

A PRISONER OF THE REICH

1940 – 1945

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Forfar, November 2001



Although my purpose here is to tell of my life as a prisoner of War, I feel I should begin with the months leading up to my capture in June 1940.

When Britain declared War in September 1939, I volunteered like so many of my age-group and asked that I might serve in any Highland regiment. For many weeks of what was called the phoney war the Army seemed in no hurry to start training us and it was mid-November before I began proper service with the Gordon Highlanders at Bridge of Don Barracks in Aberdeen.

Childhood polio had resulted in my having a right leg which was shorter and thinner than the left so that the heel did not touch the ground. I had grown accustomed to walk on the front of that foot and managed all the usual sports with reasonable success. When having my medical test in September, I managed to conceal this disability from the M.O. who happily declared me fully fit for service. Actually, during my training, no-one seemed to notice the difficulty I experienced in certain drill-movements. More important to me was the ever-present and often uncomfortable corn on the ball of my foot.

In January 1940 several of us were sent to the Officer Cadet Training Unit at Dunbar where we hoped to gain commissions. Unfortunately for me, after a few weeks the corn on my foot quite unexpectedly turned into a very crippling abscess which was very slow to respond to treatment and made me miss so much instruction that I was unable to move forward with my company to the next month's training. The C.O. resolved that it would be best for me to return to Aberdeen to recuperate. He suggested that once I was fully fit I might be recommended again for Officer training.

At the time this was a disappointment to me but I quickly settled back in Aberdeen and by the end of March I was pretty fit and had completed my basic infantry training.

Hitler's invasion of Norway saw us being kitted out ready for embarkation but instead of sailing north-east, we travelled to Southampton and crossed to Le Havre whence we went by train to the large base camp at Rouen. There, with a host of other regiments we continued training while awaiting the call to reinforce the Highland Division which was with the French Army in the Maginot Line.

On the tenth of May, Germany invaded Holland and Belgium, an offensive which drew in much of the British Expeditionary Force and in time saw them and the French driven back to Dunkirk by the end of the month.

Meanwhile in Rouen we took our turn with other units of standing ready or roaming the neighbourhood, armed to the teeth, ready to locate and deal with any emergencies like enemy parachute groups. An amusingly confident rumour warned us that such parachutists would very probably be dressed as nuns and would have a grenade in each hand when invited to surrender. None of us intrepid bands ever saw any but we lost a lot of sleep and covered quite a few miles. At least it kept us on our toes.

As the Germans advanced south through Belgium, the Fifty First, the Highland Division was ordered to move across France to join the French troops preparing to hold the River Somme, Part of the division went via Le Mans and we went south to join them. Then plans were changed and we had to return north to Rouen again. There, in true infantry fashion we assumed full marching order preparatory to marching to the Somme - sixty miles away if you were a crow but much, much more by French roads. We were festooned with bandoliers of rifle ammunition, our pouches were filled with bren magazines and we were told to stuff our blouses with tins of food.

The weather in the latter part of May was very hot, the roads were dusty and soon we were pushing north against a pitiful flood of refugees in cars, in farm-carts, on bicycles or on foot and wheeling hand-carts or prams while they and we frequently had to dive into ditches to avoid German air-gunners. I suddenly saw at first hand the dreadful cost of war to ordinary, innocent civilians.

At that time the name Dunkirk meant little to us although we all knew the Germans were forcing the French and the B.E.F. southwards and had out-flanked them on the east. At the beginning of June we linked up with the division in the woods south of the River Somme. One group of us was told off to form a new company of the Fifth Gordons to replace one which had been lost in trying to stop the enemy at the Abbeville bridgehead. Our first task as darkness fell was to unpack and de-grease anti-tank rifles and two-inch mortars while an artillery duel raged overhead. Happily for us on that occasion we were not in the target area. By daybreak we had taken our place in the division's leap-frog withdrawal in line with our French allies.

It was not till later that I appreciated we were the only British division left in France after the fall of Dunkirk.

Until the twelfth of June our platoon was subjected to bombs, machine gunning and infantry attacks but by good luck was not faced by a direct tank attack.

The infantry rifleman knew little apart from his own platoon or company front so that even during the battalion's last stand in the front line on the eleventh of June our group had not heard of St. Valery just six miles away as we were wholly occupied in repelling German infantry attacks while exposed to long-range machine-gun covering fire.

By evening the front was quiet once more and we were ordered to hold that position until dawn next day. I recall how tired and sleepy we were by this time and, as we lay and watched, our edginess was made worse by a herd of wandering cattle which kept blundering through the corn-field in front of us. Possibly the enemy across the field was as irritated as we were by these false alarms.

At daylight under a very rainy sky, we moved quietly from our position and set off towards what we thought would be our next holding line. In reality, this was our final march to St. Valery.

The roadside was now littered with wrecked or burnt vehicles - far more than we had previously been seeing - and we realised things must be really bad. In a field by the road lay orderly lines of French small-arms, showing where a unit had dumped their weapons and departed while we were holding the line. Indeed, a whole day earlier, on our way back from the fighting at Martigny on the River Bethune, we had come upon a company of French who had discarded their weapons, filled their haversacks with food and were obviously waiting to surrender to the Germans. Our platoon was at this point separate from the rest of the battalion and I asked the French if they knew which way "the British had gone at the nearby crossroads". They said we should join them and also give up. When I told the others this, they were furious. We got no directions there but luckily guessed the correct road. This kind of episode fed the belief of many that all French troops were tarred with the same brush - a blanket condemnation which, of course, was most unfair.

As we reached the slope which led down into the burning town, we picked our way through a pitiful line of dead and bloated mules, a typical French transport column, which had been strafed. At each cross-roads we had to dive quickly over because the enemy now had machine-guns to our left and enjoyed snap-shooting. We didn't linger.

Eventually we were ordered to find shelter from the rain and rest before the division "tried to fight its way to Le Havre". Someone must have thought this would keep us hoping - but we had witnessed the general destruction of our transport and felt sure it was a pipe-

dream. Our section found shelter from the rain in a ruined shop while bombs kept bursting around us.

Towards eleven o'clock Captain Colville, our company commander, came up the street on a motor-cycle calling on all troops to surrender and go down to the harbour. No-one was to fire a shot as the German tanks held the centre of the town and we were at the mercy of their guns. We threw our rifle-bolts into the river-mud and smashed the rifles before heading for the water-front. There, sure enough, was a long line of tanks with their guns menacing the various parts of the burning town. We were directed along this line to a field on the outskirts where we were being collected under the watchful eye of more armour.

We lay there all afternoon and night trying to come to terms with what had happened. My main reaction was naturally a sickening sadness and shame at having had to surrender - while, at the same time, I was aware of a curious sense of guilty relief that at last the noise and confusion of the retreat was over. It may have been unworthy of a British soldier but part of me felt it was perhaps due to my exhausted state. I don't know if I was alone in this.

A British plane flew up the coast past us through ineffectual gun-fire and then headed out to sea, no doubt, to report on the division's fate. This was the last friendly plane we saw for four years. We were given no food but most of us had our flat tin of emergency meaty chocolate and we ate that. Next morning we were marched in a seemingly endless column of British and French for about twenty miles to Yvetot.

Every eighty yards or so there was a lorry with a machine gun mounted on the cab roof. Its bumper drove the prisoners on while anyone who left the column to grab a turnip or a potato which had fallen from a farm-cart into the gutter was either hit or herded back into line by a burst of fire. That night we slept in a large field having been given a drink of water but no food. Next day we marched to, of all places, Rouen, where we were given a mess-tin of soupy stew, our first meal for three days.

Thereafter, we marched most days northwards through or near places like Forges Les Eaux, Aumale, Amiens and Villers Bocage to the town of Doullens. The march was now guarded not by lorries but by infantry who marched beside us.

On this part of the march many French-women braved the boots and rifle-butts of the guards to dash forward and thrust pieces of bread into our hands. One morning I was given an egg. Unsure whether it was fresh or cooked, I carried it gingerly all day. That

evening a friend and I managed to make a small fire in the field and boiled the precious egg. Of course, Madame had sensibly boiled it. Nevertheless we enjoyed this rare treat. The courage of these splendid women was most impressive, especially as we were now seeing roadside posters with which the Germans were trying to convince the French that the “English” had betrayed them in their hour of need.

Spending those few weeks near French troops, I several times witnessed an interesting morning ritual of some of our allies. Each man had a long bandage of flannel about ten feet by one. He would bare his torso and drop his trousers. He then held one end of the cloth on his waist and turned round and round while a friend held the other end which was then tucked in. He thus started each day with a firm, warm bandage round his middle, whether for health, comfort or military bearing I never discovered. I also several times had the experience of spending nights close to French North African troops - tall fellows who often had several scars on each cheek, no doubt showing tribe or caste. I was struck by the strange, dry, musty smell they exuded. Doubtless we seemed strange to them.

Despite the hot days, the nights in open fields could be very cold and, for sleeping, about eight of us would lie together to share our two or three coats and gas-capes. We lay huddled together like sardines in a tin. If one got cramp in the wet grass he sometimes turned and we all turned with him. We took turns at being outside man.

During the first two weeks I kept asking Service Corps personnel for any news of my brother, Hugh, who had been a driver with the division. At length a group who had been with him said they had seen his ambulance apparently bombed and burning outside St. Valery but had found no trace of him. They knew nothing of his fate. It was not until nine months later that I learned from my first letter from home that he was alive somewhere in Britain. Consequently he was one of the few who got down the cliffs on the rope of rifle-slings and escaped by boat.

After two weeks our helmets were taken away. This was a pity as the tin-hat minus its padding made a fine bowl for washing or occasionally cooking. The last such use of mine sticks in my memory. We were very dirty and desperately hungry when our guards made us spend two days in a deep quarry or moat beside Doullens Castle. It had steep sides covered with nettles and guards with dogs patrolled the top. We could get water from a stand-pipe.

The nettles gave me an idea. I remembered Mother, who had spent many years in France before the first war, telling us children about nettle soup. A few of us found twigs and

built a fire on which we placed my helmet filled with water. We then gathered lots of nettles and boiled up a thick, albeit saltless, soup. Morale had been very low, and this gave us a real fillip irrespective of any actual nourishment it contained.

It was at Doullens too that I realised how my Bible, a kind gift from Father's friend John Fairlie of Wallacetown Church, had become much sought after by other prisoners for evening reading. It seemed to be the only reading material available to those who knew me.

Next stop, St Pol, saw us receive our largest lump of bread in two weeks. It was as big as a morning roll though, of course without any spread. Then for two nights in Bethune we enjoyed the sheltered luxury of sleeping under the seats in the football stadium. From then on we passed Lille, Toumai, Renaix, Ninove, Aalst, Lokeren and then on light railway flat trucks to Dordrecht. Total walking distance was nearly 400 kms.

By this time, I had neither greatcoat nor gas-cape. McNair of our group had become very fevered and had to be left behind at Renaix with other sick men. As he had no coat and would be on his own, I left him mine as I had my cape and group-warmth at night. Unfortunately, a guard took a fancy to my camouflaged cape at a later stop and took it.

At Dordrecht we were loaded on to three enormous coal-barges. At the gangway we were given a loaf of bread each, while a notice in English told us it had to last three days. Then we went through a hatchway on the deck and down a long, shaky ladder to find ourselves in a dark hold on six inches of coal-dust. We could sit but had no room to lie even if we had wished to. Three times a day each group could climb the ladder to day-light on deck. There you got a drink of water and used the "toilet" which was a plank slung outside the rail over the water. If you were unlucky, your tum occurred as the tug-boat towed the barges along the river/canal in a town. Of course we attracted the attention of passers-by but by now we were long past embarrassment. Like some others, I soon found that half of my small loaf was quite green and inedible. On the third day we docked at the Rhine town of Wesel where we disembarked, black with dust and went to a transit camp at Meppin.

Meppin was a small camp of marquees which we shared with French troops and about thirty lascars who had been taken for some reason from a vessel on the Channel coast. They were led by a splendid, big negro who kept them in order and when speaking to me, used an intriguing pidgin French. We called him Tiny. One day, when Tiny, a French N.C.O. and I had distributed the daily lump of bread to our groups, we found that one piece was missing and I was the unlucky person. My French colleague was sympathetic but Tiny

immediately ran to his group and grabbed a weasel of a man, turned him upside down shook him violently and my bread fell out of his ragged shirt. A leader who knew his men!

None of us British spoke German. One French Alpine chasseur had school German. My school French seemed to be the best we had amongst the British. Consequently, for issuing orders, allocating food fairly or, most importantly, dealing at sick-parades with the German Army doctor, the Germans would talk to the Frenchman who tried to translate this for his countrymen. He then repeated more slowly to me what he thought the Germans had said or asked. I turned into English what I thought the Frenchman thought the Germans had said. At sick-parade each day I had to try to express in school French what was troubling the British invalids and the process went in reverse. I imagine that like me the Frenchman had no medical vocabulary but the German doctor seemed to get the drift of what we were saying and during our stay in Meppin we all not only survived but learned to respect the professional impartiality of that doctor. I may have been lucky in the German Army doctors I met but I found them to be of a very fine calibre.

One day the French from north France were sent home which caused speculation among their southern compatriots and us.

On the thirteenth of July the British were marched to a station and loaded into old horse-wagons of 14-18 vintage, still labelled 8 horses or 40 men. We actually numbered 63 in our wagon which had the usual horizontal slit high in each corner and the sliding door firmly closed. A large tin can was passed round as a urinal. Since you could not see properly in the near darkness, your thumb told you when it was full and it was emptied through a high ventilation slit. Once by luck it was tipped out as the train went slowly past a passenger platform. We hoped we had soaked one or two Germans.

After two nights we arrived at Lamsdorf, Stalag 8B, a huge, permanent camp on the Polish border. I heard it had been designed to hold 30,000 prisoners and already contained many Poles from the previous year.

The perimeter had high double fences about ten feet apart with rolls of barbed wire between them. Watch-towers with search-lights and machine-guns made escape through the outer fences impossible. Inside were many compounds separated by single fences, each compound containing four long huts and a shed with multiple toilet-holes in a long bench

above a deep cesspit. This toilet-shed afforded no privacy whatsoever. Each hut had room for 200 men, 100 on each side of a central washroom. Bunks were of wood and three-tier. The palliasses were bags of chaff but as they were very itchy and harboured bugs and fleas; most of us preferred to sleep on the bare boards with our single blanket. As our hip bones were now rather prominent, we slept on our backs.

On our first day we were documented and finger-printed, our heads were completely shaved, we were photographed with our prison-number chalked on a board on our chest and were then sent to a shower with a small cake of clay-like soap to clean ourselves and try to get rid of our lice. My number was 17232. Our uniforms meantime had been cooked in a smelly chemical to kill the lice and eggs in the seams. It was marvellous for some time after that to have some respite from the wee beasts. To save our badly-worn boots, we were each given an enormous pair of boatlike Dutch clogs carved from single pieces of wood. They were beautifully made but hopeless for walking as they were rigid and usually too big. If you had diarrhoea and a sudden call came, you had to leap out of your sabots and run bare-foot to the toilet at the far end of the compound.

At this time we had no toilet-paper (when working outside we could pick up scraps of useful newspaper). Some wispy grass grew along the bottom of the wire but to reach it meant attracting the attention of a suspicious guard. Some men had carried diaries or small Testaments and the leaves, though small, were better than nothing. I jealously guarded my Bible and to this day it is grubby but intact.

Another hardship of the prisoner is that especially in a stalag he never has any privacy. In work-camps the toilet was usually a single wooden hut or had cubicles but otherwise every other aspect of your life was open to your fellows. The ultra-sensitive amongst us suffered a great deal. Added to all this, of course, was the fact that in the Autumn of 1940 we had no news of home or war.

Food was a slice of black bread morning and evening and a ladle of ersatz coffee in your bowl. We now possessed only a tin bowl and a dessert-size spoon. Sometimes the bread was spread with cooking-fat. At mid-day we received two small potatoes cooked in their skins. A recurring dream for me at this time was of being at home with the family and waiting expectantly to go to the dining-room where a large meal had been set out. I would go through and see it but always woke up before I could eat any.

A German lieutenant whose English was broad Brooklyn, explained to us all the do's and don'ts for P.O.W's. He became known as South American Joe. One rule was that we must always stand in the presence of a German officer. One day Joe entered our hut by the end door. We didn't see him in time. He stormed at us for lack of respect and said he'd go out and re-enter when he expected us all to stand properly. He went out and paused to let us settle. In a flash half of us raced into the wash-room while the rest dived through the open windows. He and his corporal made their grand entrance into an empty room to be greeted by grinning faces outside the windows. He had the grace to laugh at our initiative and from then on was accepted as a decent German.

On the eighth of August I was sent to Oehringeri Grube, a coal-mine between Gleiwitz and Kattowitz. We numbered 250 and included men from Durham and Wales who had experience of mining. We lived in a long, wooden hut with three iron stoves and many two-tier bunks. The yard was surrounded with barbed wire and there was a two-cubicle, wooden privy in the middle of the yard. Large wooden boxes underneath were emptied regularly, a most unpleasant task. This toilet was always dirty, very smelly in hot weather and miserable in rain, sleet or snow. Our civilian work-mates' sandwiches were wrapped in the local paper, the Beobachter, and served us well for toilet purposes.

For the first few weeks I was employed above ground emptying wagons of pitprops which varied from one to five metres long. These were sent to the pit-head on small-gauge trucks, the long props being bound on firmly and lowered vertically down the shaft. The working depth at that time was about eighteen hundred feet.

At first I was glad to be working in daylight and fresh air but a very early and severe cold spell set in. Our worn-out uniforms and summer underclothes were no real protection and several lads were laid low with, I suppose, hypothermia and were very ill indeed. In addition, the absence of gloves meant that our fingers sometimes stuck to the steel of the high-sided trucks as we climbed in at the very early start to the shift. We learned to pull our sleeves over our hands in hard frost.

In late September a group of us open-air workers were ear-marked to join those already underground. Since our friends assured us that it was at least warmer down below, we decided this could be the lesser of two evils. The Germans marched us to a hospital for X-ray. This must have satisfied them for they then gave me a glass phial and a tiny spoon to provide the medicos with a bowel sample. Our meagre diet and my perennially sluggish bowels

meant a vain wait for several days while the weather became even colder and more lads suffered its effects. Then one midnight a sympathetic friend, back from mid-day shift, woke me up and presented me with a newspaper parcel containing one of his stools. Next morning I solemnly handed in my sample and was duly declared fit to go underground. No doubt I would have managed eventually to produce my own sample but since he had thoughtfully tried to help me I cheerfully accepted his gesture and we both chuckled at our odd deceit.

In the mine we followed a three-shift day, six days a week and sometimes seven when, to our disgust, we had to help when the mine worked an extra day “for the Fuhrer”. Usually, we were all together on Sunday afternoon when the night shift came back.

Normally a prisoner was attached to two or three civilians. On day-shift, for example, you got up at 4.30, marched under guard through the mine area to a canteen and received a ladle of coffee and a slice of dark bread with a smear of dripping. Thereafter, in the bath-house you donned denim jacket and trousers on your naked body. You removed socks if you had any, put on your helmet and drew a carbide lamp. This pit was luckily safe for naked lights. Then you climbed, shivering, to the draughty pit-head, entered the cage and the four-level contraption rattled down more than five hundred metres. Some sections of the cage held civilians and we soon discovered that they regarded whistling in a mine to be very unlucky. For devilment we would sometimes whistle as we went down and the miners above or below us became agitated and shouted to us to stop. We derived much innocent pleasure from our spirited renderings of Colonel Bogey.

At the bottom we travelled in empty coal-tubs for one or two kilometres to our allotted work places. We were not guarded here but under the eye of our civilian mates. Work consisted mainly of shovelling coal or stone into trucks or fetching props for the miners. Neighbouring blasts often blew out your light and if you happened to be at a distance from your squad, you sat in the dark and had a rest until a civvie came to find you and re-light your lamp. This was our best chance of skiving.

The day-shift lasted till 2 p.m . As the coal-trucks were now full, we had to walk to the foot of the shaft in single file by the light of our lamps while loaded trains brushed close past us. When we came to points, we often amused ourselves by throwing them over in the hope of derailing a train. Sometimes we merely cancelled a switch made by those ahead of us but now and again we came on a scene of great activity as a squad of break-down men strove to get several tons of electric locomotive back on track, while several trains queued up behind

them. I think that the drivers must have become good at spotting faulty points settings because these derailments were infrequent but always worth trying.

By 3 o'clock we were back in the bath-house where we showered and resumed our uniforms. An annoying discomfort was the black, panda-like ring round each eye. Our little block of coarse soap cleaned our bodies and faces but had no way of cleaning our eyes and rubbing made them very tender. Thereafter we were given a ladle of thin, cabbage soup and marched back to the billet. About six we received another slice of bread and a drink of coffee.

All winter and spring my Bible was the only book in the camp and was much in demand. Soon some of the lads asked me if I could hold a service for them. I protested I had no training for this but they pressed me hard and I agreed to concoct an ecumenical service if I was given suggestions by all who remembered parts of worship from home. Every denomination contributed something. In time we got old business letters from a mine dump we passed each day and with similarly salvaged carbon-paper we made a library of favourite hymns in bundles of sheets.

At first I led the singing, becoming fairly proficient at finding a suitable pitch. After several weeks a group of Welsh lads, proud of their country's tradition, formed an enthusiastic choir. From them I learned the tune Cwm Rhondda. It became a great favourite. Denominational differences did not loom large among us. At a time when everything had gone against us, when Germany seemed to be winning all over Europe and when, worst of all, we had no idea what was happening at home, our clumsy but frequent services were one bit of home we could keep going. It was interesting that, with the arrival of Red Cross parcels, letters from home and books, my congregations grew smaller. This was, of course, natural.

At the end of 1940 a new commandant took over the camp. He was a fanatical and definitely unbalanced Nazi. We immediately sensed the change from his predecessor who had been strict but reasonable. Now even the guards seemed nervous.

During our first few months, there had been several unsuccessful attempts at escape. At best they lasted two or three days. Punishment was three days in a bare cellar - the "bunker" - on bread and water. The new commandant punished the guards who had been on duty when the escape took place and then sent the same, now very bitter, soldiers to bring back the captured escapees. It surprised none of us when our friends returned with their bodies and faces bruised by the escorts who maintained that they had tried to escape again.

This happened once or twice and discouraged all but the most determined from trying anything, especially as we were on the wrong side of Europe and had neither food nor maps nor any other escape equipment. The Geneva Convention was supposed to protect prisoners, of course, but the commandant was a law unto himself and with the exception of one occasion I saw in Lamsdorf, I never knew of a visit to a camp by any neutral observers.

The commandant's worst deed happened in March 1941 when two lads, despite the threat of beatings, slipped away and by cruel luck were soon caught in a blinding blizzard, blundered into trouble and were re-arrested. As usual the scapegoat guards were sent to bring them in. On their return the commandant unexpectedly decided to accompany the party round the perimeter to the bunker. They set off in the snowy darkness. Soon the commandant was back and ordered a detail of prisoners to be taken out to retrieve the bodies of escapees who "had attacked him and the guards".

The two bodies, showing bullet and bayonet wounds, were, by his orders, left outside our toilet-hut in the slush for several days as a warning to the rest of us. At last he allowed us to bury them. As happened to me several times over the years, I was asked by the others to make up and conduct the burial service. On these unhappy occasions the Germans supplied grave-spaces and coffins. As in the case of Sunday Worship, I was greatly helped by the memories of older companions.

The Hauptman heartily hated me and sneeringly addressed me as Herr Pastor when inspecting the Sunday morning parade. He would invent criticism of my dress, my poor boots or, failing that, my "insolent attitude" as an excuse to slap my face. Fortunately for me his behaviour was unique and the normal guards were not like this, even if they could be pretty rough in dealing with us.

A more amusing example of his antipathy came once on a Sunday evening. At the close of worship we always sang a verse of the National Anthem. On this occasion he burst into the end of the billet and emptied his pistol over our heads through the strings of grey washing and screamed at us to stop this "propaganda". His meaning was clear!

By the next Sunday someone had the inspiration to suggest that we sing "Land of Hope and Glory" instead. It worked. We had a much better tune to sing, the commandant thought he had won and everyone was satisfied.

The Spring of 1941 saw the arrival of our first letters from home. This was a wonderful time for us all but especially for those who feared their homes were probably most

likely to be vulnerable to Luftwaffe bombing though, of course, we all had worries to a variable degree. After all, when German civilians boasted that “England” had been bombed and was now “kaput” they could really mean anywhere in Britain. To see our families' handwriting was a marvellous source of comfort - although my sister Moira's first letter cheerfully asked whether on my twenty-first birthday back in November I had been given the key of the door. Some lads received distressing news and occasionally chose me as someone to talk to. All I could do was listen sympathetically. I felt inadequate but possibly being listened to was what they needed.

About Easter we got our first Red Cross parcels. They came from Britain and couldn't match the quality of those which were later sent from Canada but at that time they were a dream come true. This first consignment was enough for one between two men (later we found we often had to share and frequently received none for several weeks).

Our delight at seeing them arrive infuriated the Hauptman. He had a table set up and ordered us to pair off and line up. He told the leading pairs to bring their tin basins. A guard opened the first parcel and was ordered to burst the packets and tip salt, pepper, sugar, tea, coffee and any other powder into a bowl and stir them. Any tins of jam, milk, rice or McConnachie stew were stabbed with a spike lest they be hoarded for escape purposes. The same happened to the next two pairs and we feared the worst. Fortunately he then grew bored and restricted things to piercing all tins. This was possibly a justifiable precaution by the Wehrmacht but even it died out after a few months.

In the late Spring a new battle-dress arrived for everyone along with boots to replace the ill-fitting, second-hand footwear the Germans had scraped from defeated armies. It felt! good to have decent clothes and get rid of my size eleven monstrosities.

All this time I was trying to learn the language from guards and miners. A good friend, Sgt Norman Griffiths, of the Royal Horse Artillery, felt, like me and one or two others, that we should keep our minds active and we used to compare notes after each shift as to new words or phrases we had learned.

Another tremendous boon to some of us was the rich treasury of poems and soliloquies we held in common. Often we confessed we had learned pieces unwillingly at school but now it was a joy to begin, for example, a poem and, when your memory failed you, heard someone else carry on the quotation. In the many months when we had no reading material this meant much to us.

“Barbarossa”, Germany's invasion of Russia in midsummer 1941 gave us hope they might after all be beaten but also made us uneasy that the pit-shaft might be bombed while we were below. Some of the lads learned from their Polish mates that an air-shaft existed which might serve as an escape-route. In the event, we saw no Russian planes for the next three years.

In late summer, books began to arrive through the Red Cross. Professor Edgar Dickie of St. Andrews University arranged study-books for captured students. Not all got through but I received quite a few Latin and Greek texts. Our families could not send food but were permitted to send clothing and books. These parcels from home were very heart-warming although, again, by no means all arrived. We appreciated that parcels and letters came by ship to neutral Lisbon and then went overland through Spain and Viché France to Geneva. The odd wagon diverted or plundered as it wandered through the temptations of south-west Europe was only to be expected and meant that stuff from home, often promised in letters never reached the camps. However, despite these disappointments, what the Red Cross did for us - and for our families - during these years will always be remembered with gratitude. I would also record that in my experience the ordinary German soldier could be trusted to respect anything that was sent to us.

By the Autumn the Germans were claiming vast advances by the Wehrmacht into Russia and the German civilians were infuriatingly jubilant in explaining the headlines, maps and photographs in the local papers. It was most depressing for us since we had no means at this time of knowing how much of this to believe.

An accident that Autumn ended my mining career. One night my knee was trapped between two loaded trucks. It was so swollen and painful that the district foreman, the Steiger, provided me with a heavy, yard-long stick and sent me to the shaft with a coal-train. He also phoned to have a guard await me at the pit-head. Eventually, more or less clean, I crawled into my bunk.

Next forenoon an armed guard aroused me and made me hobble to the commandant's office. As I stood in front of his table, my stick was kicked by the unpleasant Gefreiter (lance-corporal) who usually attended him. When I fell, the guard set about booting me while the commandant used my stick to belabour my back and shoulders. I was then sent back to the barrack-room. When mid-day shift left, I had to go too with my own guard since

my walking speed as too slow. Fortunately my work-squad of civilians were human and made no demands on me except when the foreman came round.

Next day my knee was worse and I was packed off to a hospital, a former sanatorium, up in the Czech mountains at Langenbielow where mixed nationality prisoners tholed wards which were too cold for any sensible bacteria. After ten miserable days the staff were ordered to clear us all out to make room for German wounded from Russia. Accordingly, we were sent back to our various stalags and so I returned to Lamsdorf. My leg was now obviously much better and I feared I might be sent back to the mine.

During my year's absence from the camp, the permanent residents, senior warrant officers, medical staff, the long-term wounded, cooks, post-office workers, doctors, padres and so on - had organised a more settled way of life. There was also a compound of R.A.F. prisoners who were never sent to work. An amusing practice perfected by the prisoners was used to irritate the guards most mornings. The men from each barrack-hut were drawn up for Appel (counting). We always made five lines, each line being about forty men long. The guards assumed that each front man would have four others behind him. The counting guard paced slowly along, grasping each man by the arm and chanting, "ein, zwei, drei ..." until he reached thirty-nine or forty, depending on that day's expected numbers. He then reported to the Feldwebel who had a notice of how many should be there. The guard's total was often wrong because a man in the third or fourth line had crouched down and scurried back to join those already counted so that the poor guard appeared to have lost one, or a blank file would be filled by a man who had already been counted. With the German Orderly Officer approaching the compound to receive the morning numbers, the sergeants became beautifully agitated. The unfortunate soldier who did the counting bore the brunt of this.

The time came when I was pronounced fit and included in a party to go, not to the mine but to a factory. On the eve of departure we were lodged next door to the R.A.F. compound and we could speak to them through the wire. Unexpectedly, an airman called me to the fence. He said that their escape committee had a pilot of my height and colouring ready to be the next to try to escape. He was fully equipped and only needed to get out to a work-party. To get clear of the stalag, he had to pretend to be a soldier. Would I change places with him? The price of this would be that if he got away as Private MacLean, I might lose mail

until he told my folk to send letters and parcels to Sergeant Pilot Middleton. If he was recaptured, we would both keep our new identities and hope the R.A.F. could wangle some solution with the stalag post-office or more realistically we would make a clean breast of things, take our punishment and resume our real identities. I agreed and after dark we crawled under the wire, shook hands and exchanged papers telling each other who we now were. I couldn't see him but discovered that I was now an Aberdonian whose Blenheim bomber had been shot down in Holland. Many airmen wore khaki battle-dress and so I looked alright.

After about ten days with my new friends I was called out by a guard who said that "the Middleton" was to go with him to the commandant's office. There I was quizzed by the colonel through an interpreter. For over half an hour I was able to answer their questions but unfortunately they seemed to know the maiden name of Middleton's mother and my confident guess of "Scott" deservedly failed. They then showed me my own prison card with its haggard, hairless photo of me in 1940. I had successfully smudged my finger-prints when a clumsy guard had taken them but the colonel still declared me guilty and sentenced me to three weeks solitary confinement on bread and water.

Now at last I saw my alter ego and indeed I was a good match for him apart from his moustache. As we were marched to the prison-block in a corner of the stalag he told me that when first captured he had tried to escape from the civilian hospital that was treating him in Holland and was soon recaptured. By strange bad luck, the German interpreter who dealt with him then was now resident in Lamsdorf and seemed to have remembered him. Our R.A.F. numbers were small and he must quickly have found his photograph when he decided to test the accuracy of his hunch.

My cell was about eight feet by five with concrete floor, a solid wooden bench, one blanket and a metal pitcher of water. Each day you got a fist-sized lump of dry bread. For two hours each morning and ninety minutes each afternoon, all two dozen of us were taken out and forced to march or run round and round a yard in several inches of late-November slush on the ground. Talking was forbidden. We managed a little conversation à la Barlinnie without moving our lips but often the guards would spot someone and we all had to lie face down in the slush. If the prison sergeant, a nasty bully, was present, he would push our heads down with his top-boot. It was pretty unpleasant for these three weeks but at least I was myself again.

On release I was sent with twenty-four other prisoners to the village of Gross Dubensko in a huge, formerly Polish, estate which boasted two farms, a forest, a sawmill and a distillery. We were attached to the main farm, the other being a sort of "home farm" beside the mansion house in Ornontowitz, two miles away. Our billet was a two-storey detached house with a tiny barbed wire yard in which was the usual dry toilet with its wooden box under the seat.

Now in addition to the usual 1940 bunch we had an influx of Australians and Kiwis from Greece and Crete. We stayed on this commando from December 1941 till January 1945. As my grasp of German, though limited, was clearly superior to that of anybody else, all communications were whenever possible made through me. The more I had to struggle with the language, the faster I began to learn. Of course, as time passed most of the others became to varying degrees sufficiently proficient for ordinary purposes.

An Australian sergeant, Paddy Sheahan, became our official leader. An ex taxi-driver from Sydney, an "ancient" of nearly forty, became cook and looked after the barrack. I worked with the rest but was called for from time to time to interpret for the guards or civilians. We were thus the first to be given special roles by the Germans. Paddy also worked like the rest of us. Our cook's name was Alf Waltisbuhl.

Our billet consisted of four two-roomed flats, each room being about fifteen feet by ten. The guards occupied one flat downstairs and the other served as cookhouse and general purpose area. Its two windows were barred. Upstairs, each flat held twelve or thirteen men in its inner room while its outer room had a flat-topped stove, a table and two rough benches. A door at the foot of the stair was locked at night and the upstairs windows were protected with heavy-gauge wire netting. A night-bucket was placed at the head of the stairs. Come to think of it, for five years I never once used a flush toilet.

At first we all worked in the forest where we prepared pit-props in the snow. The cold was really bitter. We took a flagon of ersatz coffee with us and the guards readily let us light a bonfire to warm them and us and to heat the coffee which was often frozen by mid-day. Some of the Australians had never experienced snow before. The novelty wore off in the first morning.

We learned to watch each other's faces for the tell-tale white appearing on ears or nose. This meant incipient frost-bite which the victim seldom felt at the time. The treatment was to rub the feature hard and painfully to restore circulation. A few of us 1940 "veterans"

had received balaclavas or scarves from home but many had no real protection in this their first winter. The Germans did not give us socks but “foot-rags” - squares of cloth like dish-towel - which we wrapped round feet and with luck the boot held them in place. In time the guards agreed to help those of us whose toes were showing signs of damage from the cold, and that meant most of us. They marched us all to Knurów coal-mine about seven miles away. There we scrubbed our lousy bodies in lovely hot water and then sat in a naked row on the floor while a German Army doctor with curved scissors clipped the dead, marbled skin from the ends of our toes. He was very accurate and gave most of us considerable relief. Then, much cleaner, we went home to our cabbage and potato soup and slice of bread and dripping.

Sometimes we had to join the farm-workers in threshing the rye-crop. We surreptitiously filled our pockets with the rye which, when boiled, made a dull but filling porridge. We now fared better than in stalag or mine with stolen potatoes or grain and our official soup and two slices of bread. The occasional arrival of Red Cross parcels added a welcome variety to our diet. At least we now never had the literally aching emptiness which we had previously endured, at least, not for our three years on the farm.

Secret and risky dealings with non-Nazi civilians, whom we gradually identified, especially those who had children, enabled us to exchange things like a bar of chocolate for a loaf of bread. Good quality soap was also a rarity for them and was often bartered. I recall a prisoner telling me how mystified he had been when his usual client had refused to accept a cake of soap. He had happily accepted soap previously but now was obviously alarmed. I soon realised the problem. Our latest parcels came from Canada and the wrapper on their soap bore the legend “Gift of the Canadian Red Cross”. The word “Gift” in German means “poison”.

The estate joiner, with fairly basic tools, made the whole variety of equipment for a huge farm, - equipment ranging from splendid four-wheeled wagons to wooden buckets for byre or stable, from huge sledges to replace wagon-wheels when the land was under snow, to simple stools for the squad of milk-maids. In Spring, he lost his assistant who had been called up for the Wehrmacht. Gus Bagley, a New Zealand cabinet-maker, whose stomach had been so damaged by a tracer-bullet in Crete that he could not perform heavy work, was given as assistant to Myrczek the joiner. Soon I found myself frequently seconded to the joiner's to interpret his instructions and add my untutored muscle to Gus's undoubted skill with wood. At busy times like harvest, I spent weeks back with the general squad.

Another Kiwi, Doug Shaw, whose grasp of German was growing faster than most, was given to the blacksmith who was not only a skilled mechanic but seemed to provide the veterinary care needed on a farm which carried a hundred milk-cows, forty work-horses and a large piggery whose fluctuating numbers I never established.

Like most Upper-Silesians, the joiner and blacksmith both spoke German and Polish equally well. In time we discovered that both had secret connections with the Polish underground which was pro-communist. At that time, of course, since Hitler had reclaimed their land, they had to speak German whenever they might be overheard. Since both were married and had young families, patriotic gestures in Nazi Germany would have been quite stupid. Those were years for patience.

The farm manager, Herr Kielbasa, was a portly and pompous Nazi whose coachman, Adamczyk, was his spy, constantly watching for un-German speech or behaviour. He was heartily disliked and distrusted by most of the ordinary workers. Civilians who could not, or would not, speak German had to wear a yellow "P" and were treated as second-class citizens. A common poster kept reminding everyone, "Wer Polnisch spricht ist unser Feind", - "Anyone who speaks Polish is our enemy".

Gus passed on to me many carpentry skills while Myrczek taught both of us how to make mysterious things like wagon wheels, sledges, barrels and harrows, often using simple hand-tools. Of course, while there was always much work of construction and maintenance to be done, we also found scope for malingering and making gadgets to improve our billet.

In the winter of 42-43, Barge Irvine, a big Australian who had large, strong hands, was often seconded to the estate saddler and managed to purloin pieces of leather and thread. With them we could make rough purses and, for example, hinges for boxes. In the Spring, Gus and I painstakingly built a cricket bat with willow blade and an ash handle which was laminated with inserted strips of an old inner-tyre. With a ball of birch-wood and yards of binder-twine, we shaped a ball. Barge cleverly cut four sections of leather which were soaked, hammered into shape and then stitched in place with waxed string.

On several Sundays that summer, our guards took us to a level field where we enjoyed mini test-matches until the poor ball changed shape enough for every ball bowled to behave like a googly. Our cricket standard was not high but its value for morale was considerable.

Our commando was too small to merit much sports equipment. We did, however, get two pairs of boxing-gloves and they were very useful to many of us especially as space was restricted.

As for the medical side, we normally had a supply of aspirin, bandages, lint, sticking-plaster and a smelly but effective ointment called Ichthyol (no doubt confirming its fishy origin). Alf, the cook, was our unofficial nurse and I occasionally helped him or liaised with the Germans about illness.

We established a system, used at prudently infrequent intervals, whereby each man could have a day off work. In the morning I would go down to the guards and report that "so and so was very fevered today'. They would give me their thermometer and tell me to stick it in his mouth and a guard would come up in due course. One lad watched the stair while we dipped the thermometer in warm water to raise its reading to the thirties. Sometimes it shot too high and involved frantic shaking down. The guards never tumbled to our trick and quite a few fit prisoners had a day of rest.

During my years at Dubensko, I continued my church services but, of course, my congregation was now a mere handful in one of the tiny living-rooms, leaving the other room to those who were not interested. It was more like a house-group.

In the Summer of 1943, Paddy Sheahan and I were taken by a guard to Lamsdorf to pick up a consignment of new uniforms. Apart from the interest of revisiting the stalag, I have two memories of this trip. In the train we were crushed in a compartment of civilians while our guard stood chatting in the corridor. A traveller beside me conversed with me for quite a while, discussing the fine work that the Todt units had done in Russia, altering the gauge of the railway tracks to enable German trains to follow close behind the advancing Wehrmacht. I quickly realised that my khaki uniform was not unlike the brown of the German Pioneer Corps and my German speech was good enough to make him take me for a not very articulate pioneer. This showed my spoken German was becoming fairly good.

My other memory, is that, having suffered tooth-ache for a good while, I managed to see a British Army Dentist. Against his professional instincts, he agreed to extract my two offending teeth since the guard could not delay our departure. Given time, my teeth might have been saved but their extraction gave me great relief.

In our first year we stole mainly grain and potatoes but gradually we managed to be more ambitious. As the farm was surrounded by buildings with high gates between them, we

were often left unsupervised to get on with a particular job. With luck, a hen or a duck would wander near us and, if unobserved, we would grab it, wring its neck and stuff it in our jerkin.

Eventually, in Autumn 1943, I was set to do two or three days' work in an alley, repairing the wooden-covers of low window-spaces through which loads of potatoes were shovelled to be turned into schnapps for the government. Across the alley was an open shed in which about twenty half-grown pigs sunned themselves in straw, waiting to be herded out in mid-morning to glean among the stubble fields. That first morning they seemed untroubled by my nearness. In the evening we devised a complicated method of passing word to Alf in the billet who would then ask the camp-guard to escort him to the potato-store for a fresh supply.

Next morning when all seemed quiet and the pigs were dozing, I tip-toed slowly among them. With my hammer I hit one very hard between the eyes. It made no sound and I grabbed it up, heaved it through the window, dived after it, hit its head several more times and buried it in the heap of potatoes. We signalled Alf who soon arrived with the guard. He shouted from the cellar for help in filling his sack and the guard happily let me go down inside to help him. It was a scramble fitting a thirty pound pig into the sack with an adequate layer of potatoes round it but we succeeded and our prize was duly escorted by the Wehrmacht across the farm-yard and over the village street into the billet.

That afternoon Alf had to butcher, clean and cut the porker within the yards of the Germans' quarters downstairs. We boiled the meat upstairs because of the smell and Alf prepared the usual evening potatoes down in the cook-house. That was a memorable evening meal. I counted on the possibility that one pig might easily have strayed in the stubble-fields and this seemed to have finally accepted by the farm after a day of fruitless searching.

The piggery was extensive and had a teeming turnover of litters which must have made counting difficult for the elderly Polish widow who was its custodian. She came once to the joiner and asked him to sharpen the knives with which she castrated the piglets. He gave me this job and, when she came back, she had the farmer's permission to borrow me as her assistant "castrator" for the next batch. She had a good knowledge of pigs though her grasp of German was about as rudimentary as mine. We got on well together and after a few bouts of operating as her theatre-nurse, I became quite proficient with a sharp knife and a tin of strong disinfectant. The spinoff was that I gained a knowledge of the piggery routine and during the

next year I got away with one or two more piglets but none as large as the first. I was able to smuggle these to the billet, wrapped round my body under my blouse.

A hazard of my position as interpreter was that if the Wehrmacht or Polizei suspected an "Englander" of stealing, of sabotage or of associating with a German woman, they would call me, "the Dolmetscher", to translate. Often I knew the prisoner was lying outrageously but I had to go along with this. Sometimes I would alter his unwise answers to make them more plausible.

Especially memorable was when a prisoner, Eddie, was transferred to us from another commando. He had in his meagre kit a photograph of a girl standing in front of a wire-mesh fence. An over-zealous guard, during a routine search, found that the photo didn't bear on the back the stamp of the stalag censors. This meant it was illegal and since a civilian was involved, the guards called in the Polizei who sent a very business-like captain. I knew Eddie had worked near this girl in the factory where he had been previously and that she had given him the photograph. I had little sympathy for Eddie whose folly in keeping the snap now put the girl at risk of the possible horror of a punishment - or concentration camp. Of course, I wanted to help Eddie avoid punishment but my greater concern was for this friendly girl.

The Hauptmann was rigorous in his grilling. I was confident that the soldiers present had no English but, for all I knew, this captain spoke the language and well knew that I was concocting a story about Eddie's fiancée posing beside the tennis court at home. He suddenly stood up, drew and cocked his pistol and shouted at me, not at Eddie, that he knew we were lying and he demanded the truth. Fortunately, after some more bluster he told the Army sergeant he had had enough of our lies. We were dismissed and nothing happened to Eddie. I often thought of that girl and hoped they never found her.

The Summer of 1944 was a time of great hope for us and for the Polish patriots, while the die-hard Germans could only claim that shortening their lines was a deliberate strategy. The blacksmith listened secretly to the BBC and told Doug what was really happening. At first Doug immediately told the whole party of prisoners but soon we found the odd loose-tongued lad who couldn't resist taunting the Germans with news that could only have been acquired illegally. So, to protect our precious source, we had to delay telling everyone until it was safe to do so. The Allies had landed in France and were also fighting their way up Italy while the Russians were advancing remorselessly from the East.

This was when huge air-raids, apparently from Italy, began to pound the industrial towns in our part of the Reich. From the safety of the countryside we witnessed quite a few of these raids.

Imagine a summer day of clear skies. The radio in the farm office interrupts its programme with the double “Coo-coo” which was the signal for every-one to listen for an air-raid warning. It then announces that enemy planes are flying North. A warning is sent to all work places on the estate and village. Soon we see a large smoke-ring in the sky five or ten miles away and our civilian mates usually tell us which town is being targeted this time by the Path-finder planes.

In a little the whole atmosphere begins to vibrate, faintly at first and gradually more strongly. Suddenly we spot the first specks of light immensely high, like stars in groups of anything up to fifty. There might be ten such groups heading for the smoke-ring, their perspex windows reflecting the sun. Soon the sky is covered with ack-ack shell-bursts as the planes descend into the ring and the bombing starts. Perhaps four or five planes are brought down but most come out of the attack in a fast climb, trailing white vapour as they escape. We never saw German fighters in these raids, only concentrated ack-ack fire.

To confuse the gunners' range-finders, the bombers dropped bundles of tinsel which recent prisoners told us was called “window”. This blew about the fields for days like tumbleweed. I was intrigued to find that our local children collected this to decorate their Christmas trees in due course. At this time I felt there could be a little sermon in this discovery.

Like most villages, we got our water from a pump in the square about two hundred yards away. We had two large containers. A guard took four men down, morning and evening to supply the billet. In the winter of '43, Gus and I made a sledge which securely held both containers. Doug Shaw made metal runners for it. The guards were tolerant and asked no questions. Myrczek was as usual sympathetic and the farm-manager, “the Ober” as he was entitled, never knew about it. It was a great help in the long, snowy winter.

On the subject of sledges, I recall that the converted wagons, drawn quite quickly by pairs of horses, approached very silently and could endanger walkers. For this reason, one horse in each pair had a number of small bells on its collar and the cheerful jingle could sound really Christmassy.

In the late Autumn of 1944 Doug Shaw, who worked with the blacksmith, fell seriously ill. He had a frightening temperature of over 40 degrees and his throat was so swollen that he couldn't eat and could scarcely breathe. The war situation meant that normal, local agencies were not readily available to meet our emergency. The guards did all they could and eventually found a Polish doctor who, for some reason, was forbidden to practise. Sharing our worry, they called him. He confirmed diphtheria and said Doug had to be taken to hospital with minimum delay. He could neither prescribe medicine nor arrange hospitalisation.

The guards again did their bit and located a spare bed in Kattowice hospital, and then tried to find an ambulance. The only available unit was one which apparently could only come if the precious petrol they used could be replaced by us, a condition which our guards had no hope of meeting. Thus an evening of frantic phoning ended in impasse and I started planning what seemed likely to be another funeral.

At work next day I told Doug's boss of our problem. He promptly said we should try to convince the guards that if the ambulance came for Doug, petrol would be forthcoming. We must name no names and the guards must ask no questions. This seemed crazy but I knew and trusted him. The guards, bless them, seemed to trust us in turn and that evening an ambulance drew up near the camp. Our guards opened the gate for us and retired to their own quarters. By the time we had seen Doug carried to the vehicle, a large can had mysteriously appeared inside it. Doug reached hospital and after the war we learned he had made it safely home to New Zealand.

Here we had a group of decent German soldiers, a disgraced Polish doctor and the Polish/Communist underground all combining in simple trust to help a sick prisoner. It was truly heart-warming.

In December of that year we began to hear the distant rumble of fighting as the Russians advanced in Poland. A group of us planned to escape to the forest at what we would judge to be the right time and stay hidden under the snow and pine-needles until the Russians passed through. We had prepared a loose bar in a window and expected that we would be told one day that we would leave next morning. We had some food and basic clothes ready in our bundles.

On the twenty third of January 1945 we were all marched to work as usual. The guns had sounded so near, we were sure we would be leaving next day. I managed to kill a small pig and wrapped it in my coat. At mid-day the guards unexpectedly rounded us all up and told us to prepare to leave in one hour, thus frustrating our plans.

They commandeered from the farm a sledge-wagon and two horses. The wagon was loaded with hay for the horses, several sacks of coarse fodder-beans for us and the Germans' equipment on top. We took our small sledge and some potatoes, a tin basin, some pots and, of course, my precious piglet carefully concealed.

The snow lay about two feet deep over the whole country-side. The roads were fairly well cleared with banks of snow on each side. We shared them with Wehrmacht transport, tanks and guns. We assumed we would reach a railway and go on by train but after five miles we were put into the billet of a mining commando. There we boiled our pig in the basin.

Next day, we marched out with cannon and machine-gun fire passing over us. After twenty-five miles we were well clear of the fighting and joined more prisoners in their camp. On the third day we picked up more prisoners, some of whom also had horses and sledges. Our numbers now amounted to three hundred British and Colonials, two thousand Russians, six or seven sledges with horses and a company of guards.

That night we all huddled in a huge wooden barn. As our pig had been eaten and our other pieces of bread or biscuit were almost finished, we would now depend on bean-soup each evening and draughty barns for shelter. In the event, that was our pattern for the next hundred days and thousand kilometres - from the bitter cold of Silesia (minus twenty-eight degrees on our third evening) to the beautiful, Spring-time apple-blossom of Bavaria.

We crossed the Oder into Czechoslovakia, marched north-west up towards Dresden about the time of its dreadful air-raid and then swung southwards past Carlsbad and Weiden. We crossed the Danube at Regensburg, were caught in the blanket bombing of the Plattling rail-complex and finally marched through Bavaria to cross the Inn on the first of May, at the little town of Kraiburg. Many ex-prisoners who were marched out of Upper Silesia during those early months of 1945 speak about "The March" as of something very special and well they might.

From the last week of January 1945 until the first week of May we never saw a fire except the army outdoor stove which boiled our evening ration of bean-soup and we slept almost invariably on straw in draughty wooden barns. Very occasionally we were thrown

lumps of bread from civilians as we passed through Czechoslovakia after leaving the pro-German province of Sudetenland.

Here are a few memories:-

During the first six or seven weeks, our greatest enemy was the really intense cold. To keep warm at night groups of six or eight pooled their blankets and coats and lay close together as we did in the fields of 1940. Lights were forbidden on sensible grounds of safety and so, to make a night-time visit to the sub-zero cess-pit in the farm-yard meant stumbling over other groups, sometimes improvising toilet-paper from straw or hay and then returning over cursing bodies to where your own group lay. We were all well aware of the danger of frostbite. On the march each day your extremities soon lost their feeling and were not painful. In preparing for sleep, however, it was imperative that you got your blood flowing again. For up to twenty minutes you rubbed at your fingers or sucked them until they thawed enough to let you untie your boot-laces which were frozen. You then rubbed at your toes for a long time until you felt life was returning. Men often cried out with pain of it but it was essential.

One night my fingers just refused to grip my icy laces and I was in helpless despair. Ken Cressey, a sterling Yorkshire-man, took over from me and eventually got my boots off. One other night, my fellow-joiner Gus Bagley, whose badly wounded stomach made bending very difficult for him, fell asleep with his boots still on. In the darkness none of us noticed. Next morning he was in great distress. We investigated and found both his feet badly frost-bitten. The guards told us to lay him on the fodder in a sledge and they would leave him at the next medical premises we passed. I never saw him again but after the war I learned that he had lost one complete foot and half of the other. Little wonder that we dreaded frost-bite.

Our other great hardship during this wearisome march was, of course, our constant, ever-present hunger. One morning our column was halted on the snowy road to allow the sledge-train to plod by. One of our Dubensko ponies was limping badly and looked to be on its last legs. We, who had known the animal well, felt sorry for it and yet were hopeful that it might be slaughtered soon. Sure enough, as we were finding places in that night's barn, a prisoner was called by the guards and came stumping triumphantly back in the gloom with a horse's leg over his shoulder. Ludicrously, it still had packed snow in the horse-shoe while the other end showed how the limb had been hacked off with an axe. One leg for three hundred men meant, at most, a token shred of meat in your boiled beans.

The poor Russians had a truly dreadful time. We had fed reasonably well before the march on potatoes and daily bread, augmented from time to time by parcels. The Russians, with no Geneva protection and no parcels, started the march in a poor state and this grew steadily worse. On days when we followed after their column, we often passed by skeleton bodies in the road-side snow - bodies which in many cases had been stripped by their companions for the precious garments, foot-rags and boots to help their own survival. We kept hoping that each day might bring us to a proper camp of huts and stoves before we too succumbed like the Russians. After a few weeks the Russians disappeared from our column.

Another memory - a very clear one - reminds me of how weakened we must have been after a month on the road. We lay one night in a barn which happened to have a large opening high in one wall. As darkness fell we lost sight of it, though snow showers often blew in through it in the night. We were desperately hungry and cold and our spirits were very low. I was lying awake in the darkness with no idea of the time when I gradually became aware of the faintest grey shape of the hatch-way as the new day slowly dawned. Into my head came a verse of that lovely song in Tennyson's 'Princess', "The days that are no more".

Ah, sad and strange, as in dark Summer dawns

The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds

The dying ears, when unto dying eyes

The casement slowly grows a glimmering square

So sad, so strange the days that are no more.

Somehow Tennyson's imagery summed up my state of mind that cold morning.

On the sixteenth of March I had my last funeral. On the previous evening, Jock Kerr, of West Calder, a member of another working party, was shot by a trigger-happy guard. His friends must have been aware of my services on mine and farm for they came and asked me to conduct his funeral. We buried him early in the village of Komhaus. I have no knowledge of the present name of it and it is too small for the normal map.

By late March the snow had given way to sleet and rain, giving us the discomfort of sodden clothes instead of the intense cold of previous weeks, which was at least dry. Needless to say, we were all crawling with lice which were little trouble in the cold but drove you mad when you warmed up. Our dirty thumb-nails were permanently stained with our

own blood from the bloated lice we cracked each night. Our toilet was usually a trench with a tree-trunk on trestles above its sickening contents and for the first two months we could not wash apart from rubbing snow on frozen features.

On the twenty third of March the guards found a small store of Red Cross parcels perhaps delivered too late to a party which had left before us. We all enjoyed if only briefly, the decent food they contained. The Russians had left us by this time.

On the tenth of April, after over eight hundred kilometres, we crossed the Danube at Regensburg and were conveyed in railway-trucks to Plattling which was a vital rail centre with a huge marshalling-yard. From Plattling lines radiated in all directions to Linz, Prague, Nurnberg and Munich. We were housed in a large warehouse in this complex which was crowded with trains, many of which were full of German refugee families from the east. Parked along the back of our shed was a military train with one of its armoured ack-ack trucks within about six feet of the wall.

Inexplicably, in view of the war situation, the Germans arranged for squads of us to be taken to the edge of the complex each day and there we were set to work digging foundations for an additional siding. We did this rather ineffectually, aware all the time that Plattling was an obvious target for bombing. We each marked convenient air-raid shelters - a culvert near us, the cellar under a track-side house or the tempting space under one of the huge locomotives.

On the fifth day, five large flights of American bombers flew over the area and rained bombs on section after section of the whole complex. Wagons and carriages were smashed or tossed on top of each other, water mains were burst and even locomotives were lifted off their tracks.

By bad luck a guard had taken three of us into the middle of the yard for a special task and we had to run the gauntlet through the first four attacks and reached the cellar as the last cluster fell around us. The house above us was ruined but we were safe and managed to clear a way out along with two civilian families.

After the raid we joined German workers and soldiers in rescuing wounded and frightened victims from the refugee trains and the civilian houses on the edge of the rail yard which in many cases were heaps of rubble. We took the walking victims to a field some distance from the yard and probably clear of future bombing. I clearly remember helping two old ladies and their grand-children towards safety while beside me a tall German soldier

escorted another woman and carried a small child on his shoulder. A close look at his collar-flashes told me was one of the hated S.S. but on that day our only aim was to help the distressed.

The raid had cut the railway between east and west and for the next week the Germans worked frantically to repair it. Each day groups of Mustang planes flew over and, with machine-guns and cannon, scattered the workers and tried to undo the repair-work. Our shed and most of the armoured train were undamaged. One day while we were in the shed, the Americans concentrated on the armoured trucks in an effort to destroy the ack-ack defences. We quickly rushed into the yard on the other side from the train and watched from about thirty or forty yards the battle between those diving planes and the undoubtedly courageous German gunners. It was exciting but much too close for comfort.

Next day, the twenty fourth of April, we marched off into Bavaria in fine spring weather, diving into ditches along with our guards when pairs of Mustangs appeared. We knew that the Americans were approaching from the west while the Russians came from the east and we were in the middle and the future could be dangerous. It was an uncomfortable period. A group of us were determined to take a risk, if necessary, to ensure we were freed by the Americans rather than by the unpredictable Russians.

I had befriended a young guard who was very worried about the Free French advance towards his home near Lake Constance. I told him that if he helped us we might be able to help him find out about his family. Our plan was as follows. When it seemed that the Americans were drawing near, the young man would walk beside our group. As we passed through a wood, one of us would feign an attack of dysentery. Following the normal practice, the guard would wait while he relieved himself and would then rejoin the column. On this occasion we would keep our friend company and with luck would slip with our guard into the wood. We would then head towards the west. If we bumped into Germans, our guard was escorting us. When (and if) we got through to the Americans we would "try to arrange for the guard to make contact with his home-town". I felt bad about raising his hopes as it would almost certainly be futile but I had to get his help. We fixed for our optimistic plan to be used next day, the second of May. That evening as we prepared to settle down in Amfing, a staff-car swept alongside us and called orders to the guards to change direction and hurry us across the valley to the River Inn which we crossed at the little town of Kraiburg whose main street climbed up from the bridge. As we marched up the hill, the bridge was blown up behind us, suggesting a sudden American advance.

We were crowded into a large farm at the top of the town and settled for the night. I quizzed a guard about the war situation but he knew little although “he had heard that the Fuhrer had died fighting in Berlin”. The River Inn now presented a new complication to our plan.

Next morning we woke up to the noise of a battle going on down at the river. It was clear that the Americans had reached it but too late to cross. We were lined up in the usual column ready to march south. Suddenly a group of the lads shouted to us all that we should refuse to go on and they asked their party interpreter and me to tell the Hauptmann so. As this “mutiny” seemed to be generally supported, we plucked up our courage and told the captain that we were too exhausted and had too many sick to be able to march further. He immediately became very angry and ordered his men to cock their weapons while others pulled stick grenades from their top-boots. For a few scary minutes he shouted and threatened us but we stood our ground. Finally he decided that he would march off with his company and those prisoners “who had the sense to go with him”. We passed this message on to the lads. He also said that the town and river were held by an S.S. unit and “we all knew what they were like”. At last the guards and thirteen prisoners marched off and we heaved a sigh of relief. I later found that I had by no means been the only one who had decided that when the first shots were fired I would be a good wee prisoner and do what I was told.

We then stayed in the vicinity of the farm buildings and pondered our next move. I remember climbing the tower of a church beside our farm to look down on the river. Both sides were firing a lot but there was no sign of any attempt at crossing. I returned to the farmyard in time to meet a platoon of young German soldiers coming in from the road. They were a Hitler Youth unit. Their sergeant told me they had been engaged far to the west but “had been deserted by their officers”. Now those thirty young men (more like Boys' Brigade lads) had discarded their weapons and, seeing our British uniforms, had resolved to surrender to us rather than risk the attention of the S.S. We settled them in a barn and their N.C.O.s managed to scrounge some food for them from near-by houses.

Towards mid-day two armed guards came into our yard and approached me. It was my young conspirator and a friend who had slipped away from the company and returned to us to surrender. They gave us their rifles but we returned them and explained our fear of the S.S. We asked them to “patrol the outskirts of the farm to keep up appearances. In the next hour a further eight or nine came in ones or twos, having had a whisper from the first two. We now had a proper complement of armed guards. It pays to remember that at this stage of

the war fanatical Nazi military police were shooting and hanging deserters to encourage the Army to keep fighting. Those guards and the Hitler Youth platoon had perhaps achieved a safe surrender with us but they were, at the same time, taking a dangerous risk with the S.S. occupying the town.

In the afternoon a Hauptmann and his wife, possibly fleeing before the Russian advance in the east, passed our farm in their little car, carried on down into the town and quickly and prudently returned. The Hauptmann came into the yard and asked for an interpreter. Then with much bluster he told me that as our guards had obviously lost their officers he was assuming command and “would I see the farmer and arrange a room in the farmhouse for his wife and him”. The whole situation was pure Gilbert and Sullivan with him, a German, asking me, a prisoner, to arrange things for him with the German farmer though we were aware that disaster could overtake us all at any moment. We hoped that the officer's presence would add verisimilitude to the fiction that we were in the hands of the Wehrmacht but, in actual fact, he and his lady stayed all night in the house.

We spent a very nervous night and early next morning Sergeant Nobby Clark and one or two other brave lads set off through the woods up-river, keeping well above the actual river-level. By luck they found an American bridge-head about five miles from us. The Yanks had captured the bridge before it could be blown and were now holding the crossing. Despite initial firing by the Americans, Nobby's group made contact. Our allies then sent a tank and an armoured car along the forest track, guided by Nobby. They reached us, threw down some packs of Camel cigarettes, wished us luck and explained that as their unit was “twenty kilometres ahead of schedule” they had to hurry back to base.

A bunch of our more adventurous men then took the guards' weapons and set off to attack the S.S. from the rear. During the next hour they sent back about thirty prisoners and, significantly, many more weapons than prisoners.

I claimed the honour of bearding the Hauptmann in the house. He readily handed over his pistol but claimed vehemently that the car was his wife's. We happily left it with her. Then, well armed, we set off through the woods towards the bridgehead, shepherding about sixty German prisoners. If there were German units facing the crossing which was guarded by Sherman tanks, they seemed happy to keep their heads prudently down and we passed safely into the arms of General Patton's Third Army. In handing over our prisoners, I was at

pains to stress how helpful our young guard had been but was bluntly told “We've taken so many prisoners this last week, it ain't funny anymore”.

A convoy of empty petrol lorries, jeeps and similar transport took us next day to the huge Stalag of Moosburg. It had been liberated days before but apparently the drunkenness, rape and pillage of the thousands of freed prisoners had forced the Americans to round up all they could and when we arrived the camp gates were locked once more and military police patrolled the perimeter.

Perhaps we looked a more responsible bunch, for the Americans sent us to take over the large village of Niederndorff and live there while we awaited repatriation. We were there from the fourth to the tenth of May and used the radio in our farm headquarters to listen to news of the German surrender. As camp interpreter I dealt with the Burgomeister each day to negotiate bread and meat for the party. I presume the Americans settled any accounts for those provisions.

On the tenth we went to Landshut aerodrome where we slept on the airfield grass as a procession of Dakotas shifted group after group of freed prisoners. On the eleventh we flew to Brussels where we were de-loused and issued with Canadian battle-dress. A canteen run by Scottish women with Scottish voices made us suddenly feel that home was very near and we were not dreaming. Lancaster bombers flew us to England and, by luck, it was my turn to mount to the upper gun position just as we crossed the English coast. On landing we were de-briefed and given a telegram form to send home.

Next day I took the train to Dundee, arriving there at 11 p.m. There was no-one to meet me but eventually a helpful policeman contacted my family at Liff Manse. My sister Moira and her fiancé, Jimmy, came for me on Father's ministerial allowance of petrol. The family had not known for months whether I was still alive. It was, therefore, a wonderful surprise for them when I turned up without warning. Next day my telegram arrived!

Brother Robin, who had been captured with his New Zealand companions in North Africa (like me by General Rommel) was unaccounted for when I got home. During the next few days another returned prisoner reported that he believed he had been among those killed in an American air-attack on his column in West Germany. Fortunately, almost immediately a telegram from New Zealand House in London told us he was safe and in England. He soon joined us at the Manse. After a short leave, he had to return to New Zealand.

The last year of the war must have been very trying for the folks at home. With Hugh in India, Robin and me somewhere in Germany and Iain on ack-ack duty in Kent during the V. I and V .2 rocket attacks on London and the south-east.

On re-reading this account of my life in captivity, I am conscious of how frequently the first person occurs. This, I suppose, is partly because of my comparatively quick grasp of basic, spoken German which meant that most of our captors' dealings with us were conducted through me. Most small commandos produced one of their number on whom the Germans depended for communication.

After repatriation leave we were fitted into various camps around Britain to retrain with weapons many of us had never used or even seen before. It was a relief when the Japanese war finished and we could contemplate a more peaceful future. I was finally discharged in March 1946.

Two final incidents come to mind which do not actually have to do with prison-life. Before the war I had entered St Andrews University with a view to following Father into the Church. In the Autumn of 1945 my C.O. told me that the Church of Scotland had managed to arrange an early release for me to enable me to resume my M.A. studies that October. Although I had had enough of soldiering, I told him I couldn't accept as I had decided to depart from my original intention and now hoped to qualify as a teacher. He thought I was far too honest and suggested many folk would grab the early release and change their minds later. Perhaps the man had the right of it.

Some time after that he urged me to accept his recommendation that I be sent to train for a commission. Again I thanked him but said my heart was set on returning to University in the Autumn of 1946. It was, however, gratifying to find I was deemed worthy of a commission after the disappointment of 1940.

How did the war and prison-camp affect me?

- I lost seven years of normal growing-up.
- I learned that social, cultural and educational background often meant little when things were really desperate.
- I learned German and got to know ordinary Germans much better than if I had only fought them.
- I learned carpentry and formed a love of wood and woodwork.
- I was forced to put my religious beliefs to the test, thinking things out for myself. I gradually realised that there were bits of doctrine I would have been unable to preach and would have made an uneasy minister. I am glad I turned to teaching.
- Starting my service as a fairly sheltered student, I gained over the years a confidence that, like many others, I had the ability to help my companions in various, unexpected ways.
- I also found that I could face physical hardship as well as most.
- I realised the immense value of a rich store of literature learned, sometimes unwillingly, at school.
- I was moved throughout those years to try to compose my own poetry, - though its quality was pretty humble. This kept my mind always active, even when working or marching, and often gave me great satisfaction when I thought I had caught and expressed a mood.

I end by quoting one of my favourites.

It was born one evening in March 1944 when a multi-coloured sunset made me long for the western hills of home which I had always loved.

*There's a froth of gold in the west tonight
'Twi'xt purple and grey.
There's a ripple of red on the home land hills
And the call of a curlew softly thrills
While the mist creeps up from the Tay.
There's a drowsy stir in the Den tonight
Where small feet move.
There's a whisper of leaves in the holly's shade,
An owl floats over the dew-hung glade
And a silence falls on the grove.
There's a restless ache in my heart tonight
That will not be stilled
For it's sick that I am of this barren place,
Of the days that drag, of the years that race
Of the fond dreams unfulfilled.
But the homeland hills will sleep calm tonight
Nor share my pain,
For the power that I and the hills obey
Has settled my part in his mighty play
Nor opens his lips again.*
