

## **ERIC'S MEMOIRS BOOK TWO**

### **Chapter One      Dortmund**

The next morning the disconcerting words of the lovely girl whom I really intended to see Again were soon forgotten as my crew and I tucked into our afternoon breakfast of bacon And eggs.

We were due for briefing and, although the afternoon was cold, dark and miserable, the Laughter instigated as usual by upper and rear gunners Alex Norris and Ted Woods our Brummie boys, made light of the seriousness of our operation.

It was November 6<sup>th</sup> 1944 and our destination on that fateful night was to be the Dortmund Em's canal, a known lock on a tributary of the Rhine, through which ships of The German merchant navy had to pass, carrying their supplies to the factories situated along the Ruhr.

As we made our way to our Lancaster bomber PG S I looked at the tense but still smiling faces of the crew I had come to love, Alex and Ted, Tasmanian Radio Operator Rex Temperman, Engineer John Tait, Bomb Aimer Ron Waters and my Navigator 'Butch' Cronney - we were not just a crew but were really good pals.

The first two and a half hours into or flight were purely routine, we were on course, the weather was predicted as clear over our target and the seven of us were vigilant in our observations.

Suddenly from 20 year old rear gunner Alex Norris, came the shout "Port Go

Skipper, PORT GO!" And I knew we had an unwelcome visitor. My immediate reaction

was to put the 'plane into an evasive corkscrew. There was a Focke Wulf on our tail.

**2** The staccato of guns firing from our rear and upper turrets ceased when Alex called some three minutes later “I’ve got him Skipper. I’ve got him”. The relief was unmistakable as we were able to resume our planned course, for the fear of collision whilst flying in such tight formation was as extensive as being shot down.

Our relief was very short lived for, shortly after making the routine checks for everyone’s safety and that no major damage had occurred, our world was shattered by high explosive cannon shells ripping through the underside of the Lancaster - obviously an attack from a second ‘plane. How had it slipped my mind that German Fighter ‘planes fought in pairs ? I was tortured with this thought when I realized the port engine was on fire and, in spite of our attempts to extinguish the flames, we were helpless.

The centre of the aircraft was now well ablaze and the port aileron was badly damaged which made the Lancaster very difficult to control and we slowly began to dive to port. I had no option other than to abort the ‘plane and I gave the order to the whole crew “JUMP - JUMP - JUMP”

Mindful of my crew’s safety and the gravity of the situation which primarily was explosion, I knew I had to get my boys out immediately but, with the centre of the ‘plane now an inferno there was no way out for us four members at the front of the ‘plane, the engineer, bomb aimer, navigator and myself, other than through a tiny escape hatch situated down in front of the engineer’s seat.

**3** Frantic efforts to open the hatch were hampered by the slipstream and I yelled to John Tait “Get the axe and smash the hatch” before I turned and tried to regain

some control to hold up the nose of the 'plane to give those extra seconds to my crew who were trying so desperately to battle their way out.

Suddenly and miraculously the hatch flew out and my boys plunged out into oblivion but, for me it was more difficult I wore my parachute on the seat of my pants and to get through this tiny space was nigh impossible. I do not to this day know how I did it but suddenly I felt myself falling and I reached for that beloved rip cord.

Whether it was the stench of cordite, fear, the tumbling action of falling or those wonderful bacon and eggs I do not know but I was so sick on that way down, a fact I did not register until coming to an abrupt halt in a tree !

It was some time before I realized that my feet were not on the ground and although I had stopped falling, in the intense blackness I had little idea as to where or how I was. Was I sideways, feet down or even upside down ? But I very gradually came to my senses and realized that I was hanging from some sort of a tree.

Training eventually came to the fore throughout my intense fear and worry for the rest of my crew. Had they all got out? Had I acted correctly? How would my parents know I was still alive when they were told my 'plane had not returned and, what was I going to do next ? I remained quite still and inactive trying to collate my thoughts. I knew that we had not been far from our target so I must be somewhere in Germany, but where ? I began to shiver - not as much through fear, but with downright cold and shock - I was freezing, hanging from a tree in the middle of a German forest and then I realized I had lost my beautiful Irvine fur jacket in my haste to escape that burning inferno.

## **Chapter Two      Get me out of here!**

4      I was twenty four years old, I did not want to die, I knew I would probably be captured, would I be shot - no they did not shoot officers - DID THEY ? My mind became

confused and I felt my morale slip to what I thought was its lowest ebb and depression hit me. All that money it had taken to train me, my wonderful training in America only to find myself in this lonely terrifying void. I had to get down and get home.

The silence was broken by a faint whistling. Was it Germans? Could it possibly be one of my crew? Could I get down before they reached me? My mind in a complete turmoil I listened and suddenly realized to my great relief that it was an English tune and that tune was the one that John Tate, my engineer was always whistling and he was approaching the tree that held me fast.

Relief gushed through my whole body and I called out to him "John, John, I'm up here" He helped me down from the tree and to my amazement he seemed to be fine whilst I was shaking with traumatic tension. Until then I had not realized just what a state I was in, the stench of the cordite had made me so sick and my uniform was stained with vomit. Shivering with cold we sat down to assess our situation.

Realizing we could not stay where we were we had to walk and, armed with the small compass from our survival pack we set off. Railway stations were out, they would be too heavily guarded and to walk at night would be just too obvious. We knew that we had to get away from our landing point, for patrols would soon be out looking for us so we, after finishing the burial of our parachutes, removed all epaulettes from our uniforms and the tops of our boots that would give away our identity, for without those tops they looked like ordinary boots.

5 We remembered to keep our Brevet wings so that in case of being captured we would not be deemed as spies. Aware that overhead our planes were returning to base we wished with all our hearts that we were with them, but nevertheless as we set out our spirits were comparatively high. John's Joie de Vivre inspired me and we walked and

continued to do so for two hours.

The rain came down and, what started as a slight drizzle became an incessant downpour and we knew that we had to find shelter. Ahead of us we saw a small hut and decided that this must be our bed for the night. We went in, cold, tired and wet through, huddled into a corner and promptly fell asleep.

How long I had been asleep I do not know but suddenly I was aware that the door to the hut was slowly opening. I put my hand over John's mouth so that if he should suddenly cry out, we would be discovered and, breathing into his ear not to move we watched with horror as a figure stood outlined in the doorway and slowly entered the hut.

Such was the blackness of the night in that hut that we could not make out what was happening, but then we realized that the human figure had gone into the other corner opposite and was doing exactly as we had done - curling up and going to sleep.

We waited for half an hour until the steady breathing from the shapeless bundle told us that he was sleeping deeply then we both crept silently out of the hut and began to walk again.

From that day to this we have never discovered who that person was, it could have been a tramp or it could have even been one of our crew following the same course as ourselves.

6 We walked until it was daylight through the continuing rain until utter exhaustion led us to realize we had to sleep so, finding a thick hedgerow we curled up and slept again.

Awaking and feeling a little refreshed we decided upon a plan of action for we could not just wander aimlessly. We found a plank of wood and realized that with so much foreign

labour in the area all wearing uniforms of a similar color to ours which we had stripped of all insignia, we might just get away with not being recognized.

It worked ! And our aimless, dejected ambulation allowed us to travel slowly but freely. We even crossed an autobahn which was so dangerous because of the fast travelling traffic but, we then became stuck in a bog and whichever way we walked we seemed to get stuck even deeper. It took ages for us to extricate ourselves but eventually with the help of our plank of wood we managed and that night we slept in the open under the trees.

John had managed to retain his rations but, somehow in the fall from the plane, I had lost mine, consequently we shared what he had and a breakfast of Horlicks tablets had never tasted so good. Again we walked, arriving eventually at a river - which one was it we wondered, we followed its course and eventually came to a bridge and, still carrying our plank of wood we crossed.

About 3.45 in the then darkness of the third evening we came to a small village and knowing that the pangs of hunger would overcome us if we did not eat we decided to enter the village to see what we could forage or steal

7 Carrying our plank, we walked down the main street then, to our horror the doors of what must have been the village hall suddenly opened and out poured German troops. We were surrounded by them, for there had been some sort of meeting in the hall and these military personal, stumbling out of the light into the darkness did not notice two dirty laborers less than an arm's length away from them. We just kept dejectedly walking and still carrying that plank we trudged through the midst of them all !

This unnerving episode made us decide to change our tactics and, after resting for the

remainder of the day we decided to abandon the plank of wood and continue our journey at night. This was to be our downfall, for about 03.00 am whilst walking along a country lane, I suddenly heard German voices and realized there was a patrol ahead.

I panicked and dragged John with me onto the grass verge and into the bushes.

The combination of the gravel on the road and the crackling winter hedgerow made enough noise to alert the German soldiers on foot patrol who had gone behind the hedge to have a cigarette, and we found ourselves looking down the barrels of two rifles.

Their shout of "Hands up" made us realize our freedom was over and we were to become Prisoners of War.

We were marched to a German Field Unit nearby that was used as a rest area for Troops. It contained 3 wire cages that were used as prison cells for errant troops who had disobeyed commands, stolen, or not conformed in many other ways to their soldiering duties. John and I were put into one of these cages that was lined with straw.

I was angry, angry with myself for being the cause of our capture, angry at the indignity of being incarcerated and angry because I could not get back to England to continue fighting the war.

### **CHAPTER 3      CAPTURE**

That anger was exacerbated even further when we were told that we had actually walked into Holland and we had been captured on the outskirts on Enschede, the town on the Dutch/German border. Just one more day and we could have been in the hands of the Resistance who may even have got us back to England - God Willing.

The officer in charge of this fighting front line unit, was most courteous and we could not have been more civilly treated. He offered us black bread and that dreadful Ersatz coffee which I, again angrily and somewhat foolishly refused, thinking in my

ignorance that to not touch it would insult the Germans. Here I was cold tired and hungry and still finding room for my principles !

Next day we were transported to a chalet bungalow where we were confronted by the dreaded SS. John was dragged to the upper storey of the chalet and I was thrown into a room on the lower floor and set upon by two, what I can only describe as SS thugs.

It was to be one of the most terrifying experiences of my life.

They beat me, accused me of being a spy and held guns to my head and threatened to kill me if I did not tell them about myself. My 'dog tags' saved me and I convinced them I was a British airman to which they then proceeded to thrash and torture me, trying to find out where I was from, what was my squadron, what was my target and where were the rest of my crew ? We were there for two days. Two days of pure hell with perhaps the worst part being that they threatened to kill John, who I could hear upstairs being shouted at because I was not giving them the information they wanted. I was convinced that I was about to die, for their continual switching between English and German and making threatening gestures, I knew they were in control of my life.

9. On the third morning we were marched from that chalet to a huge warehouse on the outskirts of Enschede, we were bruised and battered, dirty and exhausted but what seemed to be worst was the shame we felt at being tied together with manacles around our ankles.

Our depression was most severe when suddenly, we became aware that the doors of the houses on each side of the road were slowly opening - word had got around that two Royal Air Force boys had been captured and tortured.

Unaware of the danger that these citizens were exposing themselves to, our spirits were lifted by their murmured words of encouragement, their hand waves and that well

acknowledged V for Victory hand sign, made famous by Winston Churchill.

Hurled into a massive, freezing cold warehouse, having had nothing to drink or eat for three days we were joined by two American aircrew who had also been shot down and who were as dejected as we were. There was no escape for we were heavily guarded and we just had to accept what was to be our fate.

Held for two or more days in that bitterly cold warehouse John and I were eventually moved, I went to Dulagluft Interrogation Centre near Frankfurt but I did not know what happened to John until 1946 when we met again. I was in Dulagluft for ten days, held in a icy cold, windowless 7ft x 5ft cell with just a straw palliase, the only light came from what appeared to be a 25 watt bulb high in the ceiling which gave just enough light for the guards to see me through the spy hole in the door.

On the second day of imprisonment I was taken to a warm comfortable office where I was greeted with a friendly handshake from a German Luftwaffe Officer - the equivalent of a British Wing Commander.

10 This officer informed me that it was his duty to obtain certain information from me and he proceeded to ask questions about my squadron, the names of my crew and our targets. But, from his initial attitude I was aware that there would be a lot more questions to come and, when my only reply to all his questions was my name, rank and number he then told me go away and re think about the information that he wanted.

During my incarceration here I was never subjected to any form of physical torture, the mental torment was enough but what I did learn quickly was that the only form of communication with the other prisoners was possibly in the toilets where we were constantly under the scrutiny of the guards. They spoke little English and although we were not allowed to speak, those muttered phrases to each other conveyed the latest news and happenings. My trips to the toilets became very frequent; I had use of the communal

razor which did little to remove my weeks of stubble but my trips were mainly to relieve the boredom and trying to update any information.

The fear of the unknown was horrendous - was I going to be fed - could I stand up to further interrogation - could I survive the hours and hours of loneliness and solitude ?

I was fed eventually. A bowl of luke warm watery soup and some black bread, but there was considerably more interrogation to follow.

My interrogation was at irregular intervals, sometimes I would spend up to four hours during the day being questioned and at other times I would be woken from my fitful sleep to be taken to the interrogation room for further cross examination.

This continued for ten days but each day was becoming harder for me for I would not divulge any of the information that he insisted upon obtaining and my answers were always obtuse.

11 My stubbornness evoked his anger and his change of tactics and method of questioning became - him making suggestions to me and awaiting my agreement or dissent.

Eventually he became so exasperated with me that he changed from Mr. Nice Guy to the SS Officer he really was and my refusal to tell him what was meant by H2S or the code name Village Inn finally broke him and not me. To his question "What was the Village Inn?" I replied "Which one do you mean, The Horse and Groom or the Royal Oak?"

He jumped up, smashed his fist onto the table and shouted " Hookings, the R A F must be scraping the bottom of the barrel using people like you, but we have found your 'plane and all your crew have been killed"

This was the termination of my ten day spell at Dulagluft.

Next day I was taken from my cell and escorted by guards to Dortmund railway station.

There were three of us prisoners accompanied by two guards, carrying rifles but we were all too cold, hungry and exhausted to try to attempt any form of escape.

We had been told that we were to be taken to Stalagluft III in upper Silesia ,Poland, which was the German prisoner of war camp for officers.

Dortmund railway station had been very badly damaged by the RAF, and we were

ushered into a corner where we squatted for nearly six hours awaiting our transport

To sit for such a long period on a stone floor was most uncomfortable and very tedious.

Suddenly the sirens sounded and we knew that another raid by the RAF was imminent

and, out of the blue masses of women children and poured down the steps into the station into what they considered to be a possible place of safety.

12        Abruptly the crowd halted - they had seen us and the abject hatred in their faces became apparent. We were in mortal danger of being attacked by this ugly throng of females all hell bent upon reprisal. We were bombarded with God knows what and the tension made us very aware of the serious danger we were facing. The guards also realising this, fixed their bayonets and stood in front of us warning off the mob who were obviously hell bent on tearing us limb from limb.

Eventually the all clear sounded and the horde dispersed but not before spitting at us and shouting swearing and raising clenched fists at us. No bombs had fallen in Dortmund that night so obviously the target had been another city situated in the Ruhr valley.

Our train arrived and we were ushered aboard into a specially secure compartment and set off on what was to be a slow, lengthy and grueling journey continually being shunted off into sidings to let other - probably troop carrying trains, pass.

Arriving at the outskirts of Leipzig we suddenly stopped and through the slatted windows we saw above us hundreds of B17 (Flying Fortress) American bombers whose target must have been the oil installations nearby.

We were on that train for three days, freezing cold and with only crusts of black bread and water to sustain us but eventually we arrived at Sagan station where a lorry awaited us to take us to Stalagluft.

## **CHAPTER 4                    Stalagluft III**

Filled with apprehension as to what would happen next, I was dragged off the lorry and marched to the gates where to my delight we were greeted by hundreds of RAF prisoners of war, all clapping, cheering and giving us the V sign and within minutes I had recognised Peter Attwood who had trained as a pilot with me in Ponca City, Oklahoma ! Peter had been shot down on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> November whilst bound for the same target as me. It was so good to see a familiar face.

The first few days in Stalagluft 3 were very confusing. There were aircrew members who has been incarcerated there for as much as four years and their attitude and thinking was far different from that of us recent arrivals. Some had not even seen a four engine bomber and they were all so desperate for information and news from home.

I was directed to what was to be my home for the next few months - a long wooden hut divided up into separate rooms each containing many officers.

In my hut I was greeted by a Squadron Leader Mitchell a Canadian officer who was in charge of the fourteen fellow inmates who were all very interested in what I had to say.

I was allocated to my bunk - the bottom of three - where I found a straw palliase and a

thin blanket but, to my concern I noted that the base of the bunk had several slats missing - I later discovered these had been used to show up the various escape tunnels that led from our hut.

The shock of my surroundings, the accommodation, the nonexistent 'facilities' was a profound jolt of disbelief to me, there was the constant awareness of security and stilted conversation, for we were constantly being watched and listened to.

14. After seven days I was summoned to a meeting with three fellow officers of superior rank, I was introduced to each member and who in turn 'interrogated' me. Their objective was to find out if I was a genuine English officer and not a 'plant' by the Germans, which unfortunately was commonplace.

There was no doubt about my credulity to them but, my one concern was that my parents knew I was safe. I was therefore much relieved when they told me that it was the norm that the Germans told the Red Cross of my situation and whereabouts who, in turn advised your next of kin. It was not however until the end of the war that I learned my parents had received a telegram on Christmas Day 1944, telling them that I was alive and unhurt but, I was a Prisoner of War.

However I had injured my leg when I became entangled with the branches of that tree that I parachuted into and the injuries that I sustained had been exacerbated by three days walking and the rough treatment I had received from certain individuals in their enthusiasm to extricate information from me.

My leg had become inflamed and was quite painful when I reached Stalagluft III and after a few days, I approached the senior officer, Squadron Leader Mitchell (Mitch) to ask if there were any forms of medical assistance for us.

He confirmed that this was so and sent me to see an Army Captain who was a doctor but,

Mitch advised me “You must be firm with this doctor for he is inclined to be quite nonchalant and will dismiss your injuries as inconsequential“. I duly saw the doctor and taking the advice of Mitch I firmly told him I wanted my leg attended to and, that his being a doctor it was his duty to do so.

15 BAM !!! The answers that I received from that doctor are unprintable but, basically what he told me was that HE was a Prisoner of War too and as such he was only giving a very limited medical service gratuitously - and he had restricted supplies of medicines and equipment to treat the hundreds of prisoners encamped there !

With my tail between my legs after such a ticking off I slunk back to the hut where Mitch and my fellow ‘kreigies’ stood - all laughing their heads off - The sods had set me up knowing full well the character of the doctor.

It was a lesson that I learned the hard way. The leg - it healed naturally!

By the middle of November the weather changed and the cold set in and, having to stand twice a day on the parade ground to be counted I knew that I was in dire need of extra clothing, for all I had was my blouson battledress and trousers.

I sought out the officer who was in charge of Red Cross supplies and asked if there was any chance of some warmer clothing. My luck was in, for he had a heavy Army overcoat and a pair of ‘Long John’ woolen underpants.

Not quite my style after the natty dressing of my younger days but - being so cold, I was willing to accept anything. These items, were to become my only clothing for the next six months throughout that bitter winter of 1944/45 and the pants were only washed once in all that time. Being so heavy and thick it was impossible to get them dry and they hung on the line, frozen stiff and looking like some poor anemic body for many a day.

I eventually got them dry by putting them under my palliasse and sleeping on them!

The cold I overcame to a certain degree, but I had to next face a more serious and painful problem - hunger, for I was becoming weak from lack of food.

16. The rations distributed by the Germans were totally insufficient for survival. We had to exist on a daily ration of three slices of very thin stale black bread, two potatoes and a bowl of very watery cabbage soup. Our savior was the Red Cross parcels that were delivered to the camp every two or three weeks. However I never had a complete parcel - as was the intention of the Red Cross. Instead one parcel was shared between two or three of us - the German's retaining the rest for their own consumption, for their food was also in short supply at the end of 1944.

Consequently it was mutually agreed that any parcels received into our hut would be pooled and distributed equally between all fourteen of us and a daily Rota was devised that enabled each one of us to take his turn as 'chef of the day' which really meant that you had the opportunity of licking out the bowls of any food that had been prepared !

We were all very very hungry and I knew that I was losing weight rapidly by the way my clothing hung on me. My weight which had been around 10 ½ stone when I was shot down had dropped to 8 stone when I eventually saw England again and, being six feet tall I was pretty skeletal!

The cold - bitter - but you could get warm with exercise and huddling round a tiny stove in the hut. The hunger - aching - but we grew accustomed to the gnawing pains but, for me, the worst disconcertion was the total lack of hygiene, privacy and the deprivation of keeping my body clean. The only washing facilities were one single cold water tap by the latrines which was invariably frozen solid. The latrines consisted of a row of ten wooden seats - no cubicles, for the guards wanted us under observation at all times. The seats were over holes in the ground into which everything dropped into the most foul smelling open trench which was cleared at intervals by Polish or Russian prisoners.

17. Depression and melancholy exacerbated by boredom did little for my self esteem and I tortured myself each night, questioning “ what I had done wrong to get myself shot down and possibly cause injury to my crew”.

Our Senior British Officer realized that boredom was a major issue that could lead to mental illness if not dealt with and we were all allocated menial tasks such as guarding the windows as look outs when any secret meeting was taking place, for there were always plans afoot to conjure up differing ways to outwit and out maneuver and cause as much inconvenience as possible to the Germans.

I was offered the opportunity to take classes such as learning the German language or bridge lessons: art classes: English language or math's, for there were many teachers who were incarcerated who were willing to teach not only to relieve their boredom but to practice their skills. My choice was accountancy - a decision I have never regretted and a skill which throughout my life, has been invaluable.

If the weather was good we were able to get out and play football or rounders or baseball with the Americans, but most of my time spent there was during the bitterly cold winter of 1944/45 consequently we were huddled inside the huts trying to keep warm.

There were lectures given by POWs who had knowledge and experience such as the stock market, architecture, history and many other subjects so I should not have felt the boredom and depression which was exacerbated by my total lack of freedom.

Then one day we were told to expect a ‘special visitor ‘to the camp!

It was to be Max Schnellling the World Heavyweight Champion boxer who was revered by the Germans and greatly respected by the English - before the war.

!8. We were told in no uncertain terms by the camp Commandant that we would fall in, line

up and be smartly on parade in the prison quadrangle and that we would give a cheering welcome to the great man when he arrived.

Our Senior British Officer agreed that we must do as we were ordered to avoid reprisals and we stood for hours on parade, awaiting his appearance. He finally arrived and went straight into the German Officers accommodation where he spent another hour, before reappearing to carry out the intended 'inspection' of the rows and rows of multi national Prisoners of War who had been standing in the bitter cold for hours.

We were called to attention by our SBO and then, before Max Schnelling could move forward, we were ordered by our S B O "Right Turn and Quick March" - which we all did, leading the boxer quite bewildered and confused. Disrespectful? No, not to the boxer, but to our captors who considered themselves to be so superior to us that they could demean us in this way.

The camp Commandant was furious and threatened severe reprisals to us all, but our composed, clever and tactful SBO calmed the situation without too much punishment to us meager Prisoners of War.

The weather was atrocious, cold, wet, windy and snow like I had never seen before but the news which by now I gleaned like all other inmates had not been too bad. Then came news that General von Runstead had made a counter offensive in the Battle of the Bulge and our expectations of all being released before Christmas were dashed. We prepared for Christmas - with me not being able to contribute very much but those men who had been imprisoned for - some as long as four years - had stored and saved what little they could from Red Cross parcels - there were no extra rations from our captors.

19 Being locked into our huts every day at four o'clock gave us time to prepare games, create card games and write new words for the songs we recalled. Anything to help create the

Christmas spirit. My job was to make paper chains to decorate our hut and I scavenged bits of paper from every Tom, Dick or Harry's mail and parcels. The heartbreaking fact was that during the whole time of being incarcerated in P O W camps I did not receive one piece of mail and I was unaware of what was happening to my parents and brother and sister. This caused me extra depression and melancholy for I had no knowledge as to whether they were still alive and, having lost their homes twice to enemy bombs I spent many a long hour worrying about them and also my brother Dennis who was serving with the R A F.

If I had only known the joy and happiness that was in my family on Christmas Day in 1944 for, having been told by the War Ministry that I was 'Missing in Action' in November, they had no knowledge as to whether I was alive or dead until the telegram arrived on Christmas morning telling them I was alive and was a Prisoner of War somewhere in Germany.

New Year's Day and the dawning of 1945 - would I still be here next January 1<sup>st</sup>?

We knew nothing of what was happening to the advance of our troops or was it defeat?

We thought the weather could get no colder - but it did. Bitter, bitter winds, temperatures 20 degrees below zero and very little to keep us warm. But I considered myself to be privileged when I saw Polish and Russian prisoners who were slowly freezing to death.

## **Chapter 5      The March**

There were four 'compounds' in Stalagluft 3 - North, South, East and West, all identical and each housing about 2, 000 men. I was in the north compound before being transferred to Bavaria - Stalagluft 3a, some 5 miles away but exactly the same.

It was from Stalagluft 3 that many attempts were made by prisoners to escape their

confines by tunneling under the huts and attempting to reach points beyond the perimeters of the wire. These frantic, courageous, endeavors, fuelled by frustration and desperation to get back home to continue the fight against Hitler's tyranny were costly, with the most famed attempt to break out later being depicted in the film 'The Great Escape' where those men who had escaped were recaptured and upon the orders of the Fuhrer and to the revulsion of the Geneva Convention, shot in cold blood.

By the end of January we had heard that Russian forces were advancing from the east but we had no idea where they were or how soon we would be released. However, we were to soon discover that our repatriation was not the intention of our captors when, in the middle of the night we were awoken from fitful slumber by shouts of "Achtung, Achtung, Raus, Raus, Schnell, Schnell" and we were forced from our bunks at bayonet point. We were told to collect our belongings and assemble outside the huts. Belongings - I had so very little, a few scraps of food, my malodorous long johns that I was wearing, my greatcoat my invaluable flying boots which, fortunately had been a new issue and a bundle of newspaper that was left over from my attempts to make those Christmas trimmings. How little did I realize when gathering these pieces of old German newsprint that these would probably save my life !

21 We assembled shivering, outside the huts with our meager belongings and I was handed a red cross parcel - one of the many that had been hoarded by the Germans - possibly for their own use ? Considered to be quite a newcomer by my fellow inmates, some of whom had been incarcerated since 1940, I had assembled very little, but they had made sledges upon which they placed their motley collection of what they considered to be their valued treasures.

Where were we going? We knew we were marched off in a south westerly direction.

**What was the reason for our sudden departure? To escape advancing Russian armies.**

**Why were we being forced to leave the camps? So that we could be used by the Germans as protective shields and bargaining assets, for the Germans, in early 1945 were becoming desperate to save their own individual lives.**

**We two thousand or so souls from Stalagluft 3A trudged aimlessly for what seemed ages through deep snow and biting winds and before too long, realized that we had been joined by prisoners from the other camps.**

**Thousands and thousands of men of all ages, states of poor health and from far flung corners of the world - British, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Americans, Polish and many other nationalities were herded into long columns, slowly and silently trudging through that terrible wasteland of frozen white expanse not knowing where we were going, or even if we could survive another day, let alone to see the end of the war.**

**At around three o'clock in the following afternoon with temperatures dropping even lower and with darkness falling we stopped trudging and were herded into a farm that offered some form of shelter in its great barns.**

**22 I had become separated from some of my fellow hut companions but along with 500 or so others I was put into a large one storey barn where the farmer, under forced directions of our guards, had thrown in some straw bales which we instantly spread around to curl up upon. Our only food was that which was in the treasured Red Cross parcels - but- much of that was in tins and we had no means of opening these ! We ate raisins, a little chocolate and biscuits. There was nothing to drink but, it was food - we were very hungry and exhausted and before long trying to sleep, curling up together for what little warmth we could make.**

I was woken from a fitful sleep next morning by lowing cattle, I was cold, hungry, thirsty and filled with trepidation as to what was going to happen. The doors burst open, our guards marched in and ordered us at gun point to reform those long columns and once again start marching.

For the next eight hours we trudged through that ever deepening snow, we dare not stop for to do so would encounter the wrath of a guards or even to our own detriment - to slowly freeze and be totally unable to get up and start walking again. We had a small handcart and along with my fellow prisoners, I helped to pull it along. Those men who were sick, injured, frostbitten or plain exhausted took turns to rest and fitfully doze, whilst we pulled them along.

One of my companions helping to pull a cart laden with fellow prisoners was a Wing Commander Stanford Tuck, later renowned for his bravery. Escapism and literary skills. Unbeknown to me he was planning his escape and as a fluent Russian linguist he and his Polish friend were the only men who could do so safely.

23 At about three o'clock on that second day we again were herded into more barns, this time I discovered one housing cows and I knew I had to get near to those animals for my own survival - they offered warmth and although very smelly I was at a point beyond caring.

Day three dawned and depression was rife, we had very little sleep because of the cold. We were bitterly cold, hungry and very thirsty, some of us suffering from frost bite.

For indeterminate hours we trudged without stopping, through blinding snowstorms, not knowing where we were nor where we were going. Again around three o'clock in the falling darkness, we arrived at another barn and made toward the animals - only this time

they were pigs. The pigs were moved out to make way for us to be accommodated and the stench was sickening, but who cared. Wing Commander Tuck was near to me that night and he asked a small group of us close by, to pile the straw into a corner to ensure he and his Polish companion were fully covered. It was their intention to try their escape. Along with my fellow prisoners we were herded from our barns early next day, leaving our two hidden fellow prisoners behind. It was not until the war ended that we learned they had got out of the barn unseen and had made their way across Poland to meet up with the Russians who were advancing fast from the east. They eventually reached Odessa and thence back to the UK

## **Chapter 5 The lowest ebb 24**

For days we trudged mile after mile through the bitterest winter weather I had ever known, carrying the sick and wounded, scavenging for whatever was edible, huddling together at nights for warmth and doing our best to help the sick..

One day whilst passing some isolated cottages, an elderly Polish woman appeared carrying a tray with what looked to be cups of coffee, she was handing these to the nearest prisoners one of whom was me. As I reached out to gratefully accept her generosity a German guard ran up, shoved me aside and knocked the tray from her hands with his rifle. She cried out in fear of being shot but the guard, realizing the anger he had evoked

from his prisoners who, although weak with fatigue and hunger were massing around him, attached his bayonet to his rifle and prepared to defend himself. Suddenly we were surrounded by German guards and we had no option other than to recommence our lumbering trudge across the frozen slush and snow.

By this time I was beginning to feel really ill, my body was so weak and exhausted I just

wanted to lie down. My abdomen was racked with pain and I knew that I had to get somewhere to relieve myself. As we approached a barn where we knew we were to spend another night, there was a rush across the farmyard to try to get inside the cowsheds. The middle of the farmyard was thick with mud and cow's muck and, as I tried to reach one of the cowsheds I slipped into the mire and, gripped with excruciating pains, to my horror I had a violent attack of uncontrollable diarrhea. I had no means of cleaning myself apart from some straw and nothing to change into and for the rest of that tortuous, seemingly never ending march through torment, I was compelled to remain covered with not only cows muck but my own excrement as well. This was possibly the lowest point of degradation in my life.

25 I lost track of the hours, days and nights that we journeyed across Poland and into Germany but, eventually we reached what I thought to be a small town. It turned out to be the city of Spenberg wherein were the biggest marshalling yards in Germany.

The columns of men that had marched with me congregated in these marshalling yards of the German railway, there were thousands of us, all dirty, unkempt and hungry but, we were not alone, for also there were German soldiers of the Panzer Divisions who had returned from the Russian front, the majority of whom were wounded and in a terrible state.

They, like us were in a state of limbo, not knowing where we were going or what was to happen to us. They also had been fighting for their country and we all had now one common aim - to get back home to our families - if we still had them !

We soon realized that these men had no fight left in them, for like us they were not only sick and injured but utterly demoralized and homesick too - but - they did have one thing that we did not have - FOOD.

They had food, but we had still some cigarettes and before long there was bartering and

exchanges that lead to talking, swapping experiences and a strange feeling of similarity. These men were not the cruel Gestapo or those in charge of P O W camps or their goons, they were like us, ordinary men who were just serving their country and who wanted to go home. The horrors that they had experienced fighting in the bitter cold of the Russian front and the total waste of life they had seen had left them traumatized beyond understanding.

26. The German Commander of the area a bloated arrogant man, had two geese that were kept in a cage - obviously for his and his fellow officers dinner, but of course, one night the inevitable happened - the geese disappeared. Where to, only those who had committed the mysterious robbery knew but, there were 10,000 or so prisoners in those marshalling yards who were crowded together and whosoever had taken them, did not offer to share the meal !

The commander was needless to say absolutely furious and he demanded compensation and retribution, threatening to shoot us individually until he was satisfied.

Our Senior British Officer called us to assemble and told us that compensation was being demanded. What did we have to compensate those geese? We would all have loved to enjoyed a taste. Our only bargaining power were the cigarettes that some of us still had. Consequently collections were made for all to give as many as possible to appease the Commander and I being a non smoker had to contribute what I had.

Eventually we were marched down to the goods trains that were waiting in a nearby railway sidings and were herded into cattle trucks. Forty five to fifty of us were pushed and crammed into a small truck, where the only ventilation was that of the small grille

high in a corner. Also in that corner near to the doors was a slop bucket.

Ten days I spent in that foul smelling hell hole, it was deprivation at its very worst.

Dysentery was rife, we were unable to lie down and sleep was nigh impossible. The journey was full of stops and starts to let German troop trains go by, giving us the opportunity to at least have the doors open although we were never allowed outside, being constantly guarded by armed guards who looked only too keen to shoot us.

27 The only blessing was that here the engines would be refilled with the required water and sometimes a little would be given to us. It was a terrible journey, we were bitterly cold, starving and completely despondent. I never thought I would be pleased to see another POW camp, but we eventually arrived at Luchenvald, south of Berlin and, as we trudged from the railway I had my first glimmer of hope that I could sleep, eat and clean myself, although not necessarily in that order.

The camp at Luchenvald was basic although dry and quite clean, it consisted of long dormitories each filled with three tiered bunks into which we fell exhausted. We were soon to discover there were no facilities for toilets and washing and it was very much down to the basics building our own latrines. I had to wash my clothes which by now were pretty rancid. Eventually, finding a cold water tap I proceeded to strip off and rinse myself down and scrub at those green long johns. As I have previously said I did my best and hung them out on a hastily prepared line but - in those sub zero temperatures it took many days to get them dry, eventually after hanging them around the stove in the centre of the hut I was forced to put them under my straw palliase mattress in the hope that one day I could wear them again.

To this day I still envisage those pale, ghostly green long johns hanging stiffly on the line.

I befriended a fellow POW - Alan Tustin, who shared the billet, he was a Flight

Lieutenant engineer who's Lancaster had been strafed whilst on the Peider Mundy rocket Factory raid, in the Baltic. His Lancaster had exploded and he was the only survivor. Alan was suffering badly from yellow jaundice and was completely incapacitated. The Only food that he could eat was rice and potatoes and I scrounged and bartered all I had to keep him alive. We became very good friends - a friendship that lasted for years to come.

## **Chapter 6 Starvation and consequences 28**

Rumors were rife that we were winning the war but, in a camp that now contained over 40,000 men of different nationalities - who could ever know what, was the truth?

The camp was attacked by German fighters who flew low over the camp shooting at anything that moved. One day we realized that our hut was in the firing line and, jumping down from my top bunk I caught my leg on a protruding nail and ripped it open it took some time to heal, probably due to my unhealthy body and the lack of any medication.

We were imprisoned in that camp for four months, February until the end of May 1945 but we did not accept our incarceration lightly. Many officers tried to escape - myself and Alan included. We became aware of the agitation and insecurity of our guards who were edgy and threatening and, fearing that we would suffer the same fate as the 50 officers who were shot in Stalagluft III we decided to make a break for freedom.

Discovering a break in the wire fencing - probably cut by other escapees, late one night after stashing what little food we could carry and wrapping ourselves in the warmest things we could find we made our way pretty stealthily across the camp to that hole in the wire. The tension of knowing that we would be shot if we were caught in those probing searchlights brought us out in a cold sweat but we were desperate and fear drove us on.

We got through the wire and, guided by the little compass that Alan had hoarded throughout his incarceration we made our way westward from where we knew the Allies would be approaching. We could see the flash of guns and could hear the explosions in the far distance and knew that must be our goal, hence we trudged throughout that night. Dawn eventually broke and we saw in the distance an old farm house and knew that we must make our way there for our own safety.

29 We were in the wilds of Germany; there were no roads, only fields and narrow lanes and no sign of life whatsoever but that farmhouse could mean food and our spirits rose with the thought. We approached the farm very cautiously for we were aware that armed troops may be inside watching us, but our fears were soon allayed when we discovered the place was deserted - or so we thought. The doors of the derelict hovel were open and as we moved in I saw a movement in a corner but, to my amazement it was not soldiers, but a frail, elderly, terrified couple who were cringing there with their hands in the air babbling for mercy.

Without really thinking straight I put my hand into the pocket of my greatcoat and pretending I had a gun I shouted at them "Essen .Essen " I must have looked like Jimmy Cagney standing there threatening those poor souls, they had nothing - but I had obviously seen too many gangster films to have acted as I did.

We searched their house but there really was nothing to eat and those poor souls were starving but - we heard chickens cackling in the centre of the farmyard. Running toward the noise we discovered the biggest dung heap steaming in the middle of the yard atop which were dozens of real live chickens !

Food at last ! We ran toward the stinking heap not caring where we trod but those wily old birds were too smart for us, we chased them up the heap, round the heap and eventually through the heap but I - being me - fell over right into the muck and emerged

not quite smelling of Evening in Paris. I was covered in dung once again and stank to high heaven BUT I had caught a chicken ! Now all we had to do was kill it and cook it.

30. I handed the scrawny old bird to Alan who looked at me in amazement "I can't kill it" he said "But neither can I" I replied and staring at each other looking and feeling

quite flummoxed I tucked the chicken into my greatcoat and we set off to seek food elsewhere and to find our way to God knew where.

We started walking again and eventually found our way onto a small lane when suddenly we heard and saw a type of jeep racing toward us. Thinking they were Germans we knew our time was up, for we would have been shot on sight but, the Gods were watching over us and we discovered they were high ranking Russian officers and, they spoke English. They told us if we had continued along this lane we would certainly have been re captured and shot but, they explained, our safest bet was to get into their vehicle and they would return us to the Luchenvald camp which was had fallen into Russian hands.

Realising our lives must be blessed we did just that and were returned to the place that we had so hopefully escaped from two or three nights before, only to find our German guards had fled and the whole camp of forty thousand men of mixed nationalities, were all being held prisoners by the Russians. For the Poles, Slavs, Czechoslovakians and other eastern European countries this was terrifying and probably meant a certain death, but for the British prisoners, our main fear was that we were to be transported to the salt mines of Siberia.

Our arrival at the camp was greeted with cheers and hugs from our dormitory pals but suddenly we seemed to have acquired lots more friends - word had got out that I had a chicken and volunteers to kill, pluck and cook that poor old bird that had been inside my

coat for 48 hours were extensive. I think Alan and I finished up with half a wing and the wishbone !

31 The change in our captors, from Germans to Russians led everyone to assume we would soon be repatriated and to the delight of all prisoners ninety three large American lorries appeared outside the gates. But it was not be, for the idea was not to repatriate but to feed the starving inmates. Groups of prisoners were selected to form foraging parties and it was they that boarded the lorries. They travelled miles searching for anything that was edible from sheep and cows to vegetables which were bought back to the camp to be turned into soup, which was the only way to feed the forty or so thousand desperately hungry souls.

Food in our belly's brought much comfort but any feelings of elation were soon dispelled into despair when we saw those lorries disappearing with no prisoners on board.

What was to become of us? Would we be sent to Siberia? Was a salt mine our destination? Would another long forced march be our fate. Depression was widespread. Should we just walk out of the camp? The sight of those heavily armed Russian soldiers put paid to that ideas , but, if we staged a mass break out then surely some must survive ? The calm composure of our Senior British Officer put paid to such ideas and we were told to remain calm for the Russian army were our allies and he felt certain that repatriation was imminent. For us to break out of the camp whilst there were still pockets of Germans who were fighting for their lives would be totally foolhardy.

We remained in that state of limbo for two or more weeks before we suddenly realized that a huge fleet of empty lorries emblazoned with the Red Star was outside the camp.

They had come to take us away - but to where - east to Russia or west for home?

We did not know. We thanked when God, when we were told it west!

**32. Those who had possessions grabbed them quickly, but for me - I had nothing except the clothes on my back and along with my comrades I joined the queues ready to board one of those now most welcome lorries. We were taken to the eastern banks of the river Elbe, the demarcation line between Russian and American armies. Told to get off the lorries, we were then marched across a 'pontoon' bridge to the other side of the Elbe where we were welcomed by the Americans. I have never been greeted so enthusiastically as I was by those American troops but, we respectfully bade farewell to our Russian comrades.**

**The Americans had assembled many trucks into which we gladly climbed and from that base we were taken to Halle airbase to then flown to Brussels in a DC3.**

**For me the experience was traumatic, for my last flight had been pretty horrendous.**

**That flight brought home to me the reality of war, my flights had always been at night and I had not seen the damage that was widespread throughout the Ruhr valley.**

**There were no buildings that were not touched; the majority was just ruins and rubble and as we were flying at only 1,000 feet and the day was clear and bright, I was filled with a sense of anguish and remorse. I had been part of this carnage and destruction - but I dreaded to think what I might find when I got home to London.**

**There were thousands of us prisoners of war who were transported over the next few weeks and for me it was pure euphoria, I was free, I had no guard watching my every move, there was food - wonderful food. The mixture of people who were there for us, the Royal Air Force and Belgians were so kind and comforting to us all.**

**We were fed - fresh tasty food that I had almost forgotten, I was in heaven.**

**33. The next item on the agenda was a programme of intense personal cleaning.**

We were de loused (we were pretty flea bitten) we showered, letting the hot water cascade over our emaciated bodies and then given new uniforms which for me consisted of an RAF Battledress and trousers.

Our old rags which we had worn for so much time were then burnt I had to say goodbye to my long johns !

## **Chapter 7 Home 34**

We were kept in Brussels for three or four days and eventually transported to a local air base where there were lines of Lancaster bombers, all waiting for us.

For me it was pretty harrowing for here were the identical 'planes from which I had jumped months before. My mind was transported back to November 6<sup>th</sup>. Where were my

crew? Were they still alive? Would I ever see them again? These memories were Exacerbated by the realization that I now had to get on board if I wanted to get back to England.

The last Lancaster bomber in which I had flown was with me, upfront in the cockpit and at the controls, this flight was somewhat different. There were 15 to 20 men who boarded

the Lancaster, but there were in seats, of course no safety belts and men just sat on the floor above the bomb bay.

For me that was taking a high risk - who knew if these doors could accidentally be opened.

I had a far more safe seat, although a little uncomfortable, All the way home I sat on the Elsan getting up, only to let a fellow passenger use my chemical toilet. We landed safely - much to the relief of all those now ex P O W's, at Cosford near Wolverhampton and, as we disembarked we literally kissed the ground. We were home, we were in England.

The huge hanger at Cosford was decorated with bunting and banners welcoming us home, there were tables all laden with food the likes of which we had not seen for months. We were surrounded by fellow officers, pretty WAAF's the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, What a welcome. Another de lousing was incurred, for we still had the little blighters on our bodies but eventually we were free to go home and I was given six weeks leave and a travel pass to my home in Morden.