

# The Long Road Home

One man's trek back from captivity 1942 – 45



By

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## **FOREWORD**

This book is not based on any notes nor diaries nor has any previous publication being used in compiling it. It has been written entirely from memory and there are places where this memory has grown dim over the years, and this fact has been admitted to where necessary.

Only a few dates have been mentioned namely the day that we were captured and the day that we finally arrived in our first camp in Italy. Dates did not play a very important part in our lives, and we had no means of recording them. I consider that the dates in captivity would not add to the interest of this book.

What I have endeavoured to do is give an overall pen picture of life in the three camps I was in, and I think that life was not that much different in other camps, except in those camps that were specially set up in Germany to accommodate large working parties. I will refer to ***The Man of Confidence*** throughout and he was generally a senior officer on the side of the Allies who had the respect of our captors.

Humour may well be lacking, but life was fairly grim to say the least. A few of the funny parts have been included in the hope that it will lighten the narrative.

What I have had to say about the treatment we received at the hands of the Italians may not be a true reflection on the nation as a whole, but that is exactly how we were treated by those Italians with whom we had contact. As mentioned in the book, there were men amongst them who were extremely kind, and we were thankful for the way that they treated us.

The Germans proved to be a well-disciplined lot of men, and with the exception of a few, who were rather bitter as a result of their experiences at the Russian front, treated us very well indeed. We knew exactly where we stood with them. We were left in no doubt that, when we were told that a certain activity was forbidden, or a certain area was out of bounds, the guards meant exactly that. Any attempt to disregard these orders could lead to serious trouble, and in some cases even death.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE FALL OF TOBRUK AND THE EARLY DAYS OF CAPTIVITY

On the morning of the 21st of June 1942, when we stood to our guns before first light, we could see that there were numerous fires and the occasional explosions erupting in our line of sight from our gun positions. When the sun finally did come up over the horizon, and the light had increased enough to make our field of vision larger than it had been before, it became obvious to us that something dramatic had happened during the night. There was no way that we could tell exactly what was on the go, as the activity that was taking place was too far away for us to observe in any detail. We could see that gradually, the number of fires and explosions were increasing, and that there was a large pall of black smoke over the harbour area, and in other areas of the perimeter of the field of battle.

We settled down and awaited news from our battery headquarters where all the officers had gathered. As time went by, the gun crews became more and more restless, and to add to our uneasiness, we had not received any orders from battery headquarters. I now took it upon myself to try to find out exactly what was going on and handed over command of my gun to my Bombardier and walked over to the headquarters dugout. The dugout was so crowded that I could only make my presence known and so I sat down outside to wait further developments. The signaller on duty was trying to raise someone who could provide us with news as to exactly, what had happened. He eventually managed to raise someone on a field telephone who informed him that the so-called fortress had surrendered, and that all equipment, munitions, petrol etc was to be destroyed!

Our Battery Major gave me orders to return to the gun positions and to pass these orders on to all members of the battery. This order was duly passed on and preparations are made to carry them out. All battery transport was moved in the same direction after the drivers had received orders to take all but two of each gun crew with them, and when they had found a suitable position, burn all vehicles. The remaining Sergeants and the member of the gun crew who had been detailed to remain, now prepared their individual guns in readiness to blow them up.

To *spike a gun*, the following procedure first had to be carried out;

The gun is loaded in the normal way with a high explosive shell with its protective cover removed. A second shell is then well rammed down the muzzle striking pin first. The lanyard provided in the equipment issued with every gun is attached to the firing lever and led away such that when it is pulled the firing mechanism will be activated. The lanyard is then run to a slit trench dug immediately behind the gun. The two men take cover in this trench to pull on the lanyard. Until you have actually carried out this procedure, you have no idea how much a stout cord will stretch before the firing lever is pulled far enough for the mechanism to operate fully. The resulting explosion is very loud, and the net result is that the barrel of the gun is completely blown off and the gun is rendered useless. I distinctly remember my Bombardier putting the telescopic sight down the barrel of the gun before the second shell had been loaded and how he sat down and methodically hammered the dial site into small pieces.

Having made certain that our gun was completely destroyed and that it would never be used again (as had happened in the past), we now made our way in the direction that our gun vehicle had gone. Before long before long we were reunited with the rest of the gun crew. Our vehicle now was well and truly on fire and all our personal kit was still within the vehicle! No one had thought of taking our personal possessions out of the vehicle and the two of us were now left with the clothes we were standing in. Shirt, shorts, army boots, socks, stocking tops and regulation gaiters!

## **ACTION BETWEEN THE FORCES IN NORTH AFRICA IN 1942**

At this stage we were more or less in a state of shock, as the last thing we had ever considered would happen to us had now taken place and we could only wait until some enemy unit came our way before we joined the host of men who had been forced, through no fault of theirs, to surrender to the enemy.

In due course, a German armoured car arrived on the scene and the car commander greeted us with the words "For you the war is over. Yes, no?". He gave us instructions to proceed in a certain direction where we would find, one of the many areas where groups of fellow prisoners were being held. No escort was provided to accompany us to our final destination, and we did think about the possibility of escaping. However, we were hardly equipped to escape and added to this, we had no idea as to what the best route would be out of North Africa.

After a long walk, we finally arrived at the area that we had been told to make for. Here we were greeted by the sight of a large crowd of men gathered together in an open area where the perimeter was being patrolled by German sentries at regular intervals. All our officers, as well as officers from other units, were in this "Cage". (Any space or purpose-built POW camp was commonly called the "Cage"). I reported to our Major and informed him that his orders had been carried out.

At this stage, time did not mean very much to us and my memories of what took place are very vague to say the least. We simply settled down as comfortably as possible under the circumstances and endeavoured to take stock of what had happened and to speculate on our eventual fate. We were left in no doubt, that no effort was being made for a relief column to come up through the desert and relieve us. During the afternoon we were greeted with the sight of the remnants of the Cameroon Highlanders marching into camp led by a pipe major and it was a sight that very few of us who witnessed it will ever forget.

I can only remember being issued with a tin of whole tomatoes and the job that I had to find somebody with a tin opener to open this. I have no recollection at all of what other rations we were issued but I do not remember feeling at all hungry and, can only presume that the most efficient German army saw to it that we had enough to eat and drink.

At nightfall we had our first taste of mutual help as men who had surplus blankets handed them out willingly and we settled down to a fairly warm night as best we could. During the next morning a German officer arrived in camp looking for a party of men who are willing to volunteer for an unspecified job. Having nothing better to do, I joined this party, and we were taken out of the Cage and escorted to a fairly level area where we were instructed to clear a strip of land of all obstructions. Once this task had been completed to the satisfaction of the officer, we saw a light observation plane come in and land on this rather crude landing strip. Before we were escorted back to camp one of the party came across two boot brushes and a tin of polish and he set himself up as a boot black, similar to those we had been confronted with on our fleeting visits to Cairo and Alexandria. These antics highly amused the Germans. On the way back to camp I was lucky enough to find a British summer working jacket that fitted me and I was more than grateful for this additional item of clothing to add to my meagre supply.

Until now, very few men had been moved out of the camp and the majority of these were men who had been slightly wounded. They had been moved at a very early stage to the various field hospitals.

Some days later, a senior German officer arrived in camp and took up a position more or less in the centre of the Cage. He climbed onto a box and proceeded to address us in very good English. He informed us that he had received orders from his superiors that he was to hand us over to the Italians. He concluded his speech with the following words "and may God help you". I don't think he was aware as to how prophetic these words were going to be.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **IN THE HANDS OF THE ITALIANS**

Our first taste of the treatment that we could expect from this badly disciplined bunch of men came and they started to move the officers out of the cage. We were shocked at the treatment that these men were subjected to and how they were manhandled and abused by the lower ranks. Their officers and senior in CO's did not appear to take any notice of what was going on and we could not help but recall the occasions when we had captured large numbers of them and the excellent treatment, they that they had received from us. Had we dared to lay hands on any of these Italian prisoners we would soon have been in serious trouble to add insult to injury we were expected to salute the Italian officers. This we did, but not out of respect for the rank they carried pause that naturally there were those amongst them whom we did respect, on account of the way that they handled us. Large numbers of men were now being moved out of the cage at regular intervals, and in the hope that conditions would be better on our next camp, we were not inclined to hold back, and we moved out as soon as we were called upon to do so

### **ON ROUTE TO BENGHAZI**

When our turn came to be moved, we were loaded onto the backs of open lorries and as there were so many of us on each vehicle there was only room to stand and hold as best, we could. Each vehicle had its quota of guards assigned to it and we could only hope that they did not turn out to be trigger happy and that they knew the basic safety drill when they handed their rifles.

At various intervals we passed parties of Germans and Italians drawn up close to the road. The reaction to our passing was so different that we were amazed by it. When we passed a party of Germans, they showed scant interest in us and now and again one would take a photograph of us. On the whole they carried out in a perfectly normal way. When we passed a group of Italians we were greeted with catcalls, thumbs down and other obscene hand signals. This did not trouble us at all that much as they were soon left behind in a cloud of dust raised by the passing convoy.

The convoy stopped at regular intervals, and we were able to stretch our cramped legs and answer the cause of nature. He stops were never long enough to be able to thoroughly relax. Well before sundown we arrived at the place where we will go to spend the night, and we were confronted with the sight of of an area with fairly high stone walls around it and a single entrance. Once we'd been herded into this area, we realised that it was an old disused Gippo (slang for Egyptian) cemetery. We had no other choice but to settle down for the night as best we could even if it meant sitting or lying down on a grave. Fortunately for us the spirits had left the area long ago and we left in peace for the night. As soon as bit more or less settled down, we notice the group of Italian officers dressed all in white standing on a ridge overlooking this temporary cage. One of these officers detailed a private to accompany him down and proceeded to make his way down the slope towards us. As he drew closer, we could see that he had a camera slung around his neck and we guessed that he was going to take a photograph of us. In due course, he reached the wall and climbed onto it followed by his escort. When he arrived at what he thought was a suitable position he proceeded to focus his camera on us. Before he could take his photo, a voice came from the crowd "Give him the victory sign boys!". Every man stood up and gave him that sign. The officer turned to his faithful squaddie and said something that I could not hear. The squaddie loaded his rifle and fired one shot into the mass of bodies and killed a man! The officer now proceeded to try again for this photo and received the same greeting from the prisoners. This time on man was wounded in the shoulder from another random shot. Apparently, the officer now abandoned any idea he had of taking a

photograph and climbed off the wall. As he did so he was followed by remark from the same voice "No \*\*\*\* photo today mate". That was the end of this unfortunate incident.

Early the next morning we were once more on our way to what we hoped would be our final stop for some time.

## **BENGAZI**

After a long dusty and uncomfortable ride, we arrived at the above destination and found our camp was situated on the flats with a good view of the harbour. The camp was surrounded by a high single barbed wire fence with a trip fence about two metres on the inside of it. There was a single entrance to the camp and there were sentry boxes placed at intervals around the fence and sentries patrolled the area all the time. Square canvas tents pitched in lines close together provided the accommodation that we were to occupy. They were big enough to hold six to eight men with enough room to lie down in reasonable comfort. Space would have been even more cramped if we had more kids to be stored in this confined space.

Tanks containing water were strategically placed around the perimeter of the camp. These tanks were filled from the outside by a tanker. Water was never over plentiful, and we were limited to about two pints (approximately 1 litre) per day. After quite a lot of trouble, the Indian troops were issued with an extra ration of water. We managed to keep thirst at bay and reserve enough water with which to shave at regular intervals but there was never enough with which to wash your entire body.

Sanitary arrangements were very primitive and consisted of open trenches fitted with crude seats and situated on one side of the camp some distance from the tents. Very little was done to try to improve the situation. There was a fairly consistent outbreak of dysentery in the cage, and it was no wonder that more severe diseases did not occur. You were faced with two situations; either you had a runny tummy, or you were constipated. As the medical supplies provided by the Italians were very limited there was very little you could do to rectify either of these complaints.

Sadly, to relate quite a few men gave up the will to live and in a short space of time, they were carried out of the camp feet first. I can only hope that a record of their names was kept and that eventually, their remains were exhumed and moved into a military cemetery. Here again, nothing could be done to ease the plight of these men on account of the lack of proper medical facilities.

## **NEWS OUT OF THE CAMP**

Shortly after we arrived in the camp, we were issued with a printed postcard that stated amongst other things that you were well/wounded and being well treated. How tempted we were to alter this latter statement but, knowing full well that if we did, the postcard would never be forwarded. We simply complied with the instructions and filled in the required information.

A representative from the Vatican City visited the camp and gave out cards to be filled in showing one's personal details and the address to which the cards would be forwarded. These messages were broadcast over Vatican Radio, and the South African messages were picked up by someone in Johannesburg and passed on to their final destination. How we blessed the men and women who took part in this operation as we were now fairly certain that our families would receive definite news from us and that we would no longer be classified as "missing believed to be a prisoner of war". There is a very interesting book called the "Pied Piper of the Vatican" which is well worth



reading if you are interested in the work that this man did and, the amount of trouble he endured at the hands of the Italian authorities.

Other than these two occasions, there was no other way that we could get news out of the camp and as our length of stay was so indefinite, no arrangements were made to have our post sent to us. As far as I can remember the Italian authorities in charge of the camp never made a list of the names ranks and serial numbers of the men in the camp but, there was a fairly constant movement of men going in and out and the sudden influx of large numbers of men from the fall of Tobruk would have made this an almost impossible task.

All movement out of the camp was entirely voluntary and when a convoy was about to leave, men gathered at the gate and waited until the required number men had been reached. Those who were not detailed to be removed returned to their tents and waited for the next batch to be moved. It was very much a case of "first come first served". Those of us who hoped that the 8th army would advance quicker than it eventually did, held back in the hope that we would be released. No doubt we suffered unnecessarily but our minds were made-up, and we hung on until eventually we were forced to move to another camp.

### **THE LICE MOVE IN**

The reader can be excused if they decide to skip this part of the story, but it is one of the many discomforts that we had to learn to endure. As there was never sufficient water or soap to bathe in let alone wash our clothes, there was little to do there was little we could do to keep the lice at bay. The field hot air delousing chamber provided by the Italians only seemed to make them breed even faster and the only way to keep them in check was what was known in the army as reading one's shirt. I for one, was never clear of them until I eventually arrived in Germany. As can be expected the reactions from different types of men was very noticeable. The fussier men found it extremely hard to adapt to the fact while, the easy-going ones simply took it in their stride.

### **ONE MAN'S ESCAPE BID**

During the course of one day two mysterious objects came out of the sky and exploded close to the camp. As far as we could see they did no damage as they fell in an open area. Immediate panic broke out amongst the guards and one prisoner decided it was an excellent opportunity to stage an escape. Needless to say, he got no further than the fence before he was shot by one of the more alert guards. He was not killed outright, and he was left to die where he fell. There was nothing we could or dared to do to try to help him. It was only when things returned to normal that his body was removed. Exactly what the objects that had exploded were and where they had come from, we never found out and I doubt that the Italians knew. We presumed they must have come from the ground as there was no sign of any aircraft in the area.

### **RATIONS**

Food was one thing that was never out of our minds and during our entire stay in this camp we were constantly hungry and night after night we dreamt of food. Often, we would wake with whatever we had slept on was wet with saliva.

To start off with, we were issued with dry rations and the only two articles that I can remember were a small tin of very inferior bully beef and two tasteless hard biscuits. These rations were issued once a day. As things became more organised in the camp, we were issued with hot food twice a

day. This consisted of either boiled rice or macaroni which is more liquid than solid. If you were extremely lucky, you might find a piece of stringy meat of some sort in your issue. We worked out that we were receiving approximately 14 oz (340 grammes) of food per day, and it was no wonder that we lost weight very rapidly and developed a paunch from eating too much starch.

We became so malnourished that we were forced to stand up in stages otherwise we were liable to blackout and strenuous exercise was out of the question, so we did as little walking as possible.

When the Italians first issued food, they gave no thought to the religious beliefs of the Gurkhas or the Indians who were in the camp at the time. The fact that these men only ate food that had been prepared by them individually was soon brought home to the authorities and they wisely provided them with dry rations and enough fuel with which to cook. One day, an Italian officer decided to inspect the area where these men were preparing their food and unbeknown to him he committed the sin of sins by allowing his shadow to fall over the pot. He was met with a barrel of insults, a pot full of hot food thrown at him and orders to go and fetch more food. He made a hurried exit from the camp and one of his underlings was detailed to replace the dry rations. Shortly after this incident all the Indian and Ghurkha troops were moved out of the camp, and I never came into contact with them again.

## **PASSING THE TIME**

Over and above, we spent our time gathering in groups and talking mainly about food and what we were going to eat when we were eventually free, there was very little to do. Books were far from plentiful and on the average, it was very difficult to concentrate long enough to settle down to read a book. The Bible was very much in evidence, and it was passed around by those who had a copy to anyone who wished to read it. Being written as it is it was easy to read short sections.

The few packs of playing cards assume became well-worn as they were in constant use and as the only place where we could use them was on a folded blanket on the floor, they tended to become dirty in a short space of time. Numerous versions of patience were the most popular, and you were always assisted by the onlookers - generally their advice was taken in good humour.

Any piece of wood that you could lay your hands on was painstakingly whittled into various shapes and the end result of hours of labour became treasures to their makers. Pen knives or knives of any type were in short supply and a variety of homemade cutting edges appeared on the scene.

A man who was unfortunate enough to break his false teeth on the hard biscuits had to rely on the ingenuity of a fellow prisoner to repair them as best he could with the limited materials at hand. No doubt a dental mechanic would have thrown up his hands in horror that he could have seen examples of the work done. If for example, a bottom plate had broken in half, a piece of aluminium cut out of an Italian mess tin was beaten out until it was thin enough to become a suitable shape and then bent to fit. The plate was held in place by rivets at suitable intervals. The final touches of smoothing the edges took a lot of doing and the user had to get used to the new shape or do without.

One outstanding piece of work was a grandfather clock that had been made with a minimum of tools and consisted mainly of various sized tins which were made to form the various working parts of the finished article. When the sand filled weight had been finally adjusted it kept very good time. The only factory produced item used in this entire construction was one razor blade.

Artistic talent was channelled into producing a hand printed, beautifully illustrated newspaper that was started in camp #3 Benghazi and entitled The Benghazi Forum and was subsequently carried on under the title of Tuteurano Times in Camp 85 Italy (Brigione di Guerra Campo). Tuteurano is 8 miles

from Brindisi in the “Heel” of Italy. Highlights of these newspapers were later printed in book form and the proceeds from the sale were channelled into the Red Cross prisoner of war fund. The best of the numerous illustrations that appeared in this newspaper was one of the fireworks display that was put on when an ammunition ship went up in flames in Benghazi harbour. I have seen a copy of this painting which was held in the “Bundu” shell hole in Boston in KwaZulu-Natal. This incident will be dealt with in more detail later.

The final edition of the newspaper was mounted on whatever backing could be obtained and suitably displayed along with a great variety of handmade articles at an exhibition held in the camp. The senior officers were invited to view this exhibition and were lavish with their praise of the articles on display. The newspaper was especially mentioned.

In this way, those who were fortunate enough to be able to use their hands had ample opportunity to pass away the time that would otherwise lean heavily on their hands. The others had to make do with whatever they could find to do to pass away the hours.

### **ACTIVITIES IN THE HARBOUR**

On the whole the harbour is not exactly a hive of activity. The phone number of ships did make use of the harbour but only two were of interest to us. The first was an ammunition ship stop we only found out later that this was what this ship contained. It steamed into the harbour and stopped in what we took to be the inner roads third prior to being manoeuvred next to the docks by the tugs before this could happen a flight of three bombers with RAF markings on them appeared in the sky and made an unmolested bombing run. We presumed that there were ack ack batteries placed in positions to defend the harbour. Just how many direct hits were scored by the bombers we were unable to see but soon after we were left in no doubt that at least one hit had been scored when we saw fires breaking out on the vessel. As the fire spread numerous explosions occurred and the most spectacular was when the hold containing the very lights went off, I have seen a number of well organised fireworks displays but, considering that this was an unprepared display it was spectacular to say the least. Showers of red orange and green flares going off at all angles and at various intervals was a sight that very few of us would easily forget.

Shortly before we left this camp, a ship loaded with various types of fuel including petrol and oil came into the harbour and stopped fairly close to where the ammunition ship had been. Once again, the RAF arrived on the scene but only after the ship had been moored to the dock prior to being unloaded. This ship and its very precious cargo suffered a similar fate to the first and the hulk was still ablaze when we were moved out by sea. Just how news of this shipping activity reached the nearest 8th army airfield we never found out, but we had the satisfaction of seeing the end results.

### **WE MOVE TO PASTURES NEW**

The Italian authorities decided that the time had arrived for the camp to be finally evacuated and every means of transport was soon put into action to move those of us who were left in the camp to safer places. Various convoys of lorries undertook the next stage of our journey, and I was one of the more fortunate to be moved out by sea and did not have to endure the long-cramped journey that those who went by road had to face. Conditions down in the hold, in which we were confined, were very cramped and we were battened down for most of the voyage. Fortunately, our destination proved to be close, and we made it in a relatively short time. Thankfully we escaped the attentions of any Royal Navy ships that might have been in the area.

Two or three days before we were finally forced to move, in some cases at bayonet point, we could hear the distant rumbling of artillery fire which was more noticeable at night when the camp was quiet. Later, we learned that within days of our leaving, the 8th army moved in and took over the camp. I don't know if they found any stragglers still in the area - good luck to them. How close we came to being released with the 8th army advancing onto the camp we will never know.

## **TUNISIA**

Tunisia was to be our next stop and the last stop in North Africa but, only for a short period. After the ship was tied up, we disembarked we were moved to a similar camp which was much smaller than our last. By now, we were well experienced in the procedure that we had to follow, and it did not take us long to settle down and make the best of things. Old groups got together in tents, and we waited for our first issue of rations which were no better nor worse than we had had in the past. Being further inland and in hilly country our outlook over the surrounding country was limited. Just how long we stayed in this camp I do not remember but we moved out long before we had had time to become bored with the whole setup.

## Chapter 3

### ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN –SICILY THEN ITALY

#### SICILY

Once again, we were on the move to an unknown destination but this time with the knowledge that it would definitely be a camp somewhere in Italy.

Back down into the hold of a tramp steamer in our hordes we went fairly late in the day for a cruise across the Mediterranean. We were in very cramped and dirty conditions and were confined below until well out of the harbour. Whether the authorities in charge considered that we were likely to take over the ship and forced the crew to make for a friendly port, or whether we were being kept below for our own safety we were never able to find out.

Having reached what was considered to be a safe distance, and after frequent requests to be allowed on deck to answer the calls of nature, permission was granted for limited numbers to be allowed topside. It was just as well the sea was calm, as we had to negotiate a nearly perpendicular ladder to reach the deck. When the first batch returned, we were greeted with the news that we were sailing in the company of a similar ship, and that we were being escorted by two rather small naval vessels of an unknown type and vintage, which were well armed with various types of weapons.

A description of the sanitary arrangements provided on board deserves mention. They were crude to say the least. Definitely something that had been designed by "Heath Robinson"! They consisted of two planks spaced a convenient distance apart and slung over the side of the ship and then attached fairly firmly. A handrail was provided so that you could steady yourself. What the side of the ship must have looked like when we finally arrived at our destination can well be imagined?

Come dusk, larger numbers were allowed on deck for the last time. Whenever you want had had a turn we were battened down once again, and we had to use the limited number of buckets that had been provided. This is rather difficult as the hold was only dimly lit and you had to pick your way over the mass of bodies. Woe betide you if you stumbled - a barrage of curses was sure to follow. During the night all hell broke loose on the deck, and we could hear bells ringing, hurried footsteps and a sudden decrease in the speed at which we were travelling. We were not informed as to what was happening but, as we could not hear any gunfire and very soon, we were on our way again. We knew that we had not been intercepted by one of our naval vessels. We also knew that we were in no danger of sinking as there was no rush of water into the hold!

When eventually, the first batch of men were allowed topside the following morning, they came back with the news that there was wet clothing hanging all over the place and that our escort was now reduced to one. Apparently, during the night the other escort vessel had been rammed but not before everyone on board had been rescued. Another hulk added to Davy Jones's locker. What would have happened if one of the ships carrying us had met a similar fate is too ghastly to consider. I very much doubt if they would have been time to rescue us, and just where we would have been accommodated was a question which, fortunately, never had to be answered.

Before the day was over, we had our first glimpse of land, and for a change, as we steamed closer to our destination we were not confined below deck.

This proved to be our final destination. When we had finally disembarked for the last time, we were escorted by armed guards to the nearest railway station. As the name of the station had been removed, we were not sure exactly where we were?

We now found out that we were to make the rest of our journey by train in first class Italian day coaches- a far cry from our previous means of travel. What a luxury it was to be able to sit on well padded, comfortable seats, to have room enough for our legs and proper toilets- it all made the journey very comfortable.

A limited number of guards was allocated to each carriage, and during the time that we stopped in various stations we had to keep the blinds drawn. When we were actually travelling, we were allowed to open the shutters and admire the passing scenery. We passed through a variety of areas- from small citrus orchards with some of the trees appearing to grow right to very edge of the lakes to wide open country. An occasional village or town came into our view.

Our final stop on this stage of the journey was the point where the train ferry (which operated across the straits of Messina docked) The coaches are loaded onto one of these ferries and we steamed across this short stretch of water. Back onto the rails for our journey along the Toe and heel of Italy to our final destination near the port of Brindisi.

Having been formed up into columns of threes, counted and proved to be all present and correct, with guards stationed at suitable intervals down the length of the column, we were marched off down a country road at an easy pace, and only a few stragglers fell out on route.

## ITALY



### **PRIGIONE DI GUERRA – CAMPO PG 85**

We arrived at the above destination on the 16th of December 1942, and with a minimum of delay we were counted and parted from our guards. A reception party consisting of the senior Italian in charge of the camp, and two of his fellow officers met us. They were accompanied by the “Man of Confidence” who had been selected specially for this post and was always a Warrant Officer or Sergeant major. He was one of the troop Sergeant Majors from one of the battery and turned out to be a very good man to all of us. At the same time, he saw to it that good discipline was maintained in the camp.

A description of the camp is now required so that the reader can get a picture of the conditions under which we were to live.

This camp was nearly square in shape and the entire area was surrounded by two very high barbed wire fences spaced approximately 2 meters apart and the space between was kept completely clear of any growth. Strands of wire spaced close together were strung horizontally and pulled tight the poles were spaced fairly close and the strands of wire were also strung from the top to the bottom of these poles. As the common name “The Cage” implies, that is exactly what the fence looked like. One main gate led into the camp guards were stationed here at regular intervals around the outside of the fence and at every corner.

The wooden huts we occupied were situated at one side of the camp. A kitchen built of blockwork was at one end of the huts and, directly opposite the huts were the toilets. One hut, situated nearly opposite the gate housed the staff in charge of the administration of the camp. A block storeroom was set aside for Red Cross parcels.

A hard path ran in front of the huts and right around the camp. This path was wide enough for 6 men to walk abreast in comfort. The entire area was very flat with no provision made for drainage and the area became very muddy when it rained. You sank up to your ankles if you attempted to walk across the area after heavy rainfall.

When we arrived in the camp all the huts were full, and we were accommodated in tents similar to those we had endured in our last camp. Fortunately, the ground in and around the camp was dry so we were able to settle down fairly comfortably. This comfort proved to be short lived as it snowed, and the tents collapsed under the weight of the snow. The only thing we could do was to move into every available space in the huts. As these huts were already crowded, conditions became even more crowded, and much swearing went on during the night when men left the hut to relieve themselves. Fortunately for us, these conditions only lasted for three days as a large group of men left for a working camp and we were able to move into their bunks.

## **THE HUTS**

The Huts were built of wood with one door leading into them. Windows at suitable intervals provided sufficient illumination during the day. At night the only light we had came from the moon. As far as I recall, the roof was covered with a type of “Maltoid roofing material” and waterproof. The floors were wooden as were the three tier bunks. Each bunk had loose wooden slats spaced close together to start off which formed the base for a palliasse, filled with straw which we slept on. These bunks were placed fairly close to each other. About four trestle tables with benches made up the rest of the furniture. No means of heating was provided and, during the very cold weather all the windows were closed at night, and we relied on whatever body heat we could generate.

## **LATRINES**

Three separate blocks of these were provided which had concrete floors. About a third of the the floor was raised, and a channel had been formed at a suitable distance from the wall. This channel had raised portions in the shape of footprints spaced down the entire length. These footprints were high enough for waste materials deposited, to pass beneath the. One had to adopt a squatting position to use the latrines. The system was designed to be flushed by a continuous flow of water but, the flow was seldom strong enough to carry away the shredded paper from the Red Ross Parcels – toilet paper was NOT provided. Urinals were also provided. The hygiene squad detailed to cleaning the area had their cut out for them.

Strict orders had been issued that these toilets were to be used day and night but, especially during the wet weather when one was forced to urinate at least once an hour (more often than not at far

shorter intervals) you were faced with a long hike along the hardened path. Under these circumstances it was not surprising that that the rule was broken. I don't remember anyone getting into trouble for defying this order.

### **ISSUE OF BLANKETS AND CLOTHING**

On arrival in the cage, we were issued with three very thin blankets each. Apparently, the Italian army was comprised of short individuals as these blankets were so short, that they barely covered a man over 5'8" tall. In winter it was a case of boots off and into bed to sleep fully clothed under these blankets.

Within a day or two, those of us who had been captured in shorts and shirts only, were issued with a pair of long Italian Army pants and two shirts. These pants were cut in the style of riding breeches and, if you were as tall as I am at 6'2" you had to find a pair that fitted around the waist and, "to hell with the length"! The overall picture we encountered when walking around the camp gave the impression that you had been let loose amongst the cast of a comic opera!

Goodness knows what material was used to make the shirts. When you attempted to wash them, it proved nearly impossible to get them really wet, let alone clean! We were also issued with two pieces of cloth were meant to be used in the place of socks. If you tried to use them for their intended purpose, they proved so uncomfortable that we soon discarded them. At least we were now reasonably clad despite the bad fit and quite a lot warmer than we had been in the past.

### **POST, LETTERS AND PARCELS**

We were issued with a limited number of post and letter cards every month and had to restrict the number of people to whom we wrote and hope that what little news we were able to include would be passed on to those not receiving post.

The post cards provided very little space for news to be included as half of the card was taken up by your personal particulars, camp number etc. Letter cards were exactly the opposite as all the above particulars appeared on one of the flaps and the entire inner section was left for whatever you had to say. As all correspondence had to pass through the hands of the Italian censors, we had to be very careful of what we wrote to ensure that large sections were not blacked out. I must presume that there was someone who was able to cope with the letters written in Afrikaans. My spelling was never my strong point, and I am certain that my spelling must have caused the censors quite a few headaches deciphering the content. My mother kept ALL my letters and I have subsequently seen that not one word was ever blacked out. The censor must have coped. Initially, we had to pay for postage on our letter cards but, this practice was very soon stopped. The reason for this will be described later. At least we knew that the people back home would know where we were, and they would be able to write to us.

In due course we started to receive post and everyone in the camp had news from home which boosted morale. These letters tended to arrive in batches but were eagerly awaited and read without delay. One was allowed to receive a limited number of clothing and cigarette parcels. I don't remember how many were permitted or how frequently they arrived. I am certain that all the parcels allowed to be despatched to me were posted in good faith but, during my entire stay in Italy I did not receive a single parcel. It remains a mystery as to where they ended up.



## **PAY**

We were paid an unknown amount of cash in the form of camp coupons every month. The idea behind the coupons gave us the ability to purchase certain items from the camp store using the coupons as “cash”. As mentioned previously stamps were one of the items and they were always readily available. Apart from a limited supply of dried figs, produced locally, everything else was either in such short supply or completely out of stock, it was often a waste of time asking for them.

The amounts that we spent in this way was supposed to be deducted from any army pay that we would eventually receive upon release but, news got back to the authorities in South Africa and the practice was stopped. Not one cent of what we had been paid up to that date was ever deducted from our regular army pay.

When we were first paid by the officer in charge of the camp, who, by the way, was a thorough gentleman and came from an old, well-established family in Northern Italy and, when my turn came to be paid, my right hand developed a terrible itch. No doubt this was the anticipation of having money put into my hand for the first time in many months. I was forced to scratch my hand which irritated the paymaster officer but, fortunately, our good friend, The Man of Confidence soon intervened or, I am sure I would have spent some time in the “cooler” on short rations. The entire incident passed off and I got off “Scot” free.

## **RED CROSS PARCELS**

Parcels from the International Red Cross headquarters in Geneva were issued to everybody at the rate of one parcel per week. In addition to the parcels, we received 50 English cigarettes a week, these parcels were packed at various depots throughout the United Kingdom and, each depot had a set variety of items that it packed so, we were never faced with a “standard” selection within the pack. Later, we received parcels packed in Canada which were all identical and which soon became quite predictable.

Each parcel was packed in a stout cardboard box and was firmly secured with strong string. The contents were packed in shredded paper so that the contents did not crash into each other. A stamp appeared on the outside of each parcel showing the name of the depot and, after a time, you knew, what to expect in the box.

Generally, the contents of the parcels included:

1. ¼ lb of tea or cocoa
2. One tin of condensed milk
3. A slab of chocolate
4. A slab of compressed sugar
5. A tin of fish
6. A tin of meat and vegetables
7. Yorkshire pudding mix or powdered eggs.
8. A tin of jam and cheese or some cheese spread in a tin.

To make it easier to consume some of the larger items at one time, it was common practice for two men to pair off and share parcels. When this was done, care had to be taken so that there was a suitable interval between the day that each received his parcel. This arrangement worked very well and, on the whole, each partner trusted the other to share the contents of a tin equally. But it was a foolish person who decided to go on his own. Some pairs resorted to drawing lots for their

individual share once it had been divided and carefully counted. Occasional differences of opinion occurred. In most cases the chocolate, sugar and condensed milk were never shared.

Usually, we ate the chocolate on the day it arrived and eked out the other two (luxury) items so that they lasted until the next parcel arrived. If you were particularly careful, you could hoard a supply of condensed milk and have a good feed off it. I remember accumulating a tin and a half of condensed milk and then consuming it in one sitting with no ill effects. Certain items in the parcels caused a problem as they had to be cooked. I will deal with brewing tea later. The packets of tea were always carefully opened and kept for future use.

Naturally we were annoyed when we found that certain items were pilfered from our parcels. Chocolate was one of the items that attracted the attention of the light fingered. Our parcels were opened and resealed so carefully that it was only when the parcels were opened, that the shortages were noticed. No amount of complaining to the authorities had any effect on this practice of pilfering.

A special Red Cross parcel was distributed to the men who were classified as invalids, and this helped these men regain their strength. I am sure that had these special parcels not been delivered, there would not have been as many survivors.

## **RATIONS**

The amount of food that we received played a very important part in our daily lives. Seldom did we get enough to eat to quell the pangs of hunger from which we continually suffered. Hot food was provided at midday and in the evening and, until we convinced the authorities that it was a waste of fuel to provide so little sustenance, we received a cupful of Senna tea in the mornings.

The hot food was exactly the same as that which we had received in North Africa. Either boiled rice with tomato puree added or boiled macaroni with olive oil. Both "meals" were predominantly water. At one stage we were issued with boiled dandelion leaves. If you have ever attempted to eat dandelion leaves you will know how unpalatable they are. Hungry or not, we simply refused to eat them, and they were removed from our rations completely.

As the kitchens were situated in the camp and, the distance it had to be carried to each hut was short, the food was really hot. Each hut had a man who oversaw the dishing out the food. Large square pots with two handles were used to cook in and, this made carrying the pots much easier. A roster system was established so that everyone had the opportunity of being first in line. The consistency of the food became thicker and thicker down the line despite many shouts of "stir the pot". We each took turns in collecting the empty pot and were rewarded by being able to scrape out the dregs before returning the pots for washing. The ladles were made from a 500gm tin firmly fixed to a long handle and the contents were poured into whatever container we possessed. As can be guessed, it did not take long for us to eat this meagre ration and, unlike Olive Twist there was no chance of second helping as there was only enough to go round each hut.

Dry rations were issued at the same time as the midday meal and to the best of my memory consisted of:

- Two bread rolls about the size of a clenched fist
- A small portion of sugar
- A portion of margarine
- Jam of some description
- A small tin of inferior quality meat (occasionally substituted by tinned fish)

- Occasionally a small piece of cheese

You can imagine why we were constantly hungry and just how important the extra food in the Red Cross parcels meant to us. We sliced the bread rolls into thin slices – in one case I recall being able to create 30 wafer thin slices. We either ate these dry rations in one sitting or spread them over a full day. Shortly after we arrived in this camp the Man of Confidence gave my half section and me a 450gm tin of meat and vegetables. We divided this between us and devoured the lot in one hit. Having eaten it, I felt so uncomfortable that I slept for about three hours. My half section walked around the camp until he managed to get rid of this bloated feeling.

## **MAKING TEA AND COOKING**

Obviously, it takes fuel to make a fire and, fuel of any description was very difficult to come by and had to be used as sparingly as possible. Devious means were used to obtain fuel – one of which was to use the bed boards from our bunks! To satisfy the demand for fuel, the number of these boards was reduced to the bare minimum. The remaining boards were just adequate to support the most vital parts of the body. A limited supply of wood was provided by the authorities and unless the kitchen staff packed their wood into the building, it was liable to disappear. We also used empty Red Cross boxes, but cardboard produces very little heat when burned.

It is common knowledge that an open fire is not an efficient means of providing heat and so we tried various means of constructing fireplaces where the heat was concentrated more efficiently. An ingenious blower was designed by one of our men. Due to the fact that the blower created a draught, it consumed far less energy (fuel) and the resulting heat was capable of boiling a 500gm tin of water very quickly. The blower was constructed entirely of empty tins and the fan unit was driven by a series of belt driven, stepped pulleys. By turning the crank handle at a fairly low speed, a steady draught of air was forced through. The blower was affixed to a board for stability. The same blower principle was used to ventilate escape tunnels.”

On parcel day, a fresh lot of tea leaves were added to a tin of boiling water and allowed to boil for limited time. The resulting brew was carefully poured off and the leaves left in the tin for future use. Fresh water was added for the next brew with a limited amount of fresh tea added to ensure that you your cup of tea was to your liking. At the end of the week, the leaves were carefully removed from the tin, dried and returned to the original packet. The packet was resealed and was now ready for “trade across the wire”. Many Italians must have cursed us when they discovered how we had deceived them, but I guess it made a pleasant change from the “scum” coffee that they normally drank? Any housewife would be horrified with our methods of making tea but, considering we had no tea pots to brew our tea and just ¼ lb of tea per week, it proved the only feasible way of providing us with a hot drink.

The egg powder received in the Red Cross parcels was fairly easy to cook in the form of scrambled eggs as they took very little heat. The dried Yorkshire pudding, once it had been mixed into a batter, proved far more difficult as it required ashes of sufficient heat to bake.

Every day, after parcels had been issued some of the men would make the rounds endeavouring to trade one article for some alternative he preferred. Sometimes they were lucky enough to meet someone willing to trade but more often he had to make do with the luck of the draw.

## **SMOKING**

Up to the time of our arrival in Italy a smoker was hard pressed to acquire enough cigarettes to satisfy the craving and we were forced to adopt the tactic of keeping every scrap of tobacco. These scraps were then rolled into cigarettes using whatever paper could be found. With Red Cross parcels we were now enjoying the luxury of 50 cigarettes in each parcel, and we were issued with 60 cigarettes per week by the Italians. The Italian cigarettes were not the finest quality but, beggars could not be choosers, so we smoked all the cigarettes available. Now and again, we would get fair quality cigar in lieu of 5 cigarettes in one ration which was more than a fair exchange as a single cigar lasted much longer than five cigarettes. The nonsmokers had no trouble in exchanging their unwanted cigarettes for food in the camp or, over the wire. When you became accustomed to this ration, and possibly smoked more heavily, it was back to finding the fag ends and re rolling them into recycled cigarettes to satisfy the craving.

## **TRADE OVER THE WIRE**

Now that we had more goods to trade, the practise of trading over the wire was greater than it was in the past. It was more organised and exchange value for various goods had been worked out by the camp committee, which had been set up for this purpose. The system worked very well, but unfortunately, now and again a very hungry man would break regulations, and as there was no disciplinary action to be taken against him, the exchange rate had to be re adapted. Personal items did not fall under these rules and yet to barter says to get a fair price for them.

Bread, being a bulky item was the most popular article to be taken in exchange for whatever you had to offer. The Italian officer in charge of the camp seldom took steps to stop this trading. Now and then a more strict and NCO you answered him and stop a transaction, but when this happened you simply waited until he had taken himself off, and restarted the contact and concluded the deal.

## **DAY TO DAY ACTIVITIES**

The only organised activity that we all had participate in were the twice daily counts. For this count to take place we had to follow the following drill.

The occupant of each hut had to form up in columns of threes on the hardened path. Once the Italians responsible for carrying out the counts were in position, the column started to march off around the path.

As can be expected, the dressing of the ranks was seldom perfect, and by the time that the column had passed the checkpoint and come to a halt, the counters got together and compared their tallies. In most cases they did not agree with the grand total, and off we would go again. This went on until the tallies agreed to the grand total. After three or four rounds had been completed, we decided that enough was enough and marched in a more orderly fashion. If the weather was unfavourable, hey presto, the count was done at the end of the first round, and we would soon be back in the comfort of the huts.

You might ask what we gained from our mischievous behaviour. Well, we kept the Italians on their toes and kept them occupied for far longer than they liked. Time meant nothing to us as prisoners.

There was very little organised entertainment, and we had to resort to our own ingenuity to pass away the time. Books and playing cards were more plentiful and, other than the never-ending topic of discussing food, these past times helped to while away the hours. Perhaps the most popular way

of passing the time was by walking around the camp for as long as you are able. During the very cold weather we would try to get a bit of warmth by standing next to the kitchen chimney.

A large variety of handmade articles, both useful and purely decorative were made from whatever material was to hand. Two articles come to mind; string slippers made out of the string that tied up the Red Cross parcels. There were different designs of slippers, some with soles made from cardboard. The finished articles were fairly comfortable and provided warmth for your feet. These slippers were generally only worn inside the huts. The other article was a plaited belt made from empty plastic wrappers from our Red Cross cigarette ration.

The facilities provided for washing consisted of concrete troughs designed for washing clothing. No provision was made for hot water and even the supply of cold water never plentiful. It was extremely difficult to wash your body properly as the soap of any type was always in short supply and very few men possessed towels of any description. Shaving also created problems as razors and blades (especially) were not easy to obtain. You could obtain a razor by trading or borrowing but many a blade was stretched far beyond its normal life by being honed on any round glass you could find. Few men grew a full beard as these were difficult to keep in trim. Haircuts were done at a price by men who had the skill and the tools to ply their trade. Despite these difficulties we managed to keep clean.

I do not think that there is any man who went through this life without going through stage when things got him down to such an extent that he started to neglect the very basics of personal hygiene and he tried his best to withdraw from the activities going on around him. You either recognised this trend in yourself and snapped out of it before it was too late or someone who's on the lookout for this type of behaviour which step in when it became obvious, and he would help you to get back onto an even keel. The humdrum life that we led was one of the main reasons for this type of depression and, if you could find work, it was a great help.

At certain times of the year parties of Italians going to work in the fields would pass the camp either on foot or in waggons. They were singing in perfect harmony on their way. These impromptu concerts were the highlights of these times and we envied their freedom and the joy of their singing.

## **CAMP AND OTHER WORKING PARTIES**

We were not compelled to work but, if you became bored of camp life, and wanted to take advantage of the offer of double rations and regular Red Cross parcels you could volunteer to go to work. The number of times that Red Cross parcels dried up when the necessary number of men for working parties could not be found and, how soon a load of parcels would appear when the required numbers of workers were obtained, never ceased to annoy us.

The Man of Confidence decided that ten of us looked hungry enough to benefit from extra rations I persuaded the Italians that an extra fatigue party could be put to use keeping the ground between the fences free of grass etc. I and others were set to work. The Italian Corporal Major who was put in charge of us was one of the most reasonable that I ever had to deal with, and he did not make us work too hard. For our part, we did enough work every day to keep him out of trouble. The only difficulty we had was learning the art of handling the long-handled shovels which had been issued to us. As a result of being occupied in the open all day with the bonus of being excused from the daily count and the extra rations we received, we soon put on weight.

After working in the camp for a time two of us decided that life in the country might prove to be much better and so we volunteered to go out with the next small working party. As soon as we

arrived at our destination and had seen the type of accommodation we were to occupy, we realised that we had made a grave mistake. There was nothing that we could do about this and simply had to adapt. Our work consisted of loading bags of cement onto a trolley mounted on rails and pushing the trolley to a site mixing the concrete with the help of Italian labourers who, incidentally, did most of the work. At the end of each day, we had to push the trolley back into the starting point.

When we asked for extra water to wash in at the end of the day, the Italians threw up their hands in horror and told us that if we bathed every day who would catch malaria. We had to clean up as best we could. We nearly caused the riot when, on arriving back at the overnight camp, we found a very lousy shirt hung inside out on the fence. What a stir we caused when we demanded the offending garment be removed. We insisted and it was removed.

Several horses were used to pull light carts on the job and did not take us long to discover that their nose bags were filled with chopped up straw and dried figs. Whenever the opportunity arose, the number of figs in the nose bags dropped rapidly.

One of the more enterprising members of the party managed to get a look at the plans of the project that we were working on and discovered that we were actually laying the drainage system for what would eventually be an airfield with concrete runways. Having gained this knowledge and knowing that no prisoner of war should work on anything that could be used by the army we demanded to be taken back to the main camp. This move took some time to organise, and we had to continue working until such time as we could be moved.

The manner of laying the drainage was rather ingenious. A trench had been dug with an excavator that, for most of the time that we were there, was out of order. The bottom of the trench was graded and levelled followed by a layer of concrete placed in the bottom of the trench. Next, a hard rubber tube was placed in the centre of the base and inflated by means of a compressor to the required diameter. A layer of porous concrete was poured around the pipe to the required thickness and left to set. The next day, the tube was deflated and pulled out of the concrete. The next section of the casting then continued. A slow process to say the least but, apparently proper drainage pipes were not available. When we finally left, we were convinced that this job would never be completed before the end of the war and I wonder if it ever was?

## **AMERICAN AIRFORCE IN ACTION**

Shortly after returning to the main camp, we saw our first formation of about 100 flying fortresses flying in close formation close to the camp. We soon notice that a lone Italian fighter plane had taken off and was approaching the rear of the formation out of the sun. This manoeuvre had obviously been spotted by the crews of the bombers and they waited until the sitting duck was in their range. A sheet of tracer bullets appeared out of every gun that could be brought to bear on the fighter plane, a puff of smoke appeared in place of the fighter and that was the end of their encounter.

We learned later from one of the crew of this type of American plane who came into the camp in Germany that this Italian fighter would literally, have run into a wall of bullets so it was no wonder we could not see any debris falling to the ground.

## **ON THE MOVE AGAIN**

The only news we had of the activities at the war front came in the form of vague rumours. The Italians, knowing more than we did decided that the time had come for the camp to be evacuated

and for us to be moved to pastures new. Once news of this impending move had been announced preparations were made so that our limited possessions could be packed at short notice. Things that we considered to be of no value and would only add weight that we would have to carry were simply abandoned.

A collection of printed labels carefully removed from Red Cross tins were made into propaganda leaflets that would be dropped out of whatever transport were forced to be moved in at suitable points along the journey. Once again, we were formed up and marched under escort, to the nearest station. We were loaded into first class day coaches and our train was soon on its way to an unknown destination. Whenever we passed close to any village or, through any station, a parcel of labels was thrown out of the train. The guard's attention was carefully diverted from these activities by someone engaging them in conversation.

We passed through a wide variety of scenery and at one stage, had a view of old Roman ruins prior to entering Rome. How we would have loved to have been able to get out of the train to see them properly. When a request was made that we be allowed to do so, we were told that to really see Rome we had to walk around, and we were not permitted to do that. At long last, our journey completed during daylight was over and we were formed up for the march to the next camp.



## TEMPO 54 – PASSO CORESE, 22 MILES NORTH OF ROME

This camp was situated just north of Rome and was quite unlike the previous one being situated on sloping ground amongst the hills so, there were no drainage problems here.

The huts were built out of what appeared to be blocks with a corrugated metal roof. They were laid out in four rows on terraces and far superior toilet blocks were conveniently located. Some of the huts were still under construction when we arrived. The camp had an air of being a far more permanent establishment than anything we had previously experienced. It was surrounded by the normal two fences with a single main entrance. High wooden sentry boxes had been erected at each corner with additional sentry boxes in the middle of each of the three sides. These sentry



boxes were equipped with search lights and were suitably armed. Definite beats had been established for the guards and they were manned twenty-four hours a day. There was no doubt that that security was far tighter than we had been used to previously and, trade over the wire was now virtually impossible.

Having arrived at the main gate, we were carefully counted as we entered and then we were set free within the camp to settle down in the vacant huts. These huts were far bigger anything we had experienced previously and were equipped with the now familiar three tier bunks, tables and benches.

To watch the construction of the remaining camp was quite an education to those of us who were used to seeing similar buildings made up of burnt bricks. The blocks they used were cut from a quarry and were extremely soft. The whole building was erected to roof height, the roof trusses secured in place without any openings for doors or windows. Upon completion of the structure, the doors and windows were marked out, and a large hole drilled in each corner. The openings were then hacked out and sawn by hand with timber frames secured into these new openings. Due to the shoddy nature of this type of construction there had been failures so to overcome any potential failure, the external walls were supported prior to interior plastering which appeared to provide a more stable construction. When the plastering was dry, the external shuttering/shoring was removed.

Had been built to accommodate all the inmates of the camp several men were accommodated in large half round tents which were high enough to fit the bunks with enough headroom for the occupant of the top bunk. These tents had been erected close to the main gate. One day when a sentry came off duty, he had failed to count the number of times he had operated the bolt on his rifle to unload the contents of the magazine. Presuming the rifle to be unloaded he proceeded to pull the trigger to release the tension on the firing spring. A shot went off and killed one of the occupants of the tents. Soon after this unfortunate incident had occurred, a small building was erected. It was designed so that whenever a rifle was unloaded the muzzle was pointed at the wall. The entrance to this building was a gap which was only wide enough for one man to enter. This building was used by every sentry when he came off duty.

The Man of Confidence in charge of this camp was a well-known Sergeant Major of the South African police brigade he was noted for his large hands and extra-long fingers, and he stood no nonsense from the Italians.

We were soon back into our normal daily routine. Red Cross parcel days, set rosters for receiving rations, organised postal arrangements made and an issue of postcards to let the people back in the home know of our new address.

To discover what the position was as far as food was concerned, all you had to do was listen to the general topic of conversation. If food was being spoken about, rations were short but, if women were the main topic, then food was plentiful.

The two daily counts were far more efficiently organised. We fell in in orderly ranks in three's properly dressed before our camp Sergeant Major who then handed over to the Italians who were conducting the counting. This extra discipline proved to be of benefit to us all.

The kitchen blocks were situated outside the camp and hot food had to be fetched from there daily by the two-man detail. Rations were exactly the same as in the previous camp. To the best of my knowledge no working parties left the camp so we were a far more settled community of men who consisted of mostly South African troops.

Shortly before I arrived in the camp the Italians decided that every man in the camp should have his hair completely cut off. So, this operation commenced. Without knowing of what they were doing, one of the earliest men selected for a haircut was a Sikh. It is common knowledge that Sikhs never cut their hair throughout their lives! When the men in the hut had been ordered to leave, the Sikh sat on his bunk and refused to move. A guard was sent in to bring him out. The Sikh calmly got off his bunk turned the guard around and frog marched him to the door. He told the guard to fetch the Camp Commandant to cut his hair. That was the last of forced hair cutting that anyone ever heard of.

At regular intervals during the night, in order to ensure that all sentries in the towers were awake, the guard commander called out "Sentinelli alerti". This call was to be answered with "Allerto si". The calling went clockwise around the camp until complete. Not being confined to our huts at night gave some men an opportunity of starting off a false call. Inevitably it was answered and, when it reached the point of origin, the instigator would call out "Sentry no good, food no good, no cigarettes" in Italian. You can imagine what the response was from the Italians. In every case the man responsible was safely back in his hut long before any action could be taken against him.

As before, firewood was always in short supply. To ensure that not too many bed boards were cut up regular inspections were conducted, and woe betide any man who was caught with new looking wood in his possession. One day, a windfall was presented to the braver amongst us to acquire some wood. An Italian labourer entered the camp carrying a long plank. When he had got part way down the camp he was called away for some reason. He went to the caller immediately and put the plank down where he had been standing. As soon as he was out of the camp the plank was swooped upon, carried off and cut into small pieces with each piece carefully rubbed in the ground to conceal its newness. This operation was completed long before the labourer could return. You can imagine the look of disbelief when he found that his precious plank had disappeared. No sooner had the loss been reported to the guard commander, then a thorough search of every hut was carried out. Not one scrap of the plank could be positively identified. Some men even succeeded in cutting a short length out of the bottom of a wooden power, transmission pole in the camp. They matched the ends up so well that, after the deed their activity was not discovered until long afterwards. It was definitely a case of putting a problem in front of a crowd of desperate men. They will come up with a solution no matter what risks they have to take to reach their objective.

Every now and then a party of Italians would come into the camp and swoop on one hut, turn the occupants out and proceed to search the hut. While this was being done one armed guard was stationed at the door to prevent anyone from entering the hut. These guards always carried their rifles slung over their shoulders and provided an irresistible target. The barrel of the rifle would be filled with small pebbles. To do this, one or two men who could speak Italian would engage the guard in conversation and slowly move him into a suitable position where another man could get behind him and put as many pebbles as possible into the barrel of his rifle. How we would have loved to have seen his expression when he unloaded his rifle prior to returning to his barracks. They never seemed to learn, and the fun went on every time a search party arrived in the camp.

For some time, a large group of men would gather close to the main gate at the time that the daily guard parade was about to take place. This activity was well advertised by the waltzy bugle march tune play while the guards marched to the parade ground. The guards would form up in columns of threes on the parade ground, the order would be given for them to open order march and dress by the right. This order was given by the guard commander. When his manoeuvre had been carried out satisfactorily, he would hand over to the officer in charge and would start to inspect the guards. He always started with the front rank. While he was so occupied, the troops in the rear could not resist the temptation of sampling their rations. These rations were carried in a small semi oval dixie which

had been shaped to fit the contour of a body. The dixie hooked onto their belts and the spoon was held in place by two metal lugs on the dixie.

Before I relate the comic opera performance we once witnessed, I should like to tell you that amongst the audience were members of the Guards Brigade. You can well imagine the comments passed by them. These comments were passed and voices loud enough to be carried to the parade ground. On the day in question the officer decided to inspect the barrel of a rifle of one man. We could see that this unfortunate man must have realised that he was in trouble by the antics he started to form with his hands. Willy nilly the order had to be obeyed. Try as he could, the guard could not get the bolt of his rifle to open. The guard next to him, who had already been inspected, sloped off the parade ground in search of a stone that could be used as a hammer on the offending bolt. Before he could return, the officer had taken the rifle out of the hands of the next guard and used it as a hammer to open the bolt. Once it had been opened the sentry was ordered to pick up his rifle which had been placed upon the floor and to present it for inspection. Once this was being done the officer returned the borrowed rifle to its rightful owner. Apparently, the bore of the rifle being inspected was extremely dirty and the man was promptly dressed down by the officer who used his hands to emphasise his points. The unfortunate guard tried to explain the reason why his rifle was in such state, but he was at a disadvantage because, he only had one hand with which to talk!

After this performance strict orders were issued that no prisoners were allowed to gather to watch the guard mounting parade. This did not stop groups of men from doing so in the anticipation of another performance. Eventually, the officers decided to shift the parade ground and, by doing so denied all of us any more fun.

## **AN ESCAPE**

Every camp had its escape organisation and Campo 54 was no exception. As explained in all the books written about escapes, only the carefully selected few knew what plans had been considered and put into action. No doubt, without knowing it, most of us in camp had been helping to conceal the freshly dug earth which came out of the only tunnel that I knew of in the camp. Perhaps a short description of how the earth was concealed is called for. Certain members of the tunnelling gang would be entrusted with the task of disposing of the freshly dug earth in such a way that it would escape the detection by the guards. The earth would be concealed in specially made bags which were in turn, concealed in the trousers and fitted with a drawstring so that the bottom of the bag could be opened. A diversion would be started so that a group of men would gather, and while they were milling around the contents of the bag would be emptied and incorporated into the surrounding loose earth by the scuffling feet.

It was not until this tunnel had been completed and an unsuccessful escape bid had been made that we found out about the escape attempt. An inclined shaft had been sunk next to the wall of one of the huts on the ground between the hut and the wall of the terrace. The chosen spot was well out of sight of the sentry boxes and, to enter it, you only had to wait until the foot patrol had gone past. Just how the initial stages of this shaft were completed without detection I do not know. I also do not know how long it took before the tunnel was completed. As the soil in the camp was very stable very little shoring had to be used. When the final breakout occurred during the night it was found that the length of the tunnel had been misjudged and the mouth was so close to the path used by the foot patrols that it was no use for anyone to try and escape. As can be expected it was not long before one of the patrols discovered the mouth of the tunnel and a search for the entrance was started and soon discovered. As this breakout took place only one or two days before the Italians laid down their arms no further action was taken.

## **THE ITALIANS DESERT**

News from the war front was confined entirely to rumours and it is no wonder that we were caught entirely by surprise when an early bird aroused us with the news that the guards had deserted the camp during the night. We had been left to fend for ourselves as best we could. Hurried discussions were soon in progress as to which course of action to take. The majority decided that the best thing to do was to take to the hills carrying all the food we could carry. In spite of having no knowledge of the surrounding area, extra food parcels were issued to those who chose to go, and a suitable sling was soon fashioned from extra blankets. In no time, large numbers of men had left the camp and taken to the hills. It was good to be out in the open again but, after a short time you were forcibly reminded how unfit you were by the number of times you had to stop to rest. Most of the groups moved away from the roads and made their way along the tracks in the thick woods that covered most of the countryside. What a joy it was to discover a fast-running stream and have a drink and wash your face before resuming the easy stroll along the chosen path. A halt was taken only when you were forced by the pangs of hunger to stop and eat. As the day wore on, a suitable stop was selected to bed down for the night. Fairly large numbers of men embedded down together. Just quite how long we were on the loose I do not remember but, I can only recall spending one night in the open before we were rounded up by the Germans.

Owing to the large number of men who were on the loose in a confined area our chances of making our way to the advancing Allied troops were very slim to say the least. We had no idea in which direction we should be heading. Our chances were further reduced by the fact that many German paratroopers had been dropped in the vicinity. It was not long before they had combined with the other German troops and had spread out over the country to comb the area looking for prisoners of war.

## **THE GERMANS FIND US**

Before long, we were caught in one of the German dragnets and escorted back to our camp. There, we were greeted by the wise ones who had elected to stay in the camp. They had made themselves thoroughly comfortable and had acquired numerous comforts from the deserted Italian billets. They'd also laid in a good stock of food and were in far better physical condition than we were after our rambles over the countryside. I doubt that anyone managed to make his way down South and finally reach our own Allied lines. Good luck to them if they did. They may well have been others who were given shelter by the local Italian peasants, despite the dire consequences that they would have suffered for doing so. They might have been passed on from one area to the next until they were finally freed by our own troops.

The Germans knowing full well that we had had enough of walking only provided a minimum number of guards for the camp and soon we were to benefit from their ability to organise things. The rations of food we received were stepped up considerably and naturally, had to be kept within the limits of the stocks available in the camp.

It did not take the Germans long to organise the necessary rail transport to move us into their own country. Within a matter of days, we were loaded up into closed cattle trucks at the nearest station provided with the necessary guards and we were on our way. The journey proved to be fairly long, and as there were a large number of men accommodated in each rail truck it was a far from a comfortable journey.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### POW CAMP IN GERMANY



#### **STAMMLAGER (STALAG IV – B) MUHLBERG ELBE**

This camp was situated in the centre of a triangle founded by Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig in the province of Saxony and on the side of the Elbe River. The countryside around the camp was flat and consisted of cultivated farmland with small clumps of pine trees dotted across the area.

The area enclosed by the camp was rectangular and had a double high barbed wire fence on the long sides. These two fences were separated by a wide strip of “no man's land” that was kept clear of all plant growth. A hardened road led down the centre of the camp with one row of huts on either side. There was an imposing wooden structure in the form of an arch at either end of this road with a guard post situated in the top floor and two guard boxes flanking the gates leading into the camp. Elevated guard posts had been erected at each corner and a similar box situated approximately halfway down the long sides. These guard posts were fitted with machine guns and powerful searchlights. The entire perimeter was floodlit at night by equally spaced lights on all sides.



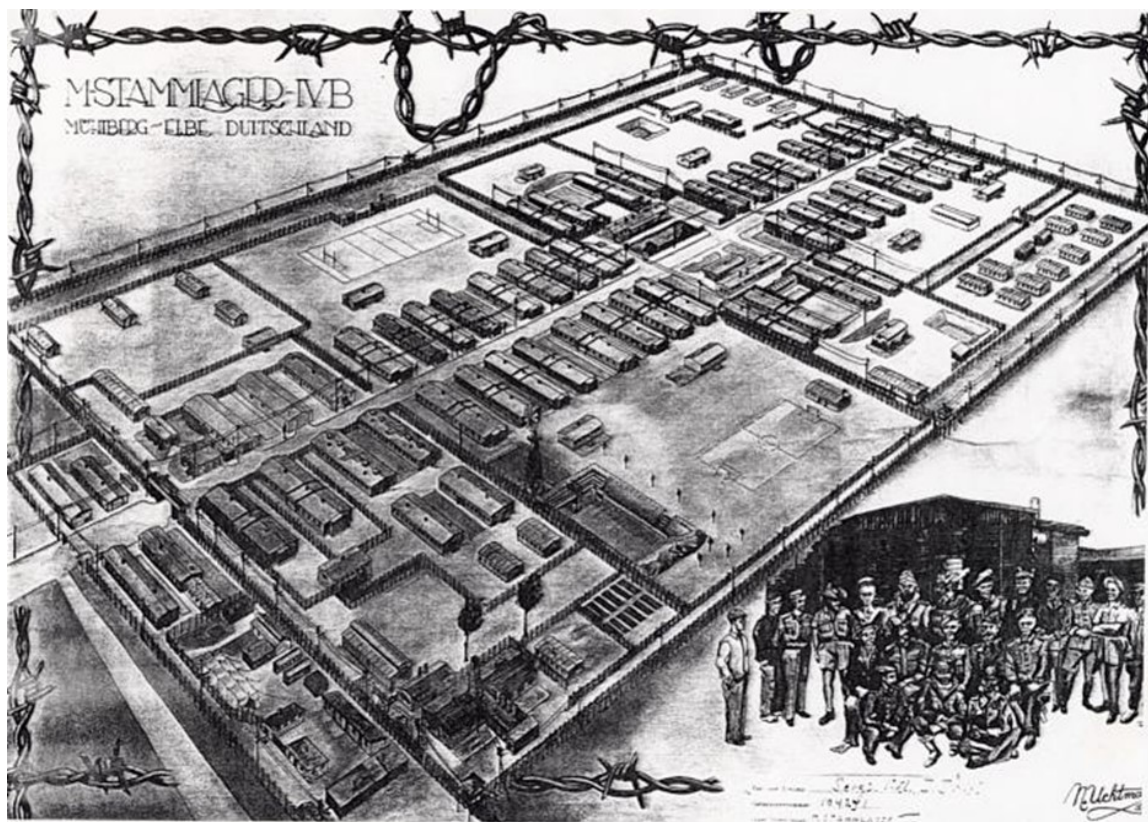
### **WATCHTOWER OF STALAG IVB**

The camp was divided into nine blocks with internal fences. Only three of these were completely fenced with locked gates. One of these blocks had a double fence with a guard post controlling the entrance to it. The enclosed area was very small and was occupied by Russian prisoners who were in the camp. They were accommodated in tents and lived under very primitive conditions.

The huts used by the Allied prisoners were constructed of wood under an arched roof. They were divided into sections by an ablution block fitted with concrete washing troughs with taps at suitable intervals fed by a pipe run down the wall dividing them. Provision was made for hot water in the form of a large urn fired from underneath, but this was seldom used. There was a door at each end of the hut and provision was made for a night latrine set on one side of the entrance and separated from the rest of the hut by an internal wall. Rows of three tier bunks were set up on the left side of the huts and spaced as follows: A line of three bunks, a passage and another two rows of bunks. This arrangement continued down the length of the hut. In the right-hand corner nearest the door, there was a set of three tier bunks for the use of the hut commander and, there was another set of bunks in the opposite corner. The empty spaces between these two sets of bunks had wooden tables and benches.

Each section of the huts was provided with two cooking areas which were connected to a sloping flue leading to a central chimney. These cooking areas had a solid steel top and were big enough to provide space for half of the occupants to use at one time. The huts were lit by electricity at night and windows were set in the long walls to allow daylight within. These windows had been carefully fitted with a mesh of barbed wire attached through them from the outside. The solitary door was the only means of escape in case of a fire. Each section of the camp housed 500 men, but we were not cramped in spite of this high number. Below is an accurate drawing of Stammlager Camp IVB





## STAMMLAGER CAMP IVB

### WE ENTER CAMP

After being marched from the train station to the camp we were confined to an area outside the camp where the shower block was located. Here we were lined up and took our places on a wooden bench to have our hair cut. The hair cutting was done by Russian prisoners and the clippers they used were similar to hand operated clippers used to trim horses. By the time they were finished, every strand of hair had been removed and, as it had recently snowed, we really felt the cold. From here we were moved to the next stop in the line where our photographs were taken for identification purposes. A card was hung around our necks showing each man's name, rank and a number that had been allocated by the guards. If you've ever seen a photograph on American gangster in a magazine, you would know it was exactly what we looked like.

From here, we were moved to another area outside the showers where we had to strip and hand over all our clothing to attendants who duly parcelled them up and put them into a gas chamber where they were fumigated with Cyanide. We were now naked and completely exposed to the elements and had to stay that way until eventually, our turn came to go into the shower. On entering the shower room, a sponge attached to a handle, soaked in some form of liquid was thoroughly applied by a guard under our arms and in the groin area.

Having received a small piece of soap we soon found a vacant shower and proceeded to have a good long hot shower. Oh, what a joy it was to gradually shed the layers of dirt and grime that we had accumulated over the months. We were very reluctant to leave the showers but leave we must, and we proceeded to a heated room where we dried off. Having done so we left this room and were faced with the task of finding our clothes. At long last we were free of lice, and we remained that way for the rest of our imprisonment.

We were marched through the main gate but, before we could enter the camp proper, we were subjected to a thorough body and clothing search. A party of troops from the SS regiment carried out the search. Despite the search there were those amongst us who were able to conceal certain items that were not detected by the hated SS. How was this done? It was a matter of simply concealing it in the most obvious place. To illustrate this point, I saw a man standing close to me calmly removing a small pistol and two clips of ammunition from his pocket and place them in the open palms of his hands before raising his arms above his head after undergoing a thorough frisking. As soon as the guards had passed him, he returned the weapon to his pocket and walked into the camp with his gun. Whether or not he was able to keep the gun and ammunition for the rest of his stay, I do not know? He certainly never used them in the camp.

From the gate, we were allowed to walk into the camp, and we were shown the huts that we were to occupy, and we were, at last, handed over to a fellow countryman who had been elected as Hut Leader. He was responsible for discipline, organising and allocating various duties that had to be carried out in the hut. He made a short speech of welcome and in it, we were told what to expect in the way of food, when each man would draw his Red Cross parcel issue and what parts of the camp were out of bounds. We were told what to expect if, by chance we strayed into any of these areas which were off limits.

The bunks provided were built of wood and their design was very similar to the now popular pine bunks seen in modern Scandinavian furniture stores. The only difference was that ours were three tiers high with no ladders provided. In place of a comfortable foam mattress, a straw filled paillasse was used. The first task was to fill the alliance with straw which had been brought into the camp in bales. We had one bale between four men. The bale was equally divided, and the paillasse was filled and was fairly comfortable for a day or two but, as time passed the straw became flattened and eventually ended up as chaff. As no more straw was issued, we were forced to make up for the lack of straw by using shredded paper from our Red Cross parcels. This soon formed into hard lumps, and we were reduced to sleeping on a thin layer covering the bed boards, far from comfortable as we did not have much in the way of body fat to pad us out.

Two blankets per man were issued and in the winter months a third blanket was added. On receiving your blankets, it did not take long to make up your bed and store what little kit you owned and to be able to settle down.

We were now issued with brand new British battle dress and two winter issue shirts. What a joy it was to be able to dispose of the ill-fitting garments that we had received in Italy and to dress in clothes that fitted and were clean and warm. The only thing that we could have done with was a great coat, but none were issued. The jacket of the battle dress had been carefully marked with a red paint triangle, but this faded in time and did not worry us at all.

Far more thought had been put into the design of the huts than those which we had been used to in the past. The two cooking areas built of brick and topped with a steel plate was heated from beneath and served the double purpose of a place to eat food and to provide warmth for the hut. The heating was achieved by means of a fire under the plates and the brick flue which led at an angle to the central chimney. Compressed coal dust briquettes were provided for fuel and, as long as there was an adequate supply of these the whole hut was kept fairly warm, even in the depths of winter. Towards the end of our stay in camp the supply of briquettes dropped off and fatigue parties were sent out of the camp to collect branches that had been trimmed off in the pine plantations close to the camp. As we could never gather enough branches in the time allocated, we had to reduce the time that the fires were kept alight resulting in us suffering from the cold, especially at night when it was not possible to keep the fires burning.



Two counts were carried out each day in the morning and then, the evening. In good weather we formed up in columns of threes outside the huts and we soon discovered that the Germans were far better at counting than the Italians. This meant that we were not kept on parade for too long. In the winter we were frequently counted in our huts, and this was really appreciated by us.



**TROOPS ASSEMBLED FOR ROLL CALL**

One of the most noticeable improvements we discovered were the toilet blocks, which were conveniently situated close to the huts. They were solidly built of concrete blocks and were always kept scrupulously clean. These toilets were so constructed that there was a waterproof concrete tank beneath the floor where all waste matter was contained. The Russian prisoners in the camp had the smelly task of pumping out the tanks and transferring the waste into a specially constructed round wooden tank. This wooden tank was mounted on a wagon body which was propelled by human power. A hand operated two-man pump was used and a flexible hose was lowered into the pit below through a manhole. When the wooden tank was full, the wagon was hauled out of the camp and the contents were disposed of onto a field which had been left fallow. I cannot imagine how we could have been expected to undertake this grim task and we were fortunate that the guards held the Russians in such low esteem. The system was efficient and, following the routine of emptying, the underground pits were never filled to overflowing. The toilet block had concrete seats which were extremely cold during the winter resulting in very short visits to the toilet.

Food, of course played a very important part of the life of a POW and if it had not been for the regular supply of Red Cross parcels I doubt if many of us would have survived. I have no idea of how the transport of these parcels was organised but, right up until the end of our incarceration, our camp never ran short of parcels.

The rations issued by the Germans were far more generous than those supplied to us in Italy but were far from balanced. As the war progressed, we found that our rations became smaller and the most noticeable item we missed was the provision of bread. The troops guarding us did not fare much better than us and their discipline must have been very strict as we never received a Red Cross parcel that had been tampered with in any way.



**A TYPICAL SCENE WITHIN THE MESS HALL**

We were issued with two hot meals a day. The first was at mid-day and then one in the evening. The issue of food was on the normal rota system and generally consisted of a variety of vegetable stew, the main ingredient being turnips. Occasionally a meagre amount of meat was added to the stew. In addition to the 500 grammes of stew, we were simultaneously issued with a good portion of potatoes boiled in their jackets. It took me a long time to face eating potatoes prepared this way when we returned to "civvy street". Once a day we were issued with dry rations, and this consisted of one large loaf of bread to be divided between four men. As stated previously, the loaf became smaller as the war progressed. A small amount of sugar was issued along with some type of jam and some meat paste. Very smelly cheese, margarine and salt made up the rest of the ration. Under the circumstances we were fairly well fed but never free of the pangs of hunger. It was quite amazing to observe how some men tried different means of stretching their ration over the day. What we missed more than anything was some variety to our food.



**CAMP ENTERTAINMENT**

Once again, we all blessed the Red Cross for providing a comprehensive selection of musical instruments and scripts for plays. The majority of the plays performed were written by inmates in the camp and were performed by a group of dedicated, hardworking, talented individuals. Backdrops and props had to be kept to the bare minimum as there were limited resources to create these items. The overall effect was amazing. Costumes were hard to come by and had to be made by hand from whatever material or fabric could be found. One can only guess the effect it had on a gathering of men in the audience when a man, dressed as a woman, appeared on stage! If you have read any of the escape stories from POW camps, you will know what could be produced by the camps' labour workshops.

There was no lack of talented and experienced men to produce and perform in these plays and they put in many long hours of rehearsals for the benefit of the inmates thus boosting our morale. As can be expected, the scripts had to be scrutinised and vetted by the camp authorities before they could be permitted to stage any sort of play. The senior officers in charge of the camp were always invited to attend the opening night of each performance and, judging from their applause, they demonstrated how much they enjoyed these activities. Needless to say, following the opening night the script was often altered to include any of the parts that had been edited by the German authorities.

Half of one hut was set aside for the camp theatre and a stage was provided. The array of lighting was limited to a few spotlights with adequate seating for the audience.

In addition to the plays, various types of entertainment were organised in individual huts, and some consisted of play readings performed behind a screen which were similar to those performed on the radio nowadays. Another form of entertainment was a group of men delivering talks around the camp of their roles in civvy street prior to the war. A large variety of topics were covered by these men who had a story to tell. From time to time, a party of musicians would visit a hut and put on a jazz show. Even if this music was inclined to be rather loud it helped to pass the time and boost morale. In fact, if you were prepared to attend ALL the entertainment on offer, there was no excuse for being bored!



**THE JAZZ BAND**

## **RELAXATION**

Each permanent camp was provided with a very good selection of library books and Stammlager IVB was no exception. A separate building had been erected to house these library books.

Each hut was provided with a large number of packs of cards and the more enthusiastic bridge players soon organised schools and ran hut vs inter hut competitions. As can be expected, there were also those who chose to play other, simpler card games. Chess was very popular and many of the inmates had their first introduction to this game. I remember teaching a friendly German guard the basic moves of the game and he progressed well enough. Once, while playing a relaxed game, I found myself in an awkward situation and was about to lose the game when I heard a voice behind me saying "Go back two moves and I will take you on". Lo and behold I found that my opponent was the guard who I had "tutored" previously and unbeknown to me, had been watching us play. I gave him a good run for his money, but I was eventually beaten but, not before a large crowd had gathered to watch the fun. I hope that guard was not delayed for too long to that he ended up in trouble.

## **STUDY**

It may surprise the reader to discover that many of the men came out of POW life better qualified than when they were captured. I take my hat off to them for persevering with their studies under trying conditions. The men took correspondence courses which were arranged by various institutions with the lectures and replies arranged through a special service provided by the Red Cross. Needless to say, there was a considerable delay before question papers were returned duly marked and corrected. Part of the library was partitioned off for the sole use of these mature students with all textbooks provided or obtained for their exclusive use.

## **SPORT**

The Red Cross yet again, supplied a variety of sports equipment for our use in the camp. The most popular sports were volleyball, football and rugby. Volleyball proved to be the most popular due the limited area required for a game. A full-size football pitch was laid out and, every section of the camp fielded a team to play in a knockout league. There were at least two full, first division teams made up of members of various clubs who played regular matches. A separate rugby pitch was established, and these matches were confined to National teams who played a series of "test" matches. So, the representation was as follows, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and a combined team of Welsh and Irish players. Quite how these men found the energy on our meagre rations to play these sports is beyond me. All matches were well patronised and appreciated by the spectators. Again, it was a diversion from the hum drum and built a sense of camaraderie.

## **NEWS**

The German authorities provided a daily newspaper and, the few of us who could read German used to study the paper for accuracy or valuable news. The paper was for general publication and the content was frequently inaccurate or out of date. It did however provide each hut with a map of the war front, and we marked out the maps using pins according to the paper. Upon close inspection it was obvious that the front lines had been marked out following the BBC news commentary. Our BBC news originated from a wireless receiver set which had been constructed by

a team of men. The radio receiver was housed in one of the huts occupied by the RAF. Almost every day, the set was tuned to the BBC with the news taken down in shorthand and subsequently transcribed to long hand. A copy was made for each hut and the hut leader read it out in the evening when it was safe, away from the guards' attention. Two versions of the secret radio existed. One was a Red Cross parcel and the other was in a carry case of an accordion. The Germans never managed to find the radio despite numerous searches in their efforts to keep us under their exclusive control. It was hidden in plain sight and never removed from the table on which it stood. One night, after the guards had been withdrawn from the camp, a messenger called the officer in charge requesting him to come and see the radio. He was naturally shocked to discover how simple the arrangements had been to retain the secrecy. Following this discovery, several more false radio sets were built and, duly found with a string of humorous written insults about the Germans inability to crack us.

### **LETTERS AND PARCELS FROM HOME**

We were restricted in the number of letters and post cards we could send within one month. It took a long time before mail from loved ones arrived. When they did, it was in batches of twos or threes. Mail was critical to our morale, and it was always a joy to receive news from so far away. Editing of letters into the camp was very strict to "keep us in the dark".

There was a limit as to the number and type of parcels we were permitted to receive. 500 cigarettes or their equivalent weight in tobacco was allowed very four months and a single clothing parcel every three months. We were always appreciative when these parcels arrived but, in reality many never reached the POW's.

### **FIRE WATCH**

The German authorities insisted that two men in each hut remained on fire duty every night for obvious safety reasons. All the hut windows were guarded (as described previously) so to escape a fire would have been nigh on impossible as there was a single man door at one end of the hut. After some persuasion, we convinced the guards that the external barbed wire be removed from the windows and subsequently we felt satisfied. We had no fires in the huts during my time in the camp.

### **THE FESTIVE SEASON**

Christmas did not have the same appeal being incarcerated with 500 men in a POW camp compared to civvy street. We managed to hoard some of our rations to celebrate Christmas day in the dead of winter, but it was a token event. I don't recall any form of religious service taking place during my time as a POW as we had no padre in the camp.

After many discussions with Germans, they finally permitted the lone Cameron piper to play a lament as he marched around the perimeter of the camp at midnight. Many of the hardened men shed a silent tear at the sound of the pipes and, quite what the Germans thought of this activity is anyone's guess?



## DAILY ACTIVITIES

Our daily activities were governed by the seasons. In the summer, we spent as much time as possible outdoors enjoying the fresh air once we had completed whatever chores were required in the huts. The first thing was a walk around the camp as it was important to retain a small degree of fitness. The length of the walk was dependent upon how you felt after another night sleeping on timber planks and a thin mattress. Following a walk, groups of men would congregate and discuss topics of interest with some, simply settling down with a book from the library. Those studying correspondence course work would find a quiet place to concentrate. At all times however, there was some type of sport taking place which drew the crowds. After the summer, the cold weather drove us into the huts.

During the winter the prospect of a walk in the snow had no appeal. There was constant ice on the ground with the risk of a fall so, our fitness levels dropped once more. A few hardy souls managed to create a type of ice skating on the frozen ponds in their boots. It was not a popular past time and as the winter dragged on, so did our boredom. We had card games (again) but the novelty of being cooped up in the hut soon led us to simply spend time under our blankets. The cold kept us indoors and, as the fuel supply for the stoves diminished, there was even less to encourage us out of our beds. It was not uncommon to spend 14 hours in bed.

Every now and again, the Germans decided that there was some task to be done around the camp. A party of men were detailed to undertake these tasks. A German non-commissioned officer was normally in charge of these parties and, invariably, they would proceed with an explanation of what had to be done. The party were asked if they understood German. Having assured the officer that German was understood, he would proceed to tell us what was to be done. At suitable intervals we would assure him that we knew exactly what was required by repeating "Ja Ja" at appropriate intervals. When he finally finished his instructions one bright spark amongst us would say "Nichts verstaan". This statement was always followed by "Verdomte Engelsman", and the officer would send for an interpreter to repeat the instructions. The Germans never seemed to grasp that this was a ploy, and they would have saved a lot of time by engaging an interpreter in the first place. For our part, we were satisfied that we had managed to waste a lot of time, reduced our workload, and annoyed the guards.

It may surprise the reader to know that no disciplinary action was taken against men for stealing from each other which occurred very rarely. No doubt, this was due to the fact that we were all in the same predicament.

Now and then one of the prisoners would disregard the stand camping orders and would land in the cooler (jail) for his troubles. Conditions in the cooler were far from pleasant as the inmate was reduced to bare camp rations and as a result, transgressions of the camp rules seldom took place.

On one occasion, we had to fetch the Red Cross parcels from the local railway station. This station was in Muhlberg and we had to pass through part of the town. We were struck how well fed the children were. Obviously, they must have been issued with well-balanced rations. What the fate of those children was when the war finally caught up with them does not bear thinking about.

## CAMP MORALE

Despite the very cramped conditions we lived under and the absolute lack of privacy, the general morale in the camp was always very high. As can be expected, at some time some of the men would hit a low spot and get disillusioned and depressed. One of the first noticeable reactions when this occurred was their tendency to neglect bodily cleanliness and to mope about and not

participate in the daily activities. Fortunately, their friends would notice this depression and step in and make them snap out of it. There were a few occasions when men committed suicide, but this was not a common occurrence and the exact nature of the cause of death was never disclosed to their loved ones.

## **CURRENCY**

The only type of currency we possessed was in the form of cigarettes. If you couldn't manage on the ration of 50 per week you had to think of ways of acquiring more. Those men trained in the art of hairdressing never lacked customers and they charged a single cigarette for a haircut. Other men repaired clothes or darned socks or did any other task that would reward a cigarette. There were only a few men who were prepared to swap items of food from their Red Cross parcels for cigarettes. The majority would rather keep every shred of tobacco and then roll their own.

## **SWAP SHOP**

Soon after the Red Cross parcels had been distributed, cries could be heard "Klim for Cowbell, Cheese for jam" etc. The items not swapped were chocolate and tea. On the whole we were satisfied with the luck of the draw regarding the contents of our parcels and would settle down to try to work out how to stretch the ration as far as possible always aware that you shared with your half section.

## **ESCAPE**

This was always very much on our minds however, the location of the camp along the banks of the Elbe River was a distinct barrier to any proposed escape.

On one occasion, a tunnel was dug leading out of the camp. The tunnel started under the camp library which was situated close to the outer perimeter. When the tunnel was started, there was a tall crop growing in the field adjacent to the camp which would have provided excellent cover for any escapees. The biggest problem of tunnelling out of a POW camp was the dispersal and camouflaging of the newly excavated earth. I know that the same methods were used across the POW camps where tunnelling was an option. It was common to congregate around a game of volleyball, disperse the soil from the bags within the trousers and shuffle about to mix the dirt. Unfortunately for the tunnellers, the Germans working their crop outside the camp decided to plough the crop for compost and a tractor collapsed into the tunnel. There was such a flurry of activity with this discovery, and it was quite some time before the tractor was removed from the tunnel. Several loads of the contents of the sanitary wagon were then poured down the tunnel.

The only other escape bid I heard of was made by a Dutch prisoner who had been provided with a pass made out in the name of the regiment guarding the camp. He was also provided with a map of an escape route and a small compass. Apparently, these items were concealed in a ¼ lb tin of tobacco within a larger tobacco parcel. The Dutch soldier successfully made it to his home where he was picked up by the Germans and returned to Stammlager IV to spend some time in the cooler in solitary confinement on short rations. The end result was that all tobacco tins were now carefully opened and scrutinised by the guards, but this made it difficult to keep the tobacco moist in a broken seal. Similarly, some tinned fish was opened for inspection and had to be eaten the same day before it was spoiled.

## MOVEMENT THROUGH THE CAMP

As this was originally a transit camp a fair number of men came and went as they were engaged from one working party to the next. Imagine my surprise when, engaged on one of my daily exercise walks, I came across a man who had recently been in the camp, and he told me that my younger brother was in a certain hut. In no time I found myself in my brother's hut and we caught up with all of our news. I had not seen him since our capture in the desert. We had only just missed each other in the second camp in Italy. As fate would have it, his stay at Stammlager IV was very brief and he was sent on a working party to Poland where he remained until the end of the war.

At one stage a large group of women were moved into an open cage adjacent to ours. Where they came from or their final destination, we never found out. It did not take long for the inmates to rally around and to pass over the fence all the suitable clothing we could spare which was obviously much appreciated.

As the war progressed after D Day and the battle moved deeper into France, it wasn't long before our first batch of American prisoners arrived in our camp. We soon realised that these men lacked the ability to keep themselves clean. Of the ten who came into our section of the hut, only 4 seemed concerned with their personal hygiene with the other 6 restricting themselves to washing their hands and faces. They were probably unused to the total lack of privacy in the shower block that we had become accustomed to. Overall, they were given a rough time by us seasoned POW's who had been in the camp for a long time. These Americans had been captured very recently following the Battle of The Bulge in December 1944 where they had been held in fairly decent conditions compared to Stammlager IV. It was only after we were released and spent 14 days in their rest camp that we understood why they were so soft compared to our standards. From what we observed, we were convinced that their rest camp was luxurious compared to our conditions.

Soon after, another batch of prisoners arrived at our camp and again, we received ten new arrivals into our hut. These men were British soldiers who had been force marched from Poland. By comparison, by the time sun set these men had thoroughly washed all their kit and had a long shower, relieved to be in "safe" hands.

As there were no spare bunks in our hut several of the men had to double up on the small bunks and the conditions within the hut deteriorated up until the end of the war. Privacy was the one thing that we all lacked and yet, I cannot remember seeing a fight or a serious argument break out amongst the inmates of our hut.

## TRAGEDY STRIKES

One area of the camp had been divided off by a single fence and the buildings within were used as a factory of some kind where a large number of Russian prisoners worked. This area was strictly out of bounds to the rest of us. Groups of men used to play football close to the fence and quite often, the ball would land on the wrong side of the fence. To recover the ball, the players would shout to one of the guards asking for the ball to be returned. This was not a quick process and, one day, one of the footballers took it upon himself to retrieve the ball. Despite the fact that the guards were ever present and watching us from their towers, he started to climb over the fence. The guard came out of his guard post and shot him dead. This action caused a howl of protest from us but there was no recourse.

For quite some time we were subjected to the harassment of Junker fighters flying low over the camp. In spite of the numerous complaints lodged with the camp commander and "The Man of



Confidence" the pilot became even more daring flying lower and lower as each day passed. One day, making an extra low run over the entire length of the camp he realised that he was certain to crash into a dividing fence so, he pulled up and the tail of the plane skidded low enough across the ground to kill a man innocently going about his affairs. The Junkers completely demolished the fence and, by sheer luck missed an accommodation hut and a sentry box. We all wanted him to crash but he managed to continue his low flight path. The authorities told us he had been severely reprimanded and the low flying across the camp came to an end.

A German jet fighter was stationed close to our camp and operated from a nearby runway. None of us had seen this type of aircraft before and it attracted a lot of attention when the pilot chose to fly quite close to the camp. During one of its flights, it was pursued by an American Lightning fighter. The German pilot flew extremely low and hopped over the camp. His flight took him directly over the theatre and, as he flew over, the Lightning opened fire and the theatre was completely peppered with bullets. Fortunately, the hut (theatre) was empty so no injuries. The fighter escaped the Lightning attack and that was the end of the excitement as these fighters never returned.

Towards the end of our stay in IVB, firewood was in very short supply and parties of volunteers were allowed out, under guard, to collect firewood from a pine plantation which had been recently trimmed. When one of these working parties were marching next the fence and were about to re-enter the gate, an American fighter appeared on the scene strafing the men. Several men were killed, and it must have been perfectly obvious to the pilot that this was a POW camp so we could not understand how this could have happened. The Germans maintained that "if a cow flicked its tail in a field, the Americans would strafe it".

## **BOMBING RAIDS**

Whenever air raids took place there was no need for us to block out our windows as the Germans had divided the country into blocks and, as an Allied night raid approached a certain point within the block, a switch was pulled which plunged the entire block into darkness. After the raid, the lights were switched on again and we resumed our simple life. During the raids we were confined to our huts so, never had the satisfaction of seeing the Allied bombers. Our camp was on the route to Dresden and, when Dresden was bombed continually for 3 days and nights, we could hear the planes roaring through the night. Occasionally the target was close to Muhlberg and the vibrations of the bombs could be felt throughout the camp. The bombing raids were generally about four hours long. The daylight raids were watched by all and sundry. An amazing sight to see 1000 Flying Fortresses passing over us, in mass formation, on their way to the target. From the position in the sky where the lead plane sent out a flare signal, we could tell, more or less, which town was the target. As long as the bombers remained in formation, no fighter dared intercept them but if one bomber broke rank, it was not long before he would be attacked and end up in flames.

During one of these raids, we noticed a figure appearing from one of the planes as he floated down suspended from his parachute. He landed just outside the camp in a newly ploughed field. We could see that he was badly wounded as he couldn't control the parachute. A strong wind dragged him across the field with 2 guards in close pursuit. After a spell in a German hospital, he was transferred into our camp. Only then did we discover why he had been dropped at all. Apparently, the Americans had a system by which wounded crew were graded in severity and, anyone with a certain level of wounds, was dropped over enemy territory with the reasonable certainty that the wounded airman would be in a German hospital before the Americans would reach their base in Europe. No doubt, many lives were saved by this seemingly harsh tactic.

One of the first indications we had, other than the news on the radio, was that the war was drawing closer to us was the intensity of the bombing raids. The daylight raids were now supported by fighter cover flying above the bombers. The fighters, in much faster planes had to weave about above the slow bombers to maintain full protection. It was now clear that the Allied forces had advanced to such an extent that the aircraft could operate from airfields in France.

Towards the end of our stay in this camp, the USA Lightning fighter bombers started to strafe targets on the ground. One of these targets was a large group of covered railway wagons which had been shunted into a siding not far from our camp and partially obscured by trees. We soon realised why they had been "hidden". They were packed with explosives and when they were hit by the Lightnings, there was an almighty explosion which cheered us no end.

We never saw any Russian Airforce planes operating anywhere nearby and, right up until we left the area of Germany which fell under Russian control, we still did not see hide nor hair of them.

### **THE END DRAWS NEAR**

As time passed the activities in the sky became more intense. The guards stationed at our camp became more anxious and jittery with the result that their attitude towards us changed for the better. It became apparent that it would simply be a matter of time before the Russians would advance past our camp. From the radio news, we were certain that it would be the Russian army that would liberate us and end our days as POW's.

What sort of treatment we would receive became a hot topic of conversation. No doubt the POW camp committee had everything worked out well in advance and had a definite plan of action.

We were advised by the camp committee that, when the day came that the advancing army came into our camp, we would be far safer if we stayed in the camp until such time that we were informed that it was safe to go out into the surrounding area.

Things became more tense as the days wore on and, after almost three years of POW life we looked forward to our freedom. Thank goodness we were not kept in suspense for very long and, by this time any talk of escape was a thing of the past. Life continued as normally as could be expected under the circumstances of "almost being free".



**AT LIBERATION – THE FLAGS ARE RAISED**

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE END OF P.O.W. DAYS**

The Russian advancing column consisting of armoured artillery and infantry passed our camp during the night but, we had no idea of their passing as there were no military targets nearby.

The early risers the next morning, mid-April 1945, soon had everyone out of the huts. What a sight met our eyes! The countryside was swarming with infantry. They resembled a swarm of locusts, and we were left in no doubt about the reason for their spectacular advance. What amazed us even more was that the infantry was not at all mechanised and all equipment was horse drawn. We wondered how a horse drawn regiment could keep up with the armoured column.

A volley of rifle fire from a small clump of trees near the camp soon had the attention of the artillery who brought in ten horse drawn field guns and opened fire. Not much was left of the clump of trees. Not certain that the resistance had been wiped out two scouts well-spaced apart were sent to investigate. Satisfied that there was no further threat the units dispersed and went on their way.

In the meantime, the camp fence had been cut in several places and a party of senior Russian officers entered the camp. Word quickly spread that, as advised, the safest place for us was to remain in the camp. When the battle front had passed through the immediate area, we were permitted to raid the country to the East of the camp but should return to the safety of the camp by nightfall.

To begin with, we had to rely on our food stocks in the camp and fortunately, we had enough. Our rations soon improved, and we kept the kitchens functioning.

The following day, an American Jeep manned by an American officer and two others enters the camp and asked if we were short of anything. "Cigarettes" came the cry and, before the day was over a generous supply of cigarettes had been delivered and distributed.

The first prisoners to be removed were the Russians. They were given 48 hours to report to a base camp. Later, when we were being moved out of the Russian zone, we came across a number of the base camps, and we were shocked to see that these men were back in full military training.

Once the battle had moved across the Elbe River, we were allowed out of the camp on the proviso that we kept to the area east of the camp and returned at nightfall. It did not take us long to discover that every house in the small farming villages, within walking distance from the camp, had rabbit hutches in their gardens. These rabbits were quickly dispatched and eaten as soon as they were cooked. This meagre supply of meat was soon exhausted, so our target became poultry of any description. The variety of chickens were generally kept in large pens outdoors so catching them was not the easiest but, we managed. With my agricultural background I was not at all squeamish about despatching live animals for the pot.

The contents of the houses were not of any interest other than pots and pans which were taken back to the camp. We had free access to these houses as the population had fled from the advancing armies. It was tempting to occupy these homes rather than the camp but, as we had established some rapport with the “rabble” infantry (Russians), we realised that occupying these homes would not be safe. We were not troubled by the troops but were stopped and questioned by them quite frequently. We had no understanding of each other’s language, so we had to make do with sign language which seemed to work.

Once the poultry had vanished it now became necessary to deal with larger stock such as the pigs, sheep and goats. Naturally it took a larger group of men so, the raiding parties were increased in size. There were not too many mid-sized livestock available so again we had to look at the larger option – cattle. Cattle were running loose so had to be rounded up and caught manually so, the raiding parties were again increased. Again, my knowledge of how to slaughter proved useful and, in no time at all, the party I was with had killed a fat Friesland cow. We took the prime cuts from this and directed the other raiding parties to the carcass. I’m sure that not much was left by nightfall.

This happy time wandering over the country and helping ourselves to anything we could find in the way of food lasted two weeks. As we were now living on a diet of protein, we soon put on weight and became less gaunt.

During this time someone found the room where the camp records were kept, and I was presented with the photograph attached to my identity card. Sadly, over the years this photograph was lost as it would have made a valuable contribution to this book.

At the end of our 14 days of roaming about the Russians decided that they required the camp to house others so, we were moved to a village called Riesa, just north of Hamburg. To reach this town on the west bank of the Elbe, we had to march about 14 km carrying all of our possessions. We were still far from any fitness levels and the column soon became drawn out and we must have resembled a crowd of refugees on the move. During our 14 km march, we passed several villages and the first thing we noticed was the horrific loss of life the Russians had suffered during the advance. There were at least 6 newly dug graves around the central well of each village with fresh flowers added every day by the civilians.

As all the road bridges across the Elbe had been blown up by the retreating German army, the Russians had been forced to build bridges in whatever they could find. The bridge we crossed was constructed entirely of wood and could carry one stream of tanks leaving enough space for six columns of infantry to march through. This resourcefulness provided a good insight of how the Russians had conducted their war.

Having been allocated billets in various buildings, we were once again forced to adopt to a completely different lifestyle. We were now in a large town occupied by Russian troops and our food raids into the surrounding farmlands were drastically reduced. This was due to the well organised Russian looting parties that were now operating throughout the area. We still managed to keep ourselves well fed but now, we had to rely on the food provided by our Russian friends.

As can be expected, we inspected all the vacant neighbouring buildings but could not find much of value in them as they had been completely stripped by the Russians. I remember finding a cider bottling plant but, the vats had been breached and the contents dispersed into the street. A disappointment because we'd hoped to enjoy some cider after our long imprisonment. The Russian looting parties were so well organised, and we were detailed to select only one type of item. Everything of the slightest use to the Russians had been taken and we saw lorry after lorry full of cattle being taken towards the back lines. When we made enquiries about this process of taking the cattle, we were told that they were taking back from the Germans that which had been taken from them with some interest.

On our wanderings around the town, we encountered women soldiers of the Russian army. Their detail was to establish traffic control in the town, and they were armed with Tommy guns and a very vicious looking revolver. They directed the traffic using different coloured flags and you were left in no doubt when you were expected to stop prior to crossing a street. If you were stupid enough to try to cross the street without sanction, a Tommy gun was aimed at you which stopped you in your tracks. I've never seen a tougher looking bunch of women.

We were able to communicate with some of the Russian officers in a tank unit which we came across in the town square. They showed us one of the larger tanks more along the lines of a mobile artillery piece as it was armed with a 10mm cannon and, other than the driver's and co driver's seats there was little comfort for the rest of the crew. The Russians told us the American tanks were far too fancily fitted even down to an ash tray. The wireless operators of these tanks were predominantly women and they insisted on some comfort being provided within. We observed one of these tanks being driven across uneven ground and we were amazed at the speed with which the tank was able to maintain.

All work in the fields had come to a complete stop and no effort was being made to work the land by the few remaining Germans. How Germany planned to feed their population in the coming months when crops would have flourished remained a mystery to us.

I didn't see one example of molestation of the civilians, and we doubted the validity of the atrocities which had been reported during the advance. I am not saying that atrocities did not occur just, that we saw no evidence of such behaviour. We were able to keep abreast of the progress of the war by means of a wireless that we found and, in due course we learned that Berlin had fallen. It would surely be a matter of time before the German army packed it in?

The Russians celebrated VE Day the night before the Allies and, it was an occasion when we were glad to have four solid walls to protect us. Every conceivable weapon was discharged continuously throughout the night as the celebrations continued. Such was the constant noise that sleep was impossible and the following morning we encountered many drunk Russians weaving their way through the streets.

## **THE AMERICANS TAKE OVER**

At long last, after many months of uncertainty, the Americans arrived and took over the responsibility of looking after us. You can imagine our joy and relief as we had heard persistent

rumours that we were to be taken to Russia “for our safekeeping”. The efficient American army had been busy and by some means, provided a fleet of buses with drivers to transport us into the American zone. We were formed up into groups of soldiers (once again) and escorted to these buses by GI military personnel. Once we had settled down in the buses, the convoy was given final orders and off we went. It was quite an experience for us to travel on an autobahn compared to our previous means of travel in cattle trucks. To describe an autobahn would not benefit this document other than to say that detours were necessary where bridges had been blown up. After a long but fast journey, we arrived at the camp where we were to be housed. It was an artillery base camp and provided us with all the luxury we could wish for.

Our accommodation consisted of wooden huts equipped with proper beds, mattresses, sheets, pillows, blankets and plenty of storage for our meagre possessions in lockers. It was not long before we settled down and sorted ourselves into the groups and these huts. Generally, we tended to drift towards those with whom we had befriended throughout our stay in the POW camps.

Before long, we enjoyed our first taste of the type of food that we would receive during our stay in this camp. Bear in mind, that food had been a topic of discussion for the past 3 years as we never seemed to have enough to eat. A Jeep loaded with boxes of K Rations arrived outside our hut. We were instructed to form parties of eight to share a box of these rations which were designed to feed ten men. Each box was carefully labelled – breakfast lunch and supper and, in addition to the food, contained ten packets of twenty cigarettes, ten packets of chewing gum and ten neat rolls of toilet paper! We were issued with white bread and, having lived on inferior black bread for so long, this white bread was like eating cake! Despite their good intentions, the food in the K Rations was actually too spicy for our neutralised tastes. We had not tasted condiments like salt or pepper for a long time so, this new food was a struggle. We would have preferred British Army bully beef and biscuits but, our tastes changed fairly quickly, and we enjoyed the generosity of the Americans. The canteen on site was of no use to us as we were penniless.

One morning we were rudely interrupted by a senior NCO who pulled up outside in his Jeep to order us out on parade. We asked why we were being ordered on to parade and were informed that the standing American orders were that ALL men had to shower at least once a week. We were not very disciplined by this time so, suggested that, if there was sufficient hot water, we would shower when it suited us. As we were now under the governance of the American army their orders were to be followed. When we arrived at the showers, we were handed a kit bag and shown to a room where we stripped and placed our clothes into these bags. The bags were taken away and we caught up with them when we had finished washing. Next step was into the shower room where we were handed a piece of soap and found a vacant shower stall. It was a delight to be able to wash in hot water and rid ourselves of the grime we had accumulated in the Russian camp. The thing that struck us was that the NCO’s remained within the shower area to ensure that the GI’s with us, washed themselves properly. Now we understood why the American soldiers who had joined us in Stammlager IVB seemed unable to wash themselves without supervision?

From the showers we went into a heated room where we were able to dry off before entering another room where we discovered our clothing. The G.I’s went into a separate room where a complete change of clothing was laid out for them on long tables. We asked if we could be issued with this type of uniform but, as we were not American servicemen, this was not possible.

As we were now receiving rations that were more than adequate for our needs, we soon lost the fear of going hungry. Naturally there were still some hangovers from the days of hunger, and we remained inclined to make certain that we received our fair share of any food available. As the days passed this desire became less and less noticeable and before long, we eventually felt that our fear of hunger and almost completely died out.

We were now sorted into our various countries of origin in preparation for our next move on our way to England. The final break with old friends now came and we were then moved into huts which consisted entirely of South African personnel. The day eventually arrived when we were transported to the nearest airfield to be flown out into the British zone.

On our way to the airfield, we were struck by the difference between the activities in the Russian and American zones. As previously stated, there were no farming activities going on in the Russian zone but in the American zone tractors were working the land in preparation for planting. The difference was like night and day. Another thing that struck us was the way in which the Americans mixed with the German civilian population despite the strict orders which had been issued against this activity.

We were transported to an airfield situated close to Halle and there, we were divided into groups of approximately 38 servicemen prior to being allocated to a specific C47 or C54 troop transporter. These aircraft had been in use since the D Day landings when airborne troops were used extensively and now, they were being used to ferry supplies into the zone and to transport ex POW's out as quickly as possible. There were none of the luxuries of modern aircraft. The seating consisted of two rows of metal seats either side of the fuselage with an indentation to accommodate your buttocks. We entered the plane through a central hatch and took our seats. We all noticed the rail to which the rip cord of a parachute would have been attached. There were no parachutes. As a mixture of infantry men and gunners, we had no training in parachuting so, they would have been of little use to us.

As soon as the plane was fully loaded and suitable instructions issued as how we were to behave once we were airborne, the plane taxied to the end of the runway and waited its turn to take off. Very few of us had flown before so we speculated amongst ourselves what it would be like to fly. The suspense was over very quickly as the plane increased its speed with the ensuing roar of the engines and, before we realised it, we were airborne! Our field of vision through the small portholes was limited but we could see that objects on the ground were becoming smaller and smaller as we gained height. We soon realised that we were flying in formation of three aircraft and the plane we were in was the last in the formation. It became clear that the slipstream of the two preceding aircraft would create some turbulence and our ride became quite bumpy. We then encountered natural draughts and air pockets and soon enough air sickness took its toll. It only took one man to start the reaction of the others, but we had been supplied with plenty of air sick bags for the occasion. We were grateful to land fairly soon at an airfield near Brussels where we disembarked to be told that this was as far as the Americans would take us. The RAF would now be responsible for the remainder of our journey. We also discovered that it was now too late to continue our journey so, we were billeted close to airfield for the night.

As it was early evening in the town, we were permitted to leave the camp and before long we enjoyed the freedom of strolling the streets in the city. Having no money, we soon became bored and returned to the billets.

The following morning, we were once again assembled in the loading area and in no time, we were aboard, and the plane taxied to the end of the runway ready to take off. The plane could not get enough speed for take-off so, we had to return to the loading area, disembark and wait while the ground crew worked on the plane. From the loading area we could see that once the cowling had been removed and faulty wiring had to be reconnected and then the cowling replaced. Again, we were ready for take-off. With the wiring problem solved we were soon airborne but now we had our doubts about the air worthiness of this plane. It was with relief that we discovered that this flight was very smooth and, as we were no longer flying in formation, there was no turbulence from

the other aircraft. As we flew over Cologne it became clear that the city had been virtually annihilated from the continuous bombing by the Allies.



## CHAPTER 6

### BACK IN BRITAIN

At long last we caught our first glimpse of the white cliffs of Dover and soon we were flying across the familiar English countryside. We were very grateful to have made the trip across the Channel with no further drama. Having landed safely, we suffered the indignity of having DDT powder liberally sprayed over our clothing before we were allowed to assemble ready for our train journey to Brighton where we were to be billeted. This short journey was quite a pleasure knowing that we were safely back in Blighty. As we were one of the last batches to arrive, we found that the arrangements for our reception were well organised, and any red tape had been cut to the minimum. This was just as well as we lacked discipline and would not have taken kindly to being mucked about.

Billets in various parts of the town had been provided and we were escorted to these billets. We were told of the arrangements to provide us with pay books, new clothing and all the other articles that we would require. The padre in charge of the camp addressed us and told the story of how one man had recently come to him with a request to be married. Having taken the man's details, the padre asked for the young lady's details. "Her name please". "Mary Jane" he replied. "Mary Jane Who?" asked the padre. "I don't know sir, I just met her two days ago!". I heard this type of story more than once and, considering the time we had been deprived of women's company, it was completely plausible.

After we had been escorted to our billets we settled in as best we could. The beds were not comfortable but, the lukewarm water was more of an issue for us as we all wanted to enjoy the luxury of a decent hot bath. Back to army life the following day for a parade and for the issue of new clothing. Amongst this new clothing we were issued with a ribbon bar with the African Service medal and, the General Service medal sewn onto it. Quite a source of pride for us after over three years. Vaccinations and a general health check followed before we were issued with a pass for one month's leave. We were warned that we must report back to the billets at the end of our leave. Now, for the first time in three years we were paid in hard cash and received pay books plus ration books for food only. Time enough to return to the billets, sew on new stripes etc before hitting the town. Before going into town most of us sat down to write letters home informing our families that we were safe and well.

I was fortunate to know a family friend stationed in South Africa House, so I contacted him. I was told that my younger brother was staying with him, and he made arrangements to pick me up the next day so that I could stay with them at their family home in Finchley. It was a joy to leave the billets and back to a relaxed family life for a few days. I learnt that despite the notorious death marches from Poland across Germany my younger brother Alan Ford, had survived and was released by the advancing American army. He had arrived in England two weeks before me. What a lot of chin wagging went on into the night once we were alone in our shared bedroom with so much news to share.

The next day we sallied forth on what was to be a daily journey by tube to Trafalgar Square and then by foot to explore London. Unfortunately, all the public buildings of interest were still closed and barricaded with sandbags. Despite this we managed to see quite a lot of London but, invariably, by the time it came for us to return "home" we were well and truly lost. With the tube network we soon discovered that it was quite easy to retrace our steps to return home before the rush hour. These trips from Finchley took us about 45 minutes. One day our host suggested we try the bus instead of the tube and, helpfully explained which buses we could catch to get to central London.

We tried this and to our horror discovered that the same distance took us 90 minutes so, that was the end of bus travel for us.

Rationing was still the order of the day and we duly handed over our food ration books. When you visited a house, you had to be careful to select the lunch dish that would provide the most substantial meal. One day we volunteered to do the family shopping and were given a list of requirements. We soon became accustomed to queuing at every shop and it was essential to shop early, or you were unlikely to get much on the shopping list. Later, back in South Africa, we were shocked to hear people complaining about shortages especially as the shops were well stocked and there were no apparent shortages of goods available.

We visited Scotland Yard and were given a limited number of petrol coupons which we handed over to our hosts. We were told where we could obtain an issue of ten loose clothing coupons which would be enough to buy a pair of shoes and a tie! Before long we visited this venue to exchange our clothing coupons only to discover that that they were only acceptable in certain shops as they were considered unlawful. The coupons turned out to be spares issued to South African officers who, once they had bought their share of clothing handed the remainder back to the Central Depot. We managed to find a friendly shop keeper who accepted our coupons and we both bought some shoes to rid ourselves of our well-worn army boots. How light these new shoes felt on my feet!

During our stay in Finchley, we contacted the sister of an aunt of ours who worked in the Foreign Office. We arranged to have lunch with her after which we were escorted back to her office. Her office was in a building opposite no 10 Downing Street, and we were keen to get a glimpse of this famous building. The first obstruction was a barricade manned by army personnel but, they relented and allowed us past. We were then confronted by a police post who demanded to see the relevant documents to pass this point. We had nothing of the sort however, our friend from the Foreign Office identified herself and after she had explained the purpose of our visit, we were instructed to form up on each side of her and march smartly in as far as the front door to number 10. After achieving this small victory, we marched straight out again and took our leave of our friendly host.

Having seen enough of London, Alan and I decided to explore more of Great Britain and so we set off to Edinburgh by night train. Upon arrival we were faced with trying to find accommodation but discovered that a special organisation organised accommodation for returning soldiers and soon enough we settled into comfortable accommodation for as long as we wanted to stay.

The floral clock in Princes Street had been refurbished and was working once again so well worth a visit. No trip to Edinburgh is complete without a visit to the castle to climb the ramparts and look at the view down Princes Street. A statue and plaque commemorating the Scottish soldiers who fell during the Boer War was an essential visit for us.



**EDINBURGH MEMORIAL TO THE ROYAL SCOTS GREYS, (DRAGOON GUARDS) COMMEMORATING THOSE WHO DIED IN THE BOER WAR.**

Another very important activity for us in Edinburgh, was to seek out and hear a piper performing on bag pipes. As this is a fairly common occurrence, we heard the piper which gave us great joy and comfort.

We then travelled across the Firth of Forth and returned by ferry taking in all the sights within this area. No trip to Scotland is complete without enjoying some of Scotland's finest ales so, after visiting several pubs we wound our way back to our home in the late evening.

So, enough of Edinburgh and off to Aberdeen. The granite buildings seemed their finest after the rain and simply gleamed after one of many showers. We spent an enjoyable evening in the NAAFI club which involved more drinking and reminiscing with fellow servicemen and found ourselves sitting in the gutter after closing time with a generous supply of bottled beer. The three paratroopers in the gutter seemed unconcerned about the late hour until a constable on foot patrol came along and, although he declined our offer a pint, he told us to move along. What our hosts thought of our late arrival home is anyone's guess but, it was never discussed. We paid the bill, retrieved our ration books and returned to Brighton.

Safely back in the billets life soon became extremely boring as there was nothing to do as we waited for news of the arrival of the next ship back to South Africa. We were issued with tinned South Africa fruit and other luxuries and, it embarrassing to see the looks on the faces of the local inhabitants as we carried these goods back to billets as the local inhabitants had none of these luxuries. They had been so deprived for so long during the war and fresh fruit was just starting to arrive from America but, it was very expensive.

We managed to change our place in one draft and spent an extra fourteen days in billets. We befriended a family from London who were on holiday at the coast. One day we walked into the country and came across a museum where nursery rhymes were exhibited with all the characters depicted by cats. A nearby country tearoom was our next stop where we enjoyed the luxury of a boiled egg, strawberries and cream tea. At a cost of one pound, it seemed expensive but, it had been a long time since we had enjoyed such a luxury. Hard to imagine a boiled egg creating such a wonderful memory.

## CHAPTER 7

### BACK TO SOUTH AFRICA

D (for departure day) day eventually arrived, and I cannot say that I was sorry to see it come as, like most of us, we had become extremely bored. We'd had enough of billets, stereo type rations and nothing much to do during the day in what was a "foreign" country to us. We were relieved to discover that all air transport had been stopped after a series of tragic air crashes. Our trip to South Africa would be on a Union Castle liner.

From Brighton we travelled by rail to Southampton and boarded the Edinburgh Castle. Except for a limited number of cabins reserved for officers and other ranks who had become married during our stay in England, we found out that we were to be housed below decks in three tier bunks and an area set aside for mess tables. Set times were allocated for meals and all food and drink had to be collected from the central galley by a fatigue party. These fatigue parties were changed daily. Conditions below deck were very crowded and inclined to become stuffy as we neared the equator. As very few of us had been to sea before, we were soon seasick once we left the Channel. What could have happened in rough seas is anyone's guess. Up on deck, things were just as crowded, and it was quite a task to find somewhere to sit. We had no choice in these matters and simply had to endure these conditions for the next fourteen days. Time has a habit of passing and we were finally greeted by the sight of the "tablecloth" (of mist) rolling off Table Mountain as we neared Cape Town early one morning.

Eventually, the pilot arrived on board to take over and guide us into the harbour. Here the tugs were attached, and we were manoeuvred into position alongside the quay. Due to our excitement of seeing the famous city, most of us had clambered across to one side of the vessel causing it to list severely and we were ordered to form up across the spread of the deck for stability.

Prior to our departure from the ship, we had been given details of which train to catch and the approximate time of departure from Cape Town. With hundreds of us keen to disembark, it took some time before we stepped onto dry land. Now, with our feet on solid ground again, we were faced with the prospect of customs officials before we could board our allocated train. Quite why we had to go through customs was a puzzle as we had so few personal belongings, they all fitted into our kit bags. Nevertheless, we found our allocated trains and boarded six men to a compartment in 2<sup>nd</sup> class. After stowing our kit bags and bedding the compartment suddenly felt quite small but, as were on our way home, we were in pretty good spirits. Our only grumble was when we visited the dining car where we were treated with indifference from the staff. Naturally we felt aggrieved having served our country while the train staff had not seen any action whatsoever. It was clear that these people had refused to volunteer for active service, and they were not best pleased having to serve us.

### 1945 Train Route from Cape Town to Durban

The "Troopie" trains were very well organised and took priority over other train traffic during our journey from Cape Town to Durban and, as a result of this priority, the train only stopped to replenish the water tanks for the steam locomotive which occurred frequently. At one of these water stops I chanced to see a distant relative of mine and asked him to send a telegram to my mother to tell her that I was on my way home. Our first long stop was in Bloemfontein where the first batch of soldiers was due to leave the train. It was a long enough stop for us to stretch our legs and I was able to buy a copy of my favourite magazine, "The Farmers Weekly" from a vendor on the

platform. Of course, the magazine was full of news about returning soldiers and the positive impact that would have on the rural and urban communities.

Our stops became more frequent as men reached their destinations and disembarked. After two days and nights the train wound its way down the hill into Pietermaritzburg station where a large crowd had gathered to welcome us home. It was quite a tussle to disembark so we used every window to clamber out and greet our loved ones. There was nothing orderly or military like in our arrival in Pietermaritzburg. Still attached to our regiments, we were given a two month leave pass and this account of three long, weary years as a POW came to an end.

## Chapter 8

### FINAL THOUGHTS



Medals awarded to me – 1939-45 Star, The Africa Star, Defence Medal (with the Mentioned in Despatches Oak Leaf) and the Africa Service Medal



PROUDLY WORN GUNNERS TIE PIN

## AFTERWORD

Soon after the war in Europe broke out, as the son of a British family, I felt duty bound to volunteer and accordingly “signed” up with the Union Defence Force and I was allocated an army service number which was number 10 as can be seen on the obverse of my service medals.

This journal would not be complete if tributes to those people whose efforts and hard work went into making life more bearable during my captivity. So, my thanks go to:

1. To the International Red Cross who had the mammoth task of ensuring that we received a regular supply of food parcels, mail from home and to the Red Cross officials who inspected the camps from time to time. They organised the repatriation of the severely wounded who probably would not have survived without their endless negotiations. We give thanks to the Red Cross and ask that any reader who feels inclined to donate to this world class organisation.
2. To the people who continuously raised funds for the Red Cross and to the many thousands who gave generously to sustain our survival and maintain our morale.
3. To the people who packed the parcels so well at all the depots in Great Britain and in Canada and to those who worked out the contents of the parcels whose efforts made it such joy to receive them
4. To the German authorities who had the task of organising the final distribution of the Red Cross parcels and who, in spite of the severe food shortages in their country, saw to it that nothing was stolen from the parcels.
5. To our families and friends who stood by us in our hardship and who, in spite of the restrictions imposed, the limited amount of mail that they were permitted to send and the long gaps between letters from us, to the girlfriends who seldom wrote “dear John” letters and never lost contact – God bless you all.
6. To the official from the Vatican who visited us in North Africa in August 1942, took messages from us and saw to it that they were safely transmitted to various parts of the world. Words fail me but, rest assured your kind work will reap its rewards throughout your life and, in the life hereafter.





7 - AUG 1942

Dear Sir/Madame,

The message given hereunder was broadcast by THE VATICAN RADIO STATION, ROME, operating on the 31 metre band at 6.45 p.m. on 7 AUG 1942. I am passing the message on to you in case you might not otherwise receive it. The VATICAN RADIO is now broadcasting on Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 6.45 p.m. until 7.50 p.m. at 31.05 metres.

FATHER *J. G. Braniff, C.M.I.*  
(CATHOLIC PRIEST.)

FROM:- *Sgt Lord. A*

TO:- *Family*  
*99 Baschoff St*  
*Pietermaritzburg*

P.O.M. Camp No.  
MILITARY POST NO.

ITALY.

*I am a prisoner of war at Benghazi*  
*I am in good health and send*  
*my love and good wishes to*  
*family & friends*

MESSAGE FROM THE VATICAN OFFICIAL IN 1942

AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN, AND IN THE MORNING, WE WILL REMEMBER THOSE WHO LAID DOWN THEIR LIVES AND WHO LIE BURIED IN GRAVES, MARKED AND UNMARKED, IN FOREIGN LANDS, WE WILL REMEMBER YOU.

# The End