

ON PARADE

Much to our sorrow one lesson we soon learnt in the early days of our captivity was that the Germans had great difficulty in counting bodies. Every day began with guards unlatching barrack-room doors, stomping down the corridors in their jackboots and yelling, "Appel! Raus! Raus!" Dishevelled, unwashed bodies roused from their blissful, escapist dreams hit the floor, pulling on a pair of slacks and a tunic, stepped into wooden stiefels to face the daily round and common tasks. Out of the other barracks they also came streaming, the great unwashed to line up on the large dirt area that, by day, was a football ground and was now a parade ground. We formed up on four sides in ranks of three and barrack detachments. Our 'Man of Confidence' in the centre, calls us to attention and then advances towards the waiting German Officer, snaps to attention but gives no arm salute for we do not possess caps. Herr Peiber then takes up his position at the centre of the parade.

"Guten Morgen herr leute!" goes forth his greeting and a thousand insolent voices make the defiant reply, "F- - - you Herr Peiber".

And now the counting began. Each of the guards was given a particular section to count, usually the occupants of one barrack room. Now began the sabotage movements which one could call the Stalag Shuffle. Fritz would pass slowly along the front rank saying to himself, "drei, seche, neun." We in turn would shuffle our feet very slightly and imperceptibly, some inches in one direction and some in the other. This was used to effect when someone had escaped and even one day's grace was a godsend to the escapee. The counting guards would then report their tally to the adjutant in the centre, who would calculate the number of bodies on parade, hoping to arrive at a known figure - more times than not the tally was not in accord so the counters would return to the ranks for a recount with the blessings of the adjutant ringing in their ears. Meanwhile from the assembled kriegies would rise a great moaning sound comprising all the delectable curses that such a ruffraff could muster.

In the early days of 1940 when a lager strength was about four hundred then a recount was simply a short diversion, but when the number present on parade rose to a thousand or two then a miscount was a pile-up of emotions with the officers bawling out the counters and they in turn bawling out the kriegies. Such events on a summer's morning were frivolous and amusing, but on a cold, blasting, winter's morning when even without the shuffle they couldn't get it right, then it was hands in pockets and heads down inside jackets from which emerged moans of "Bloody Huns!" or "Stupid Krauts!" There was no fear of your breakfast getting cold for that simply consisted of a container of ersatz coffee drawn from the camp kitchen and which was so putrid that even warming it up on the stove had little effect upon its vile taste.

One diversion to while away the time while waiting in the ranks was to have a secret smoke and then put your still lighted butt down the attendant guard's rifle. It was

reminiscent of the smoking barrels of a cowboy western but hard luck if you were caught for you would feel the toe-end of a jackboot.

One well-remembered occasion was at Hyderkrug Camp in East Prussia when guards were trying to ascertain if a body was missing. After several recounts the Germans were still unsure and being loathe to face up to the truth, resorted to a novel arrangement. All the kriegies were forced to one end of the camp while sheep hurdles were erected across the centre. Then one by one we were obliged to walk through a small gap while the officers counted us. One can imagine the anger and frustration resulting from being treated like sheep and so great bleats of "Baa! Baa!" re-echoed around. Officers faces grew red, then purple as they complained, "You do not act like real soldiers!" Even if one was missing on the count they still could not be sure that a prisoner had escaped, for perhaps he was hiding up in a barrack room loft or under the flooring, in hospital or in the cooler. Usually it was only when the escapee was picked up outside the wire that they became aware of the painful truth.



P.O.Ws. Officers of 61 Squadron at Luft 1 or 3
Front row 2nd ri. F/Lt D.M. Barrett 4th. P/O K. Jones (our pilot)
Also P/O Morley and P/O Fewtrell + F/O R.P.D Tunstall + P/O N.E. Hore (obs)
+ P/O Gould + This photograph was obtained last year (93) from
the effects of a deceased ex-P.O.W

THE ALLIES

First there came the Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders and then followed the Americans, survivors of the B52 daylight raids. Perhaps surprisingly, the Germans did not segregate these nationalities into different camps and so far as they were concerned we all came under the heading of terror fliers.

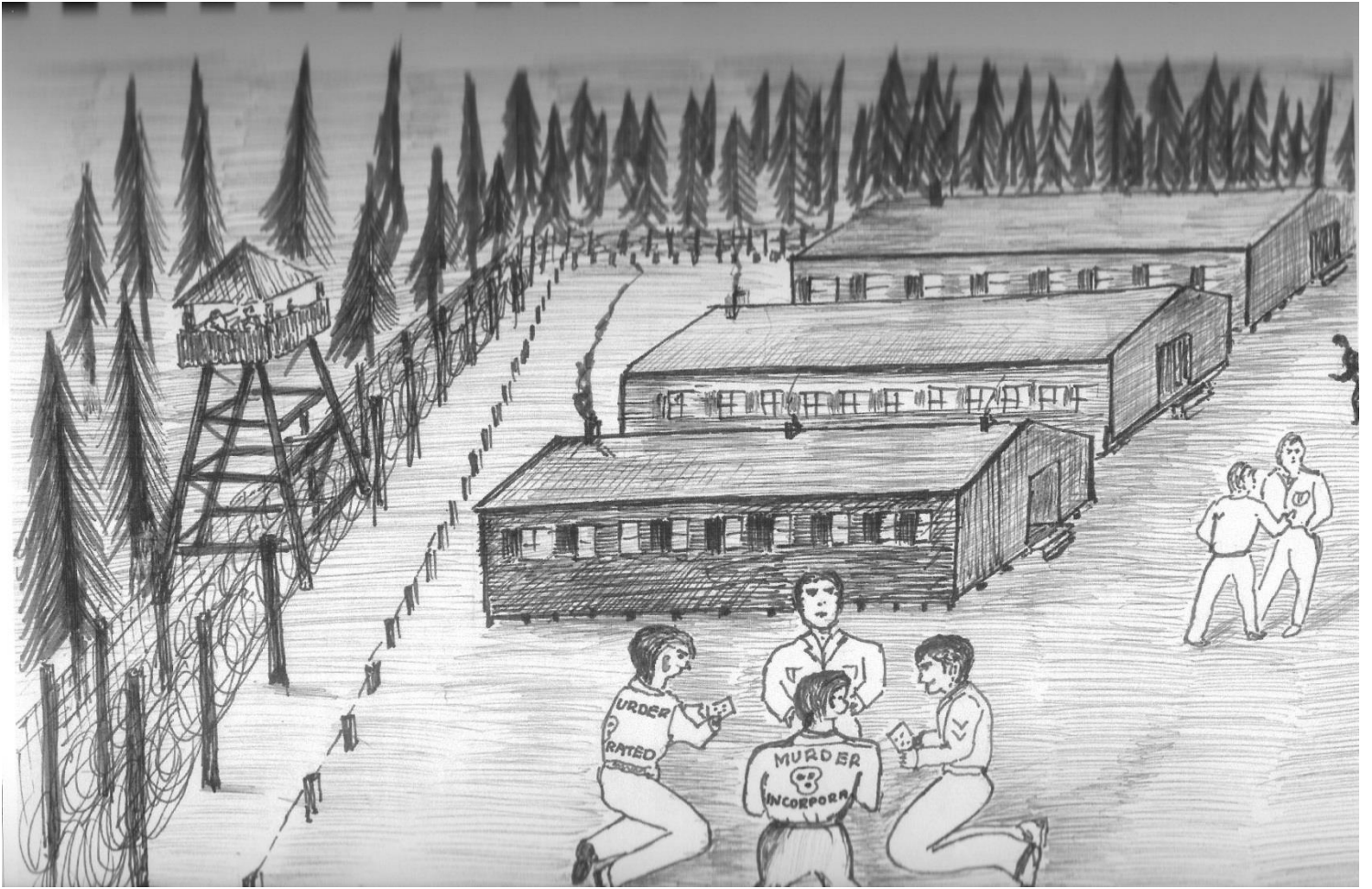
At least for us British, now seasoned survivors and scruffy POWs, their advent gave some spice to life in the lagers. It was the Yanks who took top billing when it came to outlandish pursuits. Certain fads became fashionable, not all of them pleasing to our captors especially when it came to things like hair cuts. They began to adopt the styles of the American Indian tribes, the Mohicans, the Sioux, the Blackfoot and so on. Thus, some sported a solitary tuft on the crown with the rest shaven, others with a mane from their foreheads to the napes of their necks. In no way could the Germans, with the heritage of their Prussian forebears, understand such a coiffure – to them, with their own distinctive short back and sides, it was not how a good soldier should appear.

Many of the Yanks were of a very religious nature and they would often gather round in a small circle in the open air for a daily prayer meeting. This was all very well until some crewmembers appeared with MURDER INCORPORATED stencilled on the backs of their leather jackets. From above, the armed guards in their watchtower ‘pulpits’ looked down on the scene. Some of them had recently lost family members and friends as a result of American air raids and for them to look down and see Al Capone gangsters praying to God was an abominable practice which they must have found difficult to tolerate, especially when their trigger fingers were so near to a weapon of retribution.

One particular room in the barracks had a nameplate above the door that read ‘Rose Cottage’. Here resided those Americans who were suffering from syphilis, which had been latent, but brought to life as a result of the shock received in the trauma of their being shot down in action. The treatment was horrendous to say the least with doses of large pills and injections to be suffered daily and they had an awful future to contemplate.

At meal times it was hilarious to see the snacks they concocted with their love of mixing various foods, such as putting jam into a sardine sandwich and making three and four deckers with a different food in each layer. In summer they came into their own by creating a craze for basketball and baseball at which they excelled. In winter they and the Canadians were adept at making ice rinks and with their home-made hockey sticks we watched many an exciting game of ice hockey.

We all lived in close harmony for we all had the same trials and tribulations and, especially with the Americans, their outgoing sense of good humour, generosity and bizarre behaviour helped to pass many a dull moment.



THE RED STAR RISES in the EAST

Place: Hyderkrug near Königsberg, East Prussia. July 1944

For some weeks now we had heard the distant rumblings of heavy guns in the east and knew from our secret radio of the Russians' threatened advance towards the port of Danzig. Such a move, if successful, would isolate our area from the main German armies. Some days Russian reconnaissance aircraft, making their probes, would fly low over the camp. Hopes and fears were raised in all hearts – would we be evacuated or simply left to fall into Russian hands?

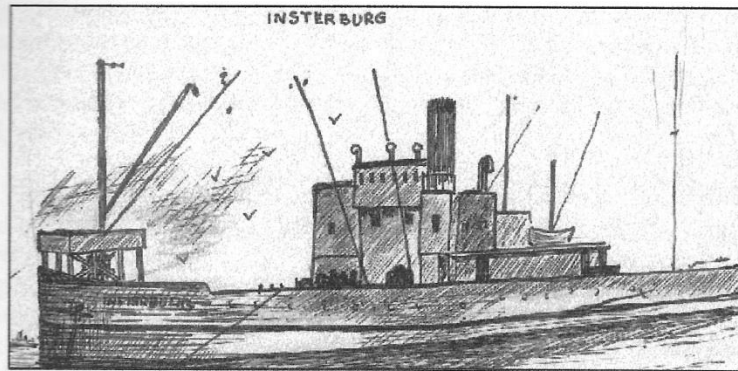
Suddenly, one day when we were on morning parade, the solution no one had given thought to was announced – we were to be shipped out over the Baltic Sea and away from the clutches of the Russians. Two days later on a warm summer's morning we were aroused from our dreamlands by shouts of "Raus! Schnell! Wir fahren!" Spirits were high as we grabbed our meagre possessions and shoved them into any old sack or bag. In went our most cherished food – the chocolate from a home parcel destined not to be eaten on receipt, but kept as the one resource which one day might be the means of holding on to life when all other supplies of food had ceased. Blessings to Birmingham and Mr. Cadbury.

Soon the scruffy ragbag army of around two thousand bodies shuffled its way down to the docks at Libau. A few local people barely noticed our movement or watched with averted eyes – they also had their worries for they in turn would either be evacuated or would become helpless hostages of the Russian army, with all the miserable thoughts which that entailed, when the high would be made low and the low made lower. All eyes searched the dockside for a large ferryboat or troopship but such were not in existence that day, just some grey cargo ships. It was alongside one of these that our caterpillar halted, not even a large cargo ship, but a small tramp steamer that today, for the first time, would carry a human cargo dumped in its hold. We filed on board through an avenue of armed soldiers and it was then that a horrible truth was revealed – the ship had no lower decks and we were to be crammed like sardines into a hulking void.

There would be at least two thousand unhappy passengers who descended into the dark, cavernous hold, one by one, down a precarious ladder to the bottom of the deckless hold. Lucky were those among this miserable cargo who found a seat on the narrow space remaining on either side of the propeller shaft casing. Some perched like monkeys on the ribs holding the outer plates and all were obliged to pull their knees up to their chins, so crowded was the space available. It was for all the world like a floating Black Hole of Calcutta. Meanwhile, surrounding the small opening skywards, were the guards with hand grenades in their belts ready to quell any insurrection from the disgruntled and hapless passengers. Seeing the voyage lasted four days and three nights one needed to obey the call of nature, so it was up the ladder and forward to the scuppers with at least a breath of clean salt air as recompense.

At a point in the voyage nearest to Sweden a U-boat was seen to surface and one hesitates to think what action they could have contemplated if a mutiny had arisen. The "cruise" terminated at the port of Swinemunde where, lined up on the dockside, were the railway trucks destined to be our mode of transport for the next part of the saga. Each truck was divided up into compartments, two for the prisoners and the centre one for the armed guards. So to shouts and yells we were ensconced within them with the same knees up routine, or 'you stand, I'll stretch' bargains with your neighbour.

Suddenly all hell was let loose when the air-raid siren blasted forth. Dozens of nearby howitzers opened fire and overhead, at great height, came the sound of formations of American Flying Fortresses perhaps, and fortunately for us, on their way to some target whose destruction would help the advancing Russians. The trucks shuddered on the rails so near was the blast of the guns. Soon it was all over and the rumble of the wheels meant that we were rolling towards some new camp in the forests of Pomerania. Eventually the train came to a halt at Kiefheide and when the wagon doors were thrown open a strange sight caused us to be apprehensive.



Built in Sweden 1919. Sunk by RAF May 3rd 1945 54.31.44N., 10.21.08E

*In days to come when I am free
In looking back I'll sometimes see
The Insterburg by Memel Quay
Which borders on the Baltic Sea.*

*I'll smell again the stifling hold
Where near a thousand prisoners bold
Were stored as slaves in days of old
In transit to another fold.*

*Four nights I spent there thick and sore
Huddling round the filthy floor
Wondering would I ever more
See once again old England's shore.*

*But such is life in many ways
Tempt not the fates, it never pays
"Roll on the boat", a common phrase
I'll say no more in all my days.*

Percy Carruthers
Stalag Luft VI
1944

FROM BAD to WORSE

Lined up before us was our escort for the march to the camp. But where were the mature men of either the Wehrmacht or Luftwaffe who usually manned our guard? Here were young naval personnel whose guns had bayonets at the ready and there were some guards with snarling Alsatian dogs straining at their leashes. The naval escort and dog handlers fell in beside us and the order to advance rang out, not to march but to run. So began our second nightmare with the rules of the Geneva Convention well and truly thrown out the door.

Encumbered with our clumsy home made kitbags, running for some of us was impossible, but after a jab from a bayonet or the thump of a rifle butt, their message and intent became clear – dump your kitbag and maintain the pace. The young guards, hyped up for the occasion and with venom in their hearts, prodded, thumped, yelled and allowed the dogs to bite any defaulters. The purpose of all this cruelty soon became obvious when in the wood could be seen a camera crew recording the chastisement of the hated British Terror Fliegers. Soon this film would be shown in such cities as Cologne and Dresden to show the bombed out and homeless populace that the perpetrators of their calamity did, in the end, receive their just retribution.

The end came as the gates of a barbed wire vorlager opened to receive the battered and exhausted kriegies. Aching and sometimes bleeding bodies sank to the soft turf, everyone too shattered to talk, being content just to recover for perhaps the next onslaught. There we remained for a night and a day without food or water. Through the wire could be seen the main lager which was unusual in that instead of the normal barrack blocks there were wooden huts about the size of a garage, showing the hasty establishment of the new camp.

To enter the main camp one had to be processed, identified and body searched with the contents of wallets and remaining rucksacks exposed to the surveillance of the searchers. The whole atmosphere was permeated with hatred, the guards seeking any excuse to manhandle the unfortunate victims. Photographs of girl friends or wives were taken from wallets and one guard would take out his penis and rub it over the loved one's face hoping that the owner of the photograph would be goaded into retaliation. This camp, Luft 4 at Gross Tychow, was to be the worst in all our experience so far and the former easy relationship between guard and prisoner was gone forever. For the weary kriegie it was to be a new kind of ball game with the guards jittery and apprehensive at the thought of becoming the meat in the sandwich between the crushing forces approaching from east and west.