the morrow you didn't have to be airborne and fly on operations, not for another seven days anyway and that seemed a lifetime away. Thus lost in thoughts, beautiful and wonderful and oblivious of his surroundings and predicament, he fell asleep.

For the next two days no-one bothered him. It seemed as if they had forgotten his presence and, apart from being allowed out to relieve himself, he was locked up all day. While in the lavatory, he came across some English literature in the shape of the newspaper, 'The Scotsman', cut into rectangular shapes for bum wiping. It was interesting reading, the advertisements, the snippets of news, the society gossip et cetera, and Dave became so engrossed that he forgot the passing of time. The banging of the door brought Dave back to reality and he hurriedly completed the necessities and then took a batch of the 'toilet Scotsman' and stuffed them into his pocket. They would make good reading material when he became bored and so would help to pass the time. He was escorted to the toilet about three times a day and so would return the read material and return to the cell with a fresh batch of sheets. He came to regard the toilet as a lending library, where he borrowed and then returned the not too crumpled sheets and hoped that none of the other prisoners objected to the crinkly, slightly-creased toilet paper.

On the fourth day, he was once again interrogated, being accused of belonging to a squadron involved in dropping saboteurs and agents in Occupied Europe. Why did he come down in Holland? Bomber Command didn't attack Dutch targets? Halifax's were used to drop agents and his aircraft had been a Halifax? He was not a member of Bomber Command, but belonged to a squadron intent on the sly, dirty business of dropping spies et cetera? Then the interrogator would change his tack and laugh at the way Dave had been caught by the Dutch police.

'All Europe is on our side,' the interrogator would rave on, 'you had no chance of escaping.'

Finally, Dave was returned to his cell to the reading of *The Scotsman*, his concern and fears for his mother; and then at night he would escape his imprisoning surroundings and become lost in wonderful, tender thought of Joan.

There were two more interrogations before he was released. Dave was herded into a truck with about twenty other Empire airmen, who including the two Canadians; Bolland and McDonald, and driven to a transit camp to await transportation to a POW camp.

CHAPTER V

The railway cattle truck with the French words, '*8 Chevaux ou 48 Hommes*' painted on its sides, rattled and swayed its way along the tracks, while the twenty-nine Allied airmen, all newly baptised prisoners of war of the German Reich, sat on the hard, wooden floor, backs to the sides for support and bodies slightly rocking in unison with the motion of the truck. All the prisoners were shoeless; these having been confiscated in order to minimise chances of escape. Although the sun had not yet set, the interior of the truck was dimly lit, for the light could only filter through the narrow, barred windows near the roof and the slit-opening caused by the sliding door not being completely closed.

The journey was nearing the end of its second day and already the cold was beginning to seep through the boards and into the stockinged feet of the inmates.

'Shit! This bloody cold kills me, for Christ sake,' stated Bolland to those near him. 'Talk about Canada! That frost last night gave my feet hell. I thought my toes would drop off.'

'Me, too,' subscribed someone else. 'I was bloody glad when it warmed up this morning. The frost seems to come up from the rail tracks and attacks your balls. Trust the bloody Germans to think up some new form of torture.'

At this there were roars of laughter and the tedium of the journey was broken for a while. Dave knew how cold the previous night had been. He had wriggled his toes endlessly within the woollen stockings and had pulled his knees up into the stomach for warmth. Jesus, he was tired and, in all probability, it would be bitterly cold again tonight and there would be little sleep.

Someone got up to relieve himself by sidling up to the narrow aperture caused by the slightly open sliding door and pissing out on to the moving, shiny tracks below.

An hour later one of the three guards lit the oil lamp and then a slice of dark bread, accompanied by a piece of German sausage, was handed out to each prisoner and hungrily devoured. The meal over, a quiet settled over the group and each prisoner was alone with his thoughts. Dave thought of Bill and the other dead members of his crew. They had been together for so long and were like members of a happy family. On the squadron they all lived in a Nissen hut, and when not flying would go off to the local pub and enjoy the friendliness and bonhomie that existed. The bar would be crowded with aircrew types, all living it up. They were the 'quick' of today and were not yet the 'dead' of tomorrow, so they had to make the most of it while the gods still favoured them. Often the last bus would be missed because of an attractive girl's company, but Dave didn't mind for he was free of emotional entanglements, having not yet met Joan. He loved walking back to base under the cold, frosty starlight for it made his blood tingle and course in his veins. He was alive and that was what mattered. He believed in his indestructibility, but doubts would arise when he saw what havoc operational flying was causing to his friends. Large gaps were being literally torn in the fabric of the squadron and these were filled by the 'sprogs', who arrived to fill the voids. It was an awful way to live, but better than dying.

The frost was now beginning to bite and the wooden boards of the floor were really cooling to the arsehole. He was hale and hearty, but there were those in the party who had had a rough time. The frost must be giving Bolland's burns hell, and yet the Canadian never complained. Then there was Blackston, a rear gunner, who had come down from 20,000 feet and survived. All his crew had been killed, but, on impact, the rear turret had broken loose, being propelled away from the burning wreck. Blackston had been in hospital for several weeks, but was one hell of a mess and pain plagued him. Danzey, a bomb aimer, had been shot down over Dortmund and his collarbone had never really knit. Each airman had a tale to tell. They had come down from God knows what height and survived. They looked a motley collection, but Dave admired their toughness and cheerfulness.

Dave's thoughts were interrupted by the soft singing of the words:

*'Missed the Saturday dance,
Heard they crowded the floor,
Couldn't bear it without you,
Don't get around much anymore'*

It was the diminutive wireless operator, Slater, who occupied one of the corners of the truck. He had been singing the song, on and off, all day. Most probably it had romantic associations, but he was quite right, he wouldn't be going to any Saturday dance or getting around much for a long time.

Dave was pleased to see the rising sun on the morrow, as the early hours had been bitterly cold, allowing him to sleep only in fits and starts. It seemed that the train had been stationary all night and little progress had been made towards their destination, the prisoner of war camp.

After another half hour, there was stirring amongst the inmates, and utterances such as, 'Christ! It was a bloody cold night' and 'I believe train hardly moved. We'll be in this caboose until resurrection day' et cetera. It seemed that the prisoners, spawned by the war, were no better than human flotsam. Their degree of priority was nil, and so the engine to which their truck was attached was shunted hither and thither to make way for important traffic which ferried soldiers, shells et cetera to the frontline. Thus the cattle truck was left motionless in some siding for hours, while the airmen cursed their luck and nearly froze to death.

The sun was high enough in the sky now, so the locking bar on the sliding door was removed. The prisoners, under the direction of the three armed guards, then trooped out of the motionless wagon and walked a little way off the tracks. The morning ritual was then performed: trousers downed, each man got into the crouch or sitting-down position, bared his arse to the cold morning elements and proceeded to relieve himself. Everywhere you looked there were either steaming, white bums or dripping cocks.

'I've seen it all now!' exclaimed one wit. 'The seven wonders of the world'. and another asked, 'If a passenger train passed now, I wonder what the traveller would think was going on?' and quick as a flash came the answer from a connoisseur of the world of experience, 'I bet he'd think he'd seen not arseholes, but Red Indians smoking big, brown cigars.'

The ceremony over, it was back to the truck with the door locked in a slightly ajar position to accommodate the prospective pisser. It was breakfast time now, the slice of bread and sausage, followed by coffee, German style, tasting like burnt acorns. The food, coupled with the rays of the warming sun, helped to dissipate the effects of the cold night and make one feel almost human again. Then the train started to roll, everyone became cheerful and Slater began singing, 'Missed the Saturday dance.' The airmen were used to activity and motion and standing still in a deserted siding or on some out of the way railway track made them champ at the bit like horses waiting for the barriers to go up at the start of a race.

During the day, Dave was able to assess his companions in adversity. He had long conversations with the Canadians, Bolland and McDonald. Their squadron, equipped with Typhoons, harassed trains, road movement and specific daylight targets such as factories, gun emplacements et cetera. Both were unmarried, but Bolland loved England and wished to settle there after the war. McDonald had been at university studying economics, but had decided that he wanted to fly, so joined the R.C.A.F. They had flown umpteen ops between them, and, although their planes had suffered damage previously and had limped home, this was the first time they had been shot down.

Slater, of 'Missed the Saturday dance' fame, came from Manchester where according to him, 'lived the most beautiful girl in the world', his fiancée. They were due to be married next month, November, and

he was quite cheery about it all, 'just temporary postponement' was his summation. His crew had consisted of all officers, excepting him, he being a flight-sergeant. Consequently, after being shot down and interrogated, he had been parted from other members of the crew, they going to an officers' camp.

'We'll be home by Christmas,' he confidently predicted. 'We're giving the Hun hell, and the Russians will shake the piss out of them this winter.'

Blackston, the rear-gunner, filled him in about his crash from 20 000 feet. They were attacked by fighters on leaving Monchengladbach and he shot one of the planes down. The bomber, a Lancaster, had gone into a dive. Blackston tried to bale by rotating the rear gun turret, but it had jammed. Then gravity got him and he couldn't move. On crashing, the turret had broken away from the aircraft and been hurled yards away. The Lancaster had caught fire and had blown up. Only Blackston had survived. Eight weeks in hospital had followed, but he still had problems.

Danzez, a bomb aimer, had come down with the aircraft from 18,000 foot into a Dortmund suburb, ploughing through telegraph wires and buildings. Only Danzey and the mid upper gunner had survived, and the latter was still in hospital. When they had been extricated from the wreck, the intention of the rescuers was quite clear, they wanted a lynching, but the pathetic state of the two survivors had somehow softened their approach.

'You can't blame the bastards', Danzey had told him. 'We knock hell out of their homes, kill their wives and children and we expect the red carpet treatment?'

Then he'd asked Dave, where had he been shot down? And on hearing that it was Holland, he commented: 'Avoid that bloody target area. That's where they'll give you curry. An eye for an eye et cetera.' Everyman had a vivid story to tell. The three guards were quite friendly and from them Dave learnt the German words for 'thank you', 'food', 'bread', 'cigarette' et cetera. They all thought the war would go on forever and felt that the Russians were the danger. They even voiced the opinion that the Germans, British and Americans would, before the war's end, unite and fight the Russians, driving them back from whence they came. Their thinking flabbergasted Dave, who believed that Hitler and the German nation were the main stumbling blocks to peace and international harmony. One of the guards always stood by the slightly ajar door, but the aperture was too narrow for escape, being designed solely as a piss hole. At first there had been a lot of ribaldry concerning the unusual urinal, with such comments as 'You'd better watch the passing trains or your cock and balls will finish up in the West, while you'll finish on the Russian front completely euchred', but now no-one took any notice, familiarity breeding contempt and disinterest.

The journey continued its slow, eastward progress, punctuated by long halts and harried by bitterly cold nights. Dave would look out of the narrow opening and watch the passing pageant, consisting of seemingly fast passenger trains or slow, ponderous freight trains. The latter were either open wagons, loaded with tanks, artillery guns, motor trucks et cetera, or cattle trucks, like the ones they were travelling in. What amazed Dave was that it seemed that the Greater German Reich had filched rolling stock from every part of Europe. The French wagons had written on them '8 Chevaux ou 48 Hommes', while the origin of the others could be identified by such words as 'Italia' et cetera.

On the fifth day, the landscape started to change. The soil became sandy and pine forests abounded. The outlook became monotonous, dreary and depressing. They were now in East Prussia, although Dave didn't know this. He didn't know where the hell they were going and didn't much care. All he wanted was to get the hell out of this wooden rectangular box, bathe and have a good sleep. His wish was granted about four p.m. on the sixth day, when the train pulled into an almost deserted siding. The prisoners were unloaded and marched along a sandy narrow track, flanked by the ubiquitous pines. Then after about four kilometres, they were there, their new home *Stalug Luft 6*, consisting of two lagers, A and K, and ringed by barbed wire and tall, stilted, postern boxes where Argus-eyed German sentries kept guard.

Outside a tall, heavily-barbed gate, the main entrance, they were kept waiting for about an hour before being admitted to a fore-lager, where the administrative office block was situated. Here they were

stripped, their clothes searched and they were given their *ikriegsgefangenert*, prisoner or 'kriegie' number. In the darkness they were taken through another gate to B Block within K Lager, their new home. Eighteen of their number were accommodated in room B3, while the remainder went to B4. A meal of a quarter of a tin of corned beef and mashed potatoes awaited each of them and then it was into the bunk, wrapped in two Russian blankets, spoils of war, and to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

The inmates of B3 were awakened by shouts of, 'Ausrichten! Ausrichten!' as the door was unbolted and the guards came stamping in. Within minutes the kriegies were up, outside and lined up ready for the 'appel' or roll call. The guards moved down the lines, counting as they went. Then, when all were accounted for, the prisoners were dismissed and allowed to return to their huts. Then it was grub-up. Two steaming jugs of coffee, acorn flavoured, were brought from the camp cookhouse and distributed, a mug full each. That was the lot, breakfast was over.

Hut B3 fitted snugly into B Block, which was a long, low building divided into twelve divisions of drab, colourless huts, B1 to B12. So B Block resembled terraced houses in some, very poor neglected suburb. Opposite was C Block, in every way identical with B Block, with its twelve huts. Separating the two was a sandy thoroughfare of about 60 feet in width. Each hut had a cobbled stone floor and down each side were arranged eighteen two-tiered bunks. Thus, being full, B3 had a complement of seventy-two persons. In the centre of the rectangular hut was a stove with an iron top, measuring about eight feet by six and used for the dual purpose of heating and cooking. At the far end there was a small alcove and here resided a very large, galvanised dustbin, used at night as a urinal. The interior of the hut resembled a large stable with the two-tiered bunks being the stalls where the horses were bedded down.

Dave looked at the miserable surroundings and decided to hit the sack. The Germans wouldn't allow members of aircrew to work, so he had no pressing engagement. He stretched out on the lower bunk, but couldn't be comfortable. He arose and shook the palliasse, his mattress, containing wooden shavings, but found that they had shifted to either the top or bottom of the sack, leaving the centre part almost denuded. He redistributed the shavings and examined the 'springs' of his wooden bunk. These consisted of six wooden slats, each about eight inches in width. However, instead of being equidistantly spaced, they had slid to new positions. Dave rearranged them and thought that if he were to lie on them for a lengthy period his body would finish up snakelike, in and out of the slats. He replaced the palliasse carefully so as not to disturb his handiwork, then gave the sack pillow a pummelling to soften the shavings and climbed into bed. His rest was soon disturbed by the itching of his ankles and lower legs. His first night in the lager hadn't been a restful one, for his whole body had been given curry by being bitten. It was, although he didn't know it yet, the wood termites in the shavings which were responsible.

Unable to rest, Dave decided to have a look at the outside, the world enclosed by barbed wire. The thoroughfare between B and C Blocks was fairly crowded with kriegies. Some were just sitting or standing sunning themselves, while others were brewing-up using their home made tin blowers. Dave made his way until he passed the end of B Block and then encountered, about twenty yards further on, two detached huts, the first being the kriegies' administration block where the British Man-of-Confidence and his staff did their 'sums' and the other being the camp theatre.

Fifteen yards on was the ablution block, and then before you reached the end of the city limits - the barbed wire - was the toilet. Dave, feeling the call of nature, entered the 'rialto' of the camp, so named because it was here that the prisoners discussed the world situation and swapped tit-bits of news. At the 'rialto' rumours were born, gathered momentum and then radiated to all parts of the camp, keeping the prisoners' hopes alive that the war would be over by Christmas. The festive season seemed the terminating point for all things, when the kriegies would be home eating turkey, plum pudding et cetera.

The toilet was a long, hut with a floor of about 20 feet in width running down the middle and flanked on either side by plank seats, containing about 60 holes each. Beneath was a huge pit dug in the earth which received the daily droppings. Thus 120 kriegies could relieve themselves at one time, but when Dave parked himself it was only half full. Wherever he looked, to the sides, to the front, one was confronted with crappers. Some were staring into space, others concentrating on the morning ritual.

There were those who were reading the most recent letter they had received from home, while others were just yarning. All this was quite an experience for Dave, for he was used to privacy.

'How are you crapping today?' asked a Flight Sergeant sitting next to him. 'My piles are giving me hell. What I need is plenty of fruit. One must have fruit for a good, comfortable shit.'

Dave didn't answer this familiarity and felt uncomfortable. Then the neighbourly Flight Sergeant leaned towards Dave, and stated in a whisper, but ensuring that those near would hear. 'I heard that the British and Americans are landing in France in a week's time, and Churchill believes the war will be over by Christmas.'

This statement made those within hearing distance prick up their ears.

'How do you know?' demanded one. 'Is it pukka gen?'

The Flight-Sergeant just smiled knowingly, and placed a finger to his lips as if he couldn't betray his unimpeachable source of information.

When those around left, the Flight Sergeant burst out laughing, 'This place gives me the effing shits,' he roared. 'You say something whilst you are in here and it's all around the camp within twenty minutes. When I get back to the hut, they'll tell me that the British and Americans have already landed and Churchill's with them. This place is full of bloody rumours and boy do they get bigger and bigger?'

Dave and the Flight Sergeant left together, he to return to his hut, Dave to 'bash the circuit'. Bashing the circuit was walking around the perimeter of the camp and a path or track had been beaten out by the feet of the kriegies. The way around followed the 'warning wire', and was the extreme limit to which a prisoner could go. Touch the wire and the itchy finger of the sentry in the postern box could bring about death. Five yards on the outside of the warning wire was the tall, thick, barbed wire fence, the second line of defence, and interspersed in this prickly maze were the stilted, postern boxes and their sentries.

On the northern side was the fore-lager, where the German administrative staff was housed. However, encircling the camp was another wire fence and then on the very outside was a huge ditch or moat to prevent tunnelling. The would-be tunneller would have to burrow deep to avoid surfacing in the ditch. All kriegies bashed the circuit in an anti-clockwise direction so it was rarely you passed someone face-to-face. The prisoners walked singly or in pairs, seldom in threes. When you walked alone you escaped from the overcrowding, the lack of privacy, and the congestion of seventy- two in a hut and almost two thousand enclosed in a compound that was far too small for such a number. On your own, one could lose oneself in private thoughts and escape from the monotony of the diurnal round and the impact the barbed wire had on the outlook of the inmates. Thus most of the airmen walked their days away so that time would go and release would seem to come sooner.

On his return to B3 it was almost midday and yet a few prisoners were still bedridden. Once morning roll call was over, there was no sense of urgency as there was nothing to do. Consequently, some of those who had been in the 'cage' for a long period had taken to the 'pit' and were indifferent to all else, as if they had woven a cocoon for themselves in which to take refuge. At noon a tub of meatless swede soup arrived from the communal kitchen and was distributed, a cup full per person. Dave felt the hunger pangs.

Breakfast had consisted of coffee and now a cup of watery, swede soup did nothing to alleviate the situation. He was bloody hungry and was pleased when the daily bread ration arrived at two o'clock.

Twelve loaves were delivered for the 72 people, so it was six to a loaf. Being portioned out as equally as possible, playing cards, of ace, king, queen, jack, ten and nine were placed on each share. Then those involved drew from six other cards, and if the ace was drawn you collected the bread portion with the ace, and so on. This lottery prevented anyone from gaining an unfair advantage in the bread stakes. Thus the bread was parcelled out and Dave, having examined his share, cut it down the middle

into two slices. He knew that his bread ration had to last twenty-four hours and there was need to conserve, eating one piece with the evening meal and the other for breakfast. He nibbled a little, and soon one piece had disappeared. He was still hungry, however, and couldn't refrain from devouring the other slice. He realised that he had committed a cardinal sin and on the morrow he'd feel miserable on an empty stomach. Still it was a lesson he would remember and his appetite would have to be curbed or he'd always be hungry.

The second and final 'appel' of the day was taken at about four p.m., followed by mashed potatoes and a quarter of tin of corned beef per man at about 5.30 p.m. Then the doors of the huts were locked and the captives were left to their own devices. Some of hut B3's inmates were veteran prisoners who had spent time in other camps and had been shifted from place to place; then there were those who had been in captivity for about six months; and the newly arrived of which Dave was a member. Familiarity and understanding had not yet been established and so there was general quiet with small groups conversing quietly and others just lying on their bunks. It was a quiet night for ex-members of aircrew, a far cry from the rip-roaring, squadron, salad days when one went to the pub and lived it up. Then the lights went out and everyone returned to his thoughts, escaping to a certain extent from the drab trappings of captivity.

As the night progressed, one or other of the kriegies would be forced to make the pilgrimage to the big, galvanised dustbin in the alcove to relieve themselves, and sometimes the volume and noise of the waterfall so made could be heard by those in close proximity. This would often result in vehement protestations:

'I don't mind the pissing or the noise,' stated the first speaker. 'It's the bloody stink I hate. It's those stinking bastards who creep down here in the middle of night and leave their visiting card. The 'pong' almost kills me, and then in the morning you see those big, black turds floating about in a sea of piss, and some poor bastards have to empty it.'

At this there were always roars of laughter and the thaw was broken. So the banter continued until tiredness and a desire for sleep overtook the participants.

So ended the first full day for Dave's internment.

CHAPTER VII

The mail arrived at infrequent intervals, but when it was delivered to each hut and doled out, the kriegies stood around in hopeful expectancy. There were those who received four or five letters and would then retire to the 'pit' to savour and ruminate the contents of each one; while others just stood, received nothing, shrugged their shoulders and smiled it off. Soon the have-nots would leave the hut to bash the circuit and get the bitterness out of their system. The majority of these had been behind barbed wire upwards of three years and had become the forgotten men of the war. Their wives or girlfriends had grown tired of waiting for the war's end and had found consolation elsewhere, for England was swarming with Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen in the shape of Yanks, Canadians, Poles, Free French, Australians and New Zealanders, apart from British personnel. Males from the four corners of the world had converged upon the little island and women were in short supply. So the kriegies who were still remembered, read and re-read their letters; while those who had been letter less consoled themselves that everything would be rectified with the next mail delivery. There were also those who lay on their bunks indifferent to everything.

The circuit was crowded with walkers all going one way. If one didn't walk there was little else to do and boredom set in. Dave tried to walk twenty circuits a day, ten in the morning and ten in the afternoon and then he was bugged. How many miles a day he wasn't able to estimate, but it was a long way for his legs felt like weights when the daily exercise was completed. Still he wanted to keep fit and, although it was a chore, he did his best to ensure the stint was completed.

Around the 'messpot' board a big crowd had gathered to read the latest sensational news from home. Dave didn't stop for he wanted to complete a few more circuits before resting. The 'messpot' board was so called for here letters were publicly displayed so that the world behind barbed wire could learn of the infidelity and indifference of the women they had left behind. A 'messpot' was a letter from a 'loved one' stating that the relationship was over and done with, and there was a crop of final notices every time there was a mail delivery. The recipient, instead of keeping the news to himself and brooding, was supposed to display it and show the world his indifference. Whether everyone carried out this procedure was doubtful, but the 'messpot' board was always pretty full after the postman had been.

On the tenth circuit, Dave was able, the crowd having thinned, to stop and read the details of the letters displayed. They contained the usual details; You've been gone a long time; I'm tired of waiting; you're only young once; there is someone new in my life who is absolutely wonderful et cetera. Three letters however, made Dave chuckle for they were so unusual, bordering on the absurd. The first, after the usual preamble, concluded with 'so I'm having a baby by this American, but don't worry, Darling, he's sending you cigarettes.' Another stated; 'I've married your father, Love Mother'; and the third announced that the correspondent, a former fiancée, had married a sailor, who was not the jealous or possessive type, and she was certain that when the respondent came home they could resume their love relationship once again without any problems.

Dave walked on and thought what a topsy-turvy world it was. One day you were in England, in love and loved in return, confident wedding bells were for you. Then the next, you were a prisoner-of-war, forgotten, rejected, and kicked in the guts. No-one could predict the future and, although Dave had been a prisoner for nearly ten weeks, he still hadn't received any mail as yet and so in the years ahead there was plenty of time for a 'messpot' to come his way.

As he approached B3, he was reminded by the presence of the hand-wagon, laden with Red Cross food parcels, that it was Saturday. He helped with the unloading and was rewarded with a Canadian parcel. The parcels came from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. It was potluck what you received. All parcels contained two tins of meat, such as corned beef, ham roll, spam et cetera, but these had been removed to the communal kitchen so that the quarter tin of meat could be given to each prisoner for his evening meal. The Canadian parcel was prized for it contained a large bar of chocolate, a tin of butter, powdered milk called '*Klim*', some sugar, a dozen 'dog' biscuits, a tin

of jam and a packet of tea. There was also an issue of fifty cigarettes per man, so it was a weekly red letter day for the camp. Dave buttered one of the biscuits and scooped the lot. He then placed a little sugar on a spoon, dipped in 'Klim', and sucked the contents. It was delicious. He reasoned that this was better than putting it in tea, for tea could be drunk without milk. He loved spooning the mixture of powdered milk and sugar, as his body seemed to cry out for sweet things. However, he had to observe restraint for there were seven days to go and one couldn't hog the lot and be hungry for the rest of the week.

He joined the group warming their backsides around the big stove and listened to the discussion about the wars progress.

'The bloody Ruskies will hit shit out of them this winter. They've already started their winter offensive. Good old Joe, he'll get us out of here,' stated one Stalin enthusiast.

The kriegies were well-informed for every day a member of 'Big X' would come into the hut and read the latest BBC news bulletin. The radio receiver's whereabouts was a top-secret and, in all probability, was only known by one or two prisoners. How on earth it had been made or smuggled in was beyond comprehension, but the camp was full of diverse and extraordinary talents and anything and everything could be accomplished.

'We'll be out of here before Christmas. Maxie Clarke has predicted it. His latest is that the war will finish on 23rd. December. Maxie's always been right,' chipped in an optimist.

'I'd put my money on Clarke any day. When he goes into a trance he comes up with the 'gen', supported another Clarke supporter.

'Bullshit! You don't believe in that crap. Who's Maxie Clarke anyway? Some washed-out kriegie living in B9, who goes down to the bog and has wonderful visions. Christmas is only three weeks away, and you expect the war to be over by then. You all must be bloody crazy and around the bend. Talk about barbed wire madness,' stated a realist.

'I'll put my money on Maxie,' retorted the optimist. Clarke says anything, because he enjoys being a prophet. 'Talking about the bog, I need to go,' chimed in a disinterested bystander. 'That bloody place freezes the balls off you.'

After the evening meal of a quarter of a tin of spam and spuds, the doors of the huts were locked and the long night began. There were bridge games, one hundred rubbers up as time was limitless and the same four people pitted their wits against each other night after night. Some played Ludo and others Tip-it. Cooking was going on at the stove, the Canadian biscuits having been enlarged by a long soaking were now being fried in margarine, supplied by the Germans, and then eaten with a dollop of jam on top. It was Saturday night and consolation was needed. On the squadron Saturday night was really enjoyed to the full. It was the pub, the dance, the girlfriend et cetera, but in B3 there were those just lying on their bunks, deep in thought of the Saturday nights of yesterday.

Out went the lights and on went the Saturday night's entertainment. The portable gramophone, supplied by the Red Cross, started to churn out the music and the disc jockey for the night prattled on, while the ex-airmen relaxed in their pits.

'I'm a little on the lonely, a little on the lonely side,

I keep thinking of you only, and wishing you were by my side,

For you know dear, when you're not near, there's no-one to romance with' warbled Sinatra.

This was followed by Vera Lynne's:

'Yours till the stars lose their glory,

Yours till the birds fail to sing,

Yours till the end of life's story.'

So it went on until the strain of, 'Whose taking you home tonight, after the dance is through,' resounded through the hut.

'Jack! someone yelled. 'I wonder what Dulcie's doing tonight. I bet she's not thinking of you.'

'Once met, never forgotten.' replied the gallant Jack with a show of bravado. 'Dulcie will be waiting when I get back. I'm number one.'

At this there were roars of laughter.

'Kidding yourself, aren't you?' quipped another. 'You'll be past middle-age by the time you get out of here, and past it.'

'Not bloody likely', retorted Jack. 'Maxie Clarke has forecast we'll be home for Christmas.'

Then there were chortles from everywhere.

The night dragged on and the gramophone ceased to make music. Dave felt the urge to visit the 'bin' and open his bowels, but although it was after midnight it wasn't a propitious moment to make the long trek. Every night the conversation would finally centre on the bin and there would be grumbles and oaths concerning the rotten, stinking bastards who had crept down in stealth and the dead of night to relieve themselves and leave the smell for those in the vicinity. Everyone used it at some time or other, but even if you had been one of the culprits the night before, you joined in the protest as vehemently as anyone else. Finally, Dave could hold it no longer and tip-toed towards the Mecca of relief. He unburdened himself and then, quickly but quietly, got back just in time to his neck of the woods.

'Jesus Christ! Who's the dirty bastard with the black, reeking arsehole? Saturday night in the lager stinks!' exclaimed an angry kriegie. Of course, everyone seemed to stir themselves and join in the tumult. The blokes at top end, away from it all, expressed righteous indignation mixed with muffled laughter, while those in the path of the smell kept up the tirade.

Relieved and feeling a lot better, Dave pulled his two blankets closer to him and settled down for the night.

CHAPTER VIII

Christmas had come and gone and Maxie Clarke's prediction had failed to materialise. The winds were now bleak and chilling and the ground was iron hard and corrugated. There had been snow and rain about a month previously making the earth very wet, soft and boggy, and this situation had not been helped by the feet of nearly 2000 POWs pounding it incessantly. All this had changed, however, with the advent of icy frosts and drying, blood curdling winds.

The recreation or soccer, rugby, cricket ground was in continuous use all day. It wasn't really a recreation ground, but was the only vacant area in the camp, being bounded by the back of C Block and the warning wire on the southern side. In the morning there was always one rugby union match played by the Kiwi enthusiasts against some form of opposition, while for the rest of the day the ground was devoted to soccer. Each hut had a team in the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the Lager League, and games were of an hour's duration. Then every afternoon about 2.30, a Major League game would take place. This league consisted of six teams, such as Arsenal, Leeds United, Manchester City et cetera, and only the very best players, generally professionals, semi-professionals or top class amateurs participated.

At these big games nearly all kriegies attended and a carnival atmosphere prevailed. The bookmakers would shout the odds and the currency was cigarettes. Everything was negotiable, providing you had the wherewithal, from a toothbrush to a Red Cross parcel. Over the years, individuals or combines had amassed fortunes, being sent cigarette parcels by relatives and friends, and it was whispered that some combines, consisting of three or four persons, had nest eggs of 40,000 cigarettes upwards. However, for the newly arrived prisoner the cigarette parcels had not yet started to flow and the individual was dependent on his weekly issue from the Red Cross. Dave couldn't afford a wager, for if he came unstuck then there would be no smokes until Saturday.

Although the ground was bone-hard and devoid of grass, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspurs battled it out to the very end. The standard of play was exceptionally high and polished, and the spectators, although chilled to the marrow, stayed to the bitter end and then the successful punters gathered their winnings and bee-lined for the huts to thaw out. East Prussia and the Baltic area were, according to the kriegies, the place where the balls of the proverbial brass monkey froze.

The continuing cold ensured that the pangs of hunger were always present, as the only supplement to the Red Cross parcel was the meagre German rations consisting of the acorn flavoured coffee at breakfast and the evening meal; a cup of meatless, swede soup at midday; the daily ration of bread - about two slices; a small weekly portion of margarine and about two potatoes daily. The body cried out for bulk, such as plenty of bread to fill one up and sweet, cloying substances such as syrup. The cold seemed to attack the 'waterworks' and one was forever urinating. The cold was only one factor, the other being that nothing really solid was being consumed.

The cold was so intense that after morning roll call many of the inmates of B3 would return to their bunks and stay till midday. However, the Canadians in the lager were more active and in the afternoon would be busily engaged in pouring buckets of water over the hard ground, thus obtaining a layer of ice the next morning.

This was repeated daily, until about three inches of ice thickness covered the surface. An ice-hockey pitch was then marked with red and blue paint, with a maple leaf in the centre. More water was then added so a further layer of ice resulted and the lines underneath plainly visible. Then, with the aid of the Red Cross ice skates, the hockey games were on with a vengeance. The winter sport attracted many an onlooker and when the hockey was abandoned because of injuries, the lager took to ice-sliding minus skates.

The winter was long, dreary, cold and miserable and everyone longed for the spring greenery and harbingers of warmer weather. The camp theatre was in constant use with the artistes taking part in revues, plays and potpourri shows. The camp boasted two dance bands: a soft lights and sweet music

combination; and a 'big band', similar to Glenn Miller's, whose rendering of 'American Patrol' was superb.

Somewhere in the lager a tunnel was being dug so that escape could be effected in the warmer days ahead. The only indication that escape activity was in the air was the request for bed boards to shore up the sides of the tunnel and the presence of the 'penguins', the disposers of the newly-dug sand. The difficulty with digging a tunnel in East Prussia was the disposal of the sand. The whole camp was built on a sandy plain and when the tunnelled sand was strewn on the surface of the compound its different colour was plainly visible and the Germans knew that an escape was in the offing. The job of the 'penguins', so called because they waddled about when performing their function, was to fill socks with sand, place these down their trouser legs and walk around the camp gradually releasing a little at the time, then pressing or rubbing it into the surface. It was a tedious job and there was a lot of sand to dispose. The bulk of the sand was placed between the ceiling and the roof of the ablution block. It might have been winter, but there was no hibernation for 'Big X' as it had its sights on escape and freedom in the spring.

The cold 1943-44 winter brought good news from the Russian front. The Ruskies were bounding along westward at a quickening pace, and every time a BBC bulletin was delivered to B3 another Russian town had been retaken and the Germans driven pell-mell before the Red Army juggernaut. All this was very heartening for the, 'we'll be home by Christmas brigade', but the towns mentioned were hundreds of miles away and this fact was sobering. It would be a long while before the return to Blighty, unless the Second Front was opened up.

The discussions on this aspect of the war were often and heated. The prisoners of the 1939, 40 and 41 vintage couldn't understand Churchill's reluctance to attack Hitler's European fortress. They argued that there was plenty of room from Norway to the South of France for a landing, and the much-vaunted German coastal fortifications were a myth - a figment of propaganda. Then there were those who debunked this line of thought as they had been shot down in the amphibious assault on Dieppe and had received a bloody nose. Their verdict was that the Atlantic Wall was tough and there would be tremendous casualties on invasion day. However, all longed for the Great Day to arrive and concurred that the war would be soon over after the landings. One thing the kriegies had in abundance was supreme optimism.

Whenever a newly shot-down airman arrived he was the centre of interest for a few days while questioned about the world outside. When was the Second Front going to take place? What was it like in England now? Was the place full of Yanks, and were they as successful with the women as rumours had it? It was a small world, especially the bomber world. Many of the new arrivals had served on the same squadrons as those who had been in captivity for years and so knew the same pubs, the same streets and, in some cases, the same women.

The afternoon roll call now took place at 3 p.m., as it was almost dark three-quarters of an hour later. Thus the confinement to the hut seemed endless and more time was devoted to the culinary arts. Each day Dave would trim the crusts off his two slices of bread and place them in a tin. For seven days he would do this and then on Saturday night he would have a big bust. The chopped up crusts would be placed in a container, the contents just covered with water, and the lot placed on the stove, heated and constantly stirred. Thus a watery mixture would be achieved or a type of bread pudding. A little sugar was then added and it was a feast fit for a king - or it filled the void in the gnawing stomach for five minutes.

Once a week it was down to the ablution block for showers. Each hut was allowed three minutes from the time the water was turned on to its turning off. Seventy-two airmen would hurriedly strip and rush to get a share of one of the 24 water outlets in the ceiling. One would go water as cold as ice and everyone would flee from the icy jets, only to remember they only had 3 minutes. So it was back to the showers. Then it was too hot, burning the skin, followed by hasty retreat. It was back to the shower, only to find that the water had been turned off as the three minutes was up. So it was another seven days wait until the next shower. Still, it was all part of a kriegie's life and wouldn't last forever.

To relieve the monotony of the daily round guest speakers would be invited to huts to expatiate upon their roles in civilian life. To B3 came a big game hunter from Kenya who woke up the denizens with stories of elephants running amok, lions springing from rocks on the unsuspecting hunter, and romance under the African stars with a beautiful woman on safari. It was all magical stuff and the dreary and monotonous surrounds were forgotten for an hour or two. Then, another time, the guest speaker had fought as a pilot in the Spanish Civil War and spoke of the barbarism and atrocities committed by Franco's men. Perhaps the most interesting talk was given by a former Hong Kong police officer who spoke about gunrunning, opium addicts, brothels, venereal disease, murder and violence. The lager was chockfull of talented men who had lived life to the full and then had taken to the air to wage war against Hitler's Germany.

The German guards were nicknamed 'goons' or 'ferrets' and they were always in and out of the huts. Trading with the enemy was 'verboden' as this could cause a spiral in prices and so this segment of commerce was in the hands of the 'Big X' committee. The members of 'Big X' would inveigle an unsuspecting guard to bring in from outside something unimportant and he would then be rewarded with cigarettes or chocolates. Then, as time progressed, the same guard would be encouraged to smuggle into the camp more important things, until he was hooked and blackmailed into smuggling cameras, wireless valves, a compass, a passport and anything that was required. Thus an inaccessible and necessary item became available for escape purposes et cetera.

The 'Big X' committee was in-charge of all important things such as escaping, trading with the Germans, tunnelling et cetera. Before any escape attempt could be made, it had to be approved and sanctioned by the committee. They were the experts and decided if the plan was feasible or not. They offered advice on tunnelling and in some cases took charge of the project. They were shadowy figures and no-one really knew their identities. It was better that way, so security could be maintained and leakages minimised.

The camp's third lager C was opened in March, 1944, to accommodate the American flyers who were being shot down in droves in their daylight sweeps over enemy occupied Europe. The Flying Fortresses had a crew of ten or more, and the long flights over Europe to bomb and then fight their way back to base were fraught with hazard. The odds were stacked against them. At first they came in trickles, but soon the floodgates opened and the new lager was soon packed to capacity. A and K lagers housed British and British Empire airmen, and A, being the longest established, was the richest not only in cigarettes, but in all things, K came a poor second, but poor old C was certainly the poor relation, having to start from scratch. The lagers were separated by barbed wire entanglements, and the Germans wouldn't allow visiting or exchange of goods et cetera. However, as the months passed, the affluence of the new arrivals grew with the arrival of oodles of cigarettes et cetera, and the roles were reversed, the British lagers becoming the poor relations.

Thus the winter gradually wended its slow way towards spring, and the prisoners looked forward to the warmer days ahead when the sun would help to assuage the pains of hunger and the biting cold would leave the bones' marrow to rest and recover. Warmth and release from captivity were what the kriegies wanted and they felt that the summer of 1944 would grant them their wishes.

CHAPTER IX

Although it was fine, it was a cool rather bleak day for the 'Kriegie Lager Fair'. The show had been advertised for a number of weeks, but the roll up was rather poor. In the thoroughfare between B and C Blocks, a number of stalls had been set up by enterprising entrepreneurs who not only wanted to entertain and provide recreation for their fellow prisoners, but had an eye on enlarging their cigarette fortunes. Some stalls concerned themselves with the throwing of darts - five cigarettes a go, score 75 or over to win, odds of 10 to 1. Kicking a football through a hoop at 15 yards' distance was another game of skill or chance, while if you threw three balls out of three into a bucket from about ten yards, 'the world was yours' according to the barker. The variety offered was excellent, and Dave enjoyed himself stooging from stall to stall as one could forget the menial round for an hour or so. He had received four cigarette parcels since being shot down so he wasn't too badly off, but still had to observe restraint or his small nest egg would disappear. He paid ten cigarettes in order to try kicking the football through the hoop. He placed the ball on the spot, kept his eye on the ball and head steady, then carefully kicked and followed through. The ball slewed off his right foot a thousand miles from the target.

'Shit! What the hell went wrong?' he queried angrily.

'Bad luck, sir!' commiserated the obliging barker. 'Have another.

'Bullshit!' retorted Dave. 'You can't kick a football with two left feet.' He walked away realising that as the weather was chilly he'd worn his flying boots to the lager fair. He had received from the Red Cross a pair of RAF lace-up leather boots and a pair of trousers, but still wore the warm, fleecy-lined flying boots when it was cold. It was time he decided to return to the hut and change boots and then he'd give the barker, 'Bad luck, sir.' Dave had played a lot of soccer and felt that he could augment the Griffin fortune, but it was impossible with two left feet.

He was busily changing shoes, when the cry, 'News up! Watch the windows and doors for goons!'

'Christ! The news is early.' Dave reflected. 'The newsreader generally does his stuff in the afternoon about 4.30 p.m.'

'Today, at dawn, the Allied Forces under the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, began their invasion of Europe. Beachheads have been established and our troops are moving inland. 6th June, 1944, will live in history as Deliverance Day,' concluded the excited newsreader.

There was a groundswell of excitement in B3, but it didn't erupt into cheers as the kriegies had to maintain restraint. They weren't supposed to know anything about the outside world and would have to wait until the Germans released news of the invasion. The hut was agog with excitement and bonhomie. Everyone agreed that the war would soon be over, six to twelve weeks would see the end. They'd all be home by September at the latest, so there'd be no more cold, bloody winters to contend with. Life was going to be sweet from now on, so the summer months would be enjoyed for at the end it would be back to Blighty.

Dave thought he'd celebrate. He had his shooting boots on and so took out of his store five packets of twenty. A hundred cigarettes would give ten tries at kicking a ball through a hoop and, besides, you didn't have an Allied invasion of Europe every day. However, it wasn't his day, and within ten minutes he was back in the hut, minus the cigarettes.

To round up the fair, there was an inter-lager soccer match between A and B. The Germans were allowing the A Lager team, plus one hundred supporters, to visit K Lager and it was going to be a big match. The bookmakers, in an attempt to induce bets on K, were offering odds of 4 to 1 and there were plenty of takers. Dave felt that his team had sufficient talent to win and, after much soul-searching and trepidation, plonked down one hundred cigarettes on the underdogs. If K could win then he'd finish the day well in front, but if they came unstuck then he'd have squandered away a small fortune.

The game was fast and furious and the spectators were in fine fettle for they knew more than their captors - the invasion of Europe had begun, but not a word was disclosed. A Lager won 3 to 1, and as Dave returned to B3, he felt like an eighteenth century rake who had just diced away the family fortune. He admitted he had been profligate, but what the hell, the war was as good as over.

He had only been in the hut a few minutes when there was a mail delivery. There were three letters from Joan and two from his mother, all written about a month previously. He retired to his bunk and read and re-read the mail. Joan was well and expressed the hope that the war would soon finish and they would be together again for always. She was lonely and missed Dave, and longed for his return. His mother's letters were brave and encouraging, but reading between the lines he realised that she was anxious, worried and concerned about her son's health and welfare. 'What a wonderful day it's been!' thought Dave. 'I've had five letters from the two people that really count, and the Allies have invaded Europe. To hell with the cigarettes, I can afford it.'

The weather grew warmer and the two left flying-boots became unbearably hot to wear. They were decidedly unseasonable in the July sunshine and had out-served their usefulness and should be got rid of. This line of thought was reinforced by the D Day invasions. Admittedly, the Allied armies weren't making the rapid progress that was expected of them, being bogged down in the Caen area, but the prisoners were convinced that they'd be home well before the winter commenced. Consequently, he wouldn't need his flying boots again, so what was the use of keeping them? The plan was to raffle, despite the fact that they'd give the lucky winner two left feet. He sought out Don Slater of 'missed the Saturday dance' fame and did a deal. Slater was to be an equal partner in the project and would display one of the boots in each of the B huts and ask for ten cigarettes a ticket in the lottery. Dave meanwhile would parade the other boot in the C huts. Everything in the lager was raffled and very little salesmanship or peddling was required.

Dave took a cardboard box, some paper, a pencil, and one of the flying boots with him and started off in C1. It was dead easy, he displayed the boot, eulogised about its qualities and then mentioned the ten cigarettes necessary to be in it. A member of a combine would just throw a packet of twenty into the box and request two tickets. This went on in every hut, but the problem was when you were paid ten loose cigarettes and they were just dropped in the box. They would get crumpled, tattered, and a little worse for wear, but they were still legal lager currency.

After a hectic morning's business, Dave had his box full and so did Slater. They counted the cigs. like misers and then split down the middle with just over two and a half thousand each. Then they put the names in the box, drew the lucky winner, who hailed from C5, and Dave delivered the 'golden' boots.

On Dave's return, Slater enquired anxiously, 'Jesus! What did he say when you presented him with the two left-ones?'

'Bugger all,' replied Dave cockily. 'He didn't blink an eyelid and just thanked me. He did mention though that he'd raffle them, as two left boots would keep someone warm.'

'I'll have a few tickets in that raffle, Dave,' commented Slater, 'and if I win, then we'll raffle them again.'

That afternoon Dave accompanied Bolland, the ex-Typhoon pilot, to the communal kitchen to see Jack McDonald. Jack had his bunk in B3, but spent all his waking time in the kitchen, ensuring that the coffee jugs were full for the first and last meals of the day and the spuds were cooked for the evening meal. Sometimes the potatoes and corned beef were mashed together into a hash and this added a little variety to the bill of fare. Jack enjoyed cooking and claimed that he would open a restaurant when he got back to Canada and to hell with flying and prisoner of war camps. Jack had adapted well to prison life, for working full time in the cookhouse had ensured that his boundless energy was channelled into a positive direction. Bolland would never change. He was still irrepressible and ebullient, and his repartee was always sharp and affective. His wit was much appreciated in B3 and would produce roars of laughter with his comments, once the lights had been doused, about the 'bin'.

'You'll be home before long, Dave,' stated Jack. 'They'll get that Welsh dragon out to greet you.'

'I bloody hope so,' replied Dave, 'but the progress the Allies are making is so bloody slow that we'll be here for bloody Christmas if they don't speed it up.'

'Like hell you'll be here,' interposed Bolland. 'The way the Ruskiies are advancing you'll either be in Moscow dining on caviar or the Germans will ship you west and you'll be deep in the heart of Germany.'

They were joined by burly cookhouse boss Bill McGuinness and an almost Dickensian looking character attired in a black top hat and a morning suit. This latter character was the local chimney sweep and one would think that he was going to a wedding rather than a big soot clean-up. McGuinness spoke a few words to the three of them and then he and the sweep disappeared into the cookhouse.

'A tremendous guy that McGuinness,' commented McDonald with undisguised admiration. 'I'd like to have him on my side if the chips were down.'

Bolland and Dave said nothing, both knowing that McGuinness had performed a superhuman feat about two years previously and had been 'gonged'. He and his crew had crashed into the sea, and McGuinness had swum three miles with his navigator, who couldn't swim, on his back. There were brave men in the lager, but McGuinness ranked with the best of them.

The doors of B3 were unbolted and the 'ausrichtens' were a lot sharper and more imperious than usual. There was no doubt that the guards weren't putting up with any backchat or tardiness, for it seemed that they were on edge and this wasn't an opportune time for fooling around. The kriegies dressed quickly and moved outside into the warming sunshine and lined up outside the huts to be counted.

Then it was the camp commandant's turn. He was annoyed, and the kriegies, having learnt a smattering of German, knew the drift of his anger even before the speech was interpreted into English. Apparently, during the night, part of the ceiling of the ablution block had collapsed under the weight of the stored sand from the tunnel and he, the colonel, would seek out the culprits and it would go hard with them. The prisoners were obviously tunnelling their way out, but the escape route would be found that day and it would be bulldozed out of existence. There was no escape from this stalag-luft as it was escape proof. He, the officers and the guards would see to that. The prisoners must be very naive if they thought they could outwit the German authorities. The prisoners were stupid, ungrateful and if they left the security of the camp could expect no mercy. The kriegies listened in silence for their commandant was a real soldier and a man of authority, having fought in France and on the Russian front. However, on dismissal, they laughed and joked about the happening in the ablution block.

They knew the tunnel would be discovered, but it mattered not, as soon the war would be over, once Monty and Ike (Montgomery and Eisenhower) got their act together.

CHAPTER X

C Lager, where the American flyers were housed, had grown apace not only in numbers, but affluence. The parcels - cigarettes, clothing and food had cascaded in from the U.S., making the lot of the American kriegie a lot happier. They were now either better off or at least on a par with the two British lagers, A and K, and felt that in keeping with their new status should entertain and throw their 'home' open to their British comrades-in-arms. They had decided on a boxing extravaganza to which three hundred guests from each of the other lagers would be invited. The program would commence at 11.30 a.m. and continue until 4.00 p.m., and the Americans would fight and take on the other two lagers at fisticuffs. The big bout was to be between the 'Bearded Wonder', the C Lager champion of champions, and A Lager's Bill Macey. Macey had proven himself previously when boxing matches had been arranged between A and K, and had waltzed through his bouts with ease, generally flooring his opponents. He was the undisputed reigning British Kriegie Champion, and a lot was expected of him by his supporters. The 'Bearded Wonder', on the other hand, was an unknown quantity having never fought a fight in the camp.'

Three weeks before the big day, the ballyhoo began. The A Lager scribes published twice weekly a one-sheet newspaper with all news of the forthcoming battle. Macey was in tremendous shape and rearing to defend the honour of A and K Lagers. The paper stated that the British hero was an ex-guards officer, who had forsaken the regiment to fly with the Royal Air Force. It was all bullshit, at least that was what Dave thought, but still it was good publicity for the coming encounter. Then there was a column contributed by the Americans about the 'Bearded Wonder'. He breakfasted on steaks, disposed of six sparring partners daily and did miles of roadwork. His identity was a closely guarded secret and it was whispered that during the fight he would wear a mask so he wouldn't be recognised. The article concluded that in all probability the 'Wonder' belonged to one of America's top families, a Roosevelt or Vanderbilt, and his anonymity must be preserved as Daddy wouldn't approve of Junior's participation in such a violent sport.

The big day dawned and Dave, who was fortunate enough to be included amongst the guests, trooped over to C Lager. The Americans had really entered into the spirit of the thing and constructed a first class boxing ring, and had home-made movie cameras, which didn't work, standing on tripods everywhere. Above, these cameras were signs such as 'Pathe', 'C.B.C. News', 'Movietone' et cetera. Each contest consisted of 3 rounds of 3 minutes' duration, and fight followed fight. The boys from the A and B Lagers were given a touch of glamour by being introduced as Johnny Jones from Nepal, Fred Stuckey from Hong Kong, Bill Haines from the South China Seas, and Bill Waring from the Khyber Pass, India, the far-flung outposts of the Empire being given much prominence. Then it was 3.30 p.m. and time for the big bout, again a three rounder, as the camp diet was insufficient to warrant a fight of longer duration. The camp celebrities were introduced from the ring: American Man-of-Confidence, British Man-of-Confidence, then a string of well-known personalities who had made the big time in civilian life and whose status had been reduced by the vicissitudes of war. It was a topsy-turvy world, up one minute and down the next.

The betting was high and the American bookmakers were offering four to one on Macey, showing that in a two horse race he was considered a non-starter. The six hundred British visitors were plunging heavily on their champion, for they felt that the odds were terrific and they'd go away with fortunes. However, it was not to be. The A Lager champion, despite background and guardsman's moustache, succumbed to the 'Wonder' in a points decision. Of course, there was a howl of protest at the decision from the British contingent: 'We wuz robbed', plaint, but the 'Wonder' had won fairly and squarely.

So it had been a great day and the Americans had grown richer by thousands of cigarettes and had left the poor relations A and B far behind.

The weather was really hot and the kriegies' attire was becoming less and less. Some had taken to sunbathing in the nude and this was becoming the vogue, until a rumour circulated that hot sun on the

testicles rendered one sterile. So respectability was gained by the 'g' string and the inmates continued to enjoy the warmth.

The heat helped to drive the hunger pangs away, and there seemed to be more energy for other pursuits, such as swimming. K Lager had a fire pool, which was as black as the ace of spades and full of frogs, but it was hot and an enterprising prisoner considered it was time for a swim. Everything was contagious in the Lager and within an hour the pool's surrounds were littered with naked bodies all enjoying the amenities of the new-found lido, while the pool was jammed with bathers who emerged a darker colour than on entering. For two days the new attraction was allowed to prosper by the authorities, although the amount of water gradually decreased as the water was splashed outwards on to the muddy banks by the antics of the bathers. Then the Germans acted, it was declared a health hazard - typhoid being mentioned and the pool was 'verboden'. So ended the two-day interlude at the seaside.

The aquatic activities having been curtailed at the height of the season, it was on with another summer sport, cricket, and what better than a test match between England and Australia to capture and hold the interests of the men of B Lager. The English supporters stated that it would be a non-event, because of the limited choice available to the Australian selectors, but when one considered the number of Aussies in the lager it was time for reconsideration. Although it was true that the bulk of the POWs were from the British Isles, it was surprising the contribution made by Australia and Canada, considering their small populations. It was to be a three-day match with set intervals for lunch and tea, just like at Lords, despite the fact that there would be nothing to eat. Still tradition had to be complied with.

Australia won the toss and batted on what was supposed to be a perfect pitch, devoid of a blade of grass. The dust heap had been swept and then rolled with petrol drums filled with water. The Lancashire curator from C9 had declared it the best wicket he had seen outside Old Trafford, and there was a bag of runs to be had, but the English opening bowlers seemed to think otherwise and made the ball bounce and lift alarmingly.

Four Australian wickets tumbled for nine runs and then the boys from Down Under decided that it was time for bold tactics. They hit out lustily much to the crowd's delight and at lunch were five wickets for 113 runs, a useful start.

As there was no selling of scorecards, chocolates, cigarettes or matches during the break, the lager's brass band entertained with such tunes as 'Colonel Bogey', 'Anchors Away' et cetera. Then some of the spectators, thinking that they could do better than the actual players, invaded the playing area and commenced a test match of their own on the holy of holies, the test wicket. This continued until the irate curator emerged from C9 and uprooted the test stumps in a bid to check the proceedings and force the invaders to take up positions behind the boundary. The abrupt ending of the game almost resulted in fisticuffs, but all ended well with the reappearance of the players.

The Australian batsmen pushed on, timing their shots and slogged the many loose deliveries, and were further aided and abetted by some poor English fielding - innumerable catches being dropped. So a respectable score of 197 was reached and Australia was well-satisfied.

The Englishmen batted as if they were at Lords, very correct and proper, but the wicket was treacherous, bouncing, shooting and keeping ankle high, so were dismissed for a paltry forty-two. Being forced to follow-on over 150 in arrears, they changed tactics and lashed out, but could only muster 148. So the three-day match had ended in a day and the Aussies had won the test by an innings and seven runs. The blame was heaped on the ground staff and the curator, who had let the kriegies down. One day of cricket, when they were expecting three was poor and unforgiveable by anyone's standards.

The lights were out and the kriegies were relaxing in their pits after a day in the sun. The conversation generally centred itself on women, the war or the 'bin', but tonight the war took precedence.

'I'll tell you what!' called out Bolland. 'For us this goddamn war will soon be over. The Ruskiies will be here and then we'll all go home via Moscow.'

'Bullshit!' interrupted Mackie, the Australian pilot who had topped scored in the recent test match. 'Listen mate, who the bloody hell wants to go home via Moscow? There'd be nowhere to go. It would be a dead end and they might keep us there for years.'

'We could no home via India or the Black Sea or some other route', explained Bolland tamely, who had been temporarily set back on his heels by the Aussie's assertive statement. However, he gathered momentum for he was never nonplussed for long. 'Moscow will do me! Think of all those Russian women just waiting to meet a Canadian fighter pilot. I'll be an instant success. Who the hell gives a shit where we go, as long as we get out of this bloody place?'

'I'm with you there, Canada.' replied Mackie. 'When you talk of 'sheilas', you're talking my kind of language. We'll go well together, the perfect and irresistible combination. Me with my sun kissed body and you with your good looks. God! What a time we'll have!'

'What a lot of crap you bastards shovel around!' chipped in an interested listener. 'Mackie, when you get to Moscow you'll be buggered. The lager diet makes you sterile and there won't be any women interested in you.'

'Like bloody hell!' retorted the valiant Mackie. 'There's bugger all wrong with me. I'm as good a man as ever I was. Who topped scored in the recent test? The old Bondi hero.' There were roars of laughter at this self-recommendation.

'Atta boy, Mackie! You give 'em heaps,' encouraged Bolland. 'We Aussies and Canucks must stick together.'

Then the argument about possible evacuation continued far into the night, and the kriegies saw everything through rose-coloured spectacles for hope sprang eternal in the prisoner's breast and the 'home by Christmas' mentality was very much to the fore.

The warmth and sunshine continued from day to day and the belief that for the prisoners the war was nearly over gained a stronger and stronger hold. It was inevitable that the Russians' westward drive would reach East Prussia in a matter of weeks, and so the intervening period was a time to be enjoyed and to prepare for freedom. However, fate can be unkind and it has a habit of jolting one's apathy and feelings of euphoria.

One night the kriegies were awakened by rifle shots, followed by a lot of commotion. The Russians had arrived at last, but then things went quiet and returned to normal. It was discovered the next day that an American from C Lager had tried to escape by scaling the barbed wire entanglements and had been killed. The camp was saddened, for they felt that had he waited a little longer then rescue was inevitable. However, the shock brought to the fore the realisation that the war was not yet over and the casualties and deaths would continue to mount.

CHAPTER XI

For two days a carnival atmosphere had pervaded the camp and an air of abandon possessed the prisoners. The evacuation had been announced by the commandant at afternoon roll call, and the next day, C Lager had been cleared and the Americans dispatched to some unpronounceable place, deep in the heart of Germany. Within twenty-four hours, A Lager had moved out to an unknown destination, and these two large compounds were now empty, silent and ghostlike. Tomorrow was K's turn. The remaining prisoners were to be evacuated in two groups and sent their various ways. So now it was time for rejoicing, for it was the last day of incarceration and freedom beckoned in the guise that the war was as good as over. Admittedly, the kriegies' initial reaction to evacuation had been annoyance and frustration for hopes of deliverance had been pinned on the Ruskies and there had been visions of Moscow and a good time. Later, however, they had reasoned that the Germans must be on their last legs and had no hope of stemming the Russian advance westward, and further the overall position of an early release had been enhanced by the British and American successes in France.

Dave had been going over his few precious belongings and packing in readiness for the exodus. Travelling space would be very limited and everything taken had to be carried, so one had to be selective. The two blankets were a must, and so was the Red Cross food parcel which had been issued one to each person for the journey. Dave knew all about cattle trucks and the time taken to get from A to K. However, there would be a thousand prisoners involved this trip, and it could be a long time before the destination was reached and another issue of food given. The Germans wouldn't be catering on this trip - it was the food parcel and nothing else. Then there was the cigarette problem - how many to take? Dave had about 1200 in packets of 20, so he wouldn't leave any behind. He'd take those for they represented currency, but 60 packets of 20 made a bulky parcel. The knife, fork and spoon, plus the drinking mug and dish were vital, but when all were put together the luggage would be heavy, cumbersome and unwieldy. He possessed one pair of socks, a vest and pants as a change from what he was wearing, so they had to be taken too. The big question was, what to do with the RAF greatcoat, a Red Cross donation? At night it was his third blanket, but in the hot July of 1944 it looked strangely out of place and superfluous. If he took it, he would be weighted down like a packhorse and would sweat streams walking from the camp to the railway siding, their departure point. Then, again, he reasoned that the war was as good as over and there would be no second winter to endure. He rolled it into a ball, kept in place with string, and then loaded himself. The blankets and greatcoat went on his back, rucksack style, and the rest was carried by hand. He felt hot, bugged, and loaded to the gunwales. It would be hard work carrying his belongings in the heat of the sun, for it was bad enough just standing in the cool of B3. He debated with himself the necessity for the greatcoat's retention and decided to hang on to everything. If the worse came to the worse, he could throw the coat away.

Everything being ready for the morrow, he left the hut to join in the festivities. The whole world seemed topsy-turvy. The Red Cross store had issued its whole stock of toilet paper rolls, as it couldn't be transported to the new camp, and so there was an abundance - about four rolls a person. The electricity and telephone wires were festooned with bunting as the rolls were thrown upwards draping everything and making a ticker-tape departure. Some of the bunting had even been thrown at the high-stilted sentry boxes and now adorned these forbidding sentinels. Perhaps the drapery was symbolic of the contempt the prisoners had for Hitler's Germany and all it represented.

There were gramophone records or discs flying everywhere. Over the years the Red Cross had been generous in this direction in an endeavour to cater for the musical needs of the deprived. In addition, many music lovers had preferred record parcels to cigarettes and so had accumulated vast stocks. It was impossible to transport these to the next camp, and so were being thrown in all directions, whizzing through the air like boomerangs. They were dangerous, too, so you had to tread warily or the head would go a-rolling. On the recreation ground one enterprising entrepreneur had set up a game of chance by sticking a piece of wood in the ground, draping it with a coat, and charging 20 cigarettes a go at trying to hit it at 30 yards' distance with a record. The prize being 50 cigarettes. No one knew what he would do with the profits, for he certainly wouldn't be able to take them with him.

The toilets seemed to have a very special attraction for the kriegies for, antlike and loaded with cardboard boxes of cigarettes, they made pilgrimages to the 'bogs'. Here they would tip the 'currency' down into the shitty depths. They were throwing away fortunes which had, in some cases taken almost five years to amass, for it was no good to them now. They couldn't carry their loot with them and the alternative was to leave it for the enemy.

'Not bloody likely!' was the consensus of opinion. 'They'll get bugger all from me. If they want a smoke, then they can have shit on it as well as arsehole aroma.'

The cigarettes were poured into this depository and the lager's wealth gradually disappeared. This dissipation was a great economic leveller. The kriegies, who possessed fortunes, were now reduced to a common denominator, for wealth depended on the number of cigarettes you could transport, and after the essentials such as blankets, greatcoat et cetera, were taken into consideration, the amount of room for 'smokes' was roughly the same as everyone else's. Those who lacked lager 'gold' were now able to stock up from those divesting their fortunes in the morass and quagmire of the lager's 'rialto'.

Despite all the unusual things going on, tradition was hard to break and many prisoners were still 'bashing the circuit'. It seemed that years of habit couldn't be discarded overnight just because an exodus was in the offing. Dull routine was an essential ingredient of lager life, and the swirling and twisting records, plus reams of toilet paper strewn all over the place, couldn't deter the regimented. However, the postern or sentry boxes weren't manned, and it was the first time that this state of affairs had existed so there was no-one to take a pot-shot at anyone infringing regulations, such as touching the warning wire et cetera. Indeed, down at the ablution block, scores of prisoners were doing their dhobi in preparation for the move and had cheekily hung the washing on the warning wire to dry, for there would be no retaliation.

The last night in B3 was full of speculation about the future. What would the morrow bring, and where were they going? Most agreed that it would be deep in the heart of Germany where they would come to rest and there would be no chance of escape. However, Mackie started an argument about repatriation. He tried to convince the inmates that the Germans no longer had the food to feed the prisoners in K Lager, and they would all be sent to Sweden, where they would remain until the end of the war. This line of argument was easy to swallow for everyone wanted it to happen, and so the more gullible gave Mackie their support. However, Bolland told Mackie that he was pissing down his leg and was being bloody stupid.

'Sweden! Mackie you must be joking.' No-one knew whether Mackie was really in earnest, for he often said things just to get a reaction and an argument going.

There was a lull for a few minutes as if everyone was contemplating the future. Sweden was just a pipe dream, so the alternative was 'deep in the heart of Germany'.

'I'll tell you what, Mackie!' blurted Bolland. 'I know you give me the shits and the piles, but you're not a bad sort of bloke deep down. In fact, you'll do me, how about you and me staying behind tomorrow? Everyone pisses off, and we'll have the camp to ourselves, we could hide in the roof of the ablution block and wait for the Ruskiies to come.'

'She'll be right, mate', came the Aussie's reply, 'but I wouldn't like to be stuck in the roof for a few weeks. It would be too bloody hot. Besides your feet stink and I couldn't stand it and I'd give myself up to the Germans.'

'We'll be in the ablution block, won't we?'' demanded Bolland.

'So I'll be able to slip down through the trap door and have a shower three times a day. Besides, it wouldn't be a bad idea if you had a shower occasionally and then you could wash the piles out of your arse. They must give you hell. No wonder you're always scratching it.'

At this there were roars of laughter.

'How about me joining you?' someone asked, good humouredly. 'What with the piles and the stinking feet, I feel you need a third person to keep up the morale.'

'Piss-off!' retorted Mackie. 'Me and Bolland want to be alone. Don't we? Haven't you heard we've got a thing going between us, and a third party would bugger things up?'

'For once I agree with you, Mackie,' was Bolland's laughing reply.

'We don't want anyone else. Two in the roof will be plenty.'

'By the way, Bolland, I see you've lost your mate, McDonald,' stated Mackie. 'Why the hell did he ship out with A Lager? Didn't he like you or something?'

'The cookhouse mob was moved out together with the A Lager bods, so McDonald went with them,' was Bolland's reply. 'I told him I'd see him when we got back to Canada, and the way the war's going, it won't be long.'

So the banter went on until the early hours of the morning.

The next morning the men of C Block were counted, checked, rechecked, and then marched out of the camp - destination unknown. B Block received the same treatment about two hours later, and by noon were on their way to the railway siding about four kilometres distant. The day was hot and the August sun made Dave feel like a trussed rooster, especially with the blankets and greatcoat on his back and the Red Cross food parcel and other luggage to hand. It was hard work just putting one foot after the other and there were frequent stops for rests and the readjustment of luggage.

At the siding the cattle trucks were drawn up ready to receive the passengers, and on the platform were innumerable buckets of drinking water. Then the prisoners were herded into the trucks, the sliding doors closed, and they were sealed, signed, and ready to be transported. The instruction '8 Horses or 48 Men' seemed to have been stretched a little for there was precious little room for each person, without the accompanying luggage. Everyone was standing as if expecting the door to slide open, and the guard would yell, 'All change! All change!' However, there was no such call, and the train remained stationary at the siding, and the temperature within the trucks seemed to rise appreciably and the perspiration simply poured from everyone. It was sit down or fall down, and gradually everyone sat. The lucky ones had their backs supported by the sides of the truck, but those in the middle were less fortunate. The leg room was sufficient if drawn up, but once outstretched they brushed someone else or rested on top of another pair of legs, accompanied by: 'keep your bloody feet to yourself.'

Then the train started to move, and Dave heard Bolland say, 'Christ! This is where I came in. I've done it all before.'

'Me too, mate!' chorused Mackie.

CHAPTER XII

The hot sun burned down on the weary, disconsolate marchers as they covered the distance from the railway station to the new camp. Although it was only four kilometres, the journey seemed endless, each plodding step requiring so much effort. The impedimenta; the blankets, the Red Cross parcel et cetera with which each person was burdened, seemed to weigh tons and became heavier with every movement, while the rays of the sun seemed to percolate to the very marrow to ooze perspiration all over. The long, bedraggled column limped its way along, watched only by a few disinterested pedestrians.

'So this is Poland!' mused Dave. 'The Germans can stuff it as far as I'm concerned.'

He felt exhausted and dispirited, despite the warmth of the day, for the journey had been a real bastard. Four days they had been cooped up in the cattle truck, only to be let out morning and evening to relieve themselves on the side of the railway tracks. The journey had been punctuated by stops and starts, and the stops had been often and lengthy. Once the sun had started to rise the temperature within the cattle truck rose appreciably until it became suffocating, especially if the train was at a standstill. The shortage of leg-room was acute for if you stretched out someone would place his legs on top of yours and so on, until yours were at the bottom of the pile and pins and needles occurred through lack of movement. Then they were extricated with difficulty and plonked on the top. This continuous game of musical chairs reminded Dave of a game he played as a child, when hands were placed on top of each other and the bottom hand was moved to the top in rotation.

In the end one would tire of the continual movement and withdraw from the contest by pulling the knees into the stomach. However, when the knees and legs grew aching and tired in this position, the solution was either to stretch out again and become involved or stand up.

The water situation had also been a problem. Buckets of drinking water had been placed inside the truck, but the movements of the train, especially the stoppings and starts had caused a certain amount of sloping and wastage. However, the urinal, the narrow gap caused by the partly open sliding door, was not in great demand for the perspiration was great and the warm weather placed no undue emphasis on the bladder.

The trek continued and Dave felt like discarding his greatcoat. Many of the prisoners had left theirs behind in the lager or had dumped them somewhere along the route, feeling that they had outlived their usefulness. The high temperature reinforced this feeling and Dave favoured the idea of following suit as it would make his load a lot lighter. He felt as if he were part of a mule train in a cowboy movie moving ponderously and laboriously towards the horizon. Still he had brought the coat this far, so he reasoned he'd hang on to it for another few kilometres.

Before entering their new abode, the prisoners were made to strip, their clothes searched, identity checked by means of 'dog-tags' and then the gates opened and they were allowed to proceed. From previous experience, the entry of new arrivals was always greeted by a large crowd who were impatient to learn, at first hand, the latest news from home or, perhaps, were hoping to meet someone whom they had known, previously on the squadron or from their home town. Thus the intermingling of the old and the new was generally a slap-backing occasion with animated discussions. However, there was no welcoming party here, and there prevailed a complete indifference to the new arrivals. The prisoners were led along a sandy track and on each side, dotted here and there, were detached huts - a far cry from the terraced type of the previous camp. The compound was huge and seemed to sprawl endlessly, lacking cohesion and togetherness. This could be attributed to the lack of barbed wire. At the previous camp there had been lagers all separated from each other, thus giving rise to closely knit communities, but here there was no separation and one could wander at will.

Dave enjoyed his new home for the weather was hot and there was freedom of movement. The camp was for soldiers, but this ruling had been waived to accommodate the newcomers. Thus, in his wanderings, Dave met men who had been far removed from his path in life. There were Dunkirk

heroes, the forgotten men of yesterday, who had fought on the beaches seemingly years ago and had spent the intervening years in different parts of the Greater German Reich. There was McLeod, a grizzled, old army veteran, who had served in India, frequented the brothels of Hong Kong, caught gonorrhoea in Singapore and been baked to a cinder in Aden. Shipped home in time for the commencement of World War II, his military career had come to an abrupt halt when captured in France in 1940.

A very relaxed atmosphere pervaded the whole compound and here things differed considerably. It seemed that one was allowed to trade with the Germans for there were numerous stalls about the place where one could purchase - providing you had the cigarettes - eggs, bread, margarine, vegetables and some fruit. However, the airmen's currency had dwindled and there were few buyers amongst the flyers. The biggest entrepreneurs were a combination called 'Burly and Bill', who owned a fairly large premise and seemed to have a monopoly on the more desired foodstuffs. Where they obtained it no-one seemed to know, but at times they had small fish for sale and even one or two chickens. All the other traders seemed poor relations in comparison and didn't possess the contacts that the partnership had. Still, it seemed that racketeers existed everywhere, even in a German POW camp.

Most of the army prisoners were employed during the day on neighbouring farms or in local factories and this contact with the outside world helped to facilitate trade. Further, it was the essential ingredient that destroyed the rule of 'no trading with the enemy', which had prevailed and been strictly adhered to by the airmen when in East Prussia. The *laissez-faire* attitude which permeated the camp after the strict regimen of East Prussia was, at first, difficult to get used to, but, nevertheless, it was something new and tended to break the monotony of confinement.

The weather continued hot and dry, and so the hunger pangs assailing the stomach were appeased to a certain extent and Dave was free to wander over the sand wastes comprising the camp. The terrain reminded him of the dunes of the Porthcawl area back in his native Wales, where he had always spent his annual holiday as a boy. However, here there was no sea to bathe in.

The hut housing Dave was parked on its own and contained twenty-four two tiered bunks and the new-found freedom existed even here. There was no six o'clock curfew when the doors were locked and no piss-bin to generate controversy. One could sleep in the sand if desired and also use it as a urinal at night.

Most of the old B3 crew were still together in the hut. At night there were no longer a gramophone and records to entertain, so it was chit-chat about the new acquaintances and experiences.

'Jesus, I'd hate to be one of those Dunkirk wallahs. Fancy being in the cage nearly five years, it would drive you mad. You wouldn't know what your cock was for after all that time. Their kids will be grown up and married by the time they get back to Blighty, and God knows what their wives have been doing,' stated Bolland in his nightly *communiqué* on the state of the camp.

'Bullshit, mate!' retorted Mackie. 'Most of the poor buggers are wire happy. When you've been behind barbed wire as long as they have you don't want to get out. This place represents security and when you grow old you don't look for challenges.'

'What a lot of crap you blokes spray about. If I were in this bloody country a hundred years, I'd still want to get back to good old Manchester and the girlfriend,' interposed Slater.

'If you were here for a hundred years, it wouldn't be worth going back,' chuckled Blackston. 'You're a cockless old wreck now without waiting all that time.'

'Talking about calling the kettle black!' retorted Slater. 'Yours almost disappeared under the 'waterfall' the other day.'

'Shit! That bloody waterfall would freeze King Kong's waterspout to the size of a peanut and make him forget sex for six months. It's the coldest, bloody thing I've ever known. Jesus, you need to be mad

to go under that,' joined in Bill Wellings, a native of Liverpool, who had been a prisoner almost two years.

Wellings was a man of few words, but he managed to extract a laugh when he made a pronouncement.

The 'waterfall' consisted of a huge, iron, corrugated tank placed on a wooden platform about twenty-feet off the ground and supported by four large poles. In the base of the tank was a spring trap door from which dangled a piece of wire. The kriegies would shower by standing under the tank, hold their breath, and then jerk the wire. The icy water would cascade down, drowning the bather, who would be forced to release the wire, thus closing the trap. The water must have been pumped from the bowels of the earth for it was freezing and you needed an hour to regain breath and composure.

The lull in conversation was broken by Danzey's voice. 'Talk about waterspouts and sex, that bloody McLeod has done everything and everybody and has caught a few surprise packets along the way. He was telling us about when he was stationed in India. The white women were all hoity-toity being officers' wives et cetera and the men of other ranks were left out in the cold. So he had to resort to the brothels, and, boy, were his descriptions vivid and colourful.'

'Did he tell you how he caught gonorrhoea in Singapore and the antics he had to go through to make himself clean again? He must have felt like a bloody pincushion by the time the treatment was over,' added Bolland. 'Christ! The poor old bugger must be sixty, and after nearly forty years of soldiering he's still only a corporal.'

'What do you expect?' demanded Wellings. 'He wasn't interested in promotion. His priorities were sex, brothels and clap, and now he's only got his memories. Poor bastard!'

'I knew a bloke like that back in Sydney,' reminisced Mackie. 'He'd strut about Bondi Beach in his swimmers and all the sheilas would be crazy about him. He had sex for breakfast, lunch and dinner and then he'd have it for afters as well if it were around. Jesus, he thought a lot of himself! Always combing his bloody hair. He'd leave McLeod for dead.'

'What happened to him?' asked Danzey innocently.

'Poor bastard caught nearly everything going,' replied Mackie, 'and passed on most of it. He died early. Just couldn't stand the pace.'

'You talk a lot of horseshit, Mackie,' stated Bolland bluntly. 'This Bondi Romeo of yours just wasn't good enough. He's dead, but McLeod's alive. So who's the better man for Christ sake?'

'You blokes are sex crazy,' interrupted Blackston, 'Let's talk about something interesting, like the war and when we'll get out of here.'

'Hell! You're a bloody comic, Blackston,' laughed Danzey. 'Here we've been having a bloody interesting conversation and you have to get back to reality and ordinary things. You give my piles a twist, and believe me they're sore enough as it is.'

'Talking about piles,' joined in Slater, 'my arsehole has been giving me hell lately. It's this bloody diet. You get nothing to open up the old bowels. When I have a shit it's like trying to pass red hot daggers through the eye of a needle.'

'You poor bastard!' sympathised Wellings. 'I have the same problem so I know what it's like. If you could get some ruddy ointment it would be a help.'

'Why don't you go and see old McLeod?' asked Bolland laughingly. 'He's got a cure for everything, and they tell me he's a bit of a surgeon as well. He might be able to operate on you both in between telling his life's history and his brothel adventures. It would add to his status if he could put up a sign stating that he was a haemorrhoid specialist as well as a pox doctor's clerk.'

'You're a real bastard, Bolland. You've no sympathy for anyone', said Mackie, entering into the fray. 'You can thank your lucky stars that you're tucked away in a POW camp or you'd be poked up to the eyebrows by now. The war's saved you, Bolland.'

'I don't know about the pox,' returned Bolland gallantly, 'but hells, bloody bells I want a piss. I'll have to go outside and study the stars for a few minutes. Don't hold your breath while I'm away, and for Christ sake give old McLeod a rest.'

Bolland exited to roars of laughter, and then a silence fell on the hut as each person took refuge in his private thoughts and world.

CHAPTER XIII

Bill Wellings and Dave were walking about the camp, neither saying much. The sun was hot and its warmth comforting and soothing. Dave knew all about Wellings' background. He hailed from Liverpool and possessed the inimitable Liverpuddlian accent. Before the war he had worked as a clerk with a shipping firm and had hated the dull routine and regimen the daily task imposed. It was eight till five, and often no-one was prepared to leave until the head clerk had downed tools and quit. Then it was on to the RAF, where he had graduated as a bomb aimer. Mission had followed mission, and he felt that he had a charmed life and, like all aircrew personnel, was indestructible. However, a raid on Essen had proven his undoing. The bombs had been delivered and the return flight seemed a piece of cake, when the Lancaster had been mortally wounded by cannon shells from an enemy fighter. The crew baled out coming down in Belgium, but had been scattered. The next morning, while Bill was walking along a country road, he was approached by a young woman who asked in English was he a member of the plane that had been shot down the previous night. Being in RAF battledress and feeling that the girl was sympathetic and friendly, he admitted that he was. She then led him to a small house about 2 kilometres distant, where he bathed, ate and was given civilian clothing. The Germans had occupied nearly every Western European nation and the penalty for harbouring the enemy was death. Thus the family housing Bill was exceedingly brave. On the third day, Bill was given instructions to walk straight down the road for about a kilometre where he'd see a man standing with a bicycle and his hat in his left hand. He was to follow him at a respectable distance and on no account was he to communicate or make any sign of recognition. This person would lead him to his new sanctuary. The journey was quite long, but worth it for on arrival at his new abode he was reunited with his skipper and navigator, looking strangely out of place in civilian clothes instead of the customary officer's uniform. There was a joyous reunion and questions asked and answered about the other members of the crew. Apparently, all had baled successfully, but the rest of the crew had been picked up by the enemy who were still scouring the area for the three evaders. They were confined to the house for a week and exercised indoors, played cards, slept and ate. Then the escape routine was repeated by walking to the railway station - being previously provided with tickets - boarding a train that went to Brussels and so finishing up in the capital. This journeying from place to place went on until they reached an hotel in Paris, where the Gestapo swooped and rounded up not only the three in question, but also about twenty other evading airmen. Then it was to Fresnes, the Gestapo prison in Paris.

'Fresnes must have just about driven you mad, Bill?' Dave said unexpectedly. 'I know I would have gone bonkers if they'd locked me up there.'

'Dave, you've got no idea of what it's like. I tell you I nearly went around the bend. When you're locked up in solitary with no-one to confide in, your troubles seem mountainous and insoluble. It's either very quiet, not a sound, or you hear some poor bastard wailing or crying. The Gestapo were either beating shit out of him or he'd gone off his head. It wasn't hard to do.'

'Did they beat you, Bill?'

'No, they didn't actually inflict any physical punishment, I suffered mentally. They interrogated me about the Underground and where had I been? Whose house had I been in? What were the names of the people who had cared for me et cetera? Thank God I didn't know. No-one told us their real names or where we were, as they felt it was better that way. I was scared stiff they might take me back to where I was shot down and try and make me find the place where I went first. I freeze up when I think of it. One piece of information and they'd unravel the knot and then God help the Resistance.'

'Your six weeks must have seemed like years, Bill?'

'It was the longest and worst six weeks of my life. Jesus, I feel sorry for Docker, he was in Fresnes ten months. No wonder the poor bastard is as grey as a badger and he's only twenty-three. They must have given him the treatment.'

'What do you intend doing when the war's over? Is it back to the shipping office?'

'Like bloody hell! I just couldn't stand the monotony. I'd tell the head clerk to get stuffed. The pompous arsehole. A little power makes some people drunk. He ought to be in aircrew, then he'd be levelled out.'

The two walked on, and then Dave suggested, as they were in the vicinity, that they drop in on Corporal McLeod and find out what crap he was shooting around. The grand old man, as usual surrounded by his devotees or those who wanted a laugh to relieve the monotony, was expatiating upon his favourite topic. He'd just been asked what gonorrhoea was like and how it affected one, and his reply was vivid, humorous and colourful. Then the crowd dispersed.

'How are you today, Mac?' enquired Bill.

'Bloody awful! I feel like my guts have been taken out, chopped up, salted and peppered, and then put back in and my belly sewn up with a red hot poker. Jesus, I feel sick!'

'It's your past catching up with you, Mac,' said Dave jocularly. 'They say that too much poking doesn't do anyone any good, and it tends to rot the guts and the penis.'

'Horseshit!' was McLeod's emphatic reply. 'There's nothing wrong with my cock. It's as good as ever it was, for it's been in retirement for five years, but my guts are giving me hell. It's this bloody food and the flies. They eat you alive and shit all over the food, so what do you expect? It's a wonder we're not all dead.'

'We'll be out of here before long, Mac, and then everything will be peaches,' comforted Bill. 'You can go back to Singapore for another dose of clap, and I'm for Blighty.'

'You're a bloody optimist then. We'll be here for years yet, and the Japs will be in Singapore for another decade. There's too much on our plate. Shit, my gut is killing me! I'm off to the quack. I haven't time to educate bastards like you,' and with that McLeod took his farewell, leaving Bill and Dave a little crestfallen at the news imparted.

They made off in the direction of their hut, neither saying much but ruminating upon McLeod's prophecy of the war's ending. Dave felt he couldn't and didn't want to do another winter as a captive. The bloody cold went through you and your state of health was deteriorating. The diet and privations took their toll and this was evident by the number of repatriations. When X-rayed by the Red Cross doctors the incidence of tuberculosis had been high amongst those who had been prisoners for a number of years. There were too many problems ahead and Dave didn't relish the future.

Dave broke the silence. 'What do you think about McLeod's forecast!'

'You mean about the war dragging on? McLeod gives me the shits. He's always crapping on about something he knows bugger all about. He should stick to sex and not make pontifical statements about the military situation.'

'The war news is good in the West. The British and American armies are screwing the balls off the Germans and Montgomery is showing the Yanks how a modern war should be fought. It's the Eastern front I can't fathom. When we came here in July, the Ruski's were steamrolling their way eastwards and it looked like Warsaw would fall. And what happened? We heard on the BBC news the Russians had asked the Polish Underground to rise up, take over the city and kill the German garrison. The Ruski's were only about 30 kilometres from the outskirts of Warsaw at that time, and what have they done since? Bugger all! They've just sat on their arseholes and kept a friendly eye on things, while the poor old Poles are being slaughtered. Buggered if I can understand it.'

'Don't worry, Dave!' Old Stalin's a cunning bastard. He's most probably giving his armies a breather and regrouping. You watch within a week they'll be on the march again.'

'He'd better pull his finger out then or there won't be any Poles in Warsaw left to liberate.'

The news from the East was disconcerting and worrying for the advance from that direction had come to a complete halt in the Central sector. Both Dave and Bill hated the thought of enduring another winter in captivity. It was hot now, but in the bitter cold of a European winter your body cried out for nourishment in the form of a good meal and warmth in the shape of a bed and plenty of blankets.

'Jesus, Bill, McLeod said that the Japs will still be fighting in ten years' time. We'll be a fine pair of bastards if the European war goes on even half that time. It won't be worth going home, for no-one will want us.'

'You can say that again, Dave. We'll be the forgotten men of yesterday, and even our girlfriends will have given us the big heave-ho. Just my luck!'

'Don't worry. She'll be waiting for you, Bill, even in five years' time. You told me that Mary was something out of the top drawer, so there's no need for second thoughts on the matter.'

'I haven't had a letter for three months. A man's morale needs reassuring from time to time, and mail from home is the best booster there is.'

Dave knew this to be true for he hadn't received a letter for several weeks and felt discarded and unwanted. Perhaps Joan had forgotten; found someone else; a mess pot was on the way et cetera. It was a topsy-turvy world with everyone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Here he was in German Occupied Europe while he longed to be in Wales. Then, again, the Yanks, Australians, Canadians et cetera were in England and, he supposed, wished to be back on native soil. The thought of so many eligible men parading around back home gave rise to further apprehension – Joan could be married to an American by the time he was out of the cage. Everything was so uncertain and unpredictable. The war, according to the kriegies, was always going to be over by Christmas, but it seemed never-ending. If there was a definite date that one could look forward to then the uncertainty would disappear and the mind set at ease. However, each big military advance by the Allies buoyed the confidence, only for it to be seriously deflated by a reversal, such as the inexplicable lack of movement by the Russian armies in front of Warsaw. What could the Ruskies be doing? Surely, they ought to go on with the advance and help the Polish Resistance in that city? Dave felt depressed, but had no wish to convey his thoughts to Bill. Everyone had his problems, despite the bravado, the sexual anecdotes by McLeod, Bolland, Mackie et cetera, and the feigning of indifference when the mess pot arrived. However, Dave consoled himself that shifting from camp to camp wouldn't help the delivery of letters and, further, no mail had been received by him from anyone, so no news was good news.

'What's wrong, Dave? queried Bill. 'Got the shits or something. You seem unusually quiet.'

'Bugger all's wrong with me.' lied Dave. 'Let's go back to the hut for I'm going to have a shower.'

'You wouldn't catch me going under the bloody 'waterfall', it would turn my balls into ice-blocks. The sudden change in temperature can't be good for them. I reckon you become sterile if you had too many of those cold showers.'

'How else do you shower then, Bill? There are no hot showers or they haven't told us about them. These soldier wallahs might be keeping it a secret. Jesus, in the winter I'd just stink. I wouldn't be able to stand the waterfall. Too bloody cold.'

'Okay, let's go! And don't forget I warned you about becoming sterile.'

'Piss off! I'll tell you what? I'll consult with McLeod about the effect of cold water on the knackers. He's sure to tell me an interesting tale,' laughed Dave.

The repartee about testicles, sterility and McLeod had helped to liven things up and make the two of them forget temporarily their personal problems,

CHAPTER XIV

It was early October and the kriegies had been in their new camp almost three weeks. The advancing Russians had finally ensured the evacuation of the Polish setup, and the procedure repeated: the walk to the railway siding; the incarceration in the cattle trucks; the seemingly endless journey of four days; the confined and cramped conditions; the disembarking and walk to the new camp; and, finally, the checking of identity and search et cetera before admittance. It was like seeing the screening of a movie for the umpteenth time.

The new 'home' was situated in the middle of the North German Plain and so, according to the German guards, was safe from the Russians and equally safe from the Allies. The guards were adamant that here the prisoners would remain until the Germans were victorious. No more moves, no more cattle trucks et cetera, as the Fuhrer wouldn't allow any enemy of the Third Reich to tread on German soil.

The camp was bleak and miserable in outlook, being divided into several lagers. However, there was no restriction of entry. The huts were terraced-typed, similar to those in East Prussia and each contained 36 two tiered bunks. Perhaps the biggest difference was the soil, which was a dark loam and contrasted sharply with the sand of the previous camps. It only needed a little rain and the tracks became boggy and the boots muddied with damp, clinging mud. However, it was still autumn and the winter and its damp seemed a long way off.

The terraced huts faced each other in long rows and at the farther end of the so-made thoroughfares was a detached ablution block with no shower facilities. Then another 30 yards on, away from everything, was the communal deep-pit, which served not only as a toilet but as the hub of misinformation and rumour. At the other extremity, placed in the middle of each 'street', was a small wooden shed containing a water tap which was attached to a pipe rising about three feet from the ground. This was used for filling buckets so that clothes et cetera could be washed, and also for showering by sitting or kneeling under the tap and soaping oneself at the same time.

The camp, to the discerning, spelt future despair, hardship and privation, but that didn't worry the prisoner for he dealt with one day at a time, and, anyway, he'd be home tomorrow. The store of Red Cross parcels had been brought with them from Poland, but it was already rumoured that there was only enough for an issue of one per person for so many weeks. After that a parcel would have to be shared by two, three, four or more. Still, no-one wanted to believe it, so it was put down as a rumour emanating from the shithouse and so had no credibility. The kriegies' mentality was similar to that of an ostrich. When something was unpalatable then one chose to ignore it and stick one's head in the sand. At the previous camps, coal in the form of briquettes had been supplied for warmth in the hut and cooking in the communal kitchen. Here, however, there was no supply and no cookhouse, and fuel for heating and cooking was dependent on two persons from each hut being allowed out daily under a guard to forage for wood in the forests. Consequently, the fire in the big stove was not lit until evening when it became colder and it was time for the evening meal. In the relative warmth of early October this didn't matter so much, but in bitterly cold December, January and February it would be a different tale.

No-one was allowed out to work on neighbouring farms et cetera and so there was a dearth of extras in the shape of additional food, forcing the entrepreneurs of the former camp to close shop. There was nothing to trade and this was accentuated by the lack of kriegie currency, the cigarette, which had dwindled alarmingly in recent weeks. Further, the camp possessed no theatre where bands could perform or a production could be enacted, so there was no relief from the boredom and monotony of the daily round. When in East Prussia hot showers had been permitted once a week, while in Poland the only shower facilities had been those of the 'waterfall'. Still the icy, cold water was of little consequence in the hot weather and it mattered little. However, the showers here were situated in the outer lager and a visit was permitted once every three weeks. In between times, one was expected to sluice under the cold water tap in the little hut. The lack of a communal kitchen added to the difficulties of everyday living. Previously the tins of meat from each Red Cross parcel had been extracted, given to the cooks who had prepared the evening meal by either mixing the meat with

potatoes to form a hash or issuing a quarter of a tin of meat per man. Now the complete parcel was given, plus a daily issue of two potatoes, and the recipient left to his own devices. So combines or

groups of two, three or four were formed to overcome cooking problems. The individual kept such edibles as chocolate, biscuits, sugar, tinned milk et cetera, but pooled the tinned stuff.

Despite the difficulties and the approach of the late autumn, the inmates were reasonably happy. They were convinced that they would be home for the festive season so a few temporary hardships were a bagatelle. The optimism that prevailed was high and little could dampen the outlook of the airmen. Admittedly, there had been, in lager parlance, a minor temporary setback, but it was nothing. The Allied forces in the West had made spectacular advances in July, August and September, forcing the Germans to withdraw to the defences of the Siegfried line. Something daring had to be done to hasten the end of the war and prevent a stalemate, so Operation Market Garden was carried out. Airborne British, Polish and American troops were dropped to secure bridges over the Rhine at Nijmegen, Eindhoven and Arnhem to find a route into the heart of Germany. However, success evaded the paratroopers, the British First Airborne Division being badly mauled at Arnhem and forced to withdraw on the 25th September and the mission aborted. The kriegies still received the BBC news, having brought the radio receiver from East Prussia via Poland, and were elated with the early successes of Market Garden. Then when the setbacks occurred there was a general souring and remarks like: 'Pull your bloody finger out for Christ sake!' 'What the bloody hell are you doing?' et cetera. No-one, however, interpreted the writing on the wall as another winter to be endured in captivity. That was too brutal a conclusion, despite the evidence of the approaching winter which, would curtail tank warfare, aerial support for ground forces, and bring about a general lull on the Western front. Christmas at home was the eternal attraction and, besides, the Ruskies revelled in the snow and if the British and Yanks were not good enough, then Joe Stalin's boys would be in and through Germany like a dose of salts.

Now a six o'clock curfew applied and the doors of the huts were locked and no-one was allowed out, so there was always a crowd around the big fuel stove in the centre of the room.

'Shit this place is getting bloody colder and colder,' stated Mackie.! I wish I were back on good old Bondi basking in the sun and casting my eye over the sheilas. '

'You talk a lot of crap, Mackie!' retorted Danzey. 'You're always on about Bondi. I'd take Blackpool anytime. The girls there are really something.'

'Blackpool, for Christ sake!' interjected Bolland. 'It nearly killed me. I was there for four weeks and that's all I did was square-bash: 'Right turn! Left turn! Squad!' et cetera, and the wind never stopped blowing. I thought my face was a piece of eroded rock by the time I was ready to leave.'

'Eroded cock, you meant' exclaimed Slater laughingly. 'I've often wondered why you look so queer, and now I know. You're the same at both ends. Very good looking.'

At this there were roars of laughter, followed by a hush as the bystanders attended to the cooking pots. There was a variety of edibles all in different stages of readiness. Those near the actual fire were boiling merrily, while others, on the periphery of the stove, were stagnating and no movement was visible amongst the contents.

'This bloody wood is no good for cooking No body to it,' someone said. 'Anyway, there's never enough of it. Two blokes go out to collect in the forest and what they come back with is bugger all. Who were the bastards who went out today?'

'I'm one of the bastards,' a voice belligerently stated from one of the bunks. 'And what's it to you?'

'The next time,' came the answer, 'pull you finger out and bring something back worth burning. This bloody stuff is not worth a crumpet.'

'What do you expect? You're only allowed to pick up the dead stuff, and a man can only carry so much. Wait till it's your turn to have a go.'

Again there was a lull in the conversation and a general departure from the stove area, leaving the one or two who were left the opportunity of moving their pot to a more favourable position nearer the source of heat. This was done by substituting yours for one that was already boiling or squeezing it in somewhere by creating space. This would cause arguments, accompanied by much banter, when the wronged person discovered what had taken place.

'Eh, Slater! Have you got your bags packed?' shouted Wellings from his bunk. 'We'll be out of here before the end of the month.'

'Who says so? Not that fake Maxie Clarke again? No-one listens to him anymore. He's a false prophet and the biggest phoney in the camp.'

'No, not him. It's in Revelations'.

'Who's he, for Christ sake?' asked Slater. 'Some sort of Gestapo boss who beats shit out of you with a toothpick.'

'God, you're ignorant, Slater! How the hell did you ever become a member of aircrew? No, Revelations is the last book in the Bible and tells you what's happened and when this war's going to finish.'

'Where did you learn that crap?' queried Bolland.'

'Old Taylor in next door told me about it. He even read me the passages from the Bible, and his interpretation of the white leader coming from the East and vanquishing the black Satan. He's convinced the war will finish this month.'

'Old Taylor, be buggered. He's only 23 and already three parts around the bend. I don't know what's come over you blokes,' continued Bolland, 'you'll believe anything.'

'Me and Bolland are the only two in this hut that have our feet on the ground,' supported Mackie. 'We don't listen to shithouse rumours, do we, Bolland? 'We'll be here for Christmas now that we've received a walloping at Arnhem. Hell, we copped a hiding there! There'll be little military activity now that winter's nearly here.'

At this there were cries of protest from many parts of the hut, for this was realism and spelt out another Christmas in captivity. Something no-one wanted.

'It was the British First Airborne Division that was dropped at Arnhem, wasn't it?' demanded Blackston. 'I've got a brother-in-law, married to my sister, a paratrooper. I hope the hell he wasn't in that lot or my sister will go bonkers. She worries all the time.'

'That bloody Montgomery wants gelding!' exploded Danzey. 'In September they made him a field marshal and he's done bugger all since. I suppose he thought up the caper of capturing the bridges over the Rhine. I hope he's got another plan up his sleeve.'

'He's a brilliant bloody soldier,' added Wellings. 'He gave Rommel's balls a tingling in North Africa and wrapped up that theatre of war in a hurry.'

'I was in that campaign and did we give Rommel a hiding from the air,' volunteered Sandy Smith. 'The Afrika Corps didn't know whether they were coming or going by the time we'd finished with them. There was only one road across the desert and it was pie-easy to bomb and strafe the German trucks and supplies. There was wreckage everywhere.'

'If it was so easy, how come you finished up here?' demanded Slater. 'I suppose you were invited and too polite to knock back the invitation.'

'Something like that,' was Sandy's reply. 'We all get the chop sooner or later. Don't we, Slater?'

'Give me those Russian generals every time,' Bolland remarked. 'They know what they're about. Don't they, Mackie?'

'I'll take the Americans,' answered the Aussie just to be controversial. 'Eisenhower is Monty's boss, so it stands to reason he's better. And that Patton with his six-shooters -- now that's what I call flamboyant. Then there was MacArthur with that bloody hat of his. When he arrived in Aussie to save us all down-under, my Mum thought he was the handsomest thing in breeches, and he was about sixty then, for Christ sake. Shows you what flamboyancy can do for you.'

So the meal preparation went on, interspersed with pontifical statements and a lot of crap.

CHAPTER XV

It was bitterly cold, but the ground was not iron hard, as two days previously there had been some rain making the soil soft and clinging. The surface had been churned up by the tramp of thousands of feet and, although icy on the surface, cracked with the weight of the foot, oozing water from the soft, clammy interior. The boots of the three walkers were mud-soddened and looking the worse for wear.

'Eh, Dave! I told you we should have given our morning constitutional a miss. Look at my bloody boots! I'll never be able to dry them out or the socks.'

'Stop griping, Slater!' was Dave's retort. 'If you don't bash the circuit, you lie on the pit and start thinking of the outside world and then you're like a bear with a sore head. A brisk morning walk will give you an appetite.'

'It's no good having an appetite if there's bugger all to eat!' interjected Wellings. 'If I'd stayed in the pit and wrapped the blankets around me, I'd be conserving energy and keeping my hunger at bay. No-one seems to play sport anymore. The recreation field is always empty, not like it used to be when we were in East Prussia.'

'No-one's got any energy left,' remarked Dave, 'we're all on our knees. Since I've been sharing my weekly parcel with you bastards, I get nothing to eat.'

'Bullshit!' snorted Slater. 'Look how healthy you are compared with Wellings and me. I reckon you must be getting something on the side that we don't know about.'

'Wish the hell I was. Jesus, look at me! I was twelve stone when I was shot down and now I'd be lucky to make ten. If this war doesn't finish soon, I'll lose another couple of stone and be like Gandhi.'

'You and Wellings are shit lucky,' stated Slater, 'you still have your greatcoats. You're wrapped up like a pair of teddy bears, while I'm the poor relation.'

'They're a good third blanket, too.' gloated Wellings, 'they help to keep rigor mortis at bay, especially at about two in the morning.'

'I nearly threw mine away,' volunteered Dave. 'The sun was so hot in July and August that I thought that the cold had gone forever, and the coat was an anachronism - something like a bathing costume in Antarctica. Thank God, I hung on to it! I suppose it's my Welsh intuition that saved me.'

'What a load of bulldust you throw in people's eyes, Dave Griffin. You're just lucky, you bastard,' scoffed Slater. 'Anyway, your Welsh intuition didn't help you with the flying boots. You raffled those and then had to throw the proceeds down the bog. .'

'Listen to who's talking! Slater, you helped me raffle them, and then took half the cigarettes. A fine, bloody friend, you are,' concluded Dave humorously, 'you should have persuaded me to hang on to them.'

'My feet are bloody freezing and my socks are wet,' protested Slater. 'When we get to the hut I'm going in and wrapping the blankets around them. I don't want frostbite.'

'It's not your feet that you have to watch, Slater, it's your cock,' explained Wellings. 'If the frost gives it a nip you'll be done for. It remains blue forever. They'll call you the 'Blue Boy'. Your girlfriend will have the shock of her life when you're honeymooning or whatever you call it. She'll take one look at it and return to mother.'

For a while the three of them couldn't stop laughing, and then Dave interrupted the mirth with, 'My ruddy socks are wet, too. I've only got one other pair and they're a bit holey. Hells bells, it's hard to dry

things around here. I'll be coming in with you, Slater, when we reach the hut or my feet will be knackered.'

'I don't know about your feet, but my boots need a pep-talk,' added Wellings. 'They'll take a year to dry and, in the meantime, I'll have to hobble around the hut in stockinged feet. Hell, those cobbled stones are as cold as icebergs. Shit, I wish I could have a square meal, a hot shower, and then get into a warm bed with white, clean sheets. I'd sleep forever. I wouldn't care if I died as long as I was full, warm and had sheets. They're the things a man misses. I'm fed up with a sack filled with wood shavings for a pillow- it doesn't do the skin any good, and the blankets are filthy. God knows who had them before me. When I get up in the morning my face and neck are black from the bloody things.'

'That's because you never wash,' volunteered Dave. 'Don't blame the blankets for your lack of hygiene.'

'Talk about getting up in the morning, have you noticed McKenzie's face of late?' queried Slater. 'It seems swollen and puffed up.'

'McKenzie's face is not the only one that's swollen when he gets up, I could name you at least ten more in the hut,' added Wellings. 'Someone told me it's due to diet and lack of vitamins. The face becomes normal by noon. It's the kriegies who have been in the cage for years who are suffering. Some of them are losing their hair. It comes out in tufts. I saw a handful come out of Gerry William's pate the other day. It gave me a bloody shock. The teeth also work lose.'

'Shit!' exploded Dave. 'I hope I don't go home bald and toothless! I couldn't stand it,' and then added, 'I'd buy a wig - a black one with a few silver streaks to make me look distinguished.'

And the three of them turned into the cold, miserable hut to obtain some form of succour.

The numbers in the camp had continued to grow and the huts became badly overcrowded as more two-tiered beds were squeezed in to accommodate the newcomers. Most of these were tough, vigorous air borne soldiers who had fought in Operation Market Garden. Some had been glider pilots, others paratroopers. They looked very professional in their red-devil berets and airborne insignia, contrasting sharply with the underfed prisoner of a number of years. The news, according to the paratroopers, was that the war couldn't finish until the summer of '45, as there would be a comparative lull during the present winter, which would be used for regrouping and replenishing the Allied armies for the spring offensive. This, of course, was a bitter pill for the old timers to swallow, as they found it unpalatable and still argued that the war would be over by Christmas, which was only five weeks or so away. They supported their arguments by referring to the predictions of the camp's visionaries, such as Maxie Clarke; Old Taylor, the Bible-basher; and a new prophet, Charlie Haynes, who propounded the very acceptable and palatable forecast that the Russians would arrive at the camp on Boxing Day and liberate the kriegies. This was just what the doctor ordered, and so he was regarded as the Messiah and the greatest. Charlie Haynes had predicted, according to his adherents, the date of the D. Day landing; the Allies speedy advance across France; the failure of the Market Garden operation, and so had gathered disciples as his fame spread. Whether he had predicted what had eventuated was problematic, for no-one had been around at the time, except his bosom mates. Still, Charlie, as he was affectionately called, was now the vogue and regarded as number one.

The usual crowd was around the fuel stove either warming their backsides or tending to the cooking pots, while the conversation ranged over a hundred and one topics.

'The elite of aircrew served in the Western Desert,' crapped on Sandy Smith. 'We were specially selected for the job of driving Rommel back across Libya and out of North Africa. The Afrika Corps were top class. They chased British general after British general back to Cairo, and it wasn't until Montgomery took over the Eighth Army and Tedder the Air Force that we gave them curry. Those were the days. Hitting hard the German supply lines in the desert, and leaves in Cairo. You blokes don't know what life's all about.'

'You give me the shits, Smith!' exploded Mackie. 'The elite of aircrew, specially selected et cetera, what bullshit! I wanted to be posted to the Middle East, so I'd get it easy. Just flying and strafing

unprotected trucks and jeeps would be a piece of cake. No opposition. Bomber Command was tough and for men only. Flying over Germany was not for powder-puffs. We'd battle our way to the target and then fight our way home. Talk about the Desert Air Force, that was for geriatrics.'

Jack Tennant, a former Coastal Command pilot, then entered the fray. 'The real men of the Royal Air Force were all in Coastal. Flying over those freezing, slatey grey waves was no picnic. If you had engine trouble over the Atlantic, there was nowhere to go. We couldn't bale out like you bums, we had to tough it out. You desert rats and bomber boys had soft numbers. You ought to get some flying hours in before shooting lines. Try flying through a thunderstorm or a snow blizzard three hundred miles out at sea. You can't see out of the cabin window, and you could be flying the wrong way for all you know, and finish up in New York.'

'What about the compass?' someone yelled.

'Jesus! Just flying over the sea and looking for submarines is my idea of a war,' laughed Danzey. 'That's a lot easier than flying over enemy territory for six hours and getting flak thrown up at you all the time, plus the fighters with their eight machine guns and four cannons. It's what survival is all about. I take my hat off to every member of Bomber Command.'

'Do you think that's all we did was stooge over the sea?' Tennant asked heatedly. 'What about attacks on enemy shipping, battleships like the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, and ports like Saint-Nazaire and Brest? You flew through flak as thick as snow and right into the mouths of those guns. Bloody frightening!'

'You Air Force pansies don't know what it's all about,' a paratrooper glider pilot stated bluntly. 'Market Garden was no tea-party. At Arnhem we had to fly in gliders loaded to the gunwales with jeeps, light artillery and soldiers. And where did we land? Not on prepared runways like you Brylcream boys, but on a field or roadway, hoping like hell that you weren't crushed to death by the cargo on landing. It was a tough war. We didn't have engines. We didn't need them, we just glided in and hoped that luck was with us.'

No-one answered him. The banter that emanated from the group was always in good fun, and no-one meant what he said, as it was done to pass the time and relieve the monotony. Everyone respected the other and knew what tough wartime assignments they had performed. Sandy Smith had fought over the desert, had eaten the sand, slept in it, and had been fortunate enough not to be buried in it; the bomber boys had flown to the Ruhr Valley and faced the thirty thousand ack-ack guns and numerous other deadly obstacles; Coastal Command crews had faced a watery death and the menacing guns of the big German battleships; while the Airborne Division - the paratroopers and glider pilots had tons of guts and had shown their metal in so many hazardous operations in different theatres of war.

'We're all bloody good blokes anyway,' declared Wellings, 'so who's arguing? Let's drink to the Royal Navy. Those bloody sailors get all the luck.'

'I don't know about luck,' commented Bolland, 'for I don't seem to be having too much lately. That's all I dream about these days are cakes. Masses and masses of them with loads of cream and plenty of chocolate icing on top. It's no good dreaming about them for they never materialise, and I wake up as hungry as ever and dying for a piss. I never dream about sex now and I'm worried about myself.'

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'I don't know about sex,' asserted Slater, 'but I dream about cakes, too. Women don't seem to worry me anymore. They say that the hunger drive is stronger than anything else. When you're well fed you want a woman, but lack of food drives the urge away. That's all I want to do, piss. I suppose the food shortage causes the liquid to run right through you. You must have something to absorb the water. Something like blotting paper.'

'To hell with the cakes,' chortled Mackie. 'All I have to do is think of the Aussie sun, Bondi, and the sheilas and I'm alright. Boy, the sex flame will never go out in this baby! I'm a hundred per cent red blooded male who can rise to any and every occasion.'

'You're a goddam liar, you son of a bitch!' accused Bolland. 'Only last week you were telling me that you felt that you were on the wane and that life was passing you by. You had doubts about your masculinity.'

'Who, me? I'd never confide in you, mate, for you'd be down the shithouse and then it would be all over the camp. No, I'm as good as I ever was. You speak for yourself, Bolland. The old Bondi star can still play any tune that's called - and that's no bullshit!'

CHAPTER XVI

Dave stood as close as possible to the big, German guard and inhaled deeply the cigarette smoke wafting towards him. The guard puffed contentedly savouring to the full the enjoyment received. Dave moved a fraction closer, and the guard, sensing his presence for the first time, whirled around. The two faced each other momentarily, and then Dave walked off.

'Jesus, you were so close I thought you were going to eat him!' exclaimed Wellings. 'Your mouth was opening and closing like an elephant's arsehole. He must have had a hell of a shock to turn and see you gaping like a fish out of water.'

'Christ, Wellings! You use some colourful language. Elephant's arsehole, indeed. I'd bet you've never seen an elephant, leave alone his hindquarters. Hell, I'm dying for a smoke! I don't know what's worse to be without a fag or a meal.'

'I'd settle for both, Dave, for you need one to complement the other. A good meal of roast beef with all the trimmings, followed by a couple of cigarettes - - - how does that grab you?'

'You give me the shits, Wellings. You're always talking about the impossible. The Red Cross parcels are kaput, and we haven't had a cigarette for nearly three weeks. The last I had was a drag on one Mackie scrounged somewhere. There were five of us and the Aussie gave us a puff each. A good bloke, Mackie!'

'It might be December, but, according to the BBC news, the Allies are still strafing and bombing anything that moves. I wish they'd ease up so that a few parcels could get through and then we'd eat again,' philosophised Wellings. 'A sixth of a loaf a day, a swede, watery soup without meat at noon, and two spuds a day are not enough to keep a gnat alive. I'm hungry all the time,' and then laughingly added, 'one could easily become a cannibal and that's why I thought you were going to swallow the guard.'

'I don't know about cannibalism, but I'm dying for a piss. That's all I seem to do is urinate. Last night I woke up and was almost pissing myself. I just got out of bed in time. Everything seems to go straight through me. It's bloody embarrassing. If I hear the slightest sound of running water I'm off like a scalded cat to relieve myself.'

'Me, too!' concurred Wellings. 'There's no food in the stomach to soak up the water and I suppose your inside is like a waterfall and the deluge has to come out. I'm sure I'll piss the bed one night. It's the cold, too, that puts pressure on the old bladder. It's one hell of a life.'

'If the parcels don't come soon,' stated Dave, 'we'll be in a fine pickle for Christmas. Nothing to eat and no cigs. That's all we do is piss. I never seem to want a shit these days. Perhaps if I had some of those chocolate cakes I'm always dreaming of then I might get the urge.'

'You might be changing your sex, too,' laughed Wellings. 'I'd better tell Mackie - he'd think it a great joke.'

Then, after a few seconds of silence, added, 'Those bloody cakes haunt me, too. It could be lack of sugar or something, but between pissing and cakes I don't know whether I'm an uncle or an auntie.'

'The difference between them' explained Dave humorously, 'is that your uncle has balls, so you'd better check when you go to bed tonight.'

'I don't need to check,' retorted Wellings, 'I can feel them and they're as cold as ice-cubes. They're getting it rough - bleeding cold all the time. Let's go back to the hut!'

The mail was being distributed. There had been a comparative dearth of late, for the Allied advance in the West and the Russian push from the East had hard hit the German communication system, resulting in a shortage of everything for the prisoners. However, there were some letters, Dave receiving two: one from Joan and the other from his mother. He lay on his pit and read and re-read the letters. It was good to receive mail from home, although over a month old, and know that somewhere things were normal in a world gone mad. Joan stated that she still loved him and was eagerly awaiting his return. They would be together again in the summer, so it wasn't far off and the time would soon pass. She had sent several cigarette parcels and hoped they had arrived. She visited his mother often and they would have tea together. He was as pleased as hell that she still wanted him and was looking forward to his return, but then he realised that the letter had been written five weeks previously and in that time she could have changed her mind or married some dashing, uniformed figure. The comment, 'the time would soon pass' made him wince inwardly. Each week now seemed like a year and it was a question of survival and hanging in there with both hands and feet. Still, he was gloriously happy at receiving the communication, despite the fact that the cigarette parcels hadn't turned up and never would. By now they were either part of the burnt wreckage of some train or goods yard, or had been filched by a German railway worker who had enjoyed them to the full.

'You bastard!' Dave muttered, and then thoughtfully added, 'bloody good luck to you, I'd have done the same myself.'

The letter from his mother was full of courage, understanding, and her indomitable will was evident in every line. Her husband, Walter, Dave's father, was with Mountbatten somewhere in South-East Asia, while her elder son, Ken, Dave's brother, was fighting the Japs in the jungles of Burma. She wouldn't give in, despite her family being torn asunder and would breathe and live for the day when peace came and they were all reunited. She was a wonderful mother and a lioness in adversity.

Wellings joined him and said that his girlfriend was still faithful et cetera. Then the strains of 'Missed the Saturday Dance' floated to their ears, and Wellings concluded, 'It seems like Slater's struck gold, too.'

The war news was bad. On 16th December the Germans had launched a major counteroffensive in the Ardennes with the hope of capturing Liege and Antwerp and so disrupting the Allies' supply system.

The success achieved was alarming, capturing Bastogne and other places which seemed to have been in Allied hands for months and taking thousands of American prisoners. The whole Allied lines of defence seemed to be crumbling, and on 19th December, Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, placed Montgomery in command of all American forces on the northern flank of the fifty mile deep salient.

'We'll have a bloody awful Christmas!' grumbled Blackston. 'There'll be no food, no heat, and the British will be doing another Dunkirk, but this time the Yanks will be with them.'

'If that bloody, heavy fog would lift we'd soon be giving them hell again,' declared Sandy Smith authoritatively. 'It would be like the Western Desert all over again. Our planes would bomb and strafe their columns until they turned tail and fled for the Fatherland. Then they'd be into them again, and there'd be nothing left. The roads leading to Germany would be clogged with wreckage and the shattered dreams of Hitler's generals.'

'If, if, if! It's always bloody 'if!' blared Slater. 'The fog has been over the front ever since the attack began, and that's all we hear on the news is, 'Today, heavy fog seriously limited the number of Allied air sorties! Blah! Blah!

They'd better pull their finger out or we'll be here for Christmas, 1954.'

'What's wrong with the bloody Air Force, anyway?' demanded Bolland. 'We used to do sweeps over France and the Low Countries looking for anything that moved or stood still. We'd blast away at trains, especially the engines, truck convoys, troop movements, water towers and even bridges. We'd fly under high tension wires, trees, anything as long as we could get right down so we wouldn't miss,

and sometimes the mists would come up and we'd grope our way home. The Brylcream boys had better start bouncing the ball around, fog or no fog.'

'She'll be right now, mate!' consoled Mackie. 'They've put Montgomery in-charge and He'll straighten things up, He has a touch of flamboyancy about him. Must be flash if you're going to be a success. Look at the way he wears that Tank Corps beret -- it denotes confidence and style. He's like MacArthur, they've both got class.'

'The war can look after itself,' stated Wellings, 'food is more important. I heard that Joe Cresswell has gone to Luneberg with a truck to get some Red Cross parcels. The German transport system's euhred, but there's plenty of parcels there.'

'Shithouse!' exploded Danzey. 'There's so many whispers going around this bloody place that you don't know what to believe.'

'I heard it, too,' solemnly stated Tennant. 'I didn't believe it, so I went up to kriegie admin. hut and said I wanted to speak to Cresswell on an urgent matter. I was told that the British Man-of-Confidence was unavailable. Now that's unusual, for old Joe will see anyone, so I drew my own conclusions: he'd gone to Luneburg to stock up. We'll be eating on Christmas Day.'

'Jesus! If he's taken that red truck he won't be able to bring back more than six hundred, and that'll be roughly one parcel to sixteen men. We'll get fat on that!' declared Danzey.

'It will be better than bugger all, anyway,' pointed out Mackie.

'Half a loaf is better than none. Still, he'll have to hurry, it is the twenty-third today. If he comes back on Boxing Day, we've had it, for we'll have to share the parcels with the Russians. Don't forget, according to Charlie Haynes, they're dropping in on 26th to wish us a Happy New Year.'

'Haven't you heard the latest?' chortled Sandy Smith. 'This is the best and should get the 'Oscar' award for 1944.'

'Trust you to hear it, Sandy,' called Wellings. 'You're always in the shithouse and I'm beginning to have my doubts about you.'

'Then, here it is chaps!' proclaimed Sandy. 'Charlie Haynes has just announced the big one. He's revised his forecast of the Russians being here on 26th December, because he's made a slight calculation error, due to circumstances beyond his control.'

'Down the shithouse with him!' interjected someone. 'Then it would be a miscalculation on our part.'

'But you haven't heard it all,' continued Sandy, 'he's revised the date to 3rd March and says that's final and binding.'

'So be it!' solemnly chanted Tennant. 'We'll wait and see.'

Christmas 1944 didn't turn out too badly after all. The war news on the Ardennes front had improved and there seemed some form of stability: the forward advance of the German armies had been contained, and the Allies were counterattacking.

Further, the seemingly, everlasting, thick fog had lifted, allowing the Royal Air Force to strike hard at the enemy and fly sortie after sortie. But the really good news was there was food to eat and fags to smoke. The British Man-of-Confidence, Joe Cresswell, had returned from Luneburg with sufficient parcels for an issue of one to every fourteen prisoners, and five cigarettes per man. It was impossible to share two tins of meat, a tin of '*Klim*' or condensed milk, a packet of biscuits, a bar of chocolate, two ounces of sugar, a small tin of oats, and a tin of margarine between fourteen, so the group Dave was in decided to glop the lot. That is put the lot in a big pot or bucket, add water, heat and stir so that you finish with a form of stew or thick, gluey mess. Still, it was wonderful and filled you up, especially

when the bread ration was used to clean up the plate. Then it was a smoke and contentment as the blue haze floated around the hut, and the scintillating conversation of the inmates got under way.

'Merry Christmas, everybody!' called out Mackie. 'I've eaten a lot of Christmas dinners, but I reckon that was as good as any. I suppose it was so unexpected and I've been hungry for months. It's good to have a smoke. I've nearly forgotten what it's like.'

Bloody marvellous! In 1938 I had a great Christmas. The sun was a cow, as hot as hell, and I was a lifesaver on Bondi.'

'What were you?' queried Bolland. 'Did I hear aright - a lifesaver? Jesus, they must take anybody in Aus. I suppose they were hard up at the time.'

'Anyway,' continued Mackie ignoring the interruption, 'I used to love the beach, the sun, the waves, and especially the sheilas. They'd always be around me. I couldn't get away from them. I believe they used to go out in the deep water and just throw up their hands in the hope that I'd save them and, God, were they disappointed when someone else did the rescuing. Well, along comes this beautiful blonde and into the water she goes and throws up her arms. I'm in like flash, she's in my arms, and I carry her to the beach tent where I resuscitate with the 'kiss of life!'

'You what?' demanded Sandy Smith. 'That's a new word for it. I haven't heard that one before. I'll have to remember that for the future.'

'It wasn't like that at all,' declared Mackie, 'it's your dirty minds. It was just wonderful, all peaches and cream.'

'What happened in the end?' asked Sandy.

'I suppose she's still on the beach throwing up her arms, and every lifesaver within cooee is just waiting to save her.'

And with that the hut resounded with happy, contented laughter.

It was a Merry Christmas.

CHAPTER XVII

The door of the hut opened with a bang, accompanied by the tramp of heavy boots on the cobbled stones.

'Oh, for Christ sake!' yelled someone angrily. 'Can't you bastards do anything without making a din?'

'Piss off!' shouted another. 'It's too early yet for roll call! It's still dark as hell.'

Then the lights went on revealing the situation. The hut was filling with soldiers all with fixed bayonets. Something was afoot and these intruders meant business. They weren't the usual camp guards, but men brought in especially for the occasion. The kriegies tumbled out of bed saying little for the moment wasn't opportune for the usual banter and exchange of pleasantries.

Dave dressed hurriedly, donned his greatcoat, and then shuffled out into the morning dark.

'Shit! It's cold,' he muttered to himself. 'Bloody freezing.' Then he turned to Wellings, and asked, 'What the hell's up? I hope the roll call doesn't take long. I want to get back to the pit.'

'It's the Gestapo!' answered Wellings. 'Didn't you see the two in our hut with the soldiers? You can't mistake those bastards. I've seen too many of them in Fresnes, and they all dress and look alike.'

As they made their way down the thoroughfare between the huts and towards the parade ground, they realised that the camp was bristling with soldiers and members of the Gestapo.

The prisoners took up their positions in ranks three deep; members of each hut forming a squad to facilitate counting.

However, there seemed no hurry on the part of the guards to carry out the daily ritual. Over an hour passed and the dark had given way to the lengthening light, and still there was no count.

'Bugger this!' exclaimed Bolland. 'I'm not standing around here like a bloody wallflower. I'm off, and they can come to the hut and count me if it's so important.'

'I'm with you, Bolland,' agreed Sandy Smith. 'Let's go!'

The two walked off, but were promptly returned to their positions at the end of a bayonet.

'Take it easy! Take it bloody easy!' gritted Sandy as he swayed to avoid the lunges of his captor. 'Jesus, this fellow's really trying. The bastard's in earnest - he's after my bum.' However, the soldier desisted before hitting the target and moved away.

'Shit! He gave me a scare,' stated Sandy breathlessly. 'I thought I was going to get six inches of steel right up the arse.'

'He most probably fancied you, Sandy,' laughed Bolland, 'and he was measuring you up. You notice he didn't bother with me, but with you. I suppose he realised that I'm not one of those. All these bloody Germans are homosexuals, so you'd better be careful.'

Finally, the roll count began, but when completed the prisoners weren't dismissed.

'Bloody hell!' grumbled Danzey. 'We've been here a couple of hours and my feet and hands are freezing. That easterly wind cuts you like a knife. It's alright for you bastards with greatcoats, you couldn't give a shit for the poor people.'

'Bugger you, Jack, I'm alright,' laughed Wellings, 'I'm in the boat so you can shove off now. However, I'm like an iceberg myself. But don't panic, if we're not dismissed in half an hour you can borrow my coat for five minutes or so.'

'What about me borrowing yours, Dave Griffin?' asked Slater. 'You look pretty, bloody cozy.'

'My whole body's blue,' replied Dave, 'and this bloody wind is numbing my hands and feet.'

'Ah, well! Wellings is a generous bastard and is giving his to Danzey for five minutes, so I guess I can give mine for half that time and still be a good fellow.' Then added seriously, 'Hang on for another ten minutes and then you can have it. Jesus, Slater, you demand a lot from your mates.'

The day dragged on slowly and still the prisoners were made to stand in rows and no dismissal order was given. Twice during the day each group was conducted to the nearby toilet to relieve themselves and then smartly returned to their positions.

'If I'd had something to drink for breakfast, I'd have pissed myself by now,' claimed Slater. 'The bloody cold goes right through you and plays hell with the bladder. I'll certainly remember today. It's been a bastard.'

'You wait till you get back to the hut, there will be a roast dinner a la Gestapo just waiting to be eaten.' stated Dave.

'That's why they're keeping us out here so that we have big appetites and do justice to the meal. These Gestapo blokes are full of surprises.'

At about three o'clock the camp commandant arrived, accompanied by the British Man-of-Confidence. The prisoners were called to attention, and then the commandant delivered his sermon. Afterwards, Joe Cresswell read the English transcript stating that the British in the North African campaign had taken prisoner the same number of troops as existed in the prison camp. These prisoners hadn't been provided with sleeping accommodation for several weeks, being forced to sleep in the sand. Consequently, the German High Command was taking reprisals and the palliasses had been confiscated.

The news stunned the kriegies. The palliasse was the only luxury left, and the Germans were expecting a violent reaction for they had reinforced the guard by bringing to the parade ground all the soldiers who had daylong been involved in the confiscation of the palliasses. These ringed the ground with bayonets fixed. There was no sound of protest for about ten seconds, and then someone started to clap and the applause grew in volume, reaching a crescendo. The noise was deafening and so unexpected. Then it stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

'Three cheers for the Germans!' someone yelled. 'Hip-hip -hooray Hip-hip - hooray! Hip-hip hooray!' Then the roll call was over. The guards must have thought that the inmates had either gone around the bend or had a perverted sense of humour.

The hut was in a mess and it seemed as if the Gestapo had not only the palliasses, but had been searching for something. The belongings of everyone were strewn all over the place and in some cases personal possessions had disappeared. The scene looked bare and uninviting without the bedding.

'I'm off to see if I can get some string,' Slater told Dave. 'You can't sleep on bare boards, they'll slide all over the place and need holding in place. Tonight you'll think you're on a slippery dip.'

'Get some for me, too?' asked Dave hopefully, although he knew Slater didn't have a cat-in-hell's chance of success, for where would there be any string, especially when thousands of prisoners all had the same idea? The six bed boards had originally been about eight inches wide, but these had gradually been pared away when 'brewing-up' operations had demanded fuel. You had to heat the water for tea making, and the only source of heat was the boards, which progressively grew thinner and thinner. Dave tidied up, and then it was soup up, the watery swede which should have been eaten at midday,

and the sixth of a loaf of bread. It was like nectar, being the first meal of the day, but the hunger pangs were still very much in evidence. That night Dave, like all the prisoners, went to bed fully clothed, excepting his boots. He also wore his greatcoat and wrapped the blankets around him. It was as uncomfortable as hell, especially with the bed boards constantly sliding and needing rearrangement every so often. You had to lie still or movement would disrupt things. It hurt too much to lie on the side as the hips, no longer rounded, had to bear the weight of the body with nothing to cushion it except the hard board. 'I'll finish up like a bloody snake if I have to put up with this for long,' proclaimed Mackie. 'My arse is almost touching the ground, while a few boards are under my shoulders and the rest under my legs, with nothing in between except fresh air.'

'Don't worry, Mackie, old son!' consoled Bolland. 'Next summer you'll be back in Australia parading your bronzed, snakelike body to all the sheilas, and this will be just a memory. You won't dream anymore about bloody cakes as it will be a thing of the past.'

'Bullshit' retorted Mackie. 'I've told you, Bolland, I don't dream about gateaux.'

'Gateaux, for Christ sake! Who's she?' laughingly questioned Bolland. 'Some Australian sex symbol that you've slept with. Why haven't you told us about her before? I bet she's full of cream, very sweet, and has chocolate on top. Eh, Mackie?'

'I knew a girl like that in Cairo', chimed in Sandy Smith. 'She was an Arab and brown all over. Was she wonderful? I'd give a year's pay to have her lying here beside me. The bed boards wouldn't count then as she'd be so soft it would be like lying on a feather bed. She'd keep me warm and would be better than all the bloody cakes.'

'Talking about warmth and enjoyment,' joined in Mackie, 'I found my pleasure either on the beach or at the Sydney Cricket Ground. I used to watch Bradman belt hell out of bowlers like Larwood, Voce, Bowes and Co. and at the same time drink beer in the hot sun. Those were the days! Then after the day's play I'd have a swim in the sea. Hell, it's a far cry from this dump!'

'You bloody exaggerate, Mackie, when you say Bradman mastered Larwood and Voce,' stated Tennant. 'You Aussies squealed like hell during the 'Bodyline' series and didn't know how to deal with the thunderbolts. We killed you in 1932-33.'

'I like that!' responded Mackie. 'You bastards only thought of that way of bowling to keep Bradman quiet. He was too good for everybody.'

'He was good,' admitted Tennant, 'but I think the pace men had his measure.'

'Bull!' exploded Mackie. 'I'll never wear that.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' queried Bolland. 'Who the hell are Bradman, Garwood, Voce et cetera? Ice hockey or baseball players or something?'

'Something like that,' came Tennant's terse reply.

Thus the conversation petered out, and it was a cold, sleepless and uncomfortable night for the whole camp.

The next morning word spread around that two handcarts, laden with the loot that the Gestapo had filched from the kriegies, had been parked overnight in one of the buildings and was now being pushed towards the main gates of the camp. Within minutes every prisoner had lined the proposed route and were hurling advice and abuse at the four guards that manned each cart. Two were pulling, while there was one on either side. The Gestapo had departed taking with them the soldiers with the bayonets and leaving the spoils of war to be conveyed to the outer lager. The articles weren't worth anything really, but to the prisoners it was a matter of honour. The things on the handcarts belonged to them and they weren't going to give up without a fight. As the cavalcade moved ponderously forward, the multitude closed in slowly, until progress had almost come to a halt. Then some brave kriegie

grabbed something off the cart and away he went for his life, vainly followed by the guard on that side of the cart, thus exposing its flank. It was enough, the crowd closed and with a heave, over went the cart scattering the trophies in all directions. It was a free for all and anything and everything was grabbed in a matter of seconds. It didn't matter what, as long as the Germans didn't have it. The guards on the second cart drew their lugers and moved in support of their comrades, only to be lost in the milling throng. Over went the second cart and the articles disappeared with the fleet-footed fugitives. The guards were powerless to shoot, and the prisoners' honour had been satisfied. The regained spoils would never be returned to their rightful owners, for in a camp of thousands it would never be known to whom they belonged, Admittedly, the prisoners had won the battle of the carts, but lost the war of the palliasses. This had been the knockout blow, for they were still suffering from sleepless nights, severe discomfort and cold.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dave viewed his handiwork and was well pleased. He had formed sacks from his two blankets by darning together, lengthwise, the two ends and then stitching the bottom. He then placed the one inside the other, ensuring that open ends coincided. The finished product would, he hoped, keep him a little warmer at nights, for the cold was intolerable without the palliase, and the continuous pilgrimages to relieve himself kept him out of bed for half the night. He placed the blankets on the equidistantly placed boards and noticed the sag produced by the gaps. Already the sack, so formed, was looking as if it were on a rippling wave. He then took off his boots, put on and buttoned his greatcoat, and tried to fit himself within the sack. It was impossible for the sack was not wide enough, and started to split at the seams.

'You'll never get in there!' stated Slater. 'It's like trying to squeeze an elephant through the eye of a needle -- an impossibility.'

'I'm going to be bloody warm,' responded Dave. 'I've had sleepless nights where you shiver and piss all the time. It's making me a bloody wreck.'

'Take your coat off!' commanded Wellings. 'You'll probably fit in then. Or better still,' he added laughingly, 'strip off and then you'll have room to manoeuvre.'

'Freeze to death, you mean. Wellings, you're a real bastard, and don't give a shit for your friends. Here am I allowing you to witness a revolutionary step in bed design and that's all you do is scoff. I suppose you'll be making it next and claiming it's your idea. When you get out of here and patent it, you could make a fortune. It will halve the number of blankets in use as you'll have the same number under and above you. You'll be a millionaire riding around in a Rolls Royce.'

'What a lot of bullshit you spray around, Griffin. You're a real crapper of the first order. It wouldn't be much good if you had to share it with a tart, there'd be no room to perform.'

'Like hell! You'd be like two peas in a pod, and wouldn't you be cosy? You could advertise it as a 'Lovers' Dream' or 'Snug as a Bug in a Sack' or 'Two Can Live as Cheaply as One in a Wellings' Comfy Bed'. It has tremendous possibilities.'

Dave then divested himself of the greatcoat and slid into the sack. 'It's bloody good,' then added, 'a bit tight though. The bloody Russians should make their blankets a bit wider. Now place the greatcoat over me, Slater!'

Slater did just that - - - -throwing it over Dave's head.

'You bloody bastard! called out Dave's muffled voice. 'The sack's so narrow that I can't get my arms out.'

Slater removed the coat, replacing it properly around Dave's body. 'I hope I don't have a nightmare when in here.' Dave stated. 'I suffer from claustrophobia. Still, take the warmth and to hell with the confinement.'

'How bloody warm do you think you'll be?' demanded Slater. 'You've still only got two blankets. It's the palliase that makes the difference.'

'Anyway, I'm trying!' retorted Dave. 'I bet both you industrial pimps pinch my revolutionary idea and claim it as a product of your fertile imaginations.'

Because of the lack of fuel for heating, showers now occurred once every six weeks and were a hurried affair. The inmates of the hut were conducted, under guard, to the outer lager where they stripped, raced under the shower, and endeavoured to make the most of every drop of water. The

showers were operated by Russian prisoners, who stuck strictly to their orders of everything being short and sweet, and it was in and out. The skin craved to be soaped, properly lathered and caressed by hot water, and the few minutes' duration every six weeks did little to alleviate the problem. Admittedly, the body felt a hundred per cent better afterwards, but within a week the flesh would feel like it needed revitalising and a good soaking, and after three weeks one felt as if the body was crawling and the scalp itching and alive. There were no bugs around as it was too cold, but only a long, hot bath or shower could rectify the situation. The talk at night was centred on feeling lousy and the overriding desire for a long, hot soak, but this was impossible. The position was aggravated by sleeping and living in the same clothes, as it was too cold to undress at night, especially without the palliase.

Dave felt lousy and his flesh as though it were creeping and crawling under his clothes, but what was the remedy? Very occasionally some hardy would dash into the small hut, soap and douche himself under the cold water tap, and then beat a hasty retreat. Dave had contemplated this course of action, but the coldness of the whole operation deterred him. However, one morning he decided that he could stand it no longer, and would perform the ritual when the sun was at its zenith and the day a few degrees warmer.

At about 1 p.m. he stripped and viewed his emaciated body for the first time in over a month or so. Then he put on his greatcoat, slipped on his boots without lacing them, and then ran helter-skelter for the hut. He left the coat and boots outside so they wouldn't get wet. Then sat under the tap, his bum in the wet, sloppy mud, and turned on the tap. The freezing water cascaded over his head and body, forcing him to abandon the position. He rubbed soap in his hair, into his skin, under the armpits, into the crevices and then it was again under the tap. The water swished through the hair numbing the pate, and he gyrated this way and that so that the water could cleanse the vital parts. He was freezing and his flesh was mottled with red and blue patches, but he had to rid himself of the crawling feeling. Again he soaped himself all over and then it was under the tap, the breath coming in gasps as he completed the ablution. After drying himself as best he could, he flew into the greatcoat, buttoning it right up. His feet were still muddy, so he washed one at a time, slipping them, without drying, into the boots. Then he bee-lined for the hut as if a scalded cat and into bed to shiver and shudder.

Half an hour later, Bolland came over for a yarn.

'Jesus! What's wrong with you, Griffin?' demanded the Canadian. 'Sick or something? Your hair's all wet and your face's like a beetroot.'

'I've had a shower in the little hut', was Dave's quiet reply. 'I felt my flesh had turned into Gorgonzola cheese, so I thought I'd give my backside a good scrub.'

'Good God! You must be crazy. I bet you'll never be able to have sex again, for your balls will remain ice-cubes forever. You know you must have hot testicles if you want to be bed worthy,' he wisely proclaimed before walking away.

Mackie, Bolland and Dave were on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the great man, McLeod's hut, so that they could sit once again at the feet of the master and listen to his teachings and have a good laugh. They had lost touch with McLeod for several months, so it would be good to renew acquaintance. However, the hut, which was usually crowded with disciples, was strangely empty and McLeod sat in his pit, a forlorn figure.

'How goes it then, Mac?' enquired Dave. 'What news have you to make our miserable lives happy? A modicum of sex with a soupcon of brothel flavouring would be much appreciated.'

The old soldier just sat there saying nothing and looked surly at the intruders.

'Come on, McLeod!' encouraged Mackie. 'Give us a hot episode from your sex life and then we might feel warmer and get some of the chill out of the bones.'

'Sex! Sex! That's all you airmen think about,' was the unexpected reply. 'Who wants to talk about sordid and unnecessary things? It's food we want to keep us warm and alive, not something that's short-lasting and not worth a crumpet.'

'Not worth a crumpet?' laughed Bolland. 'Jesus, you're a fine one to talk. That's all you've been interested in for the past fifty years is 'crumpet', and now you don't want it. Shit! What's happened to you? Gone religious or something?'

'He's over the bloody hill,' volunteered Mackie. 'Too much sex gets you in the end. Doesn't it, Mac?'

'I'm bloody hungry,' explained McLeod, 'and I'm dying for a bloody good feed. I dream about cakes and more cakes, and lick the chocolate icing off the top. All I want is a good feed and to hell with women' You're in a bad way, Mac!' commiserated Dave. 'You ought to see the doctor. He might prescribe a large cake with a soft centre for what ails you. It would be a sort of shock therapy. I've heard of blokes like you who get the call and go all queer.' Both Mackie and Bolland burst out laughing at this innuendo, but were silenced by McLeod's direct question.

'Don't tell me that you young bastards don't want a square meal? I bet you dream about cakes all the time, and they haven't got soft centres either,' he added meaningly. 'The trouble with you young 'uns is that you're not prepared to face the truth, and that is we've all lost the sex urge. It's survival now, and the hunger pangs have taken over.'

McLeod just sat as if tired of the world and all it had to offer. He had tasted its fruits and now its delights palled him. He must have been nearly sixty and looked eighty. He was too old for the rigours of prisoner of war life, and seemingly had succumbed.

The airmen took their leave for McLeod was no longer entertaining and amusing, but just an old man who wanted food, rest and quiet.

'If McLeod's dreaming about gateaux,' said Bolland loftily, 'then every bastard must have lost the sex urge. The camp's bugged.'

'Speak for yourself!' exclaimed Mackie. 'This is one kriegie that has his sights fixed on the opposite sex and to hell with the cakes. And that's no bullshit!'

The February cold was biting and although the kriegies were in their pits and between blankets, its grabbing fingers seemed to reach their very marrows.

'Thank God the Allies are again on the move,' announced Danzey, 'I thought they'd never make any progress after the Ardennes setback.'

'The Ardennes offensive, according to yesterday's news, cost the Germans a quarter of a million men and sixteen hundred aeroplanes,' stated Sandy Smith authoritatively. 'So it was a blessing in disguise. They'll be through them like a dose of salts now.'

'They've reached the Rhine at last, so they'll only have to cross and then they'll wrap up the war,' prophesied Tennant.

'What's this 'they' business?' demanded Bolland. 'It wasn't 'they' at all, but the Canadian First Army. They're the boys who have reached the Rhine, and no-one else. It takes a Canuck to show them. Where were the Australians, Mackie? Have they got an army?'

'Too right, mates They're doing all the fighting in South-East Asia against the Japs, and were the shock troops in Montgomery's North African campaign. Without them we'd lost Asia and would still be battling against the *Afrika Corps*.'

'Christ, you're a line shooter!' interjected Dave. 'I've got a brother fighting in the jungles of Burma, and he's no Aussie.'

'Well, I suppose there has to be a few troops from the British Isles around,' said Mackie condescendingly, 'for we Australians can't fight everybody, although we'll give it a go.'

'What would they do without us, Mackie?' boasted Bolland. 'We win the air war for them, the Canadians are the first to reach the Rhine, and your mob are doing all the fighting in South-East Asia. The Limeys just sit on their arses and wait for us to win the bloody war for them. Just like them.'

'What bullshit!' interjected Wellings. 'Seventy per cent of the kriegies in this camp come from the British Isles. We do our share. So get stuffed both of you!'

'It's 16th February now, so I'll give it another month,' declared Blackston optimistically. 'They'll be over the Rhine in a few days and then watch them go. Charlie Haynes's prediction about 3rd March could be right, but he's mistaken the Russians for the Allies.'

'Who the hell cares, as long as someone arrives to free us?' questioned Slater. 'I wouldn't care if it were Santa Claus as long as he gets us out of this bloody place.'

'I feel lousy,' grumbled Sandy Smith. 'I hope Father Christmas remembers to bring some fuel with him so that I can have a shower. I'd give a fortune for a hot bath.'

'You're too lousy, Sandy,' punned Slater, 'to give anybody anything.'

'I reckon that after a good meal the most important things in life are warmth, a toothbrush, shower and clean sheets. Jesus, you miss most the things that you accept as commonplace in civvy life,' philosophised Blackston. 'When I get out of here, I'll know true values. That's one thing I've learned as a kriegie.'

'Me too,' chorused Bolland. 'Still, I wish the Allied Air Forces wouldn't shoot up the trains, for I want a Red Cross parcel badly.'

'Eh, Wellings!' called Blackston. 'I hear you've been converted. What's old Taylor shooting the shit about now? They tell me he gets 'gen' from the Bible.'

'I suppose the Bible's as good a place as any,' defended Wellings. 'Old Taylor's not like Charlie Haynes who only wants to make a name for himself. Haynes is off beat, while Taylor is sincere. I'd prefer to listen to old Taylor than Haynes any day.'

'Why listen to any of the bastards?' demanded Bolland. 'They should all be down the shithouse and then there'd be no-one to raise our hopes. We're up and down like yo-yos, and we get browned off when nothing happens. They're a menace to society.'

'I'm as cold as hell!' blurted Tennant. 'If those palliasses came back I'd feel like a millionaire. The boards are getting harder and harder. I thought I'd get used to them.'

'The trouble,' volunteered Danzey, 'is that you're getting thinner and thinner, and the bones can't stand the cold and the wear and tear.'

'Then I'll eat more,' retorted Tennant facetiously, 'and that'll solve all my problems, so to hell with the palliasse.'

CHAPTER XIX

The cold continued and the prisoners either stayed indoors or bashed the circuit. However, there was little comfort offered by going to bed so the alternative was to get out, especially as the ground was hard, firm and there was no moisture,

Dave, Wellings and Slater walked nearly every morning, but this time Slater's chilblains were giving him hell, so he'd decided to give it a miss. Both Dave and Wellings were disconsolate, for the food situation was grim. With no Red Cross parcels having arrived at the camp for months, the prisoners relying solely on German rations. Further, cigarettes had disappeared and both were dying for a smoke. And the mail situation had come to a full stop. Little was said for both were immersed in their own thoughts.

Dave felt tired, hungry and lacking in strength. The walk was taxing him, but he didn't want to divulge this. He knew Wellings was bugged, too, but what was the point in complaining - no-one listened or wanted to know, for you were only expressing the obvious. One had to hang in there and hope the war would finish soon. The cold weather had to be endured and the hope was that there'd be a very early warm spring, but this was at least two months away. Then there was no news from either Joan or his mother and this uncertainty troubled him. A letter would have lifted his morale and made everything right again, but it seemed all had gone wrong. Dave knew that Wellings was also concerned, but neither made mention of their innermost problems. The prisoners poked and made fun of almost everything, but personal problems were taboo.

'If this bloody war doesn't finish soon,' stated Wellings, breaking the silence unexpectedly, 'I'll be a bag of bloody bones. A good feed wouldn't do me any harm.' Then he added ruefully, 'If I don't get a chance of putting on a bit of weight before getting out of here Mary won't even recognise me.' It was the first time he had mentioned the girlfriend's name for weeks, but it revealed where his thoughts were.

'Of course, she'll remember a good looking bloke like you,' jollied Dave. 'She's just waiting for your return and then you'll be peaches.'

'I hope so,' was Welling's quiet reply, 'I could do with a bit of an uplift.'

'How are your bloody feet?' asked Dave, changing the subject. 'Your chilblains giving you hell?'

'They're not too bad. Thank God the ground's hard and dry I couldn't stand wet boots, wet socks and cold feet. They kill me.'

'When we went collecting wood about ten days ago, I was shagged.'

'Me, too,' responded Dave. 'Just picking it up off the ground was tough enough, but when you had to load yourself like a pack horse it knocked shit out of you.'

'Yes, I kept adding to my load for I didn't want the bastards in the hut to say, 'Pull your bloody finger out; What the hell you've been doing out there?' et cetera. We brought between us as big a load as any, and yet they still grumbled. I suppose if we'd taken an elephant, they'd been disappointed if we hadn't stuffed fuel up his arsehole. The kriegie has an insatiable appetite!'

'I suppose it's a mentality that we develop,' explained Dave. 'We're deprived of everything and so become acquisitive. We can never get enough of anything and we're always hoping to hoard something for the future.'

'I hope we're out of here before it's our turn again. The very thought of it gives me nightmares. It's too tough, and next time,' he added with a laugh, 'we won't be in such fine shape. Will we?'

'Speak for yourself,' came Dave's reply, 'I've never felt fitter. The diet suits me.'

They continued on, a silence between them. Although the weather was icy, Dave felt the need for a hot soak in a bath. To lie for an hour or so in warm water would be ..., he was stumped for a word, and then remembered the caption on the cigarette pack of a popular brand he used to smoke: 'the perfection of luxury, the product of mastermind'. He liked that, but now his thoughts and cravings were on tobacco. A long, hard drag would do him the world of good, especially after a big feed. A cooked dinner and three or four chocolate cakes would go down well. It would be like nectar from the gods to have a bath, a meal, a smoke and then a comfortable warm bed.

'Shit! It would be bloody marvellous!' muttered Dave.

'What would be?' questioned Wellings. 'Come on, Dave, let's have it!'

'I was thinking about a bath, a meal, a cigarette and a warm bed,' explained Dave. 'How does that grab you?'

'I'm already salivating,' was Welling's reply. 'It would be like being in heaven without having the angels worrying you.'

As they reached the northern end of the camp, they witnessed something running like hell towards them with what seemed like a tent as a covering.

'Christ! It looks like a bloody cow with an overcoat on!' explained Wellings, and then after a few moments, 'It's a galloping four poster.'

'Like hell it is. It's a kriegie and he's got a palliasse', cried Dave excitedly. 'Where did he get that?'

'Look! Look!' commanded Wellings. 'There are six of the bastards. They've all got palliasses and they're running as if their bums are on fire. Come on, Dave, we've got to be in this. Cosy, warm nights are my idea of bliss.'

They ran towards the source of comfort, passing scores of 'fugitives', weighted down with newly-acquired bedding. Aladdin's cave was a large hut in which about 30 kriegies were all scrambling for a palliasse. Here indeed was a treasure house for it represented the epitome of comfort. Dave and Wellings grabbed theirs, balanced them partly on back and head, and then, bent low, made their retreat, brushing as they went the multitude on its way in. It was like the beginning of the January sales in the city stores with everyone trying to get in for the bargain hunt.

The two of them ran towards their hut, panting and breathing hard as they went, their new possessions bobbing up and down on their backs like moving staircases. They kept going, although giddy and weak from the exertion, for no-one was going to take the prized mattresses from them. Eventually they stopped for a breather and viewed the scene. There were prisoners going in all directions, just like ants scattering when danger threatens. The whole compound seemed alive with running kriegies and bobbing palliasses.

'What a bloody sight!' chuckled Dave. 'I wish I had a camera. This would be some photo.'

'Bugger the photo!' reminded Wellings, 'Let's get going or we'll lose the bedding. You can't sleep on a memory.'

So the burdens were re-adjusted and away they went, their legs like lead weights and the breath coming in gasps, but the mission was to deliver the palliasses safe and sound to the awaiting bed boards.

On arrival, the hut was empty, as everyone was out looking for bedding. Dave laid his mattress on the boards and then curled up on it. He was exhausted, the exertion had knocked hell out of him. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

That night was a joyous occasion. Everyone in the hut had a palliasse for the hunting had been good. Apparently, the hut containing the confiscated bedding had been guarded day and night, but some enterprising prisoner had lured the guard to his hut and plied him with chocolate and cigarettes, while his mates were out looting. Where the chocolate and smokes came from no-one seemed to know, but that was the yarn circulating.

'God help the poor bloody guard,' commiserated Sandy Smith.

'I bet he'll be sent to the Russian front where his balls will freeze.'

'Bugger him! called out Blackston. 'We've got 'em now and I feel like a millionaire who's bedded down in the best hotel in London. I'm warm and comfortable for the first time in months.'

'I don't know about warm,' interrupted Bolland, 'for the cold is still in my bones and I want a piss badly. Still, it's better to have a mattress, even if it's only a straw one. Sleeping on those boards turns the body into bloody big ripples.'

'Now that I've got something to sleep on,' stated Danzey enthusiastically, 'I could stay here forever, especially if they gave me three square meals a day and I didn't have to get up to cook them. I'd just clap my hands and James, the butler, would appear and fulfil my every desire.'

There were roars of laughter at this for Danzey had committed an unintentional faux pas and Bolland seized on the implication.

'Fulfil your every desire, for Christ sake!', repeated the Canadian. 'What, are you and James having an affair or something? I always thought you were one of those, Danzey, for you're always eyeing me up and down. Eh, Mackie! You'd better be careful now when you strip off to go to bed, for Danzey will be waiting to spear you.'

Again there were roars of laughter, and when they subsided Mackie took up the running.

'This is the first time I've had my trousers, shirt and socks off for a bloody long time, so poor old Danzey's been missing out. It's a bloody luxury to be out of them—I feel a new man.

'I've never seen such a funny sight as when the palliasses were pinched today. Kriegies like ants swarming in all directions,' someone commented.

'We've got them back!' exclaimed Dave triumphantly, 'and the bastards will never collect them up again for it would be too much like hard work. Besides they'd have to get the Gestapo and troops back to carry out the operation.'

'We've got them now,' added Sandy Smith, 'and let's enjoy the luxury. Good sleeping, fellows!'

CHAPTER XX

For the last fortnight the war news had been good, for all sectors. The Allied armies had reached the west bank of the Rhine, the last barrier protecting Hitler's Germany. Luck had also been with them, for the U.S. 9th. armoured division had captured intact at Remagen the only remaining bridge spanning the river, the others having been destroyed by the retreating enemy. Montgomery's British divisions were hovering around Wesel, poised for the kill, and the BBC news had been harping about the massive smoke screen which floated over this section of the river. The hungry prisoners were eagerly awaiting the crossing and the deliverance, but as day followed day and the news kept mentioning the smoke haze and the massing of Allied troops for the assault, the kriegies became browned off and highly critical of the operation.

'That Montgomery wants to pull his finger out,' declared Danzey. 'The bastard's like a tortoise. He pushes his head out, advances two inches, then withdraws into his shell. I wish he'd get on with it.'

'I was with Monty in the desert,' boasted Sandy Smith, 'and he always made sure that all was right before making a move. He used to say to me, 'Sandy, my boy, you've got to keep making every post a winner. A general can't afford a mistake or he's retired and forgotten!'

'Sandy, my boy,' mimicked Slater. 'Who the hell you're kidding, Smith, you line-shooter? Monty wouldn't have known you existed. If you were so close, he'd be in more of a hurry to get you out of here, so that you could renew your supposed close acquaintance. Jesus, you shoot the shit!'

'I'm not so sure,' explained Mackie laughingly. 'Smith strikes me as a bloke with lots of class. He and the general would get on well together. Over cigars and port, Sandy would be the life and soul of the party, especially with his 'blue' jokes. When you meet him again you'll be able to put in a good word for old McLeod and ensure his promotion to sergeant.'

'McLeod's gone queer,' informed Dave. 'He's not interested in anything except food. Sex is taboo. He goes off his head if you mention it.'

'Me, too!' added Tennant. 'All I want is something to eat. I reckon you could play a tune on my rib-cage. It's like a bloody harp.'

'Talk about skeletons,' interrupted Bolland, 'have you seen Jack McDonald?'

'Where did you see him?' enquired Dave eagerly. 'He left us years ago when he and the cookhouse staff moved out with A Lager in East Prussia, and we went to Poland.'

'Well, he arrived yesterday,' answered Bolland. 'Apparently, he was in a camp near the Rhine and they evacuated. About eighty of them turned up here, and he's in a hut down the road.'

'I'd like to see McDonald again,' stated Dave. 'He and you, Bolland, were the first two kriegies I met. Remember the bloody Dutch gaol and when we were nearly lynched on the railway platform? Christ, we were nearly goners.'

'That bastard with a hammer put the breeze up me,' answered Bolland, 'I thought he'd wrap it around my head as part of the welcoming ceremony. By the way, you'll have a shock when you see McDonald. He's so bloody thin that I didn't recognise him. Yet he had the cheek to say I looked buggered. Everybody knows me, for I don't change,' boasted Bolland.

'You've changed!' ripped in Mackie. 'You look like a scarecrow, but we've been with you all the time and the change has been gradual. I bet McDonald thought you were a bit of a wreck.'

'He might have done, too,' agreed Bolland, 'but, Jesus, I haven't been through what he's had to put up with. When A Lager left East Prussia they were taken to the Lithuanian port of Memel and stuffed in

the hold of a ship like sardines in a tin. They were on that boat 12 days, and were sick as hell as the old tub wallowed this way and that. The piss buckets overflowed and slopped all over the place. It was tough going. Then they were disembarked, herded into cattle trucks where they spent another five days.'

'Poor bastards!' sympathised Blackston. 'Thank God I went to Poland.'

'Finally, they reached a railway siding,' continued Bolland, ignoring the interruption, 'and the reception committee was the SS.'

'Shit! I'm glad I wasn't with them,' interrupted Wellings, 'the further away I am from those sods the better.'

'Shut up!' commanded Bolland, 'and let me tell you the rest of it. Well they line up the A Lager mob and force them to run to the prison camp about three kilometres away. They have these Alsatian dogs on chains to ginger them up and the stragglers were given playful pricks with the bayonets. They ran like buggery for the SS weren't playing games. All this after a bloody Baltic sea voyage and five days in a cattle truck. The poor bastards! Well apparently the camp was shithouse - little food, overcrowded and bugger all there. Then the camp was evacuated and McDonald and about eighty others do a grand cattle truck tour of Germany, looking for a place to live - finishing up here. He looks rooted.'

'And we thought we had it tough!' exclaimed Smith. 'I'll go around and see him tomorrow and cheer him up.'

'I'll come with you,' volunteered Dave. 'Pity we haven't got something to give him as a welcoming present.'

'She'll be right, mate,' asserted Mackie. 'Monty will be over that river tomorrow and then we'll all get a feed. It's been one hell of a war, and I'll be glad to get back to Sydney town. This Europe gives me the shits. I'll take the beach, the surf, the pub and the Sydney Cricket Ground from now on, and that's all I'll do is fight and wrestle with sheilas. For me it's going to be, 'our 'Arbour, our Bridge, and our Bradman', and to hell with everything else.'

'Give you a month to recover, Mackie, and you'll be in the Pacific fighting Japs,' said Tennant. 'A classy pilot like you couldn't bear to be out of it. Think of the 'gongs' you'd get shooting down Japs. It'd be a piece of cake. Then you'd return to Bondi with your tunic loaded with 'fruit salad' and the women would be crazy for you.'

'How would three years in a Jap POW camp grab you?' asked Bolland humorously. 'They tell me they give you sheets there. We must try and make that our next stop. What about it, Mackie?'

'Like bloody hell! A Jap camp and you for three years! I just couldn't take it. Perhaps I could stand the camp part of it, but not you as well. That's just not on. I'm off back to Aussie.'

'Monty and his boys will be here in the morning,' stated someone optimistically, 'and then we'll be back in Blighty.'

'Shut up, you crazy bastard!' came the quick retort. 'You must be around the bloody bend. I suppose you've been listening to Maxie Clarke's prophecies. They'll have to lock him up when he gets out of here.'

'Have you heard the latest?' asked Blackston. 'Charlie Haynes has revised his forecast of the Russians' arrival,' and then there were roars of laughter.

The weather was icy cold and, although Dave was wrapped in his greatcoat, the eastern wind seemed to bite to the very bone.

'Shit! It's cold,' mumbled Sandy Smith. 'I'm glad I've got something to wrap myself in or I'd bloody die.'

'I nearly threw mine away when we left East Prussia,' volunteered Dave, 'for it was so hot that I thought there was no need for it anymore. What made you hang on to yours, Sandy?'

'I was two years in the North African desert and I learnt a thing or two. Sometimes the days were so hot that the sand would burn right through the leather of the boot and the glare would almost blind you. Then the sun would go down and you'd bloody freeze. If you didn't have blankets you'd shudder to death.'

'I reckon I would have liked to have been posted to North Africa,' remarked Dave. 'Flying over the desert would have been my cup of tea. You were bombing soldiers, tanks, trucks et cetera and not towns, and a lynching party didn't await you if shot down.'

'It was clean alright, Dave. There was nothing there except troop concentrations, truck convoys and debris of burnt out vehicles and crashed aircraft. It was a hard war with nothing to impede swift advances or rapid retreats. The men of Montgomery's Eighth Army were something special. They were the corps elite who first made the Germans run. Boy, was their morale high!'

Both men turned into the hut which housed McDonald. The place was like a morgue, the inmates being either out or in bed trying to keep warm.

Sandy yelled 'McDonald, you old bastard, where are you?'

'Shut up!' someone replied. 'Your yelling is causing wind draughts, and we can do without them and the bloody cold they create.'

'Who wants me?' came a Canadian voice from beneath a blanket at the top end of the hut, and the visitors knew they had found their man.

'How's the great Canadian?' enquired Dave, although he knew that the question was superfluous. McDonald looked like he'd been through a mangle and all the juice had been squeezed out of him. He'd had a rough time.

'I'm pretty good, Dave. Admittedly, I'm not at my best fighting weight, but things will pick up when I get back into training. They say you sons-of-bitches have had your moments over the last eight months or so, but you'll survive.'

'They must have put you blokes through the mincer,' commiserated Dave. 'We've had it easy in comparison'

McDonald then told them of his wanderings since leaving East Prussia, elaborating on what Bolland had said - the voyage by boat, the endless cattle truck journeys in search of a camp and a resting-place. It had all been a nightmare.

'Never mind', sympathised Dave, 'you're safe now and your old oppos are with you. By the way, Bolland missed you.'

McDonald smiled at the mention of the big Canuck, and drawled, 'Like hell he did,' and they all burst out laughing at the thought of Bolland missing anyone.

As the war dragged on, all the prophets, seers and visionaries extraordinaire started to fade into the background. Charlie Haynes, in order to gain some credibility, had revised his forecast of the arrival of the Russians, but no-one cared anymore. They were all phoneyes. However, Wellings still believed that old Taylor had the answers, and Dave would have heated discussions with his friend over this.

'You're bloody crazy, Wellings, to believe that bullshit! Dave would explode. 'I believe you've gone religious or something. When you get back to Liverpool you'll join a monastery and preach 'Revelations'.'

'It's all in 'Revelations', according to Taylor', would be Welling's reply. 'It's the last book in the Bible and sums up everything that's happened or will happen - we'll have peace when this is over.'

'You believe in that crap! So we are all going to be sweet and cosy to each other once this is over are we? Bullshit! We'll be at it again in 20 years' time and your Taylors will still say it's all in Revelations. I think you're wire happy and around the bend.'

So the argument would continue, but for all that Dave had to admit that Wellings was a good bloke who'd he like to have in his corner when the chips were down. If Wellings had a couple of square meals under his belt and started to think about women and sex, then all this 'Revelations' bunkum would disappear.

'I'd like to take you to a good restaurant, Wellings,' declared Dave. 'Feed you up, then put you in bed with a buxom lass with big tits, and I'd bet you'd soon forget all this Revelations rubbish.'

'I suppose I would,' replied Wellings with a chuckle. 'Give us a meal and let's see what happens. It could be a revelation to both of us.'

CHAPTER XXI

On 23rd March, 1945, Montgomery's armies crossed the Rhine near Wesel, and soon afterwards the evacuation of the camp began. Already two separate batches of a thousand each had been marched out, and on the morrow a further 1,000 would leave. Dave, Wellings and the rest of the gang were in the next day's exodus, and already they'd been given their farewell gift - a loaf of bread between two. It had been explained that there would be little likelihood of a further supply, as the Germans couldn't possibly conjure up thousands of loaves and transport them to those on the long, cold walk. The British Man-of-Confidence had urged frugality upon the kriegies concerning their eating habits, and warned them not to become separated from the person who had the loaf or someone would go hungry. Admittedly, the bread could be halved, but the loaf represented a common bond between two people, who would not only eat together, but help the other in sickness or distress.

The camp administration and discipline seemed to go haywire with the announcement of the big pull out. The guards withdrew to the outer lager, not bothering to enter except in the morning, when the daily batch was removed from the camp confines and another lot counted out, given their bread ration and departure orders for the following day. One food store had been broken into, but the contents weren't very exciting. There were literally sacks of dried peas and dehydrated vegetables and one could help oneself. Dave and Bill Wellings filled their greatcoat pockets with dried peas and also a small quantity of vegetables, then beetled back to the hut.

The fire in the stove was burning merrily for it was piled high with bed boards.

'Come on, Dave!' urged Wellings, 'Let's have a bloody feed of peas. Plenty of peas, plus water, will make a soup. I used to have it when a kid. Terrific stuff to build you up.' So Dave put water in the pan or billy and in went the peas.

'What's this bloody stuff?' asked Danzey about the dried vegetables. 'It looks like a greenish brown wad of chewing tobacco.'

Very few had seen it before for the dehydration of vegetables in 1945 was a new experience.

'It looks like a hard piece of shit,' quipped Tennant, 'that's gone green with age. Something like the ones you leave in the piss-bin overnight. Eh, Mackie!'

'I wouldn't eat it,' warned Smith. 'It has to be soaked in water for about twenty-four hours and then boiled, otherwise it will swell in the stomach and give you hell. We had it in North Africa as a substitute for fresh vegetables.'

'Then it's on with the pea soup,' quipped Wellings, 'I can't wait that long. I'm bloody starving.'

The fire roared away, and the water in everybody's billy boiled, bubbled and disappeared and had to be topped up.

'I've never seen so much steam,' said Dave excitedly, 'and for once I feel warm. I'm almost cooking in this greatcoat. I'm not taking it off for it's like a summer's day'

'Keep piling those boards on, we've got to get the peas soft,' ordered Slater, 'they're like bloody bullets. The bastards won't get soft.'

'The heat will do the trick,' stated Wellings. 'It's the best softener I know. It'd be bloody funny if the Germans changed their mind about tomorrow and we didn't go. We'd all be sleeping on the floor.'

'We've got the palliasses. I wouldn't mind taking mine with me on the march,' expressed Mackie.

'You'd look bloody stupid humping that all over Germany,' remarked Bolland. 'They'd think you're a camel or something. Besides, where the hell are we going? It's going to be a bastard out there. I'm not looking forward to it.'

'I heard,' stated Sandy Smith authoritatively, 'that they are marching 10 000 of us to Berchtesgaden and we'll be used by Hitler as hostages. His life for ours. I wonder if Churchill would trade? Do you reckon we are worth it?'

'What do you mean, worth it? We are the cream of the British Empire', someone said. 'They told us that when we went for selection interview for aircrew training. The Squadron Leader on the panel said they wanted men of intelligence, integrity, super fit and all that sort of crap.'

'Shit! Look at us now!' exclaimed Smith. 'That Squadron Leader would change his mind in a hurry if he paid us a visit. I suppose he's still shovelling out the same shit to intending aircrew.'

'These peas are so bloody hard that they almost crack my teeth, and they've been boiling two hours,' grumbled Wellings. 'I suppose they should have been soaked first.'

'Pile the boards on, mates!' commanded Mackie. 'We'll keep the fire roaring all night and for once I'll be warm even if I have to sleep on top of it. Jesus, this heat makes you feel good. It's almost like being on Bondi. I might even strip off and get a tan for the top of the stove is red hot and it'll really brown or redden me up.'

'You'll have a burnt arse if you're not careful,' laughed Tennant.

'Okay, Dave, let's eat! I can't wait any longer,' ordered Wellings. 'The bloody peas will never get any softer and they've been boiling for at least three hours.'

So the feast commenced, but the peas were like rocks and not enjoyable. A spoonful was taken out, the water drained off, the residue blown on to cool, then placed in the mouth. This continued until they felt they wanted no more. Not that they felt full, but the fare was so indigestible.

'My bloody stomach,' complained Dave, 'it feels like a football.'

'Me, too,' replied Wellings. 'I'm bugged if I know what's wrong. I'm going to lie on the palliasse - the bed boards are gone, so it'll have to be the floor.'

So Dave and Wellings rested, while their stomachs seemed inflated and airborne and the farts and flatulence whistled freely. 'Jesus! I've never felt so bad,' complained Wellings, 'I think I'm going to explode.'

'I feel the same,' agreed Dave. 'When I feel a little better I'm going to the shithouse to get rid of this lot.'

In the afternoon things subsided sufficiently for the convalescents to walk around the camp for the last time.

'Don't forgot to stick close to me tomorrow, Dave,' Wellings instructed, 'for on the march we could easily become separated and then you'll be bloody hungry. Don't forget I've got the bread.'

'You've got no chance of getting rid of me, Billy Boy.' Dave confidently replied. 'That loaf's our insurance policy and we'll go easy so it lasts.'

'The way my stomach feels, I don't want to eat anything. I'm still full and bloated. Do you think the peas could be a cure for hunger? Pop a dozen or so in your mouth and you don't want any food.'

'Not bloody likely,' was Dave's reply. 'I'll never eat another pea as long as I live. They knock hell out of you. I'd rather have the hunger.'

The camp seemed like a town that had seen better days and gone seedy. The inhabitants either having moved away or those left not caring what happened. The whole German Reich was crumbling and grinding to a halt and the POW's were just so much human flotsam. The Russians were advancing rapidly from the east, while the Allied armies were across the Rhine in force and the kriegies were in the middle with nowhere to go. It was a bastard of a life and the following day would be full of surprises. Admittedly, it was freezing and the frost remained on the ground all day, but this ensured that the soil was like concrete and there would be no slushing through mud with wet socks and feet. The food situation was grim, and the sleeping accommodation from now on would be just as bad. It was a question of survival. Still Monty and his boys would soon be along and then everything would be over and back to normal.

The last night in the hut was a memorable affair. Everyone was lying on his palliasse on the cobbled floor, while the top of the stove glowed red from the burning, crackling bed boards.

'This is the life!' exclaimed Wellings. 'Eh, Dave! How about a slice of bread each? I'm hungry.'

'We'll keep it for tomorrow on the march,' answered Dave, 'for by noon we'll both be bugged. How about some peas instead? You reckon it fixes hunger.' So the loaf was left intact, and the conversation rolled around the hut.

'I hope we don't sleep in a field tomorrow night,' stated Slater hopefully. 'The frost would be bloody hell.'

'Do you remember when we came here?' questioned Mackie. 'How they told us that there'd be no more moves, no more cattle trucks and no enemy of the Third Reich would tread on German soil. How wrong they were!'

'They're only right in one respect,' quipped Tennant. 'there'll be no cattle trucks from now on. We'll foot slog it everywhere. Good for the health.'

'Like bloody hell,' grumbled Slater, 'I'd rather stay in the pit with the blankets around me. Bugger being healthy. I haven't a greatcoat and it'll be murder out there.'

'Not to worry,' commiserated Mackie, 'I haven't one either, so that makes two of us. Still, Bollard's a good sort of a bastard so he'll lend me his. Won't you, Bollard - for after all, what are mates for?'

'I'll think about it,' replied Bollard wisely. 'It depends on how cold it is.'

'I'll put some more boards on the fire,' volunteered Smith, 'for tonight we might as well be warm and cosy.'

'My stomach feels a hell of a lot better now,' stated Wellings. 'I thought I was going to die this morning.'

'Talking about stomachs and dying,' proclaimed Smith, 'I heard some poor bastard kicked the bucket today from eating those dried vegetables. Apparently, he ate them raw and they blew up in him, rupturing his stomach.'

'Fair dinkum!' exclaimed Mackie. 'He really snuffed it?'

'That's what I heard,' answered Smith, 'and I wouldn't be surprised if it's true. That dehydrated stuff is murder and blows you up just like green pasture bloats cattle and they just heel over. Still this bloody place is full of rumours. It gives you the shits!'

'I think it would be true,' confirmed Wellings. 'Dave and I boiled those peas for three hours and they nearly killed us. Christ, I'd hate to eat them raw!'

'Slater and I have oodles of that dehydrated vegetable stuff left and we'll be taking it with us tomorrow,' declared Danzey, 'but I'll make certain we soak it overnight. I don't want my guts strewn all over the countryside.'

'Whose turn is it to put more wood on the fire?' demanded Mackie.

'Eh, Bolland, you do bugger all except enjoy the heat! Get out and do something!'

But there was no answer from the big Canuck, for the palliassed and the warmth of the room had had its effect and he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXII

It was midday and the 1000 prisoners were scattered about a field close to the road eating their lunch. Wellings had cut two equal slices off their most treasured possession, the loaf of bread, and now they were slowly chewing and savouring every crumb of it. 'Enjoy every fibre,' had been Wellings' advice, 'and then it'll seem more and fill you up.' So as they sat there, wrapped in greatcoats as protection against the cold winds, each bite of food was explored thoroughly with the tongue and teeth and wasn't allowed to be swallowed until it had been fully examined.

That morning they had left the camp at about eight o'clock, so they had been on the road about four hours. At first they had been lined up military fashion, in threes, and expected to walk briskly, but this had soon been abandoned as the kriegies tired. The marchers were flanked on either side by German guards with rifles, and there were some Alsatian dogs on leads. Further, there were two or three motor cyclists who careered up and down to ensure all was correct. After about fifteen minutes the main road had been forsaken, and the POWs had been led along the by-ways and lanes. It was obvious that the kriegies were being shunted out of the way, for if they remained on the autobahns then the flow of war traffic would be impeded. Consequently, the urgency of pace receded and the tempo of the marchers slowed down to suit the rural surroundings, resulting in the column becoming very spread out over a long distance and the marchers clustered together in twos, threes or fours. The guards urged them to keep closer together with shouts, threats, and the fixing of bayonets, but realising that the prisoners didn't have energy or the inclination to comply soon gave up. The march hadn't been too bad so far as the dirt roads were hard from the frost and progress had been fairly leisurely, contrasting sharply with the pace set in the first quarter of an hour or so. At ten a.m. a halt had been called, and the prisoners had rested on either side of the road. Dave and Wellings had resisted the temptation to eat, keeping the loaf intact, although no food had been consumed by them that day.

'How do you feel, Billy Boy?' enquired Dave. 'Don't tell me you're buggered already. You should be in great shape after all the circuit bashing we've done together.'

'My leg muscles don't feel tired at all. I suppose we haven't travelled too far - - - about seven kilometres at the most. The pace is fairly leisurely.'

'I'm bloody hungry,' complained Dave, 'this one piece of bread at a time nonsense knocks hell out of you.'

'We'll have two pieces each tonight for dinner,' stated Wellings, 'but Christ knows where we'll be when that comes around.'

'As long as we don't sleep in a field, I don't give a shit where it is, but I must have a roof over my head.'

'The bastards wouldn't be that lousy,' criticised Wellings. 'sleeping in a field with the type of frosts we've been getting would really be something.'

The prisoners were roused to their feet by the shouting of the guards and the afternoon march commenced. The members of the gang: Bolland, Mackie, Tennant, Smith, Slater et cetera had paired into twos and were now distributed throughout the column. It was impossible to stick together for there was no allotted hut to return to at the end of the day where notes and yarns could be exchanged, and where the usual camaraderie was so much in evidence. This was now a thing of the past.

Dave and Wellings pushed on with the rest of the 'lost tribe', going one knew not where. It was just on and on, an aimless exercise in futility and direction. The rumours, as usual, were rife, but the one that gained most credence was that they were heading for the Bavarian Alps where they would be traded as hostages. How this rumour had come about, no-one knew, but it was the most colourful so the kriegies accepted it as 'pukka gen'. How Hitler would feed 10,000 extra mouths in his mountainous redoubt was difficult to comprehend, for the loaf of bread between two people couldn't last forever. The food

situation was the biggest problem, for altogether there would be ten different batches of 1000 each when they were all on the march, and the Germans couldn't possibly feed the lot. In addition, the advantage was held by the first batch of marchers for if there was any food to be gleaned then they would swallow it all up, leaving nothing for those coming behind.

The wind still whistled coldly and although it was still early afternoon, the previous night's frost still lay on the banks which skirted the sides of the road, Dave felt grateful that his greatcoat still graced his body for if he'd discarded it in the warm days of the previous summer then things would be a bit rugged now. He shrank within the warm, protective covering and released himself from the immediate situation by thinking of other things. Letters from Joan and his mother had been non-existent for quite a while, but so had everything else. A letter from either of them would have done his morale a heap of good, but it wasn't to be. He hoped that Joan still cared for him for he would be severely shaken if she'd changed her mind. However, this had happened to so many prisoners of war: wives had forsaken husbands, girlfriend their fiancés, and loved ones had found other consoling arms. One couldn't expect a girl to wait forever, for time dims the memory and the new replaces the old. He believed in her though and felt that all would end well, but when that would be was difficult to judge. His mother had had a rough war. The three males in the family, his father, brother and he all serving in one branch or other of the Fighting Services and being scattered, at the moment, all over the world. He knew, with certainty, that she'd be there when all was over, but the punishment, worry and uncertainty that had been meted out to her would have surely taken its toll. If the three of them arrived back in the U.K. all in one piece, then he felt that someone up there had kept a friendly eye on the Griffins.

The sun was now starting to lower and the column had really begun to spread out. From first to last, the marchers must have occupied well over a kilometre of road. The guards tried to hurry the stragglers and make the column more cohesive, but it was impossible, for familiarity now meant contempt, and the prisoners were indifferent and too tired to care. They had been on the road now for about eight hours and had had enough for the first day. It would be dark within an hour, so where were they to be bedded down?

Within twenty minutes they were led into their haven, a large farm with what seemed oodles of barns or outhouses. The kriegies were told that they would sleep in the barns, and roll call and departure time would be 7.30 a.m. the next morning. Further, the perimeter of the farm would be guarded by soldiers and dogs, and anyone attempting escape would be shot. So the prisoners were left to their own devices - to find a bed for the night, to prepare a meal of bread, and then to sleep and recover for the next day's journey.

The barn that Dave and Wellings entered was very large, being open-ended. There was a pathway down the middle with hay piled on either side. They found a place to dump their belongings and so staked a claim to the night's resting place. Dave stretched himself out on the soft, inviting hay.

'This will do me!' he exclaimed. 'It'll be warm here, especially if I burrow a little. Don't wake me early, Bill, for I need a long rest after today's trek.'

'Let's get that bread out,' ordered Wellings, 'and eat! I'm starving. I've only had one slice of bread all day.'

So the loaf was produced, and Dave was just about to start cutting when Sandy Smith and Tennant joined them.

'Listen!' Sandy whispered confidentially, 'I've found a goldmine. I was lying on the hay when I found a potato. So I burrow deep down and discover millions of the bastards. The farmer must have clamped his spud crop in these barns, just like we clamp them in earthen pits at home. Let's get a stack of them, light a fire, and boil enough for the four of us.'

They needed no second bidding and were soon outside. However, they'd been beaten to the punch, for already there were prisoners, loaded with potatoes with the same idea.

'I thought the gen you gave us was confidential,' laughed Dave. 'Everybody's into it and have the same idea.'

'I bet I'm sleeping on a potato bed, too,' stated Wellings. 'I'll be digging when I return.'

So the fire was lit, two billies filled with water and spuds and, once the fire was blazing strongly, potatoes were also placed amongst the burning embers. It was going to be a big spud bust for everyone.

It was dark now, but the red glow from hundreds of fires gave the place a carnival atmosphere. Everyone was happy for this would be a feed to remember - as many potatoes as one could eat, plus bread.

'I can hardly wait,' laughed Smith excitedly. 'I'll get one out of the fire and try it. Jesus, it's bloody hot!' Then he spluttered, 'It's not only hot, but hard as a rock. I reckon I can wait another twenty minutes and then really enjoy it.'

'Have you seen any of the gang?' asked Dave. 'I bet Bolland and Mackie will be taking a sackful with them tomorrow. They'll hump them all over Germany.'

'You bet they will,' answered Tennant, 'but I haven't seen any of the boys. They'll be here somewhere though. We'll most probably bump into some of them tomorrow, or the next day or some time,' concluded Tennant.

When all the potatoes were ready, the boiled and the baked, the fire was doused and the four moved into the barn.

'Let's have bread, too,' declared Dave extravagantly. 'A couple of slices each will make my stomach think it's Christmas.'

'How about one slice,' cautioned Wellings. 'We'll eat the spuds and bread and see how we go. Eh, Dave!' So the four got stuck into it. The boiled potatoes were attacked first, and then the baked ones for their jackets had cooled sufficiently by the time the first course was over.

'Shit! This is the best meal I've ever had. I could stay here for the rest of my life,' claimed Smith euphorically, 'and just eat spuds. It would be bloody marvellous! Tennant, are there any left for breakfast?'

'Why didn't we think of that?' Dave demanded of Wellings. 'Cold spuds would go well about seven a.m., and it would save the bread ration. I've only had the potatoes and one slice of bread and I'm full as a tick.'

'Me, too,' agreed Wellings. 'We've done well, Dave. Only two slices out of the loaf each. All the more for tomorrow. By the way, you can wash the cooking utensils and I'll do it tomorrow. Okay?'

Afterwards, Dave and Wellings retired to their reserved sleeping accommodation and Dave stretched and nestled into the hay.

'Bloody marvellous!' he sighed. 'This is better than the palliasse. Our luck's changed. Let's hope the open road is always like this and there are spuds wherever we go. What the bloody hell are you doing, Wellings?'

'I'm burrowing for potatoes. You don't think I could go to sleep when there's a gold mine below me. I'd have nightmares if I missed out on this strike.'

So Wellings worked like a rabbit, and finally surfaced with a nugget.

'Look at the size of this bastard!' he shouted. 'What do you think of it?'

'How the hell do you expect me to see it in this light?' demanded Dave. 'It's bloody dark or didn't you realise it?'

'Feel it then!' he commanded, thrusting it into Dave's hands. 'We'll load up tomorrow, Davey Boy, and never be hungry again.'

Wellings plopped down in the hay and started to slap his bare stomach beneath the shirt.

'What the hell are you doing now?' Dave asked angrily. 'You're making a racket. I want to sleep.'

'I'm just feeling good. This is the first time my belly has felt loaded for years. It's a marvellous feeling. Don't forget to remind me about the spuds in the morning. I'd cut my throat if I left without them.'

'We'll get 'em,' assured Dave, 'so don't worry! Now go to sleep, for we'll be up at 6.30 a.m. and it'll be a long, cold march tomorrow. Goodnight, Bill! This bloody hay is not only soft, but warm. It'll do me.'

CHAPTER XXIII

The day so far had been long and tiring, and the journey endless. It was the fifth day of the long, long trek and the prisoners were footsore and browned off. No-one seemed to know where they were going and, apart from the usual rumours, the whole exercise seemed futile. The marchers felt that it would have been far better if they had been left in the camp, which would have been finally overrun by the advancing Allied armies, rather than fleeing aimlessly and eventually being overtaken and liberated. What was the difference? They felt that both plans of action would conclude in the same way.

Dave's feet were giving him hell. His socks, which had been darned and darned again, had now given way under the constant friction of sock rubbing boot and large holes had appeared in each. Now the heels of his feet, no longer padded by a cushion of wool, were bearing the full brunt of each step forward and the blisters formed had burst and were sore and inflamed.

When the midday rest had been taken, Dave and Wellings had finished off the loaf with a slice each, and a cold potato.

'There goes the last of the Mohicans!' exclaimed Bill. 'It'll be shit or bust from now on, spuds only.'

'God, help us if the spuds run out,' was Dave's reply, 'we'll really cop out then.'

'We've always found them so far,' was Wellings's confident reply, 'so they'll be there in the barn when we bed down tonight.' Christ, I'll turn into a bloody rabbit by the time this caper's over. That's all I do is burrow and scratch my way through hay.'

'Then we're prepared for a rainy day for if we don't strike gold tonight, we've still got this,' Dave stated, tapping a small sack-like container on the ground. 'It's bloody heavy lugging it around, but it's insurance against hunger. We'll have spuds tonight, rain or shine, and cold ones for tomorrow's breakfast and midday break.' There was a lull in the conversation and then Dave continued, 'My bloody feet are killing me. What we want is a day's rest from this marching and then I could soak them in a stream or something.'

'Your feet would freeze. I'm afraid you'll have to stick it out. Anyway, you'll get better. You're not going to die on me? You're too bloody lousy to do that for you wouldn't leave the spuds behind. You'd be turning in your grave at the thought of me scoffing the lot.'

The prisoners were roused to their feet by the guards and it was on with the afternoon stint: the long straggling column plodding its way into the heart of nowhere. The kriegies, the packhorses of the scenario and bent low by the burden of their worldly possessions, divorced themselves from the proceedings by thinking of the past when things had been green, shining, wonderful and seemingly forever.

The afternoon monotony was suddenly broken by the scream of approaching low flying aircraft, and within seconds the way had been cleared. Everybody, including the guards, ducked for cover.

It was every man for himself, preservation being uppermost. Wellings threw himself into a ditch and Dave landed almost on top of him. The aircraft were so low that it seemed that they would land on the road or brush the prostrate prisoners. It was frightening. The high pitch roar of the engines was deafening and reverberated throughout the surrounding countryside. Then they were gone, and things got back to normal as the marchers extricated themselves from their positions.

'I thought we were gone that time,' stated Dave. 'That sort of treatment shakes the shit out of you. I thought the bullets were going to fly at any moment.'

'They were Typhoons, and ours,' claimed Wellings. 'Why they didn't open up is beyond me. We must have looked like German troop concentrations.'

'Most probably they didn't have any ammo left or they would have blasted us all over the place. Thank God for small mercies!' breathed Dave.

The trek resumed, but everyone had been shaken out of their lethargy for the Allied planes had come too close for comfort. There were aircraft almost constantly in the sky, but they had always passed within a kilometre or so. Never had they been so low and directly overhead as if they were searching for something to destroy. The Allied command couldn't possibly know that 10 000 POWs were on the march, and would conclude that they were German troop movements.

Then the roar was heard again and everyone scattered, Dave running to the base of a tree and kneeling down as if in prayer. The thunderous roar seemed so close, but actually the planes passed within about 200 metres to the right and then were gone.

Again there was a reassembling and the usual derogatory remarks, such as: 'The lousy bastards!' 'Why don't they go looking for real targets?' 'Shit! We have enough troubles without having to take cover from our own planes!' 'They'll kill us all if they go on like this - some crazy pilot will report enemy troop concentrations and then we'll be blown off the road and on our way to Kingdom Come'. So the long walk continued and it was with a sigh of relief that they arrived at a farm for the night's rest.

So far they had been fortunate, for a roof always awaited them at the journey's end and also plenty of spuds. However, this time there were none. The usual sleeping accommodation in the hay was available, but there were two big barns with a sentry posted on each, and it was there that the potatoes had to be. Dave and Wellings had spuds, but they were thinking of the future: tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. They, like all the kriegies, had no bread left so stocks had to be replenished. They conferred about a plan of action and after a reconnaissance, decided which barn should be raided. Wellings would approach the solitary sentry and offer him Dave's Parker fountain pen with the gold nib for spuds, while Dave was to sneak in at the side, where the corrugated sheeting didn't quite reach to the ground, and do his smash-and-grab act.

Wellings did his stuff, but the guard wouldn't have any of it, and when he persisted with his sales patter was ushered away by a menacing bayonet. Meanwhile, Dave was inside the barn discovering that the wall of hay was about two feet from the corrugated iron side. He scrambled up and started to burrow. It was relatively easy and soon his small, sack-like container was full, so it was time to retreat. Treading warily, he arrived back at the entrance, but now had to descend the six-foot hay wall in order to crawl under the tin. It was difficult with the potatoes, so he dropped them towards the escape hatch, but hashed it when the sack hit the iron sheeting, making what seemed an almighty din. There was no time to waste now for the sentry must have heard. Dave jumped, and his boots and hands came into contact with the noise-reverberating sheeting. Grabbing the potato sack, he scrambled under the tin, catching his clothing on a jagged edge. He was caught, half in-half out, and then saw the guard, bayonet fixed, turn the corner and run towards him. He pushed outwards, tearing himself loose, and then was running like hell, the sentry barely ten feet behind. The pursuer seemed crazy and was yelling for Dave to stop, but there were two incentives to keep going: firstly, the potatoes were now his and he wasn't going to give them up; and, secondly, the guard was in such a rage that he'd give Dave a taste of his steel, so there was no advantage in stopping. Dave ran, his lungs almost bursting, but the German wasn't giving up, being intent on running him down. He ran into and through barns, in and out of groups of prisoners busy lighting fires for the evening meal, and through a morass of soft, moist dung or manure.

Dave was buggered when he staggered into a large, empty dairy and the sound of his feet on the flagstone floor and the pounding of his heart seemed to reverberate from every corner of the white-washed walls. He ran its length, pushed his way through the half open door at the end, and slammed it hard behind him. As he went, he could hear the rattling and thumping on the door which had obviously jammed and wouldn't open. He'd escaped and still had the spuds. Reaching the barn where Wellings and he had dumped their gear, he lay on the hay, a lather of perspiration, his breath coming in hard, hurtful gasps and then closed his eyes. He was completely and utterly buggered.

A few minutes later, Wellings joined him. 'I saw that bastard chasing you and thought you were a goner. You ought to give the Olympics a try,' he joked, 'when the war's over. You'd go well in the obstacle race.'

'Bugger the obstacle race,' was Dave's reply, 'I've had enough hurdles for a lifetime. It's alright for you to joke, but it'd been different sort of setup if you'd had the bayonet up your arse.'

'Not to worry! He didn't get you, and we've got the spuds. I'll show you what a good bloke I am. I'll light the fire, cook the potatoes and wash up. How does that grab you? You rest and the head cook and bottle washer will do all the work! You're a lucky bastard, Dave, to have an oppos like me. By the way, if there were a bakery around,' he added facetiously, 'I'd send you out on another raiding mission. You've got to keep your hand in, you know.'

After a meal of spuds and more spuds, they discussed the day's happenings. The monotony of the march, the state of the blistered feet, the low flying Allied aircraft and the spud situation.

'Strange!' exclaimed Wellings. 'For four days no-one stopped us from getting as many potatoes as we liked, but when we arrived here they got tough and placed guards on the bloody things. I think the policy's changed and things are going to get rough. We could become very hungry.'

'The way that mad sentry chased me, I think that spuds will get scarcer and scarcer from now on. Anyone would have thought I'd broken into the Bank of England,' Dave concluded with a laugh.

'I'll tell you what, ' volunteered Wellings, 'we're sitting ducks for Allied aircraft. We must be mistaken sooner or later for German troops on the march, and then we'll get hurry-up. I don't think the column's all that safe.'

'It's not only the aeroplanes, but this walking without food.'

'It's not so bad as long as we've got the spuds, but if they go, then God help us! Have you noticed how the column gets spread out?'

'It's spread out all day, and it'll get worse as the days drag on. Everybody's getting tired and fed up,' replied Wellings.

'But towards the end of the day the column becomes an almighty mess', persisted Dave, 'we spread out over a long distance and the guards can't police the lot. There's not enough of them. We could piss-off together and link up with the advancing Allied armies. They must be getting close. It would be a piece of cake.'

'A piece of cake? Like bloody hell! I think it wouldn't be hard to leave the column, but how the hell do we stay alive until rescued. Before leaving the camp they told us that column meant security and if anyone left they'd be shot.'

'That's what worries me,' confided Dave, 'this shooting business. I'd like to go, but quite frankly I'm scared stiff. Where do we go when we make the break, and what do we do for food? I know we've got the spuds, but they won't last forever.'

'If we go then,' said Wellings, 'it'll be late in the day and we go together. Things must get rougher if we stick with the marchers, but if we're on our own, then surely we'll be able to scrounge food from somewhere. We won't get any help from the civilians, for this is Germany, not Holland. There'll be no Underground to help us, and they'll all be out to see that we get the chop.'

'I want to go,' affirmed Dave, 'but I'll have to pluck up courage between then and now. It's dicey and I'm too young to die.'

'Me, too! I want to get back to Liverpool in one piece, settle down and have a few kids. I'm fed up with this bloody mad world where you're nothing but a pack horse and you rest and walk when ordered. Bugger this for a life!'

'Anyway, we don't have to go tomorrow,' procrastinated Dave, 'we can see how things go and play it according to Hoyle or whoever. We'll get there, Bill, so no worries.'

'I know how you feel, Dave, but I suppose we'll do it when the time comes.'

'Let's take one day at a time, and tomorrow can look after itself. Goodnight,'

CHAPTER XXIV

Two days later Dave and Wellings left the security of the column for the uncertainty of the great unknown. At about 3 p.m. the marchers had spread themselves out over about two kilometres of road - the weary and the sick very much to the rear. The guards had almost given up remonstrating with their charges to keep together, for it was an impossible and thankless task. Wellings and Dave had deliberately placed themselves in a position where there was a dearth of supervision, and from where escape could be most easily effected. Nearly all that day their conversation had centred on the proposed getaway, but this had also happened during the previous 24 hours with no result. Both men were becoming a little testy, for their planning and resolve had not been put into practice and each felt, within himself, that the necessary courage was lacking. They both wanted to go, but the enormity of the act and the probable repercussions acted as a deterrent.

The road now was curving to the right and threading its way through fairly heavily wooded country, thus screening the marchers from those behind and in front. If the moment for escape was opportune, this was it. Suddenly, Dave bolted, ran down the side of the bank supporting the road, reached the trees, and then threw himself down in an undulation on the ground. He was concealed from the road by the stout butt of a large tree and the springtime undergrowth.

He lay there his heart pounding, for he could see the passing column. Then someone threw himself down beside him. It was Wellings.

'You've buggered it now!' hissed Dave. 'The guard must have seen you. We'll both be bloody shot. You silly bastard.'

Wellings said nothing, both of them lying as flat as possible on their stomachs and eyes to the ground. Every so often Dave would squint towards the road and witness the passing of the column. It seemed to take ages for the road to empty and for the escapees to feel that they were alone. However, they didn't move from their position for at least half an hour, as if where they were represented security from the dangers that lay ahead.

'We can't stay here forever,' muttered Dave, breaking the silence. 'What do we do now?'

'We'll go and get those spuds,' replied Wellings, 'so let's get cracking!'

Dave didn't have to ask what he meant, for about a kilometre or so back they had witnessed some tired and overburdened prisoner throw to the side of the road a small quantity of potatoes wrapped in a makeshift bag, and their recovery was given number one priority. Keeping about 30 metres from the road, they followed its direction and found their objective. The spuds, 11 in number, were counted out twice to ensure the value of the treasure.

'We're loaded!' Wellings laughed quietly. 'now let's get some cover and have something to eat. It'll be dark in half an hour so the sooner we get organised the better.'

In a small copse they took refuge, and the spuds, cooked the previous evening, were doled out two to a person and slowly eaten.

'Let's have one more each? I'm bloody hungry,' grumbled Dave, 'and to hell with the expense.'

So the food supply was dealt a body-blow and the two munched contentedly.

'How about some more?' queried Dave. 'We can afford it. After all, those eleven potatoes are a bonus.'

'Like hell!' retorted Wellings. 'What about tomorrow, you hungry bastard?'

So the party was over, and it being dark they decided to push on. 'Which way is it?' demanded Wellings. 'We're going towards the Allied lines, aren't we? So where's that?'

'How the hell should I know,' replied Dave, 'I'm not a bloody magician.'

'You're the navigator, aren't you?' retorted Wellings. 'So pull your finger out, and let's weave out of this bloody place.'

They pushed on, Dave endeavouring to keep the Pole star on his right, ensuring that his direction was westward. However, progress was slow and impeded by small trees, protruding roots which stubbed the boots hard and unmercifully, and deep indentations and rocks.

'Shit! This is hard work,' complained Wellings, 'we'll reach the Allied armies in about ten years' time at this rate.'

'Talk about the babes in the wood,' wryly remarked Dave, 'we're giving a pretty good pantomime performance, but not charging admission.'

On they went and although it was bitterly cold, both felt warm and sweated profusely. Perhaps it was fear that generated the heat and also the exertion expended. For they both knew that if they met someone they would be challenged and death could result. It was a ticklish position. They kept going and gradually the darkness was replaced by the lengthening light and so it was time to call a halt and rest in a thicket, which offered concealment and protection from the winds.

During the morning of the next day they remained hidden and conversed in whispers. Their fear was that someone would discover them both asleep and, being afraid, might dispatch them to Kingdom Come with some blunt instrument or rifle bullet.

'We made bugger all progress last night,' stated Dave bluntly, 'and we'll make less tonight if we stick to the woods and fields. I reckon we'd be safer if we walked during the day along a lane or bye-way. If we see someone, we'll just walk straight past and brazen it out. How about it?'

So the plan was adopted, and that afternoon away they went. They felt more secure this way for daylight meant safety. They reasoned that no-one committed dastardly deeds during the hours of light, but darkness and crime were synonymous. As they went, they realised that Germany housed nearly every European nationality. The Germans had Russians, Yugoslavs, Poles, French, the lot, working as slave labour on the land and in the factories, while the German male was away fighting at the front. Thus no-one took any notice of the two fliers, believing them to be slave workers, too, from some part of German Occupied Europe. It was the dogs that were a nuisance, as they always welcomed them with barks and sometimes bared fangs as they approached what they thought was their territory or domain.

They walked all that day and, being unchallenged, were emboldened to stay the night in a farm shed. They reasoned that it was unlikely that they would be disturbed and were far safer than lying in a forest thicket. They ate the remaining cooked potatoes brought from the camp and still felt hungry. However, they didn't hoe into the eleven raw spuds which had been rescued from the side of the road.

'Keep those for tomorrow,' explained Wellings, 'for they'll keep the wolf from the door. I wish the hell we had some way of cooking them. Raw spuds don't exactly turn me on.'

'Cooking them? You're the supreme optimist, Wellings, if you think we can light a fire and hang around until they boil. You must be around the bend.'

'I reckon walking by day is the shot. No-one's bailed us up or taken much notice,' stated Wellings. 'The only people you see are Russians, Yugoslavs, French et cetera, and some old Germans and young children. We haven't seen a soldier yet, so let's hope our luck continues.'

'I suppose all the soldiers are at the front, but where the hell that is, God only knows?'

'We'll get there,' laughed Wellings, 'for you're a bloody good navigator, Dave,' and then added, for good measure, 'I suppose you were going the wrong way when you were shot down.'

'Something like that,' replied Dave, 'so let's go to sleep for we have a long way to walk tomorrow, especially if we get lost a few times.'

They made a late start the next day, having overslept. They upbraided themselves for their tardiness, little realising that their strength and energy had been severely taxed over the last year and their reserves were at a low ebb. They kept to the bye-ways and lanes and saw little motor traffic, only the horse-drawn, slow-moving, creaking carts or wagons. The slave labour, recruited from the four corners of German occupied Europe, tilled the fields, milked the cows and performed the hundred and one jobs necessary to ensure that the German nation didn't starve and the war effort on all fronts was maintained. It was a strange and weird world, the manhood of Germany was being slaughtered on the peripheries of the Greater Reich, while those they had subjugated were now keeping the home fires burning.

As they pushed on, the way was blocked by a large group of Polish POWs marching towards them, accompanied by German guards. However, the experiences of the last few years ensured that the escapees were prepared for all eventualities and just kept going, threading their way through the on-coming 'traffic'. No-one seemed to take any notice of them except an RAF flyer whom they knew from their camp days and whose blue uniform contrasted sharply with the khaki of the Poles. He touched his head in salute and said, 'Good afternoon, gentlemen. It's a splendid day to be on the road', and then continued his progress.

They got through the horde without being challenged, and then Wellings laughingly asked, 'What the bloody hell is he doing with a lot of Poles, and going the wrong way into the bargain?'

'It could be the right way,' replied Dave, 'for all we know, and we could be arse-about-face.'

'We must be right,' confirmed Wellings, 'for the Germans would be leading the Poles away from the advancing armies, not towards them. Anyway, you're the navigator, so keep working!'

They continued on and, within an hour, were confronted by a large contingent of French POWs blocking the way. Again they threaded and brushed their way through, no-one taking any notice. It seemed that the whole prisoner population was on the march towards some unspecified place of safety. However, in a rapidly shrinking Germany, whose extremities were being pummelled and battered by the Russians in the East and the Allied armies in the West, where was this Shangri-La?

At about 2 p.m. they stopped at the side of the road to break their fast and ate three raw potatoes each. It was both unpalatable and indigestible, but hunger knew no bounds and every morsel was devoured. Then it was up and away towards the elusive front and deliverance.

It was getting towards dusk when they heard two almighty bangs and the screaming of missiles.

'It's a bloody bazooka!' exclaimed Wellings. 'Shit! I hope we don't run into anything like that. Bigger the front. It sounds rough.'

However, they heard nothing further and started looking for somewhere to bed down.

'We'd better stop this walking caper,' counselled Dave, 'or we might run into the military, who'll bail us up or shoot us.'

'Not to worry!' advised Wellings. 'No-one knows what the hell's going on and it's simple as A.B.C. We haven't been challenged so far. Everyone must think we're slave workers. Germany is brimming over with the bastards. Let's go on!'

The journey continued without a sleeping place revealing itself.

'Another ten minutes,' coaxed Wellings, 'and if we don't find somewhere, then we'll sleep under a bush or something. Right?' So on they went, only to be confronted with a bridge. But what was a bridge? Their confidence was overbrimming, and then Lady Luck deserted them.

'Stop or I'll shoot!' the order rang out in German, hard and metallic. 'Come here!'

They had almost made the crossing, but what to do now? If they bolted, there would be a fusillade of shots followed, in all probability, by their total eclipse. They had come this far only to disappear into total oblivion and no-one would ever know what had happened to them. They would be classed as two among the millions of missing war dead, who disappeared without trace and found an unsung grave.

It was only a second or two since the command had been given, yet it seemed like eternity. Both of them, realising that discretion was the better part of valour, turned simultaneously and walked towards the sentry, who had now been joined by four other soldiers. They were prisoners again.

In a farmhouse close to the bridge, they were interrogated by a German officer who ascertained they were British POWs. They were given some bread and coffee and then conducted to what seemed a long, low roofed stable with a cobbled stone floor. Being locked in, they unrolled their blankets and, still in greatcoats, curled up on the hard floor and were asleep within minutes.

CHAPTER XXV

Dave woke heavy-lidded and out of sorts, for he was tired and felt that he could have slept forever. However, it was the noise that had disturbed him for he was surrounded by a ring of laughing German soldiers, who kept pointing at a completely blanketed figure next to him. The laughter and good humoured banter continued, forcing Dave to a sitting position and the realisation that the stoned floor was mighty hard for the bum. Fatigue and exhaustion had, the previous night, nullified all hardships and he had slept like a babe.

'Shit!' he muttered. 'These stupid Hun bastards laugh at anything. They must be bloody crazy.'

He felt disgruntled and browned off. Not only was he a prisoner again, but he felt lousy, and needed a bath, a shave, and a square meal to put things right.

The laughter and the finger pointing continued with urgings for Dave to remove the blankets, but to no avail. Dave wasn't a bit curious, for he'd had his share of happenings and surprises over the last eighteen months and, besides, he was too bugged to lift a finger to find out the source of amusement. It would have to be the five card trick to raise a smile from him. Finally, one of the soldiers stepped forward and, like a magician, swept away the covering cloth to reveal a fully-dressed, uniformed figure, whose pallor was deathly white.

'So what?' was Dave's immediate reaction. 'Can't a soldier have a sleep without the world making a fuss about it?'

But the song and dance act continued, forcing him to look again at the motionless body. Then it dawned what all the commotion was about: the German soldier was dead and had been placed next to him during the night. However, the discovery made little or no impact for he no longer cared - -- nothing was new to him, it was all part of living. The word 'schnapps' was mentioned several times, and Dave deduced that the dead soldier had imbibed too freely of a wood alcohol brew which had proven his undoing.

Finally, the soldiers departed, leaving Wellings, Dave and the dead soldier alone.

'Tough luck on him!' exclaimed Wellings, roughly covering the corpse with the blanket. 'How did you sleep, Davey Boy? Was the cobbled mattress a bit severe on the old rump?'

'I didn't feel it. I was so tired I reckon I could have slept on a pin cushion. I'm hungry though. I hope the bastards feed us!'

And almost immediately the wish was granted for a soldier entered with some bread and margarine. So they ate away, completely ignoring the dead one at their side, for this world, they had learned, was for the quick only. The dead had to fend for themselves.

Within twenty minutes, escorted by two guards, they were on their travels, but this time on foot. They were passed by several troops of soldiers going in the opposite direction, but nothing untoward occurred until the road, which was raised from the surrounding countryside, passed a railway siding.

'Christ! What the hell is the Chain Gang doing here?' demanded Bill, in a voice of disbelief. 'I thought their activities were confined to Georgia and the Southern states.'

Dave took a long, hard look at the emaciated, ghoulish figures still being unloaded from the cattle trucks and also those who had already arrived on the road in their ones, twos and threes. They looked peculiar and out of place in their striped pyjama-looking clothes, and it was obvious that death was hovering close as they stumbled, fell, rose and moved painfully slowly towards extinction. Their final eclipse being hastened by the brutality of their captors who flogged them unmercifully. The whips

were really cracking, and two of the pyjamaed figures were driven, by the fury of the onslaught, to the roadside where they collapsed and rolled down the incline.

'Jesus Christ! What have we walked into,' queried Dave incredulously, 'a horror movie or something?'

'Those two who went over the side were as dead as door-nails, and that big, bloody, German ape over there will get a taste of this,' replied Wellings, clenching both his fists, 'and if that's not enough, I'll give him a rock in the kisser.'

The guard, accompanying them, sensing his hostility remonstrated with him to refrain by patting his pistol and urging him forward. So within a minute the macabre sight was behind them and neither POW wished to look back and be reminded of the bestiality they'd witnessed. They had never encountered such behaviour or treatment before, for the conduct of the guards within the camp had always been strict but fair. Little did they know that the Jews and political prisoners of the Third Reich received no mercy and survival was almost an impossibility. The two POWs, unbeknown to them, were within one kilometre of the infamous Belsen concentration camp, which made news headlines when it was overrun by the Allied liberating armies in mid-April, 1945.

Within half an hour, they arrived at the panzer school at Bergen and were taken to the cooler, where they were duly signed for and locked into a small cell with sufficient space for one person only. They had asked the gaoler, a *feldwebel*, to be housed together, for solitary meant loneliness and isolation. They could put up with the closeness of the confines providing they had someone to talk to.

'The bunk's big enough for one only, so shall I have first go or shall we toss for it?' asked Dave. 'You can stretch out on the floor.'

'Okay, by me,' replied Bill. 'Let's get some shut-eye.'

They slept for a couple of hours and woke feeling really refreshed.

Perhaps it wasn't the rest that had revitalised them, but the sense of security that had been newly-acquired. Now that they were prisoners again they hoped that food would be forthcoming at regular intervals; an untimely end by a bullet was less likely; and their gaoler, the *feldwebel*, was responsible for their welfare and safety. Admittedly, they were once again prisoners of the Third Reich, incarcerated in a narrow cell and doing solitary, but being together made hardship a piece of cake. Further, they were warm, even if not comfortable.

Their lot was further improved when the door was unlocked and the *feldwebel* beckoned them outside to a small table situated in the corridor, where there was bread, sausage and two mugs of acorn coffee. It was a feast fit for a king, and they tucked in while their gaoler just sat and watched. The guard seemed to be having a really slack time for all the cells were empty, except one, and they were soon introduced to its inmate, a German soldier of about twenty-five. He, hearing the noise from the 'party-goers', banged on the door claiming he wanted a toilet break and so was let out. On his return, he was allowed to sit with the three of them before being bundled back into his cell. Dave's curiosity was aroused and he discovered that the soldier was a deserter awaiting court martial. When the *feldwebel* was asked what would eventually be the soldier's fate, he laughingly drew his fingers across his throat.

That afternoon Wellings took the bunk, Dave the floor and they discussed the deserter.

'Poor bastard!' sympathised Dave. 'He'll get the chop for sure -a firing squad and a bullet right between the eyes. The military are tough on people who piss-off without permission, especially the Hun.'

'He seems bloody cheerful for a man awaiting court martial, remarked Wellings. 'I'd be shitting myself if I were in his shoes.'

'Perhaps he thinks the war will be over before they get around to putting him on trial and then he'll get off the hook. So I suppose he's on his knees all day praying for the Allies to beat hell out of his side.'

'Not him,' stated Wellings positively, 'he doesn't seem to give a tinker's cuss. I bet he's been in trouble all his life and he's always one step ahead of everyone else.'

'Our guard seems a good bloke,' remarked Dave, changing the subject. 'I enjoyed the meal. This place will do me until the end of the war, especially if we get the red carpet treatment at meal times. We'll put on weight here and go home well-covered and curvaceous.'

'The *feldwebel* might be a good fellow, but I've never seen things so slack. Every cooler I've been in so far has been a tightly run ship, but this is bloody hopeless. No solitary, meals outside, a deserter joins us - bloody hell, Germany must be falling apart. The war must be just about over, or I don't know these Huns. They're sticklers for everything being correct and regimented.'

At about 4 p.m. they were let out again and had more coffee. The guard seemed lonely, as if everyone had forgotten about him and he needed company. However, the deserter was soon knocking on the door and demanding to go to the toilet, but once out just sat and talked to them.

'Wellings was right,' thought Dave, 'Germany had gone to pot. If anyone had knocked on a cell door in the old days and demanded attention, he'd have had a bayonet up his backside and that would have stopped his gallop quick and lively. He wouldn't knock a second time.'

The conversation centred on uniforms and the deserter admired Dave's RAF tunic. Why? Dave couldn't imagine, for it was filthy, ragged, and looked the worse for wear. However, he kept on about it, and it became quite embarrassing when he asked if he could try it on. Dave felt like telling him to get lost, but finally agreed to the temporary exchange. The deserter removed his tunic leaving it for Dave, and then retired to his cell to try on the RAF tunic. Why he did this, God only knew? After a few minutes he reappeared, returned the tunic, picked up his own and then went back to his cell, closing the door. So the dressing-up parade was over and it was back to solitary.

'It's your turn for the floor, Bill,' chuckled Dave, 'and it's me for the luxury suite. Jesus, that bastard next door's queer! Fancy wanting to try on my bloody tunic when it's just about ready for the dustbin.'

'Have you got your Parker pen?' demanded Wellings in alarm. 'I just thought he might have nicked it when he cleared off. You never know about these bastards.'

'Bloody hell, it's gone!' cried Dave searching feverishly through the tunic's pockets. 'He's lifted it!'

'Call the *feldwebel*,' advised Wellings, 'he'll only have to search the cell and the problem's solved.'

So the plan of action was adhered to, the theft reported and immediate action promised. However, at least 2 hours passed and nothing further eventuated.

'They must be making a new one,' remarked Wellings facetiously, 'or they've written to the manufacturers for a replacement. It's taking a long time to find one Parker pen with a gold nib.'

'We've waited long enough,' agreed Dave. 'I'll call the bloody guard and find out what's going on. I can't afford to lose it as it's been my lucky charm.'

So the cell door was pounded on, and finally opened to reveal the smiling face of the *feldwebel*. To their questions he just kept grinning and shrugging his shoulders, as if he knew nothing about it and couldn't have cared less. Then he locked the door, leaving the two POWs to ruminate on the position.

'It looks like my pen's gone for good,' moaned Dave. 'The deserter really made a sucker out of me. Fancy falling for a trick like that!'

'I don't think the deserter's got it,' chuckled Wellings, 'I bet our wonderful *feldwebel* has it tucked away somewhere. He's no fool, and there's no flies on him. The deserter took it from you and the guard lifted it from him. So let's put it down to experience. We learn something every day. You'd better get some sleep for it'll be time to swap places before long, as this floor becomes pretty hard after a while.'

CHAPTER XXVI

The large barn and adjoining cobbled yard were empty and devoid of American soldiers, and it was obvious to all three of them that they had arrived too late. That morning, after spending only one day in the cooler at Bergen, Dave and Wellings, accompanied by a German soldier, had walked about 2 kilometres to join some American POWs who were working in the neighbourhood. However, the war situation had had its effect on everybody, and it was learned that the entire contingent had been marched out about 2 hours earlier, leaving the orphans of the storm high, dry and stranded.

The guard was in a dilemma concerning his charges. He could either march them back to the cooler and be upbraided for inefficiency, or return without them and allow the authorities to assume his mission had been accomplished. Everything was so chaotic that it mattered little. The three of them just leant against the barn wall, the soldier pulling hard on his cigarette and endeavouring to arrive at a decision. Then he threw the stub on to the cobbled stones, extinguished the glowing end with his boot and walked deliberately away, his charges following as if being towed. On reaching the main gate of the farm, he stopped, turned, faced both of them, shrugged his shoulders and gesticulated with his hands as if to say, what do I do now? The answer wasn't long in coming. He mockingly saluted them farewell and walked away at a brisk gait, leaving the prisoners to their own devices.

So once again they were free. However, freedom was no longer an attraction as it had too many disadvantages. Where were they to go and what were they to do? Every man's hand would now be turned against them and an untimely death was the last thing they wanted for the war could be over in a few weeks. They had survived this far and luck had been on their side, so they didn't want to tempt Providence too far. They walked on aimlessly having lost sense of direction and purpose. They had no food and the lethargy of the situation seemed to be typified when a lone Lancaster bomber appeared and stooped overhead at only a few hundred feet. It seemed as if the crew had nowhere to go, no target left to bomb and no enemy aircraft was left to challenge their slow, relentless progress.

An upturn in their fortunes occurred in the afternoon, when they were hailed by a Polish soldier resting at the side of the road. Courtesies were exchanged in English, the soldier possessing a rudimentary knowledge of the language, and then the tale of woe and adventure of the past weeks was related by the airmen. The Pole listened, sympathised, nodded his head several times and then, finally, invited them to come and share his accommodation at the 'Barn'.

The 'Barn' was situated about a kilometre distant on a large farm and was, indeed, spacious. It had to be, for it housed about 200 Poles of all shapes and sizes. There were the grizzled veterans taken in the first months of the war in distant '39, when the German panzer divisions had bulldozed their way into Poland and swept all before them. Then there were the children, orphans of the holocaust, ranging from eight years upwards who had been taken in the Warsaw Insurrection of August, 1944. And, finally, there was a sprinkling of women. All these persons had worked on innumerable German farms as slave labour and had been shifted from pillar to post. Then they had been nearly caught in the jaws of the advancing Allied armies as they crossed the Rhine. However, their masters, the Germans had made them beat a hasty retreat into the heart of Germany - their final resting-place being the 'Barn', where they continued to slave on the local farms.

Living in the 'Barn' was not only interesting, but most relaxing for Dave and Bill. The inmates would take themselves off to perform their agricultural chores, leaving the airmen and the younger children behind. From the youngsters Dave learnt their story. On 1st August, 1944, the Russians, who had suddenly halted their advance at the gates of Warsaw, urged the Poles to rise up and slay the German garrison. They had responded and the fighting had been waged on a grand scale for nine weeks. The Germans had put down the insurrection by bombardment from the air and artillery fire, and resistance hadn't ceased until 2nd October. All this time the Russian forces had remained passive and inactive, and no help was forthcoming. The insurgents and the civilian population were murdered or deported to concentration camps or to forced labour in the Reich. The entire population of the city was evacuated and the city almost totally gutted by fire. Thus Dave now had the answer to the riddle which had

plagued him so long: why had the irresistible Russian advance stopped suddenly before the Polish capital? The answer was obvious - the Polish underground movement had been allowed to be decimated so that there would be no resistance to a future Communist takeover.

The children in the 'Barn' were parentless. They had witnessed the Warsaw holocaust and seen their mothers, fathers and relatives slaughtered or deported elsewhere. It was one hell of a mix-up, typical of what prevailed in Europe in the spring of 1945. The children, however, were quite cheerful about it all and made a big fuss of the two 'terror-flyers', as they called them. Perhaps they saw in them something of the knight-in-shining armour who would save them from all this, instead of two ordinary, very thin, tired prisoners of war.

Dave and Wellings were given the daily task of collecting the rations from the nearby farmhouse, which housed the German guards. The commandant, a captain, and his staff were accommodated in the house, while the soldiers slept in the outhouses. The two airmen, accompanied by four or five children, would push the clumsy, wooden wheelbarrow down the rutted lane and park in the farmhouse's cobbled yard. Then the loaves of bread would be stacked neatly in the 'barrow', a seventh of a loaf per person and any other rations that were due, such as margarine once a week. The slave workers had to be fed or, otherwise, there would be agricultural problems and food shortages. The German soldiers, who doled out the rations, took very little interest in Dave and Bill, despite the fact that they were attired in RAF battledress -- the uniforms being so dirty and bedraggled that they fitted in snugly with the surroundings and were accepted. The Barn's inhabitants wore anything that kept them warm and on which they could lay their hands.

The Poles, Dave discovered, were a mercurial people. Their mood could change quickly and become despondent, unhappy and melancholy. It was little wonder for their race had suffered hardship, torture and privation under successive invaders and conquerors. Further, the inmates of the 'Barn' had been battered and driven to the four corners of the German Reich during the last five years and some had been prisoners since September 1939. Nevertheless, they still regarded the Russians as the real enemies and, in conversation, would state that before the conflict was over the Germans, Poles, British and Americans would unite to drive the Communists back to the Russian steppes. It was impossible for Dave to comprehend, for he believed that Stalin's men were true blue, and what would the Western Allies do without them?

There were several large barns in the area and all housed slave workers of different nationalities. There were the French contingent, the Russians, Yugoslavs and Poles. They all seemed to dislike each other intensely, and perhaps it was symptomatic of what would happen when the war was over and the old hatreds could then be given free rein. They were all in the same pickle, but there were mutterings of evening up the score if the chance arose. Animosities ran deep and the war's end wouldn't dispel them.

With little to do, Dave and Bill relaxed during the day on their beds of hay. It was wonderful to be able to eat regularly and rest. They felt that strength was returning to their bodies, but they would still become exhausted after some effort or exertion. Both had become acquisitive and hoarded edibles such as bread crusts, despite their age and hardness. They felt that this wasn't the end of the journey, but the prelude to another move and long walk. There was no final respite for them, only continual and endless motion from place to place.

Dave spruced himself up by having a haircut, short back and sides. He sat on one of the handles of the wheelbarrow, while a Polish prisoner of five odd years or so clipped away at his crowning glory. The right side of the hairdresser's face was badly scarred and the eye seemed to wink and stare from its ill-shapen socket. The Pole hated the Germans and told the story of his prisoner-of-war life to his customer. However, Dave couldn't understand for he knew no Polish. Nevertheless, the vehemence of the man's tirade and the occasional word which Dave understood conveyed the drift of the hairdresser's thoughts. He had received some pretty harsh treatment, especially during the early days of captivity, and the scarred side of his face had been the result of a beating from a Gestapo officer. The haircut finished, Dave arose and thanked the Pole. They shook hands, and then the hairdresser ran his fingers across his throat and mentioned the words, 'German' and 'Russian'. It was a tough old world.

One night, the two kriegies were invited to dinner by the Yugoslavs, whose barn was situated about 300 metres away. On arrival, a very upright, grizzled, old veteran approached and warmly welcomed them. He took them to a corner of the barn where they were introduced to five other men who were obviously regarded as leaders. The eight of them sat at a table and beer was poured and toasts to King George and Mihailovich, the particular Yugoslav leader to whom they owed allegiance, were drunk. Then it was on with the dinner - a rich, oily pork stew which made the belly lift and blow. There was a lot of laughter concerning the ingredients, from which Dave inferred that the pig had been stolen from one of the neighbouring farms and all hell would be let loose the next day when its disappearance discovered. It was a wonderful night with lots of backslapping, and oaths and with the name Mihailovich being mentioned often and loud. As the night progressed, the oily fare began to take its toll and Dave's stomach began to feel like a drum. The fatty pig was too much for a stomach which had been accustomed to a meagre bread diet for so long and Dave felt like throwing up. However, the letting off of wind from both ends helped to relieve the situation somewhat.

Finally, the dinner party came to an end and both airmen were relieved to get back to their abode without disgracing themselves. They lay on their hay beds feeling as if their extended stomachs would burst and the rumblings and noises would never cease. It was as if an earthquake was occurring within their bodies. They hung on, determined not to be sick and so retain the nourishment the Yugoslavs had so generously given them.

CHAPTER XXVII

The April sun of 1945 shone brightly and it was a treat to be alive. To feel the warmth on the back as it percolated its way through the clothing was luxury. Perhaps this hot flush of spring meant that the cold, biting winds of winter had been banished for good and it would be plain sailing from here on in. The warm weather seemed to dull the hunger pangs and one wasn't continually craving for something to eat as was the case when the icy winds blew, chilling and freezing the bones.

Despite the weather, things weren't all bright and shiny. Wellings had woken that morning feeling far from well. In fact, he had stated that he felt that this was his last round-up and he was on his way to the big ranch in the sky. All night he had been groaning, belching and farting and had made frequent trips to relieve himself. On returning, he would state that he now felt a little better, but within a quarter of an hour the status quo would reassert itself and the pains would return. The stomachs of both the airmen had become the delicate parts of the anatomy and would flare up and protest after something had been eaten. The night before, both had hoed into some of the stale, hoarded bread, liberally covered with German margarine. However, Dave's stomach had not protested to any great extent, but Bill's reaction had been violent. Dave had cheered his friend up by saying jocularly that he would ensure a slap-up funeral and invite the Yugoslavs to drink to his departure. Things weren't good, but Dave knew that Bill's health would have improved by the afternoon.

The noise of distant, sporadic gunfire had been heard several times that morning, but Dave didn't seem to think it important as he made his way leisurely towards the farmhouse that housed the guards. He wanted exercise to work off the excess of flatulence caused by the previous night's bread binge. He felt seedy and uncomfortable, and belched several times to relieve the rumblings in the stomach. He pressed on and as he neared the road the activity seemed to increase. Slave workers were running from all directions across the fields towards the road, and something untoward must be occurring. He quickened his step and, as he neared, he could see a crowd surrounding something monstrous and seemingly indestructible. It was a tank, and the two soldiers atop in khaki battledress and black berets signified that it was British. Dave was on the edge of the worshipping throng and the hubbub was so great that he couldn't make himself heard. He edged his way closer and then when the commotion died down sufficiently, yelled out: 'Eh, Tommy! What kept you so long?' There was no response. Dave repeated the greeting, and the sergeant turned and looked in his direction. Dave held his arms aloft and waved them furiously. 'What are you?' demanded the sergeant. 'British and army?'

'No, British and Royal Air Force,' came Dave's reply.

At the sergeant's bidding, the crowd cleaved a path and Dave moved towards the vehicle, being helped atop by the crowd and the sergeant's willing hands. Dave viewed the throng and felt elated, especially when they started to clap excitedly.

'What a way to gain release and freedom,' mused Dave. 'It's a fairy tale.'

Then another tank rolled its way into the village, stopping just short of the first, and so the crowd gravitated towards the new arrival, allowing Dave and the sergeant to converse.

The tanks were part of a spearhead of the British 11th Armoured Division and were about 50 kilometres ahead of the main force. The sergeant² had fought in the North African campaign, had helped liberate Brussels, and was now cracker-jacking about the North German Plain - ideal terrain for armoured warfare. The flying-column had liberated many slave workers, but Dave was the first British POW that the force had encountered. The sergeant produced some bread wrapped in newspaper, and it looked so light and white after the heavy, dark, German fare that it reminded Dave of 'Lux' flakes. It was a wonderful present and reminded him of belching, Wellings's stomach and his friend's likely reaction to the gift.

² Sergeant Bill Woodward, Military Medal, British 11th Armoured Division. As a tank commander he fought in the North African campaign, and also participated in the liberation of Brussels.

Then it was time to move out. A corporal and a soldier, who had been riding on the back of the vehicle were left behind to take over and administer the newly-acquired territory. Dave accompanied the tanks in their forward thrust to the village's perimeter, for the sergeant had stated that reports had been received that a German Tiger tank had dug itself in somewhere in the vicinity and he wanted to be sure of what was immediately ahead. The tanks stopped, and Dave shook hands with the sergeant and the crew members, wished them good luck, and then Sergeant Woodward, Military Medal, wrote his address on a piece of paper and said he hoped Dave would write some time and let him know how he was coping.

Dave returned to the farmhouse and here things were chaotic. The German guards, who had for so long lorded it over their slave charges, were now clamouring for protection, they wished to be assured that no harm would come to them now they had surrendered. The cobbled yard resembled an arsenal for there the Germans had dumped their weapons. There was a small mountain of arms from the hand held machine gun to the Luger pistol.

The German guards, having taken refuge in the outhouses, the corporal, the soldier and Dave entered the kitchen of the farmhouse and there were served with tea and cake. The corporal was concerned for the safety of his prisoners, but Dave assured him that they were quite capable of fending for themselves. His argument being based on the fact that Bill, the slave workers and he had survived the vicissitudes of war for years, so the Germans should be able to cope.

The party over, they trooped outside and were greeted by an empty yard.

'Where the hell have all the guns gone?' asked the corporal in disbelief. 'They've bloody disappeared. The lot!'

Dave was shaken, too, but not for long. His prisoner experience should have warned him that they were inviting trouble by leaving the pile of arms unattended. The kriegies were the most acquisitive race in the world, whether it be stale bread or guns they had to possess them. However, guns were dangerous and now Dave wasn't so sure that the German guards were as safe as he'd predicted. Further, the enmity existing among the various slave nationalities could result in the settling of grievances with bullets.

When Dave arrived at the 'Barn' Wellings was up and quite chirpy. 'Well, Davey Boy, we're free at bloody last,' and then in the same breath, 'Where the bloody hell have you been? They told me that you were part of the welcoming committee and had cleared out with one of the tanks.'

So Dave related what had occurred and concluded with, 'By the way, Bill, are you well enough to dine out tonight?'

'I'm well enough,' was the reply, 'but I'm not going to punish my guts with another dose of Yugoslav soup or a bread binge. It would kill me.'

'No, none of that. It's at the farmhouse. The 'military governor' of the area, the corporal, has invited both of us, so polish yourself up and look lively as we want to get there nice and early for pre-dinner drinks.'

There was silence between them for a while, as if both were pondering upon the day's events and how their lot had changed. That morning they were just part of the mob and that night they were dining at 'government house'. Such were the fickleness and vagaries of fate.

'I'll tell you what!' exclaimed Wellings suddenly. 'How about taking a few of the kids with us and giving them a square meal? The poor bastards get very little out of life, and tonight will be a night for them to remember.'

'You're not a bad sort of a bloke,' was Dave's reply. 'Trust you to think of them. So be it! They'll come with us. By the way, Bill, I've got a surprise for you,' and with that he produced the newspaper parcel from behind his back, and removed the wrapping to disclose the white, white bread.

'Jesus, bloody white bread! Snow White! Put the lot away and we'll have it for breakfast. How lucky are we to strike gold'?

That night the corporal, the soldier, four Polish lads, Bill and Dave sat around the kitchen hearth warming themselves and savouring the aromas arising from the cooking food being prepared by the frau of the house. They had confined themselves to the kitchen for they liked being near the hub of activity, and the bustle reminded them of home. The German guards had locked themselves in the outhouses for safety, but the captain and his lieutenant still occupied the best room. The conversation centred on the progress of the war and day's events, but this was half-hearted for their thoughts were centred on the cooking food and when they were going to eat.

Finally, they were seated at the table and partook of the first course -- a light, vegetable soup. It tasted like nectar and everyone had second helpings, for it seemed to percolate to every part of the body, and as Bill said, 'One can feel the stuff doing one good.' Then it was potatoes, vegetables and a small piece of meat, which filled one to the gunwales. It was so satisfying that the sweet, consisting of some form of bread pudding, had to be left for stomachs had shrunk and couldn't cope with the new diet. Still, it was a meal fit for a king and would always be remembered by them all.

That night the fireworks started about 7 o'clock in the form of shots being fired. It wasn't continuous and was difficult to describe. At times there would be a fusillade of shots, followed by a long quiet. Then a desultory shot would ring out to break the silence. It was as-if the populace were miserly and determined to conserve ammunition. The corporal suggested that they should go out to preserve law and order. However, the airmen likened the evening's entertainment to the American Fourth of July or the French celebration of the storming of the Bastille, and felt it unwise and unsafe to venture out of the house. One never knew if one would walk straight into a bullet, by chance or otherwise. It was much safer to stay indoors and allow the revellers their fun and games. Dave felt he had survived this far and certainly wasn't going to be buried in some unknown German village just for the sake of seeming to do the right thing.

Later in the night, the shots were accompanied by shouting and singing, as if the party were hotting up and some hidden form of alcohol had been discovered in the shape of a raided wine cellar. So it went on, and no-one left the house that night, preferring to sleep within the safety of the farmhouse than attempt the return journey to the 'Barn'.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The morning dawned bright and sunny, and Dave and Wellings held a summit conference with the corporal. They were eager to be on their way to link up with the main advancing force and be really free. The soldier counselled they should commandeer a car or truck, but neither knew how to drive. So it had to be bicycles or a long walk.

Breakfast over and farewells having been exchanged with the soldiers and the Polish lads, it was on with the motley. The bitumen road seemed unusually quiet and devoid of traffic. Even the fields surrounding the village were deserted, as if the slave workers had downed tools and declared a public holiday. And why not? Their masters, the German guards, were now prisoners of war themselves so the newly liberated were quite safe to lie abed and sleep off the Bacchanalian revelling of the previous night. Apparently, Dave had learned, that during the night's 'fireworks' a large group of displaced persons had raided a farmer's cellar and so it was hangovers all round.

On they cycled for several kilometres meeting no-one, until they reached a fork in the road. Here their progress was arrested by the hard metallic command 'Halt!'. In German. The suddenness of it almost made the riders fall off, and then two khaki clad soldiers emerged from behind a Bren gun carrier with rifles menacingly pointing at them. They meant business.

'Shit! You're British!' was Dave's opening remark. 'Thank God for that.'

'What the hell are you doing here?' asked one of the surprised soldiers. 'You could have both been shot. You stupid bastards!'

They were led to the side of the carrier where a jeep was also parked and here, in the relative safety of the corridor so formed they hastily told their story to the officer and four soldiers.

'You're lucky to have run into us,' stated the officer, 'and still have your hides intact. A number of SS were fleeing in your direction and they'll shoot anything on sight. If they caught up with you and learnt that you were RAF, it would have been curtains. They're mad at the best of times, but in defeat they just go berserk.'

There was a hurried palaver and the officer decided that one of the soldiers should take the jeep and drive the airmen down the road so many kilometres to a forwarding area, where about 50 soldiers were regrouping for another forward lunge.

'What happens if we meet the SS on the way?' was Dave's query to the driver.

'I'll go like bloody hell,' was the reply.

Then they were off on the last lap to freedom.

Their sojourn at the staging area was short and brief, but full of incident. Everyone was ensuring the efficiency of their equipment. The trucks and Bren gun carriers were being serviced and refuelled; weaponry was being cleaned and reloaded; and supplies were being transferred from the trucks to the carriers. There existed a sense of purpose, energy and direction which forcibly impinged itself on Dave's consciousness. Perhaps it contrasted so sharply with the purposeless existence and monotony of the life that Dave had savoured during the last eighteen months or so. However, his whole being seemed to respond to the new conditions as if they were the necessary stimulus to living and progression.

There was humour, too, in this far-flung outpost of the Allied empire. The sprinkling of German civilians around was being searched for weapons, but at the back of a large shed, concealed from prying eyes, another kind of search was in progress. A corporal had five males lined up, and as it became their turn to be scrutinised each would drop his trousers. Dave thought that this was taking

things a little too far and laughingly enquired what the soldier expected to discover by these tactics, surely not a revolver?

'The cunning bastards!' replied the corporal. 'They often pin their wristwatches to their shirt tails to keep them warm and comfy and safe from clutching fingers. But the Hun's not going to fool me. I'm up to his tricks.'

Then it was into a truck and back to Celle, the most forward town in that sector that the Allied armies had overrun and consolidated. The driver informed the airmen that the place was teeming with displaced persons. He described it as similar to the League of Nations, no-one understanding the other person, each doing his own thing and a real melting-pot. The schloss or castle in Celle was where everyone was fed by the Allies, and recommended that this was where they should go.

There were priorities though. Dave felt a bath was a must, and so the two entered a very large house. The place was beautifully appointed, the carpets being luxurious, exuding a warmth and comfort which had been lacking in their lives for so long. However, a deathly hush pervaded the whole atmosphere and was only disturbed by the slight creaking of the stairs as they ascended.

The bathroom was reached and there ensued a difference of opinion about who should have first use, but this was resolved when Wellings discovered another bathroom at the end of the corridor.

Dave wallowed in the soapy water which caressed his body and soothed his jangled nerves. It was the first bath he had had since being shot down and so he savoured the luxury of it all. Admittedly, the water wasn't really hot, but who cared as long as one could soak, and soak, and soak? Then to encase oneself in clean, fluffy towels and feel the blood coursing in the veins was a delight which had almost been forgotten.

As he left the bathroom clad in dishevelled gear, he felt miserable. His clean, new body was still in contact with the dirty grimy past and he resolved to start afresh by entering a bedroom and helping himself to a change of clothing. Rummaging through the wardrobe, he found everything too large for his skinny frame.

'Jesus!' he exclaimed. 'The bloke who owns these clothes must be a big bastard. I suppose he's on the Russian front or somewhere.'

However, beggars couldn't be choosers, and he attired himself as best he could. All the shoes were far too large, and as he preened himself in the mirror he could not help but notice the incongruity between his smart get-up and the dirty, mud stained boots he had been forced to retain.

'Shit! You look bloody smart, Dave,' was Bill's opening remark, as he burst into the room. 'Bloody good idea of yours toggging yourself up. I'll have a scrounge around, too, and see what I can come up with. You're thin, Davey Boy. You're like a walking skeleton.'

'People in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones,' was Dave's retort.

They left the house wondering where the inhabitants had gone, and then made their way towards the schloss which was easily discernible by its massive structure. This was their haven and it literally teemed with displaced persons from all over Europe. The advancing Allies had earmarked the castle as temporary accommodation for the liberated, and the 'inn' was bursting at the seams with the large inflow of 'guests'.

'Talk about the League of Nations and the tower of Babel,' commented Wellings, 'one needs an interpreter to understand all the cackle that's going on.'

'I'm not worried about conversation,' came Dave's reply, 'It's my stomach I want to fill.'

It was after midday and a field kitchen had been set up in the middle of the grounds where army personnel, cafeteria style, were feeding the long, never-ending queue. One shuffled along at a snail's

pace until arriving at the Mecca. Then one grabbed two plates. The larger of the two, the dinner plate, was piled high as one moved along. Firstly, it was potatoes, then a dollop of swede, followed by carrots, and then the whole was smothered with a thick, meaty gravy, which spilled over on the hands. Balancing the laden plate and ensuring that the gravy didn't run away, the other plate was extended for treatment, receiving a generous slab of some form of bread pudding, followed by a liberal pouring of hot, yellow custard.

Then it was to a secluded spot, and seated on a rug they feasted on the succulent, gluey contents, savouring each mouthful as if it were their last. Then it was the dessert, but the heavy, pudding like substance, laden with custard, was too much for shrunken stomachs and they were both forced to halt long before the plates had been cleared. They not only felt sated but drowsy and like snakes gorged with prey, lay on their backs and went off to sleep.

The rest was of short duration for within half an hour they were awake and ready to go. They recuperated easily, a meal and a catnap and energy was restored. The dirty plates were returned to the kitchen, and then they reported to an area clearly marked by the sign: 'British POWs.' An officer took particulars, while an Airborne sergeant resplendent in uniform and red beret stood idly by. They were instructed to eat and sleep in the castle and report again the next day at noon. The interview over, they left and were followed by sergeant.

'You chaps don't need to eat and sleep here,' he called. 'Why don't you come with me and live well? You deserve something better.'

So the invitation was accepted, and off the three went.

The commandeered premises were spacious, housing about a dozen Red Devils, whose tough, rugged, healthy appearance exuded bonhomie and comradeship. It was little wonder that they were on top of the world for their division, the Sixth Airborne, had made the successful drop on the east bank of the Rhine and secured Montgomery's crossing at Wesel. They felt that the war was nearing its end and had only one more mission to complete, the crossing of the Elbe, for which they were regrouping. The hospitality was lavish with cigarettes galore and plenty of everything—a far cry from the prisoners' yesterdays.

'What about us all going for a swim?' someone suggested, and then laughingly added, 'we'll be acclimatised then if we miscue and finish up in the Elbe.'

'Christ!' someone exclaimed. 'I know it's a sunny day, but remember it's still only mid-April. It'll be bloody chilly.'

So it was decided everyone was going swimming, including the airmen, and they'd be off very shortly before the heat went out of the sun.

Dave felt tired and lay on a bed. A five minutes' rest he felt would restore him and so be ready for the excursion. He closed his eyes.

It was after 10 the next morning when he awoke.

'Nice to see you awake, Sleeping Beauty!' remarked one of the Airborne boys humorously. 'You've been asleep about 20 hours—missed the swim and last night's entertainment.'

'You didn't miss much with the swim,' volunteered Wellings, 'it was bloody cold—your balls froze. Last night was terrific though, we went out and really enjoyed ourselves.'

'Yes, the entertainment went on when we got back here, too,' continued a sergeant. 'We had a game of indoor rugby, and someone was tackled and brought down right on top of you. You didn't budge. Must have been really bugged.'

'I didn't feel anything,' muttered Dave. 'I suppose I really needed the sleep.'

CHAPTER XXIX

At 20 minutes past noon Dave and Wellings reported to the area in the schloss marked, 'British POWs', and were promptly reprimanded by the officer-in-charge.

'When I tell you to report at noon, I mean twelve o'clock and not 20 minutes later,' he raved. 'You're back in the service now good and proper, so pull your finger out! No more dragging the chain and bouncing the ball around!'

Then he addressed the other five POWs present. 'I'll be back in a few minutes,' and, looking menacingly at the latecomers, continued, 'Wait here, and no clearing off!'

He then left.

'Officious bastard!' exclaimed one of the men. 'I bet that's all he's done throughout the war is give orders. His life has been full of 'Yes, sir!', 'No, sir!', 'Three bags full, sir.''

'He ought to have had a spell in the lager,' stated Wellings, 'that would have knocked the shit out of him.'

Within 10 minutes the officer returned with a truck and the seven newly-liberated were bundled aboard and taken to the airfield where they were placed aboard a Douglas transport. The take-off was quite smooth, but Dave felt the butterflies in the stomach as the plane lunged forward gathering height and momentum. It was the first time he had been airborne since that fatal night and the apprehension was understandable.

'How you're feeling, Davey Boy?' yelled Wellings above the roar of the engines. 'Remember the last time?'

'I feel bloody wonderful,' lied Dave, 'It's a piece of cake.'

The plane landed at Brussels, and the seven of them were whisked away by truck to a sort of hostel where they were plied with Red Cross goodies, such as a safety razor and blades, a shaving brush and fresh underwear. Thus they were able to bath, shave and improve the appearance, then indulge in the luxury of a clean vest and underpants. Re-vitalized, they were ready for a night out on the town. However, the essential ingredient, money, was lacking so they had to settle on a Service canteen.

The night wasn't particularly successful because they felt their German civilian clothes made them the object of attention and comment. Eyes were cast in their direction by the uniformed hordes frequenting the place and the obvious questions that were never asked: what the hell were civilians doing in a place like this, and who let them in et cetera? However, the night passed without incident.

The next day they were flown to England, and, on disembarking, Dave turned to Wellings and stated: 'Well the experience we've had will stand us in good stead in the future.'

'I don't mind the experience now that it's over,' replied Wellings, 'but Jesus I wouldn't want to go through it all again.' 'Never mind!' responded Dave. 'Think of the yarns you'll be able to tell everyone. You'll be the life and soul of the party.'

'Bullshit!' was Wellings' reply. 'No-one will want to listen and, if they do, they'll think you're a bloody, big line-shooter.'

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