

## CHAPTER XI

For two days a carnival atmosphere had pervaded the camp and an air of abandon possessed the prisoners. The evacuation had been announced by the commandant at afternoon roll call, and the next day, C Lager had been cleared and the Americans dispatched to some unpronounceable place, deep in the heart of Germany. Within twenty-four hours, A Lager had moved out to an unknown destination, and these two large compounds were now empty, silent and ghostlike. Tomorrow was K's turn. The remaining prisoners were to be evacuated in two groups and sent their various ways. So now it was time for rejoicing, for it was the last day of incarceration and freedom beckoned in the guise that the war was as good as over. Admittedly, the kriegies' initial reaction to evacuation had been annoyance and frustration for hopes of deliverance had been pinned on the Ruskies and there had been visions of Moscow and a good time. Later, however, they had reasoned that the Germans must be on their last legs and had no hope of stemming the Russian advance westward, and further the overall position of an early release had been enhanced by the British and American successes in France.

Dave had been going over his few precious belongings and packing in readiness for the exodus. Travelling space would be very limited and everything taken had to be carried, so one had to be selective. The two blankets were a must, and so was the Red Cross food parcel which had been issued one to each person for the journey. Dave knew all about cattle trucks and the time taken to get from A to K. However, there would be a thousand prisoners involved this trip, and it could be a long time before the destination was reached and another issue of food given. The Germans wouldn't be catering on this trip - it was the food parcel and nothing else. Then there was the cigarette problem - how many to take? Dave had about 1200 in packets of 20, so he wouldn't leave any behind. He'd take those for they represented currency, but 60 packets of 20 made a bulky parcel. The knife, fork and spoon, plus the drinking mug and dish were vital, but when all were put together the luggage would be heavy, cumbersome and unwieldy. He possessed one pair of socks, a vest and pants as a change from what he was wearing, so they had to be taken too. The big question was, what to do with the RAF greatcoat, a Red Cross donation? At night it was his third blanket, but in the hot July of 1944 it looked strangely out of place and superfluous. If he took it, he would be weighted down like a packhorse and would sweat streams walking from the camp to the railway siding, their departure point. Then, again, he reasoned that the war was as good as over and there would be no second winter to endure. He rolled it into a ball, kept in place with string, and then loaded himself. The blankets and greatcoat went on his back, rucksack style, and the rest was carried by hand. He felt hot, bugged, and loaded to the gunwales. It would be hard work carrying his belongings in the heat of the sun, for it was bad enough just standing in the cool of B3. He debated with himself the necessity for the greatcoat's retention and decided to hang on to everything. If the worse came to the worse, he could throw the coat away.

Everything being ready for the morrow, he left the hut to join in the festivities. The whole world seemed topsy-turvy. The Red Cross store had issued its whole stock of toilet paper rolls, as it couldn't be transported to the new camp, and so there was an abundance - about four rolls a person. The electricity and telephone wires were festooned with bunting as the rolls were thrown upwards draping everything and making a ticker-tape departure. Some of the bunting had even been thrown at the high-stilted sentry boxes and now adorned these forbidding sentinels. Perhaps the drapery was symbolic of the contempt the prisoners had for Hitler's Germany and all it represented.

There were gramophone records or discs flying everywhere. Over the years the Red Cross had been generous in this direction in an endeavour to cater for the musical needs of the deprived. In addition, many music lovers had preferred record parcels to cigarettes and so had accumulated vast stocks. It was impossible to transport these to the next camp, and so were being thrown in all directions, whizzing through the air like boomerangs. They were dangerous, too, so you had to tread warily or the head would go a-rolling. On the recreation ground one enterprising entrepreneur had set up a game of chance by sticking a piece of wood in the ground, draping it with a coat, and charging 20 cigarettes a go at trying to hit it at 30 yards' distance with a record. The prize being 50 cigarettes. No one knew what he would do with the profits, for he certainly wouldn't be able to take them with him.

The toilets seemed to have a very special attraction for the kriegies for, antlike and loaded with cardboard boxes of cigarettes, they made pilgrimages to the 'bogs'. Here they would tip the 'currency' down into the shitty depths. They were throwing away fortunes which had, in some cases taken almost five years to amass, for it was no good to them now. They couldn't carry their loot with them and the alternative was to leave it for the enemy.

'Not bloody likely!' was the consensus of opinion. 'They'll get bugger all from me. If they want a smoke, then they can have shit on it as well as arsehole aroma.'

The cigarettes were poured into this depository and the lager's wealth gradually disappeared. This dissipation was a great economic leveller. The kriegies, who possessed fortunes, were now reduced to a common denominator, for wealth depended on the number of cigarettes you could transport, and after the essentials such as blankets, greatcoat et cetera, were taken into consideration, the amount of room for 'smokes' was roughly the same as everyone else's. Those who lacked lager 'gold' were now able to stock up from those divesting their fortunes in the morass and quagmire of the lager's 'rialto'.

Despite all the unusual things going on, tradition was hard to break and many prisoners were still 'bashing the circuit'. It seemed that years of habit couldn't be discarded overnight just because an exodus was in the offing. Dull routine was an essential ingredient of lager life, and the swirling and twisting records, plus reams of toilet paper strewn all over the place, couldn't deter the regimented. However, the postern or sentry boxes weren't manned, and it was the first time that this state of affairs had existed so there was no-one to take a pot-shot at anyone infringing regulations, such as touching the warning wire et cetera. Indeed, down at the ablution block, scores of prisoners were doing their dhobi in preparation for the move and had cheekily hung the washing on the warning wire to dry, for there would be no retaliation.

The last night in B3 was full of speculation about the future. What would the morrow bring, and where were they going? Most agreed that it would be deep in the heart of Germany where they would come to rest and there would be no chance of escape. However, Mackie started an argument about repatriation. He tried to convince the inmates that the Germans no longer had the food to feed the prisoners in K Lager, and they would all be sent to Sweden, where they would remain until the end of the war. This line of argument was easy to swallow for everyone wanted it to happen, and so the more gullible gave Mackie their support. However, Bolland told Mackie that he was pissing down his leg and was being bloody stupid.

'Sweden! Mackie you must be joking.' No-one knew whether Mackie was really in earnest, for he often said things just to get a reaction and an argument going.

There was a lull for a few minutes as if everyone was contemplating the future. Sweden was just a pipe dream, so the alternative was 'deep in the heart of Germany'.

'I'll tell you what, Mackie!' blurted Bolland. 'I know you give me the shits and the piles, but you're not a bad sort of bloke deep down. In fact, you'll do me, how about you and me staying behind tomorrow? Everyone pisses off, and we'll have the camp to ourselves, we could hide in the roof of the ablution block and wait for the Ruskiies to come.'

'She'll be right, mate', came the Aussie's reply, 'but I wouldn't like to be stuck in the roof for a few weeks. It would be too bloody hot. Besides your feet stink and I couldn't stand it and I'd give myself up to the Germans.'

'We'll be in the ablution block, won't we?' demanded Bolland.

'So I'll be able to slip down through the trap door and have a shower three times a day. Besides, it wouldn't be a bad idea if you had a shower occasionally and then you could wash the piles out of your arse. They must give you hell. No wonder you're always scratching it.'

At this there were roars of laughter.

'How about me joining you?' someone asked, good humouredly. 'What with the piles and the stinking feet, I feel you need a third person to keep up the morale.'

'Piss-off!' retorted Mackie. 'Me and Bolland want to be alone. Don't we? Haven't you heard we've got a thing going between us, and a third party would bugger things up?'

'For once I agree with you, Mackie,' was Bolland's laughing reply.

'We don't want anyone else. Two in the roof will be plenty.'

'By the way, Bolland, I see you've lost your mate, McDonald,' stated Mackie. 'Why the hell did he ship out with A Lager? Didn't he like you or something?'

'The cookhouse mob was moved out together with the A Lager bods, so McDonald went with them,' was Bolland's reply. 'I told him I'd see him when we got back to Canada, and the way the war's going, it won't be long.'

So the banter went on until the early hours of the morning.

The next morning the men of C Block were counted, checked, rechecked, and then marched out of the camp - destination unknown. B Block received the same treatment about two hours later, and by noon were on their way to the railway siding about four kilometres distant. The day was hot and the August sun made Dave feel like a trussed rooster, especially with the blankets and greatcoat on his back and the Red Cross food parcel and other luggage to hand. It was hard work just putting one foot after the other and there were frequent stops for rests and the readjustment of luggage.

At the siding the cattle trucks were drawn up ready to receive the passengers, and on the platform were innumerable buckets of drinking water. Then the prisoners were herded into the trucks, the sliding doors closed, and they were sealed, signed, and ready to be transported. The instruction '8 Horses or 48 Men' seemed to have been stretched a little for there was precious little room for each person, without the accompanying luggage. Everyone was standing as if expecting the door to slide open, and the guard would yell, 'All change! All change!' However, there was no such call, and the train remained stationary at the siding, and the temperature within the trucks seemed to rise appreciably and the perspiration simply poured from everyone. It was sit down or fall down, and gradually everyone sat. The lucky ones had their backs supported by the sides of the truck, but those in the middle were less fortunate. The leg room was sufficient if drawn up, but once outstretched they brushed someone else or rested on top of another pair of legs, accompanied by: 'keep your bloody feet to yourself.'

Then the train started to move, and Dave heard Bolland say, 'Christ! This is where I came in. I've done it all before.'

'Me too, mate!' chorused Mackie.