DULAG and STALAGS

Once at Dulag Luft, like all other new prisoners, I was subjected to the sweat box method of interrogation. Here in a small cell all ventilation apertures were sealed at night and the heating system turned up until they hoped your mind became so deranged and confused that you had little control over your thinking processes. Having been in hospital so long I presumed any tactical information I might have had was now outdated and they had already questioned others who had taken part in the raid. After two days I was taken down to the main lager where again any news of happenings at home was old hat, the other inmates having been shot down after me. I remained there until a party of about thirty had mustered ready for transit to a permanent camp or Stalag. I was glad to be on my way so that I could meet up with old pals from the squadron who had been captured earlier.

Two unusual scenes remain in my memory – one is that of frauleins walking down into a nearby field where they squatted on small stools and began milking sheep. The other illustrated the Germans' desire for healthy living, when every morning they stuffed their feather quilts and bedding out of the upstairs windows so that they may receive an airing. One hoped that if there was a sudden shower of rain they were quick enough to rush upstairs and retrieve the articles.

We were marched under armed guard to the station at Oberusel with as many guards as there were prisoners. Because of the slatted seats the two-day journey was most uncomfortable and journey's end did not come too soon. It was during one of my many fitful sleeps that I had a dream of what was to be my future abode. I saw a long inlet from a sea with a hutted camp on its southern shore and nearby a small fishing village. There were boats in the harbour and protruding above the rooftops, the spire of the village church. So vivid was the dream that when we arrived at the small station and I looked at the vista before me, I was amazed to think 'I've been here before'.

Probably as prison camps go, Barth was to be the best in comparison with others of a later date. It was small and intimate with numbers not rising above five hundred – my number being 314. There were two lagers, one for officers and one for NCOs and with Ken being in the former I was not to meet up with him again. Probably their most famous inmate was Douglas Bader. Most of those in our lager were regular, pre-war airmen or Volunteer Reservists, so like any other RAF establishment there was always a sense of discipline and talk of past service at home and abroad, the first three figures of your service number giving a clue to your branch origins. Later, prisoners came in from civilian occupations and so great was their variety that it was always possible to find an authority on any subject. This became a valuable resource in later years when we realised the war would last for years and studies became feasible.

The great need for food was the be all and end all of our thoughts and conversation during the initial months of captivity. It took time for one's stomach to contract and so dispel the constant gnawing hunger pains and when our needs stabilised

then the desire for the opposite sex made a take over bid to be included in the list of our priorities.

There was no central dining facility and food for a large group was collected each morning from the central kitchen. This was then shared out on a number basis to smaller groups or combines of five or six. The dry rations such as bread, margarine, jam, cheese and wurst had to suffice for breakfast and evening meal, whereas the midday meal was collected in containers and doled out in the rooms. Bread was made in part from potatoes with the main ration being a fifth of a loaf per man per day. The cheese was a soft variety, known as Stinkcheese and the wurst had a high garlic content. But the amounts never satisfied the needs. The ersatz tea had an abominable taste and was concocted from raspberry and blackberry leaves with other herbs added. Sauerkraut and swedes were the common winter vegetables together with a dehydrated mixture. On one memorable occasion I was collecting food in the kitchen when the cook emptied a sackful of the mixture into a large vat of boiling water. Strange, black, torpedo-shaped granules came floating to the surface and with a shock we realised they were rat droppings – some displaced persons working in the factory had well and truly sabotaged the product, not realising that the results of their handiwork would finish up in a POW camp!

The carcass meat supplied for the midday meal was examined by some of our lads, former public health inspectors and found to be riddled with TB, but on complaining, the Germans simply removed the glands before despatch. Sometimes we received fresh horsemeat but later we received it after it had been thoroughly boiled and pillaged of the essences in a factory, with the remaining fibrous matter packed in crates for despatch to us. At night 'Glop' was often on the menu. This was a mixture composed off what we could scrounge or save, all mixed together and either fried or boiled on the barrack room stove. "Glop up!" was the cry when the duty cook called his combine to the table.

Our first Christmas dinner was hardly a memorable meal – boiled red cabbage, with here and there small fatty pieces of pork. But we were all in the same boat, suffering the same miseries of deprivation and the same constant lack of food, yet nowhere was the cult of honesty so firmly established as in the camps. By nightfall of each day and if you were a strong enough character you might have been able to reserve half a slice of bread from your ration with the thought of the delectable breakfast to come. So you reposed on your bunk, all the while continuing to survey this appetising morsel, rather like looking at some wonderful icon to be studied, worshipped and adored. No attempt was made to hide this treasure and no matter where you wandered, there it was left on your shelf, visible to all and sundry in the sure and certain knowledge that when you returned it would still be there. One can reflect with pride that only on one occasion was the trust broken. A young lad, recently shot down and with his stomach still not attuned to the meagre rations, found the temptation too great. So serious a crime was stealing it demanded the ultimate punishment available. He was taken by night to the bog and lowered into it by rope until he was submerged in the excrement, pulled out and left to his own devices. Even to this day many of us find it abhorrent to see food left on a dinner plate, so deeply ingrained is the memory of those days of doing without the staff of life.

But in comparison to the fate of other nationals, we were living in the land of milk and honey. One winter's day, a month or two after the Russians had entered the war, we were surprised to see numerous horse-drawn wagons pulling into the camp vorlager. Out of them stumbled and tottered some men, unshaven and gaunt, clothed in the tattered remnants of uniforms. Their guards led them slowly and painfully into sheds adjacent to the camp hospital.

Here they were bedded down on straw, too weak to talk or even moan. I was myself a patient in the hospital at the time and gleaned their pitiful story from our resident British Army doctor. Apparently they were Russians from Georgia and had been placed in the front line in their thousands by Stalin to act as a buffer against the first onslaught of the invading German army. These were some of the survivors who had been easily captured and forced to march hundreds of miles westwards into Germany. They had trudged along icy roads during one of the worst winters on record and at night dug holes in the snow to provide themselves with some little shelter from the blasting winds of an East Prussian winter.

Their only food had been potatoes thrown down to them like fodder to hungry animals. I walked along the lines of their prostrate, shirt-clad bodies in the company of our doctor and he was able to point out which of them might survive and those who would surely die, even though food was now available. When asked how he could make such diagnoses his reply was, "Simply look at their buttocks." On some a little flesh remained and on others none, just their pelvic bones being visible. And so it came about that the majority did succumb, lying quiet and still until death took away their agony. Perhaps this death march by hundreds of thousands of prisoners is one of the greatest untold stories of stoic suffering and prolonged misery in the history of warfare.

THESE FOOLISH THINGS...

Were we beginning to go 'Um die ecke' or round the bend? Going by the frivolous things we did, the answer was probably in the affirmative, especially in the warm summer days when idle minds found silly little things to do.

In summertime butterflies were plenteous and the game was to capture half a dozen and harness them together by a fine thread tied to their abdomens. They were then launched and sometimes flew for yards as a formation, at other times landing in a tangle. On odd occasions the Germans provided us with a propaganda film show. The game then was to enter the dark hall with a matchbox containing a bluebottle which had a drogue or piece of tissue paper threaded from its abdomen. It was necessary to be seated beneath the ray from the projector to the screen. The matchbox was surreptitiously taken out and the fly with the drogue would ascend into the ray, but of course its silhouette would appear on the screen, like a bomber with a drogue attached and a great cheer would go up from the assembled audience as it ponderously tried to gain height while towing its target.

On one occasion all the inmates were to have anti-typhoid injections. A long queue mounted outside the medics' door in the compound. Many recipients made their exits with painful looks on their faces, but there was great consternation when Tiny was carried forth on a stretcher. He happened to be the biggest and heaviest man in the camp, topping eighteen stone. The sight of him stretched out caused one or two in the queue to topple over. What they didn't know was that the incident was a set up job!

Considering the conditions under which we lived, with the lack of changes of clothing and lack of real soap it was not surprising that from time to time, especially in the winter, some bodies and rooms became lice-infested. The result was close cropping of hair and going into a hot shower while clothing went through the delouser or steam ovens. We were warned to keep out things made of leather. One pilot was the proud owner of a pair of kid gloves that he forgot to take out of his coat pocket. Afterwards, on putting his hand into his coat pocket he pulled out a pair of miniature gloves which would have suited a doll.

The most difficult and depressing time of year that the kriegie experienced was that of Christmastide, for his thoughts turned from the prison and hardship of his surroundings, to the warmth and gaiety of parties and celebrations among the family circle back in Blighty. From the few Red Cross parcels which, from time to time, had filtered through we reserved the sugar and dried fruit. With these ingredients we made a rough wine, but only in small quantities. With our ration of sugar from the cookhouse and the use of potatoes we concocted another wine. The concealment of such brews was difficult and the answer was to distil this rough-tasting mixture. There was plenty of expertise available and with purloined tins and tubes a still was set up, so at night with the vat on the stove and wet cooling cloths draped over the pipes, we condensed the vapour which was delivered drip by drip into a receptacle. This was done in the secrecy of the room late at night when the shutters were barred and the doors locked. The

accumulated hooch was corked in a bottle and hidden in the earth outside so protecting it from sudden Gestapo searches.

The liquor so made from rough apparatus was aptly named rotgut and drunk with a shudder or used to fortify the raisin wine. It fulfilled its purpose; it loosened tongues and helped to obliterate the morose feelings we might otherwise have had on that of all nights.

Our knowledge of the German language was, in most cases, very limited but we had great fun thinking up English phrases to which the guards would respond. For example, if we said to them 'Fish Paste?' they would look at their watches and tell us the time; or if we said 'Big Eats' they would reply 'Gut danke' thinking we were enquiring after their health.

There were many musicians in the camp and many would be musicians. The problem facing the latter was where could they practise, for in no way could fifty inmates of a room suffer the torture of bleated notes or scrapes on gut. At intervals around the barracks there were brick built incinerators where all the rubbish was tipped and it was in these receptacles that the likely lads found solitude. So on a walk around the blocks it was not unusual to hear an embryo violin concerto coming from one, a Brahms lullaby from another and a trumpet voluntary from yet another.

In later camps there were Russian POWs in adjacent compounds where there were scenes of tragi-comedy. A man would wash his only shirt and then stand for hours holding the other end of a piece of string to which his shirt was fastened, for someone would have stolen it if left unattended. In winter they could have a wash from a cupful of warm water by taking some into their mouths and then squirting it into their cupped hands as necessary. The German Commandant had a pet dachshund and one day it went missing never to return – everyone knew where the dog had finished up and hence the expression 'Hot Dog'.

A DAILY FUNCTION to PERFORM

When the call of nature descended upon one's person then one resorted to the 'bog'. There was the daytime bog and this one in particular must have qualified as being the longest in the world. It was open plan in style with a central aisle and having over fifty thrones on each side on elevated platforms. Once ensconced you could survey the lessees, among whom would be known companions and so were promoted many conversations being broadcast backwards and forwards in all directions and even if you didn't feel like taking part you could at least tune in to one of the many wavelengths on offer. So was gleaned the latest snippets of news or 'gen' and the answer to an unbelieving recipient of a piece of news was, "I heard it in the bog this morning".

One day the squatters and strainers were more than surprised to see a middle-aged gent, clad in civilian clothes, occupying one of the squats. Caustic remarks flew from side to side and lengthways –
"Who the bloody hell's this bloke?"
"Perhaps he's a displaced person!"
"What about the Gestapo?"
The repartee was brought to a sudden halt when a strong, refined voice announced in sepulchral tones,
"I am here to be your padre. I come from the Channel Islands".

During the long winter nights when you were locked in and shutters barred from about 4 p.m. then one resorted to the night-time bog at the end of the corridor. It was a small intimate place lit by a dim light, still open plan, but only a four seater, the holes being covered with wooden lids when not occupied. Many a drowsy, half asleep kriegie would shuffle his way there to become an incumbent and he would often compound his relief by lighting a precious cigarette, then lift the lid of the adjacent hole and drop in his lighted match or cigarette end. The response was immediate and sonic, for with a Boom! Boom! a large blue flame would shoot heavenwards. The gases from the deep underground receptacle, having had time to collect without disturbance, had ignited. "Bloody hell!" shouted our new stroller as he hurriedly evacuated his throne.

The emptying of the bogs was an occasion that drew the crowds. Into the camp came a horsedrawn tanker driven by a displaced person. A large hose, taken from the rear of the tank, was pushed down into the liquid through an outside trapdoor. Up climbs DP Joe to the top of the tanker where he lifts the circular hatch and pours in a jar of petrol, following that by dropping in a lighted match. The explosion lifts the hatch with a bang and a blue flame shoots forth, the hatch descends and immediately seals the tank creating a vacuum, resulting in the bog juices being sucked into the tank. The audience, which has gathered, shows its appreciation of a job well done. Joe, all smiles, climbs to his driving platform, takes a bow and drives away leaving behind an empty space that will take a long time to fill.

GOING ROUND the BEND

Churchill said in 1899, "Being a prisoner of war is a melancholy state. You are in the power of your enemies. You feel constant humiliation at being fenced in by railings and wire, watched by armed guards and webbed in by a triangle of regulations and restrictions."

Many soldier POWs who had to go out to work on farms or in forests, factories or mines looked with envy on their RAF counterparts who could, if they so wished, lie in bed all day and do nothing. We, in our turn, thought ourselves the losers in that forever and a day we lived penned-up in a cage like animals, confined to a camp, usually in a forest clearing with the same static view of the same old wire, the same old fir trees, the same old faces and routine and the same old thoughts being regurgitated around the mind. The soldier had at least the distraction of work and the sight of that other breed called civilians.

New entrants to the camp were popular for a day, but when we had milked them dry of all home news they became but one more of us – the army of has beens. Our main exercise was to walk round the camp perimeter – doing circuits, always in the same anti-clockwise direction – in a sense forever 'going round the bend'. Most of us had a particular friend who was known as 'my winger' and in walks together you confided in him your worries and fears, or when the news from the battlefronts was favourable, the chat turned to the future, the meals you would have in the company of friends and what future career you would seek out. Lucky the man with such a friend for some seemed destined to become loners, all twisted up in their own thoughts and nightmares. For some the tortured mind took over, sometimes with dire consequences.

One silent young lad could be seen day by day in a crouched position drawing surrealist pictures in the sandy soil. He used his fingers to depict the weird figments of his imagination. Others would be slaphappy, forever talking and saying idiotic things evoking the response 'You're crackers'. But one strapping sixteen stone fellow had become a victim of melancholia. Life had no longer any meaning or purpose for him and he slowly wasted away. How do you cope with someone who has placed the death wish upon himself? Our doctor allowed him to live in a small room in the sick bay, placing him in the company of a cheerful cockney character and feeding him such tasty foods as white bread and tinned fruit, but all to no avail and in the end he was repatriated.

Others who were in extreme anguish took the ultimate course which was to cross the 'no man's land' barrier and dive for the wire. Most times the guards realised what was happening, but at others the fatal shot rang out and a crucified victim hung on the wire. Solitary confinement for a prolonged period was the supreme test of mental stability. Sometimes an escapee who was picked up by the Gestapo would, without the knowledge of the camp authorities, not be handed over but remain in their custody, confined to a dark cell and put on a meagre diet. Long periods of solitary, interspersed with the ceaseless questioning wreaked its toll and after some months a debilitated creature was

handed back to camp care. One could cope with being a prisoner if the length of sentence was defined, but ours was an indefinite one and much harder to bear in our darker moments. We had to convince ourselves that our side was going to win despite campaign setbacks, for the alternative was unthinkable.

About 1942 the International Red Cross sent Repatriation Boards to the camps and this set minds agog. Sure candidates were those who had lost a limb or whose wounds automatically debarred them from ever flying again as aircrew. Such a candidate was David, our rear gunner with his useless arm. But some of the bright boys were determined to have a go at passing. Consultations with the 'think tanks' determined that heart and hearing problems were the most difficult to remain not proven. "If you powder an aspirin," they said, "and roll it in a cigarette, then smoke it, your heart will murmur and pupils will dilate". But the favourite ploy was to feign deafness. One bright boy appeared in front of the board; gongs were sounded close to his ears but he remained unmoved and solid, not even fluttering an eyelid. Signs were given for him to depart and off he went down the corridor.
"You've left your cap," sounded a voice from the room door – the candidate's head turned and that was that. Few considered the rights or wrongs of such an attempt for we were now conditioned to living by our wits and the candidates motto was 'All's fair in love and war'.

On our return home after the war the most galling question to be asked repeatedly by well wishers was, "Are you feeling all right now?" So often were we asked this that you began to think that you were in some way 'Round the bend'.

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But one day Joe did not leave the compound with his load. One enterprising kriegie had persuaded the goons to allow him to establish an allotment alongside his barrack block. Like most camps that were built in forest clearings, the soil was sandy and lacking in humus. With a bribe of ten Players cigarettes, Joe was more than willing to dump one of his delectable loads on to the plot to rectify the deficiency before the kriegie commenced to sow his precious vegetable seeds, which also had been obtained by barter. Before other kriegies realised it, the awful deed was done and so in the days that followed the bracing smell was of pinewood intermingled with human pong. Windows had to remain fastened and though the eventual cabbages and carrots were a gardener's delight, the queue of customers for them was woefully short and the brave, would be, Percy Thrower got the reply "Keep your schizen vegetables". Thus in a far off clearing in a German forest was practised the cult of organic farming.