

WARSAW, CITY of SORROW and SADNESS

It was late in the day when we managed to scrounge a lift on a truck heading for Warsaw and so it was near to midnight when we were dropped near to some railway sidings by the driver who simply pointed into the darkness and said Warsaw. Hopping across the lines we came across deserted buildings, shattered and in ruins. Wandering aimlessly in the dark along rubble-strewn streets, we entered a large ruin showing the glimmerings of light and life. It was being used as an outpatients station on the one hand and simply a place for the homeless to shelter on the other. Sleep was difficult in the cold candle-lit gloom with its flickering shadows and we were glad when dawn came at last to the sky above our heads. Oh for one of those nights on York station in the care of the benevolent Salvation Army.

That morning we wandered around asking various white-coated people if they could tell us where we could report to the Russian authorities. We were directed to cross the Vistula and told to enquire on the other side. Out in the morning sunlight we could fully take in the scene of utter devastation. How could the people have survived in this great city where, after ceaseless bombardment from the east and from the west, not one building now had a roof and where cellar dwelling was a new way of life. It was near the infamous Jewish Ghetto that we found the Russian HQ and met up with a few more British soldiers, one of whom happily had a smattering of the Russian language. We were like the original dirty dozen, but after a wash and a meal we had plenty to chat about and began to think about the next stage of our journey.

Later that day we were, in turn, ushered into the presence of two Russian officers to be closely questioned about our background and journeyings. Their attitude towards us was cold and correct but, seemingly satisfied, we were told that, when it became available, rail travel would be provided which would take us to the port of Odessa on the Black Sea, but in the meantime we were to remain within the confines of the building. We were shortly joined by the crew of an American Flying Fortress who had baled out of their burning aircraft somewhere over Poland and life was now raised to a new level with their extrovert humour and endless chatter.

TO ODESSA

The next morning we were escorted down to the railway sidings in the company of 'Joe' our duly appointed Russian chaperone for the long journey ahead. He was armed with a rifle, which we assumed was for our protection. He was a small, middle-aged man dressed in the drab khaki uniform of the ordinary Russian soldier without badges or insignia but at least he appeared to have a jovial nature.

We came to a halt in front of one of the twenty wagons making up our train. In the centre of the truck was an iron stove and to either side there were large shelves. These were covered with straw and to our amazement, this was covered with white bed sheets. Our rations for the journey were stacked up on the floor behind the stove. On opening the sacks we discovered that some were filled with dried out crusty slices of rye bread, one sack of salt, some tins of American corned beef and to our astonishment one was filled with American candy bars – God bless America!

We were soon to find out that our train was at the bottom of the queue when it came to priorities and we soon realised, after spending endless hours shunted into various sidings, that mobile did not apply to us. However we now had, through our intrepid interpreter, ample opportunity to get to know 'Joe'. He told us that he looked forward to the time when he would be re-united with his family but that couldn't be until after hostilities ceased, as leave was never otherwise granted to any soldier. His pay was 180 roubles a month and of that, 160 roubles were sent automatically to pay for his family's sustenance. The army lads worked out their pay to be about 2 000 roubles, mine to be about 4 000 roubles, but some of the Americans' pay was 14 000 roubles. Joe immediately cottoned on to this discrepancy and informed us, "Me, 180 roubles – Communist. You," pointing to the Americans, "Capitalist!" Quick on the uptake as he was, I'm sure he will still be relating this story today in some Russian taverna.

The most poignant scene of the journey that remains with me to this day was witnessed when we were passing through the vast, desolate Pripet Marshes to the south of Kiev. The only building in sight was small with boarded up windows. It was a country school and clambering on to the railings were very young children shouting and waving to us. As we looked out of our sliding door they could only be described as 'ragamuffins', their clothes tattered and repaired, their legs encased in rolls of similar rags. But for children who had never known the luxury of a piece of chocolate, yet had experienced the trauma of an invading army, it was their pale, smiling, happy faces that were the lasting impression.

It was in the vast sidings at Kiev that we saw the plight of those defeated and captured in a total war situation. Marching away from the trains that had arrived from the west and from which they had disgorged, were columns of thousands of Germans now being led to their place of misery, hard labour and an indefinite sentence. Not for them the protection of the Geneva Convention. Their bearing was one of utter dejection, shorn heads and unshaven faces looking down at ragged wrapped feet shuffling over the rutted

icy surfaces. Some carried turnips in their hands and the lack of any backpack meant that this was probably their only nourishment.

'How are the mighty fallen' in the midst of battle. No raucous singing of their martial songs now. I had witnessed similar scenes four years earlier when Russian prisoners arrived at Barth after one of the most infamous marches in military history.

Heading on a parallel course were similar columns of Russian ex-prisoners, even more pathetic, as they were probably marching to their death as it was against their military code to be taken prisoner. Would their fate be similar to that, a few months later, of the Cossacks who had fought on the German side and whose forced repatriation caused so much anguish to the allied authorities and which was to become the subject of a famous libel case in this country. And was our liberation from Russia conditioned by their fate? If so, was it very much a one-sided bargain with 50 000 of them for a few hundred British and Americans?

So unimportant was our trainload of displaced persons that sometimes our engine was taken away and the whole journey took us eleven days and nights. On arrival at such a siding the four hundred or so passengers had one desire and that was to relieve themselves. Life was basic and many local women as well simply squatted low and performed. A squad of cleaners constantly brushed the ground between the rails. There were many gypsies on the train and as they sat with their legs dangling from the wagon doors it was not surprising that we did lose one with tragic results.

Most life centred around the sidings in the towns we came across. Here, the markets - official, official black-market and unofficial black-market - seemed to thrive side by side. The occasion came when at one such stop Joe, our guard, hopped the tracks and disappeared into the throng with a can of salt. Back he came with an old eastern grin on his face and laden with white bread and vodka. Know the power of salt! We got the bread, he drank the vodka and, rocking to the 'Volga Boatmen', he curled up and snored in the ashes around the stove in the centre of the truck. "Let us flog the sheets", said the bottom deck at the next halt, once Joe had disappeared again with the salt as his purse. Back we came from the black-market trip laden with cooked chicken, bread rolls and butter, but minus the sheets of course. Back came Joe with his bread and vodka. Quickly he realised that the British were also not bad at playing shopkeepers!

"But you had no roubles" wondered Joe.

"But we had some sheets", replied the disciples.

Sten gun and Joe crossed the tracks. We waited for the shots, but no - a beaming face and an armful of sheets were helped back into the truck. Rolling, rolling, rolling over the vast Russian steppes. Joe and ourselves were now very much allied. The daily routine was invariable. We flogged the sheets - Joe grabbed his gun!

Joe's cup of joy was full and running over when one tall American gave him a US greatcoat and woolly hat he had acquired in Warsaw. Joe would send the coat to his wife and she would convert it into clothing for their children, but before that happened the coat got Joe into trouble, when we eventually arrived at Odessa.

SAILING BACK to HAPPINESS

“We are sailing, we are sailing, home again, across the sea.
We are sailing stormy waters, to be near you, to be free.”

One evening we were taken down to the dock area in Odessa. There before us was a great ocean liner, ‘The Duchess of Richmond’ of the Canadian Pacific Line. On her side hung a giant banner and printed thereon the two words WELCOME HOME. From the moment we were welcomed aboard we stepped into a new world and life became sweet once more. Casting off our dirty clothing we also cast off years of anxiety, doubt and, at times, privation, for we became refreshed in mind and body as we absorbed the care and attention bestowed upon us. We felt especially protected for only prisoners of British, American, and Dutch nationalities were being allowed through and out of the country. We understood that French prisoners were being used by the Russian army to help in transporting supplies up to the front. What was surprising to us after we cast off was that several Polish airmen materialised, even with their wives or sweethearts and how they had been spirited on board was a mystery. Surprising too was the small number of prisoners who had turned up when, no doubt, hundreds had been expected, hence the diversion of such a large liner.

The sailing was delayed for two or three days to await more turning up, but for us the great day did come when we cast off and so began our Mediterranean cruise, giving us a wonderful opportunity to recuperate. This was in great contrast to our unfortunate comrades who had been marched out of their camps to the west and who, after an ordeal lasting many weeks, were physically and mentally exhausted when they arrived back in Blighty.

We sailed south through the calm sunlit waters of the Black Sea and headed for Istanbul, enjoying the good food served at prepared tables and at night we slept in comfortable bunk beds. Arriving in the Bosphorus we dropped anchor to take on supplies and here learnt for the first time that at no port of call would we be allowed to go ashore. No reason was given and we were left wondering why; were we not inoculated against possible diseases or would we be tempted to taste the local delights we had so long been denied?

However we were more than content with our lot and steamed westward through the shimmering sea to our next port of call which was to be Naples. We sailed past the beautiful Isle of Capri and yes there were ‘blue Italian skies above’ and ahead of us we saw the mighty form of Vesuvius. The harbour was littered with sunken ships, many lying on their sides. It was here that we took on board a Canadian Medical Corps including female nurses and doctors. One unforgettable sight was that of a line of British soldiers coming on board. They were chained together and one wondered what crime they had committed to warrant such treatment.

Lined up on the platform was a reception party including a Russian General, with a camera crew there to record this auspicious occasion. Joe, in his ankle length US greatcoat and woolly hat, advanced along the platform to report. It was for all the world like a scene from a Chaplin classic, with the General unable to believe his eyes as the diminutive clown advanced and saluted.

"What the bloody hell are you doing in that foreigner's greatcoat?" was part of the verbal abuse, which poured down on him, but which sounded far better in Russian. The camera ceased rolling as Joe was ushered out of sight –

Sic transit gloria - - - - Take two.

"We Russians are very glad to welcome you to the city of Odessa".

Florence Farnborough experienced a similar homecoming to mine. She served as a nurse at the Russian front during the period 1916-1918. She has written of her experiences in her book, 'A nurse at the Russian Front' She writes of seeing a British ship, HMS Suffolk, in Vladivostok when the Bolsheviki were in power and arresting people....

"...one of the ships was flying the Union Jack! Oh! The Joy! The relief! The comfort! The security! Who will ever know all that the glorious flag symbolised for us travel – stained weary refugees! It was as though we had a dear familiar voice bidding us 'Welcome Home!' That one glance at the Union Jack dispelled all our fear, quietened all our doubt, answered all our questions. The Union jack was our talisman, our guarantee, our surety!"

But not all prisoners were to have such a happy homecoming. Describing events in Odessa in 1917 she writes....

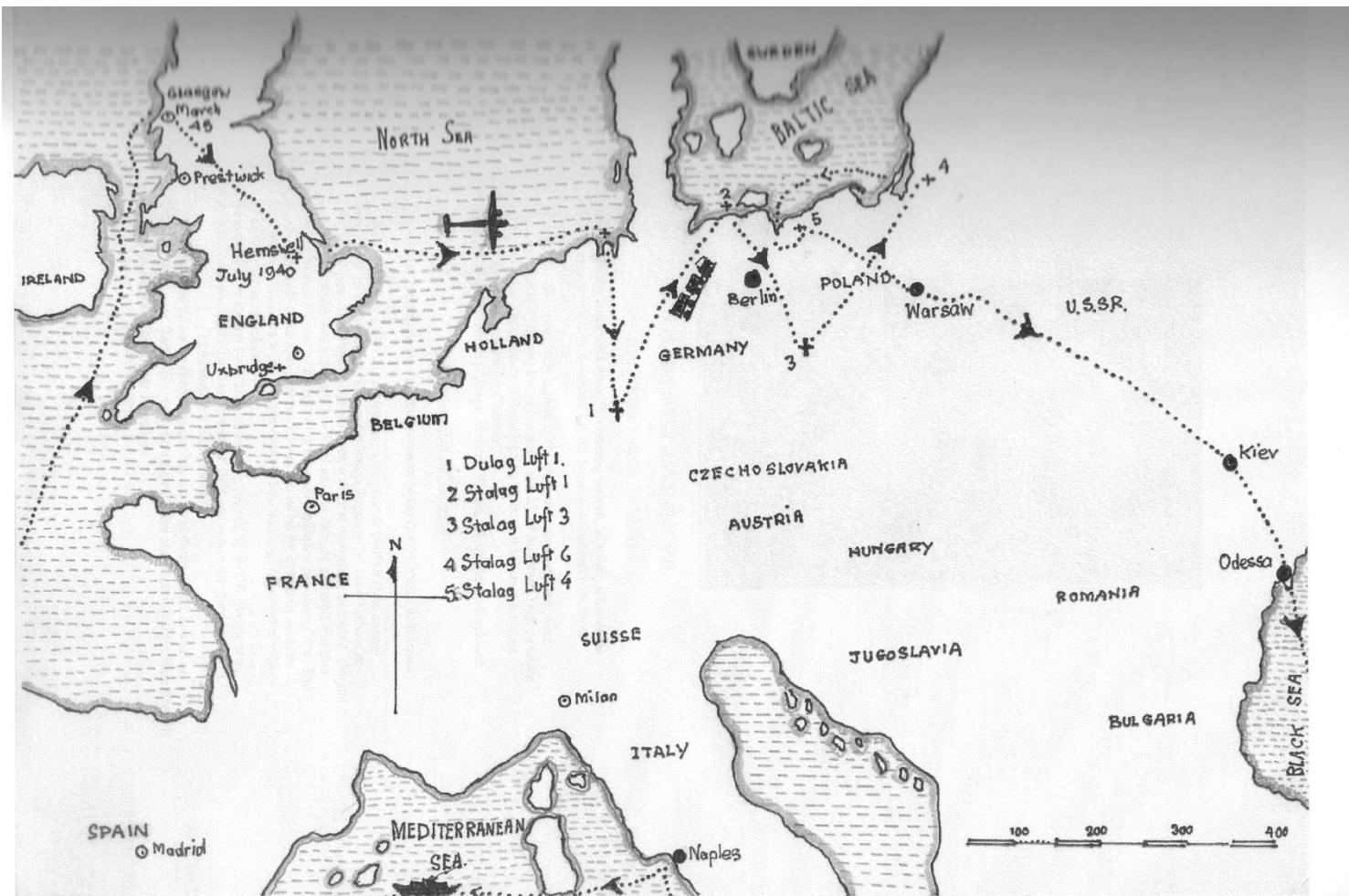
"One by one Front-line Officers escaping from their deserting soldiers had managed to reach Odessa, hoping to make good their escape by sea. But one by one they were recaptured by the Red Army. In groups they had been tied together, with heavy stones attached to their feet. Then they had been taken out to sea and thrown overboard. It was said that in some places their drowned bodies could be seen still upright, swaying backwards and forwards".

I was detailed to carry out below deck morning inspections and found it very strange weaving my way between the hammocks – being an airman I felt very much like a fish out of water and was always glad to reach the cool higher decks and more than ever realised how lucky I was to be travelling in such comfort. This was my first ever sea voyage and it was wonderful at night to walk the deck and watch the trail of phosphorescence from the ship's wake.

Arriving at Gibraltar we anchored out of the harbour in the fast currents flowing in from the Atlantic. One hot day the captain ordained that lifeboat drill should be the order of the morning. The boats were lowered and the crews manned the oars to draw away some distance from the Richmond. However, at the given signal the return proved to be an impossible feat and no matter how hard the crews sweated and strained under the mid-day sun no progress was visible. Before they finished up somewhere near Malta the captain ordered the lowering of a large motor launch and this sped through the seas rounding up the boats like stray sheep and taking them in tow to the cheers of those left on board.

Again, no shore leave and during the night we slipped out into the Atlantic for the last leg of the voyage, hoping that our speed would be too much for any roving U-boats. It was late one evening when we sailed, not into Southampton, but into the Clyde estuary and dropped anchor near Gourock. Out from the dockside that evening sped an RAF speed launch to collect the RAF personnel. There were but two of us, the other being Sqd.Ldr. Tuck, the ace fighter pilot of Battle of Britain fame. The army boys were not to come ashore until the morrow and as we left the side of the great ship they lined the rails above our heads and shouted, "There go the Brylcreem Boys," and other less pleasing epithets. We clambered ashore and that night were on our way to London. Leaning contentedly back in the train compartment, the pleasure of the day remained and all our tomorrows could only be days of joy and happiness for our freedom had been restored again.

Strangely I remember very little of the daily life on the liner, of people I met or how we passed our time. Perhaps I had arrived at the seventh inn of happiness and that after five traumatic years thoughts of home washed others from my mind.





D.F.M. FOR BISHOP AUCKLAND W.O.

Shot Down In Raid On The Tirpitz

Five years after being shot down in a flaming aircraft following a low-level attack on the powerfully defended Tirpitz, lying at Wilhelmshaven, three airmen receive the D.F.M.

The airmen, who were badly injured in the crash and taken prisoner, were:-
Sgt.(now Warrant Officer) David Dougan Cain, 25, of Stranraer, Wigtownshire
Sg.(now Flight Sgt.) John Neil Prendergrast, 30, born at Liverpool, whose home is now at Bromborough, Cheshire
Sgt.(now Warrant Officer) George Anthony Wright, 28, of Bishop Auckland.

Outstanding Skill As Navigator

The citation accompanying the announcement of the D.F.M. award to Warrant Officer Wright says:-

One night in July 1940, this airman was navigator air bomber in an aircraft detailed for an attack on the German battleship Tirpitz in the inner harbour at Wilhelmshaven. The whole of the port area was most powerfully defended. Despite this a telling attack was made at a low level and Sgt. Wright's aircraft was shot down in flames. He was badly injured in the crash and taken prisoner of war. The attack was made at the lowest possible level and called for extremely accurate navigation. In this attack Sgt. Wright displayed outstanding skill coupled with great courage and resolution.

Born in 1917 at Bishop Auckland, where his home still is, W/Off. Wright is an ex-shop assistant. He enlisted in November 1938 and is now an observer.

{The Northern Echo 1945}

The photo was taken by Germans during our first winter after arrival at Stalag Luft I near Barth. No shirt, no razor blades and wearing light blue French Alpine jacket of World War I vintage.