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1st South African Division

Gordon's War

'The fact of being captured is so overwhelming a disaster that for a while one's mind fails to grasp its significance. It seems quite possible that one's command, one's freedom, one's right to think for oneself, have been taken away, and that henceforth one must obey the dictates of those representing all one hates most in the world....But now I was caught!'

Brigadier James Hargest 5th NZ Infantry Brigade

Gordon Windridge was 'caught' on Sunday 23rd November, 1941 at Sidi Rezegh, Libya.

Gordon was my father in law. I first met him in 1976. At some point I was vaguely aware of his military involvement in the Second World War - that he had been captured in North Africa and held as a Prisoner of War. However, it never really meant anything to me at the time. It was only much later, when I started tracing the family tree, that I started to realise what he must have endured. I decided to look more closely into his war time experiences and trace his time from enlisting to arriving home. It has taken me five years of on and off research to put all the pieces together. This is his story.

When Gordon arrived at Stalag VIII B Lamsdorf on Wednesday 29th September, 1943, after three awful days crammed into a cattle truck on a train from Italy, he had already been a prisoner for six hundred and seventy-five days.

His journey to war, and thus to imprisonment, had started on the afternoon of 17th July 1940 when, together with the rest of the 11th Field Ambulance, he boarded the troopship HMT Nevasa and set sail from Durban harbour heading for Mombasa. With troops crowding the rails and thousands of civilians waving good-bye, the Nevasa headed out into the Indian Ocean. They endured a long, unescorted trip to Mombasa, almost via India, to avoid enemy submarines.

In Kenya the 11th Field Ambulance was assigned to the 5th SA Infantry Brigade based in Marsabit. They saw action in the East African and Abyssinian Campaign before setting off for North Africa on 24th April, 1941.

They arrived in Port Suez on 4th May, then on 26th May arrived in Mersa Matruh where they were trained in desert warfare until early November.

The Battle of Sidi Rezegh was part of 'Operation Crusader' – an effort to relieve the garrison besieged in Tobruk and reverse the threat of Rommel's troops blocking the route to Egypt and the crucial Suez Canal, Europe's supply link to the Middle East. The 5th SA Infantry Brigade and 11th Field Ambulance reached Sidi Rezegh on 21st November and were immediately confronted by the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The battle raged for three days, culminating in a continuous three-hour saturation barrage on the afternoon of 23rd November.

The battle of Sidi Rezegh was a disaster for the 5th SA Infantry Brigade. They had gone into action with 5,800 men and under 2,000 returned. 224 were killed in action, 379 wounded and about 3,000

captured. It was South Africa's heaviest loss during the war, according to General Smuts. The 5th SA Infantry Brigade was destroyed and ceased to exist as a fighting formation.

Gordon was taken prisoner on the evening of 23rd November, 1941, despite the assumption that medical personnel would be protected by the Geneva Convention. Little did he know there were forty-two months as a Prisoner of War (POW) ahead of him. One cannot contemplate the state of mind of those captured, after 3 days of continuous fighting and the witness of so many friends killed and maimed. Gordon had seen his best friend die during the battle.

Most of those captured at Sidi Rezegh were marched to the prison camp at Benghazi in what became known as the 'Thirst Marches'. They were marched for three days in the fierce heat of the desert, sleeping in the open during the night when temperatures were freezing cold. Dehydration and hunger loomed over those poor prisoners, they were given very little water and only a biscuit or two for food. On the fourth day they were put on trucks and taken to the Italian POW camp in Benghazi. By 5th December, 1941, the Benghazi camp (known as 'The Palms') held over 6,000 British Commonwealth troops. The facilities were inadequate for such numbers and conditions were appalling. Dysentery was rife.

The prisoners themselves were ill-prepared for captivity. Although during training they were issued with instructions should they become prisoners of war, this guidance was wholly inadequate to prepare anyone for what to expect, especially in the desert of North Africa. In addition, at this early stage of captivity, no Red Cross delegates inspected any of the camps in North Africa and the POWs were left to fend for themselves in disorganized and very trying circumstances.

On 8th December Gordon's wife, Edna, received a letter saying that Gordon was reported missing.

It is uncertain exactly what date Gordon left Benghazi for Naples, but he did talk about having to wait some time for the boat he eventually boarded. The journeys from Benghazi to Tripoli, then Tripoli to Naples were horrific. Cargo spaces were packed to capacity. There was a severe lack of toilet facilities. I know the last ship that year left Benghazi for Tripoli on 21st December, arriving in Tripoli on 23rd and staying there over Christmas, then arriving in Naples on 1st January. These were the last of the prisoners from North Africa to pass through Naples; later prisoners were shipped through Brindisi.

Gordon was 'detained' in Caserta Military Hospital, according to a Red Cross list dated 12th January 1942. The reason was not recorded, but it is likely to be connected to dysentery as he was not wounded in battle. It is also possible that he may have been working at the hospital.

After the hospital he spent a short time at PG66 Capua, a transit camp near the hospital, 40 kilometres north of Naples. He was moved further north to PG52 Chiavari in February, 1942. His post war questionnaire states his arrival there as 4th February. This camp, although lacking in space for outdoor sporting activities, was regarded as one of the best camps in Italy. Charles Rollins wrote:

'The camp itself was superb after Capua. It was numbered PG 52, was entirely of new wooden two storeyed huts, containing wooden slatted beds, one above the other, and had a brick-built washing trough with cold running water from a series of stand-pipes. Lavatories were of the usual type, a deep trench in the ground over which one squatted and tried to avoid falling in. The camp was situated in a fold in the hills with a steep ascent to one side and encompassed by a river on the other three sides which took up a 'U' bend around the site.'

In June 1942 Gordon was moved, together with other medical personnel, to staff a new military hospital in Lucca - Ospedale Militare Territoriale Numero 4. He arrived there on 11th June. There were

106 of them transferred on that day, and one of the other men was Edwin N. Broomhead, author of 'Barbed Wire in the Sunset'.

The hospital soon held 530 prisoner patients with 13 British doctors and 104 orderlies to look after them. The hospital was fairly well equipped with a good supply of medicines. Every ward had a sister from the Dominican Order in charge of ward equipment, bedding and the issue of food to the patients. It seems they were cheerful and solicitous towards both the patients and the POWs and made their lives a little more bearable.

In April 1943 hundreds of ill and disabled POWs were repatriated from Lucca, together with medical personnel to look after them on the journey. Edwin Broomhead describes what life was like at Lucca. How the hospital developed. How, as happened at most camps, theatre groups and bands were formed, a choir got together, a library was opened thanks to the Red Cross delivery of books. On leaving he states in his book:

'Those were our days at Lucca, when from so little, so much evolved; when wounded men struggled up from valleys of pain to robust strength; when dull days became bright; when hunger left us and the parcels arrived; when strangers became friends, and when the quiet repression of a new prison hospital became a crowded round of concerts, games, rehearsals, songs, books and talk.'

Of the 106 who had been transferred from Chiavari only 18 remained in Lucca. Sadly, Gordon was one of those. Curiously he never mentioned this fact. We can only imagine what a terrible blow it must have been.

On the 10th September, 1943, the POWs at Lucca Hospital were all called on parade by the Italian Officer. Italy had signed the Allies' terms of surrender two days previously. They would soon be free to join their own people. The officer asked the POWs to remain at the hospital until the Allied troops arrived. Everyone was jubilant. But the celebrations were short-lived. It seemed that the Germans were pouring into Italy to oppose the Allied advance, to take over the POW camps and ship as many POWs as possible back to labour camps in Germany.

On 26th September, 1943, Gordon and his medical colleague prisoners, together with the patients, were crammed into cattle trucks and taken by train through northern Italy, across Austria and through Czechoslovakia. Private Terry Gorman remembers the train stopping at Innsbruck Station where they were allowed to get some water and a little food. Eventually, on 29th September, they arrived at Annahof Station, Silesia, on the borders of Germany and Poland. It's hard to imagine what those men were feeling after three days crammed into cattle trucks – cold, hungry, tired, worried, confused, mentally exhausted. They were herded off the trains to be surrounded by masses of armed guards yelling 'Raus! Raus! Schnell!' They then had to march around three kilometres to the camp along a country lane that was known as Chestnut Alley.

When the POWs turned the corner and first set eyes on Stalag VIII B they probably couldn't believe their eyes. It was gigantic!

And so began seventeen months of life at Stalag VIII B Lamsdorf.

When prisoners first reached the camp they queued for induction, delousing, finger printing and form completing. They were given a number and a dog tag, issued with a spoon and a fork, a mess tin, two blankets, a straw filled mattress and bed boards for the bunks.

Soon after induction they were photographed. The Germans gave them clean uniforms to wear, which had to be returned once the photograph had been taken, and were given to the next group waiting.

On a bench in front of a hut, the men sat in a long row, with a second row standing behind. Up to 18 men could be photographed in each group. Hundreds of men were photographed on that bench. The POWs sent the photographs home; this would show that they were still alive and were being treated correctly according to the Geneva Convention.

The size of the camp took some getting used to after the intimacy of the hospital at Lucca. Gordon described it as 'like a small town'. The highest number of POWs recorded was in October 1943, after the arrival of the POWs from Italy. The Red Cross report mentions 31,052 soldiers detained in the camp. Many of these moved on to the work camps, working in factories, mines and farms.

The camp was surrounded by double-banked barbed-wire fences with twenty feet high sentry boxes on stilts. Sentries were armed with machine guns and searchlights and were about a hundred yards apart along the fences. The two fences were eight feet high, attached to thick pine posts six feet apart and with big rolls of barbed wire in-between them. There was a trip wire that ran about eight feet in front of the inner wire, fifteen inches high. Step over that at your peril! At night the fences were patrolled by guards and German Shepherd dogs.

POWs were assigned to compounds, each consisting of four barrack blocks and a common latrine. There were about 1,000 men in a compound. Each barrack block was divided into two parts each accommodating about 130 men. The men slept in three-tiered H bunks which stood along one wall and there were ten tables with wooden benches, where meals were eaten, on the other side.

Everything was very well-organised and one gradually got used to the daily routine.

Those recognised as medical personnel were given medical duties in the camp medical inspection rooms, camp hospitals or with working parties. Gordon was one of those. As a Non Commissioned Officer Gordon was not obliged to work; he stated in his post war questionnaire that he had never been in a work camp. Gordon told his daughter that he had assisted in the hospital—caring for patients, changing dressings, giving injections and at times assisting in the operating theatre.

All the medical orderlies worked on a three-month rota system, so that no one was exposed to infectious diseases for long periods of time. The hospital at Lamsdorf was called the Lazaret. It had opened in October 1941 and was considered to be the best of all the POW hospitals in respect of facilities and equipment. It was about three hundred yards from the main camp, situated among the pine trees, fenced in and patrolled by guards.

In addition to the Lazaret there was a camp infirmary situated in the main camp – the Revier. A German officer-doctor supervised the Lazaret and the Revier but it was the British medical doctors who were responsible for the care of the POWs. Amongst the POWs there were medical doctors, surgeons, dentists and eye specialists.

The medical officers gave regular courses in nursing, anatomy and physiology. Gordon and the other orderlies would have definitely benefitted from working under such skilled doctors and surgeons.

One of the privileges of medical personnel was having the right of a walk outside the camp once a week, and during this time Gordon often collected wood for the fires. He said that the guard he usually went out with was older and was kind. He always helped him to carry the wood, often carrying it all for him and actually handing Gordon his gun to carry! Those walks outside the fenced camp were a small sense of freedom—walking through the gate, following the perimeter fence to a path that led off through the woods, being away from the noise and confinement of the camp. Gordon would stay out as long as he could. Sometimes, he and his guard sat down, leaned against a tree and smoked a

cigarette, savouring the wonderful feeling of being outside the barbed wire, even if only for a short time.

By the time Gordon arrived in Lamsdorf the school system was well established. Courses were offered in a great variety of subjects targeting different levels of education. Some even offered university level courses with examinations. In October 1941, following an inspection of the International Committee of the Red Cross the school was officially registered in England as a College-University. The camp also had an extensive library with thousands of books. The books and teaching resources had been supplied by the Red Cross and various other organisations.

During his time there, Gordon chose to study mechanical engineering, which he did alongside his medical duties. He successfully completed the external examinations and at the end of his course received his certificate. Sitting a professional examination is challenging under any circumstances, but POWs who took the exams did so under circumstances much more difficult than the average candidate back home.

Food was an ongoing matter of concern and would have been far worse if not for the Red Cross parcels. As well as providing additional food for the POWs the contents soon became a form of trading currency between not only the POWs but also the prison guards.

By the end of 1944 life in camp had become pretty routine. News filtered through about the progress of Allied troops. By January 1945 the Russian and western armies were racing towards each other across what was left of Hitler's Europe. The prisoners in camp heard the distant rumble of Russian guns, and Russian planes were seen flying overhead. The atmosphere in the camp was a mixture of tension and excitement as the POWs began to imagine an end to the war.

As the Russians slowly approached the border between Poland and Germany, the German authorities dropped a bombshell – everybody able to march, around eight thousand men, would be leaving. They were given twenty-four hours' notice to pack up their belongings and be prepared to evacuate the camp. The previous week a Red Cross Commission had repatriated 700 sick British POWs (they left on 15th January) but there were still many remaining who were ill and unable to march. They were left in the camp with doctors and medical staff.

The evacuation of all able-bodied men began on 22nd January, 1945. The prisoners were marched westward in groups of 200 to 300 men in the so-called Long March or Death March. The lucky ones got far enough to the west to be liberated by the American army. The unlucky ones got "liberated" by the Soviets who held them as virtual hostages for several more months. Many of them were finally repatriated towards the end of 1945 through the port of Odessa on the Black Sea. In total around 30,000 Allied POWs from the camps were force-marched westward in appalling winter conditions from January to April 1945.

Gordon was one of those ordered to stay behind, at this time he was either at the Lazaret or the Revier. They all wondered 'what next'? The main concern was a shortage of water, so they filled all the buckets and baths they could find. Some sick marchers limped back to Lamsdorf with bits of news. Russian guns continued firing. No one really knew what was happening. Then came news that a train was coming to move some of the patients.

A train left Annahof station with over 1,000 ill POWs on 21st February, 1945, at around 3pm, under the care of Sergeant Major Noble and Captain John Borrie. They arrived in Hammelburg Stalag XIII C nine days later on 2nd March. Gordon remained at Lamsdorf.

A week later three more trains left, evacuating the rest of the patients and medical personnel.

I knew from his post war questionnaire that Gordon left Lamsdorf on 5th March, but it took several years before I discovered his actual route. My Eureka moment came when I read an excerpt from the diary of Cyril Howard Griffiths McGregor on the Lamsdorf POW Facebook page! He had been on the same train and recorded the train's route to Stalag XIII D Nurnberg Langwasser. Then, by chance, a few weeks later I discovered the diary of Sergeant Sydney Alfred Smith in the photo gallery on the website www.prisonersofwarmuseum.com. Both of these diaries showed the route from Lamsdorf, and an entry in Sydney Smith's diary on 4th April, 1945 even mentioned Gordon Windridge by name. With his friend Arthur Riddle also being mentioned, both in Lamsdorf and Nurnberg, this was the confirmation I needed of Gordon's journey out of Lamsdorf to Moosburg. Gordon had been working in the Revier when they left Lamsdorf.

The men were drafted into groups of 42 and marched to the station at Annahof. They were hustled into cattle trucks after each receiving a loaf of bread and a small piece of margarine, according to Cyril McGregor.

'Trucks were dirty and it took some time to settle ourselves. The more thoughtful of the men had brought hammers and nails and soon most of the packs and heavy items were duly hung.'

The last train left on Monday 5th March at 4pm, reaching Neisse at 6pm and then travelling through the night.

Between 6th and 12th March the train took them through the following towns:

Pardubice, Kolin, Prague, Pilsen, Furth im Wald, Schwansdorf, Nurnberg-Maryfeld, Bamberg, Schweinfurt, Thungen, Gemunden, Wackersbach, Elm, Gemunden again, Wurzburg, Nurnberg-Maryfeld again.

Sydney Smith's diary gives an insight into what the journey was like.

They were allowed out for short periods most days, sometimes only five minutes, at other times twenty or thirty minutes. Twice they managed to get out for a wash. Some food was issued every day, usually bread, meat and soup. They also had a store of Red Cross parcels they had brought with them. There were signs of bomb destruction everywhere and they were often held up by air raids.

There was a roll call on 12th March at Nurnberg-Maryfeld when it was discovered 32 men were missing, it seems men had been jumping off the train along the way

The situation was chaotic; no camp would take them. The POWs in the camps wanted to get out, but the weary men from Lamsdorf desperately wanted to get in! There were so many POWs pouring in from the east and the Germans really didn't know what to do with all those men. They were losing the war and the POWs were not their first priority. The days in the trucks were cramped and tedious.

Eventually, on Tuesday 13th March, they were disembarked and marched (very groggy from the long confinement) to Stalag XIII D Nurnberg Langwasser.

Sydney Smith recalls:

'Mar 13th Tuesday: Up at 6 o'clock – packed – marched off at 7.30am to Stalag 13D. It wasn't very far but with our kit it seemed miles.'

When we got inside the camp we lined up on a long road where we were counted and re-counted and then told we would be searched and excess food taken from us and put into store under our names and numbers. However only Bruce had his box of food taken and that was returned next day.

Parties then went off for de-lousing and we washed and shaved while we waited. The flights are overhead and constantly going and bombing and anti-aircraft guns can be heard in the distance.

It seems de-lousing is a very lengthy process because we did not get done today and had to spend the night on boards in tents. Quite comfy but very cold.'

Cyril McGregor noted:

'It was a large camp, plenty of barb wire. Were searched by civilians – volkstrum – and youngsters. Parties of 100 deloused every two hours. Met a lot of Russians picking up butt ends etc. in spite of bellowing guards. Soon the camp area looked like a huge fairground with music from gramophones and men eating in little groups near fires fed with wood torn from buildings etc. while guards and Unteroffern looked helplessly on. We had arrived. Had taken possession of this camp and called it Home. The camp fires blazed far into the night. A night of rumbles and explosions from raiding planes.'

Stalag XIII D Nurnberg Langwasser was on the site of what had been the Nazi Party Rally Grounds. With the arrival of POWs evacuated from the camps in the east it was hugely overcrowded.

Conditions were deplorable, there was no room to exercise and few supplies. The rations consisted of 300 grams of bread, 250 grams of potatoes, some dehydrated vegetables and a little margarine. Fortunately, they received several issues of Red Cross parcels. Sanitation was lamentable. The camp was infested with lice, fleas and bed bugs.

With the approach of US forces the POWs were put on the road again in a forced march. These notes from the website of the US Air Force 392nd Bomber Group unit, many of whom had ended up at Stalag 13D, tells us more about this march:

'At 1700 hours on 3 April 1945, the Americans received notice that they were to evacuate the Nurnberg camp and march to Stalag VIIA Moosburg. At this point, the POWs took over the organization of the march. They submitted to the Germans Commander plans stipulating that in return for preserving order they were to have full control of the column and to march no more than 20 kilometres a day. The Germans accepted. On April 4, with each POW in possession of a food parcel, 10,000 Allied POWs began the march.

'While the column was passing a freight marshalling yard near the highway, some P-47s dive-bombed the yard. Two Americans and one Briton were killed and three men seriously wounded. On the following day, the column laid out a large replica of an American Air Corps insignia on the road with an arrow pointing in the direction of the march. Thereafter the column was never strafed. It proceeded to Neumarkt, to Bersheim, where 4500 Red Cross parcels were delivered by truck; then to Mulhauser, where more parcels were delivered.

'On April 9, the column reached the Danube, which Colonel DH Alkire flatly refused to cross, since it meant exceeding the 20-kilometer a day limit. With his refusal, the Germans lost complete control of the march and POWs began to drop out of the column almost at will. The guards, intimidated by the rapid advance of the American Army, made no serious attempt to stop the disintegration. The main body of the column reached Stalag VIIA Moosburg on 20 April, 1945.'

Sydney Smith's diary of 4th April actually mentions Gordon Windridge, and his friend Arthur Riddle, as having marched out on this day.

The route taken was:

Neumarkt, Berching, Buching, Josep Fuller - 1000-acre farm, Fetanagger near Mindelstetten, Beilngries, Sweinbach, Holtzhauzen, Ober Munchen, Gammelsdorf, Moosburg - a total march of around 200 kilometres.

Gordon suffered from dysentery again during this march. Dysentery was very common. Sufferers had the indignity of soiling themselves whilst having to continue to march, and being further weakened by the debilitating effects of the illness. Gordon said he had never felt so ill in all his life. He thought he was going to die. If it hadn't been for a fellow Australian POW he may well have done. Gordon didn't think he could keep going, but the unknown Aussie picked him up every time he fell, constantly encouraging him to keep going and at times carrying him long distances. We don't know his name but will be forever grateful.

The main body of the column arrived in Stalag VIIA Moosburg on 20th April and Gordon arrived on 23rd. The Germans had rounded up 100,000 POWs and crowded them into the Moosburg camp. Conditions there were chaotic, with little food or water and no shelter. Many POWs slept on the ground. Fortunately, they didn't have long to wait—they would be liberated in under a week.

Eventually, the long awaited liberation came. On the morning of April 29, 1945, the 14th Armoured Division of Patton's 3rd Army attacked the SS troops guarding Stalag VIIA and, finally, the American task force broke through. The first tank entered, taking the barbed wire fence with it. The prisoners went wild. Climbing on the tanks, cheering and shouting. Pandemonium reigned. They were free!

Gordon was flown back to England on a Lancaster bomber, either via Rhiems or Brussels. The exact route is uncertain, but he arrived in England on 10th May, 1945 and was stationed in Brighton with his old friend from Durban, Arthur Riddle. They finally left for home from Southampton on 30th May arriving in Cape Town on 9th June. Gordon's daughter Jeanette recalls:

'While in Cape Town the soldiers were allowed to speak very briefly on the radio to their families. A friend of our family came to tell us that Dad would be on the air. Granny and I were in Kearsney but Mum had, unfortunately, on that day gone into Durban (approximately 2 hours' drive away) to buy a new outfit for Dad's return, so she missed the broadcast. Granny was completely deaf so she was unable to listen. But I did and I can remember so well what he said. "Hello my darling Edna and Jeanette, I will see you soon."

'I don't know how soon after that it was that the soldiers left Cape Town, but I think the train journey took about five days. I remember so well the day Dad arrived. Mum drove into Durban with me in tow. Crowds of happy people on the station were pushing and shoving. As the train arrived the mob surged forward almost trampling me under foot. A very kind gentleman then put me on his shoulders until the train stopped. A photographer from the newspaper took a photo of Dad and Mum together on the station, which was in the paper the next day. It was a lovely photograph, both looking happily tearful.'

Gordon actually arrived in Durban on 14th June, 1945, his wife's birthday, almost five years since he had sailed out of Durban harbour. He had spent 1,253 days in captivity.