

Extracts from a POW's diary

This is no hero's tale. Let me say at once my war effort never did bring out the best in me and whatever killing or anguish I caused as a front-line infantryman were always acts of sheer self-preservation and never for the glory of God or country. I never did leap with joy to the task of killing and maiming Germans for others; I never found my finest hour mainly because I never went looking for it. Millions of men were brave at that time but I have too much respect for their courage to be counted as one of their number.

By January 1944 I had already had my fair share of infantry work in its extreme application. I had fought from Algiers to Tunis, was wounded in April 1943 but not seriously enough to claim the privilege of escape back to England. About June 1943 my regiment had just returned from the island of Pantelleria which had proved to be a relatively simple invasion job and after leaving hospital I rejoined the unit and off we went to Tarranto at the toe of Italy. From there we took to the sea and invaded Naples where we stayed until January 1944. Casino became the gobstopper to military aspirations for taking Rome, and this caused Churchill to have one of his bright ideas. Anzio was conceived by him and others in far away places and executed by people like me. Landing was comparatively easy, at least, after you make due allowances for the American pilot of the boat who considered we had arrived when we scraped a sand bank about 400 yards from shore. Shortly after leaving the security of our little boat, we found ourselves in deep water which on occasions fully covered us. Progress was only possible by bouncing from the bottom and taking a slow motion leap forward for it was impossible to swim with our heavy gear. I was a sergeant and well recall the greatest concern for my platoon was to make sure the brewing up materials of tea, sugar and milk were landed safe and dry. My appointed tea basher did this by securing them to the bayonet on his rifle and as he made his way forward to the shore, every now and again all you could see above the water was the bayonet with the rations flying like a pennant, forging steadily ahead like a submarine with periscope.

The whole operation was under an American general who has since been criticised for being too cautious. Our task of making a beach head was fairly easy and when we arrived at our first objective which was a main road, my platoon formed up on a bridge which crossed over a railway and road. We were in time to take pot shots at German vehicles careering madly down the road in order to escape. The area was weakly defended and for the first time in my fighting life no one was taking pot shots back at us. History says we should have continued our advance but instead, we were made to secure our position and wait. It took the enemy about four days to assemble various regiments and one night they came at us. It was dreadful. The enemy infiltrated everywhere; platoons were isolated from companies, sections isolated from platoons and survivors of the section found themselves on their own. I was one of the survivors. That night, over 200 of my regimental friends were killed and approximately 400 of us were captured.

I lay there. I didn't know which way to go; I was lost and very lonely. Noise, bombs, bullets and shouting all created a fearful cacophony of sound and as I lay there the thin veneer of civilisation which for years had stood between me and what is the reality of me, cracked. I was in fear. A frightful, yellow, rotten, cowardly stinking fear you could almost smell; face in the earth, arms covering my head and shaking like a man on an automatic road drill. Came the dawn and I could hear around me nothing but German voices. Shelling and firing had ceased in the immediate area but I could hear it in the distance behind me as the Germans progressed in their efforts to push the allied forces back into the sea. Something primitive stirred urging me to escape from my fear. I was wriggling along a ditch all on my own when suddenly from a bush to my left and above me, a voice called out in English, "Hands up, you are my prisoner" and out stepped a German with a Luger revolver pointing in my direction. I could have blessed him because the responsibility for my survival was not now mine. As I stood up I could see over a large

area and several of my compatriots were in exactly the same situation as I and were being conducted behind the German lines. The Germans continued with their mopping up operation. I was passed over to a few Germans who were in a trench and was invited to take a swig at a bottle of wine which together with several other bottles had evidently been taken from one of the local vineyards.

A party of about 30 of us were led away to the rear and about half a mile further on, we were conducted through a wood and suddenly came to a clearing. In that clearing were hundreds of dead Germans and the Pioneer Corps were engaged in burying them. We were made to walk single file through the clearing and at the beginning I said to myself, "If I get to the other side of this clearing, I will live to be a old man". Our brigade consisted of the Gordon Highlanders, the Loyal Regiment and my own regiment, the North Staffordshire Regiment and we were a very mixed bag when we were loaded onto a lorry with sides and a tail of about 24 inches. We were crammed onto it with standing room only and hitched to this vehicle was a trailer which again was crammed full. It was bitterly cold and three Germans were on the driver's cab, fully armed and facing in our direction. Rome was about 18 miles away and just before we arrived, we were made to get off the lorries and march through the city where the Italians demonstrated their displeasure by spitting and throwing articles of refuse at us. Back on the lorries and two days later we arrived at Florence. Standing on a swaying lorry for two days is no fun and during this period our only food had been two lots of soup.

There were thousands of prisoners and we all clambered into railway wagons where it was standing room only and impossible to sit down. It was a fearful crush and the journey from Florence via the Brenner Pass to Muhlberg in winter time was an experience I describe as the worst journey of my life. The train took five days and at no time were we allowed out and no food or water issued. If you found yourself against the side of the wagon, your clothes literally froze to the woodwork and metal. Defaecation was where you stood. It was the most horrid and worst physical experience I have ever suffered. No food or water for five days gives a man an opportunity to reassess his priorities.

When we arrived at Muhlberg, we staggered from the train supporting those who suffered absolute exhaustion. Some died. A queue for soup lined up and I found myself desperately wanting to be at the head of the queue but three stripes still carried the responsibility to organise. If ever you want to see how quickly man can degenerate, then let him suffer that journey from Florence to Muhlberg. No one should sit in judgment on any man who has had that sort of experience.

And then into the prison and what a smell! That frightful stench of swedes. Fermenting swedes in clamps, swedes in the belly, swedes in the latrines. What an awful stench and the whole camp reeked of it. I have never eaten any of these since. Like many others my only receptacle for receiving soup was my tin hat which also served as a wash bowl, shaving mug, *etc.*, *etc.* I had long ago been stripped of most of my belongings.

I stayed at Muhlberg for about a month and during that time became familiar with that magical organisation "The Red Cross". One day I would like the opportunity to tell you of just what the Red Cross meant to me and it is to this wonderful organisation that I consider I owe my life. I have a personal charity box at home in which every evening, I put the odd coppers which have accumulated during the day. It is an open-topped box, and when collectors from various societies call at my door, I invariably say, "Take as much as you can get in one grab", but when the Red Cross call, I simply give them the lot plus a bit more. I and thousands of others owe this organisation the debt of my happiness and health that has been with me ever since those days. On two occasions at Muhlberg a distribution of food parcels was made on the basis of one to be shared between four people. The aims of the Red Cross was to let each prisoner have one complete parcel each week and although this quantity was dispatched from England, by

the time it had travelled to Portugal, through Spain, France, Holland and Germany, we never did enjoy the luxury of one parcel each week.

One day, all the NCOs were called together and then isolated. We were handcuffed and put on a train to Poland because it appeared NCOs were not for 'arbeit' and had to be isolated from other ranks. We were going to a camp that was for NCOs only. The handcuffs presented no difficulty because amongst us was a nail which quickly released the catch on the handcuff. We travelled for about a week but the journey was much more civilised and rations fairly regular than on my original train journey. On arrival at a place called Thorn where Copernicus was born, we were made to march from the railway yard to the camp. We passed groups of women who were mending roads under the supervision of German armed guards. It was now April and the sun warm but these women looked lean and hungry with despair on their faces and nothing on their feet. It was during my stay at Thorn that I accumulated a few personal belongings such as writing paper, a pencil and other possessions which were to become such treasures. I stayed in Poland until November when the weather was harsh, fierce and cold.

The Russians had been advancing several months and it was considered expedient to move us from this camp and we had another train journey right back to the heart of Germany at a place called Fallingbostel¹ near Hamburg. During my stay at Fallingbostel, our daily diet consisted mainly of potato soup, a rare slice of bread and as the Russians continued their advance, Red Cross supplies were so rare that on one occasion I remember sharing one food parcel with 19 others. The distribution of a parcel containing about 10 pounds of food called for the help of expert mathematicians who were dragooned into giving decisions on comparative weight and sizes. Woe betide the mathematician if in cutting a loaf of bread into 20 pieces due allowance wasn't made for the slope at each end that necessitated the slices at the extremes being slightly thicker than those in the centre where the loaf was at its highest point. Red Cross food was for distribution to the individual and no thought of communal arrangements for the whole camp ever occurred. We were generally in syndicates of four or six for heating soup and so on. There was insufficient fuel available and we had to make our own arrangements for heating food. Out of this necessity to try and obtain warm food, a contraption² was evolved which I refer to in my article "Exile and Embers".

At Fallingbostel, I took to trying to keep a diary of some kind and my notes are bound in an exercise book which I keep to this day. I also had the good fortune to obtain a book issued by the Red Cross and in it I got various prisoners to either draw, paint or make comment.

In February 1945 and out of a camp that was designed to cater for 14,000 but held 40,000 prisoners, about 5,000 of us were rounded up and told we were going to a new camp. With our few precious belongings, we left the camp expecting to go by train but the truth was, the Germans had nowhere to take us and we were marching aimlessly away from the advancing allies. We marched for days and some of you may have heard of this feat of endurance by exhausted and weakened men. The guards were trying to provide for our needs by living off the countryside and compelling farmers to issue potatoes *etc.* My last ration from the Germans was a handful of millet seed poured into the palm of one hand and transferred promptly to my mouth. Six of us were convinced that we couldn't carry on and that very day as we were lying along the roadside having a rest, on a given signal, we dashed away running over the fields as fast as we could. Rifle shots made us zig-zag but eventually we found the security of a wood and lived there for a week on raw potatoes which we raided at night from a farmer's clamp. We then decided we had to go towards our own front line and one night walked 28 kilometres and at dawn we saw the tracks of a bren carrier which evidently had come forward for

¹ see <http://www.fallingbostelmilitarymuseum.de/stalag/stalag.htm>

² A small wood stove made from ration tins that incorporated a hand-cranked air blower.

observation. Down by the track was a half-open packet of army biscuits which we quickly consumed and continued marching.

We stumbled across fields desperately hoping no one knew we were about. On the skyline we saw a typical English water carrier vehicle and shouting and waving we dashed towards it. Unkempt, but somehow or other clean shaven, we danced around the driver and his mate and hugged them until they couldn't breathe and rode into the camp astride the oval shaped water carrier. Our immediate concern was food and clean clothing which were soon provided in plenty.

A few days later we were flown from Celle to England and the pilot, bless him, did a slight detour. The day was beautiful and the detour took us along the Thames and then the pilot circled around the Houses of Parliament to give me a sight and memory I will never, never forget.

We landed at an aerodrome in Aylesbury and as we jumped off the aeroplane I stamped my two feet on the ground and said to heaven, "I am never going to leave this country ever again". I was too weak to carry my kitbag and was dragging it behind me. A young WAAF came up and said, "Here let me carry your bag; take my arm". Until that moment I hadn't realised how much I missed the warmth of human compassion and love. I needed it then, I need it now. "Take my arm" she said. I could have cried.

What did I learn from these experiences? This is the important value of experience. What do we learn?

I learned to give proper value to that word security. Security is not the privilege of fitted carpet or television. It has nothing to do with materialism and real security is far more basic. I learned that to have four walls and a roof, a fire in the grate, food in your belly, someone to love you and for you to love someone was the real and true basis for security.

I also learned that although man has been around for thousands of years, our veneer of civilisation is only about 5,000 years old. So thin, so easy to pierce and when this happens, back we go to a millennium of primitive emotions and fears. We have a long way to go before we rid ourselves of hate, greed, jealousy, anger and fear. Our civilisation will only be rock hard when the only emotions we live by are love and compassion.

Here we are 30 years later and there are still wars and there are still more prisoners. Will we never learn. Men who have been near to death have an understanding of the eternal verities denied to those who have never stood on the brink of the abyss. Men who stand defenceless at the mercy of a brutal foe, know the need of an inner strength that transcends ordinary courage.

"Take my arm" the WAAF said, and because she knew what I wanted, I could have cried.

Ernest Mellett
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