

Geoffrey Lawrence
Aug 16 1919 - May 11 1996

Black Watch
Private
Army No 2753697
Record Office 16
POW No 10481
Camp BAB21 (Bau und Arbeits Battalion 21)
(from British Army POW National Archives page 310)

captured May 21 1940 near Abbeville, France,
POW in BAB21, Blechhammer, Ober Silesia (now Blachownia, Poland)
escaped Dec 1944

MAY 11, 1940
The German Army have launched an attack of the Western Front.

We were told it was a probe by a division of the German Army and continued our training with wooden 2" mortars and blank ammunition hoping to pass our recruit training in a month or so.

Life was pleasant for a recruit in the Army. We slept in a barn but the weather was pleasant and it almost seemed like a Boy Scout outing. Our 2 bob a day could buy a little wine or beer and the 'eggs and chips' which seems to be the main requirement of the Tommy all over the world. I had in three weeks made considerable progress despite a language barrier with the daughter of a small pub and had been invited to their private quarters where an uncle had showed me the bayonet wound he had got in WW1.

But as dawn broke on May 11, I woke up with a scream in my ears. Dive bombers. The bomb used was peanuts compared to bombs used later in the war but the scream bombs scared you. They were bombing some light machine gun emplacements we had put in. No one got hurt but everyone was shaken.

MAY 21, 1940
We were all sitting down in a walled courtyard somewhere in France and a gloating German officer was playing "We Will Hang Out Our Washing On The Siegfried Line" to us on a gramophone. I remember hearing it but not really comprehending what it was all about. We were tired, dirty, hungry and scared and still trying to understand what had happened in the last few days.

I remember a few days back when I was sitting in a weapon pit with Humph and saw some tanks about 300 yards away. I remember seeing a gun flash and realizing they were Jerries. All hell seemed to break loose. I remembered Humph getting hit, my gas

cape getting stuck on a barbed wire fence, a piece of shrapnel in my leg, retreating, our platoon losing touch with the rest of the company, being pinned down in a ditch by machine gun fire, our corporal surrendering, Jerry ripping off my equipment, grouping us in a field with guards at each corner with Tommie guns and thinking "They're going to kill us."

Then with cries of "Raus, Raus" we are herded pout of the yard and begin what would be known as The March" by all the Dunkirk Kriegies. Gradually the columns got larger and larger as it was joined by other groups until it stretched out of sight. We stumbled along mile after mile praying that there would be food and water at the end of the day. Hunger is hard to take but thirst drives you mad.

It takes about 3 days to change a normal civilized being into an animal.

We passed a field of cabbage and one prisoner dashed out to get one. He was shot. We went though French hamlets and the women tried to give us water but Jerry kicked over the buckets. One girl holding out a handful of sugar nubs was knocked down in the rush.

At the end of the third day, we got to a field and were counted out in 5's. Each group was handed a mouldy loaf of black bread. A young Belgian got our loaf and quickly cut it into 5. He grabbed the biggest hunk and threw me the smallest and ran. I chased him jumping over the bodies of exhausted men with a small penknife in my hand. I finally gave up and went back to where our gang was and slowly ate the sour bread mould and all. A water cart appeared but Jerry had stripped me of my equipment including my canteen and I had to be satisfied with a half pint in a rusty tin can. This went down in a swig and I was still thirsty.

We slept with no blankets huddled together for warmth. It was late May but the nights were cold. After an hour or two, you woke up freezing and had to move around to get warm again. This way of life went on for eternity it seemed but thinking back it probably only lasted 14 days. There seemed to be no set route and I remember sign posts to Lille, Abbeville, Amiens, Amos, Arras appearing several times on crossroads. We could only think that we were being used as a cover from air attacks for the supply convoys.

Finally we arrived at Trier [Germany] where there must have been 25,000 POWs grouped. The day came when we were marched out of camp to the railway station and packed into box cars like sardines. We were each given a loaf of bread and piece of cheese and warned that it would have to last 4 days. It took 5 so the last day we fasted. Except for a small window high up and a 2 inch door opening there was no means of seeing where we were going. A bucket had been provided as a latrine and many of the boys already had the runs and the smell was abominable.

Starved and almost mad with thirst we were finally roused out and marched to a barrack surrounded by barbed wire. It was already occupied by a 100 or so Polish

prisoners taken in the September campaign. I swapped my watch for 3 loaves and learned that we were in Poland.

JUNE 1940 POSEN [POZNAN]

We lay on our 3 tier bunks in a former Polish barracks still not realizing what had happened to us. Hungry to the point of desperation. Some of us had dysentery, some of us were skin and bones. This was in late June 1940.

The living quarters were like massive barns with three tier bunks. The centre had rough tables and stools and from the smell suggested that the horses were also stabled there. Heat was supplied by a few pot bellied stoves and, as fall came, our evenings were spent huddling around these for a little comfort. Our diet was 300 grams of black bread, a bowl of soup and perhaps an ounce of jam or lard. We were sent out daily onto an artillery range to pick up crap from the shells. On a day off, no one spoke about anything but food.

Here the philosophers could speak his thoughts and the 'old solders' told us stories of India. Stories of Christmas dinners past could bring saliva dripping from the corners of the mouth.

Perhaps our most precious possession was our bowl. It was an ugly utensil made of baked clay and in most cases the only container one had. It was used to obtain soup and coffee rations, washing and shaving. At night, wrapped in a battle dress blouse, it was a pillow. It was an all purpose necessity.

We had just returned from the artillery range and were eagerly awaiting the soup call. The usual debate was on whether to get to the head of the queue or wait to the last. If you were at the front and the menu was pork and bean soup you could get the floating fat and few small pieces of pork. If you waited to the last you might get a good dollop of beans which sunk to the bottom. There was also the possibility of a cry of "buckshees up" if extra soup had been made. Deep thought went into individual decisions. But without your bowl, where would you be. Hands don't hold much soup.

One evening a loud shouting match attracted everyone to the central area where there was an argument going on about the ownership of a bowl. The two combatants were gripping the ugly clay artifice and shouting "it's my bowl." Neither dared to take his hands off the utensils and hit the other and the pair wrestled back and forth in the centre of the mob that crowded around them. Finally they stood panting but grimly holding on to the pottery piece. Impasse.

Soon we would have to collect our rations from the cookhouse and our interest was waning. Finally an 'old soldier' stepped forward faced the two combatant, wrested the bowl out of their hands, raised it above his head and crashed it to the ground.

"Now it's no fucker's bowl"

By 1944, we had all obtained plates, mugs, etc by barter or stealing, but whenever something was dropped on the floor someone would still shout out "My bowl!" and someone would add "Now it's no fucker's bowl"

JULY 1940 CAMP BAB21

My memory of the advent of lice in the camp is a little vague, but I seem to remember they appeared in July 1940. First you felt something crawling on your back and itching around your balls. Rather like a perambulatory mosquito bite. They do not impose any pain from stings or bites. It is the constant awareness of their presence that you can never forget.

The body louse [different from head lice] is not very big, probably 1/8 to 3/16 an inch long, sickly grey-white in colour and, when he has fed on you, his belly is blood red. When squashed, blood spurts out. After killing a few dozen it cakes on your thumb nail.

They meander around your body at night and even though you are weak and exhausted, you awake scratching. They were in the seams of your clothes, in your hair, underneath your armpits but mainly around your balls,

During the hot summer of 1940 when we were marched out by the hundreds to dig ditches, break rocks or pick up scrap metal on artillery ranges, any moment we had a break was spent combing our clothes for these little bastards.

There were two or three 'old solders' from the 1914-18 war and it was one of those who suddenly said "These are fucking lice."

The Jerries got in the picture and every two weeks we went for delousing. While we showered, our clothes were literally baked. We would march back to camp praying that the host had been destroyed. Alas! This was not to be. Within 48 hours the little bastards would be marching up and down your back.

Lice thrive on undernourished bodies and lack of washing facilities. The basic rations and the monthly bar of soap gave us no weapons to combat the invasion. The issue soap was a grey green bar approximately the size of hotel toilet soap, hard as rock with no lather. This also had to be used to wash clothes. For over a year, the battle of 'itch and scratch' was won by the lice.

Then two things happened. First Red Cross parcels started to filter through. The food parcels never reached the quota of one parcel per man per week but even half a parcel on top of the Jerry rations could make life again liveable. We also began to receive personal parcels from our parents which would contain sweaters, socks, chocolate and soap. There was also a few cigarette parcels. The chocolate, cigarettes and soap could be used to buy food on the job. Sugar, tomatoes, onion, eggs were now added to our diet. Soon our bodies started to fill out again. The main barometer indication was the return of good solid erections. For over a year when near a Polish panienka [young woman] you hoped she would slip you a sandwich. Now other thoughts crept in.

The second event was a new Commandant, Hauptman Koernig, a first war veteran. We hated his guts when he imposed very strict discipline on us but now as I look back he did two things for us. He made us feel more like soldiers again with some pride and he got rid of the lice.

Orders came through that all body hair was to be removed. Because of a lack of safety razor blades, most of us had acquired cut throat razors. This was time you had to put your faith in your fellow man. Standing on a table with your balls lathered by toilet soap you submitted your whole future to a friend brandishing an open razor. Luckily I was a friend of the camp barber and he operated on me. In a few minutes he had my balls smooth enough to play snooker with.

We had to take our mattresses out in the yard and dump all the straw. Buckets, brushes and disinfectant were issued and operation scrub down commenced. Under the watchful eye of the guards we scrubbed every inch of the beds, tables, stools, lockers, walls, and floor in our rooms.

We were then marched to the delouser. Stripped off we went under hot showers and with the English soap lathered every inch and cranny of our bodies. In the meantime our clothes and bed clothes were being baked. When you left the shower, you were issued with new underwear.

It worked. From that day on I have never met another louse except for a human one.

JULY 1940

In July 1940, I watched a cricket match played with no ball, bat or wickets. A more exciting contest I have never seen and there were no regrets that the contest ended in a draw. We had been captured for 2 ½ months, still dazed mentally and forever hungry and we needed entertainment. The 'old soldiers' were in most cases fitter than we were because of their superb knowledge of scrounging. We eventually surpassed them, but the initial captivity period was theirs.

'Old soldiers' were the reservists who had signed on for seven years regular and five years reserve prior to the outbreak of the war. Most of the seven years had been spent in India under discipline of the old British Army. They were tough. In the pre-war Regular Army you had to be. Most of the seven years on regular duty would have been spent in India partly in isolated stations. Even in the barracks of Poona, Bangalore and other military centres, they were isolated by society. The good class of clubs and hotels were out of bounds and unless they were career soldiers with their wives they had no company of females except the brothels and they did not mix with the natives or the Bombay Irish. Their life in these surroundings was monotonous and they were a race of their own. No pity for the weaknesses of mankind but, if you became a friend, the best friend you could find.

For the first year the old soldiers dominated camp life by getting the prime jobs: cookhouse, janitors, orderlies and any other cushy job available. This gave them opportunities to get extra food and to build themselves up before we could. Therefore, when the rest of us were licking our wounds and trying to be human beings again, they had time and energy for other things. And they were the ones who put up this very fine display of 'no balls' cricket.

It was a beautiful Sunday and everyone was basking in the sun picking lice off their clothes and dreaming of mother's cooking. Then a group walked out of the #1 hut where the old soldier plutocrats lived. A group started clapping and we found out that the cooks had challenged the others to a cricket match.

Slowly they walked to the centre of the compound and two Captains tossed a coin. The umpires were given the sweaters and hats as per tradition, and the players took up positions and the batters after returning to the pavilion to strap on imaginary pads came swaggering out with imaginary bats under their arms. The bowlers were magnificent, hurling spinners and jumpers at will. Long drive boundaries were hit, fantastic catches were made and the spectators were hypnotized by some of the finest cricket ever played. After an hour the barbed wire was lined by off duty Jerries, their wives and families clapping and cheering with the rest of us. When a draw was declared, they left shaking their heads murmuring "crazy Englishmen."

From this arose many other displays of skills. In 1941, I was feeling a lot better on a diet of Red Cross food and became a first class table tennis player with a tremendous back hand. It's a pity I couldn't keep it up when balls and bats were available.

1941

The camp speaker system gave us news of German victories and Lord Haw Haw had us rolling in the aisles with his comedy show. During Rommel's glory days, our German interpreter would dash in daily to plant pins in a large map of Africa to show us our withdrawals. With this depressing news, we listened to a sad, yearning song which had been adopted by both sides of the conflict: "Lili Marlene." The poor little private, risking the cells for a few moments with his girl friend, appealed to all of us.

When Montgomery chased the Desert Fox back to his hole, the visits by our German friend stopped. We changed the map pins daily in case he dropped in. "Lili Marlene" was no longer played two or three times a day. I still have a lot of affection for that song, particularly when it is sung in German.

The singing of our national anthem, "God Save the King" was forbidden, but the Germans gave us a substitute for it. The Jerries' chosen anthem was enthusiastically adopted by us and we sang it with great gusto on every occasion presented to us.

Our dramatically inclined fellow prisoners put on excellent plays and operettas, and these performances were often attended by the Kommandant and his Staff. We always started the shows with the singing of the substitute anthem. Our German guests would

spring to attention in true Prussian tradition while we roared out the magnificent lines of Elgar's "Land of Hope and Glory."

Wider still, and wider
Shall thy bounds be set.
God who made thee mighty
Make thee mightier yet!

1941

For the first nine months to a year we thought of nothing but food. We were in Poland and, if the most beautiful panienka in the world had approached me naked, I would have looked to see if she had a sandwich in her hand.

In 1941, we started to receive dribs and drabs of Red Cross parcels and all of a sudden the old urge returned. Beds started to rock and masturbation was quite normal and accepted. It was a little annoying when the guy in the top bunk decided to pull his pudding when you wanted to sleep but you had to be reasonable. At that time we were still working in packs with guards watching every move. Later, with the pressure of the Russian offensive, the number of guards was cut down and opportunities for sexual adventures increased.

1942

Jock and I had pulled off the best job in the camp.

Our regular chore as carpenters had closed down for several weeks due to a shortage of nails. Ironically, he and I had been partially responsible for this because we had found an outlet for the sale of nails to farmers and for several months had been living off the fat of the land by exchanging them for vegetables, apples and even hunks of bacon and sausages.

Some of our gang had been assigned to the road-making gang which was purgatory because you were always under the watchful eye of guards and unable to barter on the black market.

By the luck of the draw we went to a pipe fitting firm as welder's helpers. We worked with civilian workers from Berlin whose main interest was to keep out of the army. The Berliners were like our Cockneys. Usually cheerful under most circumstances but when one came back from a few days vacation we would be told about Aunt Olga being killed or his parents were bombed out. I would counteract with 4 cousins dead and my poor dear mother in hospital in London. Actually I had no relations in the big city and I don't think a bomb fell within 10 miles of my parents during the whole war. We would then weep on each other shoulders and say "Kreig ist Kreig."

One day the door opened and little Jew and an SS Guard came in. He was to work with us as a welder. We had worked with Jews before but only with gangs of 20 or 30 under SS Guards and capos. This kid was on his own except for a check several times a day

by an SS guard. He was as scared as hell. Gradually we got out of him that he was from Warsaw but could also speak German. He'd been in camp 2 years. As a skilled workman, he had been transferred to a small camp of 130 Jews just outside the oil-coal complex.

Everyday an SS would come in at midday so the kid could go and get his bowl of grey coloured gruel made from a meal which had on the sack "Nur fur Swinen und Juden" [only for swine and Jews]. When he came back we would be sitting with the Jerries and he would sit in the corner. The workers from Berlin didn't know how to treat him. They seemed a little shame-faced. They could see that he was a skilled craftsman and yet they couldn't mix with him.

One day Jock and I had an excellent day on the black market. We sat down with the Berliners while the kid was sitting in a corner away from us. We had white rolls, tomatoes, and boiled eggs. Even the Berliners looked on us with envy. The kid's eyes were almost popping out.

I couldn't stand it anymore so I threw him a boiled egg. He started to crack it when an SS came in. The SS started to scream and yell. Not about the egg but because the kid was reading a paper. He started beating him. The Berliners just sat still.

Jock and I jumped up and went over and called the guard every dirty word we knew. At this time British POWs were under the Army and the SS weren't allowed to touch us, but if we touched a German we could get a good long stay in the Straff Lager. Stalemate. The SS dragged the poor little bugger out.

Later the capo came and told us we had killed the kid. He'd been taken back to the camp and there were two possibilities. They would keep him under a cold shower for hours until his temperature dropped and he died or he would be transported to another camp. We never saw him again.

I found out after the war that we were 40 miles from a place now known as Oswiecim which the Germans called Auschwitz.

1942

Jock and I had pulled off the best job in the camp. After proving a little worse than useless as welder's helpers, we were demoted to become the delivery boys of cylinders of gas and oxygen.

We were working in a huge complex of about 8 square miles completely surrounded by a high fence and gates that were guarded. Here was being built a synthetic oil refinery belonging to I.G. Farben. It contained some 400 buildings and 25,000 'guest workers' from every nation in Europe.

Our job was to deliver the cylinders and return the empties to the central depot by a hand cart similar to the ones used by the barrel boys in London. The beauty of the job

is that they appeared to have forgotten that we were POWs so we wandered around with no civilian army guard. On the job we wore blue coveralls and a black beret. This helped us pose as Frenchmen or Belgians and as long as we did our quota no one interfered with us.

There were opportunities galore for making new business acquaintances and meeting new girlfriends as well as the beautiful freedom of movement. As you can appreciate Jock and I were in a position to act as agents on commission to purchase and sell on behalf of our comrades who were under strict surveillance.

We met Italian girls helping in canteens who feed us, Ukrainian girls we danced with during the noon break and Polish girls who were not averse to ardent affection. All this plus a good game of bridge in the evenings and a sleep in on Sundays came as close to paradise as a POW could expect.

One beautiful summer's day we had completed our allotted tasks and had 5 or 6 hours before we had to join the others to be marched back to the camp. By chance we bumped into an old Polish friend who happened to have a bottle of "spiritus". This was a concentrated vodka which was 97% alcohol. The only possible way to drink it was to break it down 2 to 1. After a brief bargaining session, we bought it and went to the canteen and obtained a bottle of soda. Going into a quiet restful empty building we partook of the beverage and finishing the bottle walked out into the bright sunshine feeling no pain.

Looking down the main road we saw a queue at a building known as "The Stoker" which we usually avoided. This was the place where they actually cooked the coal that would eventually be turned into oil. The odour of rotten eggs was obnoxious and volunteers took the job because of extra rations and milk twice a day.

Curiosity prevailed and as we approached we saw that a glass of milk was being given to the workers. Neither of us had tasted fresh milk for three years. We joined the end of the queue. What we hadn't noticed was the fact that the recipients of the milk were handing a card in before receiving the drink.

The German girl ladling out the milk looked up and probably smelt our breath and let out a howl calling someone from the office. There was no use staying there to plead our case so I grabbed a bunch of the cards they were handing in and we ran like bastards. No one seemed to follow us so we sat down on a culvert and examined our loot. They were passes issued to the foreign workers to allow them to pass the gate.

The passes proved invaluable to us. We used them to wander out to the local pubs thereafter and they gave us bigger and better opportunities to contact the farmers. We gave a couple away but the rest sold at a good price in the camp.

1942

The hospital camp was extremely well organized and there were about 100

patients there. It had 5 Medical Orderlies, 20 British orderlies, 30 British joe-boys and 50 Russian POW's.

These Russians had been caught in the first big drive of the German forces. The stories they told were hair-raising. Geneva Conventions were forgotten. They had been placed in cattle trucks and brought back with little or no food. They showed photos of themselves before capture and it was hard to believe they were the same persons. However they considered themselves lucky.

What a pleasure and a change the first few days were. We had spent over two years in a camp where everyone was captured at Dunkirk or vicinity. Our stories varied but generally they were the same. Now we met Kiwis, Aussies, South Africans and others who had been captured in Greece, Africa and the high seas. We heard the real story of the Battle of Britain without the German overtone of defeat.

1942

Christmas 1942 was looming and, apart from the 2 or 3 bottles of 3% beer sold at the canteen at the festive season, it appeared it would be a very dry one.

At this time everything was as good as you could expect from captivity. We were getting a Red Cross parcel a week plus Jerry rations and outside purchases on the black market. On the job things were going easy and our gang was working in a warm work-shop. I had just received a cigarette parcel, and a parcel containing 2 sweaters, 2 lbs of chocolate, 3 bars of soap - all very hot items on the black market.

Suddenly a light went on inside my head.

“Joe, for fuck sakes wake up.”

Joe was a plumber of Cockney origin who liked his kip and was a little annoyed at the rude awakening but, after brewing up a pot of tea, I sat down and put forward my brain child to Joe. Basically I explained to him the old art of distillery which I remembered from my high school lab.

Our first still was a crude effort. We got an old 5 gallon farm drum that we hid in a trap door in the floor. We were getting a regular supply of Red Cross parcels and the company issue of ersatz molasses was in the Sergeant's bunk. In went the molasses with about 20 gallons of water. I bought a bar of yeast from a Pole for cigarettes.

For about 10 days it chugged away and finally I said to Joe “This is the night.” Just before lights out, the drum was placed on the stove and connected to about 20 feet of galvanized pipe which we placed around the room. Towels, blankets and clothes were placed soaking in cold water.

A half hour went by and the mix gradually heated up. I placed my hand on the pipe and could feel that heat slowly creeping until it reached halfway along the pipe. Feeling like a midwife, I quietly said to Joe, "Blankets."

We had to stoke the stove with wood and one problem was to keep a constant level of heat. We had no thermometer and I remembered that alcohol boils off at 180 so it was a matter of ensuring the juice in the pot never reached water boiling point. This necessitated careful control and moving the pot off at critical times. Volunteers were given cooling jobs. They dashed around placing the cold clothes over the pipes to condense the gas in the pipes.

The pipe began to heat up and gradually the first drip came out. I took the first sip. After partaking, I silently passed the spoon to Joe. He had his spoonful and gasped "Jesus."

After the volunteers had had a sip, the night was spent changing the juice in the cooking pot, cooling pipes, bottling and drinking. At roll call the next morning, bleary eyed men swayed while the count was made.

News travelled fast and our room was visited by all to view the still. Joe and I were looked on as the experts and I was tempted to charge consultant fees. Within a month, there were 30 to 40 stills operating in the camp. The camp was scoured for everything that would ferment. Even potatoes peelings became a much desired item.

Saturday night became a night of howling

1944

A week ago, Private Jack Richardson hanged himself in #3 latrine. He lived three rooms away from me but I didn't know him very well. I just can't figure out why he killed himself.

We were living pretty well at that time. Red Cross parcels were coming through with reasonable regularity, and the Jerries guarding us were not bad. The expected strafing by Allied bombers hadn't yet started. Even the memories of "The March" in 1940 had almost faded away. We know that the war is now going in our favour and with reasonable luck, the end was near. How, when, and where isn't important.

Jack Richardson was twenty-three years of age. Like most of us, he probably joined the Army in 1939 as a Conscript or a Territorial. His advent into Kriegsgefangenschaft [war captivity] would, no doubt, have been the same as the rest of us.

Early 1940, he had joined the British Expeditionary Forces in France. Untrained, away from home for the first time, poorly armed and he was sent to face one of the best trained armies the world had ever seen. He had served under officers and NCOs who, through no fault of their own, had little or no knowledge of modern warfare. After a

frustrated and futile attempt to show resistance to the powerful blitzkrieg machine, he was taken prisoner in May 1940.

He then joined a long line of captives comprised of British, French and Belgians who were marched all over northern France to cover German convoy movements, and then into Belgium, Luxembourg or Holland.

Little or no food was available, and even drinking water was unavailable. He ate grass and drank dirty ditch water to survive. Finally he would have been herded into a box car, been given a mouldy ration of German black bread, and five days later, arrived somewhere in Poland. He was now reduced from one hundred and fifty pounds to ninety pounds, suffering from starvation and dysentery.

After a few weeks in a holding camp, receiving a minimum of food consisting of Polish Army biscuits and a spoonful of sauerkraut, he was sent to a work camp and herded out daily to crack rocks, dig ditches, and pick up metal scraps from artillery ranges. For this, he would get 300 grams of bread a day plus a ladle of soup. His main free time activities were picking lice off his body and clothes and dreaming of a Sunday roast beef dinner. Any possessions he was able to retain on capture, such as a watch or cigarette lighter, had long been exchanged for a loaf of bread.

He survived all this.

His luck changed when he was transferred to a Bau and Arbeits Battalion, and was allowed to work at his former trade as a brick layer. This did not increase the food supply, but the work was not as tedious and the opportunity to mix with civilian workers made him feel less like an animal. A limited amount of Red Cross food and personal parcels began to seep through, and with a little know-how, one could barter then on the black market. His body came back to normal, and with a little risk, acquaintance could be made with the opposite sex. By 1942, even the lice had disappeared.

In camp, you do your personal chores, cooking, and washing clothes. You play crib and bridge, and if so inclined, could operate a still. 1943 was the best year we had had in captivity and the writing on the wall was clear that Germany was going to lose.

It is, therefore, hard to understand why Jack Richardson took his life at this time. We had had several other suicides over the previous three years, but they took place at times when things looked impossible. The attitude now is that everything is in our favour.

But, on a Sunday at midnight, he went down to the latrines, slung his belt over a beam, put his head in the loop, and jumped from the seat. Someone discovered him early Sunday morning, and I understand that apart from a livid face, he looked quite happy.

DEC 1944 ESCAPE

Lying on a foot of snow exhausted after running through 500 feet of it, Mac and I listened anxiously for pursuers. Then in the distance we could hear the shouts of the guards: "Rausch. Aufstellen. Marsch". The noise of the marching column slowly diminished and I looked at Mac and said "Jesus we made it."

It was only 10 minutes ago we had been in the group of 1,200 British POWs. The day before the camp had been paraded and to prepare to march to a 'safer' place - the centre of the Reich. It was late December 1944 and perhaps the whole of Ober Silesia would be in Russian hands in a week or so. Mac and I had agreed for some time to make a run for it as soon as the Russians hit Crakow, about 50 miles away. Our plans now had to be changed rapidly. Luckily we had done some preparations and each had hand sewn a pack just the size of a Canadian Red Cross parcel, stuffed it with essentials and were ready to roar.

The others in the room had been caught with their pants down. Frenzied packing was going on all around while we lay on our bunks wondering if tomorrow was our big day. Most of us were Dunkerites and over a period of 4½ years everyone had accumulated possessions that were precious to our way of life so the question of "what should I take" was the issue with the majority. Mac and I decided to travel light. When we marched out the next day it soon showed that everyone had taken a little too much and after the first mile the road side was littered with enough clothing, pots, pans and other stuff to stock a Salvation Army store.

We were still in familiar territory when the first "piss pause" was called. The guards needed it as much as we did and this is when we decided to run. Entering a thick pine woods to relieve ourselves, we started running. The thought of an eager guard using us as clay pigeons kept our pace pretty rapid.

We knew roughly where we were and decided to head to Dorf Lager where, with a bit of luck, we would find food and shelter for the night before starting out to Crakow. At Dorf Lager, which was a large collection of huts where French, Ukrainian, Poles, Italians, Czechs etc labour force lived, we knew numerous workmen we had met on jobs.

Heading northwards towards the camp we came to the railway bridge and on the top was a Jerry guard. We silently retreated and finally found a culvert under the embankment that got us to the other side. We discarded our British Army overcoats and packs and in our blue denims and berets took on the appearance of either Belgian or French workers and went gaily down the road to what we hoped would be our freedom.

Arriving at Dorf Lager we had the luck of seeing our friend Marius, a French carpenter we had worked with many times. He was naturally surprised to see us and, after telling him our tale, he invited us to stay in his room which he shared with 11 others. There was a spare bunk so we were set for the night. Bottles of wine suddenly appeared and we all drank to freedom and the end of the Third Reich.

The next morning we decided to go back and get our packs and as we walked up the road a German corporal appeared heading towards us pushing a bike. "Christ it's Briller," said Mac. And it was. Briller was the Unteroffizier in charge of our block. He knew us well. It was too late to hide and too stupid to run, so we walked on with my head turned towards Mac in conversation. As he got nearer you could see he was preoccupied with thoughts and we passed him without a glance. To this day I don't know if we would have jumped the bastard if he had recognized us, but Mac insisted he had every intention to.

We went on wondering what the hell he was doing back here and after recovering our packs we returned to Marius and soon found out. The whole British camp had been marched back to the camp. No reasons given.

Mac and I would certainly be missed now on roll call and there would be a search party out for us. About noon, one of the Frenchmen came running in to tell us the camp was on the march again and would pass by the hut in a few minutes. Along came the boys and peaking through a small window I noticed they were carrying nothing and some didn't even have their overcoats on. Late December in Silesia is cold, so what gives? Months afterwards in England when talking with a former roommate I found out that the camp had been called out for roll call and marched out the gates and no one had been allowed to go back and pick up anything.

I gathered that they had a rough time for the next two months lacking food and blankets and sleeping together for warmth. The guards' nerves were frayed and some of the best of them took to using the butt and bayonet. One guy in our room was killed. All during that night rifle shots could be heard. We found out that next day the SS guards at the small Jewish camp had been ordered to retreat but before they left they were shooting as many Jews as they could. Quite a few of the inmates got away but I counted about 30 bodies in the area of Dorf Lager alone.

Suddenly there were no German soldiers or SS in the camp and pandemonium broke loose. No one knew what was happening. It is fantastic how men can become animals so quick. People who had been suppressed for so long just went mad after the Jerry troops left.

Jock and I were opportunists and we made for the main ration store. There were hundreds of workers of every nationality grabbing what they could, all drunk. In the basement a quantity of wine had been kept for the benefit of the Italian workers. There were men lying all over the place drunk as Lords. We had had the foresight to acquire a sled and promptly loaded it with as much as it would hold.

On the way back, a Russian plane flew down the middle of the road with machine guns open. We dove into the ditch and prayed he didn't hit the bottles on the sled. They survived this time only to die in the gullets of Mac, myself and our French brothers in the next few days.

On the third day, we awoke to hear shouts and cheers. Looking out the door we saw a ten man Russian patrol. They were surrounded by excited Ukrainians. Suddenly the Russian corporal in charge went up to a Ukrainian pulled out his pistol and shot him. No questions asked or replies given. No messing about just bang. We found out after that one of the women had pointed him out for collaborating with the Germans. The corporal causally turned him over searched him and pocketed some of his personal items and strolled back to his patrol.

Mac and I went to one of the Ukrainians who worked for the same firm we had and asked him where the main Russian army was. It seemed that this was a probing patrol and there were still Germans in the east. No one seemed to know how many, so it could be weeks before they arrived here. We decided to take off.

1945 NEUBRUCHE [NIEWIESZE]

We made our way to Neubruche where we had worked last summer. We knew some of the civilians because he had sold them stolen nails for apples and eggs.

As we rounded a corner in a meandering foot path we were stopped in our tracks by a sight we hadn't reckoned on. A platoon of Jerries lying on the ground in firing position. The officer was scanning the front with binoculars. He turned and saw us and shouted "Wer sind sie." Caught with our pants down we could not retreat and replied "Belgic." "Wo gehon sie." "Zum Neurbruche fur essen." He shrugged his shoulders and replied in German "Be careful - the Russians might be there" and let us continue on the way.

Finally out of the woods, we got to a village. There was no one there. Picking the house where the local squire must have lived we went looking for food and a place to sleep. I wandered around the yard, picked up a few eggs in the barn and looked for the chickens. On the way back I heard a noise in the pigsty. A nice little sucking pig I hoped. Mac picked up a pitch fork and prodded inside the sleeping quarters - more movement. "The bastard doesn't seem to want to come out" said Mac as I pounded the roof of the sty. Suddenly there was an unpiglike cry and a very sick looking face appeared. A young Jew. He finally emerged shivering and scared. When we told him who we were the mantle of terror dropped from him. He had had visions of the SS standing there ready to eliminate the little bit of life he had left.

We took him into the house, made a fire and gave him a cup of our precious tea. We found some civilian clothes upstairs that didn't actually fit him but was better than the blue and white with star. We left him in the morning looking a little better and at least not hungry.

Our decision to sleep the night in this house was sadly shattered by shelling. The Jerries had lowered their ach ach guns and were making a last minute effort to retain the canal. Mac and I grabbed everything we could and made out way down the lane to the bridge. Mac was almost crawling on his hands and knees but I was well fortified by a bottle of wine and the knowledge that the shells were going well over the hedge rows

and stood up and walked. The bridge was still passable and getting on the other side we sat in a gully and had one of our last cigarettes.

Mac said "Where the fuck do we sleep tonight?" The village had had a real bashing and most of the houses were destroyed or burning. Moving down the lane we came to a valley and at the bottom was a large barn. A glimmer of light could be seen and we walked down towards it and opened the door. There were at least 20 people there crouched around an old pot belly stove trying to keep warm. Quite a mixture - Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Belgians.

Mac and I got up early in the morning and had a quick slice of bread and a cup of tea and started on our way before these starving bastards started bumming from us. We started on the road to Crakow. Everywhere there was destruction. Houses still burning. Refugees going both ways. It was obvious that skirmishes had taken place but the Russians hadn't solidified their position. Small groups of Germans were probably hiding in the woods trying to get back to their companies.

We stayed the night in a small village and shared a large board bed with 10 other people. When one turned all turned. During the night there was a tap on the door and the most bedraggled remnants of the mighty German Army stood there begging for food and civilian clothing. The hausfrau was so scared and made them hide in the barn. She scurried around but had very little to offer them. Funny enough, Mac and I sympathized with the poor fuckers. They were cold and scared and starving. So we gave them a loaf of bread. Soldaten sind Soldaten.

What a difference from the mighty conquerors in 1940.

We trundled on for several days occasionally visiting farm houses for food. It was not a question of asking. We would go to the chicken shed grab one and take it to the farmer's wife and say "with potatoes." By this time we had discarded the dungarees and were in British uniform. The peasants didn't know if we were friend or enemy and never argued.

1945 TOST [TOSZEK]

It appeared to be a sleepy little village when we arrived but burnt houses and damaged properties showed it had been the centre of an attack. A few Russians strolled the streets and the residents hurried back and forth keeping their eyes to the front. We had heard that there was a small British POW medical centre somewhere in the area. Finally one woman pointed it out and we found the small barbed wired enclave. The gate was guarded by an Englishman and we went up and introduced ourselves. We went in one of the huts and threw our stuff on a couple of bunks.

We went through to the kitchen for something to eat. Nothing much but black bread and potatoes, so we decided to go out to eat. The sentry at the gate tried to stop us but we told him to fuck off.

As was our usual custom, we went to the biggest and best house we could find and went in. Behold - two fairly attractive fraus about 30-35 years of age and a Frenchman stuffing his guts with what appeared to be bacon and fried potatoes. A little wine on the table. We brought up the subject of food and the fraus scurried around and found a good piece of green bacon and potatoes. One went to the cellar and brought up a good bottle of wine. These girls sure were not suffering the hunger of war. We found out that both their husbands were somewhere at the front, if it still existed. They expressed their relief at the fact we were Englishers and not Russians and they made us welcome in their abode. On the surface, it appeared to be a fine place to spend a few days.

Alas. A bang on the door and a Ukrainian girl followed by 2 Russians came in. She was pointing at the two women and screaming. It appeared she had been a servant and I can only presume there was no liking between them.

She stormed upstairs and came down with clothes including a fur coat and with this left. The two German women were so shaken they started packing a bag to leave. We tried hard to persuade them to stay to no avail. We then turned out efforts to searching the house. It must have been a hive of black market. Upstairs we found a chest of sugar. In the basement, there was plenty of wine and British Red Cross food. The beds were soft so we decided to spend a few nights here.

Again, alas! A bang on the door and a Russian officer enters using a German ceremonial sword as a walking stick. He had been on the booze and spotting the bottle of wine on the table grabbed it and it emptied. The Captain knew a few words of German so we got friendly. After an hour of talking and singing our guest said in Russian "Jimna Jimna" [cold]. Grabbing a chair he started smashing up with the sword and it wasn't too long before we had a good blaze going.

It wasn't too long after that that the whole house was on fire. Time to leave.

1945 CRAKOW

Finally we reached the outskirts of Crakow. Little damage had been done but we still didn't see too many Russians. An odd patrol here and there had passed us completely ignoring us. The streets were semi-deserted and we stayed one night at a hotel (no charge) and passed on through. Trains weren't running so we were still on foot. Finally we ran into the real attacking army. Six tanks at the side of the road. Smart uniforms - the elite troops. Mac and I went over to them. We knew the Russian words for "English" and "prisoners of war" were really well received with food and vodka. To this day, I'm sure this 'vodka' was drained out of their tank tanks.

When I awoke several hours later they were still drinking and by gestures invited us up on a tank. Up we climbed and accepted a rifle and ammo. Still semi-stoned we sat there wondering what the hell we were doing. Our tank and two others started off and came to a large field. The tanks spread out and guns were pointed at the woods. The tank guns started blasting off and after a few minutes 7 Volkstormers came out of the woods with arms up. With no hesitation, machine guns opened up and mowed them

down. Laughing, the Russians jumped down and went over the bodies still moving and searched them. Wrist watches and good boots were removed and we all returned to the camp.

We parted the next day still with the haze of “tank juice” and wandered on the road of freedom. Some of the people were no longer scared because of liberation by their Russian ‘friends’. The lessons they had to learn came later.

We started to meet the other Russian Army. Thousands of them who did not seem to be in organized units were marching on to Berlin. They were probably irregulars in it for the excitement and loot. We began to run into other corps, not the elite we first saw but the PBI and Service Corps, sometimes officered by a woman. They took no notice of us and just kept heading west.

1945 CZESTOCHOWA

Czestochowa is a beautiful city and we stayed a few weeks to rest. We met several young ladies who wanted to learn English and we were happy to help them. It was here that I had my only real contention with “Ivan.” I was getting friendly with a panienka called Janna. We were sharing meat and wine at a friend's house when a Russian officer and a sergeant burst in. These Soviet boys were drunk-drunk and they invited themselves to our table and began eating the food with their hands. Both had Stens so it would have hard to get them to leave. Ivan tried to get between my little Polish flower and me. I voiced my objection and pushed him away. Instead of swinging his Sten, he grabbed my arm and bit me like a pit bull. Blood spurted out as he glared at me. I belted him about the head. He suddenly let go and dropped to the floor. His Captain shrugged his shoulders and dragged his friend out the door.

My little panienka and I left in haste and she gave me the best band-aid treatment I've ever had. If I had been an American GI I'm sure this would have qualified me as “wounded in action” and I would have received a Purple Heart. The British Army wouldn't even give me a wound stripe.

April 1945 arrived and our thoughts turned to Britain. Our dear old mums hadn't seen us for five years. Out of the blue, we heard a shipment of wounded British from Arnhem were coming through by train. There was a Red Cross ship waiting for them at Odessa. We jumped the train and after a ten day journey through the war-torn desolate Ukraine, arrived at the Black Sea port.

We assembled on the railway siding, shuffled into some kind of order, and prepared to march. Suddenly out of nowhere, came a motley group carrying musical instruments. They were very old, very young, or crippled. The war had been very cruel to the Ukrainians.

An extremely old gentleman raised a baton, and on his down stroke, the band members began to blow. I wasn't sure if the tempo was a waltz, fox-trot, or a march, but I knew

that tune and couldn't place it! After shuffling and hopping along for a hundred yards, I realized it was the old pre-war polka tune, "Roll out the Barrel."

The Red Cross ship brought us back to civilization, beautiful white bread, Virginian cigarettes and new uniforms. This was marred only by British army discipline with its sometimes unpleasant NCO's. From the Black Sea, we went through the Dardanelles to Naples, Malta, and Gibraltar, then on to the Bay of Biscay. It sounds good, but they wouldn't allow us off the boat. The ship's radio blared out the news of U-Boat wolf pack attacks. We also learned of the death of President Roosevelt. I had visions of a watery grave.

Finally, after 5 years we landed back in England. We were assembled in the railway yard to be marched to the trains waiting to take us to rest camps. A group of senior citizens appeared, carrying brass instruments and drums. One of the members raised a baton, and we all marched off to "Roll Out the Barrel."