

## ON YOUR WAY, BOY

The German staff were suffering from the impending Russian advance more than we were and they had no wish to stay and fall into the hands of their ruthless enemies. They had listened to too many tales of horror and atrocities from their comrades who had soldiered on the eastern front. Stories of barracks surmounted with crucified bodies, poisoned wells and booby traps. The German high command was also most anxious that the Russians should not liberate us. Years of flak barrages and fighter interceptions had been needed to collect together this body of highly skilled airmen and who was to say that we could not be used as hostages in the future.

So the plans for evacuation were put into action, but so devastating had been the Allied attacks on their rail system that it was only after a fortnight that they managed to find a set of wagons and bring them to the nearest railway sidings. Two thousand ill-assorted kriegies were entrained but, alas, the necessary engine was nowhere in sight and so we remained confined for days. For cattle they were not the perfect abode and even less so for the kriegies where the two available positions were those of either standing or sitting, but never the luxury of lying down. During the bitterly cold nights the compromise was that some stood whilst others in turn stretched out for a nap.

The end of the week saw the arrival of an engine and so the train began to roll westwards but only for an hour or so and then the engine was disconnected and taken away for a more urgent purpose. Movement by rail became out of the question and the German Commandant had need to devise other methods, but in the end he was left with one choice and that was the age old method of marching out. Daily marches were to be only 15 kilometres he soothingly said. Mobile kitchens were to be provided and comfortable barns were to be selected en route for each night's stay. And so one bleak, grey, winter's morning the road was filled with a great crocodile of prisoners muffled up to the eyebrows with a variety of coats, hats and heavy packs, but light hearts, hoping for the best but prepared for the worst.

The traumas of that famous march are now well recorded, of the suffering and sad deaths caused by attacks from Allied fighter bombers who, supposing them to be Germans on the march, attacked with gun and shell. Only after fifty days was deliverance found when they reached the Allied armies near Hanover.

That, however, was not to be my lot, for the Commandant had made it known that those who were unable to march because of wounds or disabilities were to remain in the camp under token guard and be allowed to fall into the hands of the advancing Russians. To march out or to stay was the agonising choice and some of the wounded were so fearful of the 'savages' that they elected to hide their afflictions and march out with the main contingent.

So there we were, about two hundred of us, the only occupants of this vast barbed wire compound. The days passed slowly in these silent and unreal surroundings, then

other columns of prisoners, of other nationalities, began to arrive from places like Marienberg further east, to rest and occupy the vacant accommodation. We were fortunate in having available a large store of Red Cross parcels and were able, on occasions, to throw to the newcomers luxuries like tea and butter.

One sight, never to be forgotten, occurred when a party of starving Russian prisoners shambled in to a nearby compound. Desperate in their search for food they entered a now vacant sick bay store. Out they came clutching blue and white jars of ointment and immediately began to eat the contents with their fingers. Vaseline and pills of all descriptions were swallowed – anything that would relieve their gnawing hunger pains. To see a man take a tablet of Lifebouy toilet soap and eat a mouthful is at one and the same time ludicrous, yet touched with a deadly pathos.

The situation beyond the camp was made known to us one day when a group of young Polish boys came running into the compound being shouted and screamed at by their accompanying guards. Not one of the boys could have been older than sixteen and they were all suffering from gunshot wounds received while fighting as guerrillas in the wooded areas some sixty miles away. Their fortitude was amazing to behold as they suffered in silence when the prison doctor treated their wounds. They told us that whoever was the occupier of their country, Poland would always have a secret underground army and would never be completely conquered.

Now, with so many prisoners on hand, a German captain decided some of us would have to march out, wounds or no wounds. Among the motley crowd, I had made contact with two Americans and two French Algerians and we decided on a provisional plan of escape from any march we may have to undergo. So when the day came and the two Americans were pronounced fit for the march, the remaining three of us volunteered to do likewise. We were fortunate indeed in having ample supplies of clothing and food at our disposal and so the remaining days were occupied in choosing what was most suitable. Tins of bully beef, chocolate, warm clothing and a pair of stout boots were the main necessities. We packed an ample supply of English soap, far more than would be necessary for our daily needs, for we knew the high barter price the German housewife placed on this rare article as compared to their own wartime clay-based type.

The great day eventually dawned with the winter sky heavy-laden with rain clouds to menacingly add to the treacherous ice and slush underfoot. The grey uniformed guards lined up, heavy coated with rifles or sub-machine guns on the shoulder, for they too were glad to be travelling in a westerly direction, towards the heart of the Fatherland and away from the advancing, murderous Bolsheviks. We were, now more than ever, a motley crowd for each man had his own ideas as to what a marching pack should look like and what it should contain. Some of them were fretful at leaving behind their beloved guitar or books, little thinking that a tin of bully beef would be of more sustenance in the weeks ahead than listening to the plaintive chords of some popular song, but it was difficult to leave behind the friend of many a lonely hour in some remote Stalag.

The guards, as was their wont, began counting the assembled ranks, some from one end and some from the other, some from the back and some from the front, but as usual arrived at different counts. To the cry of 'Verworts' we shouldered our packs and shouted good-byes as we marched steadily forwards through the big barbed wire gates and out into the open spaces hoping that, with luck, the Russians might advance and liberate us before we crossed the last main German defence line of the River Oder.

The dark pine trees now loomed menacingly on each side of us as we slithered our way along the icy roads, meeting as yet few other civilian refugees bent on the same purpose. The sleeting rain came down in torrents adding to the gloom and wretched appearance of this bedraggled flotsam of war. In the van was a batch of Russians, fierce looking men at any time, who knew that retribution would be their lot if their comrades succeeded in their advance, for as a prisoner they became a non-person in the eyes of the commissars – death or glory being their only choice. But suffering seemed to rest lightly on their broad shoulders for this was just a continuance of their past struggle to survive under a harsh regime without the cover of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners.

Next in line was a bunch of Italians in their green uniforms and then came the British Tommies consisting of Scots, Cockneys, Geordies and men from the Shires. Old prisoners these, going back to the days of Dunkirk, now undergoing a replay of the enforced march they had suffered when traversing half a continent to arrive here in East Prussia. They were followed by a group of about twenty airmen, British and American – truly palefaces having just crawled out of a sickbed but a few days previous. In the rear of the column were the Frenchmen, heavy laden with baggage that they carried on little hand-drawn carts. They were indeed the aristocrats of the column and for them it was light going as they tramped along always talking and gesticulating. The Germans strictly forbade the intermingling of the various nationalities and it was the British soldiers who had the closest guard. The order for the march was to proceed for five kilometre stretches then to have a short break until the day's tally of about thirty kilometres was attained. Not a great distance for a regular soldier but taking into consideration the icy, rutted roads and our heavy packs it was a monumental effort and our sore and tender feet began to cry out in agony.

As dusk drew near at the end of the first day we came to a large communal farming complex, consisting of a few hangar-like barns surrounded by workers' cottages. They were constructed from wood and stood out on the vast flat emptiness of the plains. Guards were placed around the perimeter of the complex and we were directed into one of the large barns. It contained an assortment of implements and a vast stock of hay and straw. Our main thought was to have something to eat before darkness closed in on us as it would be a while before the mobile kitchens were ready to issue us with our watery soup and bread ration. The off-duty guards, like us, were also famished and like us tried to make contact with the occupants of the cottages. These people, though hesitant and wary, were more kindly disposed to us and proceeded to boil water for the tramps at their doors, for that is what we must have looked like, stammering out our requests in simplistic German. As at other farmhouses we called at later, the head of the household

was a female, the man having been called up for military service at the front. The females were assisted by very young Poles displaced from their homes and usually a Ukrainian family living on a footing similar to that of slave labour. The latter seemed to have a dreadful life, receiving little reward for all their toil and finding their homes in part of the cowsheds. They seemed to be glad to see us and gave us all the help they could and that night gave us a supply of milk and we in turn were delighted to give them a little chocolate and a bar of real soap.

With our 'dankerschons' and 'bitteschons' we proudly carried our cans of milk to the relative comfort of our shed. Replenished then with food and drink, we happy band of dead beat kriegies, sat down to talk the evening away and then crawled into our straw bales perchance to dream or, more likely, to scratch.

In some strange way the conversation got round to possibilities of escape from the dreadful forced march, which could last for weeks and lead to an undefined future. I was determined to have a try for I knew that my leg wounds from shrapnel and the earlier osteomyelitis would not hold out for such an arduous task and the result of falling out was to be gun-butted and left to die. It would be far better to fall into the hands of the advancing Russians.

It was an odd group who expressed interest – two American airmen, an old Frenchman who had been a settler in Morocco and a young native Algerian. The next night, with the march getting progressively harder and more brutal we sought a place apart in the barn to lie down and make our plans. We decided that the time to break through the cordon of guards was shortly after the day's march, for we had realised that then the guards were becoming lax while fretfully awaiting their hot soup or had found a secluded place to enjoy a smoke and a chat with comrades. The plan was agreed and tomorrow night we would go. So followed another day of shouting and abuse by the now weary guards weighed down with their packs and rifles and anyway, who could be proud of being in charge of such a scruffy, bedraggled bunch of humanity. For me the aching body was forgotten and pushed to one side by the thought of action to come. That evening, on seeking out my conspirators I was greeted by a very doleful duo in Frank and Joe, the two American lads. They had changed their minds and had decided to stay with the march. Ali and Rene however, so I ascertained by using my schoolboy Franglais, were as keen as ever to go.

Darkness having descended, we slipped away from the crowd and made for the shadow of a shed on the perimeter, adjacent to the road. The patrolling guard padded by and we waited for his return – thank the Lord no camp perimeter lights here. It had taken him three minutes to complete his patrol. Once again we awaited his return and then we crawled over the road to the shelter of a nearby clump of trees. Once more we awaited his return and then slithered further away. So the action was repeated until distance and darkness provided our protective cloak, allowing us to crouch walk and feel our way forward until eventually we entered the confines of what appeared to be a wood, dense with undergrowth. Here we decided to spend the night until the column departed with the

morning light, knowing they would not delay their progress west by searching the surrounding countryside.

Corned beef and chocolate may not be compatible, but that night the entente cordiale could truly wish each other bon appetit. As we bedded down together for the long night ahead I saw a glint of steel in Ali's hand. It was a wicked looking dagger he placed by his side. No need to ask its purpose and from later knowledge of him it would have been put to use if we had been surprised. What the hell am I doing here on a cold winter's night, sleeping on the ground in the company of a small, middle-aged Frenchman and a young, hot-blooded Arab armed with a dagger – after all, I was an airman!

Morning broke and we could tell from the shouts below that appel had been held and our absence noted. For us at least freedom of a kind had come to the babes in the wood, but what of the dangers that lay ahead for we were now nobody's babies? Rene's plan was to await the arrival along the road of a cluster of refugees, mix in with them and their horse drawn wagons and try to reach the town of Treptow. He knew that here, like other towns in the area, there would be a comparatively safe haven for us. There were houses given up to sheltering up to twenty French prisoners. These were men who had made a bargain with the authorities and so were allowed to live the life of civilians. During the day they had to follow a trade at work places in the town, returning to the comfort of an unsupervised home at night. Their chosen way of life was greatly disparaged by their compatriots who would not co-operate and preferred to endure the rigours of camp life.

The morning sun brought welcome relief to our half-frozen bodies and we dug deep into our packs to find some nourishment. Towards noon clusters of refugees were underway along the icy road. Their four wheeler, long farm wagons were piled high with goods and chattels, bedding and fodder cushioning the elderly members of the family and those too weak to walk. Children, in their innocence, scampered around in attendance, muffled to the eyebrows wearing many garments. Here no faces to wash and school belonged to yesterday.

We traversed the fields to join in with this motley crowd of travelling folk. At their Fuhrer's behest they had moved east into the promised land but now it was flitting time all over again and the Russian war clouds menaced their horizons. For two days we shuffled and slithered in their company always keeping to the verges, giving way to the speeding military traffic. Dressed in our old greatcoats, balaclavas and wooden-soled steifels we were part of the great unwashed; indistinguishable from many others similarly clad in garments culled from many sources. It was noon when we entered the town where, to our surprise, life seemed to be following a normal pace with the streets full of shoppers. It was apparent that no official evacuation of civilians had taken place – was it because they still had confidence in their own forces or that there was no place left to go?

Rene eventually made contact with the ersatz French prisoners and we made our way as directed to their sheltered home. Greatly to our surprise it was a woman who

opened the door and bade us enter. It transpired that this homely looking and buxom Madame had been sent from France to look after the needs of the occupants, of which one was her husband. During the day, when all the men were out at work, she did the household chores and prepared the evening meal in readiness for their return. That night they had a discussion and they agreed we could lodge with them on condition that at no time would we leave the house. We were only too pleased to meet their wishes and were each allocated a bunk bed.

In the two weeks of my stay I gained an insight into their bizarre way of life. Like most kriegies they were great racketeers and scroungers but their lifestyle was good. They had food in abundance and variety, wine of their own making and some bought locally and no shortage of cigarettes. Handsome and virile young men, as many of them were, they had no difficulty in acquiring a ladyfriend either local or of displaced origin. It was unique to see soldiers in such a situation wearing lounge suits and looking very smart. Marie, the rosy cheeked housekeeper, had one of these younger men as her lover and he and her older husband were the best of friends. Sex was often a topic of conversation as they talked about their conquests and experiences, boasting the while of their prowess. During one of these chats the talk was directed to Ali, the young Arab. How had such a hot-blooded youth survived so long without making love? There and then they decided they would meet his desires and get him a female. "L'infirmes," went up the cry and out dashed the procurers to a street corner where they knew the disabled girl plied her trade. Her shuffled entrance was greeted with cries of mocking and bombast. This was to become a comic opera and after the two had greeted each other they were ushered into a small room and the door was closed upon them.