

CHAPTER VIII

Christmas had come and gone and Maxie Clarke's prediction had failed to materialise. The winds were now bleak and chilling and the ground was iron hard and corrugated. There had been snow and rain about a month previously making the earth very wet, soft and boggy, and this situation had not been helped by the feet of nearly 2000 POWs pounding it incessantly. All this had changed, however, with the advent of icy frosts and drying, blood curdling winds.

The recreation or soccer, rugby, cricket ground was in continuous use all day. It wasn't really a recreation ground, but was the only vacant area in the camp, being bounded by the back of C Block and the warning wire on the southern side. In the morning there was always one rugby union match played by the Kiwi enthusiasts against some form of opposition, while for the rest of the day the ground was devoted to soccer. Each hut had a team in the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the Lager League, and games were of an hour's duration. Then every afternoon about 2.30, a Major League game would take place. This league consisted of six teams, such as Arsenal, Leeds United, Manchester City et cetera, and only the very best players, generally professionals, semi-professionals or top class amateurs participated.

At these big games nearly all kriegies attended and a carnival atmosphere prevailed. The bookmakers would shout the odds and the currency was cigarettes. Everything was negotiable, providing you had the wherewithal, from a toothbrush to a Red Cross parcel. Over the years, individuals or combines had amassed fortunes, being sent cigarette parcels by relatives and friends, and it was whispered that some combines, consisting of three or four persons, had nest eggs of 40,000 cigarettes upwards. However, for the newly arrived prisoner the cigarette parcels had not yet started to flow and the individual was dependent on his weekly issue from the Red Cross. Dave couldn't afford a wager, for if he came unstuck then there would be no smokes until Saturday.

Although the ground was bone-hard and devoid of grass, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspurs battled it out to the very end. The standard of play was exceptionally high and polished, and the spectators, although chilled to the marrow, stayed to the bitter end and then the successful punters gathered their winnings and bee-lined for the huts to thaw out. East Prussia and the Baltic area were, according to the kriegies, the place where the balls of the proverbial brass monkey froze.

The continuing cold ensured that the pangs of hunger were always present, as the only supplement to the Red Cross parcel was the meagre German rations consisting of the acorn flavoured coffee at breakfast and the evening meal; a cup of meatless, swede soup at midday; the daily ration of bread - about two slices; a small weekly portion of margarine and about two potatoes daily. The body cried out for bulk, such as plenty of bread to fill one up and sweet, cloying substances such as syrup. The cold seemed to attack the 'waterworks' and one was forever urinating. The cold was only one factor, the other being that nothing really solid was being consumed.

The cold was so intense that after morning roll call many of the inmates of B3 would return to their bunks and stay till midday. However, the Canadians in the lager were more active and in the afternoon would be busily engaged in pouring buckets of water over the hard ground, thus obtaining a layer of ice the next morning.

This was repeated daily, until about three inches of ice thickness covered the surface. An ice-hockey pitch was then marked with red and blue paint, with a maple leaf in the centre. More water was then added so a further layer of ice resulted and the lines underneath plainly visible. Then, with the aid of the Red Cross ice skates, the hockey games were on with a vengeance. The winter sport attracted many an onlooker and when the hockey was abandoned because of injuries, the lager took to ice-sliding minus skates.

The winter was long, dreary, cold and miserable and everyone longed for the spring greenery and harbingers of warmer weather. The camp theatre was in constant use with the artistes taking part in revues, plays and potpourri shows. The camp boasted two dance bands: a soft lights and sweet music

combination; and a 'big band', similar to Glenn Miller's, whose rendering of 'American Patrol' was superb.

Somewhere in the lager a tunnel was being dug so that escape could be effected in the warmer days ahead. The only indication that escape activity was in the air was the request for bed boards to shore up the sides of the tunnel and the presence of the 'penguins', the disposers of the newly-dug sand. The difficulty with digging a tunnel in East Prussia was the disposal of the sand. The whole camp was built on a sandy plain and when the tunnelled sand was strewn on the surface of the compound its different colour was plainly visible and the Germans knew that an escape was in the offing. The job of the 'penguins', so called because they waddled about when performing their function, was to fill socks with sand, place these down their trouser legs and walk around the camp gradually releasing a little at the time, then pressing or rubbing it into the surface. It was a tedious job and there was a lot of sand to dispose. The bulk of the sand was placed between the ceiling and the roof of the ablution block. It might have been winter, but there was no hibernation for 'Big X' as it had its sights on escape and freedom in the spring.

The cold 1943-44 winter brought good news from the Russian front. The Ruskies were bounding along westward at a quickening pace, and every time a BBC bulletin was delivered to B3 another Russian town had been retaken and the Germans driven pell-mell before the Red Army juggernaut. All this was very heartening for the, 'we'll be home by Christmas brigade', but the towns mentioned were hundreds of miles away and this fact was sobering. It would be a long while before the return to Blighty, unless the Second Front was opened up.

The discussions on this aspect of the war were often and heated. The prisoners of the 1939, 40 and 41 vintage couldn't understand Churchill's reluctance to attack Hitler's European fortress. They argued that there was plenty of room from Norway to the South of France for a landing, and the much-vaunted German coastal fortifications were a myth - a figment of propaganda. Then there were those who debunked this line of thought as they had been shot down in the amphibious assault on Dieppe and had received a bloody nose. Their verdict was that the Atlantic Wall was tough and there would be tremendous casualties on invasion day. However, all longed for the Great Day to arrive and concurred that the war would be soon over after the landings. One thing the kriegies had in abundance was supreme optimism.

Whenever a newly shot-down airman arrived he was the centre of interest for a few days while questioned about the world outside. When was the Second Front going to take place? What was it like in England now? Was the place full of Yanks, and were they as successful with the women as rumours had it? It was a small world, especially the bomber world. Many of the new arrivals had served on the same squadrons as those who had been in captivity for years and so knew the same pubs, the same streets and, in some cases, the same women.

The afternoon roll call now took place at 3 p.m., as it was almost dark three-quarters of an hour later. Thus the confinement to the hut seemed endless and more time was devoted to the culinary arts. Each day Dave would trim the crusts off his two slices of bread and place them in a tin. For seven days he would do this and then on Saturday night he would have a big bust. The chopped up crusts would be placed in a container, the contents just covered with water, and the lot placed on the stove, heated and constantly stirred. Thus a watery mixture would be achieved or a type of bread pudding. A little sugar was then added and it was a feast fit for a king - or it filled the void in the gnawing stomach for five minutes.

Once a week it was down to the ablution block for showers. Each hut was allowed three minutes from the time the water was turned on to its turning off. Seventy-two airmen would hurriedly strip and rush to get a share of one of the 24 water outlets in the ceiling. One would go water as cold as ice and everyone would flee from the icy jets, only to remember they only had 3 minutes. So it was back to the showers. Then it was too hot, burning the skin, followed by hasty retreat. It was back to the shower, only to find that the water had been turned off as the three minutes was up. So it was another seven days wait until the next shower. Still, it was all part of a kriegie's life and wouldn't last forever.

To relieve the monotony of the daily round guest speakers would be invited to huts to expatiate upon their roles in civilian life. To B3 came a big game hunter from Kenya who woke up the denizens with stories of elephants running amok, lions springing from rocks on the unsuspecting hunter, and romance under the African stars with a beautiful woman on safari. It was all magical stuff and the dreary and monotonous surrounds were forgotten for an hour or two. Then, another time, the guest speaker had fought as a pilot in the Spanish Civil War and spoke of the barbarism and atrocities committed by Franco's men. Perhaps the most interesting talk was given by a former Hong Kong police officer who spoke about gunrunning, opium addicts, brothels, venereal disease, murder and violence. The lager was chockfull of talented men who had lived life to the full and then had taken to the air to wage war against Hitler's Germany.

The German guards were nicknamed 'goons' or 'ferrets' and they were always in and out of the huts. Trading with the enemy was 'verboden' as this could cause a spiral in prices and so this segment of commerce was in the hands of the 'Big X' committee. The members of 'Big X' would inveigle an unsuspecting guard to bring in from outside something unimportant and he would then be rewarded with cigarettes or chocolates. Then, as time progressed, the same guard would be encouraged to smuggle into the camp more important things, until he was hooked and blackmailed into smuggling cameras, wireless valves, a compass, a passport and anything that was required. Thus an inaccessible and necessary item became available for escape purposes et cetera.

The 'Big X' committee was in-charge of all important things such as escaping, trading with the Germans, tunnelling et cetera. Before any escape attempt could be made, it had to be approved and sanctioned by the committee. They were the experts and decided if the plan was feasible or not. They offered advice on tunnelling and in some cases took charge of the project. They were shadowy figures and no-one really knew their identities. It was better that way, so security could be maintained and leakages minimised.

The camp's third lager C was opened in March, 1944, to accommodate the American flyers who were being shot down in droves in their daylight sweeps over enemy occupied Europe. The Flying Fortresses had a crew of ten or more, and the long flights over Europe to bomb and then fight their way back to base were fraught with hazard. The odds were stacked against them. At first they came in trickles, but soon the floodgates opened and the new lager was soon packed to capacity. A and K lagers housed British and British Empire airmen, and A, being the longest established, was the richest not only in cigarettes, but in all things, K came a poor second, but poor old C was certainly the poor relation, having to start from scratch. The lagers were separated by barbed wire entanglements, and the Germans wouldn't allow visiting or exchange of goods et cetera. However, as the months passed, the affluence of the new arrivals grew with the arrival of oodles of cigarettes et cetera, and the roles were reversed, the British lagers becoming the poor relations.

Thus the winter gradually wended its slow way towards spring, and the prisoners looked forward to the warmer days ahead when the sun would help to assuage the pains of hunger and the biting cold would leave the bones' marrow to rest and recover. Warmth and release from captivity were what the kriegies wanted and they felt that the summer of 1944 would grant them their wishes.