

CHAPTER V

The railway cattle truck with the French words, '*8 Chevaux ou 48 Hommes*' painted on its sides, rattled and swayed its way along the tracks, while the twenty-nine Allied airmen, all newly baptised prisoners of war of the German Reich, sat on the hard, wooden floor, backs to the sides for support and bodies slightly rocking in unison with the motion of the truck. All the prisoners were shoeless; these having been confiscated in order to minimise chances of escape. Although the sun had not yet set, the interior of the truck was dimly lit, for the light could only filter through the narrow, barred windows near the roof and the slit-opening caused by the sliding door not being completely closed.

The journey was nearing the end of its second day and already the cold was beginning to seep through the boards and into the stockinged feet of the inmates.

'Shit! This bloody cold kills me, for Christ sake,' stated Bolland to those near him. 'Talk about Canada! That frost last night gave my feet hell. I thought my toes would drop off.'

'Me, too,' subscribed someone else. 'I was bloody glad when it warmed up this morning. The frost seems to come up from the rail tracks and attacks your balls. Trust the bloody Germans to think up some new form of torture.'

At this there were roars of laughter and the tedium of the journey was broken for a while. Dave knew how cold the previous night had been. He had wriggled his toes endlessly within the woollen stockings and had pulled his knees up into the stomach for warmth. Jesus, he was tired and, in all probability, it would be bitterly cold again tonight and there would be little sleep.

Someone got up to relieve himself by sidling up to the narrow aperture caused by the slightly open sliding door and pissing out on to the moving, shiny tracks below.

An hour later one of the three guards lit the oil lamp and then a slice of dark bread, accompanied by a piece of German sausage, was handed out to each prisoner and hungrily devoured. The meal over, a quiet settled over the group and each prisoner was alone with his thoughts. Dave thought of Terry, Bill and the other dead members of his crew. They had been together for so long and were like members of a happy family. On the squadron they all lived in a Nissen hut, and when not flying would go off to the local pub and enjoy the friendliness and bonhomie that existed. The bar would be crowded with aircrew types, all living it up. They were the 'quick' of today and were not yet the 'dead' of tomorrow, so they had to make the most of it while the gods still favoured them. Often the last bus would be missed because of an attractive girl's company, but Dave didn't mind for he was free of emotional entanglements, having not yet met Joan. He loved walking back to base under the cold, frosty starlight for it made his blood tingle and course in his veins. He was alive and that was what mattered. He believed in his indestructibility, but doubts would arise when he saw what havoc operational flying was causing to his friends. Large gaps were being literally torn in the fabric of the squadron and these were filled by the 'sprogs', who arrived to fill the voids. It was an awful way to live, but better than dying.

The frost was now beginning to bite and the wooden boards of the floor were really cooling to the arsehole. He was hale and hearty, but there were those in the party who had had a rough time. The frost must be giving Bolland's burns hell, and yet the Canadian never complained. Then there was Blackston, a rear gunner, who had come down from 20,000 feet and survived. All his crew had been killed, but, on impact, the rear turret had broken loose, being propelled away from the burning wreck. Blackston had been in hospital for several weeks, but was one hell of a mess and pain plagued him. Danzey, a bomb aimer, had been shot down over Dortmund and his collarbone had never really knit. Each airman had a tale to tell. They had come down from God knows what height and survived. They looked a motley collection, but Dave admired their toughness and cheerfulness.

Dave's thoughts were interrupted by the soft singing of the words:

*'Missed the Saturday dance,
Heard they crowded the floor,
Couldn't bear it without you,
Don't get around much anymore'*

It was the diminutive wireless operator, Slater, who occupied one of the corners of the truck. He had been singing the song, on and off, all day. Most probably it had romantic associations, but he was quite right, he wouldn't be going to any Saturday dance or getting around much for a long time.

Dave was pleased to see the rising sun on the morrow, as the early hours had been bitterly cold, allowing him to sleep only in fits and starts. It seemed that the train had been stationary all night and little progress had been made towards their destination, the prisoner of war camp.

After another half hour, there was stirring amongst the inmates, and utterances such as, 'Christ! It was a bloody cold night' and 'I believe train hardly moved. We'll be in this caboose until resurrection day' et cetera. It seemed that the prisoners, spawned by the war, were no better than human flotsam. Their degree of priority was nil, and so the engine to which their truck was attached was shunted hither and thither to make way for important traffic which ferried soldiers, shells et cetera to the frontline. Thus the cattle truck was left motionless in some siding for hours, while the airmen cursed their luck and nearly froze to death.

The sun was high enough in the sky now, so the locking bar on the sliding door was removed. The prisoners, under the direction of the three armed guards, then trooped out of the motionless wagon and walked a little way off the tracks. The morning ritual was then performed: trousers downed, each man got into the crouch or sitting-down position, bared his arse to the cold morning elements and proceeded to relieve himself. Everywhere you looked there were either steaming, white bums or dripping cocks.

'I've seen it all now!' exclaimed one wit. 'The seven wonders of the world'. and another asked, 'If a passenger train passed now, I wonder what the traveller would think was going on?' and quick as a flash came the answer from a connoisseur of the world of experience, 'I bet he'd think he'd seen not arseholes, but Red Indians smoking big, brown cigars.'

The ceremony over, it was back to the truck with the door locked in a slightly ajar position to accommodate the prospective pisser. It was breakfast time now, the slice of bread and sausage, followed by coffee, German style, tasting like burnt acorns. The food, coupled with the rays of the warming sun, helped to dissipate the effects of the cold night and make one feel almost human again. Then the train started to roll, everyone became cheerful and Slater began singing, 'Missed the Saturday dance.' The airmen were used to activity and motion and standing still in a deserted siding or on some out of the way railway track made them champ at the bit like horses waiting for the barriers to go up at the start of a race.

During the day, Dave was able to assess his companions in adversity. He had long conversations with the Canadians, Bolland and McDonald. Their squadron, equipped with Typhoons, harassed trains, road movement and specific daylight targets such as factories, gun emplacements et cetera. Both were unmarried, but Bolland loved England and wished to settle there after the war. McDonald had been at university studying economics, but had decided that he wanted to fly, so joined the R.C.A.F. They had flown umpteen ops between them, and, although their planes had suffered damage previously and had limped home, this was the first time they had been shot down.

Slater, of 'Missed the Saturday dance' fame, came from Manchester where according to him, 'lived the most beautiful girl in the world', his fiancée. They were due to be married next month, November, and

he was quite cheery about it all, 'just temporary postponement' was his summation. His crew had consisted of all officers, excepting him, he being a flight-sergeant. Consequently, after being shot down and interrogated, he had been parted from other members of the crew, they going to an officers' camp.

'We'll be home by Christmas,' he confidently predicted. 'We're giving the Hun hell, and the Russians will shake the piss out of them this winter.'

Blackston, the rear-gunner, filled him in about his crash from 20 000 feet. They were attacked by fighters on leaving Monchengladbach and he shot one of the planes down. The bomber, a Lancaster, had gone into a dive. Blackston tried to bale by rotating the rear gun turret, but it had jammed. Then gravity got him and he couldn't move. On crashing, the turret had broken away from the aircraft and been hurled yards away. The Lancaster had caught fire and had blown up. Only Blackston had survived. Eight weeks in hospital had followed, but he still had problems.

Danzez, a bomb aimer, had come down with the aircraft from 18,000 foot into a Dortmund suburb, ploughing through telegraph wires and buildings. Only Danzey and the mid upper gunner had survived, and the latter was still in hospital. When they had been extricated from the wreck, the intention of the rescuers was quite clear, they wanted a lynching, but the pathetic state of the two survivors had somehow softened their approach.

'You can't blame the bastards', Danzey had told him. 'We knock hell out of their homes, kill their wives and children and we expect the red carpet treatment?'

Then he'd asked Dave, where had he been shot down? And on hearing that it was Holland, he commented: 'Avoid that bloody target area. That's where they'll give you curry. An eye for an eye et cetera.' Everyman had a vivid story to tell. The three guards were quite friendly and from them Dave learnt the German words for 'thank you', 'food', 'bread', 'cigarette' et cetera. They all thought the war would go on forever and felt that the Russians were the danger. They even voiced the opinion that the Germans, British and Americans would, before the war's end, unite and fight the Russians, driving them back from whence they came. Their thinking flabbergasted Dave, who believed that Hitler and the German nation were the main stumbling blocks to peace and international harmony. One of the guards always stood by the slightly ajar door, but the aperture was too narrow for escape, being designed solely as a piss hole. At first there had been a lot of ribaldry concerning the unusual urinal, with such comments as 'You'd better watch the passing trains or your cock and balls will finish up in the West, while you'll finish on the Russian front completely euchred', but now no-one took any notice, familiarity breeding contempt and disinterest.

The journey continued its slow, eastward progress, punctuated by long halts and harried by bitterly cold nights. Dave would look out of the narrow opening and watch the passing pageant, consisting of seemingly fast passenger trains or slow, ponderous freight trains. The latter were either open wagons, loaded with tanks, artillery guns, motor trucks et cetera, or cattle trucks, like the ones they were travelling in. What amazed Dave was that it seemed that the Greater German Reich had filched rolling stock from every part of Europe. The French wagons had written on them '8 Chevaux ou 48 Hommes', while the origin of the others could be identified by such words as 'Italia' et cetera.

On the fifth day, the landscape started to change. The soil became sandy and pine forests abounded. The outlook became monotonous, dreary and depressing. They were now in East Prussia, although Dave didn't know this. He didn't know where the hell they were going and didn't much care. All he wanted was to get the hell out of this wooden rectangular box, bathe and have a good sleep. His wish was granted about four p.m. on the sixth day, when the train pulled into an almost deserted siding. The prisoners were unloaded and marched along a sandy narrow track, flanked by the ubiquitous pines. Then after about four kilometres, they were there, their new home *Stalug Luft 6*, consisting of two lagers, A and K, and ringed by barbed wire and tall, stilted, postern boxes where Argus-eyed German sentries kept guard.

Outside a tall, heavily-barbed gate, the main entrance, they were kept waiting for about an hour before being admitted to a fore-lager, where the administrative office block was situated. Here they were

stripped, their clothes searched and they were given their *ikriegsgefangenert*, prisoner or 'kriegie' number. In the darkness they were taken through another gate to B Block within K Lager, their new home. Eighteen of their number were accommodated in room B3, while the remainder went to B4. A meal of a quarter of a tin of corned beef and mashed potatoes awaited each of them and then it was into the bunk, wrapped in two Russian blankets, spoils of war, and to sleep.