

CHAPTER IX

Although it was fine, it was a cool rather bleak day for the 'Kriegie Lager Fair'. The show had been advertised for a number of weeks, but the roll up was rather poor. In the thoroughfare between B and C Blocks, a number of stalls had been set up by enterprising entrepreneurs who not only wanted to entertain and provide recreation for their fellow prisoners, but had an eye on enlarging their cigarette fortunes. Some stalls concerned themselves with the throwing of darts - five cigarettes a go, score 75 or over to win, odds of 10 to 1. Kicking a football through a hoop at 15 yards' distance was another game of skill or chance, while if you threw three balls out of three into a bucket from about ten yards, 'the world was yours' according to the barker. The variety offered was excellent, and Dave enjoyed himself stooging from stall to stall as one could forget the menial round for an hour or so. He had received four cigarette parcels since being shot down so he wasn't too badly off, but still had to observe restraint or his small nest egg would disappear. He paid ten cigarettes in order to try kicking the football through the hoop. He placed the ball on the spot, kept his eye on the ball and head steady, then carefully kicked and followed through. The ball slewed off his right foot a thousand miles from the target.

'Shit! What the hell went wrong?' he queried angrily.

'Bad luck, sir!' commiserated the obliging barker. 'Have another.

'Bullshit!' retorted Dave. 'You can't kick a football with two left feet.' He walked away realising that as the weather was chilly he'd worn his flying boots to the lager fair. He had received from the Red Cross a pair of RAF lace-up leather boots and a pair of trousers, but still wore the warm, fleecy-lined flying boots when it was cold. It was time he decided to return to the hut and change boots and then he'd give the barker, 'Bad luck, sir.' Dave had played a lot of soccer and felt that he could augment the Griffin fortune, but it was impossible with two left feet.

He was busily changing shoes, when the cry, 'News up! Watch the windows and doors for goons!'

'Christ! The news is early.' Dave reflected. 'The newsreader generally does his stuff in the afternoon about 4.30 p.m.'

'Today, at dawn, the Allied Forces under the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, began their invasion of Europe. Beachheads have been established and our troops are moving inland. 6th June, 1944, will live in history as Deliverance Day,' concluded the excited newsreader.

There was a groundswell of excitement in B3, but it didn't erupt into cheers as the kriegies had to maintain restraint. They weren't supposed to know anything about the outside world and would have to wait until the Germans released news of the invasion. The hut was agog with excitement and bonhomie. Everyone agreed that the war would soon be over, six to twelve weeks would see the end. They'd all be home by September at the latest, so there'd be no more cold, bloody winters to contend with. Life was going to be sweet from now on, so the summer months would be enjoyed for at the end it would be back to Blighty.

Dave thought he'd celebrate. He had his shooting boots on and so took out of his store five packets of twenty. A hundred cigarettes would give ten tries at kicking a ball through a hoop and, besides, you didn't have an Allied invasion of Europe every day. However, it wasn't his day, and within ten minutes he was back in the hut, minus the cigarettes.

To round up the fair, there was an inter-lager soccer match between A and B. The Germans were allowing the A Lager team, plus one hundred supporters, to visit K Lager and it was going to be a big match. The bookmakers, in an attempt to induce bets on K, were offering odds of 4 to 1 and there were plenty of takers. Dave felt that his team had sufficient talent to win and, after much soul-searching and trepidation, plonked down one hundred cigarettes on the underdogs. If K could win then he'd finish the day well in front, but if they came unstuck then he'd have squandered away a small fortune.

The game was fast and furious and the spectators were in fine fettle for they knew more than their captors - the invasion of Europe had begun, but not a word was disclosed. A Lager won 3 to 1, and as Dave returned to B3, he felt like an eighteenth century rake who had just diced away the family fortune. He admitted he had been profligate, but what the hell, the war was as good as over.

He had only been in the hut a few minutes when there was a mail delivery. There were three letters from Joan and two from his mother, all written about a month previously. He retired to his bunk and read and re-read the mail. Joan was well and expressed the hope that the war would soon finish and they would be together again for always. She was lonely and missed Dave, and longed for his return. His mother's letters were brave and encouraging, but reading between the lines he realised that she was anxious, worried and concerned about her son's health and welfare. 'What a wonderful day it's been!' thought Dave. 'I've had five letters from the two people that really count, and the Allies have invaded Europe. To hell with the cigarettes, I can afford it.'

The weather grew warmer and the two left flying-boots became unbearably hot to wear. They were decidedly unseasonable in the July sunshine and had out-served their usefulness and should be got rid of. This line of thought was reinforced by the D Day invasions. Admittedly, the Allied armies weren't making the rapid progress that was expected of them, being bogged down in the Caen area, but the prisoners were convinced that they'd be home well before the winter commenced. Consequently, he wouldn't need his flying boots again, so what was the use of keeping them? The plan was to raffle, despite the fact that they'd give the lucky winner two left feet. He sought out Don Slater of 'missed the Saturday dance' fame and did a deal. Slater was to be an equal partner in the project and would display one of the boots in each of the B huts and ask for ten cigarettes a ticket in the lottery. Dave meanwhile would parade the other boot in the C huts. Everything in the lager was raffled and very little salesmanship or peddling was required.

Dave took a cardboard box, some paper, a pencil, and one of the flying boots with him and started off in C1. It was dead easy, he displayed the boot, eulogised about its qualities and then mentioned the ten cigarettes necessary to be in it. A member of a combine would just throw a packet of twenty into the box and request two tickets. This went on in every hut, but the problem was when you were paid ten loose cigarettes and they were just dropped in the box. They would get crumpled, tattered, and a little worse for wear, but they were still legal lager currency.

After a hectic, morning's business, Dave had his box full and so did Slater. They counted the cigs. like misers and then split down the middle with just over two and a half thousand each. Then they put the names in the box, drew the lucky winner, who hailed from C5, and Dave delivered the 'golden' boots.

On Dave's return, Slater enquired anxiously, 'Jesus! What did he say when you presented him with the two left-ones?'

'Bugger all,' replied Dave cockily. 'He didn't blink an eyelid and just thanked me. He did mention though that he'd raffle them, as two left boots would keep someone warm.'

'I'll have a few tickets in that raffle, Dave,' commented Slater, 'and if I win, then we'll raffle them again.'

That afternoon Dave accompanied Bolland, the ex-Typhoon pilot, to the communal kitchen to see Jack McDonald. Jack had his bunk in B3, but spent all his waking time in the kitchen, ensuring that the coffee jugs were full for the first and last meals of the day and the spuds were cooked for the evening meal. Sometimes the potatoes and corned beef were mashed together into a hash and this added a little variety to the bill of fare. Jack enjoyed cooking and claimed that he would open a restaurant when he got back to Canada and to hell with flying and prisoner of war camps. Jack had adapted well to prison life, for working full time in the cookhouse had ensured that his boundless energy was channelled into a positive direction. Bolland would never change. He was still irrepressible and ebullient, and his repartee was always sharp and affective. His wit was much appreciated in B3 and would produce roars of laughter with his comments, once the lights had been doused, about the 'bin'.

'You'll be home before long, Dave,' stated Jack. 'They'll get that Welsh dragon out to greet you.'

'I bloody hope so,' replied Dave, 'but the progress the Allies are making is so bloody slow that we'll be here for bloody Christmas if they don't speed it up.'

'Like hell you'll be here,' interposed Bolland. 'The way the Ruskiies are advancing you'll either be in Moscow dining on caviar or the Germans will ship you west and you'll be deep in the heart of Germany.'

They were joined by burly cookhouse boss Bill McGuinness and an almost Dickensian looking character attired in a black top hat and a morning suit. This latter character was the local chimney sweep and one would think that he was going to a wedding rather than a big soot clean-up. McGuinness spoke a few words to the three of them and then he and the sweep disappeared into the cookhouse.

'A tremendous guy that McGuinness,' commented McDonald with undisguised admiration. 'I'd like to have him on my side if the chips were down.'

Bolland and Dave said nothing, both knowing that McGuinness had performed a superhuman feat about two years previously and had been 'gonged'. He and his crew had crashed into the sea, and McGuinness had swum three miles with his navigator, who couldn't swim, on his back. There were brave men in the lager, but McGuinness ranked with the best of them.

The doors of B3 were unbolted and the 'ausrichtens' were a lot sharper and more imperious than usual. There was no doubt that the guards weren't putting up with any backchat or tardiness, for it seemed that they were on edge and this wasn't an opportune time for fooling around. The kriegies dressed quickly and moved outside into the warming sunshine and lined up outside the huts to be counted.

Then it was the camp commandant's turn. He was annoyed, and the kriegies, having learnt a smattering of German, knew the drift of his anger even before the speech was interpreted into English. Apparently, during the night, part of the ceiling of the ablution block had collapsed under the weight of the stored sand from the tunnel and he, the colonel, would seek out the culprits and it would go hard with them. The prisoners were obviously tunnelling their way out, but the escape route would be found that day and it would be bulldozed out of existence. There was no escape from this stalag-luft as it was escape proof. He, the officers and the guards would see to that. The prisoners must be very naive if they thought they could outwit the German authorities. The prisoners were stupid, ungrateful and if they left the security of the camp could expect no mercy. The kriegies listened in silence for their commandant was a real soldier and a man of authority, having fought in France and on the Russian front. However, on dismissal, they laughed and joked about the happening in the ablution block.

They knew the tunnel would be discovered, but it mattered not, as soon the war would be over, once Monty and Ike (Montgomery and Eisenhower) got their act together.