

CHAPTER XIV

It was early October and the kriegies had been in their new camp almost three weeks. The advancing Russians had finally ensured the evacuation of the Polish setup, and the procedure repeated: the walk to the railway siding; the incarceration in the cattle trucks; the seemingly endless journey of four days; the confined and cramped conditions; the disembarking and walk to the new camp; and, finally, the checking of identity and search et cetera before admittance. It was like seeing the screening of a movie for the umpteenth time.

The new 'home' was situated in the middle of the North German Plain and so, according to the German guards, was safe from the Russians and equally safe from the Allies. The guards were adamant that here the prisoners would remain until the Germans were victorious. No more moves, no more cattle trucks et cetera, as the Fuhrer wouldn't allow any enemy of the Third Reich to tread on German soil.

The camp was bleak and miserable in outlook, being divided into several lagers. However, there was no restriction of entry. The huts were terraced-typed, similar to those in East Prussia and each contained 36 two tiered bunks. Perhaps the biggest difference was the soil, which was a dark loam and contrasted sharply with the sand of the previous camps. It only needed a little rain and the tracks became boggy and the boots muddied with damp, clinging mud. However, it was still autumn and the winter and its damp seemed a long way off.

The terraced huts faced each other in long rows and at the farther end of the so-made thoroughfares was a detached ablution block with no shower facilities. Then another 30 yards on, away from everything, was the communal deep-pit, which served not only as a toilet but as the hub of misinformation and rumour. At the other extremity, placed in the middle of each 'street', was a small wooden shed containing a water tap which was attached to a pipe rising about three feet from the ground. This was used for filling buckets so that clothes et cetera could be washed, and also for showering by sitting or kneeling under the tap and soaping oneself at the same time.

The camp, to the discerning, spelt future despair, hardship and privation, but that didn't worry the prisoner for he dealt with one day at a time, and, anyway, he'd be home tomorrow. The store of Red Cross parcels had been brought with them from Poland, but it was already rumoured that there was only enough for an issue of one per person for so many weeks. After that a parcel would have to be shared by two, three, four or more. Still, no-one wanted to believe it, so it was put down as a rumour emanating from the shithouse and so had no credibility. The kriegies' mentality was similar to that of an ostrich. When something was unpalatable then one chose to ignore it and stick one's head in the sand. At the previous camps, coal in the form of briquettes had been supplied for warmth in the hut and cooking in the communal kitchen. Here, however, there was no supply and no cookhouse, and fuel for heating and cooking was dependent on two persons from each hut being allowed out daily under a guard to forage for wood in the forests. Consequently, the fire in the big stove was not lit until evening when it became colder and it was time for the evening meal. In the relative warmth of early October this didn't matter so much, but in bitterly cold December, January and February it would be a different tale.

No-one was allowed out to work on neighbouring farms et cetera and so there was a dearth of extras in the shape of additional food, forcing the entrepreneurs of the former camp to close shop. There was nothing to trade and this was accentuated by the lack of kriegie currency, the cigarette, which had dwindled alarmingly in recent weeks. Further, the camp possessed no theatre where bands could perform or a production could be enacted, so there was no relief from the boredom and monotony of the daily round. When in East Prussia hot showers had been permitted once a week, while in Poland the only shower facilities had been those of the 'waterfall'. Still the icy, cold water was of little consequence in the hot weather and it mattered little. However, the showers here were situated in the outer lager and a visit was permitted once every three weeks. In between times, one was expected to sluice under the cold water tap in the little hut. The lack of a communal kitchen added to the difficulties of everyday living. Previously the tins of meat from each Red Cross parcel had been extracted, given to the cooks who had prepared the evening meal by either mixing the meat with

potatoes to form a hash or issuing a quarter of a tin of meat per man. Now the complete parcel was given, plus a daily issue of two potatoes, and the recipient left to his own devices. So combines or

groups of two, three or four were formed to overcome cooking problems. The individual kept such edibles as chocolate, biscuits, sugar, tinned milk et cetera, but pooled the tinned stuff.

Despite the difficulties and the approach of the late autumn, the inmates were reasonably happy. They were convinced that they would be home for the festive season so a few temporary hardships were a bagatelle. The optimism that prevailed was high and little could dampen the outlook of the airmen. Admittedly, there had been, in lager parlance, a minor temporary setback, but it was nothing. The Allied forces in the West had made spectacular advances in July, August and September, forcing the Germans to withdraw to the defences of the Siegfried line. Something daring had to be done to hasten the end of the war and prevent a stalemate, so Operation Market Garden was carried out. Airborne British, Polish and American troops were dropped to secure bridges over the Rhine at Nijmegen, Eindhoven and Arnhem to find a route into the heart of Germany. However, success evaded the paratroopers, the British First Airborne Division being badly mauled at Arnhem and forced to withdraw on the 25th September and the mission aborted. The kriegies still received the BBC news, having brought the radio receiver from East Prussia via Poland, and were elated with the early successes of Market Garden. Then when the setbacks occurred there was a general souring and remarks like: 'Pull your bloody finger out for Christ sake!' 'What the bloody hell are you doing?' et cetera. No-one, however, interpreted the writing on the wall as another winter to be endured in captivity. That was too brutal a conclusion, despite the evidence of the approaching winter which, would curtail tank warfare, aerial support for ground forces, and bring about a general lull on the Western front. Christmas at home was the eternal attraction and, besides, the Ruskies revelled in the snow and if the British and Yanks were not good enough, then Joe Stalin's boys would be in and through Germany like a dose of salts.

Now a six o'clock curfew applied and the doors of the huts were locked and no-one was allowed out, so there was always a crowd around the big fuel stove in the centre of the room.

'Shit this place is getting bloody colder and colder,' stated Mackie.! I wish I were back on good old Bondi basking in the sun and casting my eye over the sheilas. '

'You talk a lot of crap, Mackie!' retorted Danzey. 'You're always on about Bondi. I'd take Blackpool anytime. The girls there are really something.'

'Blackpool, for Christ sake!' interjected Bolland. 'It nearly killed me. I was there for four weeks and that's all I did was square-bash: 'Right turn! Left turn! Squad!' et cetera, and the wind never stopped blowing. I thought my face was a piece of eroded rock by the time I was ready to leave.'

'Eroded cock, you meant' exclaimed Slater laughingly. 'I've often wondered why you look so queer, and now I know. You're the same at both ends. Very good looking.'

At this there were roars of laughter, followed by a hush as the bystanders attended to the cooking pots. There was a variety of edibles all in different stages of readiness. Those near the actual fire were boiling merrily, while others, on the periphery of the stove, were stagnating and no movement was visible amongst the contents.

'This bloody wood is no good for cooking No body to it,' someone said. 'Anyway, there's never enough of it. Two blokes go out to collect in the forest and what they come back with is bugger all. Who were the bastards who went out today?'

'I'm one of the bastards,' a voice belligerently stated from one of the bunks. 'And what's it to you?'

'The next time,' came the answer, 'pull you finger out and bring something back worth burning. This bloody stuff is not worth a crumpet.'

'What do you expect? You're only allowed to pick up the dead stuff, and a man can only carry so much. Wait till it's your turn to have a go.'

Again there was a lull in the conversation and a general departure from the stove area, leaving the one or two who were left the opportunity of moving their pot to a more favourable position nearer the source of heat. This was done by substituting yours for one that was already boiling or squeezing it in somewhere by creating space. This would cause arguments, accompanied by much banter, when the wronged person discovered what had taken place.

'Eh, Slater! Have you got your bags packed?' shouted Wellings from his bunk. 'We'll be out of here before the end of the month.'

'Who says so? Not that fake Maxie Clarke again? No-one listens to him anymore. He's a false prophet and the biggest phoney in the camp.'

'No, not him. It's in Revelations'.

'Who's he, for Christ sake?' asked Slater. 'Some sort of Gestapo boss who beats shit out of you with a toothpick.'

'God, you're ignorant, Slater! How the hell did you ever become a member of aircrew? No, Revelations is the last book in the Bible and tells you what's happened and when this war's going to finish.'

'Where did you learn that crap?' queried Bolland.'

'Old Taylor in next door told me about it. He even read me the passages from the Bible, and his interpretation of the white leader coming from the East and vanquishing the black Satan. He's convinced the war will finish this month.'

'Old Taylor, be buggered. He's only 23 and already three parts around the bend. I don't know what's come over you blokes,' continued Bolland, 'you'll believe anything.'

'Me and Bolland are the only two in this hut that have our feet on the ground,' supported Mackie. 'We don't listen to shithouse rumours, do we, Bolland? 'We'll be here for Christmas now that we've received a walloping at Arnhem. Hell, we copped a hiding there! There'll be little military activity now that winter's nearly here.'

At this there were cries of protest from many parts of the hut, for this was realism and spelt out another Christmas in captivity. Something no-one wanted.

'It was the British First Airborne Division that was dropped at Arnhem, wasn't it?' demanded Blackston. 'I've got a brother-in-law, married to my sister, a paratrooper. I hope the hell he wasn't in that lot or my sister will go bonkers. She worries all the time.'

'That bloody Montgomery wants gelding!' exploded Danzey. 'In September they made him a field marshal and he's done bugger all since. I suppose he thought up the caper of capturing the bridges over the Rhine. I hope he's got another plan up his sleeve.'

'He's a brilliant bloody soldier,' added Wellings. 'He gave Rommel's balls a tingling in North Africa and wrapped up that theatre of war in a hurry.'

'I was in that campaign and did we give Rommel a hiding from the air,' volunteered Sandy Smith. 'The Afrika Corps didn't know whether they were coming or going by the time we'd finished with them. There was only one road across the desert and it was pie-easy to bomb and strafe the German trucks and supplies. There was wreckage everywhere.'

'If it was so easy, how come you finished up here?' demanded Slater. 'I suppose you were invited and too polite to knock back the invitation.'

'Something like that,' was Sandy's reply. 'We all get the chop sooner or later. Don't we, Slater?'

'Give me those Russian generals every time,' Bolland remarked. 'They know what they're about. Don't they, Mackie?'

'I'll take the Americans,' answered the Aussie just to be controversial. 'Eisenhower is Monty's boss, so it stands to reason he's better. And that Patton with his six-shooters -- now that's what I call flamboyant. Then there was MacArthur with that bloody hat of his. When he arrived in Aussie to save us all down-under, my Mum thought he was the handsomest thing in breeches, and he was about sixty then, for Christ sake. Shows you what flamboyancy can do for you.'

So the meal preparation went on, interspersed with pontifical statements and a lot of crap.