

## CHAPTER IV

The train rattled its way across the tracks, and the uneven motion caused Dave to sway against the burly, armed guard sitting next to him. The movement produced a smile on the face of the German soldier sitting opposite, and he, for the umpteenth time, produced the remark, 'For you the war is over'. Neither of Dave's custodians could speak a word of English, but this saying had found its way into the German's vocabulary at some time or other and now he loved using it. Perhaps it was to show his command of the English language or to impress on the prisoner the futility and hopelessness of his situation. The carriage had seats on either side and an aisle running down the middle, so the passengers could walk freely to and fro. Consequently, the RAF navigator attracted much attention and the Dutch passengers wanted to converse with Dave and offer him cigarettes. The burly one, however, wouldn't allow this and gesticulated with his machine gun for the gathering onlookers to disperse and go back to their seats, while his comrade-in-arms just sat and smiled benignly on all and sundry.

The train made several stops along the way, but finally the terminus was reached - Amsterdam. Here, Dave was hustled through the commuter crowd going their divers ways and into a room at the end of the platform, where three Luftwaffe personnel, one of whom was a feldwebel, waited. The burly guard produced an envelope containing three forms, all of which were duly signed. Thus, Dave, was signed, sealed and delivered. His two former guards, their task completed, left, leaving him in the custody of the new arrivals. Then, escorted to a waiting car, he was whisked through the streets of the city to his destination.

Dave was never really sure where the Royal Palace of the House of Nassau-Orange was actually situated, in Amsterdam or The Hague, but in late September, 1943, it was the Headquarters of the German Luftwaffe in the Low Countries and it was to this place that he was driven and incarcerated. Although only there for a day and a night, his stay was uneventful, save for a chance meeting with Ray Bolland, a Canadian fighter pilot. After about three hours' imprisonment, he was taken to the urinal by a guard and encountered the indomitable Ray, who was relieving himself. Dave sidled alongside the big Canadian, undid his fly and commenced pissing.

'What the hell brought you here, for Christ sake?' demanded a Canadian voice, half-humorously, half-sarcastically. Dave, turned to view the speaker. The left side of his face was badly burned and part of his battle dress had been charred. His left arm was in makeshift sling and he looked in bad shape.

'Bloody shot down. That's what happened to me,' informed Dave. 'I'm not here by invitation. What happened to you? You look like you've had a rough time.'

'Shooting up trains, when I bought it and crashed'.

One of the guards yelled out something like 'Shut up' or 'hurry up'.

'Fuck-off, you son-of-a-bitch!' was the Canadian's immediate reply. Then he finished his toiletries, carefully and deliberately buttoned up his fly with his good hand, and then shuffled off to his cell.

The next morning, they were off early and on the train before 7.30 a.m. The party consisted of Ray Bolland, Jack McDonald, three guards and Dave. Ray and Jack were both Canadians who had been shot down a few days previously while shooting up trains. They belonged to the same Typhoon squadron, which made, weather permitting, daily sweeps of Northern France and the Low Countries. Jack was unhurt, but Ray was in constant pain from the burns he'd received when his aircraft had caught fire. Nevertheless, he was always cheerful and uncomplaining, and one had to admire his spirit and courage. The guards were fairly decent and although in their forties and seemingly too old for active service, were afraid of being sent to the Russian front. Every time Ray would mention 'Ruskies', they would throw up their hands in horror. A stint on the Russian front was the last thing that any of them wanted. It was a fate worse than death.

The train was now ploughing its way through the wreckage of the Ruhr Valley. Germany's life-blood as far as the sinews of war were concerned. Here nearly everything was made for the German war effort, from the largest cannon and shell to perhaps the coloured pins placed on maps to indicate the various fighting fronts and the progress the German armies were making. All Royal Air Force flying personnel were familiar with the dreaded Ruhr, nicknamed 'Happy Valley', because it was a spot revisited time after time by Bomber Command and its thirty thousand antiaircraft guns had exacted a heavy toll of the invaders. Now, however, the rubble and wreckage on both sides of the railway line were ample evidence of the special treatment meted out to it by the bomber boys. The crews of the Lancasters and Halifax's performed their work of destruction in darkness and never saw evidence of their handwork, and it pleased Dave that it had not all been in vain.

The engine maintained its pace until it came to a large junction, where the lines criss-crossed to such a degree that their train was forced to lose momentum and click-clack its way along, finally stopping at a fairly large station. Everyone disembarked and gravitated to the platform on the other side. There was a big crowd and, as the waiting minutes ticked away, the three airmen and their guards became the centre of attention. The hostility was very much in evidence as, in all probability, these onlookers had been subjected to aerial bombardment and some had lost relatives and friends in the almost nightly holocaust. The mutterings and threats increased so the guards moved their charges against the wall and then took up protective positions on the outside.

'Christ'. They'll lynch us if that train doesn't come soon', stated McDonald. 'These bastards follow each other like a flock of sheep - they don't think for themselves.'

Then to the fore came a grizzled, old, railway worker carrying a large hammer. He was obviously a wheel-tapper and looked menacingly at the prisoners of war.

'If he comes at me with that hammer, I'll be over those tracks like a two year old', stated the irrepressible Bolland. 'He's a mean-looking son-of-a-bitch.'

The arrival of the 'old one' seemed to give the crowd direction and purpose, so two of the guards pointed their machine guns at the menacing crowd, while the third drew his pistol

Things looked dicey, then the long awaited train puffed its way into the station and so the crowd had somewhere to go and something else to do and so dispersed. The six of them clambered into a vacant carriage and slammed the door shut.

'I hope my stay in this goddamn country improves!' exclaimed Bolland. 'Bugger a mob which doesn't make you welcome,' and with that he plonked himself in the corner seat, stretched out his long legs and closed his eyes.

The journey terminated at Frankfurt on Main at about ten p.m., and they were exposed immediately to the military might of the Third Reich. The station, with its huge domed-glass roof, was seething with uniforms as army, air force and naval personnel were either catching trains to the far-flung outposts of the expanding or contracting Greater Germany, or disembarking for well-earned leave. No-one took any notice of the newly arrived POWs, for everyone was intent on going about their business and getting to their destination. Then the banshee of the air raid sirens was heard and the momentum increased. It seemed to Dave that he was watching an old silent movie and the actors, the milling throng, flickered on screen momentarily and then disappeared. The guards prodded their charges into a canter and they went down several flights of steps, reaching a sort of basement where there were bunks equipped with palliasses. This, then, was their resting place for the night.

For the next fifty-minutes or so it seemed that all hell was on the rampage. The scream of bombs could be heard as they hurtled earthwards, chilling the marrow of the bones and squeezing the innards until they felt like water. Then there was the crump of the bursting ack-ack shells and the roar of exploding bombs. Twice the whole building seemed to rock and then gently settle down as if annoyed at such rude awakenings. Dave lay on his bunk and thought of how his position had been reversed. Previously, he had always been above dishing it out, but now he was on the receiving end and wasn't too keen

about it. Only about ten days ago, he had been over Frankfurt hitting shit out of it, but now it was he who was getting lambasted.

'Bloody, stupid war!' he thought, 'But for me the war is over', and then immediately queried this assumption, for it seemed that it was beginning all over again, but this time he was on the other side of the fence. Finally, the all-clear sounded, and so it was to sleep and let tomorrow look after itself.

On the morrow the three of them were taken to an interrogation centre for aircrew, situated a few kilometres outside Frankfurt. Dave was searched, stripped of all personal possessions - one solitary Parker fountain pen with gold nib, and then placed in a small, monastic-like cell. The quiet of the surroundings contrasted sharply with the bustle, turmoil and ceaseless activity of the last seventy-two hours or so. It seemed that a thousand years had passed since being shot down, not just a few days. The endless and feverish movement from place to place had prevented him from contemplating his present position or thinking of the anguish his disappearance must have caused to his family, especially his mother.

It was his mother who counted. His father was soldiering somewhere in India, while his only brother was deep in Burmese jungles grappling with Japs. It was his mother who would receive the dreaded telegram, 'MISSING IN ACTION' from the Air Ministry, and would have to sweat out the weeks, until she received news that he was a POW. He felt dreadfully sorry for her, as she had borne, uncomplainingly, the brunt of everything. She was indestructible, but the pain and worry of it all must surely take their toll. He remembered the end of his last leave, when she had insisted on accompanying him to the railway station, over a mile away, to catch the 4.30 a.m. train. They had walked in the cold, dark starlight morning, not saying very much, but she occasionally reiterating the phrase, 'Take care of yourself, David and he, in his youth and exuberance, feeling that there was no need for worry as nothing could harm him. Then the train had pulled away from the platform, and she had been left, a deserted and very lonely figure filled with thoughts of apprehension and trepidation for the future.

In the afternoon he was conducted to the administrative block and interrogated by a Luftwaffe officer with an American accent, who began the session with a request for name, rank and number. Dave replied: David Job Griffin; Sergeant; 2711131. Then there were further requests for information: such as squadron number, how many planes involved in the raid, where were you trained etc. Dave knew that the only information he had to supply was name, rank and number and so remained silent in the face of further questions. The interrogator was skilled and couched the same questions in different ways, but Dave volunteered no enlightenment. After half an hour, Dave was returned to his cell, fed, locked up and left to wrestle with his thoughts, sweet and wonderful. The image of the beautiful, vivacious Joan, came flooding to his mind, cascading and sweeping all other thoughts away. Her dark, long hair framed her face and he wished fervently that he could be with her now, instead of in this bloody, miserable cell. She'd know now that he was missing, but he always told her that no harm could befall him and together they'd laughed away the fears that tried to mar their happiness. During his leaves, Joan and he had tramped the Welsh mountains enjoying the grandeur of the rugged scenery and happy in the knowledge that they were together. Life on the squadron was just too hectic and to be away from it all, safe, body whole, secure and Joan at his side was perfect. Then there was a sense of peace and permanence, for on the morrow you didn't have to be airborne and fly on operations, not for another seven days anyway and that seemed a lifetime away. Thus lost in thoughts, beautiful and wonderful and oblivious of his surroundings and predicament, he fell asleep.

For the next two days no-one bothered him. It seemed as if they had forgotten his presence and, apart from being allowed out to relieve himself, he was locked up all day. While in the lavatory, he came across some English literature in the shape of the newspaper, 'The Scotsman', cut into rectangular shapes for bum wiping. It was interesting reading, the advertisements, the snippets of news, the society gossip et cetera, and Dave became so engrossed that he forgot the passing of time. The banging of the door brought Dave back to reality and he hurriedly completed the necessities and then took a batch of the 'toilet Scotsman' and stuffed them into his pocket. They would make good reading material when he became bored and so would help to pass the time. He was escorted to the toilet about three times a day and so would return the read material and return to the cell with a fresh batch of sheets. He came to regard the toilet as a lending library, where he borrowed and then returned the not too crumpled sheets and hoped that none of the other prisoners objected to the crinkly, slightly-creased toilet paper.

On the fourth day, he was once again interrogated, being accused of belonging to a squadron involved in dropping saboteurs and agents in Occupied Europe. Why did he come down in Holland? Bomber Command didn't attack Dutch targets? Halifax's were used to drop agents and his aircraft had been a Halifax? He was not a member of Bomber Command, but belonged to a squadron intent on the sly, dirty business of dropping spies et cetera? Then the interrogator would change his tack and laugh at the way Dave had been caught by the Dutch police.

'All Europe is on our side,' the interrogator would rave on, 'you had no chance of escaping.'

Finally, Dave was returned to his cell to the reading of *The Scotsman*, his concern and fears for his mother; and then at night he would escape his imprisoning surroundings and become lost in wonderful, tender thought of Joan.

There were two more interrogations before he was released. Dave was herded into a truck with about twenty other Empire airmen, who including the two Canadians; Bolland and McDonald, and driven to a transit camp to await transportation to a POW camp.