

A WAR FOUGHT **BEHIND THE WIRE**

**A SOLDIER'S TALE OF LIFE IN
THE BRITISH ARMY, 1925 - 1947**

THEY ALSO SERVED

**TO ALL THE BRITISH AND COMMONWEALTH PRISONERS
OF WAR, EUROPE 1939 - 1945**

R.S.M. F.C. READ, M.B.E.

BRITISH CAMP LEADER,	CAMBRAI FRANCE	1940
COMPOUND LEADER,	LAMSDORF STALAG 8B	1941-2
BRITISH CAMP LEADER,	CHEIM, POLAND	1942-3
BRITISH CAMP LEADER,	TESCHEN, STALAG 8B	1943-5
BRITISH CAMP LEADER,	NUREMBERG, STALAG 13D	1945

PREFACE

This is an account of the life of a military man leading up to and dealing mainly with prisoners-of-war, during World War II. Of these prisoners for a variety of reasons, such as their inability, medical unfitness, lost chances and so on, could not find a way to escape and therefore, had to soldier on through the camps for years suffering humiliation, deprivation and intense loneliness of spirit.

It should always be remembered that for the fortunate men who made successful escapes, there were those left behind the fence who suffered punishments great and small, but who nevertheless accepted them as part of the game and still helped to plan new escapes for others. They were from many nations but in their hearts and in their actions, they had one common foe – the enemy.

Many of these men are still living and will recognize incidents in the following passages. It is to them that I dedicate this book and to all those men and colleagues who died during our time in captivity or in the years after the war. I would like to pay particular tribute to those named at the end of the book, without whose help, both physical and mental, I could not have hoped to carry out the duties to which I was committed in Stalag 8B. They proved to the Germans many times over that they were undefeated and managed to keep up the tremendous effort until the very last hours before walking to the other side of the barbed wire and freedom in April 1945.

I consider it was a privilege and honour to serve in that distinguished original Territorial Division – the 51st Highland. However, at St Valerie, it was decided by some high authority in 1940, that the division should be surrendered to the Germans. While there may have been good reasons for this I should have preferred an order to scatter. I'm quite sure that this great division, undefeated in battle, would have at least got half the men out of France who would then have been more ready and able to serve again. As it was, their passing into captivity brought a new dimension into the prison camps; Having been undefeated as prisoners – and defeated they were certainly not.

The notes I made at the time are now more difficult to follow and some of the dates given for various incidents may only be approximate.

CONTENTS

PREFACE GLOSSARY

CHAPTER 1.	-	ALDERSHOT:	LEARNING THE HARD WAY
CHAPTER 2.	-	EGYPT:	SHIFTING SANDS
CHAPTER 3.	-	PORTON:	FALLING IN LOVE
CHAPTER 4.	-	SCOTLAND:	HAIL CALEDONIA
CHAPTER 5.	-	FRANCE:	OVER THERE
CHAPTER 6.	-	CAMBRAI:	IN THE BAG
CHAPTER 7.	-	LAMSDORF:	GETTING TO KNOW YOU
CHAPTER 8.	-	CHELM:	TO THE FAR REGIONS
CHAPTER 9.	-	LAMSDORF:	PARADISE REGAINED
CHAPTER 10.	-	TESCHEN:	TROUBLES AND TRIALS
CHAPTER 11.	-	NUREMBERG:	THE LONGEST DAYS
CHAPTER 12.	-	ENGLAND:	AFTER THE WAR IS OVER
EPILOGUE			

GLOSSARY

OKV	-	Overall Command of the German Forces
Abwehr	-	Security Officer
SAO	-	Senior American Officer
Oflag	-	Officers' Prison Camp
Flak	-	Anti-aircraft battery station
Dolmetscher	-	Interpreter
Feldwebel	-	German Sergeant
Steiger	-	An 'Underground' controller
Gauleiter	-	District Commissioner
Luftwaffe	-	German Air Force
Lazarett	-	Prison Hospital

CHAPTER 1.

ALDERSHOT; LEARNING THE HARD WAY

In January 1925 we had lost our jobs through redundancy. I asked my friend what he was going to do now, "Well, I really don't know, my mother and father want to go to Australia and it looks to me as if the best thing I can do is go with them. What are you going to do?" I said that I really hadn't decided, but as we were passing by a window I saw the slogan 'Join the Army', and I suppose that was how it all started!

I joined the army and soon found myself on the way to the Royal Engineers Training Depot at Chatham. There began an exhausting six months during which I learned the basic principles of army life the hard way, before passing out as a fully trained sapper. One thing that pleased me considerably about the course, was that I attained the 'Crossed Swords' for marksmanship and that made up for the many injustices I had to bear, or so it had seemed to me!

Something I did enjoy was sport and this was high on the army list of necessary accomplishments. We were at first compelled to take part in all sports, but we soon started to develop a competitive spirit – I presume this was what training was all about. When we competed on the square with other battalions and groups we took a new pride in playing any game really well, whether it be boxing, hockey, football, tennis or cross – country running.

Engineering, of course, was an important part of our training. The slogan 'God made the world and the Royal Engineers were created to dig it up', was pretty true. Field works, digging trenches, barbed-wire fencing, sandbagging, bridging, demolition, all the things that go into making a soldier engineer. It was hard and pretty rough but it was satisfying and better than 'square bashing'. During my time at Chatham I met my first girlfriend, Ann. She was a nice girl from a good family but, like all other girls, started to chat in a general way about marriage and this put me off. All her relatives, father, uncle, brothers, had been in the Services and were still in the Services, Army, Navy, Marines – and she of course, was going to marry a serviceman too – come what may! Fortunately I was posted to Aldershot in 1926, it was a field company and suited me very well, from both a professional and personal point of view.

My good sports reports did not go unnoticed in Aldershot. I had to play in many sports teams at many events with the inevitable result being that weekend social activities were being somewhat curtailed. But this was the year of the Charleston and by going to local dancehalls, whenever I had a spare evening, I met my second girlfriend, Nan. Unfortunately for me again, she had her eye on marriage. This for me was an economic impossibility but I remember the pleasant times we had and the fact that I was always missing the last bus from Farnham and then having to walk to Aldershot, I always did it - I don't know why.

We went through the usual annual training, manoeuvres, tactics and so on. They eventually sent us down to Mudford near my home, where we were going to

do 'pontoon-bridging' of a tidal river. On the fourth night there, I fell over one of the guy ropes of the tents and twisted my ankle very badly, with the result that I was sent to Netley Hospital near Southampton. I was in hospital for about three weeks and got to know quite a few of the other chaps in the wards. One had been a sergeant major with the Egyptian Camel Corps. In his day he had been a fine figure of a man, about 14 stone or more, but at some time or other he had been bitten by a camel, (very bad thing as they were said to be carriers of venereal disease). He had been returned home to the military hospital at Netley where, after about fifty operations, he weighed in at less than six stone and seemed to be kept alive by electrodes. One wondered why he was kept alive at all but it appeared that once a year, about Christmas, someone would come to visit him from Australia. Although a sad sight, he was always a very cheerful man and thrilled us with tales of Egypt and the surrounding lands. I greatly admired his immense courage and I think he influenced me more than anything else in my desire to go overseas and taste the adventures of life.

Around September the list came up for volunteers overseas. With the memory of my friend at Netley still fresh in my mind, I put in for Egypt. Eventually the postings came up and I was posted to a field company in Ismalia.

We were drafted to HMS Navasa – a trooper – leaving Southampton in November 1926. I did not tell my relatives and arrived at the docks quite happily, but when I got to the ship I found they were all mysteriously there. The one thing I dislike is saying goodbye, particularly on a ship. However, we had a few stories and a few messages mingled with the tears, then they had to leave the ship and we set sail into the sun.

CHAPTER 2

EGYPT; SHIFTING SANDS

The first twenty-four hours of life at sea were not too bad at all. But going through the Bay of Biscay was rough and when I say rough, I mean it. That old troop ship did everything but stand on its head and seventy five per cent of the men were sick. The food issued at that time seemed to be composed mainly of fish, which seemed even less edible in such circumstances. As in all troop ships, we had to accustom ourselves to swinging hammocks and until you get used to such things they are a problem. Furthermore, the mess deck stank to high heaven and we used to crawl, one way or another, up on the deck to get fresh air and feed on the Naafi supply of tea and dried biscuits. Somehow we survived and when we passed the Bay into good weather things improved. The ship's discipline also improved and we spent many days cleaning up the mess decks, cleaning up this, cleaning up that, until eventually someone was satisfied and life became more normal.

We arrived in Gibraltar but had to content ourselves with looking at the Rock. Impressive though it was, the novelty wore off quite soon and we were not at all happy about not being allowed to go ashore. We moved on to Malta with great hopes

but still no going ashore. On to Alexandria where we had to wait twenty-four hours to disembark. We walked off the ship into the clutching breed called 'Movement Control' who pushed us here, there and everywhere, eventually on to a train to our destination. We travelled overnight from Alexandria to Ismalia, arriving early in the morning to a marvellous view. A small town, military huts and desert as far as the eye could see!

Our arrival meant that many of the 'time-served' people could get away back to Britain, as such they were a happy crowd and gave us a warm welcome. There were parties for us 'onions' (new arrivals), unknown to the desert and things started very well. We soon got sorted into our different units and followed in with all the routine. I got pushed into the soccer, rugby, cricket, hockey and tennis teams as per usual and after a few games I was called upon to play in games up and down Egypt. I seemed to be spending all my time travelling during the week to play in different games and drawing advance pay, though somehow come the end of the week I was always broke.

In 1927, after a few months' training, someone must have suggested that I should be appointed unpaid acting Lance-Corporal, which is about the lowest rank in the British Army and as such, were given all the rotten duties that no one else wanted to undertake, but if one wanted to get on in the Service this was a phase that had to be gone through.

After another month of this I found myself in charge of the mess hall where I had to keep discipline and see that the rules were obeyed, Saturday afternoons were particularly difficult. Having slept, the troops used to come for their tea and dry bread and cheese, or something similar, we did not get margarine very often in those days. The ruling in the mess hall was that people should appear 'properly dressed' – including socks! (This was probably to keep the smell of feet down as much as anything else). On this one particular day a well-known individual appeared without socks after spending most of the lunch hour drinking in the canteen. I tackled him and told him to put his socks on but he became abusive and said I was hiding behind my stripe, whereupon I told him that if he went to the hockey pitch about 5 p.m. We would see whether I was hiding behind my stripe or not.

I arrived there at the prescribed time and he was there waiting for me, after a good set too I belted him well and truly, as was my intention. In my innocence I thought that would be the end of the matter, but on the Monday morning we were both hauled before the C.O. He listened to the story but I lost my stripe for fighting. That's how life goes, but fortunately a couple of months later they gave it back to me and a few months later still, I was a Lance-Corporal proper.

Most of the senior people used to spend their evenings in the mess – some with their wives and some not. They say that a full moon affects only those who are slightly off balance, if that is true then at least half the people I knew out there were off balance and that included both the men and women. The capers that some of them got up to without their partners knowing would not look well in any book. As regards to those men who had no interest in that direction, they would load up with several crates of beer on a moonlit Saturday night and head off over the desert for several miles and have a real party amongst themselves. Sound travels very far

across the desert at night and back in the barracks we could hear them singing and shouting even though they were miles away.

When the various dances were held on the tennis courts, (which were covered with tarpaulins for the occasions) bands were engaged, there were coloured lights and decorations. But often we were short of bulbs and I remember the time when we were shorter than usual, we raided the drivers' quarters when they were away, knowing they would not come back from the town until midnight or later. (It must be remembered that in those days drivers were on mules and not in vehicles). The dance went very well but was somewhat disrupted when these characters came back to their rooms and found they had no electric light bulbs. Dressed only in shirts they staggered over to the dance area, which was fortunately enclosed by straw mats so that they could not be seen from the outside and with richly mellowed shouts yelled, "Never mind the bloody dance – what about our bloody bulbs!" I can remember the scene to this day.

As time went on I was doing several educational courses and as a result got my second stripe. Now having been well and truly trained in the arts of water supply, purification, bridging and demolition, my next job came along quite unexpectedly.

Ismalia is on the Suez Canal, not far from where there was a big attempt to cross the Canal during World War I. Many shells were fired and what happened to the crossing I cannot remember. However, a very severe 'sand-storm' blew up during the time we were there, exposing about six hundred unexploded shells on the banks. Armed with a few sappers, explosives and rations, I was sent down to render the shells harmless by blowing them up. We set up camp, stored our kit, positioned the guards and got the cook working in record time.

The following morning we set off to inspect and had all the visible shells flagged. We then started at one end, tying an explosive to each shell and lighting the fuse. As the markings on the shells were not identifiable and we were not sure as to whether they were gas or high explosive, each lighting of the fuse was accompanied by us running like hell! The first twenty odd went 'Poof' and we knew they were only gas shells, therefore as we were all getting a bit tired with the running business we collectively decided that the next one we would not run, it probably being harmless. Still, some instinct told us to run anyway after lighting the fuse and thank God we did. It was a high explosive and sent debris in all directions. We ran for the remaining six hundred.

Eventually the powers that be decided that I should attend a physical training course in Alexandria. I tried to get through the course as well as I could. I had been swimming frequently for a long time, but it was found that I should take a rest from this and instead sit on the beach with bar hauling and other such exercises to improve my muscles. Girlfriend No.3 Joy, had somehow arranged it so that she was in Alexandria on holiday at the time, which led to more trouble than I had anticipated. Eventually though it was resolved when both she (and husband!) were posted back to Britain.

I decided to join the Tennis Club in Alexandria where I hoped to improve my style. It was here that I met Ali, an Egyptian professional who, though only having one eye, played tennis better than anyone else I knew at the time. We agreed on a fee

and Ali coached me for several weeks. I am still grateful to him for helping me. Being a single member of a club, one gets involved and as such I became involved – with Rachel. Her father was in the commercial field of Egyptian cotton amongst many other things. She was a bit fat but a good companion and we used to go everywhere together. Once more though she was the marrying type. I on the other hand, was not.

It was now 1928 and with other chaps from the unit we used to amuse ourselves at weekends by going to San Stefano, a casino and holiday resort outside Alexandria. In our early days we used to play the casino but didn't win very often however, one night, luck seemed to be on my side. I won about £300, which was a hell of a lot of money in those days. With good common sense I packed up and went back to barracks placing the money under my pillow at 11pm and tried to sleep. But the money was burning and by midnight I was back in the casino, not only losing the £300 but also another £5 I had in reserve. I think from that night my technique in casino's improved.

Back in Ismalia we did our usual annual training, including marching from Ismalia to Cairo through the desert on manoeuvres. Sometimes this involved marching for thirty miles a day and sleeping in the desert at night can be testing because when the sand gets cold, it gets very cold. I climbed the pyramids and gazed at the pyramids like any other tourist would do. I also did all the things that soldiers do in Cairo. In my day there were brothels in Ismalia, Port Said, Cairo, Alexandria and every other town in Egypt. Certain places were legalized and others were not. The troops used to visit them at weekends – and at other times!

Now many of them used to sample the forbidden fruits of the illegal brothels and it was always a constant hide-and-seek between them and the military police. When a soldier contracted the inevitable V.D., despite the obligatory precautions taken, he would have to report the fact. This normally led to him being taken down town to identify the girl concerned. However, if his 'complaint' had been contracted from an illegal brothel, common practice was to name a girl from a legal brothel who knew nothing about it. This though had serious consequences if it could be proved that the named girl was free from disease and would lead to the maximum punishment. Pay, during time spent in a V.D. Hospital was cut to a shilling a day, the remainder collected by the army.

Early in 1929 we were due for approximately three months' leave which could be taken in Britain if wished. At the time, girlfriend No 2, Nan, was continually writing that I should come home and discuss 'our' future. I still had some credit and decided honourably, or otherwise – I'm not sure which – to apply for leave in the U.K. This was granted for the summer. At the prescribed time I was booked onto a Japanese ship the, OMA NURA, with two other fellows. With the limited funds we had at our disposal we travelled down to Port Said beforehand to await the arrival of the ship, which was several days late. We were now rapidly running out of funds and had hoped that we could draw an advance of pay from the paymaster at the port before sailing. However, this was not to be and we got on the ship very, very poor indeed. This situation was improved slightly one evening with a game of whist where I managed to win a few pounds from the tea planters with whom we shared lodgings and this saw me through. However, the two stewards I was travelling with had no

such luck but there was nothing much I could do as by the time we docked at Tilbury I had only just enough money to get home myself.

On the ship was a girl from Palestine called Sue. I liked her very much and we used to sit on the deck and hold hands, a typical shipboard romance, but we promised that when we got to England we would continue. Part of my leave I spent at the home of Nan, who was still very keen on marriage, her parents said that if I left the army they would help me settle into civilian life. I thought about all this but I was not sufficiently in love with the girl herself. Then I travelled to London to see Sue, additionally I was getting letters from Rachel (still in Alexandria), stating that she was coming home to Manchester on holiday. In fact, she was chasing me because her parents thought that it might be a good idea if she married me so that I could leave the service and join forces with her old man in his many businesses. I couldn't see that one working out either. However, she came back to England and of course I travelled to Manchester to see her. Life became very tough on that leave and I was quite glad when the time came to embark for Egypt and freedom once more.

We boarded a P&O vessel sailing through to Australia. On board, amongst others, were about three hundred domestic servants led by a stern matron to ensure that no trouble ensued. She did not stand a chance and there were fun and games all the way, although we tried dodging them they were too keen and willing, even for us! I am quite sure that by the time we got off in Egypt many of the domestics were pregnant, as to what happened to them I never knew.

For a while life in Ismalia was very quiet and uncomplicated. I finally finished with girlfriend Nan and Rachel from Alexandria had gone home with her parents, Sue was still writing though.

In September 1929 we were on a route march from Ismalia to somewhere or other. It was a Saturday morning and about halfway along the route we were turned about to march back to base, for what reason we didn't know. When we got back we were ordered to mobilize. We heard that riots had occurred in Palestine and that we were being sent there, all details for mobilization are laid down and the task was completed in double quick time. Rations were issued and we boarded a train for the twenty hour journey over Kantara into Palestine.

During the journey, tea making proved to be a bit of a problem. We once came to a halt and the cook took the tea dixie along to the Egyptian engine driver indicating that he wanted hot water for the tea. This was not interpreted well and the urn was filled with cold water, so that brew was a waste of time. We had extra tea rations so we waited a while and tried again, this time the driver obliged, not only with hot water but with accompanying steam which blew all the tea leaves out of the dixie – second ration gone. Again we waited, then finally in desperation an N.C.O. went to the driver and managed to get the dixie properly filled with the hot water required. Unfortunately though, as he walked back alongside the train there was a shudder as the train decided to move once more. This caused the N.C.O. To hasten his efforts in returning to our carriage whereupon he tripped over a sleeper and the whole contents of the urn seeped into the sand. Once again, no tea.

We arrived in Jerusalem late at night and were taken to the Russian barracks

and dumped there. In the morning a squad of men were detailed to check and guard what is known as the Jaffa Gate, one of the gates in the wall of the Old City. Our job was to check the Arabs moving in and out for concealed weapons and confiscate any found. A problem arose with the females, however we were ordered to search all persons, male or female. The women proved to be really tricky ducks – they often carried the weapons and we found it both difficult and embarrassing trying to be thorough in our searches yet remain gentlemanly in our manner. The women seemed to find it all rather amusing however, as weapons were often discovered on their persons and it was a task that had to be maintained until eventually women were brought in for the searches, thereby relieving us all of considerable embarrassment. In all it was not the best of duties, even our rations seemed to consist wholly of fried bacon, dry biscuits and tea.

After a couple of weeks of this we were sent to a place called ‘Solomon’s Pools’. These consisted of three large reservoirs about thirty miles out from Jerusalem, supplying the city with water. This duty was to patrol the area at night, therefore ensuring that no one threw poison into the water supply. From the very start this was obviously going to be an impossible job for the few of us there were. However, the first sentry (a young lad), was posted to patrol the reservoirs’ perimeter for a two-hour stint. At night and in the pitch darkness, it was not too long before he was back in the guardroom scared stiff saying that he had seen Arabs everywhere. I decided that I would accompany him but nothing untoward was seen. After a couple of hours the second sentry took up his duties, but within a very short time he too returned with stories of Arabs all over the place. Again I went around with him but saw nothing. After the same thing happened with the third sentry, I could plainly see that I was not going to get any sleep at this rate, therefore I decided that the safest place for all of us was in the pump house with the door shut.

With daylight the guards wandered around the pools, but nothing was expected by day anyway. We managed to pass the time by catching large frogs and the odd swim but were happy when, after ten days of this duty, we were relieved by a whole company of Infantry. We were glad to return to Jerusalem and the Russian barracks.

Our next move shortly afterwards, was to Hebron outside of Jerusalem. There were a few infantrymen perched in a little barracks on top of the hill without any water. Our job was to bring it up to them from Hebron. To this end, myself and the Officer in charge of the infantry travelled into Hebron to see the Mufti, as only he could give the necessary permission for the water pipeline to go through the required route. It was not a nice area and things were still pretty dicey, so neither of us felt too happy as we pushed our way through the old part of the town to reach his place. Upon our arrival we pointed out that we were short of pipeline and it would simplify

matters if we could be allowed to lay the pipe through a short cut across one of the graveyard paths, after a bit of an argument this was agreed. Back out of Hebron and up the hill to the barracks we went and I for one was very glad. The next day we started on the pipeline through the cemetery and within half an hour it appeared that we were surrounded by most of the inhabitants of the town who were not looking best pleased by our work. I managed to get a message up to the camp and all available troops were deployed to guard us, this certainly eased our position but I was very glad to get the work done and get out in one piece. It had been a very nasty area after the riots and as far as I could see it was not likely to improve for a long while yet. Still, job completed we returned to the barracks in safety.

We were generally finding life rather boring at this time, playing cards in our off-duty hours, spending all the money we had. But it was not to last and soon the powers to be decided that military establishments should be set up all over Palestine and we, the engineers, had to provide the portable kitchens, ablution benches and all such other equipment required for making up a military unit. This meant the requisitioning of supplies for the rather large task of supplying the whole of Palestine with equipment. I remember going to a timber merchant with a requisition order for five hundred boards, on delivery we inspected the boards but found many to be of poor quality, in fact they were a lot rubbish with only a few decent boards in with the load. We placed the boards against a wall and tested them, most broke. The contractor was summoned and we threatened not to pay unless he removed the damaged wood and replaced with good quality stock, finding that his trick had not worked he eventually played ball and we proceeded to construct all the kitchen, shower toilet and other kit needed across the country. As the second in command of the section, I had to travel all over the country to check on supplies and requirements. As such, I had full use of the military cars and had some very good trips indeed to places such as Nablus, Hebron, Tel Aviv and all the towns and villages where the equipment was needed.

During this time, it was noted that boys will be boys, girls (in private enterprise) will be girls. There were some difficulties but eventually it was discovered that if the boys hired a gari, a horse drawn vehicle common in those days, for a drive around the town then there would also be a girl in the gari. Sometimes this girl would be a true Palestinian, sometimes a Jewess, as far as the boys and girls were concerned it seemed to work out just fine. Anyhow, the gari would just drive around the town and the boys would presumably fulfil their desire in life and then make the appropriate payment. In most cases the drivers were Arabs so although the war was supposed to have made these religions bitter enemies it just went to prove that you can't stop private enterprise.

I went back to Tel Aviv where girlfriend Sue had arrived back. She had in the meantime been sending me literary books that I did not really understand and had written many letters, although she had omitted to tell me that she was already married. She invited me home to meet her husband and, I suppose to make up for her misdemeanours, introduced me to a matron of the hospital in Tel Aviv hoping that she would be helping in our friendly relationship. The matron was a very young and petite woman, being only 4ft 8in to my 6ft 2in. However, she was very good company and a delightful girl and I think you can say that she was also a girlfriend.

At this time the Palestinian Police was being doubled or even tripled in strength in preparation for the departing military presence. Circulars came round asking for recruits, but although some of us thought of joining we decided to let the chance go by and stay in the Army.

We had spent about nine months in Palestine when it was decided that things had stabilized enough for our return to Egypt. We decided amongst ourselves that it was too good an opportunity to miss and although we had amassed a considerable quantity of military equipment, all of which had to be boxed for returning to Egypt, we filled a lot of the tool boxes and other such containers with fresh fruits, lemons, oranges and so on. The tools themselves we just tied up in sacks. Upon our return we were severely rebuked as all the wrong kit ended up in the wrong boxes and therefore in the wrong places, however, on the whole it was forgiven as we had plenty of fresh fruit to share amongst the various messes and local children's hospitals.

Whilst in Egypt I went into Ismalia to see a Greek dentist. Although he was not very good, a lot of the troops found themselves in need of dental treatment and had also been there, having found that he had a rather nice daughter. Although not a real beauty, the way she held our hands and looked into our eyes seemed to act as a sedative and more than made up for the shortcomings of her father's treatment. Anyway, we became acquainted and I thought that we might go out together. We managed this once or twice but unfortunately either her mother or aunt would always insist on chaperoning us. I didn't mind at first but this got a bit much, particularly when I had to pay for their drinks as well. I didn't see why I should waste my money on them and so I had to say that unless I could see her alone, I could not see us being able to continue with the relationship. The usual tears started to flow, but she said that she would try to arrange to come out on her own, she also confessed her love for me and I told her how much I liked her but unfortunately we did not get that chance to prove it. So that was the end of that girlfriend.

Thirty-one years later in 1962, I visited Port Said with my wife. We were invited to a special Rotary dinner and I had to make a speech, during which I made reference to the Greek dentist and his daughter in Ismalia. It seemed that he was well remembered by many of those present, but not as well remembered as his daughter! I think my wife was never fully convinced of the purity of my past relationship.

In 1930 the R101 Airship was being flown from Cardiganshire to India. A lot of civilians were sent to Egypt in preparation of the visit and a mast was erected within half a mile of our camp so as to assist the airship as it passed through the area. We were all on duty the morning of the expected arrival of the ship, mainly for use in crowd control as there was obvious interest in this marvel. Nothing happened however and we received no messages throughout the day until that evening when we heard that the R101 had crashed at Beauvais in France. Some of those on duty had relations on board the craft and they were so distressed and felt so helpless that most of them ended up getting well and truly sloshed. Our main duty that night then became that of fetching them in one piece and putting them back in their quarters. So our reception plans of R101 ended in tragedy.

The author, fourth from the right, in the sands of Egypt

The trials of water in the desert! Cpl Read, far left.

In January 1931 we moved up to our initial camp near Heliopolis. Here we did the usual routine of training and preparation for a big manoeuvre from the pyramids across the desert. I remained behind one night with three men to guard the remaining stores on the unit for their return to ordinance the following day. The

stores all appeared to be locked inside the kitchens so instead of standing guard all night we decided to stay inside, lock the door and catch up on some sleep. We awoke to discover that during the night someone had thieved our boots. They had slipped into the kitchens burrowing through the sand under the wall of the hut, stolen the boots then got away pushing the sand back as they went. We were somewhat sheepish as we explained to the local unit our predicament, subsequently we were ordered to the ordinance depot for replacement boots after which we had to march from Heliopolis down to the pyramids in our new boots, a distance of about fifteen miles. Did our feet hurt when we got there? But it had served us right.

We had all the usual trials and troubles with water in the desert. In those days the brigade used to take off from Cairo across the desert and we, the sappers water unit, would follow up with a camel train. Each camel held two water containers called fanatis, each fanati could hold about ten gallons of water and were slung either side of the beasts. The camel train itself numbered five hundred and we had to go with these creatures this across the desert behind the army. In the evenings, we would come up and refill the water storage tanks of each unit and re-supply the tanks from the purification centres, then move on once more. The main problem that arose with the camels themselves used to centre on their tendency to wander off in all direction if not controlled, therefore it became necessary to learn to ride these creatures to try and maintain some degree of order. We also had to keep an eye on the camel drivers, or guides, who could be tricky customers. They would be paid a daily rate per camel, but if they felt that their camel was unwell they would slip the tap on the fanatis to drain the water away into the sands and therefore lighten the load. Some would even attempt to refill their tanks later in the day (therefore, not be noticed that they'd been running light) when we might be alongside some filthy, dirty canal. They would have quite happily poured this contaminated water in with all the treated water had we not been vigilant enough. The effect that this could have had on a marching army's digestive system can be imagined! The one time when the camel driver would be excused his water delivery was if his camel was pregnant, often the beast would give birth during these routes and after we drained the water off their backs, they would lie down and within half an hour it was all over with. The newly born infant would take no time at all in standing on its own feet, then would quite happily follow off across the sands behind it's mother as the train moved onwards.

With manoeuvres over once again we went back to Ismalia via Cairo, back to all the attendant sports and training. However, it was decided that some of us should be deployed as foreman of works to building projects being undertaken around the country. I was posted to Alexandria where they were building some new barracks and I was supposed to keep an eye on the contractors' work. The requirement to closely watch the standards of work was ever present as the Egyptian contractors are very astute people and would always try and pull a scam. In some areas the work would be continuous day and night, it would be easy to miss some tricks, but one of their favourites would be to exchange the contents of cement bags with Nile mud, reseal them, then use them on the contract. Obviously the adherence qualities of mud compared to that of cement would be somewhat lacking and we would fine them if detected, it didn't stop them trying though. Another of their antics used to be drawing every other steel reinforcing rod from the building making the structure weaker, then try to re-sell them back to us, (very clever people). To achieve this they would try

every trick in the book to lure us away from the site, offering us wine and beer in their huts, one contractor even offered the company of his daughter! Anyway, life went on and somehow the building got built and we returned to Ismalia.

Now we were in our last year before embarking for home, we had got to know the desert pretty well, we had been through all aspects of training and played sport up and down the country, altogether we were in good shape. During this last year, some of us older members of the company were allowed to stay behind more during manoeuvres to maintain the camp whilst the others went off into the desert. In fact the year became quite a holiday period and we made the most of it.

One job that came up during this time was in Lake Timpsah, which is an offshoot of the Suez Canal. We had used this area for many years for playing water polo until a French Company had presented us with a new ground, The old area had fallen into disuse and several people swimming in the lagoon had injured themselves on the considerable number of iron poles which used to mark out the goals and other areas which had slipped into the water. It was therefore decided that these poles should be cut at the seabed level.

I was detailed to carry out the job together with a couple of demolition experts. We went to the lake daily, the idea being to fill sacks with demolition charges, swim out to the poles then dive down tying them to the base before attaching the detonators. Two of us would carry out this task, the remaining guy would act as a safety lookout and he would connect the electrical leads to the initiator box and attach the plunger to blow the charges once we had cleared the water. However, later on I had been tying these bags and upon surfacing I was horrified to see the chap on the shoreline already connecting the leads ready to blow. This is strongly forbidden until all personnel are clear of the area! I cleared the water in a time that would have impressed any Olympic judge and got there just in time to stop him doing anything further. After pointing out the error of his ways in the usual manner of the day, I immediately sent him back to barracks before awaiting for my colleague to join me on the shore before turning the plunger. From that day forth, I kept the key to the initiating box tied around my wrist at all times.

During this last year in the desert, one of the duties that came my way was that of messing corporal. Now the unit used to receive rations drawn from the R.A.S.C., with an allowance of petty cash to buy additional items from the naafi, at the time this allowance came to ninepence a day which wasn't very much, but it was my job to see that the troops got fed. At about the same time as I took over this duty, it was decided that meals of a more, shall we say, 'refined' nature should be attempted, with this in mind a messing committee was set up to look at ways of varying the meals. The unit had a fair mix of individuals including some 'old boys' dating back to World War 1 complete with long moustaches etc. Now these chaps had no time for messing committees so therefore this innovation was mainly brought about and staffed by the newer and younger types. One of the first suggestions by these newer types was for us to have jelly for Saturday tea rather than the usual bread and cheese. Unfortunately, the unit's freezing equipment was not of the best and well below the level required to set the jelly. You can imagine the language when these old boys were presented with bowls of slippery, watery liquid jelly for their tea! After this disaster came the 'rock cake' incident. It was decided that the following

Saturday we would try cakes instead, I asked the cook 'Speedy' if he could make rock cakes, "Of course," he said, " No trouble at all." So rock cakes he would make, and never was a truer statement made. I was out of the barracks during the day but when I returned to my bunk in the evening there were rock cakes all around my bed, under it, on it and in it, I picked one up and found that they were truly rock hard. From then onwards we would stick to bread and cheese for tea.

We ploughed on through the year and after a few delays and disappointments, we eventually prepared to sail back to Britain. The replacements arrived and with high spirits, we all piled down to Port Said to embark. We left in usual manner, items of personal kit was thrown over the side, a loud cheer went up, then after shaking the last of the desert sand from our boots, we headed for home.

CHAPTER 3

PORTON: FALLING IN LOVE

I was ordered to report to Porton, near Salisbury in Wiltshire, where I duly arrived and was given disembarkation leave. I went home and thoroughly enjoyed seeing all the green trees and grass once more after so long in the desert. I was delighted to be home and had a quiet, uncomplicated and restful leave. After my leave I returned to Porton, which turned out to be a chemical gas station. Here the boffins would make the gas and the role of the troops would be to go out in the woods under the command of their NCO's and try to avoid being touched by this dye that had been sprayed around the area, representing the gas. Anti-gas capes were issued but all in all it was not a particularly enjoyable experience. Still, on the other hand it was not too exhausting and we were given plenty of opportunity to play sports in the afternoons and we managed to survive. The other activity was to actually take part in these experiments, the troops would report to the laboratories and have different gases dropped on them. If they displayed any blisters or marks they would be entitled to extra pay and days leave, as such many of the troops volunteered for more experiments and therefore chalked up quite a sizable amount of money and leave. On the whole though, we played cards and I did not find it an exciting period so I was rather glad when a posting for me came at the beginning of 1933.

My posting was to Chepstow, an apprentice boys' training school. The job entailed responsibility for the boys' behaviour, dress, discipline and most other aspects outside their trade training. It was quite a good life, the boys were in different age groups ranging from fifteen to eighteen, three groups to a company and four companies who competed against each other in sports events. Fortunately we had some good sports instructors in our group and managed to romp home in most events.

I had the second wing of 'C' Company, with boys aged between sixteen and seventeen. To be honest they were neither boys nor men, just little terrors who would try everything. They were not allowed to smoke, though of course they did. But our job was to try and keep them on the right road and if they strayed to far they were punished accordingly. There were those who were very clever, there were those who

were not. Even so, the training received by them during their time must have proved extremely valuable, as when they were eventually posted to regular army units, their promotion prospects were very high. We were asked to start camp concerts and we got the boys into this, reluctantly at first but later more willingly and I think they enjoyed it because their girlfriends from the town used to come and support them. It made the boys very proud of themselves.

During my four years in Chepstow I naturally joined several of the local clubs and became involved with a girl named Susan. It was a happy relationship and we went around a lot together, everyone was waiting for the day when we would get married like everyone else, but it never happened although we continued to attend all the social activities together. My tour of duty was extended another year and finally in 1936 my time was up and I was moved to Catterick.

By this time I owned a small car and subsequently set off to my new post in Yorkshire. On arrival at the camp I reported in as usual and started off with the routine annual military training that goes on in the army the world over. Very soon after my arrival I was due for promotion, but although my records were good and I was on an accelerated promotion list, I was told by the C.O. that he thought I looked a bit young to be promoted to full Sergeant in the Royal Engineers. I tried explaining to him that this was as a result of my many sporting interests and general fitness and he must have thought it over because I was duly promoted. However, from then onwards I wore a moustache and have worn it practically ever since.

After a short time in Catterick with all the usual training connected with a field company I was moved to Chatham for further training. This entailed months and months of instruction in heavy bridging techniques, demolition, water supplies etc. Fortunately I enjoyed all these courses and seemed to do very well in them. In the meantime Susan was still writing and wondering about our future. Christmas came and went and it was now early 1937 when I returned to Catterick and back to all the usual activities.

I used to travel down south on long weekends to see another girl at the time, she was half British, half French, always broke and nearly broke me financially as well. But she was good company and always cheerful, she hoped that I would consider our association seriously but I did not. Although we enjoyed many trips together out and around, I was finding the strain of the travelling back and forth in a weekend a bit much and felt that we were not going anywhere, therefore I felt the time had come to call a halt.

The author, F. C. Read.

In June of that year, not long after I had been back at Catterick, it was decided that the company should move to a special bridging site near Morecombe. A colleague of mine, another sergeant, told me his father, mother, sister, along with his fiancée would all be on holiday in the area at the same time. Whilst he would be spending time with his beloved and his sister would not particularly want to spend all her time with her parents, he asked if I would fill in whilst we were there as his sister, so he said, was a good sport. Well we met up and she was not at all unattractive and we started to go to various places together. But as for her being a 'good sport', her brother only knew the half of it. In actual fact she was a sexual maniac! At the time I still had my little car and we would travel about the little villages and beauty spots, at

times I had hardly parked the car before she was around my neck and had her hands all over the place. Needless to say I was not too loathe to follow suit but she was a terror. On some occasions when we were going for a picnic in the car, I would discover that under her dress she would be completely bare. After about a week of this I was beginning to get exhausted, her brother had asked if we were getting along ok, and I had to say yes, I dared not tell him the truth. She was a 'clingy' type and once we went to a dance at Morecombe and it was a job to get round the room without embarrassment, even when we got outside and I was driving back she had her arms around my neck – she was a menace. I knew that this could not go on for long but the days passed and with sunken eye balls I was getting more and more worn out. Fortunately the army unwittingly stepped in and the company had to move away. I don't know what happened to that girl in later life but if she ever did get married I would not have given her husband many years, not living the way she did. But I suppose like most, she would mellow with years.

At the time, everyone I knew seemed to be getting married and in the end I found that most social functions seemed to be for husbands and wives. Therefore, eventually I decided to take the plunge into marriage with Susan. I had come down from the North with my small car to make the commitment when on the way from Gloucester, at about 3 a.m., a big lorry came down the hill and passed me. I hadn't noticed it had a trailer in tow until it bumped against the side of the car, tipping me over into a ditch. There were plenty of petrol fumes about as I scrambled, luckily unhurt, out of the car. Unfortunately the same could not be said of the car, it was a wreck. I hurriedly got my bits and pieces out but luckily it did not catch fire and it was not too long before someone came along who gave me a lift to my destination. Early the next morning I returned to the car with a garage owner who offered me £5 for the wreck, then sold me another car, this left me pretty broke but it had to be done. Maybe I should have read the signs, but we got married anyway. (The marriage never got too much of a chance and we had only spent a short time together when the war broke out, though fortunately there were no children to worry about and she stayed down south when I went overseas).

Anyhow, after my marriage I went to Chatham again for a long transport course, which I thoroughly enjoyed and did rather well in. After that I returned to Catterick once more.

CHAPTER 4

SCOTLAND: HAIL CALEDONIA

By 1938 there were many troubles and trials in the world, the German Reich was on the warpath and despite the statements made at Munich, it was deemed that the Army in Britain should receive more training and an expansion in numbers. On my return to Catterick I found that I had been posted to Dundee as a permanent staff inspector of a Territorial Unit, I was now in the rank of Sergeant Major and attached to a field company.

I quickly discovered that if, in the early stages of a stay in Scotland you don't

get on very well with the local population, get out! They either like you or not and you soon get to find out which way it is. Fortunately, I was lucky and enjoyed my stay. All the people I came into contact with were kindness itself, an added bonus was that I was able to play golf quite frequently.

They were a good crowd, the territorials, all very keen. At that time we doubled our strength from 300 to 700 and they were all enthusiastic to complete their required quota of 'drills' to qualify for their bonus payments. Soon we were holding drills all over the place because of the numbers involved, even the school yards surrounding the camp. Some were unable to make up their quota due to illness's, night shifts, births and so on, but I would mark them up as having completed their time so as they could receive the bounty payments when the time came. I don't think anyone was being too robbed by my doing so.

Vehicles and equipment were now coming through and drivers were taken at weekends over the hills and dales around Dundee, through creeks, getting stuck and being towed out again, generally doing all things expected of them in war. In fact, doing a lot more than they would in war! They were always keen, willing and capable. Although we would return from the weekend with a few slightly damaged vehicles, it was all good training and I felt very proud.

Early in 1939 the regular R.S.M. in Aberdeen was due a posting and I was sent to the 'Granite City' to take over the divisional headquarters, which consisted of the three companies of Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen. My job seemed to entail spending most of my time driving around the countryside seeing that the training was being carried out correctly. Eventually the list of companies doubled and it was decided that these should be split into the 51st Highland and the 32nd Lowland Divisions. When war was declared, that is how they were and I remained in the original 51st Division.

A group of A.T.S., about thirty in number with an Officer in charge, was brought into the Aberdeen Headquarters immediately war was declared, perhaps it was thought that our spirits needed bolstering. They were all very keen young ladies and willing to do whatever was required of them. Reporting to my office one morning were six of these ladies who had been detailed to do some filing. Now I had a system in place consisting of about two hundred files, sub-divided into another thirty or forty, so I put one particular girl on to filing. An hour had passed and I asked if she was alright, to which she replied "Yes Sir!" I came back after lunch and the file stack appeared to be getting higher and she was red in the face. I asked her if she really understood filing, unfortunately she replied "No Sir", I asked if she was even a clerk, "No Sir, I'm a cook!" The resulting mess took the entire Aberdeen staff three days to sort out the files and return them to some degree of order.

The A.T.S. girls also had to be trained in drill. The fact that they had been endowed, both forward and aft in different dimensions, meant that getting them into lines and training them was often difficult, but we managed to survive. Why do women prefer to be drilled by men rather than their own instructors?

In the October, we were due to move down to Aldershot and the C.O. wanted

to know if we should take the A.T.S. contingent with us. I declined the offer. Eventually we arrived in Aldershot, were billeted and settled in. We had the first Canadians begin to arrive and at the weekend there were free fights all over the camp. The W.O.'s and SNCO's of the two divisions went down to sort out all the trouble. After a while things calmed down a bit and the troops returned to their barracks. I suppose both the Highlanders and Canadians were all keen to see some action, so why not start on each other, just as a preliminary.

CHAPTER 5

FRANCE: OVER THERE

At the end of October we were shipped over to France and billeted at Estaires, near Dunkirk. The Cold war was in full swing and we were straight into winter training and all that went with it.

We had been in France about six weeks when we received a message saying that on checking through our accounts of the Territorial Camp at Peebles, a discrepancy had arisen regarding one half a ton of coal. It seemed surreal what with all that was going on around the place, but the C.O. spoke to me about the matter and asked what we should do. Having left numerous papers (and files) in Aberdeen when we had left, I suggested that he should write back stating that all our records were held there for safe keeping until the unit returned. I knew damned well that the people concerned would not have the time to go through all the piles of paperwork we left and we heard no more on the subject.

Early in the New Year of 1940 we moved south to behind the Maginot Line and settled down. The Cold War was in full swing and I was informed that I would be returned to the U.K. within a week to ten days to be commissioned, my relief would take over within the week. Seven days later, the Cold War stopped and the Hot War erupted as the German advance towards France began. All leave and postings were cancelled and I never did get home. My rank at the time was R.S.M. 51st Highland Division Engineers, the same rank I held throughout the war until 1945, no promotions for prisoners-of-war.

We had moved up from our initial staging point to a French village. We found that much of the town had been evacuated and I easily found some billets on the second floor of an abandoned house. In the evening I used to go to a local bistro that was still manned, have a few drinks with another R.S.M., then return to await events. There was not a lot else we could do at the time. One particular night I had rather a lot of Martinis and went to home quite happily to bed. Suddenly, about midnight, artillery opened up behind us. The vibration through the house was quite something and I was becoming scared. In the morning we discovered that the French had brought up their artillery guns on railway wagons, fired off rounds over the German lines, then taken the guns away again. It was quite obvious to us that the Germans planes would scour the area looking for the source of the firing and generally have a crack at anything they thought might need some attention. So we

hastily moved everything back to another area, we were not wrong either as the planes were patrolling in the morning, but as nothing was found they (and us) returned to their positions.

At this time there were different companies around various villages, some near 'no-man's land' and all around, so I used to go off on a motorcycle to see how they were doing. I can't say that I was particularly thrilled going to some of these posts, but I had to put on a brave face because these men were living there in some grim conditions. Time passed and things stayed like this, until the full invasion of France began.

We were not directly involved at the time, but within a few days we were ordered out of our positions to circle Paris, with some of the unit posted to the Valerie Line. The Germans were by now pouring into France and in our movements around Paris, we were pelted with stones and rubbish from all quarters by the entire population. They were under the impression that we were retreating from the battlefield when we hadn't yet even entered it. We had managed to pass the outskirts of Paris by early morning and headed north-east. As the column moved along we met the odd refugee, but later the numbers increased enormously. We were trying our best to go forward but it seemed as if the entire civilian population was in full retreat. They had utilized anything on wheels to carry what little possessions they had. It was a pitiful sight, men, women and children with farm carts, bicycles and prams, - everything was on the move. We had the greatest of difficulty in trying to clear a way for the convoy to move through it all, we couldn't use the fields either side of the roads as we were not 'tracked' and the ground was very soft.

Over the horizon, clouds of smoke could be seen from burning villages. We pressed on and saw the absolute havoc caused by the German bombers. Arriving at a crossroads we stumbled upon some soldiers who had been blown apart, two were dead, the third had had his leg twisted in a grotesque fashion and looked very grey in the face. Another soldier was trying his best to help his comrade but he was not in a much better state himself. Fortunately the Red Cross came along and we were able to move on again. In the fields either side of us cows were mooing, - they obviously had not been milked for a long time - but we did not stop for anything and in the last light of the afternoon we arrived at Neuchatel (-en-Bray). Overcame some planes and smashed the place left, right and centre, on again into the most devastated area I have ever seen, the place had been levelled. We moved slightly north-west and holed up in a small village for the night. Next morning for reasons best known to someone else, we started to retreat and back we went but along a slightly differing route, but remained parallel with the coast. That night we holed up again still uncertain of what the hell was happening.

We in headquarters were dumped into a little wood, with the C.O. and other officers billeted in a nearby house. No information whatsoever was available, the only thing we heard was through a radio which each evening spoke of the Germans advancing fast, and there was talk of a gathering at Dunkirk. After two or three days of this and with no information at all from the C.O., we awoke one morning to the distinct sounds of firing all around us. We could hear everything from planes to tanks to artillery and here we were, stuck in some bloody wood, fully armed and equipped

with rations but with no instructions whatsoever. I went across to the house to obtain some orders, only to find that the officers had left earlier, presumably to Divisional Headquarters for an update. But by now we could distinctly hear the tanks approaching our position down the road and we had been left on our own.

An enemy advance patrol spotted us and started rifle firing the position, I now had to take command and we opened fire at the patrols, in the hope of slowing down the advance, thereby giving us time to move out. I gave the order for everyone to get on the vehicles and roll out. We came to the main road and I was not sure which way to turn, so turned left to go back the way we had arrived at the wood. After about a mile following a bend in the road, we suddenly came across a German column in full force. There was nothing that could be done apart from taking the opposite side of the road and trying to force our way through by shooting at the hip. We had almost cleared the column when my driver was shot and we careered into a German vehicle, leaving me with one leg on the German vehicle, one leg on mine, with the inevitable result that my pelvis was nearly split in two.

CHAPTER 6

CAMBRAI: IN THE BAG

Somehow or other we were all collected up and taken back to the assembly point where the Germans were holding prisoners, with the usual saying, 'For you, the war is over'. In the compound we discovered many of our divisional men who had similar stories to us and had been picked up the same way. We had no idea of what had been going on, but later heard that the division had been ordered to surrender. I couldn't walk and although we were treated fairly well, our stay here was very brief. We were moved back where we were checked over in an efficient manner, my problem was that my knee had been injured and together with my smashed pelvis.

I could not walk at all, however, I managed to get hold of two brooms and hobbled about on those as best I could.

I was next moved to a hospital at Rouen. During my stay there I had the greatest admiration for the French Salvation Army, they were marvellous despite the insults and many difficulties they had to endure from the Germans. They succeeded in entering the hospital each week to hand out a few cigarettes or bars of chocolate, whatever they had in fact. From that day onwards I have always thought the Salvation Army to be one of the best charitable organizations and try to give to them whenever I can.

One day there was a terrific uproar in the hospital, the French doctors had been treating their men and all other nationalities there when the German medics came in. One thing that can always be relied upon with the Germans is their efficiency and as far as I could gather, it seemed that the Germans were not happy with the way the French had carried out amputations. Whether it was because they were carried out too quickly or just not very well, but the Germans felt it had not been

carried out correctly. Apparently, during the operation sufficient skin has to be pushed right up so as to eventually cause a cushion over the stump after the limb has been removed. It would appear that this had not been done and the German medical officer was creating merry hell through the wards after his inspection, so much so in fact that most of these amputees were returned to the operating theatre to undergo the whole business again until the officer was happy it had been carried out correctly. I spent two months in the hospital before being discharged and sent to military barracks at Cambrai.

It was now August 1940, I met up with about 180 Britishers including two or three officers and we became a little unit of our own. In the morning, the Germans would come around the barracks chasing everyone out on parade, often using rubber truncheons to achieve their desired effect. Fortunately they never tried it with the British, we were quite a close unit and I think there would have been a free-for-all if they had, but the threat was always there. After a few days we discovered that when the Germans called out the working parties, the French and others would rush like mad to get into a party so they could go out into the town and buy some extra rations. Our own men started to complain but this I would not permit, as I felt it was demeaning and not the correct way of doing things. A few days later a German General came to inspect us during morning parades. When he came to where we were standing, he asked as to why the British were not going out to work like the others. I informed the General, through an interpreter, that the men were soldiers and we did not expect them to run and squabble like schoolchildren about who would go to work. Fortunately he saw my point of view and gave instructions that the British were to be allowed to go to work when required. This helped and groups of our men would go out to Cambrai to odd jobs, using what little money they had to buy a few items. In many cases the French population would give items, which made living conditions a little better.

Initial contacts with home

Parading with us each morning were a group of Morrocans who refused to assemble with the French and would always attach themselves with our group. They said that they held no respect for the French whatsoever, for the French had been behind them on the front line when one morning they awoke to find that the French had left their posts, leaving the Morrocans to their own devices. They were an ugly crowd of about eighty, but they were proud and they were soldiers, which they fully intended to stay as until the bitter end.

The men who were sent out to work had various ways in which they brought back their spoils. Those who worked in the sugar establishments used to bind their battledress trouser legs tightly around the ankles and put sugar down their trousers, in the camp they undid the string and let the sugar into bowls. The same would happen to the men who worked in the flour mills. It seemed at this time that the Germans were hauling in all the cattle from the surrounding districts, slaughtering them to make sausages, which they would then transport back to Germany in railway wagons. Working parties were ordered to assist and I might add they got their fair share of meat. They would return from work much more muscular than when they set off, closer inspection would reveal large sausages bound to their arms. And so it was, one way or another, under hats, down trousers, up sleeves etc., we managed to get quite a wealth of produce into the camp. The guards were mostly Air Force people who were happy to let the prisoners come back to camp without a full inspection. Sometimes we would have some of the German pilots around, they were young and always talked of their raids over England. A few of our chaps suggested they should drop some of our letters on one of these raids and a couple of them agreed, provided it was kept quiet. Later our prisoners-of-war received letters indicating various dates, which obviously meant that the pilots had dropped some of the packets and had kept their word.

In January 1941, I decided to hand over my camp leadership to another Sergeant Major and go out to work. I had started to notice that there were too many prisoners being taken daily into the heart of Germany and felt that my best chance of escape would be here. Therefore, in the second week of January I went out on a working party to repair cars in a small garage. About six of us used to go out daily, myself with my face well covered and we would work with about eight Frenchmen who also worked there. For a couple of days things went as normal and we did as asked, but the next day I thought that this was my chance. I discovered that to go to the toilet at the back was a simple affair and that there was only a small wall to climb over to escape into the street. At 11 a.m., I slipped away to use the toilet and then, with a bit of difficulty due to my gammy leg, I managed to get over the wall and into the street. About three hundred yards down the street along came a platoon of German soldiers who were doing the normal stuff of searching properties and asking everybody seen for identity cards. My only hope was to turn into a doorway of a house, which I did, and hope that the patrol would pass. I heard quizzical voices calling down the passageway of the house and knew I had to go in and ask for help. I entered the house and went into what looked like a kitchen where a big fat French gendarme was sitting in his shirt – sleeves, his revolver strapped on, having breakfast while his wife was cooking by the stove. On seeing me she let out a yell and I tried in my best French, (which was pretty poor anyway), to explain that I was a British prisoner-of-war trying to escape. There was quite a heated argument between

husband and wife, she was all for letting me go through the house and out the back door but he was unsure, perhaps troubled by his conscience. They argued for about ten minutes and I think it was swaying my way, had a young lad not come in saying that the Germans were making a house-to-house search. This definitely made up the gendarme's mind, he drew his revolver and marched me out into the street and straight into the hands of the German soldiers. Well of course, when they asked for identity cards I could not produce one and to cap it all, under my overall was my battledress jacket. There really was no hope at all and I was promptly marched back to barracks and sent for by the commandant. He blew up in the air saying I had no right to go out. That was the end of that and from then I had to report to him morning, noon and night, so that made any further chance of escape from there somewhat slender.

Raids on England were now intensifying and although we had obtained a radio on the quiet, we saw more evidence of the toll these raids were taking upon the German aircrew than they realized. To reduce the appearance of losses, the planes would take off but we would not hear them land. Apparently, the Germans were diverting them to other airfields on landing. However, it was noticed by our working parties in Cambrai that many of the wounded pilots appeared to have injuries in their backsides and legs, this meant that they were being shot at from underneath, and the shots were hitting home. We also heard that there had been a semi – mutiny by several pilots who were court martialled and shot for refusing to fly over England. Another rumour we heard from the town was that the French underground were sending up all the prostitutes from the south of the country to the north, not to accommodate the German troops however, but to infect them with V.D. This may well have been true, because of the many guards off sick during this period and their constant replacement. We did once get hold of a note warning the German troops about the dangers of V.D. and everything that went with it.

With us in Cambrai was a Frenchman 'Raymond', who was an interpreter. He had been employed at the Savoy Hotel in London and elsewhere in Britain for many years before the war and was a very charming man. When the news started to filter through the camp, (as news always does within prison camps), that we were going to be moved 'en mass' into Germany, Raymond came to us and said he was going to take off and could we help. Normally it would have been very easy to send him out on a working party, but if he had escaped it could have caused problems with the remaining group and prevented others using the same route. Therefore, he requested a night - time escape. This was simply done by a group of us making a large distraction at one end of the camp whilst he scaled a wall at the other end. He probably made it back to the war fine, as we never heard of him again.

CHAPTER 7

LAMSDORF: GETTING TO KNOW YOU

On the 31st January 1941, the rumour that had been circulating turned out to be true and we were herded down to the railway station and put aboard trucks, fifty to a truck. Only those who have lived in a railway truck with toilet facilities provided by buckets and tubs will appreciate the difficulties that arose. After two days journey in these conditions, we arrived somewhere in Germany where we stayed for a few days. Then we were on the move again once more until we came to Lamsdorf camp. This camp was known as Stalag 8B and was the recipient of many and any prisoner-of-war from Dunkirk, St Valerie and elsewhere in France. There I met many men from division and it took quite a while but we started to figure out what exactly had happened in France.

I was interested in hearing how the senior officers had been picked up and in the way they were handled. It appeared that General Fortune, along with senior staff and including some of our officers, had been put in a school where the guard was an old Sergeant, who had been in World War 1. Obviously he had come into contact with some British during his earlier service and once, upon leaving the room holding his prisoners, he tried to impress his charges with his splattering of English, by saying "Goodnight gentlemen, you F***** Bastards". I have never understood how the world over, people with the smallest understanding of our language always seem able to pick up on the worst words, even the children.

Lamsdorf Stalag 8B already had a camp leader, one R.S.M. Sheriff, a very good chap and I got on well with him. The camp was very large with fourteen compounds, each compound holding between six hundred and a thousand men who were housed in several blocks. We were allocated to various blocks and I was put in charge of one of the compounds. The Geneva Convention was being upheld at Lamsdorf which is something that we didn't really know much about whilst we were held at Cambrai. This entailed, apart from anything else, that those above the rank of corporal did not have to go out to work unless they volunteered, which was not looked upon favourably by ourselves unless they wanted to escape. Unfortunately, this meant that most of the day was taken up by the men mooching around, hoping for a delivery of Red Cross parcels or waiting for something to happen to break the monotony of prison camp. As time went by, more and more men came into the camp and it was becoming more and more full until in the end it became impossible. Some were sleeping on the floors, others on tables, but as it was still summer this did not matter much, but still the numbers rose. There were continual parades and checks carried out by the guards who were quite strict in ways and as the war was going favourably for them at the time they used to make little jokes at our expense. We had a real mixed bag of people there and it would soon become even more mixed.

One day the first supply of Red Cross clothing arrived, I was among those who had to be at the clothing store when the parcels were opened, so they could be checked by the Germans. Imagine our surprises when we found the contents to be thousands of pairs of pyjamas, all of varying colours, stripes and hues. Fortunately, at the time we were in the summer and at least it provided some kind of clothing for those men who's uniforms were in tatters. We split the amounts amongst the various

compounds and made the issues. The pyjamas brought a degree of brightness to our lives at that time, but we must have been a sight for sore eyes. The following day, when thousands of men appeared around the camp wearing these brightly coloured pyjamas, the Commandant was moved to call us “Herren Englander”, or “Gentlemen of England”.

I was in charge of one of the compounds from which many men had to go out to work daily. After a while their clothing and footwear were in a shocking state, but we had got to know that supplies of new battledress clothing had arrived at the camp and the Germans promised that the men could be issued with this. After about a week of varying delays the clothing had still not appeared. On the Monday morning, we had reached the end of our tether and when the men paraded for work and I had still not got a result after asking the guards for the umpteenth time, I ordered the men not to march out. There came the usual howling, swearing and shouting and the guards called the corporals. The corporals called the sergeants and they in turn called for the officer-in-charge, all claiming that I was to blame for the men refusing to work. I explained as best I could that this was because of lack of clothing which I had requested and been refused. Ultimately, the Lieutenant called the Captain, then he the next until we had them all in front of us with pistols drawn stating that the men would be shot unless they went to work, but we stood our ground and refused. The upshot of it all was that they eventually agreed to issue the men with the new uniforms in the afternoon, which appeared to be a major victory for us all.

Then disaster, at 6 p.m., I was hauled in front of the Adjutant and told in no uncertain terms that although ‘Herren Englander’ had protested about having no clothing, when the men did receive the kit they were throwing it over the fence to the Yugoslavians. This I did not believe, but they brought in the men who had done so. To me this had been a crazy thing to do, having taken a chance in being shot and generally maltreated to get the uniforms in the first place, they had risked everything just to exchange their clothing for a few packets of cheap cigarettes. Now the craving to smoke was understandably strong, but it was still possible to get a few cigarettes. Some were brought in by the men working outside and were subsequently traded around, they were in short supply but thankfully the guards did not take them by force.

Anyhow, the uniform incident passed over and the men who had traded their uniforms were still forced to go out to work and still in the tatters of their old cloths, but there was very little I could do about it.

Autumn was coming on and a few men decided to try and escape, both from the camp and the rigours of a German winter. The escape committee we had formed did what they could to help them and eventually they got away, including a guy who only had one arm. The Germans were raving mad, but the break didn’t last long and about a week later the men were caught and brought back into the camp. We were all then paraded in front of the security officer who threatened that should anyone else try the same, the worst repercussions would behold all of us. He was becoming more and more mad as he ranted until he got so mad that he withdrew his revolver and in his excitement dropped it in the mud in front of him. This, of course, drew hoots of laughter from all the prisoners assembled. We knew that he would not dare order one of us to pick up a loaded pistol and in any case, no one would have stooped so low.

We did not go down too well in his estimations of us and he would certainly take it out on anyone who was unfortunate enough to be recaptured after this event.

It may seem a peculiar thing to have, but inside the prison we had another prison. One could be punished for a variety of reasons by the Germans and placed inside this 'prison within the prison', where one was fed on bread and water most of the time. However, it became rather farcical as crime and subsequent penalties became so high that we had to take our place in the queue before we could serve time in the 'cooler' as we called it. It got to the stage that the men were able to work out exactly when they would be due in and out again. This affected those men who were taking part in concert parties so we had to argue with the Germans for who could and who could not go into the cooler at any given time.

The men with the rank of corporal and above had very little to do during the day, some played cards, others wood carvings and some made very good chess sets but it was the monotony that was the worst aspect because it was the same routine, day after day, morning until night. But they were enterprising chaps and they did everything possible to annoy and upset the Germans.

One example of this was that alongside the fence, outside one of the compounds there was a road and the German recruits used to have to march up and down this road while training. These young Germans used to sing lustily as they marched along, the songs usually about invading England, but we let this pass for a few days. Then one fine morning, unknown to myself about a hundred of our men had agreed to assemble at one end of the wire fence. Then as the Germans came along singing as usual, the prisoners fell into line and also marched along the length of the fence inside the wire, singing their own songs. This of course set the Germans off, not only caused by the singing but mainly the fact that our fellows were attired with boots and sticks on their shoulders, apart from that they were completely stark naked! Absolute consternation reigned among the Germans and I was summoned by the Commandant, complaining about the lack of discipline amongst the men. I responded that they had to keep fit by exercising and that was exactly what they were doing. He ranted and raved about this threatening that the men would be shot if they persisted, but they did and after a few days the German recruits were taken on a different route. We considered that to be a small victory over the Germans.

Mail from the U.K. and other parts of the world now started to trickle through and for the first time many prisoners knew of the plight of their families and dependants. Some had been killed in air raids over London and other large cities, others evacuated to far flung parts of the country. The camp became divided between those who still had hopes of seeing their loved ones again and those who were in despair, knowing they never would. The depression prevailed for a very long time afterwards.

The men were allowed to send one letter or card every so often, but these were all heavily censored by the Germans before being sent on. Eventually though, mail started to flow in a fairly normal manner and this was a great comfort.

About this time the first Red Cross supplies from Britain came into the camp, they were under the control of the British but supervised by German officials. We held a meeting and decided that we would make our first issue with the full amount of

food received, which consisted of precisely two tins of condensed milk per man. Having been in prison for quite a while, lacking necessary sugar, the first thing the prisoners all did was to get the tins open and eat the lot, spoonful by spoonful. Some rationed themselves to only the one tin, but most were so hungry and desperate for something sweet that they finished the lot. The ensuing result being that nearly everyone was sick the following day because their stomachs were just not accustomed to this.

We, the non – workers in the camp, were still wearing our pyjamas and we were looking decidedly grubby to say the least. Trying to wash them without soap was not improving our appearance, which was probably not helped by having had our hair cropped to prevent lice and other such things. Showers had become a weekly affair and generally we were looking a sorry bunch. More clothing began then to arrive, which fortunately included greatcoats. Eventually most of the men in the camp were re – equipped and we all both looked and felt more presentable. A card system showing the issue of clothing to all prisoners was put into being in the first instance and the cards gave a pretty comprehensive record of who had been issued with what.

Our daily diet consisted of some mint tea in the morning and at midday, some very watery cabbage and potato soup, which was issued to us from big tureens by the barrack personnel. Added to this soup was a loaf of black German bread divided between five. The method of dividing the bread between those five became wide and varied, some were very precise in the measurements, others as near as possible with cards cut to determine who should have first pick. Eventually we all seemed to settle upon a system whereby the loaf would be cut by one person under the supervision of the other four, (often with much argument), then each of the five would take their turn over the days in selecting the first piece. In the evenings we sometimes got more watery soup, but not often as normally it was mint tea again. As the months passed without an adequate food supply, many of the prisoners started to lose weight and began suffering from a whole multitude of ailments.

Previously the German medics had been the judges regarding an individuals state of health, but they only had one thought in their mind – that everyone was fit and had to work. But we now began to have British medical officers drafted to the various camps and although their numbers were limited, we were able to have them attend the sick. It was a great help and some improvements were made when our doctors, under the terms of the Geneva Convention and after much arguing, began to demand various drugs which the Germans grudgingly conceded to. The men I most felt sorry for were those who had lost their dentures and had to dip their bread and biscuits into the soup.

More Red Cross parcels started to come through and we managed to issue one parcel between four men. The Germans insisted that we supply the outside working camps first, of which there were many, even though we thought they were doing quite well for food in comparison to us. Anyway, the parcels were shared out as evenly as possible and were a welcome boost to morale.

Some of our men were working in the officers' mess, which was about half a mile outside of the prison camp. When they had finished work for the day, they were

to walk back to the compound for the night. On one occasion, one of the men was kept very late and he arrived back to find the camp closed. He kicked at the gate and the sentry there asked him what he wanted. He said that he wanted to get back into the camp after work and, believe it or not, the sentry told him to go away. He still persisted in kicking the gate and making a noise with the result that the corporal also came out, heard the story and told the prisoner to beat it, (or words to that effect). This was late autumn, cold even though he had his greatcoat with him and no preparation for escape had been made. He was a very obstinate chap and began to create such a hullabaloo that eventually the officer-in-charge of the guard that night also came to the gate. The situation was explained to him but he also maintained that the prisoner could not come in again until morning, but as a gesture he ordered one of the guards to throw a blanket over the gate so the man could wrap himself up with it. I know this may seem difficult to believe, but we were being held well within Germany and no preparation for his escape had been made. The prisoner had no clothing in order to make an escape attempt with, he had no maps or any idea of even which direction to take, therefore he stayed outside the camp wrapped in his coat and the blanket and walked around for most of the night waiting for dawn so that he could get back into camp again.

On another occasion, there used to be a party who would go out daily with a German guard down to the local forest to cut timber, which was collected the following day. In the forest was a small village, which had a pub. After some time the prisoners became quite friendly with this guard and gradually got him into the habit of being near the pub where, with his help, they were able to trade some beer. One day they managed to get the guard hopelessly drunk. But again without any plans of escape and as it was now wintertime, for them to make an attempt without at least heavy clothing would have been foolish indeed. Therefore, they marched back to camp, helping the guard along as they went with another prisoner following behind carrying the guard's rifle slung across his shoulders. You can imagine the situation at the camp guard - house when this working party returned and unfortunately the officer-in-charge happened to be there. I never knew what became of the poor little German guard, but I'm quite sure he got the full works from the German Reich.

Time came and went but by June 1941, we had numerous tunnels under construction, (orchestrated by the escape committee). The biggest problem facing them at the time was getting rid of the soil as it was very different from the top surface soil in the camp. Some of the soil was disposed of by putting it into the trouser legs of the men, who would then wander round the compounds gradually releasing the earth. However, the excavations were becoming so big that the need to hide the soil required more thought. As it was summertime, the escape people had the bright idea of hiding the soil inside the palliasses (a cheap form of mattress that we used to have to sleep on). They removed the straw, which they used for their cooking, then refilled the palliasses back up with the soil.

Whilst all this was going on, we started to receive prisoners from the middle - east who had been caught in the desert war. We let them in on the secret, well after all, sleeping on a bag of earth in summer was not very different from straw anyway.

Word of the tunnels seemed to reach the Germans and one day there was a sudden inspection of the various barracks. I distinctly remember one German

sergeant moving between the rows of bunk beds when he happened to put his hands on the mattresses. He remarked that they appeared to be very hard, then checked and found them to be full of sandy earth and asked why. The sergeant major in charge of this particular barrack block explained that the beds were being occupied by men from the desert who were used to sleeping on sand. This answer was accepted without any further questions.

The tunnellers had to get hold of boards, sticks or anything to shore up the walls of their tunnels as they progressed with the digging. Eventually the bed boards began to disappear to be replaced by bits of wire and string, however many prisoners would sleep like this without complaint. One day I pointed out to the German stores officer that we were short of bed boards which we would like replace, I suggested that we might even be able to pay for them with German marks earned out on the working parties. The German officer seemed to be in a receptive mood and we were all very happy anticipating these boards and the chance of a good night's sleep at last.

The following morning disaster struck. A heavily laden cart was passing outside the compound fence delivering goods somewhere when one of its wheels dropped into a ditch. When the Germans eventually came out to help the man out, they discovered the 'ditch' was actually a collapsed tunnel constructed from the camp, it stretched across an open field and almost to the woods beyond. You can imagine the fury this created and the resulting searches that took place. Unfortunately, they found the several hundred of our bed boards shoring up the tunnels, therefore all hopes of new boards were dashed and they removed those that were found.

After being a prisoner it has always surprised me that so few lectures were given in Britain to troops embarking overseas as to their rights under the Geneva Convention. The main thing of course, is to give your name, rank and number, no other information need be given. Corporals and above were not obliged to work but those below that rank could be compelled to work, though not on any job to do with the war effort and this was not easily defined. Sometimes those above the rank of corporal would volunteer for work, either to scour for escape kit, or for food and sometimes the request would be simply because they were just too fed up and bored with the monotony of life in the camp. However, if many more of the men had knowledge of the Geneva Convention prior to their incarceration, then much of the trickery used by the Germans would not have taken place. They used to force corporals to work until they had received confirmation that a particular man was a particular rank, which they then had to accept. In the meantime many more men were forced to work than should have been.

The Commandant of the camp in Lamsdorf was an Austrian of World War 1 vintage. He was generally an understanding old man, knew more than any of us and in his way did try to help us as far as possible. I remember on one occasion, on a visit around the barracks, he lost one of the brass buttons from his coat, these were apparently very difficult to replace and he offered to give five German marks to whoever found it. The next day we had hundreds of prisoners searching all over the camp for the old captain's button. Fortunately someone found it and true to his word, he handed over the money and was the happiest man alive.

When the prison camps first came into being it was possible to know who was who, but later many R.A.F. personnel came into our camps before being transported to Air Force camps. During the time they were in Lamsdorf they were not allowed out to work as they were considered too great a risk for escaping. As a result of this, many of our men below the rank of corporal who did not want to work, arranged with the Air Force men to swop identities. They would sit for hours telling each other details of their families and get all this off pat, before they finally swopped names and numbers. In many cases they resembled each other a little, also they would be helped a little by the card system in the German offices. The Germans had not sufficient men to operate the system properly and prisoners were employed on the job, gradually it became quite easy for the men working there to swop photographs from one card to another to help the 'swop-overs'. Each time a working group went out, which was almost continually, the cards were brought out. The Germans checked the card with the individual concerned, asked a few questions and then they would be on their way. The person who had now taken on the Air Force prisoner's identity remained in the compound and was quite happy. The Air Force men were particularly keen on getting jobs on the railway lines because they were electrified. Their main objective was to get hold of quartz from the electrified rails, they would return to their barracks and together with other bits and pieces they could muster, make up a crystal radio receiver. At the time special broadcasts were being sent from Britain and we were able to pick these up on the sets as they were being broadcast for this very purpose. We ended up with radio sets all over the camp and were all well aware of the news. In fact, the organizers of this little effort were so confident of their actions they used to put a copy of the B.B.C. News on the Commandant's desk every morning. As the news was not going particularly well for the Germans at the time, the Commandant got extremely annoyed, (which was hardly surprising) and had all the electric power cut off to the barracks thinking that this would stop us receiving on our radios. This did not dampen the spirits of the radio enthusiasts and for the next few mornings, with the electricity still out, a copy of the B.B.C. News would still be placed on the Commandant's desk. The electricity came on again after that.

The Latrine accommodation consisted of open trenches with boarding for seats and a covered roof, partially shielded but otherwise open to the wind and elements. There were long rows of boards with holes in them seating approximately twenty to forty prisoners at a time, with no privacy whatsoever. After the German Reich, a second formidable new enemy arrived within a few months – rats. They became big and fat and several prisoners had been attacked in the latrines and this was causing some concern. After all, rat bites on one's genitals are no laughing matter. In the end most people were standing on the boards instead of sitting to avoid the biting rats, not at all a pleasant situation.

These latrines were cleared by an old boy who had a septic tank drawn by a horse. He would convey the contents out on an open space outside the camp where it was spread around the vegetable gardens the Germans had created for the camps needs. During the hot weather, the stench from the vegetable gardens was appalling but something we all had to live with.

Some of the boys had been discussing kidnapping the old boy with his cart and they began to study his movements carefully. It appeared that he had a special tattoo mark on his arm, which the guards had particularly noticed. The 'would-be'

escapers voluntarily helped the old man with his latrine clearance and somehow or other managed to get a good idea of the type of tattoo on his arm. We had in the compound some experts on the subject and from various descriptions given, they managed to tattoo one of the prisoners in a similar manner. Everything was fixed to kidnap the old man, get a prisoner in his place, show the tattoo mark and then get clear of the camp and escape. Why this happened I don't know, but on the day of the escape an armed guard came into the camp with the latrine clearer and stayed at a safe distance while he carried out his duties. So that moment passed and they had to think of another.

After Dieppe, about a thousand Canadians were brought into the camp in handcuffs. They were rather a rough looking bunch and were put into a separate compound, it rather seemed as though they were going to be left to rot. Their handcuffs were put on in the morning and taken off at night and in the first week this routine was rigidly adhered to by the German guards. However, there were some experts amongst the Canadians and they found a way of releasing the handcuffs with keys they had prepared. They would walk around their compound all day with their hands in their pockets and with the handcuff chain still attached, when the Germans came to check they would simply slip the cuffs back on, removing them once more afterwards. But as it was, the initial handcuffing fever of the Germans began to wear off and after a while they did not bother very much about checking. The Commandant of the camp himself was aware of this, he was actually much against handcuffing, but had been overruled by the S.S. because apparently the German prisoners-of-war who had been taken initially at Dieppe had been cuffed themselves. Anyway, on the Commandant's various inspections around the Canadian camp whenever he met a man with his hands in his pockets, presumably clamped, or with handcuffs on he would jokingly ask to be shown how the prisoner could remove them. In the end, after some pressure the Canadian would show him and he seemed very much amused.

When the Canadians first arrived, they had a few sick men with them but were generally all quite fit. Among them was a contingent of French Canadians from the north of the country to whom trapping wild animals was second nature. They were an unruly lot and the Germans decided that at night they would put Alsatian dogs in the compound to keep them from wandering around outside their huts, as with the sick men who would be repatriated. This occurred for two or three nights without any trouble at all, then one day the morning tea (if you could describe it as such) was delivered as usual to the gate of the compound, it was warm mint tea in large urns. The tea went into the compound and eventually the urns came out and were taken to the kitchen where they were supposed to be washed. To the consternation of the kitchen hands, when they took the lids off they found the urns filled with bones and skins of the Alsatian dogs which the Canadians had killed and enjoyed during the night. No more dogs returned to guard the compound. – I don't suppose the Germans could afford to lose them at that rate.

The Canadians had also got in on the 'swop-overs' and as the compounds already had numerous swop-overs with those who had already swapped-over with the R.A.F., this began to grow out of all proportion. In the end we were getting letters from wives, mothers and sweethearts through the Red Cross asking why their son,

husband or whatever, was signing his name incorrectly. Well we all knew why but there was very little we could do about it.

Of course if any of the men died on working parties the Germans would inform through the International Red Cross that Willy Brown or Joe Smith had died, whereas sometimes, in actual fact it was someone else entirely. Unfortunately, the widow of 'Willy Brown' would therefore be informed of his demise by the War Office and on that assumption, some of them would remarry. It got so bad in the end that when I visited the camps I used to take with me masses of mail for men who we knew were in these camps under false names, but eventually even that became impossible because in the camps where working parties were in close proximity to each other, the swop-overs started swopping all over again and the whole situation became a nightmare. Some of the prisoners even had to have it recorded on paper who and what they actually were supposed to be.

Because of this wrong recording and therefore false details being sent through the system, we eventually managed to convince the Germans to agree that in the event of a death on a working camp, the camp leader would actually go out himself to the working party to obtain the correct details of the dead man before reporting to the International Red Cross.

In 1941, there were considerable numbers of men in Lamsdorf, who were claiming repatriation cases. The Germans were holding various meetings to decide who should be repatriated and who should stay. These committees were very cunning and tried every trick with the men to prove that they were not unfit or mentally unbalanced.

I distinctly remember one soldier who thought he would make it by feigning insanity. As an example, he would get his food from the Red Cross parcels, heat it up somewhere and set it out on the dining table with a plate and knife and fork. He would then look at the plate for a while before throwing the food out of the window and start to eat the handles of his knife and fork with great gusto. He eventually got to face the committee after trying most things going, but by then he had actually nearly become insane, having carried this so called 'act' out so realistically and so often. He ended up being placed on the 'half-way' list and later transferred to hospital.

We had another case, a man feigned deafness, stupidity and was generally thought to be altogether pretty useless. He arrived at the committee and seemed to be going through with flying colours, but as I mentioned they were very tricky. They sympathized with him, wrote him down as being a deserving case, but as he got up and was leaving the room, one of them asked him to shut the door behind him – and like a bloody fool he did!

It appeared to us at the time that people back home were not getting a clear picture of the camps, the conditions we were living in and what was really happening to us in Germany, including what we considered to be sensitive information, so we decided to try and get a message back with the men being repatriated. Of the men who had passed the committee's tests, we chose fifteen guys who were the most intelligent of the bunch and not too mentally unbalanced. We then prepared a full report detailing the concerns we had over the camp and our treatment etc., after which we sat down and systematically broke up the letter into groups of fifteen words. Then the first word in every fifteen from each group was noted on a separate piece of

paper, followed by the second word on a different sheet and so on. In the end we had fifteen lots of words that made no sense whatsoever to anyone other than the person who was eventually going to have to put them all together again. For the weeks prior to these men returning to Britain, we drilled them in the words they had to repeat parrot fashion over and over again until they were word perfect. They knew their own words, which made absolutely no sense at all, but they did not know the words of anyone else and we felt that should they be put under any pressure on their way home, the words they had memorized would remain useless to anyone.

Those men who had passed through the committee with physical injuries, the disabled, crippled, or limbless, were all contained in one of the huts at Lamsdorf. It was a long wait and although they were sick they used to do the best they could to annoy the Germans. They would wander around all night on their crutches and sticks, as they couldn't sleep too well anyway. They would make such a racket that the Germans were continually yelling at them to keep quiet when finally, the guards decided to put Alsatian dogs in the compound to keep the men inside the huts, which worked very well for a week or so. During that time the prisoners would leave tempting morsels on the window ledges, so when the dogs were brought into the compound they would know exactly where to go to get the food. After getting the dogs accustomed to this, one night the men prepared boards from their beds, sticks or just about anything they could get their hands on and placed a morsel of food down as usual. When the dogs came up, putting their paws on the window ledge as they had always done, the men set about hitting the dogs' paws and noses with all the implements they had at hand. After this bashing, the German dog handlers could not get the dogs to go back into the compound and the dogs were withdrawn.

Then, as the day drew near for their exchange the Camp Commandant came around and seemed to be in a cheery mood, he came up to me and said "Herr Read, I expect the cross-country season will be starting very soon." I looked up to the sky, "Yes, I expect so Herr Commandant," "That is good," he replied, "We will be ready for you."

The men were eventually sent away and, in our opinion at the time, those with the message were word perfect. When they returned home we understood that they were de-briefed and reported their words parrot fashion before going their separate ways, not knowing what it was all about. But the code boys pieced the whole lot together and we heard that the message had got home.

Christmas greetings!

More letters home

Firewood for the stoves in the barracks was always a constant problem and the coal issues were very small. Then, one day a party of prisoners with an N.C.O. in charge marched down to the compound where the reserve timber stocks were held. They fluttered about various papers and were allowed access into the yard, whereupon they proceeded to measure up various timbers whilst being closely watched from the watch towers. They selected this, rejected that until eventually walking back out of the yard with a sizeable selection of good timbers, the guards presuming they were going to do some repair job. This carried on all week until the Germans suddenly realized that no party was supposed to be entering the timber yard. Still, it was surprising just how much wood they were able to remove which, no doubt, ended on fires. They were never caught because the guards in the towers could not recognize them, but no one was able to remove timber again unless accompanied by a German guard.

On another occasion, during a rather enterprising attempt to obtain wood, it was noted that there was a very large wooden telegraph pole in the middle of our compound. We petitioned to have this pole moved so that the footballers would not have to play around it. After quite a lot of negotiation and with us offering to pay for a new pole from the marks issued to prisoners-of-war, this was agreed. Subsequently, one day up came the German electrical people and deposited a new pole in the compound so as the following day they could begin to transfer the wiring across from the old one. That night the fires in the compound burned very well and lots of meals were cooked. Not surprisingly perhaps, the Germans refused to supply another pole and we had to continue our football games around the existing pole.

One day some twenty of the NCO's, many of whom were RAF 'swop-overs', asked permission to go out to work on the railway station. We considered this as being exceptional, but they explained that they needed more quartz from the electrical rails to create more of the crystal radio sets around the compound, which would receive the 'dum-dum' news from England. We therefore gave them permission on the proviso that they were not to assist in the Reich war effort and away they went. Some time later I had to visit this particular camp and the German in charge thought the sun shone from the heavens on these characters. I got hold of them and told them that we were not impressed with their activities and demanded to know what they were up to. The next morning they invited me to go with them and see how their working day was arranged. Oh they were busy men, helping the German Reich by rushing up and down the railway wagons, opening the lubrication boxes and pouring in all the necessary oils to keep them rolling. However, with a good look-out system in place, they not only poured in oil but also added as much track grit as they could find, thereby helping to grind away all the bearing surfaces and as such sabotage the rolling stock. I didn't complain after that. Later, when they had obtained all the electrical quartz needed, they started to create so much trouble complaining about their work and rations that the working party was disbanded. They all returned to the main camp pleased as punch with their efforts.

The escape committee reported that they were concerned about the fact that many of their plans appeared to be known to the Germans and as such, informers were operating within the camp. We set up a series of guards to watch the main gates to see who went in and out and set up various other devices to find out what was

happening. It was noted that two particular men were going out of the camp early in the evening in the company of German guards, returning later that night. This was duly reported to us by the gate watchers and eventually we discovered who they were and it was not long before their identities were passed about the camp.

One of these men happened to be in a compound which had a particularly tough element to it and soon after, one morning his body was found floating in the water pool which was used as a fire precaution. No indication of how this man had died or if he had been killed was evident, but we in the camp knew what the body represented. The other man who had been positively identified was still in the camp, we informed the Commandant that he was a suspect and as such his life was in danger with the result that the Germans quickly moved him to another camp.

We later heard that after he had arrived at these other camps he continued to inform, became pretty useful to the Germans for a while until the other prisoners got to know him. Then they used to let slip to this character little 'secrets'. One night they quietly told him that the whole camp was planning a mass escape the following night. The message got back to the Germans and by the next day the whole camp was surrounded by the military, waiting for this breakout that never materialized. How he managed to clear himself with his contacts was never known, but it was a big laugh for a long time afterwards.

One escape group had been interrupted preparing clothes, details, maps and so on and the Germans seemed to have the idea that this was all emanating from one particular hut. We still had informers in the camp, which we could prove and no doubt the Germans were getting all their information from them, especially one man at the time. Now the RAF boys were interested in this particular escape and they figured to stop the Germans 'surprising' them in the night. They decided that after the hut doors were closed for the night, they would take a 'live' lead from the electrical points and fix it to the metal handles of the door. The idea being that if the Germans tried to rush the hut, they would get a fine electrical shock leaving sufficient time for the escape committee to hide all the evidence. Sure enough this is exactly what happened and the first German got a hell of a shock. It took a long time after that before they would open a barrack room door as they were never too sure of what the result would be.

One thing that we discovered during our period in Lamsdorf was that the Germans couldn't count. In the initial stages, during both morning and evening roll call, we used to line up British fashion – three deep. There used to be a lot of swaying from side to side, giving the Germans immense trouble in getting the tally correct. Eventually this so incensed them, they ordered that we should parade five deep to make their counting more effective as they were used to the decimal system. It was their own undoing.

At the main gates of the camp we always had a crowd of twenty or thirty prisoners watching the new arrivals, suspect German decoys and others. One day they brought in a prisoner who had been working in a nearby camp and had allegedly dropped a chain into a turbine. The turbine had subsequently cracked up and for this he received two years hard labour, which would be carried out in a harsh prison near Berlin, but because he could not do the journey in one day he was brought to Lamsdorf overnight. He managed to pass the word to the gang around the gates the details of his trial and punishment, this prompted them to start free fights and create

such merry hell in general that it demanded the attention of all the guards within sight. During all this hulaboo, the prisoner got inside the main camp and disappeared from view. At the time there were 18,000 prisoners at the camp but this incident caused such an uproar amongst the Germans that every man from the compound was paraded, in a way this was the man's saving grace. We all were ordered to line up in rows of five for easier counting, (as per new order).

The situation was desperate for this chap as he assembled with the parade, but he lay down between the third and fourth row. The Germans with their Teutonic thoroughness checked us five by five, back and front. The men where the chap was lying stood perfectly still so that they were counted, but those on either side continued to sway and move about so that counting was difficult. In the end the guards agreed the roll call was correct and were quite happy – or so it seemed – to leave the compound in the firm believe that they were right. But because of the pressure being put on the camp by the German SS at the time, who were desperate to retrieve their man, it was decided that a full and final roll call be carried out again on the whole camp.

The next day we were all, sick included, marched out of the camp to a field encircled by the SS. During our march out we were checked at five different points, but having got outside it was discovered that none of the checkpoints could agree on the final numbers. The Commandant was by now furious and ordered that we march back in through the gates to be checked again. This we did and with the help of the swaying and nodding and sick prisoners, we again passed through and once again none of the checkpoints could come up with the same figure. Finally, there was nothing more that could be done, but the Commandant in his rage gave the order that bread and rations should be issued to the minimum number agreed on the checkpoints and if anyone else was in the compound, then it was just too bad. This, of course we did not really mind, but we found that the escapee had this time, managed to hook himself onto the underside of the latrines in the compound, where he remained for several hours while all the checking was taking place. How he managed to stay under those seats above the open pits with the stench and the rats surrounding him is something I have never been able to fathom, but he did this on several occasions and I'm glad to say that eventually, after we arrived in Nuremberg and were released, the man who had escaped German Justice was still amongst us, having never served his sentence.

As the year of 1941 passed, I had a few discussions with RSM Sheriff and left the position of compound leader in 8B. Having had enough of all the trials and troubles the job entailed, aside from which I decided to go out on a working party with the others and try to escape. About twenty of us went out with myself in charge to a sawmill in Falkenburg, not far from Oppolm. The idea of our job was to roll the logs up to the mill, but whenever we could we spent our time trying to exchange the contents of our Red Cross parcels with some of the Germans employed in the sawmill, to see what we could get in the way of clothes or money. The overseer of the mill was a man named Tony, he used to tell us that the Germans would invade England and Russia, but we would respond by telling him that one day the Russians would attack and come through, past the mill swallowing it as the advance swept by. This used to get him annoyed, (and not a little worried).

Tony, as the foreman, had overall supervision of the yard, but there was also a woman manager whose husband had been called to the war. In the early stages, when

we went down to buy a few odd things in the village with our guard, we also bought items we thought might prove useful in our escape. However, unknown to us at the time, Tony was the 'brownshirt' chief of the village and area, so everything we had brought was reported back to him. After a few days had elapsed and we had managed to get a few things together, the whole camp was searched and we lost everything. We later saw Tony strutting around the town in his brownshirt uniform and he came into the mill, presumably to impress us. We taunted him by saying that when the Russians arrived in the area he should burn the uniform quickly, otherwise he might be the first away to the salt mines. We had hopes at that time it would happen soon but we were not too sure and later events proved that we were right.

The old boy in the boiler house had been in World War 1, and had seen it all before, he was really quite a friendly old chap. His wife, an elderly frau, was allowed to come into the log yard and pick up bits of stick, presumably for the fire in the house. After a while we noticed that she would wander around the logs, then left indicating to us that we should look behind the wood. When we did, we found that the old woman had left behind several eggs, which we were able to smuggle back to the working camp and cook. This developed in such a way that we used to leave a packet of tea or coffee from our Red Cross parcels behind the logs, which would be exchanged for about half a dozen eggs. Occasionally there were times when we got left a bottle of schnapps or something similar. This carried on for a long time with both sides benefiting from the arrangement however, for some reason or other the old lady was forbidden to come into the yard for a while – presumably someone had found out about the exchanges and reported her.

The chief 'saw-doctor' engineer in the factory was a German called Franz, who had lost some fingers in a machine accident some years previously. After some time, the German men in the mill started to be whittled down until only Franz and some very old men were left. I must admit that we used to taunt him that he would soon be called up to serve on the Russian Front and sure enough he did go. On leaving he blamed us for influencing him getting sent to the front, by saying that he was a very healthy man and was fit for war. This of course was nonsense but he was desperate.

Because by now most of the men had gone to war, women were being sent into the sawmills to replace the workforce. Some of these women had already lost their husbands, some husbands were captured by the Russians and were being held as prisoners and therefore, these women's sex lives had been severely curtailed. In the mills they came into contact with the British prisoners and being women meeting men, both being deprived, it was not too surprising that they made arrangements between themselves that life would continue. 'Tony' had a good idea that something was going on and used to do his best to rout them out, but he did not stand much of a chance.

Tony was also becoming worried about the mill's production levels, because they were definitely falling and we were doing our best to assist in this. The drying timber was supposed to be stacked uniformly but we so stacked the boards that from the outside of the pile all looked well, but the inside of the stack had nothing. In the hope of improving his good brownshirt showing, Tony was doing his best and thought that with the stacks growing, productively was being maintained. It was only when they came to remove the stacks that Tony discovered that he had been fooled.

Although he tried to blame the prisoners for this incident, we all protested our innocence stating that we had never erected those particular stacks in the first place.

In June 1942 we decided to try to escape. We had managed to buy in town a German record, entitled 'Look out for the silver lining'. We had an old gramophone and played this song every evening, which nearly drove the guards round the bend, but we explained to them that we were learning the German version of the song and they seemed to believe us. In actual fact, while the music was playing someone was cutting away at the bars of one of the windows and the sound was drowned out by the record. We were able to conceal the cuts by the movement the bars had within the frame around the window, we would lift the bars to cut them then drop the bar back down afterwards. In this manner we eventually cut through them all. However, a few days before we decided to leave, we discovered that it would be a simpler matter to go through the ceiling and climb onto the flat roof, after that we could slide down the drainpipe, over a small wall then escape down into the next street.

It was now early July and everything was ready, we gathered the few things that we had managed to obtain with us and then, come 11.30 p.m. On a Saturday night, myself and Sgt Bright set off through the roof, followed ten minutes later by RQMS Legget and CSM Harlow.

My colleague and I fortunately got away without too much noise and we took a hasty walk in the direction we had planned down the road. I suppose by dawn we had covered at least between six and eight miles and we hoped the others had done about the same. We holed up in some woods hoping that we had been unnoticed, the intention being that would stay put by day and move only at night. About 11 a.m. It started to rain and by 1 o'clock it was pouring down, we had no shelter and there was no possibility of being able to dry out so we were forced to move about the woods to try and stay warm in all the dampness.

At sundown we moved out of the woods, back onto the main road and headed onwards. We had not gone far though when we heard voices and dashed quickly back into the woods again, hoping once more that we had remained unseen. We holed up for a while as three women ambled past in the dark, we waited until their voices faded, then returned to the road once more. The first problem we encountered was the realization that the compass we had managed to obtain for our escape was missing, presumably lost scrambling about in the woods, although we knew we were on the right road but felt that this would present a problem later in the attempt.

We continued and had been making good progress until after about three hours we came across a crossroads, far beyond we could see the lights of a village and thought it must be Tilowitzch, which was in the right direction. As we approached the junction there was not a sound to be heard when all of a sudden, we found ourselves surrounded by a crowd of labourers from a nearby farm and the police. We had been seen and they had been lying in wait for us.

It was no good – our uniforms had been dyed but with the rain looked a terrible mess, our papers were soaked through and very blurred, we had no other identification so were immediately suspicious. They searched our bags and found our food supplies, we tried to tell them that we were French workers, travelling to our next job, but they were not having it and we were marched at gunpoint into the village and put behind bars. Second attempt thwarted!

The police took all our papers, effects and clothes and we were shoved into two cells after being supplied with a blanket each. It was pretty cold but a

policeman's wife brought us some food and it wasn't too bad, I think she had her eye on the chocolate in our bags as when her husband had gone off again on his beat, she came down to unlock the door to our cells so as we could warm ourselves by the fire. This was gratefully received, but I suppose she had realized that with our clothes and other things locked up we weren't going to go anywhere. The daughter watched through the window for her father's return whereby we had to nip back into the cells once more. There was not much to do in the cell, I sat there and watched a mouse coming through a hole in the wall, it crept along the wall until eventually, when I thought he had got far enough away from the hole I dashed off the bed and stubbed my toe into the hole. Trouble was, I was too slow for the mouse and all I got for my efforts was a bruised big toe stuck in the wall.

The next day the military came for us and picking up everything we had, we were put on a train and sent back to Lamsdorf. Normally, recaptured escapees were hauled before the legal officer in the morning, the routine used to go something like:

German - "Prisoner No. So and so, Rank so and so, you are charged with escaping. Why?"

Prisoner - "As a prisoner-of-war it is my duty to escape, the same as we hope the German prisoners-of-war are doing", (sly remark) "Besides, everyone is dropping money about in Germany for someone to find!"

The old German legal officer was not too bad and the further we got away, the lesser the sentence for some reason, if the getaway was poor the maximum sentence was given. Anyhow, we got seven days for our efforts but the queue waiting to get into the cooler was so long we had to wait three weeks in the normal barracks before we could do our sentence in the 'inner prison'. We eventually served our time on the bread and water rations then came out ready to face another fine day.

After two or three days in the cooler we had a new arrival - Squadron Leader Bader - who did all the things the Germans didn't want doing and was also sent to the jug as a temporary measure. Later, when we were released he happened to be in my compound and as he was a senior officer he stood in the front row with me during roll calls. When a German officer came past, Squadron Leader Bader would pretend to feel faint, he would slump forwards putting his arms around the neck of the German and try to slump to the ground, dragging the hapless fellow with him. It worked a couple of times as well until they became wise to it! Bader eventually managed to get himself down to the works compound and there, by some means or other he got onto a working party and even managed to get outside the gates with them, but he was caught out at a check point and brought back to the main camp. They finally took his legs away to try and stop him attempting to escape but his period at Lamsdorf didn't last too long, the Germans eventually relented and gave him back his legs then transferred him to an RAF officers camp somewhere else.

The other two guys that had escaped with us from the Falkenberg working party unfortunately fared not much better than we did. RQMS Legget had got himself dressed up as a woman with a 'skirt' tailored out of a dyed blanket and cotton wool for breasts. Like us they also got caught up in the rain with the dye running from his clothing and of course, the cotton wool became wet through and sagged completely. Going through the forest he got a tear in his shirt which he tried to remedy as best he could, it held the next day but the following evening it tore again as he was trying to dodge bushes in the forest. Legget said to me when we later met in

the camp that when they were picked up he looked awful, but had he had proper tits, he would have been taken as a woman. The police marched them to the cells and the word soon spread round the population of the village that he/she was a man and an Englishman. The next day they were marched down to the railway station where all the children seemed to have accumulated, they pointed and laughed telling everyone, "He is no frau – he is an Englishman prisoner!" Legget said that he had wished that the earth could have opened up and he could have dropped into it. They were sent off to serve their time in the cooler as well.

One of the infiltrators on the camp was a corporal, he was very definitely known as such and was moved around from camp to camp, sometimes he must have got information through to the Germans but he was very closely watched. Eventually, and how true this is I don't know, he was landed in England by the Germans and reportedly picked up by the British. To our astonishment we heard that he had been promoted to sergeant, although this was hard to believe, but after some months he was not heard of again. Whether the promotion was to fool the Germans and keep him in England we never knew but there was much talk of his future life expectancy.

De-lousing occurred weekly or so with different days for the various huts and compounds. The rule was to pick up all ones bits and pieces and take them to the de-lousing centre where the bundle would be put into the de-lousing machine while the prisoner went through and had a shower. This used to run quite smoothly when things were quite strict but in time it was noticed that some of the prisoners were avoiding the exercise, (for numerous reasons such as general depression etc.) and had allowed themselves to go downhill as far as their personal hygiene was concerned. It got to the stage that at times one could stand behind these men and actually see the lice falling off them onto the ground, only to crawl onto the man standing next to him. Therefore, we made it our business to ensure that all prisoners reported for de-lousing.

At one time the Germans insisted on disinfecting everything, including leather boots, belts and many other items that it was quite unnecessary to put through the machine. This resulted only in shrunken boots, wrinkled and misshapen belts, and other articles getting damaged. It was only after a long struggle that we managed to get the Germans to exclude these items.

Getting enough firewood for the two stoves in each block was always a preoccupation. After a while the boys started to use the bed boards, (which never got replaced), then I started to notice that strips of timber were being taken from the tables leaving gaps of six or seven inches between the boards. The prisoners overcame this with their usual ingenuity and flattened out the Red Cross tins, which they then would nail over the gaps as a temporary measure to stop things falling through the tables. This was fine in the summer months, however during winter it was not pleasant putting your hand on the cold tin – especially in the sort of temperatures we were experiencing in that part of Germany.

In Lamsdorf we had about thirteen padres, the leader of which was from one of the Commonwealth countries. I had been brought up in the Protestant faith to believe in the usual things, but I regret to say that the attitude and actions of some of

the clergy made me despair in this situation. They would argue over the cutting of the daily loaf of bread, wander around the camp pointing out that Father so and so was bad – that they were much better – and all sorts of potty things. They were convinced that the wine (which was allowed in for altar wine) was being diluted by the head padre and that he was swigging it himself, giving the ‘doctored’ wine out during church services (which may have been true!) In fact they disagreed about everything and in the end the Commandant heard about the problems and arranged for most of them to be sent out to the large working parties, where they would probably be more contented and the troops would be more likely to appreciate their presence. As a result of this, many of them were sent away to continue their ‘administrations’.

We also had to see the Commandant about the fact that homosexuality was developing in the camp to the extent that quite a large society had formed. The old boy was very good and said “You know Herr Read, this happens all over the world where men are together – it happened in World War 1, it’s happening in World War 11 and it will happen again in World War 111.” Again he asked of our views and I said that I thought that if we could separate the well - known homosexuals and send them to the different working camps all around the area it might calm things a little, he agreed to this and so the men were sent.

That helped for a while but then came a problem with ‘razor gangs’ in the camp, (maybe it was because they were a Highland Division!) anyway, they would try to dominate some of the blocks with bullying so it was decided that they would also need to be broken up, again to which the Commandant agreed. So one way or another between the padres, the homosexuals and the ‘razor gangs’, we were not particularly popular.

keeping in contact.....

CHAPTER 8

CHELM: TO THE FAR REGIONS

By late August 1942, as a result of our escaping from Falkenburg and other camps, about two hundred of us were selected by the Germans as being 'extra difficult' and were told that we were being sent to a very strict prison camp. It took seven days in the railway trucks for us to get there and with fifty prisoners to a wagon with only one bucket for a toilet, which was emptied at various places en-route, the journey was not one that I would recommend, but finally after much trial and tribulation we reached Chelm in Eastern Poland. The camp held over ten thousand Russians and other nationalities, we were the only British. Anyhow, we were marched up to the camp and were dumped into a compound where the camp Commandant severely lectured us, he informed us quite frankly that no-one had ever escaped from Chelm – and no-one ever would – we would also find out soon that his discipline was strict, very strict.

After we had been there a few days and with winter still ahead of us, they took our boots away and issued us with clogs to prevent us escaping. We would not admit it to them, but actually the clogs would prove to be much warmer than the leather boots in that climate, which at times during the winter was to reach thirty degrees below.

One day the Commandant decided to visit the British sector and we all paraded outside. He came, he inspected, he ranted and raved, though I must admit that with clogs, balaclavas, overcoats and other assortments of clothing we looked a pretty ragged poor bunch of men to represent the British Army – we felt it too. He then decided that we were not getting enough exercise and we would therefore, march past him in line divided into about ten groups of twenty men a group. It was a winter's day with snow lying thick and no sun at all, he insisted. He stood on a mound of snow to take the salute, ordered me to stand on his right hand with his adjutant on his left. The prisoners were assembled below us and attempted to march in line past us. In all my days I have never seen such a shambles on parade! They were slipping and sliding on the ice and snow in their clogs and there was no real line at all. The Commandant was livid and his face bright red, he ordered them to do it all again from the other direction, the same thing happened again. He then told me that they were not disciplined men, in fact they were not even soldiers and they must have more daily drills to sharpen up – what could I say? For days afterwards the Germans tried to get them marching, but it was a hopeless task.

As the camp leader for these two hundred warrant officers and NCO's, I should have normally had communication with the main camp back in Germany, but this was forbidden. Furthermore, I was not allowed to write to the International Red Cross about conditions. I tried to but I knew they were not forwarding the letters. How then were we to communicate with the main camp? However, one day the mail came and included was a letter addressed to one of our sergeants written in pencil. The 'experts' carefully opened the letter, the man read its contents, then handed it back whereupon the boys went to work. They filled the letter in with ink detailing where we were, the conditions we were living in etc. And giving instructions for the

recipient to take the letter to the British camp commander at Lamsdorf so that he should know of what was happening. The letter was resealed and addressed to another prisoner back at Lamsdorf. We informed the Germans that there were several letters which did not belong to this camp and that they should be returned to the main camp, including of course, our doctored letter. It reached Lamsdorf and the recipient immediately passed it to the British camp leader, who immediately put in a strong protest about our conditions (which he elaborated a bit), but I had actually lost twelve kilos in weight during the last six weeks and the others had lost similar amounts too.

About two weeks after this, in October, two of our men had to go into hospital for something and were allowed to collect their boots before leaving the camp. One of the men was called Duke and he was a well-known character. Duke managed to get to one of the hospital toilets, whereupon he was able to slip through a window and was away. This created absolute hell in the camp and our security was made tighter than ever. But what made this incident so apt was that a German General was due to arrive at the camp during this particular incident to present a medal to the commandant for never having lost a prisoner and we heard from the German doctor – a very good chap – exactly what happened. It seemed that the Commandant and his staff were standing outside the main office waiting for the General to arrive, the General pulled up, stepped out of the car to take the salute and waited for the Commandant to give his report, as was the normal custom. The Commandant, red in the face, had to report that an Englander had just escaped and as we understood from the doctor, the General was so livid that he threw the medal down into the snow, got straight back into his car and drove away. You can imagine what we suffered for a while from the Commandant.

The huts we lived in were wooden and built half below ground, the bunks were double and continuous on both sides throughout the length of the hut. As I have said previously, the temperatures in winter got down to thirty degrees below, but all we had was our clothing and an issue of two very thin cotton blankets. It was quite impossible to sleep because of the cold and eventually we had to take turns, one man would have six blankets and try to sleep for two hours while the two others walked up and down the hut and then we would change over. This was the only way we could possibly get any sleep at all and we continued with this system all through the winter months. The place became so cold that when the wooden buckets serving as urinals were placed in the huts at night by morning the contents had become frozen, we had to use iron bars to clean them out. I had been meeting the Commandant weekly about the bad conditions but with very little result.

On the morning of the 11th November we assembled for a short Armistice service, despite what the Germans said. The service and the silence moved all of us and affected me very much. To be standing there in the snow thousands of miles away from home and loved ones, wondering how this captivity would ever end - Though I think that we would all have rather died than to allow ourselves to give up the hope of it ending.

We had played various games to pass the time when some of the men with us decided that they would try and make some hooch. Somehow or other they managed to get hold of some carefully hoarded bread, potato skins, raisins and other items from

old Red Cross parcels. They used an old tea boiler, then after fixing up some pipes and with some wood they had scrounged, started with their concoction. The pipes were packed with some snow which, when slowly allowed to melt, dripped over the 'ingredients' drop by drop, eventually collecting into a bottle at the bottom. After some time and just before Christmas 1942, they had managed to fill two bottles with this stuff, which turned out to be almost 100% proof. Even a small sip of it was enough to send some of the men crazy and drinking water on top of it only seemed to make matters worse. After Christmas Eve, four of the men became blind by it and out of these only two recovered their sight. The other two, completely blinded were eventually repatriated to Germany and presumably home. This was something I would never have believed and will never forget.

The war for Germany was by now not going very well at all, the Russians appeared to be advancing towards Poland and the guards were beginning to get jittery. They started to smuggle in loaves of bread, which they began to distribute to the Russian prisoners - to show that they were good, friendly chaps. In return they were getting the Russians to give them a piece of paper stating that they had been very good to the Russians and if captured they should be treated leniently. I managed to speak to the Russian camp leader and through an interpreter asked him what the hell he thought they were doing, he replied "Not to worry, everything is fine." I said that if they were giving these notes to the Germans, how could he say that everything was fine? He then added, "Don't worry Herr English leader, because I will read to you what the notes say," he read the note out, "This is a German warder in Camp No....., As far as we the Russians are concerned, he is a Bastard! If and when you capture him and he produces this note, you are to kick him around the place and give him the worst treatment possible!" That was the end of my query.

Held within the camp at the time were many Russian Commissars, against whom of course, the Germans directed much of their vengeance and they were very often marked men. The German doctor, as I have said, was a very compassionate man and by stealth and with the aid of some of the orderlies, he would state that when a Russian died, he had been one of the Commissars and would record him as dead – although in actual fact he was not. Then by a certain amount of juggling, the Commissar would adopt the name of the man who had died. This went on for quite some time but the German doctor was eventually found out and taken away, what became of him I never knew but I always thought that he was a brave man to do what he did in such circumstances.

The toilets in the camp were the open trench type with a wooden roof along the top and wooden partitions half way up, the rest was open to the elements but we had to put up with things as best we could. Then one day there was consternation in our compound as one of the NCO's had fallen into the cesspit. He had been rescued somehow, but the only way to clean him up was to throw buckets of freezing water over him. It was so cold that ice started to form over him and they had to knock it off before getting him out of his stinking clothes. They wrapped him in twenty blankets and gave him what little hooch was left and somehow he managed to survive both experiences.

After some time we decided to form a concert party and applied to use one of the vacant huts on the compound. After a lot of argument, the Commandant relented and we set about making a stage with what we could in the way of wood. We raised the stage a little above the level of the floor and unbeknown to the Germans, removed all the timber under the 'stage' and used it for firewood in our stoves. After the first small concert the Germans found out about the wood and predictably went crazy. That ended the concert party idea.

Sometimes we discovered that two or three Russians would appear in our barrack huts having managed to creep under the wire of the search lit compound. We sympathized with their plight and would give them any tea, coffee or food that we could spare. This developed to quite a large extent but we had to stop it in the end as we discovered that many of the Russians were suffering from Typhoid or black fever and I was afraid that it would be passed on to our own prisoners.

It was now January 1943 and as a result of the letter we had smuggled out of the camp, the International Red Cross knew of our existence and sent a team to inspect the camp, much to the annoyance of the Germans. The visit proved to be fruitful, such a big complaint was made of our treatment that we were told that we would be moved back into Germany within a few days. The day prior to our move we were informed that we would be thoroughly searched and stripped, any tools or implements discovered would be confiscated. We realized that the searching was going to be very thorough and I had a talk with the seniors, we decided that during the night all implements should be thrown into a pile in front of the barracks so that we could go through the search without any trouble. What astonished me and I am quite sure puzzled the Germans was the mass of implements that had been collected. Despite the fact that we had not been allowed any of them, the men had got just about everything from pliers to axes, pickaxes, shovels and even a cutlass. However, in spite of the pile we were still given a thorough search before being allowed to exit the camp compound.

We finally were on route back to our previous camp at Lamsdorf, it had been eight months of Hell we had suffered in Eastern Poland and I had lost over thirty pounds in weight during my time there.

CHAPTER 9

LAMSDORF: PARADISE REGAINED

By August 1943, things were beginning to get a bit rough for Germany and they were apparently trying to make up units from the Dutch, French and other countries for action in places like the Russian Front. With this in mind the Irish were gradually all assembled into one of the compounds. We knew nothing of the Germans' plans at the time and although we tried, we could not get a satisfactory answer to this. A few days after they had been sorted they were moved out and later we heard what had happened.

Apparently, the assembled men were herded to the railway station where, after eating a really good meal and having been issued with plenty of rations, they were put on a train headed for Berlin. When they arrived they were billeted in very comfortable barracks with plenty of food and comfortable beds - by this time the men were wondering what the hell it was all about. The next day they were assembled and briefed by an English speaking German who said that he had heard they were disgruntled men who did not like the English. The Germans people felt that this was a shame and therefore Ireland should not be in the war, in fact they should be friends of Germany. These briefs continued for a few days and no doubt they listened, until at the end of the week they were interrogated one by one. They were told that the Germans were forming an Irish contingent and they were sure that these men would volunteer, all they had to do was sign on the dotted line, after which they would no longer be prisoners-of-war but considered to be part of the German Army.

This must have been a big laugh to many of the men and one of them, 'Duke' - who I knew very well - answered yes to the question "Do you want a united Ireland?" The Germans seemed very pleased with this answer until he followed it up with "United with the British!" They threw him out, together with almost all of his colleagues. The following day they were assembled en block and they tried again with the men by asking if all those who had given it some more thought to take one step forward. Three or four did but the rest, mostly men from Lamsdorf and the other large camps, just stood there. They were of course immediately deprived of their special rations, searched and then hustled on to the train to be sent back to the camps. The men were all convinced that the individuals who had stepped forwards whilst on parade were Germans of Irish descent, shoved into the lines to act as 'stooges' in the hope of inducing others to follow.

At about this time we were beginning to put on some very good concerts to entertain ourselves, a few of which were seen by some senior Indian warrant officers and NCO's who had been allowed to watch. The Indians were held in a compound of their own, approximately a thousand strong and after seeing our performances they asked the Germans permission to use the concert hall to stage their own entertainment. In addition, they asked whether I could be allowed to visit their compound and help them organize a show for them. Reluctantly the Commandant agreed and I started to visit the Indian camp to discuss the type of the show they wished to perform. It was the usual play format of good King, bad villain trying to kidnap princess - they seemed to like the idea - and I did my best to help them out.

Whilst in their compound I discovered that the Indians were quite successfully being as awkward and bloody minded towards the Germans as they possibly could be.

The warrant officers and NCO's were very fine men who did their best to maintain order and discipline amongst the men, whilst at the same time they had created this habit of intensely annoying the Germans during inspections. They pretended not to fully understand what the guards were talking about, so interpreters had to be brought in to explain the details over again, then all the varying groups would collect into one heaving mass whereupon each sect would natter away in their own individual dialect, discussing as to what it was the Germans wanted done. This would drive the guards mad, especially when they knew that most of the men understood English perfectly well as they had vetted their letters being sent home. The Indians also had a nasty habit of creeping up on the Germans in the dark and frightening them to death with their screams and flashing eyes, there were also some Ghurkhas in the compound who are well known for their war-like qualities. Their trick was to sneak up behind a guard and hold what looked to be a sharp knife to the man's throat (in actual fact it was a piece of wood covered with silver paper). Generally it made the Germans scared to death to enter the Indian compound, especially at night – and it wasn't surprising.

After about three months of rehearsals, the play was performed as planned. They had made costumes with bits of cloth, crepe paper and had put a great deal of effort into their appearance, a very colourful performance it was to - although to this day I still do not have a clue as to what it all finished up being about! As it ended they began talk of preparing for another concert, but it was all too much for me at the time.

CHAPTER 10

TESCHEN: TROUBLES AND TRIALS

On October 20th 1943, the Commandant called for RSM Sheriff and myself to his office and gave us the following information. The OKV had decided on new arrangements for prisoners-of-war, and a new prison camp was going to be set up in Teschen (situated on the borders of Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia). The new camp would now be called 8B, Lamsdorf would have the new designation of No. 344. I was to be sent to Teschen with staff to take over the camp and about seventy working camps around the area, Sheriff would remain at Lamsdorf 344 and take over responsibilities there. I arranged my staff and eventually on the 16th December we were transported to Teschen by train.

I was told to get the camp organized to deal with the seventy three working parties and three hospitals in the area, but I had no records or papers so had to start afresh and make a complete record of the whole area. Of the camp itself, at least the barracks and general conditions were in better shape than those in Lamsdorf and after issues of firewood had been made I was determined to stop any of the rackets starting which had developed at the previous camp.

We were a mixed International crowd but had many Russians who had been brought back from the working parties for medical treatment, but generally by then they were so ill that nothing much could be done for them, they would be given some treatment but if too ill they would be left to die off. The Germans used to collect the dead daily, they would come around the compound, tie a cement bag over the heads of the poor souls, then throw the bodies onto a farm cart which would transport them to whatever place they were using as a burial ground. Sometimes, so as to increase their paltry food rations, the Russians would conceal a death and claim his ration of bread. During morning roll-calls they would carry the body out with them and hold him upright during the parade, however this could only last a few days before the smell of the corpse became so bad that it became obvious he was dead and the body would be left in the barrack room for the Germans to collect.

The main thing that the Russian prisoners seemed to want the most was soap so they could at least have a proper wash and they would help us out in cleaning tasks purposely to get some. We were also by then getting more of our Red Cross parcels and many of the Commonwealth troops neglected the daily soup in favour of more interesting consumables, from this the Russians were grateful and only too glad to take the soup from them.

Outside the main camp of Teschen we had these seventy odd working parties, varying in strength from five hundred to twelve hundred men. Part of my duty as overall camp leader was to keep in close contact with each of these outlying camps, I was permitted to correspond by letter with each sub-camp leader to keep a check on what was going on and had to visit the camps at least once every three months to listen to problems arising – of which there were many. In addition to these scheduled visits I also had to attend all reported deaths of a British prisoner and any court-martials involving the British, (unfortunately there were many instances on both accounts). In my role as the camp leader of 8B, I was also permitted to write directly to the protecting powers of the International Red Cross in Switzerland. Sometimes it would be allowed for one of the sub – camp leaders, or even at times one of the men to visit me in the main camp. They would come with a guard and this would generally be for problems arising in the various camps, or for personal, marital and family difficulties. In the main camp we had our own office and recording system, including a card index system concerning all Red Cross clothing which had been issued to the men. It proved to be quite a busy time for myself and the twenty clerks we had in the office, keeping accurate records of all personnel spread around the areas. We also had to manage the large amounts of mail that was being generated, including writing letters of condolence to the next-of-kin for the many British prisoners who died and were buried in Germany. In most of these cases they replied asking for photographs of the grave which we would try and obtain for them. Some of these relatives I met after the War, which I found to be quite a moving experience.

By about the time of February 1944, I seemed to be constantly going out to one of the working camps. A death would be reported, then I would go to the camp with a padre and an armed guard, mainly for me to check that the man who died was actually who they said it was, because as I have mentioned earlier in the book, they had been swopping over so many times that it could prove very difficult figuring out who someone really was and in many cases the Germans were reporting people dead who were elsewhere and both alive and well.

All over Germany there were camps which had an element of ‘tough nuts’ who were proving to be very difficult to the system and who complained about everything all the time. These men were good soldiers who hated the Germans as we all did, however they found it impossible to contain their anger and were a real thorn in the side to the many camps at which they resided.

Teschen was no exception to this rule and we had a party of about twenty of these chaps who proved to be extremely useful. The way it worked was that if I found out that one of the working camps were treating the men harshly or overworking them, I would quietly arrange for one of my ‘disciples’ to move in to the camp whenever a vacancy arrived, then start creating merry hell and complain about anything possible. In time so many complaints would surface that questions would be asked and I would simply explain to the German officer-in-charge that it must be the fault of the guards because there had been no complaints previously. This often proved successful and many times I was able to convince them that it was the guards and not the men who were causing the problems, with the result that considerable improvements were made and because of the volume of complaints, some of the camps were even closed. I was very grateful for the work that these men did.

Despite my determination, ‘rackets’ were beginning to develop within the camp at Teschen as they had in Lamsdorf and I decided to put a stop to it. We called a meeting and arranged that on a Sunday morning we would set up tables in an area where people could swop items which they didn’t want. This proved to be extremely popular and before long this ‘Petticoat Lane’ market became a regular Sunday function. (as detailed in Ralph Harris’s book ‘Against the Wind’). So popular was this ‘market’ in fact, that it wasn’t long before the German guards themselves would come along and barter for goods from the men. Although this was technically illegal for the Guards to pay for items bought off the prisoners in German marks, they were so fed up with life in general that they couldn’t have cared less whether the officers saw them or not. In this way of course, we managed to collect a sizable amount of German money for the escape committee.

One day in March there was quite a hullabaloo in the camp because it appeared as if the Germans were erecting scaffolds on an open space near the camp. Despite my best efforts, no information was forthcoming from the guards and it wasn’t until I was able to speak to one of the Russian sergeants in charge (although I believe he was a commissar) that I was able to find out what was going on. In his broken English he told me that five Russians had been brought into the camp and were currently being held in cells awaiting hanging for allegedly killing several Germans. The reason they had been brought into Teschen for the hanging was for it to be an example to the other Russians prisoners held there.

This disturbed me greatly and having checked through my copy of the Geneva Convention, I discovered a clause that could prevent this from happening. After consulting a Senior British medical officer I complained to the Commandant, I stated that this action was in direct contravention the Convention and that I wished to make a report to the International Red Cross. He informed me that the Russians had committed an assault, they would be dealt with according to German justice and as the Russians were not signatories to the International Geneva Convention, it was nothing to do with us. I still insisted that it was wrong however they stated that the

British would be confined to their huts when the hangings were taking place and all windows would be closed.

During the night prior to the proposed execution we could hear much commotion from the guardroom, which was not too far away. There was singing, shouting and then a tremendous row which appeared to be emanating from the Russians who were the following day to meet their doom. This continued for quite some time until at around 10.30pm when things seemed to calm down a bit and we all settled down again. In the morning we encountered numerous guards searching the camp and discovered that the Russians had managed to escape. Apparently the noise that they had been making was to deaden the sounds of breaking chairs and tables then, when one of the prisoners requested permission to go to the toilet at about 10pm, the guard who opened the door had his skull smashed by the men armed with lengths of wood. The prisoners then charged out of the cells smashing any guard they could find and relieving them of their rifles, which they subsequently used to hold up the main guard room. Finally, after also taking weapons from the guards at the main gate, they made their escape through the fence to awaiting partisans and presumably onto Czechoslovakia.

This we heard about throughout the morning when the hangings should have been taking place and we were all greatly cheered by the news. The following day the Germans returned and dismantled the scaffolding and we all felt a great deal happier, despite the camp Commandant saying that they would soon be caught and returned for hanging.

The Germans were always searching to find radios and anything else that they considered 'anti-German'. Now in Teschen we had a particular German Feldwebel (Sergeant), who rapidly became the bane of our lives, in fact he was a bloody nuisance to every prisoner there. Whether the man was a mental case or not I was never sure, but he was thoroughly hated by all.

Early one fine morning the guards appeared in force with an officer commanding to search all the camps for radios, escape plans and so on. I told the captain in charge that if he wanted to search our huts, then they would have to be escorted by the British NCO's to ensure that they did not steal anything. Although he protested I insisted and eventually the search commenced, NCO's in tow. During the searches the prisoners were sent outside as each hut was entered by the guards, closely followed by their escorts. One of these search teams was commanded by the above mentioned sergeant and was being very closely shadowed by our men. Beds were tipped up, boxes opened and in general a very thorough search was made of the huts, however, nothing was found despite the guards' efforts. After a search had been carried out on one particular hut, one of my NCO's reported to me that he had seen this German sergeant put a bar of soap into his pocket during the search. Knowing my man as I did I was not too sure as to how innocent he may have been in this matter, but none-the-less I reported the matter to the captain and formally requested that the sergeant be searched for the evidence. The Germans made a tremendous fuss but the man in question was taken inside the barracks and searched, with the bar of soap duly discovered. The German captain was fuming and had all members of the search teams searched themselves. We later heard that the sergeant had somehow found his way to the Russian front for his troubles, but such is the way of life in a prisoner-of-war camp and although these things can seem difficult to imagine, there are a good many men around who can testify to such goings on.

I often did wonder how that bar of soap was slipped into his coat pocket!

After that episode the German guards were even rougher with the prisoners and it was obvious that something had to be done. The German captain in charge of the guard force was quite a kindly old man and one day he came down to have a chat with me. He pointed out that he was old, married with several children and he didn't think that he would be much good on the Russian front, which is where he would be sent if it were found that he was neglecting his duties. He therefore stated that if he were to 'play ball' with us, then would we consider playing ball with him? We therefore came to a mutual understanding that neither side would cause too much friction with the other and for a while the camp jogged along quite happily, until they moved him anyway!

Among the many working parties that came under the Teschen umbrella were some who worked in the nearby coal mines. Within these mines were Polish Steigers who were alleged to be pro-German, (although in many cases this was not so). Also in these mines were Russian prisoners-of-war who by now, were so completely indifferent to life that they did not care whether they lived or died. Often to prove this they would remove the pit stops to encourage a rock fall and generally put the fear of God into everyone around them whilst producing very little in the way of coal. After some time of this, the Germans decided that unless a certain quota of coal was brought to the surface during a shift, then all below would stay there until the volume was attained. Needless to say, the Polish Steigers and the Germans guarding the prisoners were included in this demand and were none too pleased about it, but seeing as the prisoners couldn't have cared less either way it ended up with the Steigers and guards doing most of the work just so as they could see the light of day again.

During this time in the camps, in addition to the Red Cross parcels certain parcels were allowed to come in for the prisoners from next-of-kin and other relatives. In the main these parcels contained the usual things necessary to the prisoner and although of course all the parcels were opened at the security office, most contained routine items and would be grudgingly allowed through. However, occasionally, someone somewhere would send in the private mail maps, compasses, money and other items which would sometimes pass through the system after only a cursory glance. One day I was called down to the office after a parcel addressed to one of the prisoners had been opened and it was quite a sight, it seemed to contain every map, every document, train timetable, money, saws, you name it and it appeared to be in this parcel. The prisoner had to be present when the parcel was opened and expressed surprise. The Germans, of course, used this as a good excuse to stop the parcels going through until they had been torn open completely and had been looked through thoroughly.

As I have said before, we had been sadly disappointed in the group of padres we had in the camp and eventually managed to get them dispersed to various areas. The boys looked forward to a Sunday service and when I happened to be visiting the working camps, they seemed to think that in the absence of a padre I should automatically give the sermon or read the lesson and on many occasions I did so. I didn't think I was the right person to do this, but things being what they were I did

what I could and no-one seemed to complain about the content or delivery of my sermons.

One day I was on one of my journeys to Gliwitz, a large hospital where there were a couple of English doctors and approximately eighty prisoners-of-war patients in a wing set aside by the Germans. These were commanded by Dr. O'Mara, a South African and a very good man, indeed he had accompanied the troops on the long march from Teschen back to Nuremberg and had received many complimentary comments from those who had survived the ordeal.

During the journey to the hospital and as we passed through the town, the 'fliegeralarm' sounded (air-raid siren). As is usual in such circumstances, everything halts and everyone gets to the nearest shelter to take what cover they could. With my guard, I managed to get into the hallway of a big store in time to hear the droning of overhead planes and the falling of bombs. The hallway was full of Germans and I distinctly overheard one German say to another, ".....and Herr Goering said that no planes would bomb Germany, so what the Hell are we doing in this shelter?" This tone was taken up by others but in a careful manner as they never knew who or where the S.S. or other security forces were listening.

It was quite an amazing thing to watch the deterioration of the German morale. I remembered the 'Jackboot' German of 1940, when we were taken prisoner-of-war, he had his heels correctly built up and with Teutonic thoroughness he was smart in his uniform, the elite of the Germans. But as the war had progressed the uniforms were becoming shabby and patched, the boots were becoming worn and their heels wearing thin. Later still a pair of civilian trousers would appear with the army issued jackets and ordinary shoes would replace the 'jackboot'. These were very obvious signs that things were not going too well for the Germans in this war. Strangely enough, this coincided with the British prisoners taking more pride in their appearance whilst on the streets and in view of the general public, uniforms would be pressed as best as was possible and shoes would shine like stars. But it was becoming quite obvious that the Germans were getting short of supplies and as such, our rations began to be cut down despite protestations that our daily intake of calories were becoming far less than they should have been, but it was all a pointer to the future.

In one of the large mining camps there was a female medical officer, her name was Dr Frau Gosch and she was a bitch! Nazi through and through and nothing was likely to change her. She started to mark many of the sick as being 'fit for duty' and the complaints about her behaviour started to pour in. I therefore had to include this particular camp on my next visit to the area and went there ready for battle. We tried many ways to curtail her 'fitness' campaign, one was to try and get her medical views upset by the British doctors, but she had powerful friends in the German Forces who supported her and this line proved fruitless. However, the most important thing to the German Authorities was production from the mining camp. As a result of this fair lady being in the camp production was faltering and with a little word of advice to the prisoners, it continued to deteriorate month by month. This culminated in the Commandant becoming concerned and upon request I told him quite frankly that this mine had been very successful prior to Dr Frau Gosch taking up position. I added that in my humble opinion the drop in production would continue for as long as she remained. Eventually they could not suppress the mounting figures and so, in time honoured military tradition, they promoted her. She was then withdrawn to the main

camp where she continued to cause trouble, however there we had other means of stirring things for her and she ultimately was removed. But as I've said earlier, if ever there was a bitch, it was she.

When I made my weekly or fortnightly visits to the various working camps, I would often have to travel on the trains with my armed guard, perhaps the odd tram, but some occasions would involve walking along the streets. During these events, I would walk along the pavement with my guard trailing behind in the usual manner, but on one occasion when I was walking along the pavement in Gliwitz, I was accosted by two S.S. Officers and told to get off the pavement and walk in the gutter as was common for anyone other than Germans. I refused to walk in the gutter and tried to explain to them my position and what I was doing. This did not go down too well with them and they drew their pistols, threatening to shoot me if I did not obey their order. My guard tried to calm the officers by protesting his orders and confirming my story, but I think the S.S. men had been fuelled by drink and began yelling and shouting. I just sat down on the pavement whilst all this was going on until in the end a military vehicle rolled up and the screaming officers bundled me in the back and we drove to the nearest military headquarters.

Upon arrival I repeated that I always walked the pavements and fully intended to continue to do so or if not, then I requested that I be returned at once to the main camp at Teschen. The officer-in-charge of this particular unit didn't quite know what to make of it all, but looked distinctly uncomfortable about having two S.S. Officers still yelling their wrath about the place. To try and resolve the situation he telephoned Teschen and spoke to the camp Commandant who apparently, in no uncertain fashion, told him that I was the leader of all the area's British prisoners-of-war, with specific duties to perform and that I was entitled to walk on the pavement. This was relayed to the S.S. men who were still not pacified and continued in their ranting. Eventually after a few hours the Commandant of Teschen contacted the General of the S.S. of the area who himself telephoned the, by now, twitching officer-in-charge of this small unit of which we had descended upon. The end result of all this was that the two S.S. men seemed to sober up a little and went away having been told quite definitely the error of their ways.

Throughout this delay the officer-in-charge who was a major, managed to give me a meal and some coffee, he also offered me his apologies when we eventually left but it was obvious that he was scared stiff of the S.S.

Despite his hopes of remaining at Teschen, the old Capitan had been sent away and in his place we had Major Birkhof, of whom we had had previous dealings with at Lamsdorf. If ever there was a bastard in this world, it was Major Birkhof and although some are made, others are born and he was most definitely born that way. Life in Teschen became more and more difficult with him in command. Whereas the old Capitan had listened to people who had escaped and as mentioned earlier, was more lenient on those who had managed to get the furthest away, it was quite a different story with Birkhof. He often would seem to be the most pleasant person, then would suddenly sentence people to the harshest of times, making life in general, as impossible as he could for the prisoners.

On one particular occasion while I was away for a burial, a case cropped up on the base in which my deputy – RSM Tetley of the Seaforth Highlanders – had to deal on my behalf. The commandant, our friend Major Birkhof, asked RSM Tetley

why he did not speak German like Herr Read as everything they discussed had to be dealt with through an interpreter, his Scottish accent being unintelligible to Birkhof. Much to the Commandant's surprise my deputy said that he was not interested in a dead language, intimating of course that he considered the German language to be so! For the insult Birkhof sentenced him to seven days in the cells, however 'Jock' told me that he didn't mind one bit – it had been worth it to see the look on the Commandant's face.

All during this time, information began to stream in to us from many sources, sometimes from the guards themselves, about the activities on the Russian Front. Wounded troop trains were returning through the area and everything was pointing to a reduced level of effort and the fact that they were in big trouble. While it was good for morale generally to hear this news, we were more interested in trying to relay any information back home in case it could have any tactical significance. It took some time and effort, but we eventually were able to secure a line of communication through the mines where Polish workers had installed transmitters which could be picked up in England. After careful checking, we made various contacts within these working parties and were able to begin relaying reports back to Britain. Indeed, on one occasion we were able to report on a particular bombing raid nearby, details of which were transmitted on a BBC radio news report ten minutes later. I expect the Germans often wondered how this information was getting through, but there were so many ways that they did not have much hope of finding out.

During the War, propaganda had been continually broadcast against the German nation and their allies by British radio. But what always seemed to have been overlooked was perhaps the biggest propaganda of the war – the continued supply of Red Cross Parcels to prisoners-of-war, from the British, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian governments. Despite continual statements in the German national newspapers that they were winning the war and that the Allies were being starved to death, these parcels continued to arrive weekly, much to the astonishment of the German population! They wondered how could the British, who were supposedly losing the war, send their prisoners food items that the Germans themselves had been deprived of for years?

The prisoners picked up on this and when they were being transferred between camps by train, would deliberately save their parcels so as to open them in front of the Germans and relish in the contents. As time progressed, the continual arrival of these parcels resulted in many 'rackets' being set up for the supply of tea, coffee, butter and chocolate to the Germans whose own supplies of these items had long since dried up. The Germans would pay for these in German marks and this money would find its way back to the escape committee. In doing so, when prisoners took off on their planned escapes, there was never a shortage of money to help them on their way! I do not think that the British and other nations ever came to fully realize just how much propaganda these parcels generated and it was a situation that was fully exploited by prisoners during the war.

One day, in connection with my court martial work, I had to attend a case where a corporal who worked in one of the mines had been charged with striking a Steiger (German 'controller'). We arrived the day prior to the court martial taking place and I was allowed to see the prisoner, whereby I asked him straight out if he

had hit the Steiger in the face with a shovel as charged. At first he denied it outright, but then admitted to the offence after explaining to him that I could only help him with the German counsel if I knew the truth, which of course I would then not convey to the German side. Apparently he had never thought too highly of this Steiger who continually complained about his work, then on the morning in question, the corporal received mail from home in which his mother had told him that his wife was running around with another man, which led to him feeling deeply depressed and even more fed up with life than usual. The Steiger appeared to have been particularly nasty that morning and after an argument drew his pistol to threaten our corporal, whereupon the corporal promptly bashed the Steiger in the face with his shovel, knocking out a few teeth and causing a fracture or two around the area of his jaw. It seemed that it had taken about four weeks before the German was capable of talking again and this had delayed the court martial. The only thing we could do was plead self-defence because the Steiger had drawn his pistol, but we knew it was a flimsy defence and our man got six months, although he could have got three years.

Sitting over the case was a German Colonel who was the Judge Advocate, on entering the court with an interpreter he asked one of his officers who I was and what was I doing there. It was explained to him that I was the Hauptver-traunsman of all the English prisoners and as such was permitted to be at any court martial to ensure that all was fair. Before the case had adjourned, the Colonel asked me through the interpreter what I had thought of German justice. I replied “not much!” and the interpreter, who was normally quite good and would pause to put things as diplomatically as possible, like a damn fool turned round and interpreted my comment exactly to the Colonel. I got seven days in the jug for contempt of court! They took me away to the cells, but within a few hours I heard a load of commotion going on outside. It seemed that my guard had left the court and returned to Battalion Head Office and informed his commander as to why his charge was now in jail himself. The commander in turn contacted Teschen whereupon the Commandant (who also happened to be an S.S. man), apparently would not agree at all to my being kept slammed up. I was needed back at the camp to carry out burial duties and prepare for a visit by the Swiss International Red Cross and so I was released and with my guard, returned to Teschen.

Life within the camp often involved inspections upon inspections! The guards came to the office one day with profuse apologies but stating that they were required to carry out a thorough search– this time they were looking for radios. I offered no objection whatsoever and made myself comfy on my one comfortable seat whilst they turned the place over. They left after about an hour and a half, finding nothing and proceeded to search the barracks where they also found nothing. Later on some of the British prisoners came to the office and thanked me for what I had done, I asked them why and apparently they had slipped a radio under the seat of the chair I had been sitting on, of which the Germans had not thought fit to inspect and they had now returned to collect it. I was not at all amused as in my capacity as camp leader I had to be seen as not being involved in that kind of behaviour, to do anything other would have compromised my position and as such reduced any influence I may have had. I told them not to do it again, which I must admit they never did.

I received information that a certain individual would be arriving in the camp. We were given a pretty good description of what he looked like and certain code

words which he had to give us. It all seemed somewhat far-fetched but we waited. Eventually into the camp came several P.O.W.'s who apparently had parachuted into Germany, the reason they were being treated as Prisoners-of-war was them having worn uniforms, without which they would have been arrested as spies.

I was lying on my bunk one evening when there was a knock on the door, in came a soldier who sat down and said that he would like to talk to me. He gave some pass-words which I checked back with the coded messages received and he matched the details. As a prisoner one always expects a trap, but we checked and cross-checked this man until we were confident that this was the individual we were expecting. It appeared that he and the others had been deliberately dropped into German territory so that they would be picked up and brought into one or other of the camps, there they would pass on instructions as to what was expected of us, how and why. This chap passed on much information, especially regarding the Russian advance and as to whether we should do this or that.

The next day he asked if he could be swapped over with someone else so that he could go outside the wire on a working party, whereupon he would attempt an escape, return to England to report 'mission accomplished' and presumably start the whole lot over again. He spoke fluent German having been a teacher in Heidleberg, he also spoke French, Italian and a smattering of just about all else. Small and mean he may have looked, but he was a great chap. Anyhow, we arranged his swap-over and he went out with a working party, two days later he managed to escape and a fortnight later we received a message back from England saying that he had returned high and dry. I take my hat off to this man and others like him who deliberately came into German hands and got out again for the purpose of helping us. There are not many people in this world who would or even could, be capable of doing such a thing.

It was reported to me that we were having problems getting Red Cross Parcels through to the various working parties in the Eastern industrial area of Susnovitch and Katowitch. It was suggested to me by one of the more pro-English guards, that I should ask for a meeting with the Gauleiter of the area to see what could be done about the situation. I explained my predicament to him (he spoke good English), and asked as a humanitarian if he could do anything to help. I suggested that as the trams ran through to all the areas concerned, perhaps an additional carriage could be added to deliver the parcels to the districts concerned, which could then be collected by the working parties involved. He was an S.S. man and at first flatly refused to do anything to help. However, I further suggested that perhaps if this could be arranged, then we could leave some parcels with him as a token of our appreciation. He knew only too well that the parcels contained chocolate, coffee etc, and eventually agreed on the proviso that he received parcels each week to arrange the additional carriages. He was the Gauleiter of the district and provided he got his cut, he couldn't care less about regulations. The arrangement worked well for many months.

I received some court martial papers concerning a corporal in a working party, a Jew, who somehow had been associating with a German housewife. But full details had not been given and as I was permitted to attend all court martials under the Geneva Convention, I applied to the Commandant and was permitted to attend. I read copies of the charge but they were a little vague so I asked the prisoner for the truth on the matter. It appeared that for the past year he had been slipping out of a working

camp, visiting and cohabiting with the wife of an area Gauleiter. The house was striking distance of the working camp and signals were arranged whereby the wife would let it be known that her husband was away and the coast was clear. Additionally, the guard in charge of the working party had been bribed by the wife to let the prisoner out in the evening, provided he return early the following morning. This affair appeared to have been going on for some time, much to the satisfaction of all concerned. However, one night the Gauleiter returned home early and discovered his wife and her lover in bed together. The court martial was heard and there was not a lot that could be done as the corporal admitted his misdeeds. Eventually he was sentenced to two years, with the wife being sentenced for fraternizing with the enemy, she was given five years during which time she had to sweep the streets of Sosnovitch.

We sympathized with the corporal, but as he explained, two years was worth it because he had just had a year of virtual freedom and an active sex life, which he doubted any other prisoner had enjoyed. In that respect I could not argue!

In the May of 1944 it was reported that two men had been shot out on one of the working camps at Beuthen and once again the Commandant ordered me to travel out and check on the deaths. I knew the German in charge of this camp very well, Feldwebel Pantke – an Alsatian dog enthusiast – and a man of whom I had crossed swords on previous visits when prisoners had informed me of bad conditions. On that occasion I had told him that I would report him to the Commandant but he did not believe me, but I did and he was severely punished. This time he was more subdued! To visit Beuthen meant a rail journey of about eighty miles and half way through the trip there was an alarm sounded. The train ground to a halt and everyone was ordered off, my guard asked an official at the station what he should do with me and was told to take me into one of the air-raid shelters. These shelters were massive concrete structures above ground and in the event of a raid only the very old, women and children were permitted inside, the other men remained outside. I knew enough German to realize that when the guard shoved me inside this shelter, the mutterings around me were stating that I was an Englishman and should be dealt with accordingly. With the English planes raiding us I am quite sure I would have been lynched if the women had got half a chance and to be honest I didn't really blame them. I feigned ignorance, but kept myself busy with the hand-pumps that these shelters used to expel the stale air. After about an hour the all-clear sounded and I got out of there as quickly as I could with the guard not far behind me.

We continued on our journey and arrived more or less in one piece at Beuthen. I spoke to Feldwebel Pantke who attempted to persuade me that these two prisoners had tried to run away, a challenge had been given, but as they refused to stop then they were shot and killed. However, the version from Jimmy Friedland, the British camp leader was very different. Friedland was a Jew in the Palestinian forces, he had about four hundred men in the working camp under his control and knew the German mentality backwards. He told me that these two prisoners were being led somewhere by Pantke and another guard, they were told to hurry along and when one of them turned around suspecting a trick, the other started to run so the guards opened up on them both. One died on the spot, the other was in hospital but permission for Friedland to see him had been refused. There then ensued an awful lot of argument and trouble with the German authorities, but finally I obtained permission for Friedland to visit the man and then the whole story came out. As a result, Feldwebel

Pantke was on my list of wanted men when the hostilities ceased. Very shortly after Friedlands' visit, the man died and both Friedland and myself were convinced that he had been silenced as he would have been a dangerous witness. Pantke was added to my list of fourteen wanted men! (By the time the war ended, I had a list of twenty four who would have to account for their crimes. Of these, twenty three were apprehended and only one escaped.

During 1944 the Russian forces were steadily moving forward and all the Polish miners and others were getting geared up for country wide action against the German forces. The various camp leaders of my working compounds were arriving gradually and asking as to whether the British prisoners-of-war should join them if the opportunity presented itself. This was a new one to me and I tried to contact England for instructions on the matter. However, although I had sent off three letters to my special contacts, I had not received a reply. I began to get worried as to whether the code had been broken and I dared not risk sending another requesting instructions, but there was one last resort and that was the Polish underground. I made it my duty to visit one of the mining camps and once there spoke to the British camp leader, asking him to pass on a special message to one of the Polish workers he could trust, so as it could reach Britain. My main concern was a definite answer to the question of whether British P.O.W.s should be involved in any uprisings. This of course took some time, but eventually I did get a reply saying that we were not to become involved at all. Later, as a result of the Warsaw uprising, the reason was fully understood.

We eventually discovered that the cause of the delay with our communications with England had been several trainloads of mail for home being blown up during air-raids over Germany. All my fears and suspicions at the time about the possibility of spies being at work had fortunately proved unfounded. Phil was the only other one who knew about the code and he too was worried. We decided to hold a reserve code and addresses that either of us could have used if anything unusual happened again.

Working party E.742 was under RSM Taylor and up until now we had received no complaints from it. The prisoners were helping to build a factory of some kind in the area of the working camp and were used as bricklayers, carried out electrical work and employed as general labourers. It was a very peaceful working party with few complaints and I had always found the men seemed to be well provisioned by the German guards, they were even allowed plenty of exercise and sports. However, towards the end of 1944, we started to receive numerous requests for transfers on the pretext that prisoners were sick, had been there a long time and wanted a change, etc. This seemed unusual and the final straw came when Taylor himself submitted a request for transfer, so I decided to include E742 in my next batch of visits.

When I arrived at the camp I could see that the factory was near to completion, I quietly took Taylor to one side and asked him what all the business about transfers was about. He said that the men had been happy building the place, but were now getting worried because they had heard that the factory was going to be opened officially by the Economics Minister – Speer – within the next month or so. The men knew that by then they would have to be as far from the place as possible as they had sabotaged much of the construction and there would be a lot of trouble to

follow. Taylor also told me that although they were not totally sure what the factory was going to produce, they had the definite impression that it was going to make small arms and associated equipment. Although the Geneva Convention was quite specific in that prisoners-of-war can not be employed in any work associated with arms manufacturing or the war effort, unfortunately I could not prove anything at the time. I told Taylor to keep quiet and for the men to do likewise and I would see what I could do, but that he must inform me as soon as possible as to the proposed date of the factory opening.

Within a few days Taylor came to the main camp on some pretext and informed me of the exact date of the factory opening, then returned to the working party to await events. We managed to have the information passed to Britain by way of underground channels of communication and on the Friday night before the factory was due to be officially opened, the RAF came over and flattened the place to the ground! With usual Teutonic thoroughness and efficiency, the Germans put the now, happy prisoners, to work the very next morning cleaning the mortar from the bricks and stacking them up ready for the building to begin again.

In the main camp we now lost a troublesome German sergeant, only to be replaced with 'American Joe', he was the German under-officer interpreter in Lamsdorf and a right bastard. It appeared that he had been promoted since the last time we'd met, though fortunately we knew 'American Joe' and his ways only too well and I was quite sure that the boys would be able to deal with him in due course.

I visited an area near Oppeln where there were several small working parties under the joint control of a German Lieutenant, the office of which was in the town. I went to see him initially to inform him that I was in the area and asked if there were any incidents that I should be made aware of. At first he replied that there wasn't, but then he remembered that there was something. One of the working parties in the town was daily supplying a gardener for the house of a high official in the town – I think he was the mayor – and the Lieutenant had received a report that the prisoner was not working properly at his gardening duties. As the officer was busy at his headquarters he directed me to go and investigate these reports.

I duly arrived at the house which was old and had a very large garden. My guard and I looked around but could not see anyone, we wandered around the garden and finally came across a German gardener who was obviously being kept busy and did not look a particularly pleasant customer at all. We enquired as to the whereabouts of the prisoner and with the jerk of his thumb, the German directed us to the main house, we followed his direction and went around to the back door only to find in the kitchen, the prisoner-of-war. He appeared to be doing very nicely thank you, sitting there with a cigarette in one hand, housemaid in the other and calmly taking tea complete with napkins and small cakes. I immediately took him outside and demanded to know what the hell was going on, to my surprise he said that he always spent the afternoons with the housemaid, taking tea, teaching her English as well as many other acts! I told him about the report and he replied that he knew the source – the German gardener. Apparently he was also interested in the maid and was therefore jealous of the prisoner. I asked him as to why the gardener had not reported him directly to the Mayor, but the prisoner explained that the maid was also the mayor's 'bed companion', and the Mayor would be so mad that there was any

competition for the maid's services, the gardener himself could become embroiled and find himself on his way to the Russian Front – it was as simple as that!

I asked the maid if the British prisoner was a good worker, "Oh yes!" she replied, "The very best!" Without her having known anything of my conversation with the prisoner I said that we had received a report about his work, she replied that it was the fault of the gardener as he wanted to marry her, although she was not interested. She added that she would ensure things would be kept in hand and I left, bewildered as to the fortunes of some during war!

I've have always never fully understood how children always seem able to pick up such bad language in any country. But one day, as I walked from the railway station to visit various camps in the vicinity, I was more than a little surprised to hear from a small German boy standing by the side of the road as I walked past, "Good morning, I am a F*****g German Bastard!"

When I got to the working party I asked the camp leader where the children were picking up these words and apparently the prisoners, when they were being walked through the town would keep some of the chocolate from their parcels to give to the children. The guards were aware of this but held no objections as it appeared as if the prisoners were being friendly towards the children, then the men would teach the kids the worst phrases and language as possible and if the children spoke it well, they would receive the chocolate. A small victory, but good for morale!

One morning on my table with the other mail was a large, somewhat familiar envelope from the German legal department. I knew that it would contain a copy of the details for a court martial that was due for hearing and I opened it before the other mail, as always. It appeared that one of the prisoners from a working camp had been tasked with cleaning out and looking after some stables. He had found himself now facing a charge of indecent conduct with animals – and in this case, attempting to rape or actual raping a mare in the stables. As usual we received the papers late in the proceedings, so I hastily made arrangements to seek permission from the Commandant to go out to the respective camp and help the prisoner with his defence.

Although in most cases the defending officer would be a German military man, this time it happened to be a civilian and I managed to make contact and arrange for him to be present when I interviewed the prisoner. As usual I asked the prisoner to tell the truth and he stated that on the day in question he had been at the stables, cleaning out and putting fresh hay out for the animals. Around two in the afternoon, he felt the need to 'take a leak', which he did in the stables close to the mare. At the same time apparently the mare decided to do likewise. Just then in came an under-officer who was known to be SS, he was pretty drunk and immediately accused the prisoner of an indecent act. Of course, the prisoner denied this but was none-the-less taken into the cells and charged. I looked at the prisoner, taking in his rather short stature and noted that the mare was several hands high, I pointed out to the counsel that how could a man possibly carry out such an act without steps or some sort of box.

Next day in court, the German defence counsel asked some interesting questions to the under-officer who had made the initial charge, for instance, "Were the stables kept very clean?" to which the under officer replied "Yes". He then asked "What happened when the stables had been cleaned out, did the prisoner sit about and wait further orders?" The under officer said, "No, there were no chairs or boxes on

which to sit as this was not permitted in any case". "So," asked the civilian counsel, "How was it that such a short man could rape such a tall horse?" The under officer had fallen into the trap, he tried to say that having caught the man with his pants down and the mare being so close it must have been so. The counsel then pleaded with the Judge Advocate that this was no proof and the case was dismissed. However, true to German justice, they then gave him seven days in the cooler for urinating in the stables! Still, this was better than the alternative.

As we came out of the court, the German counsel slipped me his card and said that he hoped we could meet again one day. I think that he, along with an increasing number of Germans at that time, were becoming worried about losing the war and maybe he was hoping that I would put in a good word for him once the war was over.

When I started off in Teschen doing all the jobs that were assigned to me, I found that I was starting to miss the soup queues and also that I was becoming unable to find the time to keep the offices in a reasonably tidy state. I was even finding it increasingly difficult to keep my quarters clean. I told the Germans that I would need to keep one man for this sort of work, as usual they protested, but this I resolved by deliberately failing to meet the Commandant on a couple of occasions with the excuse that I hadn't had the time to get ready. They relented and I kept a man named Harrison whom I called my 'good man Friday'. Harrison was a Yorkshire man with as broad an accent as they came, middle-aged and was looking forward to nothing more than getting home to have a quiet time with his wife and a beer in his local pub. He was one of the most reliable men you could meet and although the Germans tried very hard over the years to get him out on a working party, I managed to keep him throughout. If I happened to be away from the office and the Germans came in wanting something, Harrison would staunchly defend the office with his broomstick and say "You can't take nowt until Mr Read comes back!" In 1944, when parcels were getting a bit short and we were down to half a parcel each, it seemed to me that our rations (Harrison and I used to pool our parcel contents) were not getting any smaller, I suspected something was up and tackled Harrison about it. I asked him directly if he had been giving me a larger share of the parcels than he had himself and he told me that he wasn't always hungry and he didn't mind. There and then I flew into him and made clear that if he ever tried that again then I would ensure he did get sent out on the working parties. I am glad to say that after that Harrison always shared our portions evenly. Of course, I promised to keep in contact with him after the war, but in the rush to get home I am afraid I lost his address. However, were he ever to read this, I would like him to know how indebted I am to him for all the help he gave me during that time.

Teschen had a small castle on a hill, which was being used for the billeting of German troops, mostly guards from around the area. One morning we were informed that no one could go out of the camp that day and we naturally wondered why. In the afternoon one of the working party leaders came in to see me and said that although it was being kept quiet, he had gathered from overhearing various bits of conversation that the night before one of the guards walking back to the castle had been stabbed and killed. That morning the German troops had been out through the local town in force, they randomly hauled out men and strung them up from telegraph poles here and there with a warning, that if any other guards were killed the same thing would happen again. This I personally did not witness, but others did report seeing bodies

strung up about the place for all to see and knowing the mood of the Germans at the time I quite believed it.

As 1944 rolled on by, it became apparent that the German forces were feeling the strain of commitment. The day came when I was told that if I gave parole, I would be allowed to continue travelling to the work camps without the need for a guard escort. My answer to that was "Not on your Nellie! – I will go either with a guard or not at all". I then started hearing reports from leaders of the working parties that their weekly walks or sports activities were being curtailed by the Germans - the shortage of guards to accompany them was the reason given. However, they would permit the prisoners to have their exercise with a single guard, provided they also give their parole that they would not escape! The camp leaders wrote to me asking as to whether they should agree to this. I visited some of the camps and wrote to the others stating that we should not accede to the Germans request, if they could not provide guards in the usual manner then they should inform me and I would write through to the relevant authorities. The point was of course, that as mentioned the Germans were getting very short of man-power and one thing was for sure, as hell was I going to agree that we – the prisoners- would assist in releasing guards for the front line.

It had been suggested to me that when I visited working parties it would be fairly easy for me to attempt an escape. I did consider this many times and it would probably have been quite a simple exercise as my guard was old and dodderly, I could have slipped into a Polish house without him knowing and got away. I thought about it a lot, but on the other hand my job was to visit the camps and help them as much as possible to keep up morale. I also tried to help in beating down irregularities of treatment and conditions by the Germans and I realised that if I should try an escape, then no one would be given the job in my place. I felt that by staying I could do more good just by being there and I know my conscience would have worried me afterwards if I had escaped and been successful purely for my own considerations.

We heard one morning in August that there had been a big air raid launched from Italy on the town of Auschwitz. We had a prison camp nearby with approximately four hundred men and although our people had managed to get shelters built within the prison camp, some were naturally curious and stuck their heads out to watch the raid when the prison caught a number of the bombs. Forty-three were killed and I went with the padre to the camp. From the railway station at Auschwitz there was a short journey of about six miles by bus to the camp, we could see that the whole area was a mess and in a very jittery state. The padre and I stood with our guard near a bus stop and there were many mutterings from some of the local population about the Englanders being there. Just as we were about to board the bus, a woman standing in the queue suddenly flew at me with her fingernails tearing at my face from the eyes downwards. I could only think she was demented but she left me looking a right bloody mess.

It was a hot summer's day and it had been decided to bury the casualties in a mass grave at four-thirty that afternoon. The Germans had already sent some prisoners down to the graveyard to start on digging a mass grave, the remainder of the men in the camp were engaged in picking up pieces of bodies and putting them into some sort of form, after which they were sewn into blankets and labelled to give some

idea of who the bag represented. Altogether it was a horrible sight, made even more gruesome by the squelching sound the bundles made when placed onto the wood. Eventually the task was complete and late in the afternoon the bodies with a detachment from the camp together with myself, the padre and a guard, assembled at the graveyard. The bodies were laid out in rows, numbered and recorded to the best of my ability.

With the short ceremony over we were marching back to the camp when the alarm sounded again, we quickly broke into a run to get as far away from the town as we could before it was struck again from the air. Fortunately we managed some distance between us before the bombs fell and fall they did, including completely blowing the entire graveyard apart – as I discovered when I returned the following day. There was nothing I could do apart from reporting back that the men had died, been buried in a mass grave and gave numbers and details as recorded. Although I knew that all our efforts had been in vain.

The air raids from Italy were increasing in their intensity and number, both by day and night. I must admit that the old German in charge of us at the time had a sense of humour, we were talking about war – as he had also been in World War 1 and I found that he was getting a bit fed up with the whole thing, all he wanted was to get home and lead a quiet life with his wife and family. While we were talking, he made a very good point and one which I could verify. He said that when German planes flew over England, all the English ducked; when English planes flew over Germany, all the Germans ducked; but when the American planes came over – everyone ducked! This was highly an accurate statement as the American's policy appeared to consist of 'carpet' bombing way before the target area, then continuing throughout so no one quite knew where the hell they would fall.

We heard through our news sources and smuggled radios that the Italians had surrendered and the Germans had picked up many thousands now as prisoners. Within a very short space of time between two and three hundred of these Italian prisoners arrived at Teschen. They were placed into one of the barracks, a shabby lot who nobody wanted to bother with. To make matters more complex, there were two factions to this rabble, pro-Mussolini and anti-Mussolini. Eventually the Germans were forced to separate them but the enmity remained.

They had separate latrine accommodation but in the normal Italian fashion, they were soon fouled up and the Germans, inspecting periodically as usual, decided that the Italians were no good one way or the other, especially with regard to their toilet habits! Despite warnings by the Germans, the situation did not improve until eventually, a German sergeant shoved them all into the fouled up latrines, locked the doors and told them that they would not be allowed out until it was all cleaned up. They remained in there for twelve hours until after another inspection half were let out and half left in, on the grounds that the Germans were only half pleased with the result. After a further twelve hours the second half were released with dire threats as to what would happen if the latrines were not kept clean in the future. Some of the Italians were so frightened that they would avoid using the latrines at all in case of punishment.

From their respective political groups they would try and approach us, pointing out the faults of the other, but I must confess that we had no time for them,

the Russians had even less! In the end they became a group on their own without a friend and as far as being military men, they were dead ducks.

In 1945 and with the Russian advance approaching, the camp at Teschen was ordered to be evacuated. Many of the prisoners were put on the road to march with the guards westwards and onto Germany, (Teschen being on the junction of Poland and Czechoslovakia). I thought that I would be going with them but the Germans told me that I should stay and arrange for the sick and lame to travel by train.

As far as I gathered from the men who eventually reached Germany, they were forced to march on and on, through the snow and any who lagged behind were never seen again, although shots were heard. After some nights the men were so exhausted they fell asleep as soon as they reached the night's staging point without even taking off their boots and socks so as to dry off their feet, even though the medical officer, another South African, tried very hard to get the men to follow the normal rules of hygiene. Of course, after several days of this many of the men got frostbite and rings appeared on their legs and ankles, when they finally attempted to remove their boots and socks, great chunks of flesh would come away from the rings, leaving the bones exposed. These men had to be left behind for amputations however, how many of them survived I do not know but if they had had the strength to remove their boots each night, no doubt they would have been back in their country today.

CHAPTER 11

NUREMBERG : THE LONGEST DAYS

We were sent to quite a big camp about four miles from Nuremberg, where we were dumped with me again as camp leader. Other prisoners were being brought in from the East in front of the Russian advance until we held about 17,000 assorted prisoners; about 8,000 Russians, 1,000 Yugoslav, 1,000 British, and combined with a general melee of French, Italian, Belgian and Dutch, a most mixed bunch if ever there was, although the differing nationalities tended to remain in their own respective compounds.

Things were now getting desperate for Germany at this time and the RAF Pathfinders used to fly at night over Nuremberg. We had already dug slit trenches, a useful exercise so that we could throw ourselves into them if bombs fell, but the Pathfinders dropped flares at night and we became so confident of their ability that we used to stand and watch as Nuremberg was lit up. We could hear and sometimes even see the bombers coming in and dropping their loads right over the hapless city, though we felt quite safe in our camp. Soon the raids intensified and the bombers began coming by day as well, they would fly low over the camp and began the bombing run from half a mile away. We were informed that in just one of the raids which lasted about an hour, 30,000 people in Nuremberg were killed. There was no more lime left to stop the stench of the bodies and the city became a deserted, disembowelled place.

I had managed to get hold of a bicycle, which I used to get about the compounds as they were some distance apart. Across the camp was the Russian compound, commanded by a Commissar (who was impersonating a sergeant). I was on friendly terms with him and we would plan and plot the future together. He would not reveal that he was a Commissar, but he told me of his problems and I'd try my best to help out.

About this time things in general became very hectic. To try and convey this I have therefore, used the notes that I made at the time.

March 23

Red Cross parcels arrived by road from International Red Cross. Hope Soars again. First death in camp – GNR Hepburn, - buried today. Sherrif dealt with this.

March 24

Two more lorries with Red Cross parcels addressed to me by the International Red Cross. They are trying hard.

March 25

Parcels arriving – some to Luftwaffe and some to us! Eventually worked our system of supply.

March 26

Now putting up tents for prisoners-of-war.

March 27

Germans getting difficult about the firewood parties going out. Told by Germans that P.O.W.'s had burnt up some beds, compound was blamed. Complained to Commandant. Ban lifted but firewood parties must sign parole.

March 29

Now bits of huts are disappearing – in the fires I guess.

March 30

Different working parties now arriving and asking for back issues of parcels and cigarettes, I say “nonsense” – not enough on hand and could not allow anyway.

March 31

Reporting all names and numbers of new arrivals to International Red Cross, hope they are getting the lists.

April 1

Today all P.O.W.'s in the Stalag issued with a half a British Red Cross parcel and cigarettes. The 1,100 men due to go out to the working party tomorrow were also issued with a full parcel in addition.

April 2

The P.O.W.'s remaining in the Stalag were all issued with two tins of food from the bulk supplies carried here by the Stalag 344 party. In the evening we heard that the 1,100 men were returning, eventually returned at about 11 p.m.

April 3

I was informed by the Abwehr officer that the P.O.W.'s were expected to be moved the next day and that all Red Cross parcels should be handed out. This was done by RSM Heard as ordered. At this stage all P.O.W.'s had then received a couple of parcels and cigarettes on April 1 and one full parcel and cigarettes on April 2 & 3.

April 4

All the officers (medical and chaplains) together with the full ranks were marched out on the end of the Luft 111 column. I should have gone too but heard that I had to stay and deal with any supplies arriving for us.

April 5

This was day of bombing when twenty-three American officers from Colonel Seeley's column were killed near the railway, many more brought into camp for amputations.

April 6

The French 'man of confidence' found two trucks partially burned with British parcels on it and claimed these for us. He also arranged for the contents to be brought into Stalag where he handed them over to me with the details – 2573 partially burned parcels, two cartons of cigarettes and various odd tins. Up to the last issue of parcels it had been possible to issue new arrivals in the Stalag with a full parcel each. But as no other stocks had arrived it was now necessary to cut to half a parcel and later still, only a few tins. This of course, led to much complaint from the new arrivals, a group of ten American officers was a casing point, but what was there to do as supplies of late from the authorities were now so sporadic due to the bombing.

The partially burned parcels were then kept as an iron reserve in case of another order to move.

At this time I knew the Americans from Luft 111 had not officially left us any stocks to take over, although the majority of the Americans returning had been with the column and stated that they had not received any parcels before marching out. I know that Luft 111 had received approximately 20,000 parcels since March 27th but have no idea of how they disposed of them.

April 8

I knew that the German military had in store 960 American parcels, which they were holding for another unit. I asked for them to be handed over to me for issue to the British and American POW's and received them on condition that we would repay the parcels in kind once re-supplied if the other unit came back for them. This temporarily eased the situation.

April 11

After a bombing raid I was informed that some trucks of parcels were stuck at the railway station. They weren't actually addressed to the Stalag, but in view of the damage incurred to the railway lines during the recent raids, I had no qualms about taking parcels that were originally destined for those POW's held in Stalag 13.

I sent RSM Heard and Corporal Jepps to the station with transport to get them unloaded. They located the trucks but were unable to unload them due to the damage caused by the bombing. They remained at the station 'on guard'.

April 12

Sent down thirty POW's with RQMS Leggat as officer-in-charge to off-load the trucks. I later learned that the prisoners of blocks 3 & 4 were in quarantine, but we managed to get the men there to unload first. Late in the day after three trucks had been unloaded, another truck containing British parcels was found but in a very difficult position in the yard, it involved a further 500-yard walk to unload and as such they were unable to complete the work in time. RSM Heard and Jepps therefore had to spend another night at the station.

April 13

It was necessary that the Russians helped unload (no other men were out during the quarantine period) and they were given food for the work they did. Over both of these days, only myself and CSM Charlton remained in the store as all others available were at the station trying to off-load this difficult truck. RSM Heard and some Dutch prisoners who were assisting him were also given some extra food.

Heard even managed to obtain some old boots to replace the flaps of leather that constituted footwear currently worn. Incidentally, the German Feldwebel with his lorry helped us a great deal as we had very little transport and this also prevented much loss by looting.

I heard at about 1 pm that No.3 & 4 blocks had been taken out of quarantine and I immediately asked CSM Howard to come down and draw parcels for the blocks.

The previous day I had stated that I would issue half a parcel from the burnt stocks to each man, however it was not possible to make up a sufficient number of cigarettes as only 12,000 were recovered from the British truck, less than 20 per man. Therefore, we added half an American parcel to everyone and this seemed to alleviate the problem.

While these stocks were still being drawn by blocks 3 & 4, I was called down to the Commandant's office where I was told that the British P.O.W.'s from 3 & 4 were to be ready, on the road, to march out at 19.00hrs, approximately an hour from now. I pointed out that many of the men were sick and had not been inspected by a medical officer as to their fitness to even walk. I was informed that a German medical officer would be present at the 19.00hr roll call to inspect the sick.

I tried to get transport to cart the remaining parcels down to blocks 3 & 4 for the exciting personnel, but to no avail. I informed the British medical officer of the impending move, then returned to the store and informed RSM Heard to get approximately 2,500 parcels of the 7,000 parcels collected from the railway trucks ready for immediate issue to those men leaving. This was in addition to the parcels we had already issued earlier in the day.

Come 19.00hrs, I returned to the blocks and observed the German medical officer inspecting the sick in a pretty haphazard manner. I requested the men be allowed to pass the Red Cross store in order to be issued with extra parcels for the march, but at first it seemed as though my request would be denied as many of the sick and injured men were late getting on parade. I persisted by saying that as the prisoners were not being issued with marching rations, then not ensuring sufficient food was available for the march would only lead to illness amongst the POW's and subsequent delays to the Germans. Grudgingly, the authorities agreed that if the prisoners got a move on then they would permit the issue of another parcel. This was later twisted to appear that it was *me* who would deny a further issue unless they hurried along. However, they finally left later that evening and we were able to issue all with another complete American parcel. This meant that in total the men had received half of a British and a full one and a half American parcels, which seemed fair enough! There were some who thought that a further parcel should have been issued to each man, but as individual kit was already being discarded so that the men could carry what they had, anything else would not have been possible and only have led to waste.

In total then, we had held 2,000 partially burned parcels and had 'liberated' 7,000 American and 2,300 British parcels. Of these, we had that day issued 3,700 to all in the Stalag and additionally a further 2,500 for those who marched out. This left us with approximately 6,200 parcels of which 1,000 were in block 8B and 450 in the Lazarett. We had no information if we would ever be re-supplied and the railway

system was completely disorganized. But we still aimed at fulfilling daily requests for new arrivals and columns outside the Stalag on the march.

APRIL 14

Another 1,152 prisoners were marched out during the day. Both CSM Howard and myself issued the men with parcels and new clothing as far as was possible. After the column had marched out we found new underclothing left behind that had been issued that day, the men were trying to lighten the load whilst still carrying as many rations as possible. Again, even if we had been able to issue any more they probably would have taken the cigarettes and chocolate out, then dumped the rest of the parcel.

Heard of another railway truck of rations in sidings at another station, sent Sergeant Rix to the station to try and commandeer the contents and transfer parcels to the camp. This he achieved by employing civilian transport for which we paid 170 Marks, money that we had accumulated over some time.

At this time, the Serbian officers in the camp – about 900 – asked for us to hand over 1,800 parcels that had been ‘loaned’ to the Americans in the camp during January, when the Americans’ supplies had been very poor. Colonel Cavander was the S.A.O. in the Oflag at Hammelberg at the time, but now happened to be in Lazarett Stalag 13, and was able to confirm that the statement from the Serbians was correct and they were owed the parcels. As the American parcels we had ‘liberated’ were not addressed to us, then they probably had as much a claim to them as we did, therefore, although it caused much comment, I transferred the parcels over to the Serbians and I am sure I did right by doing so.

Questions were being asked as to when we were going to get re-supplied, the food situation was not particularly satisfactory and the bread problem was becoming acute. A request was made for the biscuit supplies from the remaining parcels to be issued.

APRIL 15

Throughout the day, odd groups of prisoners were being marched in, then out of the camp once more. The officers and NCO’s from the Serbian block were ordered later in the day to march out, even after protest from the current SAO, Major Irwin.

For reasons best known to himself, CSM Howard became somewhat protective of the rations that had been accumulated and spent the day in Block 3 watching over the stores.

Things are beginning to become a little nervous and tense. A munitions works in the village is blown up and removes all windows in the hospital. It is becoming obvious from sounds of battle that the whole place is being encircled, but sounds from the east are quite mystifying! We attempted to get some rations through to some of the men who were marching to Allesberg. I dispatched Sgt Rix into town to try and hire the lorry driver he used yesterday, but he returned stating that the driver was employed delivering butter and would not be available today. The other lorry that could have been used was employed carting French and Red Cross supplies to Allesberg. Efforts to get military rations were pointless.

Major Block sent for me and said that he understood that I should be moving on with the French and Belgian camp leaders once the lorry delivering supplies to Allesberg returned, (which it never did). I stated that I had no intention of moving again, especially with the commotion going on around and the ongoing requirement

to have the men fed. I contacted the German officer in charge of rations who promised that the ration lorry would return at midday and parcels would get to those columns of men marching to Allesberg.

Spoke to the chief German doctor at about 17.00hrs and he informed me that he was now the senior officer, with orders to hand the camp over to arriving forces, apart from that he had no other information. I instructed additional parcels to be issued and circulated instructions amongst the prisoners in order that they be ready for *any* eventuality.

APRIL 16 / 17

We had lately heard a lot of rumblings far to the west and were uncertain as to whether this was explosions or heavy guns reverberating, we were all getting excited though. Today we distinctly heard the rumblings getting louder and louder, a few newly arrived POW's were brought in and informed us that they had seen large columns of German troops and vehicles retiring both north and south of the camp, this was quite obviously becoming a full withdrawal. How this would affect our situation was unclear, however nerves were taut. We heard the sounds of gunfire all day, planes were continually flying over smashing everything in Nuremberg and around. We frantically dug slit trenches and ran to them whenever we heard the alarm sounding, initially like ostriches, head down, forgetting that our backsides could also get 'splashed', so deeper the ditches became. There were some who were too tired, or too lazy to dig their own trench and would try and dive into someone else's, but they were soon slung out. During the day several fighters flew over looking for targets, we saw they had American markings and hoped like hell that they knew of the presence of the camp, but I was sure that they would have because of the pathfinders.

During the night the artillery became incessant, there was a German 'flak' station on the west corner of the Russian Lazarett and so I therefore decided after not too much debate that the best place for me was to remain head down in my slit trench. The sound of small arms fire from the south to south-east led us to assume that forces were closing in, but by now all hell was breaking loose. Shells had started to fall across the camp moving in both directions leading to one and all diving for their trenches! This proved to be a wise decision as shells dropped during the night killed thirteen Russian POW's and wounded a further eighteen. Morning saw about 500 bombers fly over and commence carpet bombing from about half a mile from the camp in the direction of Nuremberg. They were American planes again and the whole ground shuddered with the explosions.

A showdown was getting very near. The shells continued to fall across the camp and we all wondered whether one or two would finish us off, it would certainly have been ironic if, after five years in the 'bag', any of us were to get clipped off by one of these right at the very end! We were now extremely jumpy, hoping that we could just get through the last few hours before relief came. The barrage of artillery fire seemed to intensify even further.

Suddenly, Sergeant Major Howard came to me and reported that American tanks had broken down the wire at the far end of the camp, the patrol leader was there and he would like to see me. I quickly got on to my old bicycle and crossed the mile or so towards the site and found the American patrol leader waiting with a few men. I

passed on what information I could, then he passed on with his group to where we thought the Germans had retired. A short while later, along came another group of Americans and with them was a little fellow, about 5ft 4, with horn-rimmed spectacles and chewing on a large cigar. He wore a steel helmet with the words 'War Correspondent' emblazed across the front and, in the usual American fashion, he wanted to know what we thought now that the *American Forces* had liberated us. I suppose that I had just about generally had enough and I replied, "About Bloody Time!" (The next day when the American Army news bulletin came out the number of prisoners taken over was wildly exaggerated – nearly double the true number).

Six of the American POW's came down to see me and stated that they were representing the American forces. They wanted to take over the American Red Cross parcels that we had managed to salvage from the railway station, this I flatly refused. I told them that they had been sharing the British and Commonwealth parcels all week and I fully intended that the sharing would continue for all concerned. They got a bit belligerent at this and threatened to send down some of their men to collect the parcels anyway. I pointed out to them that we had several hundred of the Highland Division keeping an eye on the store and I didn't think that the Americans would come off too well if they attempted to remove the parcels by force.

I later received a request from the American General in the hospital to meet with him, he spoke of a complaint made against me and asked as to what the position was. I explained that the Americans had been getting their fair share of British and Commonwealth parcels, therefore everybody would be getting their fair share of the American parcels, with this he agreed and so I left. I later heard that the General had called in this so called 'committee' and blasted them in no uncertain terms – I heard no more about it.

I was informed that an American P.X. Officer (a Camp Officer) – would be along very shortly to take over the camp. An hour later he duly arrived. I informed him of our numbers – approximately 15,000 men, of whom 10,000 were Russians. I also explained that Typhus was in the camp and that I thought the military police should be brought in to control the situation as things were beginning to break down a little. The Americans first act was to remove all the German personnel remaining, including the medical personnel. This was not expected and I felt that they should have been allowed (under close supervision) to carry on with urgently required hospital duties.

The general attitude appeared to be getting a little too much for everybody and the Military Police appeared, I suggested that the Russians should be kept in their blocks to control the Typhus in their ranks. This they eventually managed but only after many of the Russians had been through most of the camp, including some of the medical POW's kits, which were stolen.

The PX officer wanted to set up Headquarters inside the camp, and voiced the idea of using the facilities recently vacated by the German Commander. I suggested that this might not be such a good idea as there was a German 88 battery to the north of the camp which was proving a damned nuisance and I was pretty sure that they would know the exact range of the buildings and would reasonably assume that indeed the Americans would want to set up their HQ there. He agreed with me and decided to keep away from the headquarters block for at least a couple of days until the area was more secure. It did not take too long for us to be proved right and come

midday exactly, down came a salvo of shells directly onto the old headquarters. Had he and his staff been inside, they would have suffered the same fate as three Russian prisoners who, it was discovered, were scrounging in the building at the time and were killed outright.

The first order was made for the prisoners to get ready to be moved out. Then came the second order to return to the blocks and wait as patiently as possible. CSM Howard heard the first order and, with about twenty-five others left the compound. I did not blame him for this and could not hold him responsible for misconduct.

Our food situation remained tight, with the Russians augmenting their diet by collecting potatoes from the areas outside of the camp, there were further parcels in store and I informed the Military Police of their presence.

During the afternoon, American artillery opened up and the Germans replied from the town, five or six shells landed in the compound and our worst fears that the Germans would fire on us were realized, luckily there were only a few wounded. Later some allied planes flew over and settled with the guns but we were getting understandably jittery. Major Irwin, (the SAO) and I spoke about our position and he tried to relay our fears to the American H.Q., requesting that we should be moved. However, we were ordered to stay put. Many prisoners left on their own accord despite orders otherwise, but after years in captivity and with much confusion around them it was understandable, they knew the risks they were taking.

Discovered that the Russians had discovered an arms truck whilst collecting potatoes and many were roaming around fully armed up – not a situation to be taken lightly! Late in the day an American arrived as temporary camp Commandant and got things a little more in order.

Spent much of the evening in the slit trenches as were told to expect the Americans to barrage the town and therefore it was likely for the Germans to reprise, they were already responsible for a few deaths today so this did not seem an unreasonable assumption to make. As it was the barrage did not start until the following morning and although the Germans did retaliate with shellfire, it was not directed towards the compound.

APRIL 18

This morning, Red Cross parcels were given out to the Russians at the rate of one to five as they are becoming desperate for food. Later in the day many of them slipped out of the camp, only to return later loaded with food and various other items of booty raided from the town somewhere.

I had left a runner with Major Irwin and during the morning he sent for me. I went to meet him at the main gate and found him with about forty other American officers, as well as American and British O.R.'s about to leave in a truck bound for the American rear. It seemed like a strange way of returning, but I suppose it was in order. This incident again led to many others taking off on their own, the presumption being that they would be held towards the American rear until they could be formally identified.

Russians are getting out all over the place now! Evacuation of British and Americans from Lazarett commenced and I hoped they would get them all away soon. This was all carried out by the American medical authorities.

Fighting still going on in town and easily heard.

Major Sears, the camp commander, called all heads of nationalities together, lists were to be submitted for evacuation planning so I guess most people getting ready to leave.

Water in Lazarett went off during the evening, the very thing we had been dreading for the past few days.

Still many prisoners around with firearms, although many are being collected by the police each day, I am afraid some are being hidden. Will be dangerous if someone gets drunk and acts foolishly.

Have arranged for clerks to help with the lists to be typed up tomorrow on a special type of pro-form. No food arrived, Major Sears has promised it will arrive tomorrow.

Collected the twenty-two Russians who had died as a result of yesterdays shelling in the camp. they were taken to Sud Friedhof cemetery for burial, Corporal Jepps accompanied the lorry.

APRIL 19

Water now off in whole of camp. I was sent by Major Sears to check on method of supply to the camp. Found the camp civilian worker and also a plan of the water supply system in an office, traced fault back to the pumping station and found that there had been an electrical fault – no electricity – no water! Found local electrician and sent Corporal Jepps with him to trace fault line, fault seemed to have occurred in the town itself, which had yet to be cleared, so in the meantime there is nothing that can be done. Reported back to Major Sears and told him the position.

Russians getting out in large numbers now and are returning with sacks of food. No one seems to be too bothered about it, although I tried to impress to Major Sears the seriousness of the situation. Even stolen cars and motorcycles started to appear in the camp, much evidence of drinking and a whole heap of trouble in the air unless something done very soon. Americans seem to take the situation casually, perhaps it's me worrying too much? I don't know.

They have started on the lists now and should be pretty quick. Have to get everything ready for moving and hoped it wouldn't take too long now.

Russians now in Luftwaffe camp under the Russian Colonel, hope they get under control somehow. No rations have arrived yet and am afraid the Russians may think it not good enough.

The town still the scene of fighting, but seems to be in one corner now. Many French move out as the result of a rumour that the Germans have counter-attacked about seventeen kilometres away. That was enough to give anyone the jitters and although Major Sears has discredited the rumour, many POW's are too nervous to wait and are off. Actually there does not appear to be enough Americans to guard the camp and many POW's are running amuck. Arms are still numerous with many rounds of ammunition about the place, rubbish seems to be building up.

Twenty Russians apparently went over to the Germans and were sent for by the Russian colonel to be placed under arrest as they are in danger from their own comrades – a new problem to help the day along! Talk of water tankers arriving so at least giving us a water supply.

Whilst I was in the office with Major Sears, a German padre came in to report an incident that had occurred in the town. He had with him another padre following,

presumably to offer support. Apparently an old lady of about seventy had been raped by a Russian soldier in the street and, of course, the padres were most indignant about this and wanted to know what could be done. Major Sears looked at me and said, "What do you think Mr Read?" I said that I thought she was bloody lucky! With difficulty, Major Sears kept a straight face and turning back to the padres, he solemnly informed them that there was nothing he could do at the time, but that they should advise old ladies that if they saw any prisoners about they should stay at home, as there weren't enough troops to patrol the whole of the town. The padres went their way and afterwards the Major remarked to me that he was not a bit surprised at this sort of behaviour. The way the Germans had treated the Russians it would probably go on happening, even to seventy year old women!

The Russians continued foraging for booty, mainly for food but also for anything else they could get their hands on, including more weapons. We asked the American Military Police, who had little establishments all around the camp, if they could guide the Russians back through the two main gates where they could be checked for firearms. This they achieved with lots of gesticulation and eventually by firing off a few shots into the air to help things along a bit, although this method proved successful, it was probably a bit too close to call for many of the prisoners having just spent years in captivity.

APRIL 20

Day memorable for American MP's attempting same tactic in controlling Russian prisoners returning from their daily booty hunt. Shots in the air from the Americans replied with half of the Russian POW's opening up over the American's heads with weapons of their own. So that was the end of that!

Whilst travelling to Headquarters with Major Sears to secure supplies, I noticed that the front of the jeep had a very sharp piece of angle iron welded on to it. I asked the driver why, he said that when they were travelling about on patrol at night, some of the drivers lowered the windscreens for better visibility and the German underground had been stringing wires between trees across roads at neck height. Quite a few drivers had been decapitated and therefore, they welded on this iron and sharpened down the front to cut through any wire. I don't know if it worked but I could certainly see the point of it. As we drove down an autobahn an aircraft flew overhead and dropped a flare, indicating that he was going to land up ahead. The signal seemed to be known by all and there was no bother.

We managed to get two truck-loads of supplies from a German store, then eventually found six of the promised twenty-one lorries with 'C' rations – fifteen are still missing. We returned to the main camp, unloaded, then I returned to HQ and was able to load another five trucks with food from the German store, this should carry us over for a few days! During the evening nine water tankers arrived so this should cater for our water requirements for a while I am sure.

Spent evening trying to collect various cars and cycles from around the camp, seems that the men can acquire fuel quite easily from the Americans so this will be difficult to prevent. Still no orders to move out. Must keep waiting and hoping as I suppose this is right, but I really want to get away from here now.

APRIL 21

In the morning travelled to view pumping station with Major Sears. Still no electricity so must wait patiently. Wandered around camp checking up on things until a conference was called at 11.00hrs. Noted that the tankers which had arrived yesterday have been set up around the camp, so at least that appears to have settled the water problem for now. Meeting consisted of mostly the routine things such as seniors from each nationality must look after their own POW's, the Russians require more medical supplies for a further twenty operations and so on. Have a feeling that this is all going to drag on for a lot longer than it had first seemed. Wrote a 'V' letter to my mother so she should be pleased.

In the afternoon went with the French Captain and Corporal Itskovitch to HQ. The captain wanted further details on any proposed evacuation and Itskovitch was going to be medically evacuated as a swelling around his jaw requires urgent attention. Managed to get some sterilized cloths and plaster for the Russians, as requested for their operations.

Returned to compound to find a set of fires had started in the woods to the south of the camp and although quite visible from the blocks, nobody seemed to be too bothered about them even though any spread would lead to a mass movement of men. A very casual effort! Managed to get some Russian support and we put the fires out but the area will need to be monitored as the wind is getting stronger and could spread any flame easily. Then discovered a fire had ignited in the old SS camp near to the Russian hospital in the north-west corner of the compound, this is all getting a bit suspicious but not too sure quite what is going on. This one is fairly large and Major Sears takes a look, but something needs to be done rapidly as a nearby ammunition train is in acute danger of catching fire, which if so would lead to the whole camp being evacuated and the chances of that being entirely successful is doubtful. Find myself having to remind guards near to the train that they should close the doors of the carriages if they don't want sparks getting inside the trucks and setting off the whole lot. Moved some barrels of petrol away from the area and then, whilst checking about to gather the full extent of the fire, discovered hand grenades and countless rounds of ammunition lying close to the flames. All in all a complete fiasco! Managed to get hold of an American Engineering section who would take over control of the fire, of which some heavy rain is helping and am now retiring to the camp to get some rest and give thanks for surviving another day in one piece.

APRIL 22

Found that as a result of yesterdays fire-fighting, I have ruined the only uniform I possess. Spent best part of morning trying to get myself rigged out from available stocks. Was intending to take a trip into the town and check up on the electrical supply, but informed by Major Sears that an American General was expected and therefore I was to remain in readiness. This is fine but my uniform is still in a pretty bad shape. Managed to get myself pretty much cleaned up in time for General Theodore E. Buechler who arrived at about midday, accompanied by a British Brigadier and several other officers. Rushed about a bit to get them reasonable accommodation to stay in and supplied them with two of the POW's to carry out any chores, this took most of the afternoon. In the evening acted as guide for two of the officers heading out to Division Headquarters, took a bit of finding but managed at last – took even longer returning as there was a blackout! To bed at last and pretty tired.

APRIL 23

Appeared before the S.H.A.F.E. Enquiry and gave the necessary replies on oath, pity that the documents in question are with George Tatley but expect that I shall have them ready for when I return to the U.K.

Move on to the power station to try and check on power supplies. Find that all is in hand but it will be another ten to fourteen days before power can be expected again. Joined RSM Goodey for trip to Sud Friedhof cemetery to check on graves of the Americans, then made arrangements with American Forces chaplain to visit the camp in the morning to arrange for a burial service, which had not been held over the POW's. Returned to camp to find General and his staff leaving, apparently he expressed his appreciation for all we had done during his visit. After which I headed off to bed as I'm starting to suffer a bit of flu and feel a bit done up.

APRIL 24

Pretty late in getting up and find all the prisoners in a bit of a flutter. Apparently the message came through last night that they are going to start the evacuation of the men today. Expect that most of them are ready and might even be on parade in time!

The chaplain arrived and a service for those in the cemetery arranged for 14.00hrs. RSM Goodey carried out the honours as I was kept pretty busy on a hand-over. Found that grave of 'Buckle' had not been located, so I had to go down to the cemetery to try and find it by allocated number. Found that although thirty men were buried, two had been unidentified and therefore, one was given a number, the other a name. Trouble was, am not too sure if details correct. Will have to go again tomorrow and confirm. Spend rest of day clearing up remaining correspondence and am now just about ready for the 'off'.

Is going to be quite a day when I get back home after all these years.

Spend time searching around the old German offices, come across several bundles of papers which I feel could be of use to British Intelligence when I get back, I eventually accumulate sufficient documents to fill four 'tea-chest' size cases.

APRIL 25

Awoke at around 06.30 hrs to hear an American officer say that he had arrived with six trucks to evacuate the British, with a further fifteen trucks rolling within the hour. A flutter all around and 139 men are off as quickly as possible. I was able to organise a few men to give me a hand preparing my document cases and lug them down to the assembling point where I was thrust a letter from Major Sears personally thanking me for everything! Then, at around 11.00hrs and with all the rest of the British POW's readied and packed into trucks, after just about five years of captivity we finally rolled out of the gates.

The lorries transported us to an airfield where, after being fed and watered, we were told to clamber aboard the rows of Dakota planes which had been lined up, ready to transport us to Brussels. With a few others helping, I managed to lumber my document cases aboard one of the planes only for an American pilot to say, (through his chewing gum) "Hey bud – you can't take those with you!" I made him fully aware that I was not going anywhere without them, period! It all got sorted in the end

and we took to the air, arriving in Brussels just in time to be de-loused, de-medicated, de-showered and just about de-everything else!

CHAPTER 12

ENGLAND:- AFTER THE WAR IS OVER

Remained in Brussels for a few days before being taken to the docks, still with my four boxes of papers and boarded a ship headed for Blighty. I could not get anybody at all to assist me with carrying these boxes aboard and finally had to struggle on my own, which I thought was a pretty poor show. I said as much to the officer at movement control, still I suppose everybody was too concerned with getting themselves aboard and all thoughts were of home. We finally set sail and after what seemed an eternity, we landed in England and all piled ashore to be met with drinks and a meal.

Isn't it funny how you never forget a face! I instantly recognised a Captain who was the officer-in-charge of the reception centre. The last time we had met was back in 1936 at Catterick, where he was a Lance Corporal cook in my company whom I had not recommended for promotion. After nine years and a war, we recognised each other immediately. I reported to the main office where I asked for my four boxes to be dispatched to M.I.5. I later discovered that they did eventually manage to arrive there and I only hope that some of the information contained was of use to them.

We were dispatched to various camps out and about with a small group of us ending up somewhere near Salisbury. I began to prepare for going home and was medically checked over once again. I had lost 4 stone 8 ounces since 1940 and now came in at 10 stone exactly. We were issued with pay, some clothing, railway tickets – the lot. Then we were able to take off at last with one month's leave.

I had sent a telegram home saying that I would be home the following day, so that evening a few of us went down to the local pub for our first taste of beer for a very long time. Oddly enough, it was not at all up to our expectations and we soon left, returning to camp feeling rather depressed about the fact.

Next day, bright and early, I was off to the coast to meet the wife. Although we were on our best behaviour for the first forty-eight hours, it did not really have a chance. I knew that after five and a half years that I was a changed person and so was my wife, we both realized that our marriage would not work. We tried for a little time, but then decided to call it quits. Fortunately there were no children to make the situation more difficult, it was just one of those things really and I am sure that it was a similar story to many hundreds of couples whose lives and circumstances had been so dramatically altered by the war. But I felt it far better to be honest about it and call it a day than to live a long, miserable life together.

After leave had come and gone, I had to report along with others to what turned out to be a rehabilitation unit. Here they tried all sorts, mainly I think to see if we had suffered any mental damage and as to whether we could take up our original rank in the Services. We duly carried out what was asked of us, until it came to running cross-country which we flatly refused to do. Although we expected to suffer

repercussions over this, it was apparently accepted as normal behaviour. We were subsequently passed as fit, then sent back to our units to carry on serving our time.

I was sent back to the Royal Engineers battalion at Chatham. There I found that the Commanding Officer of the battalion – a Lieutenant Colonel – was a man who had been junior in rank to me many years before in Chepstow. He expressed genuine sorrow over what had happened to me during the interim and that seeing as he was the C.O., as far as he was concerned, I could remain on permanent leave until I had decided upon my future. This suited me because at the time I had written to the War Office enquiring about sums of money that had been sent home for the next-of-kin of deceased prisoners, which had not apparently been received. I was called to the War Office where it was explained to me that this money had been paid in German prisoner-of-war Marks, which as a result of Germany losing the war, was pretty much worthless. I said that we had never been informed of the consequences, that it was in extremely poor taste and that I still truly believed that the money was owed to the relatives of those servicemen who had perished in camps. Furthermore, if the monies were not paid, then I would personally insert a notice to the effect in the national press stating the facts. Otherwise, many of the prisoners who had subscribed would think that the money had been embezzled by yours truly. After a few days, it was agreed that money would be paid over, provided that it was agreed by the other Commonwealth Governments who had dealings in the scheme and I felt that I had won a victory for the little man. However, I soon came to realize that there are a lot of clever people in the War Office!

I finally got word a few weeks later that all Commonwealth Governments concerned had given their backing to the proposal and I was recalled to the War Office. Once there I was informed that it would be my task to travel around the country finding these next-of-kin and verifying their entitlement to the money. I was given a book of travel vouchers to fill in and sign myself, then dispatched to venture forth and travel to all areas listed and find answers to some of the cases pending.

I started on this trail with eighty seven names of next-of-kin and quickly began to discover during my journey that this was not going to be as straight forward as I had first hoped. In many cases, the prisoner who had died had declared a wife and child, whereas in actual fact they were not legally married at all. Therefore the child was illegitimate and was, more often than not, being looked after by the dead soldier's mother or other relatives. All this made any subsequent claim to money somewhat doubtful and not at all straight forward. I then found out that some wives who had been nominated as next-of-kin had gone and married someone else, left the area and children who were also being cared for by relatives. There were many such cases and it took me nearly nine months to sort out the problems, after which I returned to the War Officer a much sadder, yet wiser, man. Still, I submitted my report and those relatives I could justify as being entitled, together with those who were caring for offspring, eventually got payments. Some of the letters I received as a result of this were quite pathetic.

I was having trouble with my knee again and eventually the M.O. thought that I should have it dealt with by physiotherapy. This meant continual visits to the hospital at Chatham where I used be well looked after by a nurse called Joan. She was single and, as usual I became involved. We used to go around many places

together in our spare time and also to the many usual army functions in the mess. It seemed as though this might really work out, but then they sent me to Rippon, which effectively put an end to our relationship. We still saw each other occasionally for a while after, but what had been a very good thing unfortunately came to nothing.

V.J. Day had just been celebrated and, of course, everyone was in a happy mood. I had a lot of leave due to me and so I decided to go down to Aldershot for a week to see some of my ex-prisoner colleagues and reminisce about our experiences. When I arrived I found that they had arranged a V.J. Day Dance for the Saturday night and they had invited a group of girls – nurses from Connaught Hospital. On the night in question, about forty five of them arrived and the entertainments committee had arranged a ‘draw’ for the girls whereby all of our names were placed into a hat and when the girls drew a name, then that lucky man would be theirs for the evening. I heard my name called and went over to be claimed, by a little freckle-faced girl of about 5ft if that. I was 6ft 2ins! The dance got going well enough and she started on the Gins, which I thought quite harmless enough. Before long though, she was on the double Gins without any pressure from me. These shortly turned into triples, then quadruples and she didn’t seem to give any signs of wear. At about midnight the dance was still going strong and everyone was having a great time, celebrating as they haven’t done for the last five years of war. One of the girls called out in a loud voice that she wanted to pee, so there and then she did – right in the middle of the dancefloor for all to see! Somehow the situation seemed to pass off without much embarrassment, I think all were too well hammered by then to care. The dance ended about 01.30 hrs, and in our innocence we thought that we would be able to take the girls back to the hospital, which was not very far away at all. But lo and behold, a bus appeared and with it a very hatched-faced matron who checked all the girls onto the bus one by one. Then, after slamming the door shut, said to all of us standing there with somewhat glazed expressions on our faces, “How lucky can you be eh?”

Having spent all this time going around the country, I had to decide what it was I was going to do in the Services until my release date in 1947. I had in the meantime been commissioned, which should have happened when the war started, but as I have mentioned earlier in the book, prisoners-of-war did not get commissioned and therefore it had to wait until my return. It was then decided that I should go to Darlington as a Works Officer with the Royal Engineers, so off I went. When I arrived, nobody seemed to know anything about me. There were no quarters available, not even a job to go to, so back to Chatham I came until they could sort it all out. After that fiasco, they sent me back to Rippon where it had been decided that all ex-POW’s required retraining. There I met up with a number of men who had been in similar circumstances to mine and we underwent a course under a young instructor who, during the short time that we were with him, learnt everything bad and nothing good! After this waste of time, I still felt unsettled and was sent to a training camp in Malvern with about six months remaining until discharge.

It was not too bad at Malvern. I helped in the training of the new boys, who appeared to be very young. At times I even thought that the Army should be charged with kidnapping! But I suppose it was just me feeling older and that was how it was. Anyhow, we did our level best in trying to mould them into the shape of men. I used to try and spend time playing golf on the local course, but I didn’t know very many

people so would often go round on my own. But the club often hosted activities and it was here that I got to know Audrey, again a very nice girl. She used to work in a bank in town, was pleasant company and used to be happy to accompany me around the golf course and carry my clubs – great as far as I was concerned. Soon, friendship turned to affection and we were going along quite nicely. Then one day a big dance was going to be held in Malvern, we arranged to go and so I bought the tickets. Then with just two days to go, Joan sent a message that as I hadn't been writing to her much lately, she had arranged for some time off and was coming down to see me. Problem! I felt that I could not write back to say that I was on manoeuvres or something and, in any case, it was too short notice and so I had no choice but to accept the situation. I spoke to Audrey and mentioned that an old friend of mine was coming down whom I would obviously have to take to the dance, however maybe I could arrange for one of my colleagues to accompany her and we could all go in one party. Reluctantly, Audrey agreed and we all agreed to meet at the dance.

I picked Joan up from her hotel but as soon as we got to the place, fire and hatred immediately flared in both girls eyes. I would advise anyone who reads this, never, ever, take two girlfriends to the same dance because if you do, you are sitting on a volcano. I think that within two seconds of meeting, both girls knew the position and neither would let go one inch. I was duly getting the full bout of questions and answers as they were determined to find out the full story of who was who and what was what. As far as I was concerned the evening was a complete disaster – the worst of my life – even when it was over and I was returning her to the hotel I was subjected to the full lashing of her tongue and the next day she took off, never to be seen again. That next evening I had arranged to meet Audrey, which I did and tried to smooth things over with her, but she was having none of it and I got a full lashing off her as well. As a result of all this, come Saturday I went to town, enjoyed myself and thought to hell with the both of them! Unfortunately, at the end of the evening I discovered that my wallet had been stolen and that was enough to just about finish me off.

During the previous six months we had been allowed to go on various job placements, where we could possibly gain employment on demob. At first I applied for a job in charge of a Polish camp in Wales, which I thought would suit me very well. I was called for an interview by the Forestry Commission and, as a result, they offered me a job as Assistant Camp Commandant. Some other clown who had never even been overseas was to be the commandant and I discovered over conversations during the following day or so, that he did not appear to have any idea at all of other nationalities. I didn't intend to serve under a character like him and I therefore flatly refused the job offer.

I then had the bright idea that I might enjoy the life of a driving and traffic examiner and therefore applied for a test. I arrived in Birmingham, a city I had never seen before and somehow or other, I drove around the place with another instructor and I got through the test fairly well. I was offered the post of Traffic Examiner in Chelmsford, which I accepted. As a prelude to full time employment, I went there for a few days before leaving the Service to see what I made of it. I went with another examiner for one day to get a feel for the lie of the land, then the following day I was appointed to take my first examination. I met this woman at the proper time and place, she had her own car and I got in and said that we would take a certain route. Having hoisted her skirt a little higher than I imagine she would normally, we started

off, unfortunately rearwards as she had selected reverse by mistake! With many apologies we eventually got moving again and although I had been driving for many years and had come across many drivers, I would have to say that she stood out for her failings. If we were not stopping suddenly, we were going too fast. She did not signal and generally left me little to commend her with. After about five minutes of this I stopped the vehicle and asked her how long she had been driving, apparently it was her third test but I informed her there and then that I did not think that she was capable of undergoing another test at this time. She, of course, resented this and told me such in no uncertain terms, adding that that she was the wife of some public figure. In the mood I was in, I simply got out of the car stating "Madam, I don't care who you are, but you are not fit to drive!" Fortunately for her, she had a friend nearby and I suggested that he should take the car home. I returned to the office and said what I thought of the job! I would soon have been a mental wreck if I had many more applicants like that, in fact I decided that I would leave Chelmsford and not take on the appointment. The manager of the department was a little civil service type who was aghast at my decision (heat of the moment, so to speak.) I told him that I wouldn't be back and simply walked out.

I wondered what to do next. I had always had a hankering for the Sun because I had thoroughly enjoyed my six years in Egypt and I started to scan the advertisements in the Sapper - a monthly journal issued by the Royal Corps of Engineers, which advertises vacancies all over the World. I discovered two that I thought might suit me, one as the Assistant City Engineer for Colombo, Ceylon. The other being as a Site Agent in Accra, Gold Coast. I applied for both and after a little while a London firm contacted me and asked for me to attend an interview. Questions and answers were exchanged in the usual manner and they said that they would let me know in due course.

About a week later I had another request for an interview, with the same firm. Questions were further elaborated upon, to the effect that they were very interested in me for the post in the Gold Coast, however, they were unsure as to whether my long time spent in the Army, and time spent as a Prisoner-of-war, would have somewhat 'rusted' my knowledge and they didn't want the expense of sending me to the Gold Coast if I turned out not to be what they wanted. I said that it worked both ways, they might not offer me what I wanted and the job may not suit - they hadn't expected that one! After more discussions I suggested that I would go out on a reduced rate of pay, if after six months I didn't like it or they did not like me, then I would move on under my own steam. This seemed to convince them, but more discussions ensued and I began to wonder as to whether this might not be my future after all. After the interview, about four days later, I received a telegram asking me for yet another interview. I was of the opinion that if, after two interviews they could not decide as to my suitability, there was not much point in going for a third and sent them a telegram saying so. It was returned stating that I had been accepted and appointed, it had been confirmed that I would be going to the Gold Coast and all arrangements had been made. As it happened, the very next day I received a letter saying that my application for Colombo had been accepted, but having already accepted the job in the Gold Coast, I did not feel that I should change my mind.

My time in the Army was now drawing to a close. We continued to train the troops, cross country walks and map readings, but my heart was no longer in it. They

offered me a further service contract as an Engineering Officer, but I felt that it was about time to take off.

Demobilisation time came for group No 13, I went with everyone else to the centre where I received my pay and arrears, my clothing which I sold at the gate for £12.10s, and I set off for London to have a few days rest – a free man once more!

As I have said earlier, my wife and I had separated because it became immediately apparent after my return from captivity that we weren't going to make it together. As a result, I had given all the evidence necessary to obtain a divorce but unfortunately she was a Roman Catholic and flatly refused to have anything to do with divorce, so I was stumped.

Eventually, details of the new job were finalised and I reported to London Airport to catch a plane for Africa. In those days (1947), the flights were in old Dakotas and it took three days and two nights to complete the journey. There were twelve people on board, mostly ex-service personnel like me going to new jobs up and down the African Coast. During the flight we were served coffee and sandwiches and got to know each other rather well. Our first stop was Portugal and being an adventurous crowd, we went down to a casino for the night and came out pretty broke. The next night we arrived in Bathurst, capital of Gambia and I felt more than ever that I was back in Egypt once again, of which I served all those years back from 1926-32. I felt at home! Next day we took off again and arrived in Accra at 5pm, I had previously been told that I would be met, but when we touched down there was nobody there and I didn't have a clue where to go. I waited for about twenty minutes and then went over to the West African Airways desk to see when the next flight back to London was. It would be the following morning, so I said "Right, put me on it!" about ten minutes later up came Lambert, the office manager of the company I was joining. Apparently he had had a puncture on the road to the airport and everything had gone wrong. I cancelled my return flight and life in Africa began.

EPILOGUE

Despite everything that has happened to me over the years, I am pleased that I decided on my particular choice in joining the Army on that cold January morning in 1925.

During the intervening period – nearly fifty years – much has happened to change the world and peoples outlook, everywhere. Many have known the ravages of war in all parts of the world and faced up to the desolation and difficulties it has left behind, sometimes seemingly insurmountable. But to most of us, looking back on the very worst time in our lives, when we seemed to have hit the bottomless pit of despair, even then there was always that bright shaft of hope and faith in the future, irrespective as to whether this would arrive the next moment, the next month or even the next year. Each of us will have our own memories of that time held in our hearts.

I have always believed that National Service training is the best thing that ever happened. With the advent of the European Community, I think that all young people between the ages of seventeen and nineteen should do at least one years training in one of the Services, or in another national undertaking in the E.C. country of their choosing, irrespective of whether they are incapacitated or what position they hold in life. It should not be too difficult to arrange camps for handicapped and others for a year and I know this would be a rewarding experience for them too.

By this system of moral and physical training, I think that young people would grow up into being more rational, thoughtful and tolerant adults. This in itself would deter war and be of the up-most benefit in helping to bring peace in all its varied ways to the world as a whole.