Through the barbed wire

EJ Lees
Prologue

In 1910 Walter Lees won a prestigious prize to leave Britain and work on the Southern Argentine Railway. In 1914 he had to return home to fight for his King and country at the outbreak of the First World War.

During a short period of wartime leave, whilst visiting a friend in Edinburgh, Walter met Georgina who was at that time secretary to the Headmaster of Herriot School. There followed a whirlwind romance, and they married in February 1919. Following the end of the war, they both returned to South America and Edward (Ted) James Lees was born on 28th December of that year in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ted spent the first 12 years of his life in Argentina where he became bilingual in English and Spanish. In 1931 he was sent home to be educated at Dollar Academy, near Stirling in Scotland. His mother came with him, to help him settle, and also to spend some time with her sisters in Cumnock in Ayrshire.

In 1933 his father became seriously ill with cancer, and was sent home for treatment in this country. By the time he arrived after the six-week journey by boat, the cancer was too widespread, and he died soon after arrival.

Ted enjoyed his time at Dollar Academy. He played rugby for his school and also did well in languages. Upon leaving, with the advice of his father’s best friend, Mr. Gee, he decided to become an apprentice with English Electric in Stafford. The pay was not very good, and his mother decided to come and rent a house nearby. The year was 1937.
Part I

Chapter 1 1939: war is declared

One afternoon in June 1939, completely carried away by the mob hysteria and totally influenced by the slogan 'Make Britain strong, to save the peace', I volunteered for service at the Territorial Army. Little did I realise at that moment what the decision was going to mean to me. When I returned home to tell my mother what I had done she did not appear to be pleased and muttered something about 'an empty headed young fool'. Still it was just good fun going to the drill-hall twice a week to play at soldiers and then of course it was grand to have a uniform to swank about in.

The annual camp was held at Monmouth and, although it was a bit strenuous and more than I had bargained for, it was nevertheless wonderful to think that one was a soldier doing a man's job and - what was more important - building up Britain's strength so that Hitler would never attack. Anyway, the people who spoke about the impending war were only jitterbugs who had no idea of the true situation - just those born pessimists who seemed to take a delight in spreading fear, panic and misery. Anyone with but an atom of sense knew that Hitler and his silly Nazis were only playing a great game of bluff and when it was called, as it was going to be now, they would just collapse and those same people would lead them out. Just how could Hitler dare to wage war, he had no goal, the people were undernourished and were not his tanks made out of cardboard and his planes out of matchwood. Thus, with no small measure of surprise did we hear of his unprovoked attack on Poland - the man must be mad, did he realise what he was doing? Of course, though the German/Russian pact was a disquieting affair, and that no doubt had encouraged him in his wild gamble, in my life this was a big moment for it meant that I was now part of her Majesty's regular forces.

At home great excitement reigned. I was hurriedly putting up the blackout before going away - one never knew when the Luftwaffe would be dropping its first bombs. Apart from that, we knew that the same week I might be shipped over into France and in a few days be moving up to the front.

There could be little doubt that at that very moment the guns of the Maginot line and the Siegfried line would be exchanging salvos. Still, this was going to be a good war as one would just sit in an underground fortification and press buttons. At least it was going to be a good war for us. As for Jerry, that was a different matter. In the first place the Siegfried line was not a patch on the Maginot line; the concrete was wet and the poor old Huns were ankle deep in mud and water. We used to see pictures of them on the newsreels before the war broke out, wading about in water.

However, things didn't seem to turn out as we had expected. There were no air raids and we didn't go over to France straight away. Instead of that we stopped in our hometown of Stafford and filled sandbags. On the Western front, the French were advancing a bit but the expected capture of Saarbrucken did not materialise; instead of that, attacks seemed to develop into stalemate.

Meanwhile, on the Eastern front the German armies were roaring across the plains of Poland at a most alarming speed. Even more disturbing, perhaps, was the announcement that the Red Army was now advancing westwards over Poland. Could it mean that we were going to be involved in a war with Russia as well? These were rather disturbing developments which one
could not discuss without a feeling of grave anxiety. Then came the heroic stand of Warsaw which focussed the world’s attention on that city and which abruptly brought the people to realise what a formidable tool Hitler now constituted for the forces of world democracy.

Russia was as ever an enigma and it was hard to estimate whether she had gone into partnership with Nazi Germany in an endeavour to obtain world domination or whether she was just helping Germany. Whatever may be the reason we still maintained our diplomatic relationships with the USSR and the war drifted into a stalemate. Hitler made his peace overture which was duly rejected and then we sat back and took stock of our position, our chances and our strengths.
Chapter 2 France, a baptism of fire

On the 28th October 1939 in this genial and non-warlike atmosphere, the unit I was serving in crossed over to France to form part of the British Expeditionary Force. We took up our positions on the Belgian frontier near the town of Orchies; the weather was cold and building roads and pillboxes up there was anything but a pleasant experience. The work went on at a feverish pace and before many weeks had elapsed, a most impressive system of fortifications came into being. Pillboxes were abundant, artillery was plentiful, long lines of trenches were dug and strands of barbed wire were laid. The sight was impressive. Confidence in it shone through and the general morale of our troops was high. Everyone was confident that behind these fortifications any attempt on Germany’s part to break through into Northern France would be frustrated. Winter dragged on, and mighty bitter it was too. Rumours of the German’s massing on the Dutch and the Belgian frontiers were always prevalent yet the expected invasion never seemed to come.

Meantime, what I had learnt at school stood me in good stead and in due course I was made company interpreter. This suited me very well as it meant that during the very cold winter days I was not compelled to be outside all the time. My work was interesting and brought me into contact with most of the local administrators of the French villages in which our unit happened to be billeted. Some were very awkward and rather uncooperative; though speaking generally, the rest were obliging and anxious to assist the British military authorities. They nearly always tried to drive a hard bargain but that is because they believed that we were a nation of capitalists and they regarded each one of us as millionaires. On the whole, I think the French liked us even though some of our troops behaved badly and when intoxicated, which was quite often, they were apt to start brawls in the estaminets (the pubs), with the resultant smashing of chairs and windows, etc. This sort of thing did not tend to create a good impression, though I must at this point give credit to the redcaps, not that I ever had much love for them, but they put in a lot of good work in maintaining and restoring order within our zone as well as bearing themselves in an exemplary and dignified manner.

Although the unit was never stationed in a big town, we had facilities to visit such places as Douai, Arras, Amiens, Albert and St Pols. Needless to say, we availed ourselves of these opportunities and the first town I visited was Douai, a town of considerable size, typically French with cobblestones, old-fashioned trams, extensive cathedrals and, of course, numerous cafes. On Sunday afternoon, my friend and I after we had had a most enjoyable meal decided to have a walk around the town in order to discover the places of interest. In the course of our travels we happened to come across a quaint and narrow cobblestone street with houses down one side only. The street was full of British soldiers who were fighting and pushing, trying to make their way into these houses whilst the redcaps were desperately endeavouring to hold them in check and trying to organise them into some sort of order. Yes, our troops were fighting to get into the brothels.
At first, I was disgusted to see British soldiers behave like this in a foreign country while the French looked on, smiles on their faces, laughing to one another, 'Les sales Anglais' – it was a bit boring to hear our countrymen referred to in such terms. On second thoughts, however, let us not take such a poor view of it for I realised that this was a novelty to certain of the troops. They had probably heard from the last war, soldiers talking about the famous French red lamps and were curious to see them for themselves; when the novelty wore off, then these places were not highly frequented and certainly the troops were strongly discouraged from visiting them. There is a small section to be found, I believe, in any community. Despite of all that, the number of cases of VD amongst our group appeared to be high, although it was impossible to state any figure, having no means of obtaining any statistics whatsoever.

The bitterest winter the French had experienced for many years was over and in the early spring the long awaited leave arrived. It was a wonderful sensation to go home from overseas, even though it was to be a short time – ten days. In those days every consideration was given to the British expeditionary force and it was pleasant to think that one belonged to it. Alas, those ten days sped by and before long I was once again on Dover quay, this time returning to France. It was with a sad heart that I gazed overboard at the fast disappearing quayside, wondering when, if ever, I would see it again. Although I felt confident I would return sometime, there was something that told me that the immediate future held for me rather black clouds. On rejoining my unit was I soon amongst my pals again and all doubts soon dispelled.

Shortly after my leave, I returned to my company of Royal Engineers. Being a sapper, I was then transferred from the 46th Midland Division into the 51st Highland Division, which was moving into the Moselle to take over a section of the front from the French.

This news we met with mixed feelings, as we realised that we were now about to receive a "baptism of fire". The stark reality now began to dawn on us, for it became evident that our days of gaiety were going to be interrupted and, what is more, some of us might remain behind forever in the soil of the Saar. Our journey to the Saar was quite enjoyable, passing through such historical places as Albert, Rheims, St Quentin and Verdun and witnessing on our way many of the relics of the last war, such as tanks, trenches, barbed-wire, entanglements and huge British and French cemeteries which remained for ever a testimony of the gallantry and the bravery of those two races who stood undaunted in perilous times against the immensely superior jaws of the Kaiser. These gallant men opposed a self-styled master race, attempting to impose its will on the free people of the world. These men gave us another chance to build a better and democratic society of nations, alas, they died in vain. The egotism, their vanity and mistrust, the short sightedness of the world politicians sabotaged all those efforts to create a lasting peace. Our fathers suffered cheerfully untold miseries, hardships and deprivations in order that we, their sons, should be spared those horrors. The world's leaders, however, talked only about the situation into which we would have to undergo the same, if not greater, hardship.

Finally, our journey through Picardy, Champagne, the Meuse and the Saar came to an end and we reached our HQ which was the town of Thune, situated about 15 miles from the German frontier, 30 miles from the town of Metz. Thune was never under shellfire when we were there, nor was it ever subjected to aerial bombardment. Our stay there was short. One evening we were all aroused and slowly moved up to take our positions at the Maginot line. That night we received our 'baptism of fire' and, although we considered it intense and physical. General Gamelin, the French commanding chief, in his communiqué the following day merely reported slight artillery activity. We were stationed at Bickering Barracks, which was at the entrance to one of the largest forts in the Maginot Line.
During the day we were on road construction in some woods near the front. Whilst I was on road constructing work, I had an opportunity to come into contact with Alsatians. It was not long before I took an intense dislike to these people, who I considered to be not only unfriendly but also hostile. Although one must guard oneself against being biased against them merely because they happen to show a preference to speaking German, one could not help feeling at the same time that these people were constantly spying on us. I'll never forget one French soldier whom I happened to meet at a town called Hagendange. Our conversation soon inevitably arrived at the topic of war. "Who is going to win the war?" he asked? "Why we are, of course" I replied in astonishment. "You're mistaken" he replied, "this time Germany will be victorious". "Good Lord" I said to him, "that's impossible". "You wait and see" he replied. "England is going to lose, for the first time, a war."

Although I regarded the man as a sheer lunatic to entertain such ideas, I was nevertheless annoyed with the man for I felt that he was reflecting if not the thoughts, at least the hopes of the people of that area. One morning we were awakened at five o'clock by intense aerial bombardment. It was the morning of the 16th May. We turned the French news on a little later and learned that the expected offensive had begun for Hitler had attacked Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. We took up new positions with the Northumberland Fusiliers who were a machine-gun battalion immediately behind the lines of contact, which happened to be outposts manned by small forces of Gordons, Camerons, Argyles, Black Watch and the Northumberlands.

Meanwhile, our portable wireless also informed us that Churchill had assumed power back at home, so we clapped our hands and thought that the war was as good as over. On our sector, the fighting too flared-up considerably, though there was none of the positional type of warfare – tanks seldom being employed. The infantry, however, were heavily engaged while the artillery duels were constant and severe. Luckily for us, however, the aerial activity was very limited. Possibly the worst and most demoralizing aspect of the fighting was the night activities; our positions were in woods with a very small distance separating the two lines. Fighter patrols were sent out from both sides at night to go behind the opposite lines, find out as much as possible and try and bring back a few prisoners. The Germans in this area were very good on this sort of work as apparently most of them were local inhabitants and knew the countryside perfectly. Thus, we stood at a great disadvantage. The Germans used a cuckoo-call as their signal; so whenever we heard that naturally we were on the alert for we never knew whether it was a real cuckoo or a German patrol.
Chapter 3 The Germans attack on the western front

The German attacks on the Moselle were successfully repelled but on the rest of the front, where the Germans had thrown the bulk of their armed divisions into combat, the news was bad and it came as no small shock to us when we heard first of all that the Dutch army had capitulated, and then that Brussels had fallen into the hands of the enemy. What alarmed us most, however, was to hear that the Germans had captured Arras and Amiens, which we had visited but a few weeks back and which were considered to be miles behind the line. The plight of our comrades in Belgium was desperate and so the 51st Division was withdrawn presumably to try and ease the pressure on the British Expeditionary Force [B.E.F.]. The Germans meantime were driving fast for the channel ports and so it became a race to see who could get there first. Owing to the bulge which the Germans had created over the Meuse, when they breached the defences of Sedan our journey to the ports was dangerous as we scarcely knew where the enemy was going to pop-up next.

We were easily beaten; Boulogne fell and we were still in Champagne. Thus, we became isolated from the rest of the British forces. After a long and adventurous journey we reached the Somme. The Belgian’s had, meantime, capitulated and so our commander Lord Gort had no other choice but to try and evacuate the bulk of his forces in Belgium before they were totally annihilated. The only possible port from which he could do this was Dunkirk; but in order that Dunkirk could be kept free for evacuating the troops, Calais had to be held at all costs. The rifle brigade, the King’s Royal Rifles and the QVRs [Queens Volunteer Rifles] were allocated this onerous, though most unpleasant task. When these men were sent from England to defend Calais they knew many would not return. This meant for them death or captivity. Though this engagement was short lasting, I think about three days, it was bitter street fighting with all its horrors and uncertainties. They did their task magnificently and when the survivors were eventually overpowered they were herded into prison cages, but the B.E.F. had been successfully evacuated - truly one of the most important and decisive battles of our history.

Thus, the battle of Calais and Dunkirk was over, there remained but one small body of Britons to eliminate from the continent, the 51st Highland Division. Major General Victor Fortune rather audaciously decided to put in an attack against Abbeville, for what reason I did not know, but the fact remains that our attack, lacking any air support, was quite easily repulsed with considerable losses to ourselves. The Germans counter-attacked and, although our infantry had equipped itself well, it was decided to withdraw to a line behind the River Bresle, our task as sappers was, naturally enough, to blow up the bridges.

The section I was in, about 50 strong, was allocated the bridges at the town of Totes. The Germans had apparently advanced more rapidly than had been anticipated and a hurried order came through to blow the bridges immediately. This we did, and so effectively did we do it that we nearly blew ourselves up in the process. This was done practically in the face of the Germans and to our horror we learnt, as dusk fell, that we were surrounded. The suspected attack on the villages of Totes did not materialise that night; instead, in the evening they decided to subject us to a mortar bombardment. My own opinion, for what its worth, is that the Germans at that point were rather weak, and at the same time they over-estimated our own strength. Little did they know that we were but 50 engineers and a battalion of Royal Scots fusiliers! Our officer, Second Lieutenant Butler, decided that the village would be defended and so at dusk he organised us in small groups of eight or ten, behind heaps of rubble, in houses, or behind hedges, at all entrances to the village. Our orders, however, were only to defend and open fire only if we were directly attacked. Fortunately, we were not directly attacked by infantry or mechanised formations but merely subjected to a mortar bombardment, which in itself was bad enough.
Meanwhile, our officers were not satisfied in the way in which one of the bridges had been blown and so a corporal and I were detailed to go and make a better job of the demolition. This proved to be a very unpleasant task as all the bridges were apparently under cover of enemy fire and every few minutes bursts of rifle fire were ricocheted into the structure of the bridge. However, neither of us was hit, though it made us work with a speed which previously we never would have credited ourselves with having.

The task done, we returned to our posts to find that all was as we had left it, to our great relief our armoured units had put in an attack, which successfully broke the ring around Eu. Our officer gave us orders to abandon our posts as quickly as possible and led us out of the ambush.

As all communications with the division had been interrupted for 24 hours he had no choice but to lead us to what had been Yves Tote, a small town. Fortunately, the HQ was still there. Here we rested one day. The enemy, however, put in a big attack which had been held by our infantry on the Bressle River but unfortunately the French who were on our right flank, allowed their front to be breached and Rommel’s armoured forces, in a lightening dash, were driving for Rouen. Our position was now desperate and, in the light of these events, I have no doubt that our commander applied to Whitehall for naval forces to assist him to evacuate what forces he could. At any rate, the order to evacuate was given and we were informed that our rendezvous was to be Fécamp.

But before proceeding to our port of embarkation we were allocated the task of destroying the crossroads at the village of Tote on the main Rouen/Dieppe road. Rouen had fallen; this was confirmed by refugees who were now congesting the roads of our perimeter, which was continually being compressed by the ever-growing power of the Germans. With the fall of Rouen it was anticipated that the Germans would now strike for Dieppe and endeavour to handicap our means of evacuation. The streams of refugees on the roads were one of the most distressing and heart-rending sights, which I had so far witnessed. It brought home to me, probably more than anything else, the horrors and inequities of war. There were innocent women and children, harmless and infirm old men fleeing from their homes, leaving behind them their world’s possessions, many of them doing it probably for the second time in 25 years - this was the glory of war.

With the fall of Rouen our task in blocking the Dieppe road was going to be very important, but also very dangerous and very difficult. In that tense atmosphere in the evening of the 9th June we set out to do what we could. The lorry I was riding in brought up the rear of the convoy. We had not been travelling long before we heard a shot, our lorry stopped and the driver found the bullet lodged in one of our tyres. We hurriedly changed wheels and proceeded, but not for long. Once again the lorry stopped. I saw a flash and felt as though I have been struck on the face by a sledgehammer. There was a wild scramble out of the lorry, the spirit of self-preservation told me to take cover behind the lorry. This was certainly a tight spot we found ourselves in and there was no doubt that we had had a head-on collision with a German armed column. I glanced up the road to see, to my horror, a never-ending column of German tanks, armoured cars, motorcyclists, cars, lorries, etc; it was terrifying.

The Germans, too, were determined that we should feel the full weight of their arms and in the very one-sided action, two of our comrades were killed, whilst the rest of us were wounded. The lorry, which we were taking cover behind, was full of explosives. If the gunpowder or ammo had been hit, the explosion would have been tremendous; the three of us who were using it for cover would have been blown to pieces - we would not have stood an earthly chance. We made a quick decision, to make a dash for the nearest house, which
happened to be about 10 yards away. Then, in practically one movement, we were up, walked to the gate and dashed into the back entrance of the house. Whether the Germans aimed at us or not, I don’t know; if they did, I don’t know how they could have missed us as we were barely 20 yards away from them. The rest of the lorry survivors were also hiding in this house and although it was distressing to see some of them arriving in pain, it was at least good to see so many of them still alive.

We quickly bandaged ourselves up with the few dressings we had at our disposal and for the rest, ripped up our shirts and singlets and made them do. Our plan of action was to remain in the village that night and then on the next day to make a bid to rejoin our own lines. Consequently, we sought out a hen house, huddled ourselves together and decided to spend the night there, hoping for the best. It was not long before we heard the heavy tramp of Nazi jackboots entering the courtyard; we held our breath, and our hearts almost stopped beating. We heard them enter the house, smash some windows, fire a couple of revolver shots and shout “Raus!” Then the steps moved towards the hen-run, they paused and we said our prayers. Our prayers were answered for the Germans moved on. All through the night the armoured vehicles moved through Tote, which made us realise more than ever how truly helpless our task had been right from the start.

We decided to move out of the hen-run, for the Germans were bound sooner or later to investigate it. We found an attic and into that we moved; not before time either, for a few hours later, just after dawn, a German field-kitchen made its headquarters in the courtyard of the house and from the attic we watched two German cooks go into our own hen-run. There was little doubt that we would have to leave this village if we were to avoid capture. Whilst we were deciding what to do next, our troops began to carry out a severe bombardment and whilst the Germans were taking cover in the trenches and cellars we ran for our very lives along country lanes, over cornfields and hedges, not having any idea where we were heading for and expecting to run into a company of Germans at any moment.

Eventually, we discovered an isolated, empty barn and there, totally exhausted, we took refuge. Through the cracks in the wood we observed the landscape and to our horror saw that German tank units were stationed in the vicinity. Another heavy artillery bombardment made us keep our heads down and on reviewing the situation we saw that the German tanks were moving out. About a mile away an attack was on the go; our hopes soared for this was evident proof that our own forces were quite near and we could never tell, but the Germans might decide to withdraw and we should be able to rejoin our own lines. Unfortunately, the British armoured divisions were inadequate for the occasion and the Germans were triumphant. Dusk was falling; we were very haggard, tired and thirsty for we had had nothing at all for over 24 hours.

Then we decided to head into the direction in which the battle had taken place. At the same time looking for some food for a start and when we came across another barn, as we were very tired, we decided to pass the rest of the night there. Early in the morning the door was thrst open; our hearts sunk. To our relief, however, we heard the chatter of French women and children, they went away again and when we considered them to be a safe distance away from us we extricated ourselves from our hiding in the straw to investigate. They had brought two large baskets in; they had to be inspected. To our joy we found hidden underneath a lot of clothing, many bottles of port wine and various boxes of block sugar; what a find! So we took three bottles of wine and four boxes of sugar and proceeded to have a good feast on port and sugar.
We lay in the straw all day, the Germans came in and went; refugees did likewise, but at nighttime the women and children began crowding in and eventually stepped on us. Then we were forced to make our presence known; poor souls, what a shock they got when they saw us appear from under the straw. We asked them where the Germans were and they replied bitterly “Partout”. We could hear the Germans singing and feasting outside, obviously drinking the fruits of victory. It was now dark and our only means of escape was to crawl across a field on our bellies and then across the road on which there was a guard. This we fortunately succeeded in achieving, and we continued crawling on our stomachs for at least another mile or so until we considered ourselves to be safely out of the German sentry’s sight.

We tramped through the night after wading waist high through the wet corn until we thought we could go no further and so we decided to call in at the first barn, house or shack that we encountered. In the distance we saw a house, we slowly approached it, we heard voices, listened carefully, we couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. My friend, always an optimist, thought they were Scots. We moved on slowly, then there was an awful scuffle, firing of shots and wild German shouts. The moment had come. We had fallen into German hands.
Part II

Chapter 4 Captivity

The first blow of captivity was indeed stunning, as it was difficult to realise that one was now in the proverbial ‘bag’ and that unless we had a good share of luck one would have to stay there until the war was over, and God only knew how long that would last; it might be as long as two years! The Germans who picked us up were artillerymen, which goes to show how far off track we were. We must be perfectly impartial and unbiased in our judgement and confess that these German gunners were exceptionally kind to us and, judging by the curiosity which they displayed, I think I would be correct in guessing that we were the first ‘Englishers’ that they had seen in the campaign. An officer was summoned to have a look at us and he, a typical German-looking officer, full of arrogance and dignity, only surveyed us with a look of contempt. Finally, he uttered these words in broken English “For you, the war is over” and he then barked out some incomprehensible order in German to the sergeant who, in turn, detailed orders to four soldiers.

We thought our last moment had come and really thought that this was the firing squad receiving its orders. We waited a few moments and the sergeant beckoned us over. He said it was too early to drive us to hospital, it was 4.30 am but that when dawn broke, he would do so. In the meantime, we were to lie in a barn on the straw, cover ourselves with blankets, which he gave us. However, he soon returned and said it would be better if we went to hospital immediately and that he would drive us there. German soldiers helped us into the lorry and in a couple of minutes we were speeding along the road to a German hospital.

On arriving there everyone was asleep and so two orderlies had to be awakened who in turn fetched the German medical officer. My wounds were carefully dressed and I was removed to a tent full of wounded German soldiers and given a continental breakfast of bread, butter and coffee. They were kind to me and later I was removed by means of an ambulance to a casualty station at a place called Forges-les Eaux. Actually the casualty station was a hotel, which had been requisitioned and converted. Our ward was the dining hall, whilst the mattresses had to be brought down from the bedrooms, laid on the floor and on these we lay all huddled together - Germans, French and British.

Medical treatment for the prisoners was nil, but the German orderlies were attentive and kind and proved a helpful and efficient medical corps. The food was good and plentiful but unfortunately, that which we needed most - medical attention, was sadly lacking.

Five days later the Hotel Mouton was evacuated of all prisoners of war who were transferred to the casino, also in Forges. Meanwhile, the awful surrender of the remnants of our division had taken place at St. Valery. Apparently, the evacuation had not gone according to plan. Fécamp, the original evacuation port, had suddenly and unexpectedly fallen into German hands. Our commander then being compelled to use the only remaining port, the small fishing harbour of St. Valery, most of the men received orders to throw away their arms in the night of the 11th and make their way to the beaches in order to embark next morning.

Unfortunately, there was no halting the German hoards that climbed the cliff heads during the night and carefully positioned their mortars for a massacre on the following day.

Our own men were letting themselves down the face of the cliffs by means of ropes, which every now and then kept snapping with the inevitable horrible result. At dawn the slaughter began. The Germans commenced by dropping their devastating mortars on the crowded
beaches; with the tide far out, our men were hopelessly trapped and, in order to save useless bloodshed, General Fortune agreed to surrender unconditionally. Those who were lucky enough to escape mishap were huddled together on the road and sent on the march towards Germany. I saw them pass through - privates and sergeants, lieutenants, colonels - all together, tattered, torn, ragged and worn. Some with jackets, some without, some in shirt-sleeves, some stripped to the waist; some in steel helmets, some bareheaded; tramps never looked worse but their spirit was never higher and as they passed the rest of us in hospital they gave us a mighty cheer and sang 'Tipperary'. The Germans stood and watched, shook their heads and smiled. This was quite beyond them, they were now convinced the British were a very eccentric race. [To their sorrow they were going to learn, five years later, how eccentric we really were.]

The casino at Forges was one of the horrors of captivity. In fact, it remains the graveyard of many a Britisher who died, not because his wounds were beyond medical repair, but because he was neglected and starved by his arrogant captors. France lay prostrate and crushed; Europe was under the Nazi jackboot. England, the Germans believed, would not dare to fight alone. German dreams of world domination were realised. Why should she adhere to the Geneva Convention, which makes provision for the humane treatment of captured soldiers? Consequently, the ensuing weeks cannot but remain in ones mind as other than one of the most horrible in one’s whole life. The food rations were scandalous. Breakfast consisted of a very small cup of coffee, sometimes a biscuit. Never was it more than a crust of dry bread, if at all, and I have seen the day when my breakfast consisted of one sardine.

Dinner consisted of a small portion of about eight spoonfuls of a thick soup, either rice, beans or peas. Tea at 3.30 pm was a slice of bread with cheese, or honey or margarine and a cup of very weak tea without milk. At 6.00 pm we received a quarter litre of very thin soup, actually it was a brown-looking composition with a few grease spots floating on the top and what looked like a thistle just to thicken it up. That meagre ration was totally inadequate to maintain the human frame or far less build it up after being wounded and having lost a good deal of valuable blood. Therefore, one more or less held onto one’s existence with a grim determination for the best.

Many of our comrades who had severe wounds, such as amputations and internal injuries, inflicted upon them were overcome by their conditions and unfortunately they passed away. In fact, men were dying with such monotonous regularity that one wondered when one’s turn was coming. The doctors who had been captured at St Valery were sent to the casino and although they worked hard and did what they could to relieve the suffering, their task was enormous as the equipment was so scanty. Bandages were rationed, and only given to those who were desperate. Instruments were not to be had, whilst anaesthetics were out of the question. Consequently operations were not carried out.

I do remember one case, however, of a poor fellow who was suffering desperately with gangrene, which had set into his leg. He pleaded with the MOs [Medical Officers] but they shook their heads and said they only wished they could do something. Just as they were leaving the rest of us, a medical sergeant appealed to him, “Wait a minute”, he said, I have seen a butchers saw. “For Christ’s sake do something,” cried the poor fellow. “Right-oh” replied the sergeant, “no anaesthetic, just a saw”. Armed with a saw and assisted by those who held the poor victim down, the sergeant proceeded to saw the poor fellow’s leg off. In spite of his shrieks he could take it until the task was done and what is more that man’s life was saved. That same medical sergeant also carried out smaller operations by means of penknives. The medical sergeant, Jock of Aberdeen, was callous, but he was fitted to the occasion and I hope his acts have not passed by unrecognised.
If these incidents have been left solely to our own senior British officer and our O.C [Officer Commanding] Major, I am sure that nothing would have been done. This despicable action surely disgraced the very uniform they wore, as well as lowering the dignity of a British officer in the eyes of our enemy. The O.C. furthermore warned us against planning any escape by offering a feeble excuse that he might have to answer to the Germans with his life. It was indeed regrettable to see a senior British officer treated with contempt by the other British ranks. Happily, he was removed after we had suffered his presence for about three weeks.

Little improvement was shown in the conditions of the casino as the days rolled by. Fortunately a British army dump had been uncovered near Forges and the Germans had very kindly allowed us to use what was left only after it had been carefully pillaged by themselves. Our doctors proudly returned with a few blankets, one or two battered books, sundry objects and some badly needed bandages. The food situation remained every bit as critical except for a few gallons of milk, which the local ‘sisters of mercy’ had somehow managed to smuggle in for the bad cases.
Chapter 5 Hospitalisation and imprisonment in Rouen

A few days elapsed, when a German general happened to be passing by in his car and by the grace of God decided to stop and have a look for himself. Later I was to learn that he was no other than the great Field Marshall Rommel, himself. He seemed a very fine fellow, young and upright and what is even stranger, he appeared to be a human man. The conditions appalled him and no doubt he felt that such a state of affairs simply disgraced a so-called civilised race such as Germany. He promised the boys cigarettes and he promised us all better conditions. The tobacco arrived that same night and next day a fleet of German ambulances arrived to take us away; our destination was a convent in Rouen. Arrangements had been made for the French Red Cross to care for us. The convent had been requisitioned as a military hospital for the prisoners of war; a wing had been granted to the British, which was to be staffed by our own medical orderlies though under overall French supervision. We were allowed three or four French female nurses who tended the very bad cases, whilst the rest of us were nursed by our own male nurses.

The commandant of the hospital was a French colonel, there were no Germans within the grounds. There was no barbed wire around the hospital and there was no sentry on the gate. Looking back now, I am quite convinced that our allied doctors guaranteed that none of us would escape as no encouragement was given and, what is more, as soon as one was anywhere near fit enough he was quickly transferred to prison camp. Criticism was naturally enough often directed against these tactics; but if one had an open mind and maintained it, it must not be overlooked that the medical personnel came under a different clause of the Geneva Convention whose duty it was to care for the sick and the wounded, and who are not expected to escape so long as there are still some of their own nationals in enemy hands.

Consequently, they were not prepared to allow us to escape from the hospital for fear of German reprisals in the form of cutting down their freedom of action and instituting a more rigid supervision. I am convinced at the same time that the French doctors were the real advocates of this policy. It was they who informed the Germans when a man was practically ready for the camp. The British doctors were lukewarm towards this policy. The food, however, was plentiful and it was good, whilst the medical attention was adequate and satisfactory.

The French branch of the Salvation Army visited the hospital once a week and distributed to each patient a bar of chocolate and two cigarettes. A visit of the Salvation Army was the most popular item of the week and it must have been a source of great satisfaction to these people to be greeted by so many happy faces. Strangely enough, the Germans even allowed the civilians to visit us twice a week and it was not long before each one of us had been adopted by a French lady. They were wonderfully kind and sympathetic; we owe them a debt which we shall never hope to repay and no words from my humble pen could aptly describe the joy, the happiness and tenderness these ladies brought into our lives in those dark and worrying days when none of us had news of our loved ones back at home, and they probably were without news of us.

Speaking for myself, I was adopted by a young French girl and it was thanks to her that I had any clothing at all for my first winter in captivity. She gave me shirts and knitted me a pullover, a scarf, gloves and socks. It was not long before a wireless receiving set came into the hospital and in due course we were receiving daily news bulletins. This was not encouraging and not really beneficial to general morale. Although the news was bad at the time with London, Sheffield, Coventry, Bristol and many of our other cities being blitzed, it was nevertheless most refreshing to hear the BBC instead of having to rely on the German-
controlled wireless, and the French wireless for our news. Our wireless was never discovered by the Germans and was in full swing when I left the hospital.

Once at Rouen we were able to appreciate, to no small degree, the efforts that the Germans were making towards the planned invasion of our country. Convoys passed through Rouen for eight days, night and day, in the direction of the French coast. This was disturbing to us for we knew full well how strong and confident the German army was and had a good idea how sadly depleted our own forces must have been. Our confidence in ultimate victory never for one moment wavered, but we knew at the same time that momentous days lay ahead and that should Hitler get a foothold on the south coast it would only have been a matter of time before our country was overrun which would have meant continuing the war from Canada and that would have been a long drawn out affair.

Tales used to drift into hospital about attempted invasions and about German bodies having been washed up on the French beaches. One story was that the Germans had refused to embark knowing the expedition to be suicidal and that the German soldiers were now being handcuffed and chained prior to embarking. Another story was that the Germans had attempted to land and that we had poured oil on the sea and set it alight. Whether these stories had any real truth in them or not it is not for me to say; but one thing is certain and that is that they were making elaborate and careful plans to invade us. The only reason that they did not strike in August as planned was that the harbour, the barges and their boats had been shelled and bombed to such an extent by our own navy and air force, that they found themselves unable to ferry forces across the channel.

I spent practically 15 weeks at the convent in Rouen and was then moved to a prison camp; actually it was the racecourse at Rouen. With a heavy heart I left the hospital for I knew full well that the best days of captivity were now over and from now it would be a struggle for one’s very existence - a survival of the fittest. The prison camp, however, did not hold all the horrors I had supposed. We were about 150 British strong, amid practically 5000 French and Poles. Thus we kept very much to ourselves and indeed were scarcely ever molested by the Germans. The Poles and the French were taken into Rouen and during these jaunts they managed to procure many invaluable articles from the civilian population. In spite of the rigid search, which they underwent at the camp entrance, they usually managed to baffle their captors and in time became very cunning. Sausages were usually hidden behind the long puttees [strips of khaki cloth wrapped around the lower leg], which the French soldiers wore, whilst beefsteaks and other delicacies found their way into the camp by means of water bottles with false bottoms.

This camp was subdivided into compounds and it was very much like small camps within one big one. To our amazement the compound next to ours was filled with Germans; a complete battalion, officers and men were locked in as punishment. Many rumours went around as to the reason but we could not say with certainty why they were there. These Germans were excellent choral singers and one night a German captain called a group of us over and suggested that we should have some international community singing. First of all an English song would be sung by us, then the French would sing a song and then the Germans would sing. It was not long before a large crowd had gathered at the wire. We sang many songs but finished up by singing the three National Anthems at the captain’s request. It made one realise the futility of war.

The food, though scarce at the camp, was comparatively good and although we were not receiving any Red Cross parcels we were allowed to receive packages of food from the civilian population. At this camp I was fortunate enough to make friends with an excellent
Frenchman who intended entering the monastery as a monk and was therefore able to be in contact with the local nuns. These ladies were wonderfully kind and never failed to send a large parcel of food into us every day. The comparative ease and comfort and good treatment could not of course last, and so on the 4th December we received our marching orders and learnt that we were now being transported into the Moselle area - a Stalag at Trier.

From the camp to the station was a memorable occasion and one, which we shall never forget, particularly by those who witnessed it. Instead of marching down the street in a rather sullen and downcast fashion, which was usually associated with Prisoners of War, we were acclaimed as heroes by the French. Those brave and gallant ladies lined the streets and cheered us to the sky shouting out such slogans as "Vives les Anglais, we know you will come back however long it may take".

We in turn shouted back at them and sang 'Tipperary', which they loved, and 'Rule Britannia'. In the face of all this the Germans were powerless. It had all been so spontaneous and completely unhearsed that they were completely taken aback. The German guards kicked and pushed some of the ladies and the German officers roared out orders at all and sundry, but no-one paid the slightest bit of attention and we carried on with great rejoicing until we reached the railway goods yard where a train load of cattle trucks was awaiting to take us to Germany.
Chapter 6 To Germany, in cattle trucks

How can I describe that awful journey in those cattle trucks? My powers of description are limited, and it was a horror, which you had to experience in order to appreciate what it really meant. This journey along with two others, which I had later on in my captivity, I would always hold against the Germans. I would hold against them that it was an atrocity and a breach of decent conduct against humanity. In a truck which was meant to hold 40 men the Germans crammed in 75 of us with the result that we couldn’t all squat down on our knees or haunches at the same time. Some of us had to stand, while the rest of us squatted down. The doors were locked and two small holes were permitted at the end of the truck to allow the entry of light. The doors remained locked until we reached our destination Trier, three days later. Thus one can scarcely picture the condition in which we were in after those days in such a cramped space and having no facilities to perform nature’s functions. One poor fellow fell desperately ill and was in terrible agony. We yelled through the hole in the truck for assistance and medical attention when the train stopped at Metz and Nancy. It was not only denied but it was scorned. Consequently shortly after we reached Trier that man died after two and a half days of murderous agony. The Germans were now very sympathetic and just to show what a ‘wonderful’ race they really were they granted this man a funeral with full military honours - another piece of typical German hypocrisy, coupled with insidious propaganda.

During the journey we were caught in an air raid just outside Paris. An unpleasant experience of being trapped like rats whilst our fighter bombers swooped down on the train, presumably in an endeavour to discover what freight it was carrying as many flares were dropped. Fortunately, our pilot had the sense to realise that the freight was not worthy of being attacked.

The rations for the journey were not only meagre but most unappetising consisting of about two pounds of bread and a piece of meat pate for the journey. Eventually we arrived at our destination, luckily still in one piece. Trier is a beautiful old city standing on the Moselle and dating back to the days of the Holy Roman Empire. In fact, I think I am correct in stating that ‘Charlemagne’ was crowned there. The population of Trier did not appear to possess as fine a spirit as its buildings, for they were positively hostile towards us. There was an excuse for the children jeering and mocking us as we marched through the streets, however galling and humiliating it may have been, for they had been brought up to hate us. Whilst most of the adults stared at us with grim determination, some of the workmen hissed and spat at the French. Ironically enough it was quite a relief to get behind the barbed wire again.

Stalag 12D Trier was a hell camp especially for the British who were hated by the Germans with an intense hatred, hard to describe. Everything possible was done to make our lives awkward and thoroughly miserable. The rations were meagre and there was no way of
morning

broke

who in

biscuits

men.

boys

Final, our leader gained
the camp,

‘it must have been
irregular

and

Tide

first

it

that was the

worry

to

avoid one

scrounge one

due

we were

get past

to

voluntary

France arrived they were dumbfounded

then

raitons. Tiree

bers

fire

were

French

chreis was as u:-ip\easant

or

courage.

however-

and

broke in, underneath his bed were a whole stack of biscuits. That half satisfied us for one day

and then the boys began to think of other ways of getting something to eat. During our daily

cledge one of the lads discovered that there was a potato peeling faction every day. Those

who volunteered had a double ration of soup and then of course it was always up to them to

tuck one or two potatoes down their shirt front or down their trouser leg and trust that they

would get past the search at the door. Personally, I found that hiding one or two potatoes

underneath my hat was the most successful method, though I must admit rather embarrassing

if the cook, who did the searching, decided to raise it up.

Our chef was an unpleasant character, a Sergeant Major in the Foreign Legion and of dubious

nationality. He had a small room to himself and we suspected that he cheated us out of our
due rations. Three or four fellows volunteered to raid his bunk that night and when they

broke in, underneath his bed were a whole stack of biscuits. That half satisfied us for one day

and then the boys began to think of other ways of getting something to eat. During our daily

cruise one of the lads discovered that there was a potato peeling faction every day. Those

who volunteered had a double ration of soup and then of course it was always up to them to

tuck one or two potatoes down their shirt front or down their trouser leg and trust that they

would get past the search at the door. Personally, I found that hiding one or two potatoes

underneath my hat was the most successful method, though I must admit rather embarrassing

if the cook, who did the searching, decided to raise it up.

The French had been in the habit of volunteering for this potato fatigue and so we decided

that we would volunteer too. At 7.30 the next morning we arrived at the cook-house door,

complete with knives ready to do the job but we were nowhere in the picture as the French

had been queuing up since 7.00 and even at that only a limited number were taken in. Next

morning we were there at 6.30 and queued up for two hours in the cold and the snow. When

the French arrived they were dumbfounded and understandably enough were not too pleased.

Trouble was inevitable and in a few isolated cases it came to blows. That was nothing to

what was to come later when the doors were opened; there was one wild mad scramble

dicted by hunger. I was simply pushed in practically on my face for I was at the front of the

queue. It was hard work, peeling potatoes from 7.30 in the morning to 4.30 in the evening but

it was worth it as we received a double soup ration and were up to all the dodges of the day

sneaking away with a few extra potatoes. That, however, only lasted a few days for when the

German’s heard that the English were on potato fatigues, they stopped it.

Our first Christmas in captivity was spent at Trier and for many reasons it was a very

memorable Christmas. For one reason it was the only night that we did not have an air raid in

weeks, but probably more important was the fact that shortly before Christmas we received

our first Red Cross parcels. Not one each by any means, but still something. Six parcels

between 150 of us; not much it may seem, but that added to the few luxuries which the French

Red Cross had sent us, such as rice, peas, lentils and condensed milk; It all made at least a

welcome change in the diet before Christmas.

At Trier we were divided into three rooms, each containing about 50 men, and as supplies

were so dreadfully limited we pooled everything and made communal stews, rice puddings

and brews of tea from the delicacies. After the so-called Christmas meal we held communal
singing and Scottish dancing, the music being supplied by a number of mouth organs. Our decorations consisted of one inflated condom, which some optimist had held onto after his capture. New Year we celebrated in a similar fashion and in between, on the 28th, I had my 21st birthday. Rather strange circumstances in which to attain one's majority, for if ever I felt less like a man it was now.

The Germans at Stalag 12D Trier were not particularly pleasant. They detested the very sight of the British. From time to time they used to hold so-called control searches and at these they used to go through our personal belongings. These searches amounted pure and simply to look, and they confiscated anything they fancied. When we protested they threatened us with brute force. However, they had their work cut out when it came to anything of value as the prisoners were smart monkeys, and we were a match for any German when it came to a battle of wits.

There was also some very good talent in Stalag, especially amongst the French who claimed to have the world's All-In Wrestling Champion. He and another fellow, a French international footballer who happened to be a great big powerful chap of about 16 stones, used to give exhibitions at which the Germans were in full attendance. They used to love to watch these performances, feats of brute force appealed to their mentality. These two men had unlimited rations and received anything they wanted from the Germans. The British, however, were forbidden by the Germans to attend these displays; still, what surer way is there of getting a man to eat of the forbidden fruit than to try and forbid him to do so.

At Christmas the French organised a theatrical festival and kindly asked us to participate by means of supplying some talent. We had a very good singer and he volunteered to give one or two songs. On the night of the dress rehearsal the German interpreters were there as usual and they were particularly pleased with Reg Wigg's singing. In fact, they took a great interest in him - until they discovered he was a Britisher. That was enough, his stage turn was banned; in fact, they were so furious about it that they threatened to forbid the whole show. What a mentality; what an intellect; we must have been poison to these German soldiers.

The billets at Stalag 12D were positively horrible. The wooden huts in which we were housed were sub-divided into rooms and in each of these rooms the Germans crammed about 40 to 50 of us. We weren't supplied with beds or bunks but merely three platforms around the wall on which we were expected to sleep. Neither palliasses nor straw was supplied, nor were there chairs, tables or cupboards. When the rations arrived, a blanket was laid out on the floor and on one of the bed platforms and the rations were then divided up and distributed amongst us all.

Conditions were bad for us but they were even worse for some 700 Republican Spaniards who were housed in one of the big huts and were sleeping in tiers, seven high. It was the bitterly cold winter of 1940, and we were supplied with practically no fuel. A week's ration for 14 men would be burnt up in about three hours. These poor fellows were dying off from starvation and cold like flies.

When we arrived at 12D these Spaniards were wired off from the rest of us in the camp, and the German sentries patrolled the wire. They looked a miserable, ragged and torn group of individuals and were pleading to us with their hands out for food. How they expected us to have any, I don't know. But at any rate, one of our own men was so moved by this pathetic sight that he went up to the wire with half his soup ration for one of these unfortunate fellows.
Next, we heard a shot from one of the guards. The crowd was dispersed, and then we saw one poor, miserable Spaniard being assisted by two of his colleagues. The German guard had shot him in the thigh. The Spaniards had had a tough break; most of them were idealists, they refused to be called reds or communists, insisting that they were Republicans or Democrats. They had had three years of cruel Civil War in Spain; many had been besieged in Madrid, and for many months withstood the German armoured attacks. After bravely fighting a losing battle for three years, they had been driven up to the Franco-Spanish frontier where they crossed into France. Into this land of democracy, they were immediately put into concentration camps.

Men, women and children all together, living under most appalling conditions with little to eat. Later, they were organised into labour battalions and they were forced to make fortifications on the Franco-Belgian frontier. Here they remained until the German invasion of Belgium. When the retreat began, they withdrew along with the British Expeditionary Force, finally ending up at Dunkirk where the Germans took prisoner those who survived. Most of them were pro-British, though they said that our politics were bad. They hated Chamberlain, who they accused of being a Fascist, but admired Churchill and Eden hoping that they had not been called to office too late.
Chapter 7 Stalag 8B

Towards the end of January, rumour had it that we were moving, and we were moving to a certain camp Stalag 8B in Upper Silesia. This rumour we treated with reserve and mixed feelings; it was cold enough where we were, and heaven only knows what it would be like on the Polish frontier. The rumour had foundations, for a few days later we received our marching orders at very short notice that we had to move.

This time, however, we had learnt what a move meant and we departed better equipped, carrying with us haek-saws, files and nails that, somehow or other, had been acquired. On arriving at the station in Trier our cattle trucks were awaiting us, but in spite of our equipment this proved to be an even worse journey than the last one from Rouen.

We had some hot soup on the Thursday, leaving on the Friday and never had another bite to eat until the following Tuesday, having to survive on the meagre rations of two pounds of brown bread for the journey. The accommodation was as bad, only this time it was considerably colder. The further east we went, the colder it became. The water in our water bottles was frozen, consequently we had nothing to drink and icicles were hanging down from the roof of the cattle truck. Sanitation was just non-existent, although we were allowed out once, for ten minutes, at Frankfurt-on-Maine. There was little to see except desolation and snow. Everyone wanted to have a view in case we could see the damage that had been caused by the RAf bombing. Once the train was in motion, one could observe two of us on their knees working like fury sawing a hole in the side of the truck. With the result that when we reached our destination, Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia, the truck had some resemblance to a sieve!

Fortunately, we arrived there at night; otherwise more would have been said about it. What a relief it was to get out and stretch our legs, although it was after ten o'clock on a cold winter's night. It was most inconvenient that we should arrive at that late hour for the Germans were running round in a panic with electric torches trying to count us. The sergeant major and sergeants of the escort party were screaming and shouting at us and at their own guards. We paid not the slightest bit of attention for we hadn't the slightest idea what they were talking about anyway. The guards in a fury and a panic were pushing us around. They must have counted us at least a dozen times and never got the same answer twice. This performance lasted for over an hour. It was not hard to imagine our own feelings, cold, hungry, dirty and by that time fairly low-spirited. We had reached a stage when we didn't really care what now happened. The biggest physical endurance was to come, however, for the camp was three miles away and the only way to get there was by walking through the ankle-deep snow.
Through a clearance in the woods we arrived at the camp mentally and physically exhausted. To crown it all, no provision had been made for our arrival, and we would just have to sleep on the floor, which was concrete, and wet. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

I thought that there was going to be a riot. Anyhow, it wasn’t long before a German Officer and a couple of British RSM’s [Regimental Sergeant Major] arrived and, what was more important, accommodation was found for us. We were far too tired to ask any questions that night but next day everyone was trying to glean all possible information about the new camp and, at the same time, searching for anyone that they might know. At any rate, it was a British Camp. The restrictions were many, rations were meagre and poor, and there was plenty of work to be done outside - quarrying, mining and tree-felling.

We were told that there was a limited supply of Red Cross parcels and as we had not received any, there probably was a whole parcel each. It was too good to be true. Someone was pulling our legs. After supper, the RSM blew the whistle in the barrack room. There was silence. “An announcement to all new arrivals.” They were to go outside and fall in on parade and get their Red Cross parcels. The cheer that went up nearly took the roof off!

What a transformation; kids at Christmas time were never more excited and happy as we were on that occasion. When we actually received our parcels, we hurriedly unpacked them examined the contents and then proceeded to have a jolly good first class feast. In those days the Germans allowed us to keep our parcels intact, the string was not even taken off them. Later they opened the parcels, sometimes they punctured the tins and usually broke the chocolate bars into pieces.

At Salag 813 the German propaganda was turned on us full force. In charge of this propaganda was a German who had spent most of his time in the United States, so we nicknamed him ‘South American Joe’. A weekly newspaper was distributed amongst us entitled The Camp. Although it claimed to be a perfectly impartial paper, which contained news that would be of interest to us, it was of course nothing more than a Nazi rag, whose whole object was to undermine our morale. As is often the case, it had exactly the opposite effect and considerably stiffened the attitude of all British prisoners of war against the Germans. It was now a case of whatever claim they made, we simply dismissed it. Still, we always accepted the paper because it came in for more useful purposes than one. The anti-British propaganda was one of the greatest and most difficult evils that we had to combat. The physical hardships, bad as they were, were no means as tantalising and nerve-wracking as the mental agony of this continual drumming anti-British propaganda.

You wanted to turn your ears away from it. Wherever you turned, you could see an anti-British poster. Germans kept telling us that we had lost the war, our people were hungry, our cities were raised to the ground, and our ships were all now sunk. We fought against it, convincing ourselves that we had to win; that we had never lost a war and that we would have to win this one. We forced our spirits up; we cultivated a sense of humour, we were driven to find our own entertainment; we had sing-songs, which gradually turned into theatrical shows; we collected books, and as our stocks grew so we developed other activities. We gradually began to hold our own educational classes, which in turn developed, into a school. We now had a better library that was split into a reference library and a camp library. One or two fellows started kicking a football about; sides were taken, and in time a camp league was formed. Fellows began to think about escaping. At first they were unsuccessful, so others decided to assist. An escape committee was formed.

And so, bit-by-bit, we had formed ourselves into an organised community. Life went on in the camp as it would have done in any town, but with obvious limitations. None of these things
would have been possible had it not been for the great assistance accorded to us by the International Red Cross, the British Red Cross and the YMCA. Their work would not have been possible had it not been for the great army of voluntary workers back home and the generosity of our countrymen, wherever they were, particularly the ladies who did not forget us during our captivities. We owe to each and all of them a dept that we shall never, never, be able to repay.

"The Chain Gang". The inmates poking fun at their captors. The author can be seen just left of centre by the wire.

Conditions at Stalag 8B Lamsdorf were not very good; besides, there were too many restrictions so it was with a certain amount of relief that I received the news of my transfer to a working party. Before leaving for the camp, however, we underwent a great humiliation, for the Germans shaved all our hair off and made us look like convicts. Fortunately, we were able to see the humorous side of it and were able to have a hearty laugh at each other. It is remarkable how strange and degraded one looks with all one's hair off.
Chapter 8 The limestone quarry (Sakrau Stalag E93)

At five o’clock in the evening of the 22nd February 1941, 18 of us under armed escort departed for a working party camp, number E93. None of us knew or imagined what the work was going to be, though we all proved that it would not be a coalmine. Our destination was a place called Gogolin and was a matter of sixty miles away, so we had to travel by train but this time we travelled in a civilised manner in civilian carriages. Strangely enough, the civilians were not at all hostile to us and although they were forbidden to converse with us, they did chat quite freely – never mentioning the war, apart from saying that it was evil and iniquitous. Our working camp was at a place called Sakrau, a small village about 40 miles from the Polish border, from where we could also see the Sudeten Mountains. The German system of employment of prisoners of war was to let a civilian apply to

the Wermacht, which was the army, for a number of men. At the same time he had to billet and feed the prisoners as well as pay them token money of so many marks per head. POW’s were also paid by the Wermacht at the rate of 70 pfennigs per working day, approximately one halfpenny.

Our employer, a Nazi aristocrat, was a lime manufacturer and we were allocated various jobs in the factory. Most of us were made to work on the quarry face; the rest loading stones into trucks, which were taken away by means of a lift to the top of the kilns, where they were tipped in. This was, of course, all very hard and unpleasant work - making us very tired indeed. Fortunately, the billet itself was good. It was clean and it was warm, and the food was, comparatively speaking, satisfactory. After what we had been accustomed to at Trier, and then later on at Lamsdorf, it was wonderful.

As time went on, we got to know the civilian workers to a certain extent and soon had nicknames for most of them, such as Rat Face, Frankenstein or Squeaker, or something else. But by bit, we started to learn German. Personally. I took it quite seriously and tried to gain a good working knowledge of the language. When the Red Cross parcels began to
arrive we were ‘wealthy men’ and were able to set up quite a barter system with the civilians working with us on the quarries. It was illicit, of course, and although the penalties were severe, there were very few civilians who did not play ball with us. There were some who had to be watched, because there were always Germans who split on one another. Some of the few were guilty of informing the Gestapo of any illicit trading in order to try to gain favours from that dreaded organisation. We fixed the prices amongst ourselves, and it was a point of honour to rigidly adhere to them so any price-cutting was frowned upon by the rest of us.

The only thing we were short of when we had the Red Cross parcels and the food that we received for working in the quarry, were things like flour, eggs and bread. These we usually obtained from certain civilians in exchange for cigarettes, cocoa or a bar of chocolate.

There were only 18 of us on this working party and as the months passed by uneventfully, it became fairly obvious that we should in time become utterly fed up with one another’s company. Week after week, month after month the same old faces, the same mannerisms, the same conversations.

All this played on one’s nerves, and one felt that one would go mad. I was desperate sometimes, and as I gazed out of the window there was nothing to see but barbed wire. There were no prospects in the immediate future; one could see no end to the war and no end to our own captivity. What was the remedy? Just stick it out, have a sleep and try and dispel all thoughts from one’s mind. There was no other way. It was that or insanity. It has always been said that the army was a great education; but an even greater study in mankind and human nature is captivity. There one met all types, from all Regiments and all Corps, from all walks of life, rich and poor, beggar and thief, aristocrat and pauper. Here, [in Stalag 8B] they were all jumbled up. All on a level footing; all existing for one thing - freedom. Unfortunately, in a small working camp, there did not exist any great diversity, though on ‘arbeits commando’ [working party E93] there was an interesting study.

Our oldest fellow was called Benny Jackson, a man in his early 40’s who in peacetime was a beer carter during the day, and a barman in a pub somewhere in Glasgow at night. He hailed from a tough quarter of that city, the Cowcaddens, and was worthy of the tough reputation that these people had acquired for themselves. He was rough, foul-mouthed, coarse, and yet possessed a kind heart and was a great lover of children. He was married and father of six. Although at times he spoke of them in a rough and rude manner, at the same time he gave them a lot of thought and was living only for the day when he could be re-united with them all.

I will never forget one occasion when, by agreement with the German government, we were allowed to send an allocated form to our own paymaster in England, instructing him to allocate a certain amount of money to whoever we nominated. This money was withdrawn from our credit balance, which was building up during our captivity. Benny had been thinking about this and decided to send £20 as a Christmas box to his wife and his children.

A couple of months went by. One day a batch of letters arrived to our little working party from the main camp. We were sitting at the little table engrossed in our own letters. One could have heard a pin drop. Then there was a great exclamation from Benny, in his broad Glasgow twang. “Waddy make o’ that? She’s gone and bought a piano?” No one paid the slightest attention to Benny who was furious that all his money had been spent and he had had no control of what was bought. “A piano” he said “What do we want a piano for? Nas one can play, it’s sheer swank, that’s what it is. And it’s the last twenty quid she gets frae me! I tell ye that. It’s a guid job she’s no here or I’d take me belt off and give her a guid hiding!!”
A few weeks later, we got news that his family had moved. This had been a bad blow to Benny who did not like the idea of leaving his beloved Cowcaddens. "I'm afraid she's getting swollen headed" he said. "If Cowcaddens is no good enough for her the noo, she's got to go up to be in with the snobs in Springburn."

One of the finest fellows I met out there, was a chap called Harry Bugden, who came from Suffolk. We used to have many a peaceful chat together and we had so much in common, we built a strong friendship. Old Benny had an accordion, which he was learning to play, every night, and when others desired a little peace and quiet, he would insist upon practising. It was not as if you could escape from this awful sound; we were all locked up in this one room, the one in which we lived, we ate and we slept in. At 7.30 in the evening when the guards locked us up, this wretched instrument got on everyone's nerves. Its squeaks pierced our nerves, Harry's in particular. We got our heads together and hatched up a plan to do away with the instrument of torture once and for all.

We pooled our German money and offered to pay Benny twice what he had paid for it: 350 German camp marks in order to have the sole rights on that accordion. If he accepted, which we hoped he would - and it was a tempting offer - then we were going to slash the concertina part of it with a razor, followed by a Viking bonfire around which we would dance singing "be gone thou evil spirit, be gone". At a suitable occasion we approached Benny with our tempting offer. He looked aghast, words failed him, "Don't be so cheeky, I'm old enough to be your father, and I'm standing none of your nonsense". Thus, the accordion remained, and when we pleaded with him not to torture us, he became quite indignant. "I've got to have my recreation", said Benny, "You've got your books to read, I've got to have my music." Poor old Benny, he used to make silly stupid jokes. When no one laughed, he'd sulk and say, "Oeh, you chaps, you've got no sense of humour at all".

Another remarkable character was Bert Leathley who had been a soldier, a gardener, a waiter, a butcher and a postman, before finally ending up in a prison camp. He had a wonderful disposition; he was the only person that I knew who bore no grudge to anyone at all. He was generous, he was kind; he was likeable, but he was an awful man for arguing, even when he knew he was in the wrong. He was a bit absent-minded and as lazy as he was argumentative. He lost everything he ever had. A hat or a cap he never could keep more than a day. He would lay it down somewhere and forget all about it. His bed was always an awful mess. To lift the paillesse up, was to witness a junk shop. Strewed together were cigarette ends, letters, old camp money, socks, dirty shirts and every other conceivable thing that a prisoner might possess. One day, Bert was standing with his back to the fire having a warm, and although he felt himself getting hot, he was too idle to move. We smelt something burning. Next moment Bert was jumping and streaking around the place, he was on fire, and volumes of smoke were coming out from his rear!!

The complete lack of female company and the abnormal sexual life that we were compelled to live affected some men in most remarkable fashions. Some were able to continue more or less normally, others reacted in a way that was curious. Two fellows in the camp fell in love with one other; many of us were disgusted, and would most certainly have intervened had we discovered them indulging in undesirable practices or behaving in an improper manner. Whatever remarks we may have uttered did little to affect them then, for they continued in the same way. They went to work holding hands and used to pine for one another. One fellow actually caught them in an embrace over at the factory!
A Christmas Card designed and manufactured in Stalag 8B and sent to Ted's mother.

The factory workers were a mixed crowd. Though, generally speaking, I cannot say that they were actually hostile towards us. One reason for this might have been that they were a border people, and all of them were bi-lingual; they were quite unconcerned whether they were classed as Germans or Poles. It's hard for our people back in Britain to understand the sentiments of these people; the lower classes, the peasants, considered it immaterial who their rulers were, as long as they got work, bread and shelter. The upper and middle classes were possessed of a nationalistic or imperialistic spirit and probably proudly defended the German
Reich. The youth was naturally weaned on the Nazi doctrine and was fixxed with its fanaticism.

The manager of the works (not to be confused with the owner himself) was not an ardent Nazi, but was, nevertheless, a German patriot and firmly believed in the justice of Germany’s cause. He also firmly believed that we had started the war, carefully pointing out that it was the democracies that had declared war on Germany, and not vice versa. When the unprovoked aggression on Poland was pointed out to him, he flatly denied ‘unprovoked aggression’ and claimed that it was counter attack. He then quoted Goebbels parrot-like, regarding frontier incidents and atrocities against peace-loving German civilians. It was a waste of time trying to argue with him or, for that matter, any real German patriot for they had all been nourished on Goebbels’ long standing propaganda and they had an utterly distorted view of the outside world. They were convinced that they had won the last war, and that the Jews had stabbed them in the back.

Whenever they were doubtful about anything or stumped for an answer about anything we said, they blamed the Jews. It was very handy to have a scapegoat for everything. In a way, they felt sorry for us Britishers; we had been misguided and led into the war by the city Jews. They pointed out that every large conglomerate in Britain was Jewish owned. Every member of our cabinet was a Jew or under Jewish influence. In a way it was tragic, they thought, that a great empire and a great people should be laid to waste merely because of the pig-headedness and arrogance of a handful of Jews living in Britain. They themselves were so confident of victory that they were adopting a patronising attitude towards us. That we should show resentment to this attitude was completely beyond their comprehension.

Our manager, as a man, however, was a very nice fellow and an excellent employer who always believed in fair play. He was a very human man, who understood our position, realised our feelings and treated us accordingly. He never shouted at us. On the contrary, he always showed the greatest courtesy towards us. Whenever we had a complaint, which was pretty often, he listened patiently and really tried to meet us half way.

During my two and a quarter years at the stone quarry, I spent a few months in the blacksmith shop. The blacksmith was an oldish man, about 63 years of age. But he was rather miserable, and he was niggly, besides being awkward to get on with. He had five sons, all of them in the forces, and he did nothing else but worry about them all day long. His main concern was that I was here out of danger, while his sons were out in the front; this was more than I could stand, and in spite of our difference in age, we used to have some bitter quarrels together. Apart from that, we used to get on quite well. He was very ignorant of the outside world and current affairs, and he was quite astounded at some of the things I told him. “This place, England”, he once said to me, “you tell me it is an island; an island, what is that?” So I explained to him the best I could, that it was a piece of land surrounded by water. “That’s remarkable,” he said, “I can’t understand with all the bombing that we are doing on England, that it doesn’t sink”.

Another time he asked me, if we had cows and horses, and trees and hills in England; the same as here in Germany. When I laughed and told him “Of course we have” he turned round, surprised, and said “Well what are we all fighting for, you don’t seem to be much different to the people over here. What are we fighting for? You don’t appear to be wild and uncivilised, and, what’s more, I understand you go to church.”

The blacksmith’s shop was situated near the factory and the factory workers’ houses. Consequently, many of the women came to the shop from time to time wanting odd jobs.

18
done. So in time, I got to know most of them. Here, as everywhere else, I found the German women kind, sympathetic and understanding. They often spoke to me; they were civil, courteous and were interested to know all about my home and my family.

One woman in particular was very kind and on many occasions gave me cake and eggs. More than once she asked the old smithy to let me go and fix her lights. When I entered her house I found a good meal awaiting me. It must not be forgotten that she took great risks in doing this. In the first place, the old blacksmith should not have allowed me out of his sight. Had a guard, during his patrol of the works, called in the shop and found me missing, there would have been real trouble. But, had I been found in the house, she would have had nothing less than three years prison and, naturally enough, I would probably have had a court martial. In these cases the Germans were harder on the civilian offenders than the prisoners themselves. The penalties for intercourse with German women were severe, and sexual intercourse was punishable by death.

There were one or two lads on the works and we used to have a good deal of fun teasing them. One youth, German boy of course, named Richard, was just a young devil - one of those law-breaking youngsters who are to be found in any country. He said he was very keen to learn English, and as he worked with Harry, my friend, he learned most of it from him. As can well be imagined, what he did learn was not always printable. It was nothing for him to say to a manager as he was going past, in front of us, “Get away you dirty square-headed cheery old so-and-so”, or words to that effect. We, of course could barely keep our faces straight while the boss would merely chuckle or say “Ah hah! Der Richard is learning English now”. This gave him ideas, and he always imagined himself playing a role in some hair-raising adventure. He went to Hanover and, when he returned, told us all about the air raids. His conversation went something like this: “Air raids? Good lord, marvellous. Day and night, I saw the British planes come swooping down, machine-gunning the buildings. They came so low, I could see the identification colouring on the wings. When I saw one shot down, I looked for the pilot. For if I had seen him I would have given him civilian clothing and money, in exchange for his jackboots and his revolver.

Another youth was a detestable wretch; we called him ‘Sauerkraut’, but he served a useful purpose. One day, he was walking about with a small compass in his hand, and so right away, one of the boys was after him:

“What have you got there?” said Jimmy.
“Oh a compass” said the innocent youth.
“A compass” said Jimmy, “What is that?”
“Don’t you know what a compass is? It’s a thing for finding direction”.
“My word, said Jimmy, “How wonderful, we don’t have things like that in England”
“Don’t you?”
“Well,” said Jimmy, “I’d like a little souvenir, I’ll give you a packet of cigarettes for it.”
“Sure”, said the boy, and calmly handed over the compass.

Before many months passed, Jimmy was trying to find his way home with that compass!

One day, we received some very bad news, that the Germans had murdered some of our comrades at the next camp, not a mile away. We were distressed and wanted to find out all about it. The only means we had for getting in touch with the camp was for one or two of us to report sick, for the doctor was usually at this camp. Two of the boys went down and got the news. This unfortunate fellow had been nagged and provoked by this German guard to such an extent that he felt he couldn’t stand it any longer, and so he warned the guard to stop tormenting him or else there would be trouble. The guard was furious at being threatened by a
POW and went into a mad frenzy over the affair. The prisoner leapt at him, to strike him, while another guard shot him in the back. He collapsed, but was by no means dead. His comrades rushed to assist him but were held back by the guards, while one guard stood over the wounded fellow and warned them that anyone who approached would be likewise shot. Meanwhile, the Guard commander and the British Camp Trustee were summoned. The guards discussed the why's and wherefores of the incident, and finally gave orders for the man to be taken off for treatment. The man had been bleeding for over half an hour, and when he reached hospital, it was too late. Shortly after, the man died. The discontent and ill feeling which now reigned at this camp could scarcely be described. The guards were changed immediately, the lads refused to work, brute force was applied, and the boys recommended, after a fashion, a return to work. It was found unprofitable, however, and the camp was disbanded, the men being sent back to the main camp and then disbanded to small working parties throughout Silesia.

Of course, the trouble was the German control officer for that area - a very fine, upstanding man, with a plausible manner, but ruthless - and it was he who gave the orders to shoot at the slightest sign of insubordination. Trouble was now brewing on all the working parties and we were experiencing a great amount of discontent and dissatisfaction.

The root of the trouble, I think, could be traced to our confinement. All being in the 'bag' for two years, and consequently it was beginning to tell on our nerves. We were tired of one another's company, and we all desperately needed a change of scenery, a change of work and a change of company. We applied for transfers to other camps but they were all refused. The food, too, had deteriorated terribly and had it not been for the Red Cross parcels, we most certainly would not have been able to exist there. We did everything possible to make ourselves unwanted, we complained about the food, the conditions, about the work, and even had strikes. Also, they were all too no avail. We were driven on, and on, until I became desperate and planned that as soon as spring came, I would escape. This thought was most consoling to me as I now felt that I had an objective in mind. I felt that I had something to live for. I had something to which I could look forward.

As the civilians got called up one by one, the manager said that he could not continue to operate the quarry and the chalk mill without more labour, and so he applied for more POW's. They were to be housed in a different camp to our own, some 200 yards away. When they arrived, we learnt that they were Cypriots. At least they called themselves Cypriots, though in actual fact they were the biggest collection of mongrels I had ever met. Some were Arabs, some were Turks, and some were Egyptians, while the rest seemed to hail from Cyprus. I will give them their due, however, because they really could teach us how to be lazy. We did little for the Germans, but they did even less. The Germans couldn't do anything with them. They jabbered to one another in an incomprehensible language, a mixture of Arabic and Greek. They used to squat down on their haunches and wail weird and wonderful songs, just as if they were Arabs. We didn't get on very well with them, I'm afraid. It's just that their way of thinking and living was quite different to ours and we couldn't agree.

Our attitude to the German guards was one of constant aloofness and obvious coolness. They on the other hand, would rave and argue with them the one moment, and the next they would be the best of pals, sitting down, chatting to them, exchanging cigarettes, and slapping them on the back. Apart from that, they didn't even agree amongst themselves and were constantly quarrelling and fighting. They used to beat one another with sticks, and hurl Red Cross tins at each other. In each case, the guards used to have to intervene or else someone, in all probability, would have been killed. This too we disapproved of, for whatever our internal differences may have been, we always showed a united front to the Germans.
During the two and a quarter years at the stone quarry we had many changes of guards; some were fairly decent, others hostile and malicious. We never tried to be friends with them, always treating them with open contempt. But I think we can claim, without being too boastful, that we had the measure of them, mostly, and in the battle of wits, nearly always came out on top. There was one guard, however, who was a grand fellow and, much as we would have preferred to have been hostile and antagonistic towards him, he was too much of a gentleman to be so. He never shouted at us; he never asked us to do a thing without saying please; he never lost his temper; he never referred to us as prisoners, but always as Englishmen. Whenever we asked him to do, he did his best to fulfil it, and many times, when we had been out working in the rain and returned to our little room, we found that he had got a roaring fire going for us and plenty of steaming hot water to wash in. I wonder how many Britshers would have done the same for German prisoners of war? I don't think I would have.

One or two of the guards, however, were real bad pieces of work - especially one who was called George. He was a whining, moaning old fisherman, and was constantly nagging us. We were fed up with him, and soon had decided to have a protest strike. When he called us in the morning to go to work, no one moved. He came back a few minutes later and we told him we were fed up, and were not going to move. "What!" he said, "we'll see to that!" In a split second, he and his henchmen came rushing in to the room, each putting a round up the breach. They set upon one fellow, stuck a loaded rifle into his stomach, and were going to shoot him. We went to work.

Old George was dreadfully jealous of the Red Cross parcels and used to take great delight in holding onto them as long as possible. He referred to them as the 'English propaganda'. George was the unbrilleable type; at least we didn't try very hard. Consequently, we didn't get much out of him. But another guard whom we had was the gluttonous type; his eyes used to nearly pop out of their sockets each time he saw a Red Cross parcel. Therefore, one day, we casually dropped him something he enjoyed it, and we got to work and demanded the BBC news on the radio. He wouldn't hear of it at first, but we put the pressure on him and we got our way. During the reading of that news bulletin, he was in a blue funk. The sweat was pouring out of him. Next, we heard he had applied for a transfer, and got it. So our laborious work was of little avail - no more news bulletins!

Another bad guard was one we called Walleye, because he had one glass eye. He was like most Germans, a very dull-witted fellow, and he was very conscious of the fact that we burlesqued him and so his badness was a form of revenge. He was obviously a man who had had no responsibility in his life before, and his post as a guard commander, even for a small group of 18 prisoners of war, filled him with pomp and a sense of his own self-importance. He was very anxious to exercise his newly-found authority, and was constantly always making new and petty rules and notices to which he would attach his signature. Then he would stand back and gaze at it with a smirk of self-satisfaction. He was also quite unbrilleable. For example, there was the question of the BBC news. When he was guard commander, unfortunately, for many months, we never had it.

Another miserable guard commander we had named 'pop'. He remains in my memory, chiefly because of an incident that occurred about the bread ration. There was only seventeen of us at the time, and we used to collect the bread every second day. That meant there was half a loaf per man, for two days. Thus, we should have had eight and a half loaves. Instead we drew eight and a third and the guard, not old 'pop', but his understudy (we always had two guards, a corporal and a private), took two thirds for themselves. This meant that the odd man was going to go short, which was most unsatisfactory. So the senior fellow amongst us took a loaf into the guardroom and said we want half a loaf and walked out. Then the guard came
into the room, threw the two thirds of a loaf in and said, "There you are, you miserable dogs, perhaps that will satisfy you." In one motion, our senior man picked it up and threw it back at him, saying, "We want half a loaf or nothing". A few seconds later, old pop walked into the room, placed the two pieces together, cut them into two equal halves, and asked us to take our choice.

In the period that I had now been a prisoner, I had made one or two excellent friends. My first friend was Bert Owen, a fellow out of my own company who I had met in hospital and with whom I was until we went into working party E93, when, unfortunately, we had to split partnership. Three other grand fellows I met in hospital days were Stan Randle, Geoff Goldsmith, and Reg Wigg. Another good friend I had was Danny Beamier, a Frenchman. He was a good friend to us, and although we disagreed with his beliefs and his intention of entering a monastery after the war, nevertheless we were all staunch friends. At Sakrau, the working party E93, my friend was Harry Bugden. I was also friendly with Jim Simpson, Bert Leathley, Eric Holmes and Maurice Johnson. The last mentioned was a New Zealander and was a fellow with a really delightful disposition and a sweet temper.

Christmas in captivity was always a sad occasion, for however much we tried to celebrate and forget our circumstances, our thoughts were constantly going back to our loved ones at home. We always had a little party with a Christmas tree brought from outside and decorations made from coloured wrappings around the Red Cross parcels. We usually managed to get the guard to bring us some beer, and in that way made the most of the festive season. We had a salsongs, and then it was an unwritten law that each one of us should give an individual effort. For me that was always a great ordeal, for I can neither sing, recite or do any conjuring tricks.

After Christmas 1942, we were practically snowbound in Upper Silesia. All form of communication to us was strictly limited. One of the first things to be affected were the Red Cross parcels and ere long we were feeling very hungry indeed. We used to lie on our beds in the evenings and think up ways of supplementing our rations.

Bert Leathley usually came to the rescue with a bright idea. About a mile away from the camp on the other side of the quarry, were some potato pits. The plan was to steal out of the camp at about 6.30 and break into the pits. Bert was going to lead the first potato patrol and he would take with him two other fellows. So as I happened to be the camp interpreter, it was decided that I was to go to the guardroom and have a chat with the guards and keep them busy until the operation was over. When the task was completed I would receive an all-clear signal so that I would know that I could leave the Huns to themselves. Four men, each armed with a sack, climbed over the wire, climbed over the quarry – which, of course, they knew perfectly well, across the fields to the potato pits where they got through the snow, the straw and the mud to the potatoes themselves and filled the bags. It was pre-arranged that the pits should be dug over in such a fashion to allow the frost to enter, and each subsequent visit that we made, we should open a new pit.

The first patrol was successfully completed and after the guard had locked us in, we all began peeling potatoes and prepared to have a communal feed of spuds. We each had a plate heaped high and did enjoy them, and stuffed ourselves with dry potatoes until we were scarcely able to move. Why should we exercise economy; there were plenty more potatoes where they came from and we were now living in the land of plenty. The floodgates were open, we kept repeating our patrol about twice a week until, suddenly, there was an unpleasant turn. Harry happened to be near the telephone at the works when it rang. It was customary to listen in to
the conversation, in case it was from the main camp regarding a Red Cross parcel. The manager answered and the conversation was something like this:

"Heil Hitler!" said the inspector.
"Yes?"
"The potato pits have been raided!"
"You are coming to investigate?"
"Good. The prisoners. Quite possible, but it won't be the English. They don't work near the quarry now. Quite possibly the Cypriots. I wouldn't put it past them. Righto. I shall expect you, and I'll warn the guard commanders."

Harry immediately came round to warn us, and we were quite worried in case the police arrived before dinner time and we might not be able to dispose of those potatoes that we already had. Our luck was in, however, and the police did not arrive before dinner hour. When we got over our dinner, we were frantically disposing of all the evidence. Some we had underneath the coal box, some down the latrines, others we burnt. Thus the main evidence was cleared. The police arrived and right away searched the Cypriots camp, finding no trace of the potatoes, they decided to look over ours. They hadn't the high opinion of us that the boss had. They had a shock coming for them, however, for they were dealing with Walleye - a single-tracked minded man who jealously guarded his authority.

"Well?", he said, when they arrived at the gate.
"We are going to search the camp" said the police.
"Are you?" said Walleye. "Who said so?"
"Potatoes have been stolen and we intend to exercise our authority to search this camp."
"These men inside here are prisoners of war, who come under military law, the Wermacht, over which civilian police have no jurisdiction whatsoever. So I know that they cannot possibly have taken the potatoes, for none of them work near the quarry. What is more I have the billet under constant supervision, and have no intention of allowing anyone to inspect my duties."

So thanks to Walleye, we had two more good meals of potatoes!

As the winter set in I had become more and more determined to escape. Two other lads, Bert Leathley and Jim Simpson had also decided that they would escape at the same time.

Life was very monotonous and tedious and the thought of making a dash for it always gave us something to live for - we intended to go on the march but as the winter was so delayed we did not get away until May 21st. We saved our chocolate rations, whilst other boys in the camp were also very helpful, assisting us in every way with food and German money that had been acquired from the German population. Civilian clothing was acquired, by means fair and foul. At springtime we did not bother about jackets and satisfied ourselves with trousers and caps. Our main problem was knowing where to hide all the clothing successfully until the required moment. We found that the most satisfactory way was to hide it amongst the stones of some unused kilns over at the works, doing the same with the food. The way we got past the guards was to place the Red Cross parcels food into buckets, which we took over to the works each evening, then covering them over with bags which carried the coal. This was a necessary risk that we took the night before we made the break. We went out for an hour to get our belongings together and put them all safely for the morning. We returned without having been missed and in the event went early to bed for a goodnight's rest. I do not know
how the other two got on for I was too nervous and excited and had to content myself with intermittent snoozes.

At last, the moment had arrived. Jim and I had agreed to go together - Bert expressing a wish to go on his own. Whilst being handed over from the Guard to the civilians at the works, we managed to slip them both and successfully got away. We hurriedly changed and were soon on the road leaving the factory and the camp behind us. It was good to feel free and we were well on the road before we had our first thrill; for coming in the opposite direction to us was an old man who knew us. The old boy got a shock but he passed us without a word showing indifference. That obstacle being successfully overcome, we regained confidence. Alas about dinnertime we were passing through a village when the Burgher Master who was standing at the office door hailed us:

“Where are you going?”

“Get into your appropriate place.”

What a mentality! Even then, Jim and I had a good laugh about it. Next morning, we were interviewed by a Sergeant major and he certainly behaved more like a raving lunatic than a controlled human being. He screamed and shouted at us and threatened to shoot us if we didn’t tell him who gave us the civilian clothes. When we said that we had found them, he said that we could say that at our court martial. But the civilian had admitted having bartered with us. We stuck to our guns. Then, he charged us with espionage and sabotage, which we couldn’t quite understand. But, apparently, in searching through our kit, he had found a box of foot powder and the silly nitwit, thinking it was explosive powder, had sent it to be analysed. At the time we didn’t think it was that funny, but we had heard quite a lot about Nazi frame-ups and hoped that we were not going to be two stooges who were going to be made an example of.

On the following day, Bert Leathley was brought in; he had been away longer than us and had also had a bit of bad luck. After four days we were allowed out to have a shave. This concession could only mean that something was in the air. We asked the guard what was happening, to which he replied that the company commander was coming down to try us. We saw him arrive, and after an anxious half hour, we saw him depart. What’s happening? That afternoon we were allowed out of our cell and were informed that we were returning to the main camp.

The major, on hearing that we had escaped in civilian clothing, and had contemplated sabotage had said, “We were a bad lot who deserved to be shot” and refused to have anything more to do with us. Thus he recommended the camp authorities to send us up to be court-martialled. The major had apparently added that had we been a couple of decent prisoners that had escaped in uniform with no further intention, he would have given us seven days and the matter would have been finished. But, we were a ‘bad lot’ and wished Germany harm and deserved a court martial. When we returned to the main camp, and a new court martial went before the law officer, he was a grey haired German captain, with quite a genial look on his face. “Well, you naughty boys” he said, “What have you been up to?” We told him. “Where were you going?” he said. “Towards Switzerland” we said. “Oh ho, that’s a bad way to go. Always go south east” he said. His smile somewhat astonished us. “What were you going to eat?” “Well, we had a bit of chocolate” we said. “Well, that wouldn’t have kept you going long, would it? And May is a bad time of the year to escape, you know. Better to go in the autumn when potatoes are in the ground and fruit is on the trees” “Ah well”, he said, “Eight days.”
Bert was full of cheek, and said, "But we've already done four in a cell!" "Ah, hah" he said, "Typical Englishman, always trading, always trying to get a better bargain! I'll split the difference, six days!"

Well pleased with the result of our court martial, we went up to the compound where all the convicts were waiting. Their turn; the cells were full. Whilst we were there, the Germans wanted us to work. We all decided against it, and refused. The Germans didn't tolerate that. They picked about 60 men out at random, and that included all three of us, and sentenced each of us to double duty. That meant that we were sent to the German glasshouse. That was a blow, because the glasshouse was much worse than the cells. Those ten days were the longest and worst in my life. The German sergeant-major in charge was the biggest swine I'd ever met. I never thought it possible for any man to be such a horrible and hateful creature. He just was the last word. Time and tide wait for no man, and eventually we were released and that marks the end of one of my main chapters of captivity.
Chapter 9 The paper-mill in Sudetenland (Stalag E399)

My return to the main camp at Lansdorf in the summer of 1943, I always look back upon as a milestone in my captivity. For it marked the end of my days of hard, physical labour in the stone quarries and elsewhere. I didn’t have much of a chance of looking around the camp when I was in previously, and the Germans had me allocated to a working camp as soon as I was released from the detention compound. However, in that short space of time, I did make the acquaintance of a fellow who I had been wanting to see for a considerable length of time. And that was, Guy Irving. Guy was a grand fellow and later on proved to be one of my very best pals in captivity. He was generous, openhearted and blessed with an excellent sense of humour.

The camp, too, had changed considerably. Various organisations such as libraries, schools, theatres, football leagues which had been present when I left in 1941, had by now blossomed forth into mature adulthood. But I had little chance, however, of scratching below the superficial crust of camp life and seeing it as it really was. On the contrary, in the short space of time that I was there, I considered it a marvellous treat to be back in the main camp after the drudgery and monotony of close confinement in a small working camp. Still, my ‘hosts’ deemed it necessary that I should go to another working camp. Thus, ere long I was on my way to working party E399.

I went to E399 with Bert Leathley and a Spaniard with the name of Julian Lillo. Although the Spaniard was 23 years of age, he had had an eventful and sad life. When he was recruited into the Spanish civil war, like everyone else of his age, joined one side or the other [Fascists or Republicans]. He joined what was called the Republicans in order, he said, to protect the lawful rights of the country. The bitter civil war dragged on for almost three years and eventually the Republican forces were overpowered by the Franco regime and his German/Italian Allies. Julian thus had to make an escape into France, along with thousands of other Spanish refugees.

As I said, before, France showed a great hospitality by clapping these unfortunate people into concentration camps. Starvation occurred and disease was widespread and, when these people were on the verge of collapse, France offered them their liberty if they would agree to join the Foreign Legion for five years. Julian like the rest joined and in due course was sent to Algiers, and then into Syria. They were in France when it collapsed in 1940, and so he and a number of Spaniards escaped, and successfully made their way into Palestine where they surrendered themselves to the British authorities and then volunteered to join the British army. The commandoes were being formed at that time, so they joined them. Liberty was not to be Julian’s bit for long, however. In 1941 he was captured by the Germans on Crete. Prison life was very hard for him, as there were few Spaniards in our camp. His English was very very limited. Thus, he did get fits of depression and moodiness, for which we all forgave him. One must also not forget that a Spaniard’s nature is very different to that of us Britshers.

I have met practically every nationality in the world now, and I am convinced that there is no other nation in the world that can adapt themselves to varying conditions with such ease as the British.

Working party E399 was a cardboard factory, beautifully situated in the Sudetenland and we were housed in a portion of a castle, while the factory in which we worked was situated in a valley. The scenery was quite magnificent, especially in wintertime, with the snow-coated mountains and the silhouetted pine trees. Czechoslovakia can rightly claim to have the most
gorgeous scenery in the whole of Europe. I could certainly not wish to see anything more spell-binding or enthralling.

The castle in which we lived was the property of a German/Russian Count. He was a perfect gentleman who had spent much of his time in England and was very well acquainted with our language. For prisoners of war it was a magnificent billet to have and when we first went there we enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and were allowed to wander around the grounds of the estate unescorted.

There was practically no chance of getting anywhere, as we were high up the mountain and miles from anywhere. If one had been able to contact the Czech resistance movement, then there might have been a chance. At any rate, two fellows made a break and so, naturally enough after that, we were completely locked up. And we had to content ourselves by gazing through iron-barred windows or, if we wanted air, we could go into a small courtyard surrounded on three sides by the castle and on the fourth by a large insurmountable gate with many strands of barbed wire upon it.

The work was, comparatively speaking, easy. Cardboard boxes were made at the factory; we just did general labouring jobs around the works. Unfortunately, the factory worked on three eight-hour shifts and so, in order to make it fair for everyone, we had to change our routine every week. It was rather unpleasant and certainly did nothing to assist a depressed state of mind. Half the civilians were Czechs, and the other half were Germans. Some of them had Nazi leanings, whilst others professed a democratic approach.

I worked with an old boy called Ambrose. Although his family lived in Sudetenland all their lives, he admitted that they were of German stock. He was one man I did admire. He hated the Nazis and, what is more, he told everyone he hated them! On the various flag days that the Germans used to have, he always refused to make any contributions to the Nazi party.

From time to time, local Nazi leaders would visit the factory to maintain the morale of the German people. It was compulsory to attend, but old Ambrose used to refuse to go. How he avoided being put in a concentration camp, I really do not know. I think he was such a good man at his job, that his boss considered him irreplaceable and was afraid to report him. He
used to listen to the BBC news bulletins at night, and the following day would give me a
detailed account that I would, in turn, pass on to the rest of the boys. He, thus, was our only
source of information apart from the German paper. Ambrose helped in no small way to
maintain the morale of us all at a reasonable level.

Many of the civilians were lukewarm in their sympathy to the regime, but were too afraid to
open their mouths and were, in fact, quite submissive and dejected. When one had seen the
terror of the Nazis and the Gestapo, one is reluctant to condemn the Germans for this
submissiveness. It was a horrible organisation whose agents were unknown to anyone. The
efficiency and the horror of the camps were a constant fear to the German people who lived in
constant fear of being sent to the concentration camps.

I knew of the case of a man who had been listening to the London Radio and was innocently
given away by his young son. Whilst listening, he had not taken the necessary precaution of
putting his child to bed or out of the room. This particular man had been suspected and so the
teachers at school had begun to pump the little boy and discovered, in due course, that his
father had been a regular listener to London. One night, a caller knocked at the house. He was
whisked away and sentenced to five years in a concentration camp.

There was a great diversity of men in working camp E399. The camp was made up of men
from all corners of our country and all parts of our Empire. Our camp trustee was a Scottish
sergeant called Joe Adams. He was a straight fellow, 100% anti-German and who, at the same
time, stood no nonsense from any of us. I got to know him very well, for I was the camp
interpreter. He came in for a lot of criticism from our own fellows, but I felt it was definitely
unjustified. For Joe had the welfare of us all at heart, and fought tooth and nail for our lot, to
improve our conditions. However, taking a broad view of it now that it is in the past, one must
not overlook the fact that captivity is a perfect nightmare.

A group of men clumped together in confinement for months on end with absolutely nothing
to think about except exasperating monotony. It was only to be expected that they should
become bitter, bad tempered, quarrelsome, etc. They suppressed the feelings so long, that in sheer desperation, they argued, they quarrelled, and they moaned. It's an outlet for their feelings. In spite of all that, there was plenty of good fun and many gags. No-one like to remain in a working camp and so everyone was trying to think up some stunt or other that he could exploit and get a return to the main camp.

The best stunt was carried out by four of us. It was arranged amongst the four of us, the 'victim', Joe the sergeant, the medical orderly and myself as interpreter. It was arranged that this fellow would throw an epileptic fit and be foaming at the mouth whilst we rushed for the guard commander. We prepared our victim, carefully powdering his face, to make him look pink, and put some toothpaste in his mouth so that he should foam. Now we went all out to stage our act. We banged the table and hammered the door; Joe who was really a master at it yelled frantically and excitedly for the guard. He, in turn, rushed into the room and the 'poor fellow', lying on the floor being held down by six of his comrades, whilst the medical orderly was carefully wiping the foam away from his mouth with a piece of cotton wool.

Joe was rushing around, creating an atmosphere of great excitement about this and that in front of the fellows, opening windows, etc. whilst I was talking about the seriousness of the complaint and how fortunate it was that it had happened on a Sunday whilst we were all in the billet. If he had taken a fit at work, it might have been a disaster. The guard added that he had been a medical orderly in the army, and he knew all about these things. This was probably the reaction to some experience that he had had before.

He was a dispatch rider; I lied, and his bike was blown to pieces and he had then been picked up by his comrades. "Ah" said the guard, "I knew it, I knew it, and it's all the work of this war. That must take the blame for everything."

He then advised us to pick him up carefully, and put him to bed. We then gently picked him up, carried him over to the bed. The guard stayed with him for about half an hour, and then came back every now and then to have a look at him. He said that he [the victim] must go to the Doctor on the following day, so it was suggested that it was a long walk, and the man was so ill that it might be better for him, the guard, to go and see the doctor, explain everything and get the doctor's permission to have the man sent back to the camp hospital. The guard agreed. It was a good idea. Everything went according to plan, and in a couple of days, that man was back in the main camp!!

Two other old dodgers were a couple of Aussies. Slim and Rossie. They were, in actual fact, two scoundrels, and Slim was really an old rogue. He hailed from Kalgoorlie and was by profession a gold miner; at least that's what he said he did when he did any work at all. In spite of his rather bad history, I rather liked old Slim, for he was quite honest about what he was and there is, after all, such a thing as honour amongst thieves. When Slim was down the gold mine, he used to make most of his money by what he called private deals. Cunning as he was, the law eventually caught up on him and Slim got three months jail. He often used to compare his two confinements and was quite definite that, apart from the disgrace, it was better to be in a civil jail than be a prisoner of war. When he was released, he couldn't go back to Kalgoorlie and he went to Perth where he lived rather a shady existence. He admitted that the best time he ever had in his life was when he lived with a wealthy prostitute. He lived in a luxurious flat, had plenty of money, and did well. That was a heavenly life until his mistress discovered that he was keeping company with another woman. She showed her displeasure in no uncertain manner, turning him out of the flat at a moment's notice and hurling dishes and pots of flowers at him as he went out!
As I said, they were up to many dodges. For actual laziness, Rosie was actually even more of a maestro than Slim. Rosie had a plantation in New Guinea and consequently was in the habit of having natives waiting on him hand and foot. The idea of doing any manual labour at all was quite repugnant to him. Slim, on the other hand, had many ingenious ways of having days off. He would suddenly have an accident at work; a lump of wood would suddenly fall on his foot and badly bruise it. What had really happened was that he had carefully strapped up his hand in a wet handkerchief and then tapped the knuckle of his first finger. After about a quarter of an hour it would swell up considerably and develop a bluish colour giving the resemblance of a badly bruised hand. That was actually enough to have a week off work.

Another trick was to tell the guard that he had been doing carpentry and had had nails in his mouth and had actually swallowed one. Another way to report sick was with his heart. About half an hour before he saw a doctor he would smoke a cigarette in which a couple of crushed saccharines were mixed with the tobacco. That caused palpitations of the heart and that was Slim's 'super' trick, one that he would use when he wanted to return to the camp. He said it was infallible.

After the strict control of our movements had been enforced, one or two of the lads began to work on the window bars and one lag made the perfect job of cutting them. It was so perfectly done that it was quite unnoticeable. And even when one shook the bars, they appeared to be as firm as a rock. Boys used to go out and visit Czech girlfriends of theirs, and others used to sneak out and steal eggs from the farmyards.

I remember distinctly, one cold January evening of 1944 when the boys were wandering about idly wondering what on earth to do in order to break the monotony. They suddenly hit on a bright idea. "Let's steal", someone said. Four of them got their heads together and decided to raid the office of the works and steal the works wireless. All set, out with the lights, down with the blackouts, pulled the bars apart and let the five adventurers out.

They agreed that on their return they would give a gentle tap on the window. They set off whilst we anxiously waited for their return. They had been gone for an hour and a half when the long awaited taps were given. Two went to keep a watch for the guard and then the same procedure: lights out, count down, bars apart, and then in came the treasured wireless. It was a perfect beauty. They had had a great amount of trouble obtaining it as they had been unsuccessful on the first attempt at picking the lock on the office. They had been forced to smash down the door. It (the radio) was such a big thing it was an awful job to know where to
hide it. It was suggested that we made a hole in the floor beneath the cupboards and keep it there. That idea was scrapped, though personally, that was my favourite.

The truth of the matter is that one or two of the boys were beginning to get the wind up when they reflected on what the consequences might be when we were caught. We began to panic somewhat. In the end, we decided to take the wireless out and hide it in a haystack a few hundred yards from the castle. The wireless was then wrapped up in sheeting. I advised them against this, expressing my opinion that it was inadvisable evidence should it ever be discovered. They turned round and said it was a simple matter to criticise, what it needed was a practical alternative. I said no more and let them carry on.

Then we had six clear hours to debate during which we considered one plan after another. However, the wireless was taken away and when we went to work the next morning, it wasn’t long before the civilians were chatting about the raid that had taken place at the works. Fantastic stories were going round about stealing so much money. But it was generally accepted that the Czech partisans had arrived and carried out a raid during the night. The Gestapo arrived and investigated everything with a great air of superiority and made the customary notes in their notebooks. News was sent down from the castle that town girls had found the wireless while gathering the straw. Things looked mighty black now, and we were definitely under suspicion.

That afternoon the police arrived and one of them was carrying in his hand the chair covering in which the wireless had been wrapped. We were all turned out and our billet was searched. Fortunately, they seemed to find no evidence and allowed us to go back to our rooms. Frantically, we pulled the chair to pieces and burnt all evidence - just in time, for the police arrived, this time with the bloodhounds. These wretched dogs smelt each one of us; nothing happened. They searched the house, high and low; they went away, but kept returning. They knew we were guilty but didn’t have the evidence to prosecute. Apart from that, the guard, to save his own skin, must have protected us and spoken up in our favour convincing them that it was impossible to get out. All the windows were tested for faulty bars but none were found and the whole affair ended in a bit of an anti-climax and we heard no more.

In October 1943 the first exchange of prisoners took place, and we heard that one of those had returned to the village where we were. This was very interesting as we were keen to know how he had been received in England. We were convinced that his lot in England had been better than ours. However, we were soon to discover that he was, apparently, a Nazi fanatic and had come back with fantastic tales of bad treatment and even said that while he and other Germans had been passing through London, they had been stoned by the women. A couple of days later, when we went to the doctor, he was there and he was frightfully insolent and rude to us and tried to humiliate us in front of the civilians in the waiting room. Strange things began to happen at the camp, the guards were trebled and S.S. [Storm troopers] guards were also employed. We could not fathom out the reason for this but the most popular theory was that the villagers had had a meeting and had resolved to storm our camp and give us a beating up.

Another theory was that the Czech partisans were operating in the area and the Germans were afraid of them liberating us and arming us. Whatever the cause may have been, after a week the extra guards were relieved. Winter had set in by now and I was utterly fed up with working party 399. The intense cold deterred me from making another break and I decided, along with an Australian fellow prisoner, that our only escape from the unbearable atmosphere of the working party was to swing the lead as hard as we could and to make
ourselves such a nuisance that the civilian employers would become totally exasperated with us and ask the military to have us withdrawn from the working party.

On second thoughts, we decided that this might be a rather slow procedure and, as we were in a desperate frame of mind, we drew up an alternative plan, which was rather more drastic. Thus, one morning I decided to take a fit. My fellow conspirator John, who was an Aussie, looked on and hurriedly brought the works manager to the scene. After a great deal of discussion between them and John rolling over my body, it was decided to arrange transport to take me back to the billet. This was duly arranged and, thanks to the great collaboration offered by my comrades, I was carried out on a sledge, undressed and put to bed.

The German guard commander looked over me with a lot of doubt. He repeatedly asked me if I was deceiving him and, in spite of my pleas, groans and grunts, was always very doubtful about what I was up to. The following day, I had to visit the doctor and as I claimed complete inability to walk, the guard commander asked for a horse-drawn sledge to take me down to see him. All this would have been impossible without the great assistance that I received from my pals, especially the sergeant in charge of the camp and our medical orderly - both Scotsmen. The doctor diagnosed my case as lumbar, injecting me with a large hypodermic needle. The sight of this horrible old thing terrified me, but the bluff had gone too far. Too many others were implicated for me to show the slightest emotion. About an hour after the injection had been administered, my left leg felt horribly numb.

Now, I was, in reality, unable to walk! Fantastic thoughts went through my head and I was terrified by the thought that he might have injected germs to counteract lumbago that would soon give me lumbar itself! However, it all turned out fine in a day or two's time and the guard commander was convinced that I would be better off in a day or two. Thus, in desperation, I chewed some tobacco and swallowed it.

The results were drastic. I had never felt so ill in all my life. But it was effective, the guard commander thought I was going to die and so he hurriedly phoned the hospital for an ambulance. However, the hospital was not at all sympathetic and, I presumed, told him [the guard commander] that he would have to make the most of it. Still, it had had the desired effect. After four or five days I was whisked back to the main camp. When I arrived there, I explained to the English M.O. [Medical Officer] what had happened; he was very cooperative and allocated me a month's convalescence after which I would have to fight my own battles.

It provided me with a breathing space which I needed, and in the time I was able to make the necessary moves and contacts which were to safeguard me against manual work for the rest of my prison days. However, John the Australian was losing no time and had had a serious accident with his hand. Allegedly, a log of wood had fallen on it; but in reality he had tapped the gland below the knuckle of his first finger with the back of a cloth brush. The procedure, though painful, is quite simple. One wraps a wet handkerchief around ones clenched fist and then one taps solidly at the aforementioned spot for a quarter of an hour. The results are stupendous. Not only is the hand swollen beyond recognition but it acquires a reddish blue inflamed colour, which deceives the expert eye. In due course, John followed me back to Landsdorf Stalag 8B.

Before leaving working camp life, I would just like to refer to one galling and humiliating routine which we were all subjected to whilst out on working parties. Every evening the guards locked us in our rooms but before we were counted and checked for the night, each one of us had to surrender his trousers and his boots. These were stored in a special room,
each man having his own peg on which to hang the trousers. After they had been checked, we had to stand on parade in shirt-tails, pyjama trousers and socks as were counted once again. The humiliation and bitter hatred that this most galling procedure caused can only be imagined.
Chapter 10  The main camp

February 13th 1944 was a landmark in my captivity, for it marked my total and complete break with the German labour front. Work was compulsory for all prisoners of war who held a rank below that of corporal or sergeant, and so it was appreciated that the avoidance of work was a battle of wits. Whilst I was in the convalescent compound, I hurriedly began to make the necessary moves in order to protect me from being pushed out on another working party to another part of East Germany. Who knew what it might be next time? It could be a coal mine.

My old friend Guy Irvine was the first man I consulted on the subject. He was a wise old bird with experience and knowledge of Stalag life unmatched by anyone. He agreed wholeheartedly that to go out and work was something that had to be avoided. It was not long before he learned that the compound interpreter was leaving the camp with the alleged intention of escaping. Guy encouraged and coached him and gave him ideas, and by means of a bit of wangling I was made the camp interpreter in a month’s time. The Regimental Sergeant Major in charge, a man by the name of Sherriff from the Berkshire regiment asked me a few questions, such as whether I could read and speak German and after replying in the affirmative, asked me if I would like to take the job on. Of course I jumped at the chance and remained in that capacity until the camp at Lansdorf was evacuated in January 1945.

Life in the main camp at Lansdorf was without a shadow of doubt the most enlightening experience a prisoner could ever wish to have. I began to believe that before I had finished there I would receive an honorary degree from the university of Silesia on human behaviour and personal relationships. I believed that serving or living in this camp was an education for anyone. It was far more interesting here than life on a working party. But at the same time, it was more exacting and a greater nervous strain. No doubt, we had to rely on our wits in every respect and knew what tomorrow was going to bring, or what it would demand. Here in a camp of just under one square mile were 10 to 12 thousand men at any one time, of all creeds and classes and types, thrown together. Here was a small piece of Britain in the enemy camp. In fact, it would be true to say that it was a small piece of the British Empire as it was. Stalag 8/3 Lansdorf was situated in Upper Silesia just outside the village of Lansdorf and this was some 30 miles away from the larger town of Oppel. We were about 50 miles from the Polish frontier and in sight of the Sudeten Mountains, which are part of the Carpathian chain. I suppose, for a prison camp it was ideally situated, as we were a few miles off the beaten track.

Day in day out, month in month out, we never saw any civilians, we never saw nor heard the sound of a motor car, nor heard the rumble of a train. Admittedly, we did see a number of women who were employed by the authorities to act as censors. However, we looked upon them as part of the camp staff and, therefore, in our eyes quite beyond the pale. Of course, army lorries used to arrive at the camp most days with bread or mail and sometimes with our Red Cross parcels. There again, that was military and something that we abhorred, despised, detested. The camp itself was frightfully overcrowded and from the outside it would have been quite impossible to get any idea of what life was like on the inside. I think it would be best to say that the camp was subdivided into 11 smaller camps each with its own barbed wire and locked gates. Round them were two sets of barbed wire, 12 feet apart and with coils of barbed wire entangled between them. About six feet inside there was a single strand of barbed wire, known as the warning wire. The guards had orders to shoot any prisoner that touched it.

Around the camp were seven lookout posts, each of which contained a machine gun and a searchlight which were manned day and night. All night long the searchlights used to play up
and down and took quite a lot of getting accustomed to, as every now and then a searchlight would shine in our barrack windows and light up the whole room. Although this caused us some annoyance, it worried the detaining power a bit more.

Camp organisation

In spite of the diversity of the men within the main camp, there was, nevertheless, some semblance of organisation. The internal administration of the camp was carried out by British personnel. A camp leader was elected; it would be better to say self-elected. However, in the case of Lansdorf he was, in my opinion, a very fine man who had been prepared to shoulder responsibility in the arduous and uncertain days of 1940. He had many enemies and numerous critics, but a man in his position was certain to arouse criticism. He had a difficult and exacting task. To use his own words, he fought a war on two fronts - first of all, with the German authorities and secondly, the discontented and disgruntled prisoners of war. Personally, I respected Regimental Sergeant Major Sherriff, who was always dignified, and always commanded the respect of the Germans.

In the choice of his lieutenants, however, he left much to be desired and many of the unscrupulous officers won their way into advantageous jobs, such as being in charge of the cookhouse or in charge of the Red Cross parcels. The administration of the cookhouse was not onerous. The racketeering and the graft that went on was, allegedly, disgusting. However much the men agitated for a change of organisation, nothing was ever done about it. The root of the trouble lay in the fact that too many of the men had little rackets of their own and interests of their own. They were afraid to join any united front against these individuals in case they lost their own extra potatoes, or wheat, or extra lumps of fuel a week. It was more difficult to wangle Red Cross parcels, as each man was entitled to a parcel and the distribution of these was controlled by Geneva, so it was not possible to do much wangling.

The invalid parcels and the bulk issues, which came from the Argentine Red Cross from the Anglo/Argentine community, were the only loopholes, however. As much as we tried to stop the wangling and cheating, we were never successful. I suppose it was asking too much of human nature and no doubt these sort of things went on behind the scenes in our present society. Most of us were not in a position to see it. Without any doubt, the two most unpopular men in the camp were two warrant officers appointed by RSM Sherriff.

One was appointed to be the Red Cross representative. He was a typical W.O.1 [Warrant Officer] - pompous, arrogant, big-headed and stupid - the rank that thinks all other ranks are bits of dirt to be kicked around and treated as though they had no feelings, whatsoever. He thought that he could behave in a prison camp in much the same way as he would do on a parade ground. He tried to enforce military discipline, wrote out charge sheets, and instituted an orderly room over which a senior British Medical Officer was foolish enough to preside. They both caused themselves a lot of trouble, made themselves unpopular, and needless to say did not do a scrap of good. The internal military discipline was nil; self-discipline was another matter.

The second appointee, on the other hand, was a far more cunning fellow. He had learned quite a bit in the army and practised it in no uncertain way. He was appointed Red Cross Trustee, in the first place by Sherriff, but as the organisation built itself up, he became directly responsible to Geneva and was even beyond the jurisdiction of Sherriff. He had the Red Cross store moved outside the main camp and he lived there.

35
I do not think that it would be erroneous to assume that he and the camp Commandant were on fairly good terms with one another. Consequently, the great privilege that he received was that he was never able to publish a statement of accounts and was never able to explain all his actions to us; indeed, he was not man enough to do it. He adopted dictatorial methods, stating that the issue of one parcel a week was laid down by Geneva. As long as we had that, we had nothing to complain about. Supplementary issues that he received from such bodies as the Swiss, Turkish and Swedish Red Cross, as well as the British community in the Argentine would be distributed at his discretion. He had full power from Geneva.

Another mysterious gentleman on the staff of the camp was the head of the British camp security - our Gestapo Chief! This fellow was reputed to be a certain SM [Sergeant Major] 'X', but who exactly composed his staff, no one was ever quite sure. Nevertheless, he did build up quite a good organisation and they did a fair amount of good work. We practically always knew when the Germans were going to make a 'surprise' raid on the camp. More important, however, were the very useful contacts that they made with the Czech underground movement and the close liaison that they were able to build up, whenever any organised escape was going to be held, so we understood.

Camp structure

As I remarked previously, the camp was composed of eleven compounds as well as an infirmary and two cookhouses. The camp was full with about eight and a half thousand prisoners in it, but it was seldom kept at that level and we have known it to be housing as many as thirteen thousand, particularly at the time that the Germans were evacuating POW's out of Italy and Poland. At those times, it was unbearable and one was scarcely able to move about in one's own barrack rooms. Our beds were wooden structures that were three tiers high. They were all occupied; some were even sleeping on the concrete floor in the passages, or on the tables or the forms. In fact, every conceivable inch of spare space was taken up. For some unknown reason prisoners were constantly paying nocturnal visits to the latrines situated outside the barrack room or at the end of it. This caused great inconvenience during the periods of overcrowding, as some unfortunate prisoners were certain to be trodden upon. This brought forth great volleys and oaths from the unfortunate victims, which invariably brought forth counter-volleys from bad-tempered individuals, telling the victims to shut up in no uncertain terms.

As far as possible, each compound served a purpose. For instance, there was the working compound, the NCO's compound, the Royal Air Force compound, the convalescent compound and the staff-employed compound or, as it was better known, the 'Rackets' compound. There were also the international compounds. There was also a theatre compound. Without a doubt, the most interesting from a human point of view, was the international compound. Here every race under the sun had been thrown together. One could enter at one end of the barrack, and there would be a group of Spaniards chatting, playing cards or singing. Most of them had been Republican soldiers who had fled out of Spain into France when Franco had won the civil war. Then they had joined the Foreign Legion and had been sent to Algiers. In 1942 when we had landed, they joined our forces, fought with us and had then been captured in Tunisia. Some of them were very rough, and, of course, typical Legionnaires; but others were genuine idealists who believed in freedom and democracy and were prepared to endure any hardship in order to attain their aim. As you moved in a little further, you would hear other men talking French. They were De Gaulists; and next to them, men talking German - men who had fled from Germany for political reasons or, more probably, German Jews who had the foresight to see the forthcoming events in Nazi Germany and had left in good time. A little further on and there were Russians, Estonians, Lithuanians
who might also have been in the Foreign Legion or, more likely, captured on the Eastern Front and had somehow or other managed to get into a British Stalag.

On the other side of the barrack room, one could see some blacks from the Congo, Uganda, Kenya or Nigeria. Most of them had been picked up during one of Rommel’s advances. Then further on, there were Cypriots, Greeks, Turks, Egyptians, and Croats and further on again, Arabs squatting on their haunches playing for cigarettes, even their Red Cross parcels. I think an Arab would rather go hungry than miss an opportunity to gamble. It seemed to be in his blood. However, I will confess that they were good losers and although they might lose all they had one day, they would go back the following week and have another go. Sprinkled across this cosmopolitan group of men were quite a number of Indians who were very good fellows, especially the Sikhs.

But even in a prison camp it was quite noticeable that the various castes did not mix. The most coveted compound to get into was the ‘Rackets’ compound for, naturally, here one was right on the spot, and if there was any possibility of getting any extra, well, this was the place to get it. Hunger was the predominant feature of POW life, so everyone strived to get into the ‘Rackets’ compound. Anyone who was not in, was jealous of those who were and contemptuous of them as ‘Racketeers’. Nevertheless, the Rackets compound remained everyone’s aim and goal and it took me four years to become one of those chosen few. I have to thank my dear old friend, Guy Irvine, who got me in there. In his early days of captivity, he had been able to get a job in the camp post office. As time went on Guy managed to get himself into the Rackets compound and he gradually learned the ropes. Guy, being what he was, never looked back. When I came in from the working camp in February 1944, he had worked the oracle for me, because once I was in, I didn’t look back either and later on was able to assist some of my pals. And so it went on. It was a case of wheels within wheels.

The German guard in charge of our compound was one of the pills that held Stalag 8B together. He had been there since 1940 and had managed, somehow or other, to avoid or shall we say, survive every single purge that the Wermacht had made on the guards. Periodically the guards were regraded to see if they were fit enough for the front.

John Bognor our guard, as he was called, was too smart. He had a great war record, spending over 5 years at Stalag 8B. In the end, he was as much a prisoner as we were. He really was quite Stalag happy, more at home amongst the prisoners than he was amongst his own fellow guards. He spoke a strange mixture of English and German, which most people seemed to understand. He was completely under the influence of the prisoners, but at the same time, seemed to have a lot of influence with senior German authorities for he got away with more than any of the other guards. Compound number nine was usually referred to as the theatre compound, though I think it would be more accurate to refer to it as the place of spiritual enlightenment. One barrack room had been converted into a theatre, while another had been converted into a school, and another into a small church.
Camp activities

The Lamsdorf Theatre

The theatre was exceptionally good and, although most of the credit for what was done must go to the prisoners, one must not overlook the fact that none of it would have been possible had not successive commandants of the camp been interested in that side of camp life. The men threw themselves into the development of the theatre compound with both heart and soul, and worked really hard. They turned out a succession of first-rate shows. It would be impossible to overestimate just how much they managed to keep up the morale of the prisoners. They improvised in a marvellous way, making costumes out of paper and Red Cross sugar bags. Also, through bribery and corruption, they managed to acquire some very good ladies clothes from the Germans. I do believe that the theatre wardroom was fantastic, though I never saw it. It was an absolute eye-opener to any one. The Germans themselves used to be positively amazed at the manner in which the shows were presented. It all started off in a very small way in 1940, but as our time was coming to an end, it had reached a very high standard. The players were most proficient, and it is only fair to say that many were professionals before the war; nevertheless, due credit and praise must be given to them and their work under very adverse conditions.

The school too was a very good go-ahead concern and another example of careful development. It had started out with a few fellows studying in the corner of a barrack room and gradually, as more and more had shown an interest in learning, permission had been obtained from the Germans to use one half of a barrack room as a school. This had been subdivided into about four or five smaller rooms which were used as classrooms. Large numbers of technical books had been sent out by the Red Cross and YMCA and so, by the time 1944 came along, a large reference library worth many hundreds of pounds had been built up. This was a real boon to those who were in the camp, but those who were able and wished to study were few and far between. They were rather exceptional men. The conditions
were all against serious study and there were practically no facilities except the ones I
mentioned. A man had to study in a noisy barrack room which was cold and draughty in
winter and non too pleasant in summer. Apart from that, the pangs of hunger usually made
concentration a difficult task. My own experience on this matter was that I found myself
unsuited psychologically. I found prison life with its monotony and its horrors had strained
my nerves to such a point that I could not do any serious study. Nevertheless, it was very
pleasant to be able to go to the reference library and gaze onto an encyclopaedia or two.

At the other end of the school room barrack, a lovely little church had been made. In the early
days we had had an organ fund to which most of us had subscribed our earnings. The
Germans had then bought this very fine little organ for us and had installed it. The Padres had
then set out to work and decorated the barrack in an appropriate manner. The Roman
Catholics used to hold their mass there every day, whilst other denominations used it on
Sundays. The church was not as popular as it should have been and it did not bring the
comfort that it could have done. For this I must blame some of the Padres. Here, in the prison
camp they had a wonderful opportunity to perform their duties and to give some examples of
practical Christianity in everyday living. Some of them wasted their chances and were more
intently on making themselves comfortable in the infirmary, forming a mess with the doctors
and having the orderlies wait on them. One of them, who we called ‘Honest John’, preferred
to cultivate the friendship of the W.O. [Warrant Officer] in charge of the cookhouse in the
Red Cross store. The Padres as a whole, and this is generalisation, had themselves to blame
for the rather poor reputation they had earned, and for the scepticism with which they were
regarded by some of the other ranks.

Up to the middle of 1943 the Germans thought to keep all the compounds locked up and
strictly forbade any intercourse between the compounds. Life was unbearably dull and it was
an atrocity to keep thousands of men fenced in Upper Silesia. However, I was in a working
camp at the time, and knew little of this. When I took up my sort of permanent residence in
Stalag during 1944, the gates had been opened and the prisoners were allowed to move freely
between most parts of the camp.

**Sporting Activities**

There was one piece of ground that was used as a sports ground and it could be used as a
football or cricket pitch, sports ground, etc. The result of opening up the gates was that we
were now able to have some sport amongst ourselves. Football leagues were organised, and it
was not long before we had some good matches. Great interest was taken in these games,
especially the internationals for which a lot of enthusiasm was aroused. At least three-quarters
of the camp used to turn out to witness these matches. Early on in the morning of the match,
men could be seen wandering up to the football match with a stool underneath their arms
booking themselves a good position. In spite of a great shortage of fuel, there was a code of
honour that these stools and forms were left completely undisturbed all day long. But woe
betide anyone who forgot to take his stool away after the match was over.
The cricket test-matches were also a great success, especially the match between England and Australia. Feelings ran very high over that game. Australian supporters would group themselves at one side of the pitch and the English at the other. The barracking and the wisecracks sustained, were rather amusing. One, however, must understand the Australian make up in order to appreciate their barracking. Although they passed some very scathing and slandering remarks, they were really in quite good humour. However, they did not always confine their remarks to the opponents and they often had a great deal to say about their own players. Collectively speaking, I think the Aussies were the best players in Stalag, though the
South Africans had some very remarkable cricketers including Billie Wade who was a test match player.

Rugby was not a success in Stalag, first of all because it demanded a very high degree of physical fitness and secondly because there was not a suitable ground. However, there were some remarkably fine players in Stalag. Outstanding ones were: Doug McRae who had been capped thirteen times for Scotland; Bruce Stirling who was an All Black; Potbard who was an All Black as well; and Bartard who was a Springbok.

Getting news

All these amenities that I have mentioned, the school, the sport and the theatre, helped to keep up our morale and assisted in combating the dreadful monotony of captivity. But none of these things meant as much to a POW as the news itself. POW's became professional news hunters and the conventional way of greeting one another was by using stock phrases such as "What's the Gen?" "What's the dope?" "What's the Griffin?" A POW's life was centred around the news. He pinned all his hopes on it, and whenever he got a good piece of news he clung on to it, allowing his imagination to run away with him. Before long he could convince himself that the war could now only last a few more weeks.

Either the Germans were starving, (even though he could see for himself they had enough food), or else the morale was sure to crack under the pressure of the Allied air attacks, or else the Wermacht was being frozen up in Russia. There was always something, but it never seemed to come about.

And so in time the prisoners became an amazing mixture of super-optimists and cynics. A super-optimist because it helped to keep up his morale, which he was always afraid might be allowed to sink, or a cynic because he had always had so many disappointments that he was sceptical of every bit of news that he received. He hoped for the best, but always feared the worst; however, to get any news at all had always been a great question.

In the early days, the Germans had always supplied us with news and some news it was too. The war was going very badly for us, as it was, but having to see the situation from a German point of view was a very dismal and a depressing experience. The Germans tried hard by all means to break our morale. They installed loudspeakers throughout the camp, which blared forth the German news in English four to five times a day, and this was usually backed up by a war commentary read by Lord Haw Haw. Then they published a weekly newspaper called ‘the Camp’. This contained carefully selected passages from the British and foreign press, which endeavoured to create a defeatist impression amongst us.

However, the retaliation was truly marvellous. Everyone forced themselves to disbelieve the German news and described everything the Germans uttered as 'sheer propaganda'. One or two did adopt a defeatist attitude, but the condemnation of their comrades was so violent that they eventually kept quiet. It took the Germans a long time to realise that this propaganda drive towards us had failed. Meanwhile, feverish activity was going on behind the scenes in an effort to build a set that could pick up the BBC Home Service. The first model that was made was, I believe, a small crystal set in which Red Cross tins had played no small part. However, that only picked up little bits and pieces from a private station in the Sudeten Mountains. We were ambitious, however, and wanted nothing less than the BBC; so cigarettes and chocolates were temptingly waved before any weak-willed German guards. Bit by bit, radio parts found their way into the camp. In due course, a set was built and ere long we had the news.
In due course, an organised news agency was built up. One fellow would take down the news in shorthand, then a team of workers would write it out in longhand and at the appointed hours in certain barrack rooms, the news was read. The Germans always locked up the compound at 9 p.m., left the interior of the camp and only patrolled the outer perimeter. Therefore, the news was read appropriately at nine-fifteen. It did not take the Germans long to hear that we had a radio set, and so they suddenly swooped on the camp in an effort to confiscate it. They were allowed to find the odd crystal set, which they proudly marched out of the camp with, firmly believing that they had found the trouble.

The security was told then that this was not the case, so they decided to cut off the electricity during the news times. This was soon overcome, as a battery found its way into the camp and, of course, it was charged up whenever there was any light. The Germans realised, at last, that they could do little about it with the personnel that they had at their disposal. In any case, more than one set was in operation, so I understand. On the other hand, I have no idea who built up the sets or who organised them. I only knew that there was a set, because I got the news. The camp commandant called our camp leader for an interview one day and told him that he knew of the existence of a wireless set in the camp. However, he was a very humane man and he did not wish to interfere with our wishes, but could the prisoners please refrain from telling the German guards the English news from the BBC!

**Escape**

Every prisoner of war at some period of his captivity had either made an escape bid, or contemplated making one, and imagined making some dazzling and spectacular break. However, from Upper Silesia it was no easy task to escape and get home on one's own initiative. Many tried, but none seemed to succeed. Some wonderful breaks were made: some fellows got as far as the Swiss frontiers; others got to Stettin and even on to a Swedish boat, only to be recaptured in the very sight of freedom. Thus it was decided in our camp to build up an organisation to assist men to escape.

An escape committee was formed, and the first task was to interview and select suitable men for this purpose. Naturally, the men who were most badly needed back at home were normally selected, such as technicians, specialists of one kind or another, pilots or air navigators - provided that they were men of first-class character and were one hundred per cent reliable and trustworthy. This was a very serious matter which the Gestapo would definitely deal with very sternly should there be a slip up of any kind.

Once the candidates were interviewed and selected, they were trained in map-reading, the geography of the countryside, study of the stars and any other subject which was considered necessary to help in reaching freedom. Next photographs were taken in civilian clothing. Identity cards were prepared by professional forgers, and papers from the general ministry of labour were forged, stating that the bearer was a civilian worker and had authority to travel on the railway.

The next problem was to get out of the camp. The easiest way to do that was to be sent on a working party in Czechoslovakia. This was arranged through the camp labour bureau whenever a vacancy occurred at a particular working party. From there, the escapee would have to escape to an address, which was that of a member of the underground movement in Czechoslovakia who was in touch with the camp. There he was fed, clothed and then driven by car to the nearest town where a railway ticket would be issued on his behalf, and safely put on the train for Stettin. Once there, he had another place to go to where an agent housed and fed him until a boat arrived. Then, of course, the object was to get on the boat. Various
ingenious devices were adopted such as being slung on board ship in a crate or a mailbag. However, it was not easy and was usually the stumbling block in the whole scheme. Still, the organisation was reasonably successful and as far as I was told, 57 of our selected men did manage to get home.

At this point, may I say, I was not a member of the escape committee; I was very much on the fringe because as a Spanish speaker, my task was to translate and to forge documents for the Spanish workers. However, in the process of being on the fringe I gleaned much of what I have just written.

There was one compound that was usually called the ‘Straff’ compound. In translation, I suppose that meant the punishment compound. Into it were put all those so-called jailbirds. It was a single hut, heavily wired off from the rest of the camp, and particularly heavily guarded. One could more or less compare it to our own glasshouse in the British Army. Most of the men were in for minor offences, comparatively speaking. They had either escaped or been caught stealing potatoes from the cookhouse or bread from the bread store.

But some were in for rather more serious charges, such as sabotage or violence against the Germans. They had either been court-martialled or were awaiting trial. If anyone had been court-martialled they were usually sent to the Straff compound before being transferred to a rather more serious place in East Prussia, which was like a penal settlement or, as the Germans officially termed it, ‘a house of correction’. Men were being sent there for two or three or four-year stretches and as no one had ever been returned with a first-hand account of the place, the prospects were grim. It was known, however, that no Red Cross parcels were allowed and it was also reported that SS troops did the guard duties. That in itself was enough to scare anyone. There were great efforts to get the men out of the Straff compound and hide them in the main camp. This was no easy task. But, with co-operation and good will, a lot was done. Sometimes the men in the Straff compound (I am now talking about the one in the camp itself) got themselves out by slipping under the wire. Usually, the inmates were helped to get out by their own colleagues.

Many ingenious methods were used, but the cleverest that I heard of was that the prisoner was put in a rubbish box, covering him with Red Cross tins and anything else, and allowing him to be carried out when the dust cart came round. It was possible to lose himself in the camp for a while, but the German security police were no mugs so this game soon became a huge battle of wits. Naturally, they laid low and disguised themselves, as one would expect, but this was not enough, these men were lost. They were on nobody’s roll, and so each day on parade they had to hide themselves somewhere. Special hideouts were made in the barrack rooms, that was all well and good; the big problem was feeding them. The rations for the camp were issued on the morning strength, but as they were on nobody’s roll, no rations were issued for them. The issue of Red Cross parcels was a bit different. This could be wangled, and this was a British responsibility; but there was no means of obtaining additional German rations. That was a difficulty. In the end it was generally agreed that everyone would give a portion of their rations to feed our fellow prisoners.

Towards the end there was about fifty of these men that had got out of the Straff compound, and they were on the loose; feeding them meant that each fourteenth day each man in the compound received a sixth of a loaf instead of an eighth. It was negligible, but it did save the men’s lives.
Propaganda

As I've said before, one of the worst aspects of captivity was the intense German propaganda to which we were bombarded. The two great strategists in this campaign were John Amery and Lord Haw Haw. Neither of them ever dared enter the camp and mix with us, even under German protection. They never even spoke to us directly over the camp loudspeaker. They, of course, were big men and so used the Germans transmitters, such as Breslau and Hamburger. I have no doubt that these broadcasts were relayed to every British POW camp in Germany. Superficially they created no impression, but in due course these broadcasts did cause a certain amount of confusion in the minds of a number. This was the danger against which we had to guard. Men became despondent and depressed, and flaws were beginning to make themselves apparent in their moral bearing. Fortunately, the birth of our BBC news service was also able to resist this downhill slide.

There is no doubt about it in my mind; John Amery was the worst of the two. He founded the so-called Free Legion of St. George, which had as its emblem the Swastika with a Union Jack as a background. He wrote a book about it which was distributed free of charge within the camp, and he also wrote many pamphlets. I read them, first of all because I was convinced that he was wrong in his ideals, and secondly because true democracy is that at least one should listen to the other point of view. The more I read of John Amery, the more convinced I became that he was completely, hopelessly wrong. It reeked of Nazi propaganda, of course, but the main line of attack was the Jews. He blamed them for everything; he carefully went into events to show that they, the Jews, had been the cause of both World Wars, and that they were the men behind the scenes in London, in Washington and in Moscow.

At the same time, John Amery was convinced that the Jews in Moscow were the arch-enemies. They were the real Bolsheviks, and they wished to set up a world dictatorship. He himself was an Englishman who believed in the English way of life. He believed in the mission that the Commonwealth League of Nations had to fulfil in the world. He had assurances that he had received from Hitler that Germany only wished to live in peace with the British. In fact, he was prepared to guarantee our Commonwealth after the small question of the colonies had been settled. That was, of course, no cause for war. John Amery had been so impressed with these assurances that he had asked Hitler to allow him to organise, from within the British POW’s, a free legion to fight a holy crusade against Russia. He had a promise from Hitler that anyone who joined his legion would never be sent to the Western Front; in fact they would never be used against any troops, except the Russians. Anyone who joined would, of course, be set free immediately, trained and treated exactly as a German soldier.

I knew of no one who joined. Any who did, would never dare tell their comrades. Myself, I could never imagine anyone who would dare joining, irrespective of their political feelings or ideals, because when it was instituted it was obvious which way the war was going. However, one must not be too harsh on those who did join; one must not overlook the mental anguish of captivity and those who had domestic worries; mentally they were sometimes unbalanced; they felt that they had no more to live for and might as well get out of this hell-hole while they had a chance. My only hope for all those who did, and I don’t believe that many did, was that if they fell into our hands again they were psychona.ised by psychiatrists before they were handed over to the rigid, uncompromising hands of the British Military law.
Welfare

Those of us who had been in the bag for a very long time, or as someone kindly called us the professional prisoners, and who had had time to adjust ourselves as far as we could to captivity, knew that a stunning experience it was to be taken prisoner. Consequently, whenever any new prisoners came in most of us did everything possible to get them used to this new environment. Whenever we heard of new fellows around the camp, we swarmed around the barracks to see if any came from our own district, and to see if they happened to know anyone. I think it was this influx of new prisoners that caused the POW associations to be formed in the camp. Fellows from various districts grouped themselves together, such as Sussex, North Staffs, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Somerset, etc. Prisoner of war associations used to meet every now and then to exchange bits of local news, but the real object was to help any new prisoners. However, over and above that, and really quite independently of these associations, there was a camp comforts fund, and its real function was to assist the needy prisoners who had no next of kin and new prisoners, who in all probability came to the camp without a change of a shirt or even a razor. Quite obviously these men needed help.

The Germans couldn’t care less, and so clearly it was the duty of every one of us who were in the camp for any length of time to help as best we could, and this we did through the comforts fund. If any prisoner had, for example, a spare shirt, towel, underwear, soap, razor, razor blades or anything like that we were asked to contribute that to the comfort fund. When we went to the theatre, which was free, there was always a box at the door where we could make any voluntary contributions we liked. All this went to the fund.

Towards the end of our captivity we organised two pageants, which were followed by a fair in which each POW association had a stall. It was a great success and, quite apart from the money we raised, we actually raised 56,000 cigarettes. That actually swelled the fund considerably and allowed generous issues to be made to those prisoners who were new to the camp, quite apart from the benefit, which could be obtained by means of bribery. I will never forget the appreciation and gratitude shown by the Arnhem boys. It did make you realise that it had been well worthwhile. It was never accepted in the spirit of charity, nor was it given in that spirit. It was just our way of doing things.

Barter

Lager Gelt, that it is to say the camp money that was paid to prisoners who did work on working parties, was of very little value in the main camp in spite of the fact that we had been told by the Germans that after the war the money would be exchanged at the rate of fifteen marks to the pound sterling. This was treated with scepticism and the accepted currency in the camp was cigarettes. Everything was valued in that currency and practically every business deal was translated using this process. It was most interesting to see prices rising and falling as supply and demand fluctuated. Swap shops were started; these were the recognised places to do business. If you wanted a tin of marmalade instead of a tin of jam, and were unable to execute the deal privately, then you trotted along to the swap shop. Here you traded your tin of whatever it was for cigarettes, and if they didn’t have what you wanted, you went along to another swap shop in a different part of the camp. All these shops were in a camp union and they all had fixed and regulated prices. Of course, there was also a sort of black market, especially when food parcels and tinned goods were in scarce supply. At that time, prices rose astonishingly and one would have to pay up to 200 cigarettes for a 2 ounce packet of tea.
A one-pound tin of jam would probably cost as much as one to two hundred cigarettes, and then you thought yourself lucky to get it. If on the other hand, there was a general hold-up in cigarette parcels, then prices of other items dropped to rock bottom. Many of the Stalag financiers and economists used to try and make profit on the uncertainty of the arrival of parcels. Needless to say, the most cunning of all on this score, were the Jews. They certainly organised the Stalag black market.

**Fuel Shortage**

One of the greatest hardships that we had to endure in Stalag, was that of the cold. The barracks had concrete floors, which was bad enough, but as they were continually wet with people bringing in snow on their boots, it was positively horrible. Quite apart from that, few of the barracks rooms had any windows left. They had gone for fuel years ago. Fuel, that was a nightmare. The German ration was so meagre that they might as well not have given it to us - one little briquette per man per week. Without any exaggeration we used to burn that amount in about four hours. Consequently, every possible thing that we could lay our hands upon that would burn was used and burnt. Consequently, all the bed boards went, so most of us slept on string beds prepared from the Red Cross parcel strings; and the structure of the beds was whittled down to a dangerously weak level. In many barracks rooms, even some of the tables and forms went for fuel; the men being more prepared to squat on their packs and eat off their Red Cross boxes than deny them a brew of tea and a hot meal. However, one did manage to fiddle a lot of fuel from the coal store and the cookhouse. I believe the coal stolen during twelve months was really quite fantastic.

The great shortage of fuel led to the build up of all sorts of economic finds. Without a doubt the greatest invention of all was the 'blower'. The blower was based on the principles of the blacksmiths forge. A small fire was constructed out of Red Cross tins lined with clay or mud, built onto a wooden base. Then an enclosed fan was erected into this in such a manner that the draught created by the rotation of the fan would pass underneath the fire grate. The result was amazing; with a small piece of coal, half the size of a man’s fist, one could boil a pint of water in approximately three minutes. The beauty of it was that it was so economical; the ashes could always be used again once the fire had been started. In fact, ashes were preferable as they created no smoke and so kept the food and water perfectly clean. The first blower, was, however, rather primitive, but later on super efforts were made with double and treble gearing and with two grates. Towards the end, streamlined noiseless efforts were on the market. The ingenuity of some people was incredible.

**Maintaining Morale**

As mentioned earlier, the Germans relaxed our movements in the camp and allowed us to, move most days from one compound to another. On the first of March, as a matter of fact, I was moving from my own compound to see some friends in another where, by coincidence of coincidence, I ran into Ken Bevan. The last time I saw him was when he was called up to the Militia. Ken and I were student apprentices together at the English Electric factory in Stafford. Not only did we work together, but also we were friends. I saw him from time to time in the camp, and I looked forward to meeting him again when we returned to resume our studies.

Captivity in life is something which very few could adequately describe; you have to feel it. You have to live with it and you have to know just what it means to appreciate what a mental strain captivity is. We experienced through our incarceration many physical handicaps but
none were so hard to bear as the mental ones. The monotony of the life and its apparent
endlessness practically drove you mad. You yearned for a change; you yearned for something
different, you yearned for female company; you yearned for the company of your loved ones;
and you yearned for home. Everything and everybody was unsympathetic. Everybody became
materialistic; it was like being in a town without a soul. Everyone could be judged at their
face value. There was no veil to hide, no personality to disguise. Here a man could be judged
for what he was. In spite of all that, everyone tried to lead a fair life. Everyone tried to get on
as well as possible away from prison life. Everyone attempted to indulge in small comforts,
such as building armchairs out of Canadian Red Cross parcel packing cases. Everyone talked
as little as possible about camp life and talked as much as possible about home and interested
themselves in the family affairs of their companions. Many imposed tremendous self-
discipline, they restricted themselves, and often when they felt like coming to blows over
some trivial affair held themselves back. In spite of that, we became irritable and
argumentative. I won’t say quarrelsome, but we did argue. It was an outlet for our feelings.
The arguments were stupendous and usually on the most trivial and ridiculous subjects. They
normally began in the early evening, when everyone was settling in the barracks, and worked
up to a climax at about lights out. Most POW’s cultivated a keen sense of humour. It really
was that that kept the majority from going bitter.

By maintaining a sense of humour, the POW’s used to get up to some amazing pranks and
tricks. Some of the tricks were positively childish and stupid, but we all had a good laugh at
them, so that was all that really mattered. Everybody thought that the other fellow was a bit
Stalag happy. It was all very well to be a bit Stalag happy, but no one was quite sure who was,
and to what extent it affected them personally. At times it was terrifying, as one began to
imagine oneself as being abnormal and going home to be patronisingly accepted by everyone.
This was one thing that every POW dreaded, and that was to be treated in a condescending
fashion when he was finally repatriated. Many fellows did turn quite simple and were sent
away to a mental hospital.

What did a great deal of damage was a British Medical Journal, which was sent out by
someone, in which an article by a psychiatrist was about repatriated prisoners of war who
were exchanged. Most of them were from Germany and Italy; he said that the findings were
that over ninety per cent were mentally abnormal. Everyone treated this as a huge joke, but
secretly every person began to worry. This alleged state of mental unbalance preyed on the
minds of most, and without a doubt did a fair amount of harm. Nearly every POW began to
dread this reaction, which all the leading authorities forecast would set in. Previous to that, no
POW had ever given a thought to this kind of reaction. Many organisations were formed to
help the lot of the POW’s. None meant more to him than the British Red Cross Society. It
really had become his prime thought; the POW became Red Cross minded. Without the Red
Cross, many of us would never have survived. We owe them a debt that we can never hope to
repay. They saved our lives; they had the monopoly of all the food that was sent out to us,
consequently they were the organisation in which we were deeply concerned.

In lavishing my praise upon them, we must not forget other organisations, also doing a great
deal for our welfare: the YMCA, in particular, sent us sports gear, gramophones, games,
books; as did other POW organisations back home. Outstanding amongst them, was, I think,
the North Staffs organisation. It was truly magnificent, and I was privileged and fortunate
even to be included amongst the beneficiaries. My friend Guy’s father was the founder
of that organisation in Stoke on Trent, and he certainly did a splendid piece of work for us. Guy,
although refusing to take any part in the camp organisation, certainly kept on cordial terms
with as many of the boys from the Potteries as possible. He did a lot in his own quiet,
unassuming, modest sort of way. However, because he happened to be Mr. Hugh Irving’s son,
he was expected to perform wonders, and many of the more unreasonable prisoners criticised
him for not taking enough interest. As it was, no one in the camp did more for them than Guy.

If our first preoccupation was food, then surely our second was letters. They were our sole
contact with home. They were more than just letters; they were that link between us and
civilisation. They were the few words of comfort that we had. The camp postman was the
most sought-after man in the camp. What joy he brought to those who did receive a letter.
What disappointment to those for whom there were none.

Avoiding Work

As I had been forced to work for over four years for the Fuhrer, I rightly considered that I had
done enough and I intended to do no more whatsoever, if I could help it. However, it's not
just quite as easy as all that. In fact, it was a full-time job dodging work! The Germans had a
system whereby they classified POW’s into medical groups.

- Grade one were the super-fit (allegedly) who were destined to work in the
coalmines or on the iron-ore mines.
- Grade two: not so fit but fit enough to work on stone quarries.
- Grade three, they were the lighter workers. They were supposed to be fit
  enough to do work in a sugar plant or paper mills, etc.
- Grade four were the ‘dead losses’ who were unfit and were not supposed to
  go out of the main camp, under any circumstances. However, they were fit
  enough for camp duties, obviously it was a policy (amongst POW’s) to
  become a grade four man.

Everyone’s ambition was to become a grade four. The Germans employed a doctor known as
the ‘Stabsartz’ who did nothing else all day, other than grade men. As soon as one compound
was finished, so he began on another, and so the cycle went on: men being continually
combed out for work. It was undoubtedly one of the most disturbing features of camp life and
the so-called ‘Stabsartz’ parades, as we called them, were universally hated and feared. The
intrigue, the graft, the bribery that was employed to avoid these parades was something to be
believed.

Apart from the tricks and the dodges that were employed, there were the things that men did
to give themselves a lower grade. These had to be seen to be believed. A favourite dodge was
to smoke a cigarette in which there was a crushed saccharine mixed with the tobacco. This
caused palpitations. Another was to wrap a wet handkerchief around the knee and then tap it
with a spoon. This was supposed to be water on the knee. Another was to ask for an X-ray, as
you feared you had an ulcerated stomach. Before the X-ray, small balls of silver paper were
swallowed and the best was hoped for. A very dangerous trick, I think, though some
employed it with great effect. However, the best trick of all was to give the Stabsartz who had
your card, a packet of cigarettes and ask him to change your grade to four! Sometimes it
worked!

Once I was established in the camp, I never had a grade higher than grade four; but I must
confess that these parades were very, very upsetting and did interfere with ones restful sleep.
The British medical officers played a big part in helping the fellows in the camp, as they were
able to exert a certain amount of influence with the German medical officer - medical
etiquette and all the rest of it! Most of the medical officers did a very fine job under very
trying conditions. Most of them forgot the snobbery, which only too often one associated with
some British officers. They threw that overboard, realising that they also were prisoners of
war and that we would all sink or swim together. They were always sympathetic and did
The worm

The worm was a Norse god who was, by profession, a philanthropist, dedicated to voluntary work.

The worm's concept was that of a kind-hearted, selfless individual who would undertake any task voluntarily, regardless of how difficult or unpleasant it might be. The worm would work tirelessly to help those in need, always putting others before himself.

The worm was known for his compassion and empathy, and was respected by all who knew him. His deeds were celebrated throughout the land, and he was held in high regard by the people of Norway.

Despite his heroic efforts, the worm was not without his faults. He was often too trusting of others, and was sometimes taken advantage of by those who sought to exploit his kindness.

Nevertheless, the worm remained a beloved figure, and his legacy lived on for generations to come. His example continues to inspire those who seek to make the world a better place through acts of selfless service and dedication.
I have been awakened at night by bites of these confounded things as I felt them crawl over my body. It was a mistake to squash them on one's body, as the stench was abominable. There was only one thing to do and that was to try and shake them off as best one could. I have, at times, lit a match to see from what direction they were coming, and have seen thousands crawling over the bed supports - it was ghastly. As for lice, we didn't have as many as I would have expected. That was probably due to the personal cleanliness of individuals coupled with the strong measures taken by the doctors. It's a strange thing, but I found that we were actually smitten with lice more when we were in low physical condition - that is to say when there was a shortage of Red Cross parcels.

The worst period was immediately after capture. All new prisoners are lousy and neglected; they are dirty and invariably in very low spirits. Once in Stalag, we were fortunate enough to have a good de-lousing plant which was efficiently run and through which everyone had to pass, when entering the camp from another camp or from a working party. Once the lice were detected, it was immediately reported and the necessary measures were taken. Lice were something we really feared, because they could bring about typhoid and an epidemic of typhoid could wipe out the camp. As I have said previously, when we did have an epidemic, the British M.O.'s acted instantly and ruthlessly and they cut the death rate of British prisoners down to about a dozen; yet over 30 guards died, whilst I understand that in the neighbouring Russian camp, they died like flies.

**Hope in the skies**

One of the real pleasures of captivity was to see our aircraft. Being tucked away in Upper Silesia, we had seen very little of our aircraft previously, but as the German had been transferring most of their industry from the Ruhr to Silesia we knew that sooner or later our aircraft would follow it over. This all began in the spring of 1944, by means of night raids on Breslau - very unpleasant they were too, especially as one pilot mistook our camp for his target and dropped a stick of, I believe, 4000 pounders. I happened to be lying on my bed at the time when I heard the things 'sizzling' through the air. Frankly, I thought it was an aircraft crashing and when the bomb did explode, I thought it was the end. Never have I experienced an explosion like it - or such concussion. I thought part of the camp had been hit but fortunately, the bombs had dropped outside the wire.

The day raids, however, were very pleasant and it was a real moral uplift to see hundreds of our planes majestically passing overhead, quite unopposed. They never bombed anywhere near our Stalag; the nearest was probably thirty miles away, even so, we could still feel the vibration. Unfortunately, some of our fellows had to work in these bombed areas and casualties were sometimes heavy. I remember one raid over Blechhammer in which 35 POW's were killed and about 50 wounded. It was a remarkable and tragic fact that this particular working party was made up almost entirely from our fellows brought up from Italy. Most of them had been free for a few days, then they had been recaptured by the Germans and sent to our main camp, and then this had happened to them. The irony of fate!

There was great commotion in Stalag one day when a corpse was discovered floating in one of the stagnant water tanks. A man had been murdered. The Germans stopped in immediately and took possession of the body. They would allow no British doctor to examine the body for about two days, by which time it was unrecognisable. Every effort was made to try and trace who was missing, but it remained for ever an unsolved mystery. In fact, the Germans seemed to discourage an investigation. The popular theory was that this murdered man was a 'stooge' that the Germans had sent into the camp and our own British internal security had dealt with him in no uncertain fashion!
It was rather peculiar that two months later another mysterious person was found in one of the latrines with a battered skull. A verdict of suicide was returned, though it's a strange way to commit suicide! However, it was said that the skull was damaged when the man fell down the latrine pit. Unconvincing! There was no doubt in our minds that both were 'stool pigeons' who were caught by our internal security and they paid the price.
Chapter 11  The end is in sight

On 8th January 1945, the Red Army began a large-scale offensive from Warsaw towards Upper Silesia. This was the news that we had been waiting for ever since the 22nd June 1941 when the Germans invaded Russia. We were all keyed up and excited. There were few POW's in Germany who had not followed the fortunes of the Red Army since 1941. Those of us who had been in Upper Silesia all the time, had pinned our hopes on them and had followed their fortunes.

The Russians had no more loyal supporters than British prisoners of war. We had followed them all the way back from Stalingrad and, although our spirits were dampened on occasions, we had never lost faith in them. How could we? Did our fate not depend on them? Then, as the Russians slowly began to drive westwards, our hopes once again began to rise. In our minds we followed them day-by-day, almost hour-by-hour, anticipating the capture of Russian towns. The names of Russian cities and towns and villages that previously we had never heard of were now household words to us. We began to picture them in our imagination; but the drive westwards was a tedious and laborious job.

First of all, Russia itself had to be cleared of the entire enemy; then Rumania was captured; then the Baltic States were cleared; then East Prussia was invaded; then Poland was invaded. In our mind the Russian high command had come to its senses and realised the importance of Poland and Upper Silesia. To us, all that mattered was Silesia. Christmas 1944 saw half of Poland in Russian hands. Most of us now realised that great events lay in the very near future. We were perplexed about it all; it was wonderful to think that the invading armies were on Germany's frontier, but here we were in Germany itself, and the armies of three mighty nations were about to converge. Germany's most fateful hour had arrived.

We were able to witness her at this turning point in her history. We watched the reaction of her sons, but more important from our point of view, what was going to happen to us? How were we able to fare through all this? Would we be evacuated or would we be left to our own devices? If we were to be moved, then where? Would it be possible that the Germans would carry out their threat and march us at rifle point into the mountains and hold us there as hostages? These were questions over which we argued and debated from morning 'till night. Then came the news - the Russians had broken through at Krakow. They were 30 miles away from the Silesian border. We were electrified with the news! We almost went into fits of ecstasy. Rumours were rampant, nerves were tense, and conversation was completely dominated by speculation whether there would be an evacuation or not. The next news bulletin told us that the Silesian border had been breached. We now began to listen for the guns. Suddenly, one morning, we heard them! That was the Red Army! Everybody was thrilled and could talk of nothing else but the Red Army and 'Old Joe' (Stalin).

Bit by bit, the sound of the guns drew nearer. Most of us were now convinced that the Germans had decided to leave us. 'Old Joe' was advancing too fast and the Germans were too concerned about pulling themselves out. They weren't going to bother with a few thousand broken-down old prisoners of war. How wrong we were. At midday on 21st January [1945] an important announcement was made to the effect that the camp would now be evacuated, compound by compound, starting immediately.

There is no doubt about it, the Germans are fast workers when they so desire. Sceptically had the announcement been made, before a company of armed guards were in the camp, rounding
up the RAF prisoners and all the NCO's. They had them outside the camp gates before they realised what had happened. All that afternoon, prisoners streamed out of the camp. Men who had been held in captivity for three, four and almost five years were now being forced to turn their backs on their chums, which for them spelled freedom. By dusk, a mere three thousand of us remained in the camp, and we were to leave in the morning.

We more or less resolved that if there was any chance whatsoever of remaining in the camp we would do so. In the meantime, we made all preparations in readiness for the worst. The snow was lying thick outside and so we built some sledges. Beds were broken down, tables and forms were smashed up, and even doors were taken off their hinges and made into sledges. Everyone was prepared to travel as light as possible and consequently, a wave of generosity swept the camp. Valuable possessions were being given away. As a matter of fact, very few people were prepared to accept anything and so at the end of each barrack room could be seen a pile of abandoned goods. None of it was junk, either. Amongst it could be found valuable articles of clothing, which the Red Cross had sent out. It was sad, and distressing to see it abandoned, but what could one do? This was an evacuation and a life and death struggle and one could not afford to be hampered with superfluous goods. The instinct of self-preservation prevailed. At six o'clock in the morning, the Germans were in the camp chasing us out of the compounds and lining us up for the road. As we passed through the gates, we each received a parcel and fifty cigarettes and then we all halted. There were about three thousand of us gathered outside the camp gates, each with his few remaining goods and chattels, and many with homemade sledges. It was very cold, so naturally we were well wrapped up, wearing overcoats, scarves, balacalava and gloves.

It was a sorry sight to look around and see all these men each of them with a Red Cross parcel tucked underneath his arm, stamping about to keep his feet warm or squating on his kit looking glum and fed up. In the not too far distance, one could hear the guns; yes, that was old Joe Stalin - the men we had patiently waited for months and months. Now, we were within their grasp and we were being forced away. It was a bitter pill. However, the Germans were not finding it quite so easy to march us away. We all professed to be sick and unable to march. When they told us to advance, we all looked dumb. We didn't know what they were talking about!

This spontaneous passive resistance surprised the Germans, but I think we were even more surprised ourselves. Someone at the back shouted "About turn!" Someone else shouted, and then someone else, and within a few minutes we were all facing the camp and shouting at the Germans to reopen the gates! They were perplexed at this amazing reaction and we were, naturally, very anxious to drive home our somewhat unexpected advantage. The Germans were not going to allow themselves to be browbeaten quite so easily as all that. First they threatened us, then picked out one or two and said they were fit enough to march and they would march! A German doctor was called for, and his opinion was asked as to the fitness of the men. He said that he knew many of the men were sick, but said that he was not prepared to accept responsibility for any. As he was not prepared to accept responsibility, then no one else was, and so we won our point and were allowed to return into the camp. We all went frantic with joy, and were now convinced that it was only a matter of a day or two before we would be liberated by the Russians. The news too was terrific; the nearest town to the camp had been taken! Back in the camp, we watched the machine guns being taken out of the towers, as the German guards were hurriedly packing up and leaving on lorries and cars.

The German camp authorities panicked and handed the camp over to RSM Sherriff, as the senior prisoner in the camp and had advised him to fly the Red Cross flag. As soon as the last Germans were out, and only the rear party were left, Sherriff in turn requested everyone to be calm and stay inside the camp. Many of the fellows had run out of the camp and wandered
down into the nearby village. Everything was in turmoil, and those POW's who strolled out of the camp, against strict instructions had taken a stupid and unnecessary risk, which served no purpose whatsoever.

In my opinion, it was bravado. Meanwhile, artillery and guns seemed to be getting nearer and nearer and we could now even hear the rattle of the machine guns. We went to bed that night, happy and contented convinced that this was to be the very last night in captivity. We expected to find the rear party gone on awakening the next morning but, unfortunately, the Germans were still there. That dampened our spirits a bit. But being super-optimists we convinced ourselves that they would not leave until the very last moment. In fact, someone discovered that, according to the Geneva Convention, they - the Germans - were supposed to remain behind in a case like this and hand us over to the liberating forces and then be granted a safe passage to their own lines. That, however was a bit far-fetched, and few of us really believed it would happen. Days went by, and still those guns got no nearer. Even more ominous was the return of many of the guards. This was a severe blow to our morale. The situation in the camp was becoming very serious, the water supply had been cut off and there was no electricity, and the bread reserves were finished. Some wells were discovered outside the camp, but as the quantities of water were very limited, we had to be rationed, and we were allowed a pint per man. To make the daily soup, fatigue parties were detailed who used to gather snow, which was then melted to provide the necessary water for the soup.

We saw some marvellous aerial activity. The Russian planes used to swoop down over the camp and then bomb an aerodrome that was about half a mile away. One day they opened up their machine guns on one of the sentry boxes. What a scatter of guards there was! We thought they had made a mistake. The woods around the camp were bristling with anti-aircraft guns, and so there was always plenty of fun when a few Russian aircraft came over to have a look. Time rolled on, and still there was no sign of a complete German evacuation. We used to imagine that the guns were getting closer and, once or twice, that Russian patrols were getting very close to the camp, as we could hear sharp exchanges taking place.

Many fellows tried to get through the lines, but most of them were quickly recaptured and some were shot. It was a very nerve-wracking experience, being so near to freedom and yet so far. Everyone was afraid of being moved, and men could talk of nothing else. Insurmountable theories were advanced that the Germans would never move us, but equally, there were as many who said that the Germans would leave at the first available opportunity. The German area commander discovered one day that our camp was in his sector, and demanded its immediate removal; he no doubt regarded us a potential menace. It is quite impossible for me to say the extent of the arguments over us, but before long Geneva Red Cross officials arrived. They said we had to go. We said that we did not want to go. They replied that it was not for us to decide, it was for them to decide, and they would take us all away by train.

Thus after six long weeks waiting for our freedom, we were to follow our comrades and go into the interior of Germany. Our hopes had been raised to the limits, and now they were dashed to the ground. However, we took consolation in the sure knowledge that it would not be for long.

Our destination was supposed to be Hanover, but really that did not worry us. What did worry us was the thought of being locked up in cattle trucks for days on end, with so much aerial activity around. The journey, in fact, lasted eight days and in many respects was the worst of all the train journeys that I had experienced in Germany.

From Lamsdorf, the village in which our camp was situated, we went to Czechoslovakia, then through Pilsen to Bavaria, right across Bavaria to Munich where we were caught in an RAF
raid. And what an unpleasant experience that was too. Apparently, when we did reach Prague, the stationmaster had a notice to say that the line to Hanover had been totally bombed and there was no way that we could get through. We had to proceed, therefore, to Munich and see if we could get in a camp there. Apparently, most camps were unwilling to take us and certainly Stalag 7A in Munich was full to overflowing, and so we were to proceed to Salzburg and see what was doing there. From there we travelled eastward across Austria through Wels, Linz, St. Pollen and finally into Vienna dropping a truck here and there.

The damage through Allied bombing was terrific. Ravensbourg appeared to be completely flattened, whilst the factories along the railway line in the Vienna area seemed to be destroyed and out of commission. Most of the camps were full of prisoners of all nationalities and so the various camp commandants were reluctant to take us in. Eventually, we were taken into Stalag 17A in Kaisersteinbruch, just east of Vienna.