

CHAPTER VII

The mail arrived at infrequent intervals, but when it was delivered to each hut and doled out, the kriegies stood around in hopeful expectancy. There were those who received four or five letters and would then retire to the 'pit' to savour and ruminate the contents of each one; while others just stood, received nothing, shrugged their shoulders and smiled it off. Soon the have-nots would leave the hut to bash the circuit and get the bitterness out of their system. The majority of these had been behind barbed wire upwards of three years and had become the forgotten men of the war. Their wives or girlfriends had grown tired of waiting for the war's end and had found consolation elsewhere, for England was swarming with Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen in the shape of Yanks, Canadians, Poles, Free French, Australians and New Zealanders, apart from British personnel. Males from the four corners of the world had converged upon the little island and women were in short supply. So the kriegies who were still remembered, read and re-read their letters; while those who had been letter less consoled themselves that everything would be rectified with the next mail delivery. There were also those who lay on their bunks indifferent to everything.

The circuit was crowded with walkers all going one way. If one didn't walk there was little else to do and boredom set in. Dave tried to walk twenty circuits a day, ten in the morning and ten in the afternoon and then he was buggered. How many miles a day he wasn't able to estimate, but it was a long way for his legs felt like weights when the daily exercise was completed. Still he wanted to keep fit and, although it was a chore, he did his best to ensure the stint was completed.

Around the 'messpot' board a big crowd had gathered to read the latest sensational news from home. Dave didn't stop for he wanted to complete a few more circuits before resting. The 'messpot' board was so called for here letters were publicly displayed so that the world behind barbed wire could learn of the infidelity and indifference of the women they had left behind. A 'messpot' was a letter from a 'loved one' stating that the relationship was over and done with, and there was a crop of final notices every time there was a mail delivery. The recipient, instead of keeping the news to himself and brooding, was supposed to display it and show the world his indifference. Whether everyone carried out this procedure was doubtful, but the 'messpot' board was always pretty full after the postman had been.

On the tenth circuit, Dave was able, the crowd having thinned, to stop and read the details of the letters displayed. They contained the usual details; You've been gone a long time; I'm tired of waiting; you're only young once; there is someone new in my life who is absolutely wonderful et cetera. Three letters however, made Dave chuckle for they were so unusual, bordering on the absurd. The first, after the usual preamble, concluded with 'so I'm having a baby by this American, but don't worry, Darling, he's sending you cigarettes.' Another stated; 'I've married your father, Love Mother'; and the third announced that the correspondent, a former fiancée, had married a sailor, who was not the jealous or possessive type, and she was certain that when the respondent came home they could resume their love relationship once again without any problems.

Dave walked on and thought what a topsy-turvy world it was. One day you were in England, in love and loved in return, confident wedding bells were for you. Then the next, you were a prisoner-of-war, forgotten, rejected, and kicked in the guts. No-one could predict the future and, although Dave had been a prisoner for nearly ten weeks, he still hadn't received any mail as yet and so in the years ahead there was plenty of time for a 'messpot' to come his way.

As he approached B3, he was reminded by the presence of the hand-wagon, laden with Red Cross food parcels, that it was Saturday. He helped with the unloading and was rewarded with a Canadian parcel. The parcels came from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. It was potluck what you received. All parcels contained two tins of meat, such as corned beef, ham roll, spam et cetera, but these had been removed to the communal kitchen so that the quarter tin of meat could be given to each prisoner for his evening meal. The Canadian parcel was prized for it contained a large bar of chocolate, a tin of butter, powdered milk called '*Klim*', some sugar, a dozen 'dog' biscuits, a tin

of jam and a packet of tea. There was also an issue of fifty cigarettes per man, so it was a weekly red letter day for the camp. Dave buttered one of the biscuits and scooped the lot. He then placed a little sugar on a spoon, dipped in '*Klim*', and sucked the contents. It was delicious. He reasoned that this was better than putting it in tea, for tea could be drunk without milk. He loved spooning the mixture of powdered milk and sugar, as his body seemed to cry out for sweet things. However, he had to observe restraint for there were seven days to go and one couldn't hog the lot and be hungry for the rest of the week.

He joined the group warming their backsides around the big stove and listened to the discussion about the war's progress.

'The bloody Ruskies will hit shit out of them this winter. They've already started their winter offensive. Good old Joe, he'll get us out of here,' stated one Stalin enthusiast.

The kriegies were well-informed for every day a member of 'Big X' would come into the hut and read the latest BBC news bulletin. The radio receiver's whereabouts was a top-secret and, in all probability, was only known by one or two prisoners. How on earth it had been made or smuggled in was beyond comprehension, but the camp was full of diverse and extraordinary talents and anything and everything could be accomplished.

'We'll be out of here before Christmas. Maxie Clarke has predicted it. His latest is that the war will finish on 23rd. December. Maxie's always been right,' chipped in an optimist.

'I'd put my money on Clarke any day. When he goes into a trance he comes up with the 'gen', supported another Clarke supporter.

'Bullshit! You don't believe in that crap. Who's Maxie Clarke anyway? Some washed-out kriegie living in B9, who goes down to the bog and has wonderful visions. Christmas is only three weeks away, and you expect the war to be over by then. You all must be bloody crazy and around the bend. Talk about barbed wire madness,' stated a realist.

'I'll put my money on Maxie,' retorted the optimist. Clarke says anything, because he enjoys being a prophet. 'Talking about the bog, I need to go,' chimed in a disinterested bystander. 'That bloody place freezes the balls off you.'

After the evening meal of a quarter of a tin of spam and spuds, the doors of the huts were locked and the long night began. There were bridge games, one hundred rubbers up as time was limitless and the same four people pitted their wits against each other night after night. Some played Ludo and others Tip-it. Cooking was going on at the stove, the Canadian biscuits having been enlarged by a long soaking were now being fried in margarine, supplied by the Germans, and then eaten with a dollop of jam on top. It was Saturday night and consolation was needed. On the squadron Saturday night was really enjoyed to the full. It was the pub, the dance, the girlfriend et cetera, but in B3 there were those just lying on their bunks, deep in thought of the Saturday nights of yesterday.

Out went the lights and on went the Saturday night's entertainment. The portable gramophone, supplied by the Red Cross, started to churn out the music and the disc jockey for the night prattled on, while the ex-airmen relaxed in their pits.

'I'm a little on the lonely, a little on the lonely side,

I keep thinking of you only, and wishing you were by my side,

For you know dear, when you're not near, there's no-one to romance with' warbled Sinatra.

This was followed by Vera Lynne's:

'Yours till the stars lose their glory,

Yours till the birds fail to sing,

Yours till the end of life's story.'

So it went on until the strain of, 'Whose taking you home tonight, after the dance is through,' resounded through the hut.

'Jack! someone yelled. 'I wonder what Dulcie's doing tonight. I bet she's not thinking of you.'

'Once met, never forgotten.' replied the gallant Jack with a show of bravado. 'Dulcie will be waiting when I get back. I'm number one.'

At this there were roars of laughter.

'Kidding yourself, aren't you?' quipped another. 'You'll be past middle-age by the time you get out of here, and past it.'

'Not bloody likely', retorted Jack. 'Maxie Clarke has forecast we'll be home for Christmas.'

Then there were chortles from everywhere.

The night dragged on and the gramophone ceased to make music. Dave felt the urge to visit the 'bin' and open his bowels, but although it was after midnight it wasn't a propitious moment to make the long trek. Every night the conversation would finally centre on the bin and there would be grumbles and oaths concerning the rotten, stinking bastards who had crept down in stealth and the dead of night to relieve themselves and leave the smell for those in the vicinity. Everyone used it at some time or other, but even if you had been one of the culprits the night before, you joined in the protest as vehemently as anyone else. Finally, Dave could hold it no longer and tip-toed towards the Mecca of relief. He unburdened himself and then, quickly but quietly, got back just in time to his neck of the woods.

'Jesus Christ! Who's the dirty bastard with the black, reeking arsehole? Saturday night in the lager stinks!' exclaimed an angry kriegie. Of course, everyone seemed to stir themselves and join in the tumult. The blokes at top end, away from it all, expressed righteous indignation mixed with muffled laughter, while those in the path of the smell kept up the tirade.

Relieved and feeling a lot better, Dave pulled his two blankets closer to him and settled down for the night.