

CHAPTER X

C Lager, where the American flyers were housed, had grown apace not only in numbers, but affluence. The parcels - cigarettes, clothing and food had cascaded in from the U.S., making the lot of the American kriegie a lot happier. They were now either better off or at least on a par with the two British lagers, A and K, and felt that in keeping with their new status should entertain and throw their 'home' open to their British comrades-in-arms. They had decided on a boxing extravaganza to which three hundred guests from each of the other lagers would be invited. The program would commence at 11.30 a.m. and continue until 4.00 p.m., and the Americans would fight and take on the other two lagers at fisticuffs. The big bout was to be between the 'Bearded Wonder', the C Lager champion of champions, and A Lager's Bill Macey. Macey had proven himself previously when boxing matches had been arranged between A and K, and had waltzed through his bouts with ease, generally flooring his opponents. He was the undisputed reigning British Kriegie Champion, and a lot was expected of him by his supporters. The 'Bearded Wonder', on the other hand, was an unknown quantity having never fought a fight in the camp.'

Three weeks before the big day, the ballyhoo began. The A Lager scribes published twice weekly a one-sheet newspaper with all news of the forthcoming battle. Macey was in tremendous shape and rearing to defend the honour of A and K Lagers. The paper stated that the British hero was an ex-guards officer, who had forsaken the regiment to fly with the Royal Air Force. It was all bullshit, at least that was what Dave thought, but still it was good publicity for the coming encounter. Then there was a column contributed by the Americans about the 'Bearded Wonder'. He breakfasted on steaks, disposed of six sparring partners daily and did miles of roadwork. His identity was a closely guarded secret and it was whispered that during the fight he would wear a mask so he wouldn't be recognised. The article concluded that in all probability the 'Wonder' belonged to one of America's top families, a Roosevelt or Vanderbilt, and his anonymity must be preserved as Daddy wouldn't approve of Junior's participation in such a violent sport.

The big day dawned and Dave, who was fortunate enough to be included amongst the guests, trooped over to C Lager. The Americans had really entered into the spirit of the thing and constructed a first class boxing ring, and had home-made movie cameras, which didn't work, standing on tripods everywhere. Above, these cameras were signs such as 'Pathe', 'C.B.C. News', 'Movietone' et cetera. Each contest consisted of 3 rounds of 3 minutes' duration, and fight followed fight. The boys from the A and B Lagers were given a touch of glamour by being introduced as Johnny Jones from Nepal, Fred Stuckey from Hong Kong, Bill Haines from the South China Seas, and Bill Waring from the Khyber Pass, India, the far-flung outposts of the Empire being given much prominence. Then it was 3.30 p.m. and time for the big bout, again a three rounder, as the camp diet was insufficient to warrant a fight of longer duration. The camp celebrities were introduced from the ring: American Man-of-Confidence, British Man-of-Confidence, then a string of well-known personalities who had made the big time in civilian life and whose status had been reduced by the vicissitudes of war. It was a topsy-turvy world, up one minute and down the next.

The betting was high and the American bookmakers were offering four to one on Macey, showing that in a two horse race he was considered a non-starter. The six hundred British visitors were plunging heavily on their champion, for they felt that the odds were terrific and they'd go away with fortunes. However, it was not to be. The A Lager champion, despite background and guardsman's moustache, succumbed to the 'Wonder' in a points decision. Of course, there was a howl of protest at the decision from the British contingent: 'We wuz robbed', plaint, but the 'Wonder' had won fairly and squarely.

So it had been a great day and the Americans had grown richer by thousands of cigarettes and had left the poor relations A and B far behind.

The weather was really hot and the kriegies' attire was becoming less and less. Some had taken to sunbathing in the nude and this was becoming the vogue, until a rumour circulated that hot sun on the

testicles rendered one sterile. So respectability was gained by the 'g' string and the inmates continued to enjoy the warmth.

The heat helped to drive the hunger pangs away, and there seemed to be more energy for other pursuits, such as swimming. K Lager had a fire pool, which was as black as the ace of spades and full of frogs, but it was hot and an enterprising prisoner considered it was time for a swim. Everything was contagious in the Lager and within an hour the pool's surrounds were littered with naked bodies all enjoying the amenities of the new-found lido, while the pool was jammed with bathers who emerged a darker colour than on entering. For two days the new attraction was allowed to prosper by the authorities, although the amount of water gradually decreased as the water was splashed outwards on to the muddy banks by the antics of the bathers. Then the Germans acted, it was declared a health hazard - typhoid being mentioned and the pool was 'verboden'. So ended the two-day interlude at the seaside.

The aquatic activities having been curtailed at the height of the season, it was on with another summer sport, cricket, and what better than a test match between England and Australia to capture and hold the interests of the men of B Lager. The English supporters stated that it would be a non-event, because of the limited choice available to the Australian selectors, but when one considered the number of Aussies in the lager it was time for reconsideration. Although it was true that the bulk of the POWs were from the British Isles, it was surprising the contribution made by Australia and Canada, considering their small populations. It was to be a three-day match with set intervals for lunch and tea, just like at Lords, despite the fact that there would be nothing to eat. Still tradition had to be complied with.

Australia won the toss and batted on what was supposed to be a perfect pitch, devoid of a blade of grass. The dust heap had been swept and then rolled with petrol drums filled with water. The Lancashire curator from C9 had declared it the best wicket he had seen outside Old Trafford, and there was a bag of runs to be had, but the English opening bowlers seemed to think otherwise and made the ball bounce and lift alarmingly.

Four Australian wickets tumbled for nine runs and then the boys from Down Under decided that it was time for bold tactics. They hit out lustily much to the crowd's delight and at lunch were five wickets for 113 runs, a useful start.

As there was no selling of scorecards, chocolates, cigarettes or matches during the break, the lager's brass band entertained with such tunes as 'Colonel Bogey', 'Anchors Away' et cetera. Then some of the spectators, thinking that they could do better than the actual players, invaded the playing area and commenced a test match of their own on the holy of holies, the test wicket. This continued until the irate curator emerged from C9 and uprooted the test stumps in a bid to check the proceedings and force the invaders to take up positions behind the boundary. The abrupt ending of the game almost resulted in fisticuffs, but all ended well with the reappearance of the players.

The Australian batsmen pushed on, timing their shots and slogged the many loose deliveries, and were further aided and abetted by some poor English fielding - innumerable catches being dropped. So a respectable score of 197 was reached and Australia was well-satisfied.

The Englishmen batted as if they were at Lords, very correct and proper, but the wicket was treacherous, bouncing, shooting and keeping ankle high, so were dismissed for a paltry forty-two. Being forced to follow-on over 150 in arrears, they changed tactics and lashed out, but could only muster 148. So the three-day match had ended in a day and the Aussies had won the test by an innings and seven runs. The blame was heaped on the ground staff and the curator, who had let the kriegies down. One day of cricket, when they were expecting three was poor and unforgiveable by anyone's standards.

The lights were out and the kriegies were relaxing in their pits after a day in the sun. The conversation generally centred itself on women, the war or the 'bin', but tonight the war took precedence.

'I'll tell you what!' called out Bolland. 'For us this goddamn war will soon be over. The Ruskiies will be here and then we'll all go home via Moscow.'

'Bullshit!' interrupted Mackie, the Australian pilot who had topped scored in the recent test match. 'Listen mate, who the bloody hell wants to go home via Moscow? There'd be nowhere to go. It would be a dead end and they might keep us there for years.'

'We could no home via India or the Black Sea or some other route', explained Bolland tamely, who had been temporarily set back on his heels by the Aussie's assertive statement. However, he gathered momentum for he was never nonplussed for long. 'Moscow will do me! Think of all those Russian women just waiting to meet a Canadian fighter pilot. I'll be an instant success. Who the hell gives a shit where we go, as long as we get out of this bloody place?'

'I'm with you there, Canada.' replied Mackie. 'When you talk of 'sheilas', you're talking my kind of language. We'll go well together, the perfect and irresistible combination. Me with my sun kissed body and you with your good looks. God! What a time we'll have!'

'What a lot of crap you bastards shovel around!' chipped in an interested listener. 'Mackie, when you get to Moscow you'll be buggered. The lager diet makes you sterile and there won't be any women interested in you.'

'Like bloody hell!' retorted the valiant Mackie. 'There's bugger all wrong with me. I'm as good a man as ever I was. Who topped scored in the recent test? The old Bondi hero.' There were roars of laughter at this self-recommendation.

'Atta boy, Mackie! You give 'em heaps,' encouraged Bolland. 'We Aussies and Canucks must stick together.'

Then the argument about possible evacuation continued far into the night, and the kriegies saw everything through rose-coloured spectacles for hope sprang eternal in the prisoner's breast and the 'home by Christmas' mentality was very much to the fore.

The warmth and sunshine continued from day to day and the belief that for the prisoners the war was nearly over gained a stronger and stronger hold. It was inevitable that the Russians' westward drive would reach East Prussia in a matter of weeks, and so the intervening period was a time to be enjoyed and to prepare for freedom. However, fate can be unkind and it has a habit of jolting one's apathy and feelings of euphoria.

One night the kriegies were awakened by rifle shots, followed by a lot of commotion. The Russians had arrived at last, but then things went quiet and returned to normal. It was discovered the next day that an American from C Lager had tried to escape by scaling the barbed wire entanglements and had been killed. The camp was saddened, for they felt that had he waited a little longer then rescue was inevitable. However, the shock brought to the fore the realisation that the war was not yet over and the casualties and deaths would continue to mount.