MEMOIRS OF A PRISONER OF WAR

1940 – 1945

1. Introduction - Early life

I was brought up in North Cornelly in South Wales. When I was 12 years of age, I used to drive a two ton Dodge Lorry, a bullnose and haul chippings from a quarry in Port Talbot all round South Wales.

After school, in the evening, I used to work on the mortar pans making mortar. For each yard of mortar I was paid 18 pence. You needed five pans for each yard of mortar and each pan required 26 shovels of acid, four shovels of sand, six shovels of lime and two buckets of water. I made just about one yard of mortar before it got dark. All that work for 18 pence.

When I left school I went to the local quarry Smoking Cot and I was on a drill, drilling holes for the shotsman to fire the shots to get out the limestone. Then after a while he put me on the lorry, driving the limestone up to the kiln then emptying it. My hands used to get absolutely raw, blistered to bits.

My brothers Tommy and Billy, were in the Welsh Guards and Tommy was Sir Alexander Stanier's Butler-cum-Batman. As Sir Alexander was a Colonel in the Welsh Guards, he used to have him butling at his home. Tommy never did any army work after his basic training. He learned his trade at the house of the dowager Lady Stanier down at Shrewsbury, where he turned into a very good butler. He was very well thought of, so when they wanted a kitchen hand there and they couldn't get one locally he put me forward and I was accepted. In time I rose from the scullery and ended up as a cook.

I went from there to three or four places in private service and ended up at Englefield Lodge, in Berkshire, working for the Castle people, who owned big boats up North, the liners of the Castle Line. Best job I ever had. I was getting two pounds a week all found and the family used to go away from early April to the third week in May, on a long cruise. While they were away, they used to put us on board wages, which meant your pay plus thirty bob each for food but I used to get all the provisions in before they went away so the food actually cost us nothing.

While I was there the footman and I joined the territorials but we didn't join the same unit. I didn't know it but the butler had joined the territorials too, the Middlesex Regiment, machine gunners. He was taken prisoner, early in the war and that's how we came to meet later at Lamsdorf.

I left Englefield because I decided to get out of service and went to work at Egham College, which was close by, cleaning out the big boilers. By then, 1938, there was all sort of talk of war and I was in the college when I was called up in the Terriers.

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2. Capture in Belgium

My regiment, the East Surrrys crossed the Channel on the 1st April 1940, by boat to Cherbourg. I knew nothing about it; I slept all the way over. When I did wake up it was at night and pitch black. Naturally I went up to get some air but kept falling over because people had been sick all over the deck, so much so that we couldn't stand up. When we disembarked, we marched north, to Roubaix in Northern France. We were there for about ten days before we went over into Belgium, on April 12th.

I was a cook and one of my memories is of cooking for my lot outside the palace in Brussels. From there we went forward till we ended up at the Albert Canal. One cook had to go back down the line and cook everyone's food. My job was to go halfway down the line and wait, then take the food off this cook and take it up to the frontline troops. But the first night we went up with the food they'd all gone. By now it was June 1940.

There were six of us, all members of the East Surreys regiment. There was the Quartermaster Sergeant, the MT corporal, the clerk and three privates, including me, We pulled back about 10 or 20 miles to a big farmhouse and stayed there for a few days. We could hear the troop movements at night, mostly marching but had no idea what was going on. Then one morning we woke up and could see Germans in the fields next to us. When we saw them we skedaddled. We were going across a field towards a farmhouse in front of us. The Germans were chasing us, firing and we were firing back. Then, when we were about 40 yards from the farm, two Germans came into the farmyard and placed a machine gun at the front doorway so we thought that was it and we put our hands up. The MT corporal that was with us was carrying a Mills bomb and they hit hell out of him because he had this Mills bomb. I suppose some of their mates had been caught by one earlier.

We thought we were going to be shot there and then, but we were taken back through the lines and all the way back we could see the Germans soldiers advancing. Not one of them was walking, everyone had bicycles or horse carts, and as they went past they were gesturing to our guards to slit our throats. Eventually we got back to a big barn. They pushed us inside and it was crammed so full of prisoners we were right by the doors. We couldn't go in any further.

We were in this barn all day and all night. The next morning the doors were opened and the Germans grabbed the first 10 of us, including me, of course. We were taken down in a lorry to work in a big wood, moving shells. We moved these shells all day long. Coming back in the lorry we prisoners were guarded by two Germans in the front and one in the back. Sudenly the driver got into a speed wobble and overturned the truck. The German guard in the back was killed, his helmet was pushed right over his ears; two of the boys had broken legs and arms; I had hardly anything because I had been thrown clear.

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It happened outside a big convent, near Evergem, which is just outside Ghent. The Germans had turned the nunnery into a field hospital, so we were all bundled in there. They kept me on there to look after the boys who had broken limbs. Well as time went on and as they got better I didn't have much to do, so the Germans gave me some other work. They put me to work with a German who was putting Germans who had been killed into coffins and I spent about six weeks with him. He was a ghoul, if there was any bit of gold he would have it, even from their teeth, he used to knock their teeth out to get it. If a ring wouldn't come off a corpse's finger easily, he would put the finger on the edge of the box and chop the finger off with a bayonet to get it. The funny thing about that job was that we worked in a huge hall with big pillars and was full of trestle tables, supporting rows of these wooden coffins all in straight lines and every evening at dusk all the bodies used to sit up, I don't know why, the air I suppose – the change in humidity or from warm air to cold.

He and I used to go down the line of coffins saying "Get down, get down" The first couple of days I was a sick as a dog, but in the end you can get used to anything. We used to bury these amputated arms and legs, reeking of gangrene, which is awful, you smell it on everything.

While I was there the nuns told us about some Germans being marched back in chains; hundreds of German soldiers coming back in chains. We didn't see them but we heard all the noise and heard all the Germans talking like mad on the wards. We guessed there was something wrong, something was going on, but we didn't speak German, not then, so I asked this Irish nun and she told me that they had refused to cross over the water to England and they were being taken back to Germany for refusing to fight. She said they had refused to board the boats to come over here, to invade Britain, whether it's true or not, I don't know.

As I said, we had been taken prisoner in June 1940 and we were in this place until late September. By then all the boys were fit and well and we were put with a group of other prisoners, Arabs or Palestinians, that had been fighting for us and been taken prisoner. We were put with a group of them to come up the canal in a boat to Holland. This boat was full with hundreds of prisoners, so they had machine guns fore and aft with two Germans covering them all the time. Well of course it got very cold at night and we was on top because all the Arabs were down underneath.

It was so cold on deck that I inched myself down the ladder down into the hold to get warm. Well I must have trodden on an Arab's face or something because suddenly there all hell let loose. I scooted back up the ladder and lay down on the deck, while underneath there was chaos, with everybody accusing everybody else. The Germans came through with fixed bayonets, floodlights and all the rest of it. Eventually that passed over – I didn't move again.

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3. Colditz and Stalag XXA

We came up to Holland where we were put into a box car and we were taken on down into Germany. We didn't know where we were going and we ended up in Colditz Castle. At that time the Germans were using Colditz as a transit camp. There were a few officers there, mostly French, and we only stayed the one night. I must have been among the last to be held there in transit to the prisoner of war camps because of my month I stayed in Belgium. After that they turned it into an officers' camp.

We were put on a train down to a place which we called Thorn and the Germans called Tuhorn. You can see the name on my Prisoner of War ID tag on the cover and my number, 20849. The camp at Thorn, Stalag XXA (20A) was in the Polish Corridor. We got there at the beginning of December 1940.

From Thorn we were sent to work on a brickworks, on a working party. Two of us escaped from it by just wandering off but had no idea where to go. Eventually we ended up in Vienna at the big marshalling yard there and we saw a goods train marked for Switzerland so we thought we'd hop on that. I wanted to wait till dark but this man I was with, he came from up North and I think he was called Andy, was all for getting on there and then. He went, so I had to follow or get left behind. We were seen getting on, so of course we were caught and taken back to XXA.

When we got back we were not treated too badly at all. In fact we were lucky; we got back there about four or five days before New Years Day 1941 and went straight into solitary confinement. Also in clink there were a lot of Jocks and on New Years Eve, of course, they went berserk, rattling and banging the bars and shouting "Happy New Year". They shook my hand so much they nearly shook it off. Well up came the Germans, through the cold and snow, wondering what on earth was going on, but that's all it was.

All of us that were in the clink, about 28 altogether, were told we were going to a better camp, which we knew was bound to be a worse one, because anything they told us was good was bad. We packed up and ended up in Stalag VIIIB, which was known in those days as 'Hells Kitchen'. Before we went, those prisoners that didn't have an overcoat were given a blanket; if you had an overcoat you got nothing. It was freezing cold, snowing like mad and so we eventually finished up in this Stalag VIIIB, or Lamsdorf as it was called, in Upper Silesia.

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4. Stalag VIIIB (Lamsdorf)

We arrived in Lamsdorf at the beginning of 1941. We marched into the camp through these big wide gates and there was a track going through the camp with compounds either side, 20 or 30 yards wide. As I walked up the main track from the gate, who should be coming down it but the butler that I used to work with at Englefield Lodge before the war. I couldn't believe my eyes. It shook me rigid when I saw him but we had a good old long chat. He had joined the TA as a machine gunner and had been taken prisoner in France. He must have been forty odd even then, I've no idea what happened to him.

In the camp we used to get Red Cross parcels, one between two. We had them regularly for three or four months and then they stopped. That was during the time that the battleship Bismarck sunk HMS Hood, then we sank the Bismarck. We were told that the Bismarck was carrying our Red Cross parcels, that's what they said, anyway, so we didn't get any more for a long time. It was a good 15 months before we saw a Red Cross parcel after that.

In Lamsdorf I was always known as 'Lettuce' Roberts because I was always pinching lettuces to eat. I used to eat anything that would keep me healthy, including ordinary nettles. I ate a lot of them, we used to boil them up in water; nettle water is also very good for pleurisy, I'm told. I never stayed long in Lamsdorf, I would go out on working parties whenever I could; not too work, if I could help it, I went out mainly to get stuff to eat or to barter, you couldn't get anything in the camp. Going out helped to keep you sane; many that stayed inside the camp went berserk. There were two brothers in the camp, one pinched the other's bread, so he killed him, He killed his brother then he walked up to the wire, went right up to the fence and he was shot dead. Life was worth nothing there.

There was all types of work – anything from road making, stream bank mending to sugar beet factories – any type of work that they wanted men for. I got quite a name as a trouble maker because I would go out on work parties and then get brought back because I wouldn't work. Other times, I stayed indoors, complaining of being sick, because I never used to do any work if I could possibly get out of it – I wasn't going to work for those people..

Up to the rank of sergeant you had to work, whether you wanted to or no. From sergeant upwards you didn't have to but if you were in the army you could volunteer and of course it made a break from the routine. On the other hand, none of the RAF in the camp were allowed out to work; they were too fond of escaping. Because I was going in and out of the camp on jobs, I was accosted by this wireless bloke from the RAF. He asked me to try and get him all sorts, like papers and film, which I used to do by selling stuff, mainly soap or chocolate, which the Germans didn't have. Everything out there you see was barter. Your main was chocolate, coffee, tea, soap, cigarettes – that was your main - and I used to get bits and pieces. Of course coming back into the camp you were always searched everything you had was searched. So we used to put a bar of soap or a bar of chocolate on the top of the pack and the guard searching us would see this and pocket it and then he'd say "Geh weg", "Go away, finish" so he never searched us properly; that was how we used to get

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things in. It helped that there was a strict system of rationing via food coupons throughout Germany and once you used up your coupons, that was it, whoever you were. It was fair but a lot of people were short of food.

I went out on many working parties. In December 1941 I was working at the Breslau Gas Works. On Christmas Day I refused to work. I said I wouldn't work for the King on Christmas Day, let alone Hitler. I got beaten up, but they failed to make me work. In the meantime in the works I had got friendly with a little Australian, called Jerry Cameron from Kalgoolie, Western Australia, the gold area. One day he got into a fight with a German civilian and knocked him out. The Guards chased him all over the works, eventually caught him and gave him a good hammering. He was so burnt up by the sun that when one of the Guards tried to poke his bayonet into his arm it just slid off.

Three days later we were packed off back to Lamsdorf, 21 days solitary each. When I came out we were put in the straff compound where all the bad boys were kept. It was in there I met Len Perrett. We became firm friends, a friendship which lasted for nearly 50 years. He was best man at my wedding.

In Lamsdorf, Len saw that the two guard dogs got two large bowls of pea soup nearly every day, which made our mouths water. It wasn't long before Len found a way of getting it. We lived like lords for a few days, until Len was caught taking it. The two Guards thought it was great fun; they chained him up to the dogs kennel for a week. Neither of us minded - we still got the food. The Commandant got to hear of it so we got a further 14 days each as I was aiding him.

On another occasion we both went out to work for the Commandant of a local German Air Force base; we had to work in his garden. One morning Len pinched a big round pumpkin, a huge thing. The only way we could pick it up and pass it over the fence was to roll it up the wire and push it over. Once we got it back to the camp we used it to make up a real brew; everyone kept putting bits and pieces into it. Come the day of drinking it - it was strong stuff - we were all half drunk. We also cleaned his tomatoes out. That was the end, he ordered us all back to the camp. I took two big cases full of green tomatoes. We were having tomatoes early in January next year, lovely and red, because if you put green tomatoes in wool, within four or five weeks they turn really ripe, lovely.

Early in 1942 Len and I went on a working party to a paper works, sawing up large trees and making pulp. 2000 Russian men and women worked there. It was bitterly cold and the women used to tie cement paper bags around their legs from toe to thigh to keep warm. There was only two lavatories, two small sheds with no locks on the doors, so you took pot luck that they were empty. One morning I opened the door and there was this woman with all these sandbags having a piddle. That finished me, I went round somewhere else and did it in the open.

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4.1 Joining the RAF

The RAF main camp housed about 500 and because the RAF pilots weren't allowed to work outside, in case they escaped, we used to swap. They took our identities and we took theirs so they could take our places on a working party. My friend Len took the place of the Canadian Air Commodore, though he didn't look anything like him, and I swapped with Flight Lieutenant Routledge, from Pompey. While they were out either somebody got caught or the Germans cottoned on to what was happening; they held a spot check on all RAF prisoners. We were all lined up and the Germans went through the identity photographs of everyone while they were going around. This Routledge chap more or less looked like me, so I wasn't concerned but we had to do something about Len as he had no chance of passing himself off as the Air Commodore. So we bandaged him from head to toe and said he had impetigo. As soon as we told this to the Germans guard, he said, "Geh weg, Geh, weg" (go away) and they wouldn't go near him. He was left in the hut; so his photograph was never checked; and they couldn't have seen anything through the bandages anyway.

That time I got away with it but shortly afterwards, Flight Lieutenant Routledge was recaptured. The plan was that, if he got captured we could swap back inside the camp but when he got caught, the twerp gave his own name, rank and number instead of mine. So there were two Flight Lieutenant Routledges in VIIIB. It didn't take the Germans long to find me out. I got 28 days solitary for that – the same amount as he got for escaping!

I learnt quite a bit from the RAF. For instance, in early '42 the RAF brought out this lark to brew up in the huts. Using two tin cans, two pieces of wood and a stone they made an electric element able to boil a pail of water in ten minutes. Everyone was onto it like a shot and every day around half past four the lights used to go dim, right down, because everyone was connecting up to the lights. The Germans couldn't understand it; they searched high and low and found nothing. But it was so simple and it was also a marvellous way of saving bedboards, the alternative source of heat.

There were some very clever people there in the RAF, that's why the Germans wouldn't let them out. Through them we knew how the war was going as they had their own radios, crystal sets, made from bits and pieces I used to bring in from bartering outside. We used to have great joy in telling the Germans things, especially when the war started to go badly for them. We even told them about the Dambusters raid*. At first the Germans in the camp wouldn't believe us, they went away chuckling and laughing; a fortnight later they'd heard all about it and they came and searched the camp for our wirelesses.

And there was one RAF person I met in there, he had been a gunner in a bomber which had been shot up and he had jumped out without a parachute. He landed in a some trees and survived; all he had was an egg-shaped lump on top of his head and even that the Germans took off for him.

* Carried out on 17th May 1943 by 617 Squadron, resulting in the breach of the Mohne and Eder dams

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4.2. The Sugar Beet Factory

Len and I went on to a job at a sugar beet factory. This place was a beautiful clean factory with lovely tiled floors – well it had to be, for making the sugar. And there was a person there from down Sussex way, Dick or something, and he could sleep anywhere; he could even sleep on a barbed wire fence. One day he got tired of working so he dropped a steel bar down one of the drains that carried the beet after it was cooked. Of course it wasn't long before the whole place was flooded. The Germans went berserk and they blamed two Poles and hung them, without any argument at all. Dick didn't feel too pleased about that but you couldn't do anything about it; life out there was dirt cheap.

Another time we pinched a whole bag of sugar. Now the sugar used to go up to the top floor to be whitened, so the boys up there filched a whole sackfull and put the sugar into about five or six different bags. Each of these must have weighed a hundredweight. The only way they could get it out was through the window and dropping down to the yard. Of course there had to be somebody down there to pick it up and get it away quickly. I was chosen to be the one in the yard, so I was there, as planned, at half past three. Sure enough the window opened and out came the bag of sugar. As it came out, one of the boys walked across the yard. He knew nothing about what was happening; only six or seven of us were in on this swindle, because everything was kept to a minimum.

He walked across and the bag just missed his head, it went down the back of his neck and it took his clogs off – he was wearing clogs. He was petrified, so was I, but I walked over, picked up the bag and put it into a wheelbarrow, which I filled up with coke and just wheeled it up to our billet. Below the billet there was a bit of a slope and I didn't have the strength to push up this wheelbarrow, not with a hundredweight of sugar underneath the coke and with me as weak as a robin, as I'd had hardly any food and was as thin as a rake. Then out came a German so I thought "Crikey, here we are I've had it"

"Was macht ihr"

"Feuer machen" for the fire

"Zu schwer"? Too heavy, he said,

"Jawohl"

So he gave me a hand to push it up! And from that sugar we got tobacco, eggs, bread, vinegar and salt; by trading it with one of the police guards

Another time, we had no work for four or five days and it got so boring that, with another mate of mine, a man called Allman, I climbed over the fence one night and went down the village to have a look around. There was no point in trying to escape as it was too cold to stay out long. So we went down and on the way back we caught a goose and Allman wrung its neck. We thought "We'll have a good feed tomorrow". So we slung it over the perimeter fence and climbed over after it. But when we'd slung the bird over, it had landed at the feet of a patrolling guard and he waited for us to climb over after it. When he saw us with it, he said "You'll go before the sergeant, the Feldwebel. You'll be for it" he said, "You've had it" Those were the very words he said. We thought so too, because he was

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a swine of a sergeant, a real Nazi. Not quite the type of Nazi to go in the SS regiments, but a bit like that.

We went up to the guardhouse carrying the bird. After about 10 minutes the Sergeant came in and said “How did this happen?” Allman was a bright one, he was in the Second Battalion of the Welsh Guards and could speak fairly good German. So could I but I had a bad stammer at the time. Allman said to the Sergeant. “Me and my mate was just taking a stroll and this bird attacked us – I had to kill it in self defence.” Well, it tickled that man’s fancy, somehow and he laughed. He could have taken us out and shot us but he just kicked us out and said “I will tell you what it tastes like tomorrow.” I doubt he had tasted meat for years, so for him it was a godsend.

My stammer came and went during the war. I lost it when the Red Cross parcels stopped, because we didn’t get any cigarettes, for a year or so. When the parcels reappeared so did my stammer and the others prisoners used my stammer to get out of trouble. I had learned a fair bit of German, as it came easy to me. Now i there was trouble, the guards used to ask for someone who could speak German to translate, so the lads would call out for me. I can hear them now, “Come on Robbo quickly, we’re in trouble”. The lads used to encourage my stammer because, by the time I’d translated even the first few words, the guards had lost interest. That made my stammer ten times worse. When I got home it was terrible.

4.3. Back in VIIIB, fooling the guards

It wasn’t long before Len and I were carted off from this little sugar beet factory back to VIIIB as undesirables. When we came back to VIIIB, we got in touch with two Welsh guardsmen, ‘Dusty’ Smith came from Merthyr Tydfil and Price came from Swansea. They were in the Second Battalion of the Welsh Guards and knew both Allman and my brother Billy, who was in the same mob. The five of us got together in one of the huts in VIIIB. Inside there were bunks, three high 140 bunks in each hut and one hut to one compound. Anyway, these two, Smith and Price, were the laziest couple I’ve ever come across, they used to lie in their bunks from about 6 o’clock in the morning, arguing the toss about whose turn it was to get up and make a fire with a bit of bed board to make the tea and they’d be still there five hours later at 11 o’clock.

This particular morning Len got browned off and said “I’ll go and do it”. So Len gets up and he takes a board out of his bed, about 6 inches wide. As he used them up so he was putting cord in between. He was busy chipping it up and in walked the guard. “Ah nummer, nummer” He took his number as he was to go up before the camp commandant for burning bed boards, which was 14 days in solitary. When the guard left, Len said “Oh bugger them now” and continued making the fire. In walked another guard; so Len ended up in solitary for 28 days, two lots of 14 days for the same offence.

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Now normally we used to get one 2-kilo loaf a day between 12 people. This loaf was cut meticulously into twelve slices and twelve playing cards placed face down, one on each slice. Then you had to choose one card each from another set of twelve and whichever card on the slices corresponded to yours, that's the piece of bread you ate. That's all the bread you had all day, plus a cup of hot, well, lukewarm, water which they called soup. They put in one bag of spuds for 4,000 to 5,000 people and they called it potato soup. Early morning, if you were up in time, you had burnt wheat for coffee, not in a cup, for cups we used our own tins, from the Red Cross parcels. When they included tinned carrots, we used to keep the tin for a mug.

The point is, people didn't mind doing solitary, because in the clink you had a third of a two kilo loaf and as much water as you wanted, a beanfeast, by comparison. The Germans couldn't understand why folk went off to the clink singing; the reason was because they knew they'd have a good feed. I spent about 200 odd days in clink altogether over five years, which is why I didn't have many cards to write home, because every time you went in, you had three months cards cut off you.

On the subject of bread, here's a funny story. We were all on parade once in the Commandant's office in VIIIB. There was about fourteen of us in a long corridor, with little offices, stubies, off. Glass doors at one end, glass doors at the other end, like French doors and the Commandant's office in the middle. We were all lined up on one side, waiting to go in, reporting, for things we'd done, things like burning boards or refusing to work. A German soldier came in with a 2 kilo loaf, throwing it from one hand to the other. Every eye was on it, this loaf of black bread. He knew of course, he was teasing us. So he went past us, went up past four or five doors and tried the next door. It was locked, so he pulled out a big bunch of keys, opened it, went in and was in there about 10 minutes or more. When he came out, he made a big show of locking the door, trying it and pushing it, then he walked away.

He had hardly gone, when I went up to the top doors and two more went down to the bottom doors to keep watch. There was a bloke called Jones from Newcastle, he could open anything in no time. He was up there, prick prick, open the door, in, got the loaf, back out, prick prick, lock the door. And he was pulling off bits and we were eating it. We all thought we would be well gone before the guard came back, but we were still there when he came back, a smirk on his face. Tried the door; obviously it was locked. He pulled out a bunch of keys and went in. Two or three minutes, he came back out, looked at the door, tried the door, locked it, tried it, unlocked it, tried it again You could practically see his brain talking to himself, saying “I am sure I put that loaf in here, but I couldn't have”. And he went out through the door. Didn't say a dickie bird to us.

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We would always be trying to get one over on the Germans. In the camp there used to be four terrific mounds of coal, about 50-60 tons of coal, all in heaps and there used to be about ten guards around these all the time and everybody used to inch up and try and pinch a lump but it was hopeless. Then, one day, I walked up there with two black buckets, walked in between two guards, filled them up and walked away and they never said a thing to me. I suppose what was going through their head was "He must be doing it for some officers".

I knew where to buy eggs outside the camp. I sold my boots four times to four different Poles, for tobacco, bread and eggs and on this particular day I had eggs wrapped round my tummy. Coming back into the camp, at the post, that's the doorway of the camp, two German guards were searching everybody. One searched the bloke in front of me and he didn't find anything but then gave him a kick up the behind; he had eggs underneath his crotch and they broke and all went down his leg. Of course I knew the first thing the guard was going to do was search me and I had 48 eggs! So I thought I'll own up to this and I pulled them back and his eyes were getting bigger and bigger, he was going "Eine, zwei, drei"... But as he was putting them down by the gatepost, one of my mates was picking them up. He came to the last one:

"Is das alles, you're sure is alles, it's all?"

"Yes".

He patted me all over, to make sure "You're going to get it for this, acht unt fumfzig",

I said "What are you talking about? Ist ferich"

"I'm Mad?" he said "You must be double mad".

I said, "Where's acht unt fumfzig? I can't see none" and he turned round and there wasn't one left. He went berserk he did. He didn't tell the Corporal, the Sergeant or otherwise he'd have been sent up the Eastern front.

If there was anything happening out of the ordinary, the prisoners were up to it in seconds and would take advantage of any opportunity. There was two Irish Liverpuddlians who escaped from VIIIB. On the day they escaped, there was a party of Red Cross officials in there, going round the compounds, half of them were men and half were women. So these two dressed up as women and just walked through the two gates, past about 10 guards and got away. One of them got picked up weeks later, he was on a train and had not crossed his legs, instead he sat with his legs wide open; they could see from his stance he was a man.

Towards 1943 the Germans used to come round the camp and try to get the Irish to sign up with them. They used to take them up to Berlin, give them a good time then ask them to join the German army.

One I knew came back from Berlin with a beautiful shiner.

I said to him, "I thought you were going to have a good time."

"So did I" he said, "Until he asked me 'Would I like to join the winning army?' and I said 'I'm on that now' and that was it."

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5. Auschwitz

I went to Auschwitz towards the end of 1942 and stayed there until early 1943, about five months altogether. I went there on a big working party of about 30 British POWs. Outside of Auschwitz camp itself was a big works, Auswich 2 - Birkenau. The Jews used to come out of Auschwitz and work there as well. The Jewish compounds were right up against this works. I worked in the machine shop, I was sawing up steel, sawing up round shafts of steel, with a big machine saw. You had to keep pouring lubricant over it, it was very, very slow, I used to cut just one a day. The other people in the machine shop were a carpenter and his mate, they used to make small wooden boxes.

When we arrived, the first thing we were asked was were there any bricklayers amongst us. So of course everyone puts his arm up, anything to get out and see what they could pinch, to eat or drink or barter with. I put my hand up and I was one of those picked. We had to build a clink that would hold about 12 people, with cells going up through. When we built them, we left a loose brick in each one so everybody could talk to everyone else who was in there by taking out this brick– the Germans never found out.

Though were working with the Jews all the time, when we were there we couldn't communicate much because very few of them could speak German, they were mainly from the Balkans and Russia. But we could see everything that was going on in the camp, as the Jewish camp was next door to us, right up against us. We saw the beatings, the hangings and all. I used to see the lorry loads come up with the ones that were going to their deaths. You always knew when they were going to the gas chambers, because they were always all in the nude. They took every garment off them, you see. We saw them many times, about three or four times a week, all nude, lorry loads of them, passing up the road in the camp. Women, children, old men, old women. The rate of killings all depended on the ovens, I think, in the end. They had the same trouble in Dachau, there was piles of dead waiting to be burnt, but they couldn't do it in the time.

The smells in Auschwitz were disgusting. In fact, when I was in the machine shop, before they had the ovens, they used to burn the bodies on open fires; over sleepers, criss-crossed sleepers and they used to put two men with one woman – because apparently there's more fat on a woman, that made the burning far easier. It used to cause a hell of a smell, even the Germans I worked with in the machine shop began to complain about this smell.

I came across the Gestapo in Auschwitz. There used to be a young girl there that would bring in bits and pieces, like drink, for us and we used to give her a bar of soap now and again which was worth pounds to them. No doubt she must have cut it up into about 16 pieces and sold it on for a big profit. Somebody must have noticed because the carpenter and I were pulled in.

The Gestapo said 'What do you want to give her soap for?'

'Well we gave her soap because she was dirty and smelled'.

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We didn't say we'd given it for her anything. We got let off but the Gestapo took her away. Finished. I don't know what happened to her. That's the point; you never knew.

The Gestapo was walking about like ordinary people, you didn't know who they were. The ordinary German people and the Wermacht, used to hate their guts, but they daren't say nothing, they daren't say nothing about anybody in front of their own kids, even their own kids would shop them.

5.1 The Picture of Peggy

Hung up in pride of place in Bryn and Peggy's front room in Church Street Lyme Regis was an oil painting of Peggy dressed in a light green blouse.

This is the story behind this picture, which was painted in Auschwitz, where I worked in the machine shop.

In the machine shop there was a Polish boy and also one from Czechoslovakia. And this Czech used to go home once a month for a couple of days, on weekend leave. During the course of time, I got very friendly with the Polish boy and he was very friendly with one of the Jewish painters. They were painting oils that the Germans had pinched; not restoring them; they were copying them. The Germans were keeping the good ones and putting back the copies. That's how the Jewish painters saved their lives. The same thing happened to the Jews who could do anything with gold or silver – they were looked after. They had a place on their own, they had good food and everything kept up to scratch. That's why when people ask me “How did they get oils?” I tell them how they got them, from the Germans.

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Well the Polish boy had seen the black and white photograph of Peggy, sent to me on a Red Cross postcard and he said “I can get that painted for you in oils”. I said “Get away, where is a Jew going to get oils here?” and he told me all this. So I said “All right, but if you lose it I’ll break your neck”. I suppose he was gone a fortnight, three weeks and he came back with this portrait on canvas wrapped round his tummy. He came in to work then went out to the toilets, where he undid it and gave it to me. So I did the same, I put it round my stomach and that’s the way I carried it for the rest of the war. I was searched, but like I said, you always put a cake of soap or a small piece of chocolate on the top. That used to disappear and they would say, “Vich” as much as to say “I pass you”. And that was that.

This Czech boy used to go home to a place called Olomouc, near Bratislava. One day he came back and asked if I would do him a favour. He was very friendly with a man whose son was learning English but he had no books to learn from. He had told this man about us and he wondered if we would write letters which he could take back home so the son could copy the English. And that’s what I did all the time I was there. We corresponded and later, when I went on the loose, I wrote to him and said I were coming to him, so could he put us up at Olomouc. The two boys sent off the letter for me; they wrote the name on and posted it. I didn’t know until 1999, when I met him out in the Czech Republic, that he was crapping himself when he got this letter, thinking that we were coming there and if we got caught he’d be taken out and shot straight away. If I’d known I wouldn’t have sent it, but I didn’t think. Anyway, we didn’t go there because we didn’t get an answer from him. We kept in touch, though and we met him and his family in Bratislava.

5.2 Weekend leave from Auschwitz

One morning, I was talking to a guard, who said he was going back to Lamsdorf. “That’s good”, I said, “I wish I was going with you.” He asked me why and I said I had a brother, Billy, who had been imprisoned in Krakow, not far from Auschwitz. He’d been there nearly four years. When the Russians started to get near, they’d all been moved out of there and into Lamsdorf, to my old camp, VIIIB. I said “I haven’t seen him since I left England”. “Oh” he said. A day or two later, right out of the blue he came up to me and said “Komm mit” (Come with me). When I went down he said “You’re coming back with me to Lamsdorf for the weekend to see your brother”. That was good. I hadn’t seen Billy for ages

So I went back. I saw Billy on the Friday night when I went in, stayed Saturday and Sunday and we were supposed to be going back on Monday. Well, through the gates piled these other boys that had been at Auschwitz with me. There were only half of them there. I said “What’s happened?” and they said there had been a bombing raid, a Russian one, I think. They had been told to go into the air raid shelter but of course they were stood outside waving at the planes and the bomb had dropped right down on the entrance to the air raid shelter. I think there were about 16 killed there, so of course I didn’t go back and that’s how I came out of Auschwitz.

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I knew Billy was in Lamsdorf because he had sent me a postcard. We corresponded, using Red Cross postcards, though quite infrequently as he wasn't much of a writer and I used to get three months postcards docked every time I went into solitary. Though we were both in Poland, our postcards used to get to each other via Britain. I don't suppose I got more than three postcards from him all the time I was out there. In some ways it was no bad thing as Billy couldn't spell and every time I had a card from him I used to get hauled up before the German officers, who would ask me, "What's this, what's that." His spelling was so bad that they thought it might be some kind of code.

Note: On Jan 19th 1943 a stray bomb on Auschwitz killed around 40 people, including several prisoners

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6. Back in Stalag VIIIB

6.1 Typhoid Outbreak

Whilst I was in Auschwitz, there had been an outbreak of typhoid at Stalag VIIIB. Right alongside our camp, up against the wire, was a second big camp for Russians and Ukrainians. The typhoid fever broke out there and they died like flies. Every morning there were cartloads hauled off and burned. Unfortunately, they were fools to themselves - they kept the dead bodies amongst themselves to claim the extra rations - but by keeping them, they caught the typhoid themselves. It was rampant.

6.2 More Working Parties

Another time we were coming out of Lamsdorf camp, about 30 of us, going on a working party. We had to catch the train at Lamsdorf Station. Now all everybody is thinking about is "What can I find to eat?" You're always on the look-out for something to eat. In the guard's office were six cans, fairly big cans like a pail and on the side it said treacle, black treacle. We whipped the six cans and by the time the journey ended, between the thirty of us we had polished them off but some daft idiot spilled it all over his trousers and he had to pay for the six cans!

There was also another working party I was on, with a boy from Newcastle. We were doing the floor, for a big works. We were putting rubble on the floor, a bit like hard core, then levelling it. They were giving us hardly any food so I said, "I'm not going to work tomorrow". This other boy said he'd do the same, so the pair of us stuck it out. Well, we got bashed about a bit; we were taken back to the nearest army camp and handed over and then we were brought back to VIIIB, we had 14 days apiece for refusing the work.

After the 14 days we came out and were told we were going out on a working party again, but they didn't tell us where. We ended up back in the same place. When we got out I said to him "I'm not working here, so don't take any food." The guys came in about 5 o'clock from the works and they all had this bowl of soup and a bit of bread given to them. Ours was put down in front of us; I didn't touch it, so the Germans took it away. The next morning they came in with the burnt wheat coffee, just a sip, I wouldn't have it. I went out to the works and refused to work. They picked up a shovel and put it against my chest, I stood back and let it drop on the floor, didn't touch it. The guard got behind this other man and he pushed his bayonet into his back and his neck, pricked him with it and he still wouldn't work. Then a passing German Officer came across to see what the fuss was about, why these guards were bashing us about. So he told them to take us back to the camp. So we were brought back to VIIIB again, up before the commandant. He said, "You say you were attacked by these two guards"

"Yes"

"They said you attacked them."

I said "How can we attack them when you've got bayonets at your back"

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Then the lad stripped off and showed him the scars, you see, so we got off and I expect that the guards got the Russian Front.

The funny part about it was that the guard who took us back out to this working party from Lamsdor the second time, was supposed to have gone back straightaway to VIIIB but he didn't. He made a deal with the corporal that he'd have the night on the town there. So the next day, we were catching the afternoon train back to Lamsdorf and who should come onto the platform but this guard, who should have been back at the camp the night before.

When he saw us he said "Where are you going"

We said "Back to VIIIB".

"You can't , he said " I've just left you out there. I'm in trouble if you go back there now".

"Can't help that," we said

So we made a deal with the other postan (that's an ordinary squaddie) that was escorting us. He gave the guard all the papers so that *he* could take us back to VIIIB and make out he'd been told to wait. So on the train on the way back in the train we made him give us fags and bread and everything, otherwise we'd tell the camp commandant what he had been up to. It was all intrigue out there, you had to be hard as nails and think nothing of it.

Whenever I wanted to get off a working party I walked off and 'escaped'. It was easy to wander off but Poland was too far to do a home run, You did it to get off the working party, it made a bit of life for you on your own but you always ended up back at VIIIB. That was the camp name you gave them when you got caught and were asked:

"From Wohr": from where.

"Stalag Acht B".

Once, when Dusty Smith and I hopped it, we ended up in Gliwice. It must have been June 1944, a boiling hot June. The nights seemed long because outside Gliwice gaol there is a big town clock, chiming out every quarter of an hour. We hadn't been in there four days, when the door was slung open and Price was pushed in with a bowler hat and a tramp's uniform on, full of lice. Crawling with lice he was; before too long we all had it. We didn't half give it to him, me and Dusty.

I escaped thirteen times altogether. Of course you got punished, with solitary confinement. The punishment you received: 7, 14, 21 or 28 days solitary, all depended on what you did. Why did I do it? It was a way of avoiding boredom. Thousands died of boredom and thousands went mental from boredom but I didn't. Survival in the camps could be a matter of pure luck, pure luck. The point is you got to the pitch where you didn't care whether you lived or died, it made no odds to you.

People were shot for doing some of the things I got away with. There was this boy called Sandy, from Bournemouth, and he went out on a working party one

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morning. For some reason I didn't go, I was sick or something. When they came home that night, we said "Where's Sandy?" and they told us he'd been shot dead because he wouldn't work. The Corporal just pulled out his gun and shot him. I was shocked because he was a very quiet spoken boy, no trouble at all. The Corporal was taken straight away, up to the Russian Front. Rather than put him on trial or put him up against a wall, they sent him up there to more or less certain death.

6.3 Escape from the Sand Quarry

Once back in VIIIB, Smith, Price and I went onto a working party at a sand quarry in Upper Silesia. Len had been picked but had gone off somewhere else so we had got parted. When we arrived, there was a bit of a mix-up getting in and Price hopped it - he didn't say a word to me and Smithy. So, because he got away, we were two marked men, they watched us like hawks.

We slept in a kind of big shed, with bunks in it. The German guards slept at the far end, partitioned off and connected to us by a passageway. Because of Price hopping it, the Germans made us take off our trousers and boots and hang them up in this passageway, to make sure no one else tried anything. It was June and hot and, as a further punishment, they'd given me and Smithy the top bunks because they were the hottest. Lying up there, I was wild as a coot; I was cussing Price and banging with my fists at the boards in the ceiling. Of course it was loose, so it wasn't long before me and Smithy had taken two or three boards out and there was an opening through the roof that we could climb out.

The guards had been there since the outbreak of the war and, until then, there hadn't been any attempts to escape; they were on a cushy number. So Smithy told them that there were bugs about: "The place is full of bugs", he said, then he blocked his earholes and nose with bits of paper. I did the same – I was in the know. The guards were looking at him.

They said, "What are you doing that for?"

"Stops the bugs getting in your brain. Two blokes got killed the other day, with a bug going into their brain", said Smithy.

Soon all the guards were stuffing their noses and their earholes with paper. That night, in the early hours of the morning, we quietly took away the boards, climbed through the roof and down to the ground. We collected our boots and our trousers, got our clothes on then off we went. It was best to get as far away as possible from the people that you'd escaped from, otherwise you were in for a hiding if they caught you. So we walked all night and just as it was getting light I saw this place in the distance. It was the same camp we'd escaped from; we had come round in a full circle.

We set off again and then we heard a train, a goods train so we hopped on. It went for miles all that day and the following night and coming through a big wood, the train whistle started blowing like mad, so we knew it was going to pull up somewhere, probably in a big town. So we decided to get off in this wood and jumped off. We were in the heart of Poland and that night was one of the worst

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nights I've ever spent in my life. We were in that forest with wolves, howling wolves, a ghastly, unearthly sound. I didn't like that. We didn't try to sleep; instead we climbed the highest tree we could find! We were just keeping out of the way until daylight, until we could see where we were going. I don't mind telling you I was pleased to get out of there.

Anyway, we had no sooner come out of the woods, than we were taken prisoner again. The SS picked us up and they wanted to know where we'd come from. We didn't want to go back to the quarry, so when the commander asked us why we'd escaped, we said we didn't like it there, it wasn't our cup of tea as we were coal miners. We knew well we were in coal mining area and we didn't mind doing that. He said: "So, a coal mine, you'd like to go there would you?" We said "Yes" so we went to a coal mine.

6.4 Working in the mines

The coal mine we were taken to had no safety lamps because there was supposedly no gas. We used candles, which I didn't like the idea of at all. While I hadn't been a miner, I knew a bit about it because Billy, Tommy and my father had worked in the mines in South Wales. The prisoners worked only days and afternoons, from 6 till 2 or 2 till 10; they never let us work a night shift. One night there was an explosion – they'd came across a pocket of gas and there was about 40-50 killed, when it blew up. There was no British down there as nobody worked nights. Following that we were taken from there and put in another mine, further south. Around Katowice, there's a lot of coal mines, from Uber Silesia down the Polish Corridor.

I had a funny experience in this second mine. There was Price, Smith and I in this pit, all working together. They were both up at the coalface. There was a heading coming down from the coalface and I was down at the bottom, on the level, pushing in drams (a small mine truck). Coming down through this heading was what they call shuttle bins: pans that shuttled back and forth. The others dropped the coal off from the coalface onto the pan and it shuttled down to me, I put the trucks under, filled them up from the pans and pushed them out of the way. Well, Price and Smithy were up at the coalface working with two Poles and a German. Well, like I told you, Pricey was incredibly idle and the German called him a "lazy bastard". Price smacked him one round the earhole, didn't he and put him on the pan with the coal. Well, I didn't know anything about it and when the German came down with the coal on the pan, I dumped him in the truck, without thinking. I didn't know he was there, it was pitch black, and I only had one little lamp. Meanwhile there was a hell of a row going on up at the top, lights flashing, whistles blowing, everything, and the three of us got 21 days each, me too even though I didn't know what was happening. I was in it as well for dumping him in the truck.

I worked in about five coalmines in all. In one, I worked with a German, a "repairer", who put up posts here and there, botching everything. This place used to work three shifts. They had arc lamps going right up practically to the coalface, a huge pit it was. Once, when we were on the night shift, he came up to me and said "Komm mitt",

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I said “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to get zwei hauts”, two pieces of wood, two poles.

We were going into the old workings. As we went in, the roof was coming down, lower and lower. In a coal mine you see, the floor comes up and the ceiling comes down all the time, like a big squeeze. Anyway, it was getting lower and lower until we reaced an area that looked like a field of mushrooms, with all these white supporting poles about three feet high.

We reached these two logs, tied them on our feet and started dragging them back, crawling on our hands and knees. He went on ahead and I was following him, when all of a sudden I got jammed. And the more I tried to heave, the bigger I was getting and the tighter I was getting stuck. He had disappeared so I didn’t know where to go and I was stuck tight fast. So I said to myself “Calm yourself down, coil yourself down”. I knew what I was doing wrong, so I coiled myself down and I could feel myself dropping. I’d just got out of this squeeze, when I saw his light. He had come to see what had happened to me, fair do’s to him. So he turned round, took the log off me tied it to his own foot and I followed behind the log and him, back up and through.

When we came out, Price and I decided to go sick. I had a hernia, which I kept and any time I had a job that I couldn’t escape from, I used to play on my hernia and get back to VIIIB. So I went sick with my hernia. Pricey had a carbuncle and it was right in the cheeks of his behind. You’ve never seen anything like it in your life, monstrous and purple and all the colours of the rainbow. Well, we both went sick and this German Feldwebel, (Sergeant) said “If you’re wasting my time, you’ve had it”, because he had to take us 30 miles to the hospital. He detailed the guard to take us by train and when we got there we went before the doctor. He tested us. He said I had a bad hernia and couldn’t possibly work in the coal mine, so it was back to VIIIB for me.

Next, he told Pricey to undress. Now in the room there was a German girl, about 18, a smart piece she was and of course Price didn’t like to strip, he said. In the end, the German doctor gave him a smack across the earhole and told him to get his trousers down. If only I had a camera I would have had the finest shot in my life…there was Price with his testicles hanging down and this great carbuncle poking right out of the cheeks of his behind., all the colours of the rainbow…you’ve never seen anything like it. Well, he was passed unfit, so he came back to VIIIB with me.

Back in VIIIB, the Germans caught up with me and gave me the hernia operation, so that spoilt my little scam. While I was recovering, two Sikhs came in for the same operation, I wound them up saying we were all finished with sex now. They wanted to know what I meant, so I said when they had been done like me, it was the finish of sex games. They made a big stink and wouldn’t have it done, so they fetched an interpreter and he told the Germans what I had said. They laughed but still gave me 14 days solitary.

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7. The Big March

Coming into 1944, the Germans started pulling everyone back as the Russians were beginning their advance. At one stage we POWs on working parties were put into this Russian camp for a while. I didn't like it there. For two pence they would have killed you for what you stood up in; we were always on tenterhooks. When the Germans started to move everybody back this was the start of the march back from Poland, the Big March

We were on the march with the Russians and some Yankee planes came over and they dropped their petrol canisters, you know their long range drop tanks and everyone thought it was bombs coming down. Picture a road, a clear road packed with troops on the march, prisoners and guards… and within seconds you couldn't see a soul. One of the horses that had been pulling the cart along was badly hit and the Russians was gouging it and though it was it was only half dead, they were cutting it up and gouging it, skin and all while the Germans were hitting hell out of them with their bondhooks*. Those Russians and the Ukrainians were just like animals, they were as dumb as animals anyway; I'm sure that they couldn't feel pain because though they were hit and kicked they didn't turn a hair.

7.1 Escape in the Mountains

We were marching over the Sudetan Mountains into Czechoslovakia. As we walked along, we came across a farmhouse, which we raided for food and we came across a bin full of flour, which the farmer was obviously storing illegally, so we all dived in. A bloke got killed in there, he dived in but couldn't get out and the flour smothered him. We emptied the bin, stuffing the flour into our shirts for later. The farmer was there wringing his hands and crying, though he couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't even tell the guards, because he shouldn't have had the flour in the first place.

We came out of there and some of them were catching all these chickens, so we caught one, they half plucked it, they half drew it and they half cooked it and I haven't been able to eat chicken since. As soon as I get a smell of a chicken it all comes back to me and I start heaving up; I can't touch chicken at all. But the flour was good. Every day, on the road we used to mix some of the flour with water and put it on a hot stone just dry it and eat it.

One night when it was snowing like mad, cold and bleak, Allman and I just hopped it. It was a completely daft thing to do because it was freezing cold with open fields all around and anyone could have seen us, two black dots moving against the snow. We went through something like ten fields before we got lost, we didn't know where we were going. Fortunately we ended up by a building, a barn full of hay, so we went in. We made a big hole in the hay, took off our clothes, which were soaking wet and dumped them in the bottom. We climbed in after them and stayed in there for 2 days until the clothes were only damp.

* Bondhook = rifle: word commonly used by riflemen

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We put them back on and went outside and walked right out in to the arms of a German policeman, a constable. But he was one of the best we ever met. He took us down to his house, which had a police cell underneath it. He took us down there and gave us a hot drink first and his wife cooked us some soup which was like bread from heaven. As I said, Allman could speak fairly good German and he said as you've been so good to us can we clear the snow from around your place so you can walk on the pathway, well of course the German policemen was all for it. So we cleared all round the house, the path and everything. We stayed in the house during the day and went down to the cells to sleep at night, locked in, of course. On about the fourth or fifth morning, a party of Serb prisoners came through, marching, about 500 odd of them, with German guards. This policeman had been trying to get rid of us, because we had been taking up his rations, obviously, so he went over to the person in charge and they decided to put us in with the Serbs.

We marched with the Serbs for two days. As we had tried to escape before, we were watched; one young corporal in particular kept looking out for me and Allman all the time. On the third night we came to this big field where there was a huge barn where they were going to put us all inside and it was about four p.m., just starting to get dimpsy like, dark and of course Allman and I were at the front of the line, wanting to get in and find a good place. We got in and tested the wall and found a loose board, so we stayed there. We thought we would hop through there. What we didn't know was that the Germans had placed a guard on each corner of the building.

It was nearly dark when we crawled through. First of all Allman didn't want to go. I said "You can stay here, I'm going." He came with me, rather than stay on his own. We crawled between the two guards and climbed up over a wall into a farmyard, owned by a Pole. As we inched round the corner of the farmyard building the Pole must have heard something and was inching round the other side to meet us. So we met.

"Geh weg, Geh, Geh"; "Get out"

"No, we're not going anywhere. Get us some food"

"Nicht essen" (no food)

"Get us some food or we will tell the Germans you called us in here!"

The guards would have believed us and he would have been taken us and shot and he knew it. He put us in this outhouse building and it wasn't long before he fetched us a loaf which we guzzled down. He was frightened because the village was full of German troops. He was wringing his hands, so I said to him, through Allman

"Have you got a horse and cart"

"Yes" he said,

"Haven't you got any sheep or anything up on the hill that you have to feed?"

"Yes" he said

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“Right” I said, “Get the horse and cart, put some hay in we’ll crawl under the hay and you take us up to the wood at the top of the hill, dump us off and you can carry on about your business.”

So he goes off and gets a mate and told him all about it and they both come back and loaded the cart with hay and we crawled underneath it. We went right through the village of Germans, up the road to a big wood right at the top of the hill where he turfed us off. As we were getting out, a woman was crossing the road about 500 yards away. She saw what was happening but she never said anything, so Allman and I hopped it.

We travelled that night right down to a big crossroads and from there went along a road, which passed by a burnt out village, completely deserted. We kept going towards Prague until we reached the next village, where we were put up in a house with a mother and her two boys. When we asked about the burnt out village we were told it was called Lidice. The Germans had burned it to the ground earlier in the war and had shot everybody there because a man from there had shot a big noise in the army in Prague*. Yet when we called on these people they kept me and Allman for a week – with everybody in the village taking it in turns to feed us, every day

The first night the mother gave up her bed to me and Allman. We didn’t know it but that night she had slept in the pig sty. Of course, once we heard that she had bedded down with the pigs, we went to the pigs the following night and from then on she went back to her bed. The two Czech boys are the ones we are still in contact with now. We’ve been out to see them since and Peggy has as well.

We decided to leave there. We didn’t want to, but didn’t want them to be harmed because of us, seeing as they’d been so good to us, so we hopped it.

When we left the village we walked all that night towards Prague then came across a private caravan park, a fairly large place, full of caravans locked up for the winter. We broke into one, made a fire in the stove until daylight then put it out. We were there a couple of days then some workmen turned up. They were the caretakers of the place and they had smelt the smoke of the fire we had going in the night. They gave us some food but told us we would have to go as they would have to report the break-in to cover themselves. They gave us about 8 hours start, but it was not long before we met a policeman who took us into custody. The local people didn’t like it but he said he couldn’t help it, he said the same people who was against him taking us in would blackmail him if they got into any trouble themselves. So we ended up in Prague gaol.

* The assassination of Rheinhard Heydrich by Czech paratroopers on 27 May 1942 resulted in the passing of the 2nd Martial Law in Czechoslovakia, 1412 executions and the burning down of the villages of Lidice and Lezaky

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8. Theresienstadt

We were in Prague gaol about four or five days before the commandant would even deign to see us, let alone talk to us. We weren't in there all that long, about 11 or 12 days, I suppose, before we were told by the guards they were taking us out next morning to a "nice place", Theresienstadt concentration camp. Even they were panicky about going there. I could see why when we got there, because the camp guards bashed them about, making out it was their fault we were on the loose.

Theresienstadt (Terezin in Czech) was an old fort that had been turned into a prison but it was a death camp; thousands died there. Today those that died are all planted out the front, thousands of gravestones. In the old fort there's a ring of underground corridors that you could go right round. Outside the far end was a gallows where they used to hang them; in the back of the yard is where they used to shoot them. It's all still there, exactly the same. Above the gate was a sign "ARBEIT MACHT FREI". The same sign was outside all the concentration camps. If they couldn't work, that was it...out...dead. There were also crematoria in Theresienstadt, with the same smell. The main difference was that Auschwitz was built for the purpose of extermination, while this was an old fort that had been converted.

Bryn, Peggy and David inside Theresienstadt, 1999

At the time there were only five of us POWs, a Frenchman, a Dutchman, one Yank and me and Allman. By early January 1945 we had been in there for a couple of months or so, I suppose. They wouldn't let us go out to work, but the Jews were taken out every morning. Our sleeping quarters were next to theirs. We could hear or see the Jews being killed every night. The German guards used to go out and get drunk. When they come back in, drunk, they used to open up the Jewish compound, go in with clubs and hit hell out of them. In the morning the cart used to come and haul out the bodies. These guards were

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what I call Volkdeutsch, the people who had turned German. There were Dutch, Belgian, French, Swedes all sorts. They were out to show the Nazis they could be worse than them.

It was in Theresienstadt that I saw Irma Grese, the notorious Auschwitz woman guard who was hanged. If you speak to any Jews who were in Auschwitz, they'll know of her. We were in this big square yard and could see and hear what happened. There was a Jew crossing the yard and as she crossed the yard the guards on the wall all around shouted out to her,

"Don't come anywhere near us Irma"

She asked "Why?"

"Passing that that Jew, you must be full of lice"

So she turned round, she called the Jew and then kicked him between the legs and kicked him until he was dead. She kicked him to death, there and then on the spot. Well, she was hung for all her dastardly deeds.

At some stage we were moved into the Jewish compounds, we slept in the same rooms, on the same beds sometimes, head to toe. We could talk to the Jews, but I couldn't understand them because very few spoke German. The Jews in Theresienstadt were Czechoslovak and Balkan Jews, while in Auschwitz there were mostly Russian and Polish Jews.

Bryn outside of his cell block

I saw some awful things there. They used to stand a Jew up with his hands above his head with two bricks for 24 hours, if he sagged he got a smack across the back. Simple little tortures but they were agonising. Punishments were for

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not working, or falling out of line or something or other, or not taking off his hat to an army officer. Another time one of the Jews had been caught pinching someone's food. Rather than turn him over to the Germans so that he would be shot, they used to dish out the punishment themselves. He was stripped of his trousers and held over a barrel with his behind all bare and pummelled with a pickaxe handle, about twenty strokes, as hard as they could. It must have broken every bone in his pelvis; he screamed blue murder and all the skin burst in the end, drawing blood. I don't expect he lived after it, though I don't know. This was done by the Capos, the Jews who acted as foremen over their fellow prisoners. If they were seen to be a bit lenient, the Germans would go for them, so you couldn't blame them, really. The Germans were clever that way, making the prisoners do their own dirty work.

Bryn standing in front of his cell

While I was in Theresienstadt, I ate little bits of meat, sinuous meat that was like no meat that I ever knew. You never knew for sure what you were eating.

They wouldn't let us POWs work, until early in January 1945. We didn't know of course but the Russians, the Yanks, everybody was getting closer. The Germans were digging big tank traps up in the town of Terezin, which from the concentration camp was a good mile to one and a half mile march. They decided to make us work, so five or six of us were taken out one morning with the Jews and marched up to the town. Coming down on one side of the road was a big German noise, I don't know who he was, a General, or something. Anyway we all dived across to him and the guards chased after us, but he told them to back off and heard what we had to say. We told him where we were, said we shouldn't be there, giving him all the bumpf under the sun, Prisoners of

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War, Geneva Convention, we gave him the lot. He said he couldn't do anything at that time, but he was going back to his headquarters after the weekend and he would see what he could do.

When we got back in our ranks, the German guards gave us a good belting with their bondhooks. We expected that, we knew they wouldn't like it. Then we worked all day and during the day, two Jews asked to be shot; they had got so down in the dumps that they pleaded to be shot so this German corporal politely shot them. I had to help to carry one of the bodies back to the camp.

The following Tuesday, six German squaddies, ordinary German army, turned up for "The Englanders" as they called us. The French, American and us were all called "The Englanders". If it hadn't been for that big noise in the army I doubt if we would have got out of Theresienstadt, because the Germans wouldn't have left us alive to talk about it. They hated to see us go so much that they even gave these six German squaddies a tough time of it.

We were put on a train to Bavaria to a prisoner of war camp down there. Well on the way, we all hopped off the train. We were all in a long carriage; we were up one end and the German guards were at the other end, talking and playing cards or something. Whatever it was they weren't taking any interest in us. The train was moving fairly slowly because of air raid warnings, so we just leaped off and rolled down the embankment, left the Germans with nobody.

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9. Freedom

We headed west and as we made our way through the Czech countryside, the Czechs were giving us food and I was carrying a sack on my back with bits and pieces of cake and tart. The Czechs in those days used to make all their cakes and tarts on Sunday. So we were walking along one night and we ran into a patrolling German. He stopped us:

"Halt, Was mach hier?" (What are you doing?)

We told them we were fleeing from the Russians.

"Oh yes, keep away from them, they're nasty people, Where are you going now?"

"We're going West"

"What are you doing for food? I haven't got none, I haven't had none"

So we gave him two tarts. His eyes lit up and he took us right round the village, dodging every other patrol and he sent us on our way. All for two tarts.

After about 70 miles, Allman and I arrived at the place where they held the war trials, Nuremberg. Just outside of the town, we came across a Yankee forward position, with about 40 Yanks and two tanks. I will always remember it, because across the road going into their position, was a line of little pots, all wired up. There was a notice warning the German populace you could come this far but no further. I was pushing the pushbike in between these pots and all of a sudden, this Yankee shouts" Halt." So I said "Its alright, we're English." "I don't care who you are, if you don't halt, you'll get blown to hell, you're in amongst the mines". So of course I stood there. He came over, took the bike off me, lifted it above his head and said "Follow me", so I followed him through.

In a big hall in this village the Yanks had set up two large trestle tables full of bottles. They had every drink under the sun there and two monster bottles of boiled sweets. We were told to fill up, but I did something wrong. We had been brought there by two German men, an army doctor and an ordinary soldier, and I gave one of them a drink. The captain in charge of these Yanks came up to him and went berserk. He smacked the bottle out of his hand and smacked him round the earhole, shouting "Who gave him that; I'll shoot whoever gave him that". So I kept quiet.

We had also brought two Yanks who had been prisoners with us, and two German military girls. That night they sent us four men on and kept the two women. We were taken by lorry down to the town, Nuremberg. We went to the Burgermeister's house, where all the head people were, the Yanks, including the Intelligence people. They had us all in and asked us all sorts of questions about what we had seen on our way. We were in there for about an hour talking to them. Then they said, "You'd better go down to the cellar to sleep, I don't know where you'll sleep tomorrow but we'll find you something". So we went down the cellar of the Burgermeister's house, which was full of all the valuables that the good people of Nuremburg had brought to their Burgermeister for safe-keeping. There were bolts of cloth, silver, you name it and two lovely soft feather beds, so Allman and I jumped on them and tried to sleep but they were too comfortable; it

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wasn't long before we gave up and slept on the floor. And all night long the Yanks were coming in and taking loads of stuff and we came out without nicking a sausage. The following morning breakfast was eggs and bacon; we queued up and went round three times, me and Allman.

We stayed in Nuremberg for five days. On the first day, we saw a German pushing a motorbike, so we asked him what was wrong. "Kein Petrol" – no petrol, "Give us the bike". Oh no, he wouldn't give us the bike. While Allman was trying to pull it off him, up came this American jeep:

"What's going on?"

So we told them. This Yank just pointed his gun and said. "Vich" (Go). The German left us with the bike and they give us a big can of petrol, we filled it up and had the bike for five days. We had a lovely time with it.

At the end of the five days we were put on a US plane and we came back to Swindon. If I could have caught a plane back to Germany, I would have gone back. The boys were coming in with suitcases full of stuff, there was no check at all. All I had was a Zeiss camera and a German Luger. When the plane landed we dived out, so pleased to be on English soil again. Then the plane turned round, taxied and took off, taking my Zeiss camera, Luger and all with it.

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10. Back in England

When we were brought back, we were put in this Salvation Army hostel. We were given a good wash, food and postcards to write home. We were just getting into bed for the night, when we all had to get out, “All out all out”, loaded into lorries, down to the station, onto a train, shunted and banged about all night long. We ended up in North London, in a lunatic asylum which they’d turned into a big hostel. On parade the next morning, the pay corporal and lieutenant came along, took all our names and numbers and asked what lot we were in. They gave us £5 each on our pay book. So Allman and I said goodbye; we went over the wall and went down to London.

Dad then was living in Byfleet, so I was thinking “What’s the best way to get to Byfleet?” I knew where it was, naturally because I had worked around there, Virginia Water, Staines for years. Talking to a taxi driver during that afternoon, I told him all about it. “Oh”, he said “I can’t take you now, but I tell you what, “If you come by here 12 o’clock tonight when I knock off, I live down by there, in Chertsy and I’ll take you down. So that’s what he did. He didn’t charge us for anything, just gave us a lift down. So, round about half past one, we were knocking them up back home. Our Billy had got home before me. When his camp was relieved, he came out, pinched a German car, drove it all the way to Le Havre and sold it to an incoming British officer!

Whene we got back to the hostel we were supposed to be stayingin, four or five days later, we found that the nurses had put two black dolls in our beds, one in each. Now in Nuremburg, the Yanks had fitted each of us up with one of their uniforms, all brand new stuff and we had kept these all the time. So when we were in London, we were getting picked on by the Yanks’ Military Police; but as soon as we showed them our pay books they didn’t want to know. Of course, our own MPs were sniggering at the two unseemly Yanks!

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11. Postscript

After we got back, we had to report to Amersham, not far from Slough and be togged out properly, including a new bondhook full of grease; I had to clean it all off. We had to start off army life as if going in as a raw recruit, in the square and everything. After a month of that we went down with the rifles to Aziers en Maine. We all had a gamble on the best shot and it turned out I had a one inch group with a brand new rifle. So I didn't have to do anything to my rifle. The instructor said "If you can get an inch group with six shots you don't need nothing doing". Anyway I picked up a pool of about £21, I think and of course had a good night out.

The quartermaster sergeant there wanted my Yankee clothes.

I said "No, you are not having them".

He said "You were given them"

I said "No I had to buy these",

He said "You didn't"

I said "Have you ever heard of the Yanks giving you anything for nothing? I bought every bit of it".

"How did you pay for it?"

I said "With German money, which I had earned".

Of course really I'd got them for nothing.

So, at last, I came home here to Lyme Regis to be with Peggy. I'd met her here in the canteen, one of the finest canteens in the country. I used to work on the pebbles in my Yankee clothes for a few months. That's what happened to them. When we got married I wore my proper army uniform.

Bryn and Peggy on their wedding day. 8th December 1945

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