

Eric (Blondie) Marchant

I was a private in the Royal Sussex Regiment when I was captured in Belgium in May 1940. I had been part of the rear guard action for Dunkirk when my unit were surrounded by German tanks and infantry, near Poperinge in Belgium. The officer with us, Lieutenant Fuller, negotiated the surrender and then told the men to ditch their weapons and we lined up on the road. We were marched with many other British and French prisoners from Poperinge through Belgium to Maastricht. Even before we were captured the soldiers had been hungry and as we marched through Belgium we would dive into gardens we passed to grab any fruit or vegetables, even raw potatoes. As prisoners we were allowed to stop at Ghent where the Red Cross representative went round to all the men and asked them if they wanted to write home. I wrote a note to my parents to let them know I was all right, but it did not get back to Sussex for 6 months, during which time I was posted as "missing."

The march continued to Maastricht where, as captured men, we were told that we must walk three abreast and not to walk out of our positions, otherwise we would be shot. Dutch people watched from the side of the road. One man took pity on us and threw us some food. The Germans arrested him and made him march with the captured soldiers. The soldiers were made to march on to near Aachen where they were put on a train to the Polish border, and a place called Lamsdorf. 'Till we got on the train exhausted, we had had to march almost 300km from Poperinge to Aachen.

We arrived in Lamsdorf at the end of June 1940. Lamsdorf was a big prisoner of war camp, with around 10, 000— 15, 000 inmates housed in many concrete huts. It was the central prison camp for a large area and men were sent out from here to work on the various labour camps in that region. The first thing the new prisoners had to do when they arrived was take a shower to get rid of their lice. There was warm water but no soap. Then all the prisoners were finger printed and photographed with a Stalag label around their neck. My label read: STALAG VIII B N14049, and prisoners had to wear their ID all the time.

There were more than 200 prisoners in a hut with bunks arranged three tiers high. Each bunk had straw sacking for a mattress and one blanket. The huts also had a big concrete basin like a trough. You could turn the water on for a while each morning and then everyone washed in the same water. There was a large toilet block for every 7 or 8 huts. In the toilet block there were 4 rows of seats in the open over a very deep pit. There were rats running around everywhere. Local Poles would come in to empty the cess pit, and they would pump out the sewage into a barrel on their horse-drawn cart.

Food was limited but the routine was always the same. The men would line up and get one loaf of bread between 10 prisoners each morning. Then someone would cut the loaf into the 10 pieces needed. My friends and I had a system for making sure no one could always get the biggest piece — we would draw cards and picked our pieces of bread in order, the man with the highest value card choosing first. Lunch was a bowl of soup— really just cabbage water, with some boiled potatoes in their skins. There was no dinner.

However, Lamsdorf was just a holding camp and from here we were sent out in working parties to wherever we could be put to work. It was only the ordinary soldiers, without rank, that had to work in the labour camps. Sergeants were sent with the privates, but the sergeants only had to make sure everything was in order and keep the billet clean and tidy — all the heavy labouring was done by the private soldiers.

At the beginning of August 1940 I was sent to Raciborz on the Polish border, and billeted in an old brewery. The brewery housed about 50 men who were sent out everyday to work as diggers, clearing a silted up overflow from a sewerage works. The men worked up to their knees in water, but this was all right as it was summertime. Germans guarded the men all the time and they would shove their rifle butts into the back of any man who did not shovel hard enough, otherwise the billet was not too bad. One of the guards, a German or Pole, whittled birds out of wood while he was supposed to be looking after the prisoners. At the brewery the men slept upstairs on the straw covered floor, where they became infested with lice. At night time they picked the lice off their skin by hand, and ended up with fingers dripping with blood from squashing the lice between their

thumbs. We were given old Polish clothes and for shoes we were issued with Dutch style clogs. We were also given a piece of cloth called "footslappen" to cover our bare feet so that the clogs were a little more comfortable. Each morning we started the day with a breakfast of bread and ersatz coffee, which was made of acorns. At night, when we came home from work we had a meal in the damp kitchen. The meal was cooked by a Polish or German man, and it was a soup with a mixture of onions, potatoes, cabbage, and every now and again lungs or other cow offal.

In October I was sent with the other prisoners on to another job. This time we were sent to the river Nysa in Poland, near the Czech border. Here we stayed in a pub or dance hall in which the Germans had installed two tiers of bunk beds, enough for up to 50 prisoners. I had noticed that at the last camp some men had been given carpentry jobs, mostly this involved mending the shovels and sharpening tools. These men were able to work inside and the job seemed easier. So when some German guards came into the hall asking for carpenters, both myself and a friend volunteered. This turned out to be a very wise choice. Whilst the rest of the men were digging soil from one place along the river bank, and then loading the soil into railway trucks which had to be pushed to the place where the river had been flooding, we helped to construct a wooden framework that would support the new soil. The work was hard, and in the winter very cold. Both of us working on carpentry duties were working in an unheated shed, but outside it was freezing and men quickly became ill.

By January 1941 there was so much snow and the river was frozen so hard, that the men could not work there anymore, and so the German army lent the men out to contractors. Our new job was clearing snow in the streets of the local village. However food rations were cut in half, and so the bowl of soup we'd once got for supper became half a bowl of soup. The men felt that they needed more food than this and so we refused to go out and work. There were only six or seven guards looking after us, not enough soldiers to make us go out. However, then a lorry pulled up outside their billet and more soldiers jumped out. I was in the hall, standing near the doorway talking to an Irish man. German soldiers came in and grabbed me and the Irish man and took us outside and put us up against the wall. We were told that we would be shot two at a time, starting with myself and my comrade, until we all went back to work. The men immediately agreed to go back to snow clearing. The German soldiers demanded to know why we had gone on strike, but our rations were not increased. Our rations only finally went back to normal when the weather improved and we went back to work on the river.

I received my first Red Cross Parcel while I was living on the river Nysa. The parcel came with a prisoners' newsletter and inside the newsletter was a sheet of poetry. The poem I found I learnt off by heart, and it kept me going through the many years as a prisoner:

*It's easy to be nice boys when everything is OK
It's easy to be cheerful when you're having things your way
But can you hold your head up and take it on the chin
When your heart is nearly broken and you feel like giving in
It was easy back in England amongst your friends and folk
But now you miss the friendly hand, the joys, the songs, the jokes
The road ahead is stony and unless you're strong in mind
You will find it isn't long before you're lagging far behind
You have got to climb the hill boys it's no use turning back
There is only one way home and that's off the beaten track
You know there is a saying that sunshine follows rain
And sure enough you'll realise that joy must follow pain
Let patience be your password, make fortitude your guide
Then instead of grousing remember those who died
They died to earn your freedom it was not too great a price*

*If only you are worthy of such a sacrifice
They bore their cross in silence they sort not wealth or fame
And you must try to emulate and glorify their name.*

The men were also issued with a sheet of paper once a month, and we were allowed to write home. I still have the postcard I sent home from Stalag VIII B. In October 1941 orders came from Lamsdorf to move some of the prisoners to new labour camps, I was moved to a cement factory in the town of Opoleonora, Poland- camp number E196. The cement factory was a massive complex with many different jobs. I got a job as a painter working with a Polish civilian painter. The civilian was a nice man who also looked after the chief engineer's rabbits and chickens. Between the painting tasks the civilian painter and myself would go out into the nearby field and feed the engineer's livestock. We would cut the grass, feed it to the rabbits, and would also collect eggs. Every now and again the engineer would ask us to kill a rabbit, and so we would kill one and I would then skin it. This was a very lucky job as the painter was a good boss and we were able to get out of the giant cement factory to attend to the engineer's animals, and also sometimes to paint one of the local houses. When the civilian painter got called up I took over not only all his painting tasks, but also the job of feeding the rabbits and chickens, and collecting the eggs for the engineer.

The cement factory had its own cookhouse and the prisoners were also fed there. Again they had bread and ersatz coffee for breakfast and lunch was a sort of gruel, but there was no evening meal. The men by now had been kitted out in British uniforms with proper boots instead of clogs, but the German guards usually took our boots away each night. However, after a while the German guards got more relaxed and stopped bothering to take our boots when they locked us in for the night. It was now, decided a group of men, time to try and escape. So 15 of the 50 English prisoners in my room hatched an escape plan. The men were billeted three stories up but there was a sloping roof underneath which they could jump onto if they could just get out of the barred window. So Harry Peach, a Londoner who was working as a joiner, managed to sneak some tools back and started work lifting the metal window frame out from the inside. He then had to cut through the top of two of the bars on the outside of the window. At the end of each cutting session everything had to be put back exactly as before. It took a fortnight for the work to be done, then the bars were ready to be bent back for the men to escape.

The 15 escapees were all recaptured quite quickly and sent back to the main camp at Lamsdorf. There they were put into the punishment block and had to stay inside and did not receive their Red Cross parcels. New prisoners were sent out from Lamsdorf to make up the numbers at the cement factory. The new men were from Australia and New Zealand, and had been captured in North Africa or Crete. By this time we were now getting a Red Cross parcel every week. The parcels included cigarettes, soap and chocolates. The men exchanged soap and chocolates with the Poles and got eggs and any other food that could be bartered for. Two of the Scottish lads in the room, one named Dundee, and the other a tall, young man with a friendly face called Tommy, shared all their parcels and one day swapped some of their gifts for locally made wood alcohol. That night they sat on their bunks and started drinking the evil brew. My friend said to me that someone should warn them not to drink it. So I went over and told them not to drink the alcohol as it was "poison." Tommy looked at me and said "Look Blondie, you can have your years but we want our moments." A little while afterwards Tommy was screaming with hallucinations. The men laid him out on a table in the room and tried to hold him down and calm him. He died there on the table.

The men put Dundee to bed as he was unconscious, and during the night he woke up screaming that he could not see. By the morning he was completely blind. When the guards unlocked the door that morning the men told them that one man had died and another had gone blind. The guards brought a doctor to have a look at Tommy. He looked at the dead body and saw that the whites of his eyes were completely black. The doctor said that the men had been poisoned, but as no one knew who they had bought the alcohol from nothing was done. The Germans let the men bury Tommy in a cemetery by the Oder River.

A short time after this a German guard shot one of the Australian boys dead just outside the toilet block. There seemed to be no reason for the shooting. There were no witnesses, but one of the

men heard the shot and ran to see what had happened. He was threatened by the guard, and so left the scene.

In June 1943 I and 12 others were sent to camp number E702 at the coal mines in Sosnowiec in southern Poland. The mines here were deep, going down four levels, and it was frightening as the cage plummeted down to the shafts. The prisoners of war worked as the labourers for the Polish men working in the mines. The prisoners did the hardest tasks, and conditions were not pleasant — the mines were damp and wet, and there was water everywhere. Each man was issued with an ID tag and a carbide lamp every time he went down into the mine. The lamp had a flint on it so that it could be lit, and it made a gas that burnt when water from the mine dripped onto the lamp. There were three shifts each day, each shift being about 8 hours long: 6am 'till 2pm, 2pm 'till 10pm and then the night shift which was 10pm until 6am the next morning. The morning and afternoon shifts dug out the coal, and the evening shift moved equipment and supports into position for the next day's work. I worked at night moving equipment and putting in new support structures, it was unpleasant and dangerous work. Prisoners thought about trying to sabotage the mine, but there were always men working on the lowest levels so any attempt would inevitably endanger many prisoners. On occasion the lift was damaged and men in lower levels had to escape by a complex system of ladders, but nothing more extensive was done because the resultant loss of life would have been great. The men lived in huts beside the mine. There were 10 to 12 men in each hut. Men on different shifts were billeted together, this made it very difficult to get any real sleep. The food was the same as at the other camps— bread and coffee for breakfast and one meal a day of soup. Thankfully the men were still able to receive their Red Cross Parcels. I am sure that without them we would not have survived.

After a short while I got bronchitis and was sent to the infirmary. The infirmary was run by a Jewish prisoner John Gotea, who had joined the British army but was from Athlith near Haifa. I always felt very grateful to John because he persuaded the German doctors that I was too ill to work and should be sent back to the main camp at Lamsdorf. Without this help I might not have survived. Back at Lamsdorf I was allowed to stay in a convalescent hut for a couple of months. This hut was not really any different from the other huts. Like the other huts it had fires but they never worked. However, with the help of his Red Cross parcels I did recover and once well enough was sent off again this time to work at a limestone quarry in Saubsdorf in Poland.

At the limestone quarry in Saubsdorf the prisoners of war dug limestone out of the ground, and then it was moved to the works and burnt for lime. Some of the limestone was also cut into slabs to make gravestones. Each day the prisoners at Saubsdorf were given a target for the amount of limestone they had to get out of the quarry, and work did not finish until the target was reached. Enormous boulders of limestone were attached to a pulley and six men would work the winch to ease the limestone out of the quarry. Smaller lumps of stone were dug and then broken up and loaded onto flat wagons that were pulled out of the quarry by men. It was while I was pulling a wagon laden with stone out of the quarry that I said to my companion, an Australian P.O.W., that I was going to get away. Mickey Bell, from Melbourne, said that he would like to escape with me.

The camp was on the borders of Czechoslovakia and Poland and we could see the Czech mountains in the distance, and thought that if we headed in that direction then we could escape. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire, but the toilet block was up against the wire fence and there was a spot behind the toilet block that the guards could not see. Over a few days I dug out the ground beneath the hidden area of fence, and Mickey kept watch. When we were ready to go Jack Jones, a New Zealand P.O.W. gave me a haversack so that we could take some Red Cross parcel provisions with us, and we left at dusk. Mickey and I climbed up over the wooded hills and into Czechoslovakia. On the second day we were very lost and didn't know which way to go so decided to head south. By the third day we had seen no one and run out of food. At the end of the day we came down from the hills and into a village. A band of Russian prisoners was passing along the road and we decided enough was enough and fell in with the Russian prisoners and gave ourselves up. We were able to show our ID tags from the labour camp, so that the Germans knew that we were prisoners of war and not spies. We were concerned that we were not sent back to the quarry as we thought the guards at the quarry might want to take revenge. We were lucky as one of the German guards had been captured in World War I and had been well treated in

England, he spoke a bit of English and I spoke a bit of German. The guard gave us a bowl of soup each and agreed to send us back to Lamsdorf the main camp for the area, and not to the quarry.

Two days later we were taken back to Lamsdorf. There we were sent to the punishment block. This meant we were kept in a separate area to the other prisoners and were not allowed to walk around the camp. A German officer then interviewed us and asked us why we had escaped? We said that it was "Because it was a soldier's duty." This was deemed an acceptable and understandable excuse, as you could not say you had escaped because the work was intolerable or the guards were unkind. Mickey and I each got put in solitary confinement for seven days. However, as the prison was so full, 'solitary' turned out to be two prisoners to a cell!