

## CHAPTER XII

The hot sun burned down on the weary, disconsolate marchers as they covered the distance from the railway station to the new camp. Although it was only four kilometres, the journey seemed endless, each plodding step requiring so much effort. The impedimenta; the blankets, the Red Cross parcel et cetera with which each person was burdened, seemed to weigh tons and became heavier with every movement, while the rays of the sun seemed to percolate to the very marrow to ooze perspiration all over. The long, bedraggled column limped its way along, watched only by a few disinterested pedestrians.

'So this is Poland!' mused Dave. 'The Germans can stuff it as far as I'm concerned.'

He felt exhausted and dispirited, despite the warmth of the day, for the journey had been a real bastard. Four days they had been cooped up in the cattle truck, only to be let out morning and evening to relieve themselves on the side of the railway tracks. The journey had been punctuated by stops and starts, and the stops had been often and lengthy. Once the sun had started to rise the temperature within the cattle truck rose appreciably until it became suffocating, especially if the train was at a standstill. The shortage of leg-room was acute for if you stretched out someone would place his legs on top of yours and so on, until yours were at the bottom of the pile and pins and needles occurred through lack of movement. Then they were extricated with difficulty and plonked on the top. This continuous game of musical chairs reminded Dave of a game he played as a child, when hands were placed on top of each other and the bottom hand was moved to the top in rotation.

In the end one would tire of the continual movement and withdraw from the contest by pulling the knees into the stomach. However, when the knees and legs grew aching and tired in this position, the solution was either to stretch out again and become involved or stand up.

The water situation had also been a problem. Buckets of drinking water had been placed inside the truck, but the movements of the train, especially the stoppings and starts had caused a certain amount of sloping and wastage. However, the urinal, the narrow gap caused by the partly open sliding door, was not in great demand for the perspiration was great and the warm weather placed no undue emphasis on the bladder.

The trek continued and Dave felt like discarding his greatcoat. Many of the prisoners had left theirs behind in the lager or had dumped them somewhere along the route, feeling that they had outlived their usefulness. The high temperature reinforced this feeling and Dave favoured the idea of following suit as it would make his load a lot lighter. He felt as if he were part of a mule train in a cowboy movie moving ponderously and laboriously towards the horizon. Still he had brought the coat this far, so he reasoned he'd hang on to it for another few kilometres.

Before entering their new abode, the prisoners were made to strip, their clothes searched, identity checked by means of 'dog-tags' and then the gates opened and they were allowed to proceed. From previous experience, the entry of new arrivals was always greeted by a large crowd who were impatient to learn, at first hand, the latest news from home or, perhaps, were hoping to meet someone whom they had known, previously on the squadron or from their home town. Thus the intermingling of the old and the new was generally a slap-backing occasion with animated discussions. However, there was no welcoming party here, and there prevailed a complete indifference to the new arrivals. The prisoners were led along a sandy track and on each side, dotted here and there, were detached huts - a far cry from the terraced type of the previous camp. The compound was huge and seemed to sprawl endlessly, lacking cohesion and togetherness. This could be attributed to the lack of barbed wire. At the previous camp there had been lagers all separated from each other, thus giving rise to closely knit communities, but here there was no separation and one could wander at will.

Dave enjoyed his new home for the weather was hot and there was freedom of movement. The camp was for soldiers, but this ruling had been waived to accommodate the newcomers. Thus, in his wanderings, Dave met men who had been far removed from his path in life. There were Dunkirk

heroes, the forgotten men of yesterday, who had fought on the beaches seemingly years ago and had spent the intervening years in different parts of the Greater German Reich. There was McLeod, a grizzled, old army veteran, who had served in India, frequented the brothels of Hong Kong, caught gonorrhoea in Singapore and been baked to a cinder in Aden. Shipped home in time for the commencement of World War II, his military career had come to an abrupt halt when captured in France in 1940.

A very relaxed atmosphere pervaded the whole compound and here things differed considerably. It seemed that one was allowed to trade with the Germans for there were numerous stalls about the place where one could purchase - providing you had the cigarettes - eggs, bread, margarine, vegetables and some fruit. However, the airmen's currency had dwindled and there were few buyers amongst the flyers. The biggest entrepreneurs were a combination called 'Burly and Bill', who owned a fairly large premise and seemed to have a monopoly on the more desired foodstuffs. Where they obtained it no-one seemed to know, but at times they had small fish for sale and even one or two chickens. All the other traders seemed poor relations in comparison and didn't possess the contacts that the partnership had. Still, it seemed that racketeers existed everywhere, even in a German POW camp.

Most of the army prisoners were employed during the day on neighbouring farms or in local factories and this contact with the outside world helped to facilitate trade. Further, it was the essential ingredient that destroyed the rule of 'no trading with the enemy', which had prevailed and been strictly adhered to by the airmen when in East Prussia. The *laissez-faire* attitude which permeated the camp after the strict regimen of East Prussia was, at first, difficult to get used to, but, nevertheless, it was something new and tended to break the monotony of confinement.

The weather continued hot and dry, and so the hunger pangs assailing the stomach were appeased to a certain extent and Dave was free to wander over the sand wastes comprising the camp. The terrain reminded him of the dunes of the Porthcawl area back in his native Wales, where he had always spent his annual holiday as a boy. However, here there was no sea to bathe in.

The hut housing Dave was parked on its own and contained twenty-four two tiered bunks and the new-found freedom existed even here. There was no six o'clock curfew when the doors were locked and no piss-bin to generate controversy. One could sleep in the sand if desired and also use it as a urinal at night.

Most of the old B3 crew were still together in the hut. At night there were no longer a gramophone and records to entertain, so it was chit-chat about the new acquaintances and experiences.

'Jesus, I'd hate to be one of those Dunkirk wallahs. Fancy being in the cage nearly five years, it would drive you mad. You wouldn't know what your cock was for after all that time. Their kids will be grown up and married by the time they get back to Blighty, and God knows what their wives have been doing,' stated Bolland in his nightly *communiqué* on the state of the camp.

'Bullshit, mate!' retorted Mackie. 'Most of the poor buggers are wire happy. When you've been behind barbed wire as long as they have you don't want to get out. This place represents security and when you grow old you don't look for challenges.'

'What a lot of crap you blokes spray about. If I were in this bloody country a hundred years, I'd still want to get back to good old Manchester and the girlfriend,' interposed Slater.

'If you were here for a hundred years, it wouldn't be worth going back,' chuckled Blackston. 'You're a cockless old wreck now without waiting all that time.'

'Talking about calling the kettle black!' retorted Slater. 'Yours almost disappeared under the 'waterfall' the other day.'

'Shit! That bloody waterfall would freeze King Kong's waterspout to the size of a peanut and make him forget sex for six months. It's the coldest, bloody thing I've ever known. Jesus, you need to be mad

to go under that,' joined in Bill Wellings, a native of Liverpool, who had been a prisoner almost two years.

Wellings was a man of few words, but he managed to extract a laugh when he made a pronouncement.

The 'waterfall' consisted of a huge, iron, corrugated tank placed on a wooden platform about twenty-feet off the ground and supported by four large poles. In the base of the tank was a spring trap door from which dangled a piece of wire. The kriegies would shower by standing under the tank, hold their breath, and then jerk the wire. The icy water would cascade down, drowning the bather, who would be forced to release the wire, thus closing the trap. The water must have been pumped from the bowels of the earth for it was freezing and you needed an hour to regain breath and composure.

The lull in conversation was broken by Danzey's voice. 'Talk about waterspouts and sex, that bloody McLeod has done everything and everybody and has caught a few surprise packets along the way. He was telling us about when he was stationed in India. The white women were all hoity-toity being officers' wives et cetera and the men of other ranks were left out in the cold. So he had to resort to the brothels, and, boy, were his descriptions vivid and colourful.'

'Did he tell you how he caught gonorrhoea in Singapore and the antics he had to go through to make himself clean again? He must have felt like a bloody pincushion by the time the treatment was over,' added Bolland. 'Christ! The poor old bugger must be sixty, and after nearly forty years of soldiering he's still only a corporal.'

'What do you expect?' demanded Wellings. 'He wasn't interested in promotion. His priorities were sex, brothels and clap, and now he's only got his memories. Poor bastard!'

'I knew a bloke like that back in Sydney,' reminisced Mackie. 'He'd strut about Bondi Beach in his swimmers and all the sheilas would be crazy about him. He had sex for breakfast, lunch and dinner and then he'd have it for afters as well if it were around. Jesus, he thought a lot of himself! Always combing his bloody hair. He'd leave McLeod for dead.'

'What happened to him?' asked Danzey innocently.

'Poor bastard caught nearly everything going,' replied Mackie, 'and passed on most of it. He died early. Just couldn't stand the pace.'

'You talk a lot of horseshit, Mackie,' stated Bolland bluntly. 'This Bondi Romeo of yours just wasn't good enough. He's dead, but McLeod's alive. So who's the better man for Christ sake?'

'You blokes are sex crazy,' interrupted Blackston, 'Let's talk about something interesting, like the war and when we'll get out of here.'

'Hell! You're a bloody comic, Blackston,' laughed Danzey. 'Here we've been having a bloody interesting conversation and you have to get back to reality and ordinary things. You give my piles a twist, and believe me they're sore enough as it is.'

'Talking about piles,' joined in Slater, 'my arsehole has been giving me hell lately. It's this bloody diet. You get nothing to open up the old bowels. When I have a shit it's like trying to pass red hot daggers through the eye of a needle.'

'You poor bastard!' sympathised Wellings. 'I have the same problem so I know what it's like. If you could get some ruddy ointment it would be a help.'

'Why don't you go and see old McLeod?' asked Bolland laughingly. 'He's got a cure for everything, and they tell me he's a bit of a surgeon as well. He might be able to operate on you both in between telling his life's history and his brothel adventures. It would add to his status if he could put up a sign stating that he was a haemorrhoid specialist as well as a pox doctor's clerk.'

'You're a real bastard, Bolland. You've no sympathy for anyone', said Mackie, entering into the fray. 'You can thank your lucky stars that you're tucked away in a POW camp or you'd be poked up to the eyebrows by now. The war's saved you, Bolland.'

'I don't know about the pox,' returned Bolland gallantly, 'but hells, bloody bells I want a piss. I'll have to go outside and study the stars for a few minutes. Don't hold your breath while I'm away, and for Christ sake give old McLeod a rest.'

Bolland exited to roars of laughter, and then a silence fell on the hut as each person took refuge in his private thoughts and world.