

CHAPTER VI

The inmates of B3 were awakened by shouts of, 'Ausrichten! Ausrichten!' as the door was unbolted and the guards came stamping in. Within minutes the kriegies were up, outside and lined up ready for the 'appel' or roll call. The guards moved down the lines, counting as they went. Then, when all were accounted for, the prisoners were dismissed and allowed to return to their huts. Then it was grub-up. Two steaming jugs of coffee, acorn flavoured, were brought from the camp cookhouse and distributed, a mug full each. That was the lot, breakfast was over.

Hut B3 fitted snugly into B Block, which was a long, low building divided into twelve divisions of drab, colourless huts, B1 to B12. So B Block resembled terraced houses in some, very poor neglected suburb. Opposite was C Block, in every way identical with B Block, with its twelve huts. Separating the two was a sandy thoroughfare of about 60 feet in width. Each hut had a cobbled stone floor and down each side were arranged eighteen two-tiered bunks. Thus, being full, B3 had a complement of seventy-two persons. In the centre of the rectangular hut was a stove with an iron top, measuring about eight feet by six and used for the dual purpose of heating and cooking. At the far end there was a small alcove and here resided a very large, galvanised dustbin, used at night as a urinal. The interior of the hut resembled a large stable with the two-tiered bunks being the stalls where the horses were bedded down.

Dave looked at the miserable surroundings and decided to hit the sack. The Germans wouldn't allow members of aircrew to work, so he had no pressing engagement. He stretched out on the lower bunk, but couldn't be comfortable. He arose and shook the palliasse, his mattress, containing wooden shavings, but found that they had shifted to either the top or bottom of the sack, leaving the centre part almost denuded. He redistributed the shavings and examined the 'springs' of his wooden bunk. These consisted of six wooden slats, each about eight inches in width. However, instead of being equidistantly spaced, they had slid to new positions. Dave rearranged them and thought that if he were to lie on them for a lengthy period his body would finish up snakelike, in and out of the slats. He replaced the palliasse carefully so as not to disturb his handiwork, then gave the sack pillow a pummelling to soften the shavings and climbed into bed. His rest was soon disturbed by the itching of his ankles and lower legs. His first night in the lager hadn't been a restful one, for his whole body had been given curry by being bitten. It was, although he didn't know it yet, the wood termites in the shavings which were responsible.

Unable to rest, Dave decided to have a look at the outside, the world enclosed by barbed wire. The thoroughfare between B and C Blocks was fairly crowded with kriegies. Some were just sitting or standing sunning themselves, while others were brewing-up using their home made tin blowers. Dave made his way until he passed the end of B Block and then encountered, about twenty yards further on, two detached huts, the first being the kriegies' administration block where the British Man-of-Confidence and his staff did their 'sums' and the other being the camp theatre.

Fifteen yards on was the ablution block, and then before you reached the end of the city limits - the barbed wire - was the toilet. Dave, feeling the call of nature, entered the 'rialto' of the camp, so named because it was here that the prisoners discussed the world situation and swapped tit-bits of news. At the 'rialto' rumours were born, gathered momentum and then radiated to all parts of the camp, keeping the prisoners' hopes alive that the war would be over by Christmas. The festive season seemed the terminating point for all things, when the kriegies would be home eating turkey, plum pudding et cetera.

The toilet was a long, hut with a floor of about 20 feet in width running down the middle and flanked on either side by plank seats, containing about 60 holes each. Beneath was a huge pit dug in the earth which received the daily droppings. Thus 120 kriegies could relieve themselves at one time, but when Dave parked himself it was only half full. Wherever he looked, to the sides, to the front, one was confronted with crappers. Some were staring into space, others concentrating on the morning ritual.

There were those who were reading the most recent letter they had received from home, while others were just yarning. All this was quite an experience for Dave, for he was used to privacy.

'How are you crapping today?' asked a Flight Sergeant sitting next to him. 'My piles are giving me hell. What I need is plenty of fruit. One must have fruit for a good, comfortable shit.'

Dave didn't answer this familiarity and felt uncomfortable. Then the neighbourly Flight Sergeant leaned towards Dave, and stated in a whisper, but ensuring that those near would hear. 'I heard that the British and Americans are landing in France in a week's time, and Churchill believes the war will be over by Christmas.'

This statement made those within hearing distance prick up their ears.

'How do you know?' demanded one. 'Is it pukka gen?'

The Flight-Sergeant just smiled knowingly, and placed a finger to his lips as if he couldn't betray his unimpeachable source of information.

When those around left, the Flight Sergeant burst out laughing, 'This place gives me the effing shits,' he roared. 'You say something whilst you are in here and it's all around the camp within twenty minutes. When I get back to the hut, they'll tell me that the British and Americans have already landed and Churchill's with them. This place is full of bloody rumours and boy do they get bigger and bigger?'

Dave and the Flight Sergeant left together, he to return to his hut, Dave to 'bash the circuit'. Bashing the circuit was walking around the perimeter of the camp and a path or track had been beaten out by the feet of the kriegies. The way around followed the 'warning wire', and was the extreme limit to which a prisoner could go. Touch the wire and the itchy finger of the sentry in the postern box could bring about death. Five yards on the outside of the warning wire was the tall, thick, barbed wire fence, the second line of defence, and interspersed in this prickly maze were the stilted, postern boxes and their sentries.

On the northern side was the fore-lager, where the German administrative staff was housed. However, encircling the camp was another wire fence and then on the very outside was a huge ditch or moat to prevent tunnelling. The would-be tunneller would have to burrow deep to avoid surfacing in the ditch. All kriegies bashed the circuit in an anti-clockwise direction so it was rarely you passed someone face-to-face. The prisoners walked singly or in pairs, seldom in threes. When you walked alone you escaped from the overcrowding, the lack of privacy, and the congestion of seventy- two in a hut and almost two thousand enclosed in a compound that was far too small for such a number. On your own, one could lose oneself in private thoughts and escape from the monotony of the diurnal round and the impact the barbed wire had on the outlook of the inmates. Thus most of the airmen walked their days away so that time would go and release would seem to come sooner.

On his return to B3 it was almost midday and yet a few prisoners were still bedridden. Once morning roll call was over, there was no sense of urgency as there was nothing to do. Consequently, some of those who had been in the 'cage' for a long period had taken to the 'pit' and were indifferent to all else, as if they had woven a cocoon for themselves in which to take refuge. At noon a tub of meatless swede soup arrived from the communal kitchen and was distributed, a cup full per person. Dave felt the hunger pangs.

Breakfast had consisted of coffee and now a cup of watery, swede soup did nothing to alleviate the situation. He was bloody hungry and was pleased when the daily bread ration arrived at two o'clock.

Twelve loaves were delivered for the 72 people, so it was six to a loaf. Being portioned out as equally as possible, playing cards, of ace, king, queen, jack, ten and nine were placed on each share. Then those involved drew from six other cards, and if the ace was drawn you collected the bread portion with the ace, and so on. This lottery prevented anyone from gaining an unfair advantage in the bread stakes. Thus the bread was parcelled out and Dave, having examined his share, cut it down the middle

into two slices. He knew that his bread ration had to last twenty-four hours and there was need to conserve, eating one piece with the evening meal and the other for breakfast. He nibbled a little, and soon one piece had disappeared. He was still hungry, however, and couldn't refrain from devouring the other slice. He realised that he had committed a cardinal sin and on the morrow he'd feel miserable on an empty stomach. Still it was a lesson he would remember and his appetite would have to be curbed or he'd always be hungry.

The second and final 'appel' of the day was taken at about four p.m., followed by mashed potatoes and a quarter of tin of corned beef per man at about 5.30 p.m. Then the doors of the huts were locked and the captives were left to their own devices. Some of hut B3's inmates were veteran prisoners who had spent time in other camps and had been shifted from place to place; then there were those who had been in captivity for about six months; and the newly arrived of which Dave was a member. Familiarity and understanding had not yet been established and so there was general quiet with small groups conversing quietly and others just lying on their bunks. It was a quiet night for ex-members of aircrew, a far cry from the rip-roaring, squadron, salad days when one went to the pub and lived it up. Then the lights went out and everyone returned to his thoughts, escaping to a certain extent from the drab trappings of captivity.

As the night progressed, one or other of the kriegies would be forced to make the pilgrimage to the big, galvanised dustbin in the alcove to relieve themselves, and sometimes the volume and noise of the waterfall so made could be heard by those in close proximity. This would often result in vehement protestations:

'I don't mind the pissing or the noise,' stated the first speaker. 'It's the bloody stink I hate. It's those stinking bastards who creep down here in the middle of night and leave their visiting card. The 'pong' almost kills me, and then in the morning you see those big, black turds floating about in a sea of piss, and some poor bastards have to empty it.'

At this there were always roars of laughter and the thaw was broken. So the banter continued until tiredness and a desire for sleep overtook the participants.

So ended the first full day for Dave's internment.