windy and four of us were loading a trailer up with timber, which was in long planks. The guard kept shouting at us to hurry, which was very annoying. We stacked the timber on the trailer as much as we could on one side only until it started to sway. The guard was standing below smoking a cigarette, when a sudden gust of wind struck the timber with such force that it blew over. We were prepared for this and jumped off the trailer. Our guard 'Monk' could not be seen but to our surprise we could see his rifle poking out of the timber, so we guessed he was underneath. We started to pull the timber off, as slowly as we could. We called another guard who fetched the commander. After we got him out, he looked as if he would not do many more guard duties. We explained to the officer what had happened, and how sorry we were. We carried him back to his billet as smoothly as we could, going over every bump we could find. It was very quiet after that.

Another day we saw some civilians and the boss of the mill measuring up the ground in a big field near our billet. We found out they were planning to build new billets for us and the extra prisoners that were coming. They said it should be finished in six to eight weeks. We were looking forward to moving out of the old place, as it was getting a bit grotty. We started on the new railway that would go straight to the mill, so that wagons could be loaded and unloaded there with the produce brought in from the surrounding farms. They brought civilians in to work and also several of the lads from the mill to get it finished quickly. It was hard work digging and laying track. We took our time, we did not want it to finish too quickly. We found a way to go sick with a sprain. We put a damp rag round the part we wanted to sprain, like a wrist or arm, and tapped it with a spoon. It took a long time to swell up and when we had to start work we showed it to the guard, who sent us back to the billet. After a time there were so many off with sprained wrists that the Germans tumbled us and made us go to work, using one hand only.

In our party were three brothers, Tom, John and Wally Gribbins. They came from Salford. Tom had a razor blade and if anybody had bad corns, Tom would cut them. One evening he went to the other room to see a chap called Ken Gooch to do his feet. The guard, whom we called 'Chinky', realized Tom had been missing from his room for over an hour. We could hear from our room what was going on. 'Chinky' must have opened the door to get Tom out. There was a commotion in the corridor and an argument was raging between Tom and 'Chinky'. We could hear scuffling, puffing and panting and suddenly there was a dull thud of a body falling on the floor. Tom's brother John was listening and could stand it no longer. He banged on the door shouting, "What's going on Tom? Tom, are you all right?" Getting no reply John realized something was happening to his brother. Fred Best, who was in the same room, helped to smash the door in. When he got into the corridor John could see his brother lying on the floor with his head bleeding. He was livid with rage and rushed at the guard, who raced back to the guard-room, followed by John. 'Chinky' got there first and stood in the doorway with his rifle levelled and finger trembling on the trigger. Other guards just stood and watched. Breathing heavily, John pointed at 'Chinky' and bellowed in German, "You . . . . . You will pay for this — you rotten b . . . . . Remember we are British — you'll see — by God you will."

Tom was taken back to his room where, after his wound was treated, he told us what had happened. He was finishing Gooch's feet when 'Chinky' came in. He said he had nearly finished and would only be another couple of minutes. 'Chinky' angrily pulled

him to his feet and started to manhandle him out of the room. Tom struggled with him in the corridor when 'Chinky' screamed that Tom was a prisoner. Tom replied he was British — and proud of it. That did not please 'Chinky' who drew his bayonet and struck Tom on the head and knocked him unconscious.

Tom was not finished with 'Chinky'. He decided not to do any work until he was given the opportunity to report the matter verbally to the German officer in charge. The following day Tom did not go to work. The rest of us carried on working as usual, waiting to see what would happen. When we returned from work in the evening, the commander had us locked in. He also agreed to phone HQ for advice regarding Tom's wish to speak to an officer. In the meantime we found out that the other guards disliked 'Chinky' and would like to see him transferred. A while later an officer arrived and Tom had his chance to speak to him. Tom's brother John spoke German pretty well (he had learnt a lot in the short time had had been a prisoner). He spoke for Tom and told the officer that 'Chinky' was a born sadist and could cause a lot of trouble because of his intense hatred of the British. The attack on Tom had been unprovoked and that sort of behaviour would invite retaliation. Men would retaliate in their own separate ways. Some might escape just to get away from 'Chinky'. There could one day be a mass break-out. Tom pointed out that it was not a threat, only a plea to an intelligent officer who would see the problem and solve it by having 'Chinky' transferred to other duties. Tom gave the officer a detailed account of what had happened and how the trouble started. The officer said he would put all the details to his superior officer if he would guarantee there would be no more trouble. Tom replied he could not guarantee the men who, he said, had minds of their own. The officer saluted, turned away, and spent a long time with the guards before returning to HQ in nearby Troppau.

A few days later we were stacking timber near our building when to our amazement we saw 'Chinky' coming from the guards' quarter carrying his full kit and personal belongings, walking in the direction of the village towards the station. The word got round and all the lads stopped working and gathered by the roadside. 'Chinky' was not looking very happy. There were plenty of remarks and cheering. As he went by someone shouted, "We hope you enjoy yourself at the Russian front — you will freeze till your ears drop off." 'Chinky' was fuming by now with the German civilians witnessing his degradation and moved as fast as he could. Tom's injury, by the way, appeared to be healing and he seemed OK.

A newspaper was printed in Berlin for the Prisoners of war. It was called *The Camp*. In it the Germans would write their propaganda and boast about how they were winning the war. One issue we received seemed very interesting, as it mentioned a holiday camp in Berlin for prisoners. It was hard to believe but it was true.

They would pick sick or run-down prisoners who needed building up, and who would benefit from a couple of weeks off from work. These prisoners were picked from the various camps and working parties. They had an outfit of new clothes supplied by the Red Cross and than transported to the camp, which was not very large. It was clean, and the food was better than usual. All this was done for the benefit of Red Cross officials who visited the camp to see how the British prisoners were treated. It was not the best place to have a holiday camp as Berlin at the time was the most bombed city in Germany. The prisoners who obtained the dubious privilege of staying at this camp were very glad

The guard used to take me to the village with our handcart to draw our rations from the small General Stores like the one we used to have at home. The young girl who served there with her parents was very nice. If she had anything to spare that was not rationed, she would let me have it. We got tubs of mild mustard which tasted quite good when spread on bread. We also got flavoured pudding powders in small packets which were similar to custard. For a small charge I also made things like cakes and rolls for the men who had obtained flour from the sawmill by bartering. That is how I got flour for myself, as I no longer could do my own bartering, not going to the mill any more.

The German commander in charge of our party was not too bad. His name was Kattz. At times he would come to the cookhouse with a small parcel and ask me if I would cook him some meat for his evening meal. His real reason was of course that he wanted some vegetables with his meat. I did not mind this. I always cut a couple of thin slices off for my mate and myself. We cooked his meat which had shrunk a bit, but we flattened it out and it did not look too bad. We always gave him mashed potatoes. The reason for this I cannot tell you because of what we put in them. We also gave him some gravy, and his meal looked very nice on his white china plate. I would take it to his room and he was always smiling and thanked me a great deal. He used to say: "Williamson, you are a good man." He would give me a couple of cigarettes, pat me on the back and send me back. Had he known what I had done to his meal, he would have shot me on the spot. If I saw him at the evening roll-call, he would always tell me how much he had enjoyed his meal. That was the only time I enjoyed doing something for the Germans.

Chapter Nine

We had had no trouble for a while until one of the lads by the name of Westall badly injured his hand on a planing machine he was working in the sawmill. Unknown to us the commander had ordered one of the guards to take Westall to a doctor a few kilometres away. He insisted that they walked and did not use public transport despite the considerable loss of blood suffered by our friend. The doctor just bandaged the hand and told him he would have to go to a military hospital. The following day the commander said Westall could go to the hospital but would have to walk. By now our friend was not feeling too good as he had lost more blood. The rest of the lads caused a riot, not intending to take this treatment lying down. John Gribbin took over as he could speak some German. We all got together and talked about what we were going to do.

John went to the guard-room and demanded to speak to the commander. When he came out he did not look very happy and we wanted to know what the trouble was. John tried to persuade him to let Westall go to the hospital by train, but the commander insisted that prisoners were not allowed to travel on public transport. John quoted the Geneva Convention and demanded proper medical treatment and transport. He reminded the commander that German POWs were guaranteed proper treatment in Allied hands. The commander went mad at this and raved at John, who shouted back and demanded to see a superior officer. This the commander refused and John told him to do his own interpreting in future. He then stormed out of the room, slamming the

door. He expected the commander to follow him out and shoot him, but fortunately he stayed in his office.

While this was going on we all had our ears to the wall, listening to what was going on and hoping John would come out OK. In the evening we again discussed what we could do. We knew it would take a long time to get an officer to the camp to discuss the situation and we talked about going on strike. Some of the lads were not keen on this, but as Westall needed medical treatment it was up to us to see that he got it. We knew the punishment if we went on strike, but mutiny was something different. John had another talk with the commander and told him what we intended to do. He also pointed out that when another officer came he would be told to regard our action as a strike and not a mutiny. We had taken this simple action to get an officer here to discuss the situation, one who would quickly realize the circumstances and the cause. One could not declare in front of so many witnesses that he would not comply with the Geneva Convention rules regarding medical aid and transportation of an injured prisoner of war. The rest of the evening was quiet, we just lazed about on our bunks, wondering what was going to happen the following day.

Next morning the guard came in unlocking the doors and shouting for us to get up. We had our coffee and bread, a wash and then we waited for zero hour. The the guards came in shouting "Alles raus," meaning get out. We all stood still where we were and did not move. It was obvious to the guards they were up against something they had not dealt with before. They stood by the door waiting for the commander, who sent the message to lock the doors and let no one out. We just stood there waiting to see what was going to happen. We kept going to the windows to see if there was any action outside. John and his brother Tommy were trying to keep the lads together and not to give up easily. After a while we heard shouting and lorries pulling up outside. A few minutes later the doors were unlocked and swung open and in poured a number of armed guards shouting for us to get out. They wore steel helmets and had bayonets fixed. Our usual guards wore soft hats but carried rifles and bayonets. We were hustled about and clubbed and forced to the door leading to the forecourt. John was lucky for as he was making his way to the door one of the guards was just going to hit him, when he recognized him as the interpreter and did not hit him. We then realized that another officer had arrived. When John reached the top of the staircase, he caught sight of one of the lads named Atkins, who was groaning and holding his hand over his left eye. John took a quick look and could see he had a nasty gash. He told Atkins to come with him and follow him straight to the officer without wiping any blood away. He then helped him down the stairs. When we were all lined up in threes, all of us were holding the parts of our bodies that had got in the way of the German rifles. The officer, a Captain, was standing in front of the parade. John approached him with Atkins and told the officer to see for himself the kind of treatment we were receiving. He pointed out that if it was continued it would mean an uprising and escapes. The British would not accept this sort of thing without retaliation. John then took Atkins' hand away from his eye to let the officer see the injury, which was not a pretty sight. John explained the facts and all that had happened to make the men feel they should stop work until they saw a superior officer. Brozing, the name of the officer in charge of our camp, did not feel very happy while all this was going on. He came to attention, saluting the Captain who just raised his hand for silence. He looked around at us, who were waiting to see what was going to

happen next. The Captain turned back and spoke to our Sergeant-Major and said he would give orders for the injured man to be taken to the hospital with transport, if he would guarantee that the men would go back to work and consider the incident closed. We then went back to our huts to have some treatment for the bumps and bruises we had received. Among the injured was John's brother Tommy, who had received a blow on his head which was bleeding. The same wound he had received earlier had been opened again. John had a cracked wrist.

A short time later John was taken away facing charges for enticing mutiny and slamming the door in the commander's face. He was sentenced to several days on bread and water in the cells in Trappen Opava, the German military town. On his release he was sent to another working party to help on the construction of a new railway siding. John spoke to the commander there pointing out that a mistake had been made and that he should have rejoined his two brothers Tommy and Wally at the old camp in Mankendorf, where the trouble had started. I later found out that nothing had been done for a few weeks and John had again refused to work. He wanted his case dealt with immediately. The commander informed him that he had passed the case on. In the meantime John was again sentenced to 10 days solitary on bread and water after which, if he promised to keep out of trouble, they would let him join his brothers. Instead John managed to get Geneva HQ to let his brothers join him. They were glad to get away from Mankendorf and Commander Brozing.

On being reunited with his brothers John asked Tom if he had any ill-effects from his injury. John replied he had a small lump on his head that would not go away. He said it was not painful and he only noticed it when he combed his hair. He said, "I am used to it, it does not bother me." (These words were to be remembered a few years later.)

Tommy Gribbin was a fighter and would never give in to the Germans. He did quote that the British soldier would never be the underdog and would always be one step ahead of the enemy, also that England never has been and never will be at the proud foot of a conqueror.

Chapter Ten

One Sunday the weather was nice and hot. It was a day when we did not work and we had time to do our washing, mending and darning. I was sitting on the steps of the cookhouse having a chat with one of the lads. My friend Sam, the Australian, was standing on top of the stairs leading into the billet, whistling 'Waltzing Matilda', it was quiet and peaceful. Suddenly a nice big chicken appeared under the gates leading into the compound. It must have wandered away from one of the houses in the village. It just stood there and looked around. I called up to Sam, "How would you like chicken for supper?" just as you would ask a friend who had popped in to see you. Sam called back asking us to keep the chicken occupied. He then disappeared into the billet and quickly came back with a long piece of wood. He waved it round his head a few times and then threw it like a boomerang. It went flying through the air and struck the chicken on the head. It just jumped up in the air and collapsed on the ground. Sam rushed down and

When I first thought of writing this account of life as a prisoner of war, it appeared to be straightforward and easy. I soon realized the opposite was the case. Trying to trace my fellow prisoners with whom I had been working as a prisoner proved very difficult. I contacted the British Legion. They put an advert in the Legion magazine which was answered by three men who had been with my unit in France in 1940. Two of them had been taken prisoner and had been held in Poland. The third managed to get back to England. I also wrote to Charley Chester who broadcast my request on his Sunday show, but there were no replies. I have also tried the Cilla Black show 'Surprise, Surprise', again without result.

I next tried to trace the three brothers who worked with me at the sawmill in Mankendorf. I had some old photographs with telephone numbers, but I was unsuccessful in my enquiries. I knew they had lived in Manchester and placed an advert in the *Manchester Evening News*. This was successful. The following day I had a phone call from the daughter of one of the brothers. She told me that when she had seen the advert she burst into tears, as the three brothers had been trying to find me for years without success. The brothers, Tommy, John and Wally, had often talked about me and the working party. Unfortunately they had all died within the last few years.

Tommy was the one who had been struck on the head with a rifle by a German guard when we went on strike. This episode has been mentioned earlier. In December 1987 I went to Manchester to visit the families, who were very pleased to see me and wanted to know all the things that had happened.

Tommy and John had made some notes of some of the things that had happened to our party and other working parties they had been on. John also wrote about Tommy and what happened to him in 1966. He started with the small bump on Tommy's head caused by the rifle blow. This had come to life again and was diagnosed as an ulcer. Various treatments were tried, but failed. Surgery was then performed and the upper part of his skull was removed, as a result of which he had to wear a wig to hide the unsightly scars on top of his head. He also suffered a stroke and became partly paralysed. He applied for a pension for the suffering and disfigurement caused by the blow on his head while a prisoner of war. He failed. The case was referred to the United Nations, but the affidavit relating to his case was not available. The British Legion, who handled his case, was advised to contact the International Red Cross regarding his case. The IRC replied in due course to the effect they they had no papers relating to him either.

Where are these documents? The vital proof that Tommy needed to substantiate his claim for a pension is apparently non-existent. Are they buried in archives in London or have they been sent abroad to a foreign power insistent on bringing war criminals to justice? Possibly this power was only interested in the big names from Dachau, Belsen or Auswich. These documents must be in existence somewhere.

This story is true. I have fulfilled my promise to Tommy's family to print it.