

# STORIES OF LIFE IN PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS 1940 – 1945

by  
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As soon as I clapped eyes on the olive green uniform with black buttons and attractive shako hat with plume, I knew the Queen Victoria's Rifles was the regiment for me! The shilling for each drill attended as well as for each day spent at annual camp, also had the attraction as did the cheap booze at the HQ bar, but it was the uniform which tipped the scales.

All went well until taking a more serious turn when ominous noises began to emanate from Germany, but it was hard to believe even Germans were foolish enough to challenge a military power which could put into the field such a finely honed fighting machine as us. As a precaution though, we devoted a whole drill period to polishing and sharpening our swords. As might be expected, when war looked imminent, the Queen Victoria's Rifles was amongst the very first to be 'called to the Colours'....and we promptly took up threatening positions in various empty, decaying buildings earmarked for demolition dotted around London's West End. A thoughtful move by the War Cabinet.

When, in May 1940, we were unexpectedly rounded up to be sent across the English Channel after receiving a personal message from Winston Churchill to "fight to the last man," we travelled, as might be expected, in some style in a cross-Channel ferry. Ordered to hold the French port city of Calais, it would have been nice to have ammunition for our revolvers... but hell, we had our swords and things were in short supply due to the war! Fortunately, German General Guderian and the division of heavy Panzers he commanded, became so intimidated by our fierce Anglo-Saxon war cries that their advance north towards Dunkirk halted after making our acquaintance, for which I am given to understand those sunning themselves on the beaches were appreciative. Anyway, to the victor the spoils, and some of my companions and I went off to enjoy a protracted spell travelling under the auspices of the German Reich.

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## The Message

On the 9th June 1940, after the column of prisoners of which I was one had been driven across France for some fifteen days with little or no food or water, we were all in a pretty bad state, so when we reached the village of Beersel in Belgium and I saw an unlatched wooden door in a long six foot high brick wall, and no guards in position to notice me slip through it, I took the opportunity to do so. It was a spur of the moment thin, with little thought about it other than to find food and rest. One week before, I and my mate Cyril Gowing had slipped away during the darkness and run for as long as we were able until finally climbing a wall to enter the grounds of a large mansion, and collapsing under some bushes to promptly fall asleep.

We were woken in the early hours under the hooves of horses belonging to a German Army field kitchen unit, and promptly returned to another column of prisoners with no worse punishment than being forced to run in front of a motor cycle combination with machine gun mounted! In a way, that first experience had given me a false idea of what to expect when recaptured.

After closing the door behind me I turned to find a young nun kneeling in a large vegetable garden staring over her shoulder at me. I said in my school-boy French, "Avez-vous quelque chose de manger, c'il vous plaiz mam'selle?" When she got to her feet and, without saying a word, took me by the hand and led me along a path to a building, in through a door and along a passage into a room where she then said in perfect English, "sit down at that table and I will bring you something." She returned with three other nuns, all dressed in the same fashion - long black habits with long sleeves and starched white aprons, bringing bread, butter, cheese and milk.

The watched while I ate, warning me to go slowly. After I was finished, "my" nun (for that is how I have always remembered her) asked that I follow here, when we left the room to go further along the passage into a smaller room fitted out as a lazarette (medical room). There she made me sit on a stool while she washed the blood off my face and head, cut away the hair, and, after bathing the injuries put some kind of salve on them. Whilst this was being done, she asked me where I came from in England, was I married and did my wife know where I was; to which I explained that Gwen and I were only recently married, had never really had the opportunity to live together because of the war and, no she did not know where I was. Much to my surprise, my nun then suggested that if I wrote a message she would try to get it to Allied soldiers....of course, at that time we all still hoped there was fighting going on. I had an empty Players cigarette packet in my pocket, which I tore down one side and she gave me a pencil with which I wrote on the inside "P. A. Bartlett, 6895796 (my Army number) and "Am O.K. Love Peter." Not much of a note, but limited by the belief I should not divulge much more than my number and name, in case it fell into the wrong hands!! I still picture my nun lifting up her apron and placing the note in the large pocket in her habit.

Just how the Germans came to know one man had escaped the column, or exactly where I was remains a mystery, but know they did and when they smashed their way into the Maison des Servantes du Coeur de Jesus, I and the four nuns were set upon with rifle butts and boots, dragged back out into the garden ... and the last I saw of "my" nun was lying, huddled on the ground whilst the soldiers repeatedly hit her. After some further rough treatment, I was returned to the same prisoner column from which I had broken. I learned the four nuns were all shot for helping an escapee. However, the story was to have an unexpected and quite extraordinary sequel.

Back home in England, Gwen was first informed I was missing in action, then that I had been killed and that she was therefore a widow. She was given a pension and for the seven months to December 1940, continued to believe I had died.

She only learned the advice of my death was somewhat premature when a letter was delivered from the War Office to say that as a result of the "enclosed note" finding its way across the Channel, further enquiries by the Red Cross had discovered me alive and well in Poland!! It seemed the note had found its way - no doubt removed from the body of "my" nun - later to be brought across the Channel by fishermen intending to join the Allied forces.

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### **A manacle does not a prisoner make**

The daring raid carried out by Canadian and British commandos on Dieppe has found its way into war history, but the consequences for many prisoners of war did not make the headlines! In what, under other circumstances, might be considered a merciful action, the small band of commandos chose to tie-up and leave to fight another day, those German soldiers and sailors they captured during the raid rather than cut their throats ... which would have been the quiet way of doing things. When Hitler learned of this, he felt it was a slur on the great Aryan race that those fighting for the honour of the Reich should have been left tied-up rather than with their throats cut, so as a reprisal intended to show the world just how he saw things, orders were given to manacle all British prisoners from sun-up to sun down every day until further orders.

The first we knew about any of this was when the huts were suddenly invaded by a great many revved-up soldaten waving fixed bayonets around with gay abandon to drive us all out to line-up and have our wrists enclosed with manacles! Only after it was realised this was not the precursor to being lined up and shot did we begin to see the funny side of things! Of course, we all had to stand in varying stages of undress to listen to the inevitable protracted diatribe by the German Commandant, from which we learned about the dastardly behaviour by our compatriots at Dieppe. the fact that we burst into a cheer when he was silly enough to include the fact that the raid had succeeded, did not help matters. However, it took no more than a few minutes after returning back to the seclusion of the hut, for some bright spark to discover that, a minor adjustment to the key from a Red Cross supplied sardine tin, transformed it into an efficient tool with which to do the necessary, so that in no time at all, the manacles were off and things were back to normal! It took our highly intelligent captors several days of this carry-on before one of their number, more alert (or perhaps less dopey) than the rest, realised we had been manacled in an undressed state yet were fully dressed when the time came to remove them! Once again the influx of irate guardians and out again into the open to be ordered to explain how we had put our clothes on. The pantomime that followed was quite awe inspiring!!

Our chosen spokesman, the camp leader, who happened to be an Irish regular soldier, once a heavy weight boxing champion of the forces in India, was ordered by the camp commandant to explain how we managed to dress whilst wearing handcuffs; he stood there out front, with a bemused expression on his face, as though puzzled as to why anyone would be asking such a question when we all knew how to put our clothes on.

After trying to explain in plain language - somewhat marred by his appalling version of pidgin German with an Irish accent (sprinkled with lots of "f" words) our sergeant decided the only way to get these curious people to understand was to act out the whole procedure. He proceeded to illustrate, in slow motion, as though guiding little children, how one should hold a jacket whilst inserting the right arm into the sleeve, followed by flipping the garment over the back to the other shoulder and putting the other arm into the left sleeve. All as simple as pie!!

It took a second or tow for the commandant to realise he had lost the plot somewhere along the way, and to point out this was rather difficult with handcuffs on ... so he asked again. This went on, repeated word for word, action by action, until finally even the commandant could see we were going to get nowhere ... and the balloon went up! The order went out to conduct a "search and destroy". In spite of the meticulous search, nothing resembling a key was found! For the following fortnight or so, the same kind of invasions took place at regular intervals, day and night, always hoping to discover someone holding the golden key to freedom, but never with success. Finally these ceased, and in due course a night arrived when the dreaded manacles were removed, never to be seen again.

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### **A spell at the coal face**

Thankfully, our sojourn down a Polish coal mine was a short one, for though John Stanger and I were greatly relieved to be dispatched from the unpleasant conditions at the sugar mill, what we found at the mine was infinitely worse. the first morning there, I was detailed off to fill the role of "offsider" to Pauli, a Polish coal face driller, to spend my days waiting behind him in a cloud of dust, large shovel in hand, waiting to load the results into a hand pushed skip. He was a decent young fellow, liable

for trouble if he failed to fulfil his quota, so it became difficult to let him down. We soon struck up a rapport; he brought a little extra "bait" of bread, sausage and ersatz coffee so I could share, when he would always have something to tell about his young wife or their infant daughter, of whom he was so proud. But as soon as he believed I could be trusted Pauli began to tell me what he had learned from listening on his radio to the BBC.

I guess there was always risk to a Pole who broke the German law about radio, but it is unfortunate it had to happen to Pauli at this time. One morning there was no Pauli to collect me from the marshalling point, and I was detailed off to work on the surface assembling wagons. It was soon learned that Pauli had been arrested but some three weeks later, before we heard both he and his wife had been taken from their little cottage early that morning, the door nailed up and a notice fixed to it forbidding anyone to enter under pain of execution, and the young couple thrown into the cells. Only when released and permitted to make their way home did they discover the real nature of their punishment, for the infant had been left in its crib to die of starvation.

When John, I and thirty others were loaded into a Wehrmacht truck for the long and circuitous trip to Kozle on the Odra River, we had no idea what lay ahead - only that we were glad to go! Although by this time pretty hardened to German brutality in Poland, it was still with great horror when being driven through the city of Lodz to see the rotting remains of a body hanging from every lamppost along its streets. The stench was appalling, the people prohibited from removing any bodies under penalty of death if caught. Our guards pointed out what the consequences were for Poles who rioted over lack of food!

It is not difficult to find much for which to be thankful about the paper factory at Kozle where we were to spend the next three years; if not always because some of the things we had to endure there, and we would all look back upon the quite remarkable bonds of mate ship that developed around John and I. In the order in which they became accepted, they were: Wykeham Vaughan, War Office draughtsman; Malcolm Adam, University student; Walter (Wally) Watson, Manager, Fruit & Veg at Fortnum & Masons; Jack Darrow, N.Z. Electrician; Bluey Horsfall, N.Z. Railways; Shorty Parker, N.Z Railways; and "Dig" Digweek, Professional Burglar.. John Stanger was an ex-regular soldier who had served in India and Palestine but recalled to the Forces from his job as a country postman in Lincolnshire.

Unhappily, Shoorty Parker died whilst we were on the "long" march of 1500 miles from Poland through Czechoslovakia, over the Carpathian Mountains into Austria to Nuremburg and back to Czechoslovakia, where our remaining eight and a number of N.Z. comrades rode on U.S. heavy tanks eastwards towards the Russian advance and "took over" a village near the Czechoslovakian border.

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## **A very aged prisoner**

The paper factory at Kozle on the banks of the Odra River in Poland used only pine logs of two metres in length and varying diameter up to thirty inches - rather heavy! Upon arrival we were put to work unloading these from open rail waggons on a siding and carrying them on our shoulders to skips on a small gauge railway for the internal factory network; it was dirty and heavy work for sixteen hours a day, daylight or darkness. The tree bark played havoc with our by now, well worn battle dress blouses, so we generally worked stripped to the waist using a pad of paper to protect our skin. However, I had managed to "acquire" an ancient and filthy trilby hat with a matching in age and condition jacket at the coal mine which now stood me in good stead. Rather strangely, I was allowed to produce this outfit and wear it! I suppose it was unusual to see such a paragon of up-to-date fashion working among prisoners of war, but I had also grown a long and rather straggly beard which for reasons I cannot explain, was well streaked with grey! The temptation to show off my thespian abilities was irresistible and I would stagger about from wagon to wagon, fall to the ground under the weight of the log on my shoulders only to somehow manage to climb wearily to my tottering feet to gamely struggle on... to the great amusement of the simple minds of the other prisoners and complete disregard of our Kraut intelligentsia. However, after my superb performance had been presented, non-stop for two days, it evidently caught the attention of someone in the mill office block away across the huge open space where we worked, for an attractive, upwardly mobile, young lady executive secretary (we could tell by the way she walked) came across to one of our guards with a not to say I was obviously far too old to be doing such demanding work and was to be taken to something more suitable. Of course, I only became aware of my promotion as I was being taken to the electricians' shop, where I found myself appointed executive hygiene officer ... and handed a broom! I was the envy of the camp!!

I restrained any inclination to become big-headed about this rapid rise, but by using my influence with the over-foreman managed to get Jack Darrow transferred as well as Wyke Vaughan, so we had access to tools and other equipment, as well as "cushy" conditions. When it was realised that behind that grey hirsuteness was hidden a young man more usually to be found resting in some dark corner than pushing the broom (and morsels of sausage and bread were mysteriously disappearing from the electrical staff's rest room) I was again moved, this time to carry tools and fetch and carry for a Silesian tradesman called Mocha. More will be said about Mocha later, but suffice here to only say he claimed to be a communist and godfather of the local mafia so we were well matched.

It was this access the three of us had to factory materials (and Mocha's helpful guidance) which enabled us to construct what we proudly claimed to be the best and most up-to-date still for distilling alcohol in all Poland. This great accomplishment was not brought to fruition without incident!

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## **Distillers by Appointment to the Reich**

Having nothing but the best in mind, and not content with the crude small bowl-bigger bowl developed by lesser mortals, we decided we had to have at least eight feet of high grade copper tubing which we knew could be found in the store. But there was the difficulty of getting it back to camp unnoticed by the guards, who proved difficult over anything other than waste timber for our stoves. I think it was Jack who had the bright idea of heating it and winding it around my body under my clothes. Always the hero - or mug - I put my trust in my comrades to be careful, only to find that trust sadly and painfully misplaced! This only became evident when, standing in the nude in the gloom of the furnace room, Wyke and Jack proceeded to wind the wretched stuff around me to the acrid smell of scorching flesh!! Once begun, there was no turning back, so, unable to bellow my disgust for fear of drawing attention, I could only resort to pulling faces!

There was no trouble getting back to camp, even though I appeared to have put on weight, but I have to say, I was not impressed by the problems that arose from getting the tubing off when it had gone cold, nor the hilarity and lack of concern shown by the others when insisting that the condition of the perfect bend was more important than my well-being.

By the time my wounded pride and scorched flesh had recovered, we did have an imposing still, which, when supplied with fermented sugar, raisins, dates etc., from Red Cross parcels, was found to produce alcohol of proof way off the Richter Scale! It was used in lighters and guaranteed to take off the most persistent rust. When every brew was complete - in the early hours of course, with blankets over the windows - a decision was always reached to allow it to age to perfection ... but the Devil was always there urging us to bring the containers down from the ceiling cavity - just to taste. We might have become distillers to the Reich had not the wretched New Zealanders, always subject to excesses, gone on an almighty binge one Sunday with the filthy sixth grade muck they produced then proceeded to throw things over the wire at the guards whilst performing hakes in the nude. Obviously impressed by all this, the Commandant called for reinforcements from the Kosle army barracks to come and look when, with their customary lack of humour, bayonets were fixed, shots fired and we were finally left to care for our bruises and mop up the blood! It was far more effective than joining Alcoholics Anonymous!!

### Footnote:

A surprising number of PoW's went either blind or off their rockers from drinking the frightful concoctions produced in camps.

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## **A friend in need**

Mention has been made earlier to one Mocha, the Silesian electrician to whom I was allotted as offsider at Kozle; he and I got on well, mainly perhaps because I was willing to hide the materials he wished to steal, down amongst the thousands of log-stacks assembled along the river bank land owned by the factory, from where, at night, he could remove them. These stacks were erected by prisoners, so my presence amongst them raised no suspicion.

In effect we were comrades in crime, but I did not realise just how much our relationship meant to him until Christmas 1943, at which time the whole camp was being punished by reduced rations and with-held parcels. It was, as usual, bitterly cold with heavy snow on the ground and still falling, when the fellows near one of the barred windows in the brick building heard a low voice calling from the darkness outside and going to see, were handed a parcel with instructions it was "for the Bottle." The others knew that meant me, so this parcel was duly delivered, and found to contain bread, sausage, a cake together with a small bottle of schnapps!

Why this was so extraordinary is because to get to that window, Mocha had to slip through the main gate and across the entrance yard, passing the guards' quarters! Had he been caught, he would have undoubtedly been handed over to the Gestapo for punishment ... and that would have ended up with his death! Mocha always claimed he was a communist and would welcome the arrival of the Russians, but I fear their practice of shooting first and asking later could well have proved fatal.

## **Offsider to the Pope**

No doubt a psychologist would diagnose the trouble as frustrated religious mania which, when it first evidenced itself, compelled me to complete and submit to my Commanding Officer an application to become an Army Padre, when a notice to the effect that there were postings vacant appeared on the Regimental Notice Board just after the outbreak of war in 1939. No doubt I would have been accepted and fitted with a back-to-front collar had I not answered the question which asked "what denomination" by filling in "no special preference." As it was Colonel MacCartney failed to forward it, perhaps from a fit of pique after seeing my other applications to be a dog handler, radio operator or military policeman. However, my chance came in the prison camp when a complete change of guards occurred and Wykeham Vaughan and I both had our heads promptly shaved so as to leave only a tonsure ring of hair, and began administering confession in a quiet corner of the compound, bestowing blessings upon the unholy amongst us, and generally behaving in a priestly manner. After all, we were completely celibate and used to fasting so already halfway there!

As expected, this caught the eyes of the guards and it was not long before our trusty camp dolmetcher (a guy who spoke excellent German) was called to explain. In the expected fashion of a true German whose right arm would fly up in a national

salute (which when seen by one or more prisoners brought the instant cry “shit that high?”) the Commandant believed the story that we were Jesuit priests inducted against our will into the fighting forces and even went along with a service conducted on the following Sunday. Wyke and I might have been priests until this day had not our congregation insisted in singing “We’re going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line” when called for a lusty rendering of “Hail to the King.”

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## The Gun Shearer

When at dawn one day I was ordered out of the hut to be told to accompany a single guard out of the compound and through the gates onto the road, I had absolutely no idea where I was being taken, or what it was all about, so was more relieved than anything else when my personal bodyguard with rifle and bayonet at the ready was friendly enough to inform me that I was off to shear sheep, the property of “Herrn Direktor.” The awe in his voice when speaking those two words set my mind at rest immediately for it was clearly a kind of Royal Command. When we reached our destination I understood, for the house was very large and imposing. We proceeded around the back, where he knocked on a door which was opened by two highly desirable maidens at the sight of which the guard’s eyes stuck out like organ stops; he knew when he was on a good thing. I would have felt the same way, but my eyes had been drawn to a grand vegetable garden which, I felt, offered rather more promise to a lowly PoW. At that stage it all felt like Christmas had come early, but disillusion quickly followed, for the maids then took us to see what lay in wait down over the vast area of lawn.

Never having been much of a man for mutton, I had grown to maturity with pictures of baby lambs frolicking amongst the daisies ... the two creatures to which I was presented turned out to be horrible great monsters, covered in filthy wool, from the nostrils of which I would not have been surprised to see flames emerging! My legs told me to run but thoughts of the vegies (and the presence of the maidens) held them in check. Pretending an experience I did not possess, I pointed out the two creatures would have to be rounded up and put into one of the sheds before I could administer to their needs. So, for a good half hour the four of us proceeded to run all over the garden until, finally, we had them locked inside what I had already selected as my shearing shed. When I asked what implement was to be provided to carry out removal of the wool, one of the girls produced a pair of kitchen scissors, which I knew enough about to point out that I was used to more suitable equipment, but would carry on regardless. I sensed the guard had only one thing on his mind, for which he wanted a little privacy, so made the point that once I and my two companions were in the shed, the door should not be opened as a half-shorn sheep must never be exposed to the elements.

Let me here give a word of advice to anyone considering locking themselves in a ten by four shed, with two overgrown, nervous sheep ... DON’T!!

My companions back at the camp had often said to me “You’re in the shit now,” but until that day it was not an experience I had suffered so literally! Sheep pellets may appear innocuous enough but when wrestling such creatures in a life or death struggle up to the ankles in the stuff, it is somewhere between a skating rink and a mud bath. Undaunted by the challenge, and determined to win no matter the cost, I finally succeeded in getting one on its back and was able to tie its legs securely so that it lay supine whilst, with experience gained, I entered the ring against the other. When both were trussed up and I was able to take a breather ... and, believe me, the state in which all three of us and the floor were in, did not encourage breathing - I pondered exactly how best to remove the eight inches of so of matted muck, supposed to be wool, from all sides of the creatures. It was like a revelation! In a flash of light I saw it all. Tie the front legs to the hook on the back of the door and then hoist the back legs up by rope thrown over a roof strut! In no time at all the first patient was swinging gently, and, it seemed to me, quite relaxed. I got to work! Discovering just where the wool ended and the flesh began was a problem I never really resolved, so the results of my toil produced a growing mountain of small tufts (mostly attached to skin) floating in a sea of blood. It was harder work than I anticipated, and the atmosphere in the shed was a bit overpowering, so I was only about half finished with the first when a knock on the door and a young female voice announced that lunch was served and waiting outside. Not anxious that proceedings should be witnessed, I reluctantly asked it be left for me to collect when I was ready, which meant waiting until the footsteps died away. The shock when I opened the door and saw what waited was overwhelming! Such a repast had not sullied my lips for nearly four years and I wasted no time getting stuck in, whilst mentally promising my mates back in camp a share of the next day’s offerings.

By the time the first of my patients was finished and I had lowered the result - which rather resembled a sheep created by Van Gogh - to the ground where he/she was clearly content to just lay with eyes closed, I was able to await my escort and contemplate a good day’s labour. When I heard his footsteps, I nipped smartly outside, closing the door behind me, and again emphasised the need to not open the shed for fear of the result. He was easily persuaded to return to the servants’ area to make sure they understood and just as eager that another full day’s work was necessary.

Upon my return into the compound, I was surprised to see the Kiwi contingent awaiting me but began to understand when they cheered the return of their country’s top shearer! The rotten stinkers had volunteered my name when they had been asked by the Commandant if there was a shearer amongst their number! Their laughter soon turned to envy when I described the voluptuous nature of the two maidens, my mid-day meal and the promise of an even better tomorrow! Next day was more or less a repeat performance except that conditions in the shed deteriorated even more and I carried out the promised raid on the vegetable garden, lifting everything growing beneath the ground and sticking the green tops back in the earth to disguise their disappearance.

All in all, it was a fruitful exercise. Had I known how to make blood sausage and taken a bottle or two, it might have been even better. I suppose I always knew there would be consequences, so was hardly surprised to be reluctantly dragged into the

factory and to the offices, where I was projected into a room to face the Commandant and a very worked-up Herr Direktor waving a revolver and shouting "Sabotage, sabotage." Thankfully, the Commandant appreciated the questions that would have been asked, had the Direktor's wish that I be shot on the spot, would bring, so personally undertook to see I was adequately punished for so heinously treating fine specimens of Aryan sheep ... and, of course, Herr Direktor less directly ... so for good faith, I was given a hiding whilst he shouted encouragement, then dragged back to nurse my bruises in the lock-up ... which wasn't as the blokes outside had a key!!!

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## **Walls do not a prison make**

Although a large timber hut was added in the compound later, upon our arrival at the Kozle Paper Factory, we all spent the first year or so in a three storey brick building with unglazed, barred windows, originally a kind of warehouse. In the centre of the middle level, there was a small room with a heavy wooden door and now windows which the guards recognised as suitable for a punishment cell. It measured about ten feet by five and was very cold in winter. What the Germans never knew, was that within thirty minutes of it being used the first time, a key had been made that readily turned the lock!! Always better to keep such conveniences to oneself, nothing was ever done which might have alerted our captors to the true situation, but anyone locked in knew there was help on the way. With that knowledge safely tucked away, it was only a matter of acting whenever a Kraut opened the door!!

## **The Kozle irregulars**

On the far side of the Odra River was the small town of Kozle, with its German Army barracks and nearby a little lazarette staffed by prisoner medical men and used only for very sick or injured prisoners of war. As well as one British Army Doctor, there was a Yugoslavian Professor of Surgery, who saw this as an opportunity to experiment, and, three medical orderlies from the Royal Army Medical Corps. Medical supplies provided by the Red Cross invariably failed to get to their destination, so there was usually no anaesthetics and only paper dressings and bandages of the kind being used by the Wehrmacht. It was hardly a holiday resort, although on the occasion I was sent there as a longer term patient, after my fingers had been repeatedly broken by a German Hauptmann (Captain) suffering from unhappy memories of the Russian front, I was pleased to be admitted! Each fortnight, those at our camp at the paper factory considered sick were sent along the road on our side and walked across the bridge over the river, to this lazarette for attention, under escort of two guards. It was not a duty the guards enjoyed, so it invariably fell to two simple minded Austrian peasants in uniform ... and we knew this.

When news reached us of the capitulation of Italy, Wykeham and I decided something should be done to rub it into the local population, so arranged to take advantage of this rather slack fortnightly excursion. Arrangements were made for more malingers than usual and for myself, Wykeham and a Scottish Highlander who possessed both a well-worn kilt and a set of bagpipes (how he got them was a mystery) to be included. As Commanding Officer of the R.R.R. (Royal Regiment of Roughs) and being suitably attired in my freshly laundered white Polish cavalry jacket, riding breeches and top boots, topped off with swagger stick and officer's hat, I scored the questionable honour of heading, what was intended, whilst Wyke was to act as my second in command. Care had to be taken to actually depart from the camp without drawing unwanted attention to ourselves - especially the bagpipes - but all went well. As usual our two guards took up their customary position at a leisurely pace at the rear ... smoking of course.

We did not make any unusual move until on the bridge with the town in sight at the other end. Then I moved out front, with my loyal piper immediately behind me, Wyke took a position off to one side, and, on my command, we all stepped out at attention and at a very brisk pace! Bagpipes at full blast, screeching and wailing - guards left struggling far behind to catch up - we entered Kozle like the vanguard of a conquering force! As anticipated, our arrival did not go unnoticed and whilst dignity suffered somewhat from our increased pace in order to keep ahead of the guards, who ended up almost running and shouting orders frantically, the whole affair did cause a bit of a stir. Especially was this noticeable at the barracks! There were unpleasant repercussions, not least the disappearance of the pipes, which I guess went to that place all good bagpipes go when having carried out their duty.

## **Collared**

When our accommodation was extended with the addition of a long timber hut divided into twelve rooms each to sleep 16 men in double bunks, we - that is our combine - saw it as an opportunity to have us a room of our own in which to enjoy privacy. At each end of the new building there was an entrance space, and it was at one such space we looked to fulfil this end. In the course of the construction, enough material to partition one of these spaces found its way into the punishment cell to keep it away from prying eyes and the day the hut was finished, we went to work to erect what Jack Darrow assured us would fill the bill. Under his expert supervision, the chosen area was partitioned off, with a sliding door to save space ... and in we went. Unfortunately, it was only large enough to hold two double bunks, which meant some of us had to move into the adjoining shared room but it did give us a communal place in which to all eat together, play bridge and cribbage ... and plan!! The bunks became occupied by Mac & Wally, Wyke and myself.

It had not gone unnoticed by us that our end of the hut was within arms reach of the wire, whilst being built on high piles (to prevent tunnelling) and that our window was almost at the level of the top of the perimeter fence. An invitation!

The ballot decided Wyke and I should be the first to venture out to see what could be found in the way of material assets and a cautious venture to the town proved fruitful. Among other things we returned with three smallish rabbits, removed from hutches. Germans just love to keep rabbits for the table and locals were no exception. Clambering back whilst carrying our ill-gotten spoils proved infinitely more difficult than leaving and we were exhausted and relieved to arrive safely, although, the risks were far less than might be supposed.

The addition of three rabbits to the camp's population caused some mirth, and envy, so that they had to be guarded night and day. We used to poke and prod them regularly to establish their potential eating qualities, until the first was ready for the chop. Baked along with Red Cross bacon, it was food for the Gods ... and the skin went to add an imposing fur collar to my greatcoat, a kind of badge of prestige I always believed. The Camp cartoonist never failed to include it in his efforts to depict me. (See enclosed drawing).

## **No longer a place to hang about**

Latrines at work camps served more than one purpose, for they were places for self contemplation, for lively debate, as well as the news centre where someone always seemed to have the latest information about the outside world, but sadly, they were also the last thing seen by those amongst us, who succumbed to depression, or had received the dreaded "Dear John" letters which removed motivation for survival. For it was behind the latrines the suicides inevitably occurred. That they were crude goes without saying; usually no more elaborate than a couple of timber struts over which one perched exposed to the elements.

At Kozle just such a contraption was built out to overhang a wide man-made ditch leading to the river so that the water level was of the same height. It was also the abode of giant water rats, as big as large cats, in ever growing numbers as news of Red Cross food was spread around the river. Sitting in a row discussing some erudite subject or other, conversations were against the background sound of squeaking and snarling and the plop of bodies falling back into the mire having failed to jump high enough to reach the targets. So familiar was this, that we would have missed it had it not been present. Animal lovers amongst us were sometimes known to sit there for hours, conducting some kind of study of rat behaviour.

It was a fine Spring Sunday morning, with the week's washing completed and bodies stretched out around the compound enjoying the few hours of leisure allowed, when the calamity occurred. The dreadful screams which split this peaceful scene were gut-wrenching! As we all leaped to our feet, out of the latrine bounded a wild figure, to go madly jumping like a demented kangaroo around the compound shrieking "The bloody bastards have bitten my balls off!!" I clearly recall thinking to myself 'now that is a nice piece of alliteration under stress.' The more personal significance of what happened to this poor creature hit us like a bombshell and there was an urge to attest to the damage. After quite a chase, several of the sturdier fellows captured the injured party, forcibly wrestling him to the ground so that the rest of us could confirm the true extent of the risk that now faced us all. What we saw caused a palpable shudder to ripple through the very heart of the camp! Had he been more of an entrepreneur, the poor chap could have amassed a fortune at ten fags a look, but then he had other things on his mind.

For a while, fresh green shoots grew over the usually well worn path leading to the latrine, and a terrible epidemic of constipation brought bulging cheeks and strained expressions to us all ... but then, one wonderful morning, out into the sunlight came marching a metal enclosed figure, striding boldly like an ancient knight in shining armour, in the direction of the dreaded latrine. The news spread like a bush-fire! In seconds a crowd had gathered to watch with bated breath as he strode through the entrance. Every vantage point became crowded to watch our hero mount to take up the position that had instilled such fear into us all .....and we waited!! It was like the welcome sound of soup falling into a dixie, to once again listen to the cacophony of unsuccessful leaping and squabbling. Immediately there was a rush to find empty tins appropriately sized for one's more personal statistics. Of course there were then the macho types who went around offering to swap cigarettes for five pound jam tins, when everyone knew a six ounce capacity would have been more than enough. In a way, a minor tragedy, but something that forced us all into the era of the Personal Private Parts Protector, which produced some truly marvellous pieces of engineering ingenuity which, under other circumstances, might have earned fortunes.

## **An unholy pilgrimage**

Only years later at the Nuremburg trials was it learned that it was an order over Hitler's signature at the end of 1944, which was responsible for thousands of captives, including PoW's and those from some concentration camps still capable of standing up, being driven out onto the roads leading south, to be walked throughout the winter months towards the Tyrol, there to be eliminated if the Allies refused to allow the Fuhrer and his top henchmen, to go to sanctuary in South America. It was a ridiculous scheme, always doomed to fail. From the outset, absolutely no provision was made for anyone, even the guards, who had to walk with their prisoners. Their orders, which were never withdrawn or amended, were to proceed to the huge natural basin at Beyreuth by back roads only.

At Kozle we were only a very short distance from Auschwitz (Oswiecim) the evil and notorious concentration camp from which a considerable number of inmates remained only a short distance ahead - leaving a continuous trail of corpses, dead from exposure, bayoneting or skulls smashed, for us to pass. Reports of their number varied according to US and other Allied versions, but, all of which were in the thousands, of which only one person to my knowledge survived to reach England. But that is another story.

We were 'roused' from sleep in the early hours of 24th December 1944, by the camp guards, augmented by the soldiers from the barracks, to be told to be prepared to take to the snow covered roads in one hour. We had been able to hear the distant sound of heavy explosions coming from an advancing Russian front for several days, so we were prepared for any eventuality, but had we known we were to be walking for the next four months and cover in excess of fifteen hundred miles, during the worst of winter, we would still have felt unprepared! What lay ahead was to bring many trials and tribulations, not least the sad death of Shorty Parker, who was to die of pneumonia (and had to be left lying in the snow) as we climbed the lower slopes of the Carpathian Mountains.

There are so many stories that could be told about that time, killing and eating chickens raw, being used as shields for petrol tankers whilst attacked by U.S. P47 fighter planes and consuming bread and sausage soaked in the blood of half a German officer which landed amongst us during the biggest Allied air raid on Nuremberg, also the hundreds of naked females imprisoned in the Bata shoe factory in Bratislava, amongst them. It was at Bratislava that our small group was turned off the road, into a disused factory, to remain overnight, because of some kind of trouble ahead. Only after we had been driven in, was it realised, there were six Czechoslovakian workers inside ripping out timber etc., when they were ordered out, Dig Digweed and I seized the opportunity to tag on behind and were allowed to exit through the big gates onto the road. The workers realised we had joined them and said nothing, but were nevertheless, eager not to become embroiled in anything further once outside.

We had no intention of trying to escape, but did hope that we might be able to collect eatables from houses since, as we had come through the city, the locals had shouted good wishes and shown every sympathy for the state we were in.

We knew better than to go towards the city centre and proceeded to knock on doors and ask for food as soon as we were a safe distance away. All went well for quite a few such calls and we had amassed quite a lot of bread, cheese and sausage when we approached a cottage and knocked boldly on the door, which was opened by a local in his shirt sleeves. Opening directly into the living room we proceeded to present our spiel, but, as we were doing so, saw a German soldier sitting in front of the fire, boots off and feet stretched out to the warmth! For a few tense seconds it was a static tableau, the poor Czech was frozen, not knowing what the hell to do, whilst the soldier was also glued to his chair and looking over his shoulder at us. Then Dig nudged me and directed my eyes to just inside the door, and there, leaning against the wall, within easy reach of Dig's right hand, was the guard's rifle, bayonet fixed!! That we had seen it determined our reception ... the soldier told the Czech to give us what we wanted, trying his best to smile at us. We left, deciding the time had come to return to the factory, but then made one more call as we were passing another small cottage. There the door was opened by two old crones - looking like witches without broomsticks - who promptly dragged us inside and, gabbling all the time, did their physical best to get us to descend into a cellar through a trapdoor! Like the children in Grimm's fairy stories, we suspected their intentions were not honourable but had to literally fight our way out into the open again. Arriving back at the factory, we had no difficulty persuading the guard on the gate that he would be better to let us back in than to have to explain to his superiors how we had been allowed out! I think he was too astounded to have two escapees asking to be allowed in to hesitate! The rest of our combine were suitably enraptured with the success of our venture. Hail the conquering heroes bringing gifts!

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## **The one that got away**

One day, not long after beginning on our long trek southwards, when we had already passed so much evidence of what lay ahead on the road, we turned off for the night into a walled yard attached to a remote farm. In the centre of this yard was a large pile of manure - a midden. As soon as we had "staked" our place and while the rest of us were getting things organised, Bluey and Dig went off to reconnoitre the lay of the land. Bluey came back in a hurry to tell us that he could see a human foot visible poking out of the midden! We all went to investigate, and sure enough, there was a foot. We set about excavating and soon pulled out what we had already come to expect, a skeletal figure, garbed in the usual black and white striped cotton shift, absolutely terrified of course. Reassuring the mind was not easy, and by this time, all the rest of our prisoner contingent knew and had gathered around. In a way, what followed, was a remarkable example of sympathy towards another in adversity, for in no time at all, our find was cleaned up, wrapped up in as much warm things as necessary, and being plied with hot drinks and food, which had to be administered slowly. He proved to be a Polish Jew from Auschwitz who had feigned dead under a covering of snow the night before, and found warmth in the midden. His recovery was miraculous. Next day, and for the first few days thereafter, he needed some help, but, dressed in an outfit made up from contributions from us all, he looked no different to the rest of us, and was fed by contributions from all. The last we saw of him, was with the others by the roadside, after our contingent had been overtaken and released by a column of U.S. tanks advancing towards Czechoslovakia and as we and the Kiwis climbed aboard to ride the tanks until a suitable village was found for us to "take over." We all had weapons taken from the Germans who had guarded us. Weeks later after our spell in a forward U.S. hospital, we climbed down from our ambulance plane at a reception air-strip in central England, to see the fortunate Pole from Auschwitz already being interrogated in the hangar set up for the purpose. I wonder what the interrogators made of a Polish Jew dressed in American fatigues and unable to speak English (except for swear words!) and what became of him?

## **Waggon and stove**

Apart from the immeasurable importance of the comradeship that had developed from sharing everything and being so close to one another, the next most significant things to our survival during the four months of walking through the winter of 1944/45

were the ingenious stove made by Jack Darrow and the dog/goat waggon we acquired through the co-operation of my factory friend Mocha.

The stove was made from empty tins and had a short tunnel, inside which was a hand turned fan, leading to a confined 'hob' on which a can could stand. Quite a minute amount of any fuel would bring the can of liquid to the boil in a surprisingly short space of time with the fan being turned to create a draft. The design was copied by many and provided the means of heating food and drink throughout our time on the road.

The waggon, which was about eight feet long, on four wheels and fitted with a single shaft, was obtained for us by Mocha, who then brought it into the factory in pieces on the pretext he intended to carry out repairs in the workshop. It was then smuggled by us back into camp for hiding in the ceiling cavity. Along with these two items, a large tarpaulin was invaluable.

These steps were taken before the march began, when we first realised defeat of the Nazis would not be long delayed and it became obvious the Russian advance would inevitably lead to our movement. We even imagined ourselves free of the guards and trying to make our own way through the chaos! As well as amassing as much in the way of provisions as could be carried, we also worked out a plan by which to maximise the benefits of what we had. Four of us were detailed off to act as 'horses,' with two in reserve to keep watch either side when not on duty. Two others to act as 'outriders' and responsible for making sure we got "our share" of whatever was there to be got along the way, whilst I (as Quartermaster and Cook) kept look out and did whatever else was needed. When the time came to put it all in to practice, it worked like a charm! When the alarm came and we were ordered to turn-out ready to take to the road on one hour's notice, we were - because the waggon had to be assembled and packed - the last to appear from the hut into the open. The German Commandant nearly had apoplexy when he saw the waggon and bellowed we could not take it ... so all nine of us promptly sat down and simply refused move without it! There was a bit of thumping and pricking for a while, but, the sound of explosions in the far distance, which had been getting steadily louder over the past forty-eight hours, had great persuasive force, and, desperate to get moving, he finally relented ... and off we all went, through the gates and headed south.

In darkness and with snow a foot thick on the ground, it was heavy going for the waggon and we were lucky to have the brawn and numbers to measure up to the task. The winter days were fortunately short, for we were kept moving from daylight to dark, although it also proved a blessing that those guarding us, chose not to overtake and pass the ex-inmates from Auschwitz ahead of us, for their pace was extremely slow. Each evening, as the time to be turned off the road into some convenient and suitable field or other enclosure for the night came close, the two outriders would make their way to the front of the column so as to be in position to grab any position that offered shelter, then hold it against all comers until the waggon arrived. The very first task, followed religiously, was to remove and spread the tarpaulin, get the stove going under a can of snow ... and sit in a circle to enjoy a hot drink and a smoke! For this communal smoke, a corn-cob pipe was filled just once, and then passed around with each of us having a single puff before passing it on. We always sat in the same order and started each evening with the one who had first missed out the previous day. I have to say that during those really difficult months, when we rationed ourselves to an absolute minimum and steadily lost weight and strength, there was never one occasion when anyone of us complained or said anything to regret later. Though I say it, it was a remarkable performance. Even when threatened with the most dire consequences - once for being caught stealing bottled fruit from the cellar of a farmhouse (in which guards were sleeping in watches off duty) and later with blood on our clothes from chickens whose heads had been torn off before being eaten raw - those amongst us under threat became saved only by the fact that the rest stood with them and the guards were reluctant to shoot all nine.

## THE FINAL GLORY

### Part 1

Finally finding freedom after a squadron of American tanks overtook us whilst scouting ahead of the force from which they came, it took only a salvo of shots to make the guards drop their weapons ... which we immediately recovered. The tanks commander gave us permission to ride with them in preference to remaining where we were, so the Kiwis and our lot decided to carry on with them until a village was found which we could "take over." We all then dropped off at a village on the German side of the border with Czechoslovakia, not far from Pilsner ... the locals took one look at the ragged-arsed, half starved lot the tanks had deposited on their doorsteps ... and rushed indoors, closing the doors behind them! I do not blame them!

It took little persuasion for them to fall in line with our requests. As anyone who knows Kiwis might guess, they immediately decided the pub was to be their base but we decided we would be more comfortable and more likely to rest up a short distance away at the school buildings and headmaster's house at the crown of the hill. For reasons we never understood, the headmaster promptly fled with his family down into the village, so we made ourselves comfortable. Armed and with the Kiwis, who always had to show off, riding horses whilst we travelled in the requisitioned baker's van, no farms were safe from our visits for miles around - we lived off the hog's back! The road past the school was used by advancing US Army and we soon learned that by making rude signs and shouting inflammatory remarks, a shower of chicken in cans, beer in cans, coffee in cans, cigarettes and cigars in cans ... and chocolate ... was sure to be launched at us. One day a captain even stopped to promise we would be collected next day - but nothing transpired. Then, as we were sitting out front in our arm chairs, enjoying ten o'clock coffee and cakes, baked by the baker, a motor cycle combination pulled up and a large gentleman in uniform came across to enquire "And who the flaming heck are you guys?"

We told him we had been prisoners of war and for how long, he told us to be ready to be picked up the next day. Having gone through that before, we were not exactly complimentary about Yankee promises, and told him so. He seemed so

understanding, he was asked if he would like to join in a cup of American coffee ... and he agreed. Whilst he was partaking, John carried another cup down to the combination driver and remained there talking. After they had driven away, John came back up the path to inform us that our guest was some American General named Patton and was in command of the American Army, members of which we had come to know from a throwing distance! To our surprise, a whole fleet of ambulances arrived next day to cart us all away back westwards to a US Forward Base Hospital (in tents) near Nuremberg. Arriving there and despite our repeated shrieks and yells, we were stripped, scrubbed, disinfected, clothed in pyjamas, and, put to bed under strict orders to remain there!! To our absolute horror, at the head of each bed was the order "No solids to be fed"!

## Part 2

Prison life for five years tends to produce cynics. Had it been otherwise, I might have taken steps later to have my lips declared a National Treasure ... perhaps even a Sacred Site ... as the result of the amazing honour bestowed upon me (and some others, but they don't count) whilst in hospital. The day dawned with an air of excitement permeating the atmosphere and by the feverish activity, with our beds being made and remade time after time, continually being asked to clean ourselves up and the continual stream of pushed up brass which kept inspecting each of us, we knew something BIG was in the wind. I will not say it was an anti-climax when a huge mob of cameramen and their bum boys entered with cameras wurring to herald the entrance of no other than Marlene Dietrich, for directly behind her cam a smartened up orderly carrying a tray of doughnuts. It was probably a disappointment that our eyes became fixed only on the doughnuts, but then those were extraordinary times!! When this entrancing sight made it's way to stand beside my bed, my lips and mouth began to salivate at the expectation and no price would have been to great to pay to wrap them around one of the doughnuts. Unfortunately, there was a price to pay first so I had to resign myself to a pungent inhalation of heady perfume and make-up whilst a mouth was pressed to mine, with a determination that, somehow, seemed to lack passion. Perhaps this was because my head had been forced into a position from which Marlene was able to look towards the lenses rather than into my eyes.

Romantic though it all was, I rather think we both had our own agendas ... mine was more concerned with the doughnuts! Whatever! All was well when I received my award, and she turned to her next victim - John Stanger. Perhaps someone should have warned Marlene, for John was never one to confuse his priorities! As her face descended towards him, he looked her straight in the eyes and said rather loudly, "Just give me the doughnut and I'll wait to get home and kiss my own granny." To say there followed a stunned silence is an understatement; the hand raised to slap John's chops only resisted the impulse upon realisation the cameras were still whirring but our visitor turned on her heel and departed! The truly sad thing was neither John nor the others got their doughnuts! In his individual case, John gained other benefits, for he became the absolute hero of all the female staff ... and just what went on behind screens which went up around his bed was the envy of us all!

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## Return of the Veteran

Much is heard these days of stress and mental trauma suffered in war, but in 1945, such thoughts played no part in anyone's reckoning! Back in England again my first 24 hours were taken up completely by identification checks, interrogation, ablutions, disinfecting, medicals that seemed only to be for the purpose of ensuring I could still eat, walk, talk and dress myself. This was followed by extensive form filling included in which was a curious invitation to apply for medals. In this regard and to save time, I simply entered the competition for everything, then finally came the important business of sewing onto our new uniforms all the bits and pieces of ribbon etc., required to let us know who and what we were. All that completed, travel passes and leave passes for six weeks were thrust into our hands ... and I found myself shoved out the door into a world I had forgotten, in a part of England unknown to me, with only directions which way to walk to find the railway station! Still weak and certainly far from being my brightest, I, like the others found even humping my kitbag a serious fatigue, but, trying to find my way across a country where identification signs had been removed, stopped by every redcap in sight to prove I was not a deserter and establishing the hundred connections that would take me, ultimately, to an address in London, I only knew from Gwen's letters, was something I could have well done without. It probably had more to do with being under the care of an Army specialist for many months than all the years spent abroad.

At the end of my leave, an order to report to the Intelligence Corps down on Salisbury Plain dragged me back to reality, and, given my German experience, I knew I was back in the Army when I was there, given a desk and a great heap of captured Japanese military stuff ... and expected to make sense of it! However, I fulfilled that duty with diligence and outstanding imagination ... and was never once faulted for my efforts to bring to an end the war in the East ... which went unrecognised.

Due for discharge in February 1946, I had to apply for a compassionate discharge in December and this was granted providing I signed away any claims to a war injury pension, but I did, of course, receive my fifty shilling grey, pin-stripe suit along with a couple of million others, to walk around, in more of a uniform than I had worn for the five years overseas!!

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Footnote:

In retrospect, and with the benefit of hindsight and some understanding of the world, the six years of war service, but particularly the five as a PoW, equipped me better for all that has happened with my (and Gwen's) life since, than anything else I can imagine and had I the choice of altering them, I would not. Some idea of what those times taught can be seen in the mutually agreed decision the eight of my comrades and I reached, as we first stood on the airstrip in England upon our arrival. We agreed the complete trust and confidence we felt for each other whilst prisoners and immediately after, could only suffer in the very different conditions of civilian lives and decided to keep those memories unaffected. It was agreed we would not seek to maintain contact from that moment. Half a century later, Gwen and I did go to see Jack Darrow at his home in N.Z. and were left greatly saddened, for not only had his badly wounded leg never come good but he was completely blind and has lost his wife who had only recently died.