



British Army Guardsman William Dexter

In 1935 I lived in Glasshoughton, Castleford and worked at a coal mine there. In those days the pits stopped working for the summer and you went on the dole. It was in June of that year (I was 17½ years old) when the pits were out, that I decided to get away from it all. I went to the Army Barracks at Pontefract and joined the Coldstream Guards (I told them that I was 18 years old). A week later I was on the train to the Guards Training Depot at Caterham.

When I got to Caterham the first person I met at the Depot gates was Sergeant Major Britton (Tibby Britton we used to call him - a well known character at that time). I spent six months at Caterham and owing to the amount of duties there I managed to get out only once; for a brief visit to Croydon.

After the Passing out Parade in January 1936, I was sent to the 1st Battalion of the Coldstream Guards at Windsor. A few weeks after arriving, King George the Fifth died and I was on duty at the Ceremonial Service for him in London, and at the funeral at Windsor Castle.

In September of that year, trouble flared up in Palestine and the 3rd Battalion of the Coldstream Guards was ordered there. They asked for volunteers from my Battalion to make the 3rd up to full strength and I volunteered. We landed at Haifa in October and went by train to Jerusalem. The trouble quietened down in March 1937 and we then returned to England. I did duties at Buckingham Palace, also at St James' Palace and the Bank of England. I was on duty at the Coronation of George the Sixth; it rained most of the day.

In the Autumn of that year the 3rd Battalion was going to Egypt for a two year tour of duty so I again volunteered to go with them. I returned home in February 1939, my time with the colours was coming to an end. In May, I was transferred to the reserve and went to work at Rampton State Mental Institution as a male nurse. On the 1st September 1939 I was called back to the colours and I became a member of the Military Police. In January 1940 I left for Palestine with the 1st Cavalry Division and was billeted in a house on Mount Carmel, overlooking the harbour. The Australians



'Some of my squad' - Coldstream Guards,
Bill Dexter front row, right



and other troops had started to arrive and we had to police the Port. I saw a ship which had brought Jewish refugees to Palestine, but it had not been allowed to land. I heard a bomb blast and saw the ship begin to roll on its side and sink in the harbour. Lots of refugees climbed on the upper side, but many were drowned.

When France collapsed, some of us were sent into Syria via Galilee to escort convoys of Polish and a few Free French troops out. I also escorted a convoy of Spanish troops who had fled Spain when General Franco took over.

In December of that year I was sent to Greece, together with about twenty other Military Police, as Italy had invaded from Albania. We were sent to police the Port of Piraeus and Athens to control the few troops and air force personnel there. There I became friendly with Lady Palliser, wife of Sir Michael Palliser, British Ambassador to Greece. She and her daughter helped at the YMCA. One day when I visited, Lady Palliser's daughter pointed out to me a young lady helping and said she was Princess Alexandra of Greece. In March 1941 Lady Palliser arranged for me to meet Anthony Eden and General Dill. Then in late March and early April British, Australian and New Zealand troops began arriving.

One night during this period two large cargo ships arrived at the Port of Piraeus. One was the *SS Clan Cummings* and the other *SS Clan Fraser*. Both were loaded with arms and explosives. The *Clan Fraser* unloaded its cargo of arms and moved to the outer part of the harbour to unload its explosives. While the *Clan Cummings* unloaded its supply of arms some of the crew went to Athens and got drunk. I had to arrest two of them and take them back to their ship. The Captain took me to his cabin



'Arab Rebels' 1938

and we had a drink of whisky together. I stayed for about half an hour, then I returned to Athens. About two hours later German bombers came over and bombed the harbour. The *Clan Fraser* was struck and damaged, but did not blow up. The *Clan Cummings* however, was hit and blew up, wrecking the harbour installations and part of the Port.

Later I was attached to the 2nd Armoured Brigade, which I convoyed to the front. Sometime around the 19th April 1941 the British forces started to evacuate Greece. I was placed on a road junction at Elefsis, directing troops coming from the north via Larisa. I sent the troops to Corinth. They came through at night to avoid air attacks. On the night of the 25th April a Tank Corps Major came to me and told me that his convoy was the last to come through, with the exception of the 4th Brigade New Zealanders, who were blowing up the road and would not be long before they came. I was to follow on behind them.



I waited until about 5pm on the 26th April. During this time all roads around me were bombed and strafed and but they left me alone at the junction, unharmed. Of course, unknown to me, German Paratroops had dropped at Corinth, Athens and to the north of me. They had me completely cut off. Later I learned that the New Zealanders had cut across the east coast because the junction had been cut off. At 5pm I saw a small convoy of British trucks coming towards me and as it got nearer I went to meet it. When I was only a few yards away I noticed the leading truck carried German Parachute troops and a tommy gun was pointing at me. I had only a .38 revolver, so I didn't see any point in arguing with the sergeant when he said "The war is over for you". After being disarmed, I jumped into the truck. One of the Germans took my motor cycle and we left towards Corinth. On our way we collected a few British stragglers. The Germans began to starve us to weaken us. We had only one small meal of lentils a day, and some days not even that.

On the 20th May, still at Corinth, I saw hundreds of German planes pulling gliders passing over towards Crete. The invasion of Crete had begun.

At Corinth I was kept prisoner in an old Greek Barracks and a few days later we were joined by other prisoners of war captured at Kalamata. We stayed for about six weeks and then we had to march from Corinth to Larisa, which is about 120 miles as the crow flies, and mountainous. It was hard for the German soldiers escorting us and they had not been starved like us. It was on this march that I met Bert Williams, an Australian and I am sorry to say that an event took place that has stuck in my mind ever since. We had not been given food for this march; we were weak and hungry and many collapsed, including some of the German guards. The Greek folks were handing us crusts of bread as we passed their dwellings. I received a crust of bread and ate it myself. Later Bert Williams received a piece of bread and straight away he split it in half and gave me one half; I had let down my Coldstream Guards training and Christian upbringing, and at that moment of receiving the bread I felt ashamed of myself.

When we arrived at Larisa we were taken to some railway sidings, where we got a shower under the overhead railway water pump used for filling the railway engines. We were then given some raw salted fish, raw molasses and a few Greek Army biscuits. Most of us gave our raw salted fish to some Greek Cypriots who were with us, as there was no chance of cooking it and they seemed to like eating it raw. After about two hours we were placed in railway trucks - 65 to a truck - and the doors closed and locked. We then set off for Salonica. On arrival we were taken to a large barbed-wire camp where we stayed for about six weeks. It was there that I had my first contact with lice. I saw other prisoners searching through their clothes and thought I was clear, until I took a look through mine and found scores.



From there we were transferred to a town in the north of Yugoslavia. On our way we saw convoys of German tanks and troops making their way north, I suppose to the Russian front. Part way into Yugoslavia we had to get out of the railway trucks and wade across a shallow river as the railway bridge had been blown. I filled my water bottle from the river as someone had drunk the water from mine while I had been nodding off. At Mariberg we were placed in a camp which was later called Stalag 18B. We stayed there for about a week during which time we were deloused. Our clothes were put in a delousing machine and we had cold communal showers, then we stood outside to get dry as our towels were in the delouser. We were also officially registered as prisoners of war and given a number. Mine was 5466. Then we were photographed. I later managed to get a copy print by giving a German soldier who worked in the office, 20 cigarettes, which I got from my first Red Cross food parcel. We were given one meal a day, mostly potatoes made into thick soup.



Mariberg, Yugoslavia 1941, official German photo

A number of us were then marched off to a small village named Maria Rasp, about six miles from Mariberg, and we were billeted in a camp. There we were engaged in making a new road. It was there that I met Tom and Walter Williams, Reg Banks, Reg Davies, Jack Davis (New Zealander), Jack George (Australian) and Bill Goddard. This group, together with Bert Williams and myself, stuck together for most of our prisoner of war life. We were given two meals a day as workers. We did not do a good job of the road; most of it got washed away during a thunderstorm.

After about two months we were taken back to Mariberg, broken into small groups and taken by train to a small railway town called Fronleiten, Austria and then marched up a mountain road to a farming district named Rechberg, which is 1000 metres above sea level. We were billeted in a small farmhouse and that same evening farmers of the district came and chose which one of us they wanted to work for them. All the farms were mountain farms, and years behind in their farming methods, with sickles and scythes, wooden threshers to beat the sheaves of corn



Here I am working on my farm at Rechberg

and hand driven blowers to blow the chaff from the grain. Pine tree branches chopped into small pieces were used as bedding for cattle. In winter we felled pine trees for



sawing and chopping for firewood and repairs to farm buildings. Pigs and hens used to roam into the farmhouse while we were at meal.

Not long after starting work on my farm, I was leading the oxen while the farmer held the plough and he began shouting - I believed at me - so I got hold of him and threatened to punch him if he did not stop shouting at me. He told the German guard when he came to collect me that night. The guard said that he would shoot me if it occurred again and the farmer treated me better after that.

My boots, which I had when taken prisoner, had worn and caused me to have a septic foot, so a week before Christmas 1941, I was taken back to Stalag 18B for treatment. There, the conditions were really bad. Most of us were given all-wood clogs. They kept our feet warm, but when you came to an incline when there was snow on the ground, you kept sliding down. While I was there Russian Army POWs started to arrive. They were really hungry and like us when we arrived, were placed in communal showers while their clothes were deloused. Many died, in fact many died of hunger in the following weeks and detail groups of our lads were given the task of digging trenches on the outskirts of the town and burying them 50 to 60 to a trench. One day I was detailed to go with a group. A few days later I went down with bronchial pneumonia and was detained in the Stalag hospital. Kaolin poultice and M and B tablets supplied by the Red Cross, helped me to recover. While I was at the Stalag, new British army/navy clothing arrived and I was refitted and also given a new pair of army boots. I was then returned to Rechberg, but to another farm.

During the spring of 1943 a local farmer who was a dedicated Nazi came to me while I was repairing fences and began to annoy me, saying that England was 'kaput'. I struck him and knocked him out. I was reported by the local Police and later taken to Stalag 18A, Wolfsberg, where I was tried and given three weeks solitary confinement. Afterwards I was sent to a Prison Camp at Steinach in the north of Austria and put to work with other troublesome prisoners on the railway, replacing wooden sleepers and occasional iron line. The civilian workers had to replace at least 12 sleepers a day and give a full day's work. We were supposed to do the same. We decided this was too much and went slow, only doing three, and some only doing one. A few days later a German Army officer came and said to us that Adolf Hitler did not expect prisoners of war to do the same amount of work as the civilians, but he expected 60 percent of the work. After a bit of bargaining we made a contract to do six sleepers each and when they were done we could return to the prison camp. We had the job done in two hours. It caused ill feeling among the civilian workers, but the army officer was happy with the result.

We built a still out of conserve tins and pooled our Red Cross prunes. We made darts and a dart board but the Germans said they were offensive weapons and took them away. Some lads made crystal sets and we could get news from North Africa. One Saturday morning in July 1943 we heard that Sicily had been invaded. I told some German civilian workers but they did not believe me. On the Monday evening it was broadcast to the German people. After that they always came to us for the news.



A few weeks later I was caught with other prisoners trying to escape through a tunnel we had dug, using wooden supports for the tunnel and electric cable we had stolen and attached to the electric junction box in the Laager, for the lighting. Each one of us took his turn to dig. The Germans had got to know about it on the night before we were to escape, and were waiting for us when we emerged in the adjacent cornfield. I nearly got shot, I smiled when captured instead of looking serious and frightened. Mind you, when the German army sergeant put his pistol in my face I stopped smiling.

During the following weeks we saw trainloads of POWs from the Italian camps pass on their way to camps in Germany.

Once you are in a Punishment Camp you appear to be there for the rest of the war, as there is no stipulated time you have to serve. After I had spent several months there, I went to see a civilian doctor who served the camp. I had torn the cartilage in my right knee. I had had word that he was friendly, could speak English, and would accept a bribe. I gave him a tin of Red Cross cocoa, some English tea and a bar of chocolate and asked him, quietly, to arrange for me to return to the main camp (Stalag 18A) hospital. The day I arrived at Stalag 18A I volunteered to go with a work party to Graz to help clear bomb debris in the town, for I knew I would be sent straight back to the Punishment Camp otherwise. I did not appear to be missed for I was in Graz for five or six weeks and managed to get out to a small Laager in the mountains near Peggau. The camp was employed felling trees for the paper mill in the town. I was then sent to a farm at Dobal, a village near Graz.

An event occurred there which involved me attending a Court Martial back in England after the war ended, as a witness against a British traitor. One evening I was having a meal of maize in the Hotel kitchen with an Australian soldier who had been helping me that day with the farm work. A man called Callender, who was a soldier in the New Zealand army, together with a British ex-Guardsman, came into the Hotel wearing German military uniform with 'Free British Forces' written on the shoulders of their tunics. Callender tried to persuade us to join his force but we refused. I did keep a pamphlet he asked the daughter of the Hotel owner to give to me, asking British POWs to join Germany in fighting Russia and 'Jewish-controlled' Governments of Britain and America, because he had signed it on the back. I said I would show it to the lads in the Camp. When I left, I noted the time and date in a small diary I carried and also particulars of my Australian friend. After the war ended I reported the occurrence and gave a Statement to an Intelligence Officer of the Army Special Branch. Callender got 15 years imprisonment.

I was then persuaded by some other prisoners, to work in a nail and wire factory nearby, as there were



Rechberg 1944 Reg Davis
second left, back row, next to
Bill Dexter.



about 60 Russian women working there. I arrived at the factory, accompanied by a Scots soldier and it got bombed the same day. I thought "I'm not staying here, Russian women or not", so after about a week I told a German official visiting the factory, who came from Army HQ at Graz, that my brother-in-law was a prisoner at Rechberg; that I had two children to his sister called 'Ebb and Flow' and that I would like to work with him if possible. A week later I was back at Rechberg, on a very poor farm, but I was thankful to be back with my old friends. We heard about the invasion of France and we started to see more of our aircraft passing over on bombing raids.

On the farm the hens were laying most of their eggs in the straw I had placed here and there in the hedges. I could carry them in my trouser pockets without breaking them. In the Autumn I was threshing flax at a small farm nearby, as one farm helped another at Harvest time. They used the flax seed for oil and the stems for making cloth. During flax threshing they celebrate; there is cider to drink and bread made from wheat instead of rye and if the young women slap you with a bundle of flax you are supposed to chase them and have a kiss and a cuddle. One young woman slapped me and I gave chase. She fell in a small stack of hay and as I was bending down to get hold of her I remembered that I had a hen's egg in each of my trouser pockets. I left her alone.

A week before Christmas 1944, a farmer from the next farm told me that he had a lamb and he would let me have it ready for roasting if I gave him 80 cigarettes. Cigarettes were rationed in Germany at that time and as I did not smoke and had received 500 cigarettes from the Yorkshire Copper Works in Leeds as a gift, I agreed. He then said that he would be distilling schnapps on 23rd December and would like me to call that evening on the way back to the Laager. The Guard allowed us to go to and from the farms on our own at that time, but we had to be back by 8pm. I called at the man's farm about 7pm and the farmer had already cut up the lamb and put it in a sack. I gave him the cigarettes and also some English tea from my



One Sunday near my farm -
Rechberg 1944

Red Cross parcel and his wife made tea and put in some schnapps. I had already been drinking warm schnapps given to me by the daughter, whose husband had been killed on the Russian Front, and I became a bit intoxicated. The farmer's daughter said "You can stay and sleep with me" so I agreed. About 10.30pm there was a knock on the door and a Polish civilian farm worker from the adjacent farm came in to tell me that the German Guard was looking for me. He had been sent on to another farm while the Polish man came to warn me. He helped me back to the Laager and the lads let me in through the cellar door which could be opened from the inside. Tom Williams, who had accompanied the Guard, arrived back at about midnight to tell me that the farmer said I had just left for the Laager. The Guard gave Tom the keys to let himself in and



spent the night with the farmer's daughter, arriving back at about 7.30 the next morning.

A few weeks after Christmas the German Authorities at Graz decided the local residents were becoming too friendly with us and we were sent to work at a quarry at Peggau. Next to the quarry, Jewish prisoners dressed in what looked like striped pyjamas were digging a tunnel into the hillside; I believe to house a factory as defence against air attacks. We were bombed one day but luckily no-one was hurt, just a bit shaken up.

About five weeks later we were taken to the camp near the railway in Graz to help clear the bomb debris. We did our black-market shopping with the French, Russians, Polish, Germans, Yugoslavians and Lithuanians. One day the railway station was bombed and a goods train was damaged. We were sent to clear the line and found a truck full of dried egg powder. As Red Cross parcels had stopped owing to transport difficulties, we all filled our haversacks and we ate scrambled eggs for quite a while. Another bombing raid caused a roof-fall in the Schlossberg shelter and a large stone broke a German civilian's leg. Another British POW and I carried him out to the first aid post. German civilians trusted us to help in cases like this. After leaving him there we stood watching our aircraft bombing the city. A German soldier began shouting at me angrily about the bombing, but I said our cities had been bombed too which quietened him down.

The Russian Army advanced to Bruck, a railway town about 25 miles north of Graz. All POWs were quickly moved on foot, over the mountain ranges west towards Salzburg. One day we were up in the snow, the next down in the valley, where it was warm and clear. I used to break away from the column during the march, in search of food. I had my haversack and asked farmers on the way for flour, to make pancakes. The dangerous time was leaving the column and getting back in; once away from it no-one troubled you. Tom and Walter Williams and Reg Banks made a fire at the end of each day's march, and while I rested, they cooked pancakes. One day I entered a village which had a monastery and a grocer's shop next door. I went into the shop and called out but no-one came, so I walked into the back of the shop and saw a sack full of what I thought was flour. I filled my haversack and left. A few minutes later, when I was passing the monastery, a priest came out and I told him I was trying to bargain a bar of Lux soap, for some bread. He went into the monastery and brought out half a loaf of bread which he gave to me, but refused to take the soap. I got back into the wrong column by mistake. It was a column of Hungarian Jews in Army uniform. After we stopped for the night I rejoined my own column and had sweet pancakes that night; it was sugar and not flour that I had taken. During the march I threw away several educational books and a bible that I was carrying, but kept my small New Testament, which I still have.



The next day we stopped near a farm and I took two legs of pork from an outhouse where they were being smoked, and fastened them inside my trouser legs, hanging by string tied to the buttons of my trousers. I marched hours with the meat there and was glad when we rested for the night.

After several days of the march we arrived at a small town called St Johann, just south west of Salzburg. There was snow on the ground and it was May. In June the American Army released us and about two weeks later I was flown to France. I was then flown to England in a Halifax bomber, deloused by DDT, given new clothes and sent home on leave the same day. I was demobbed on 27th December 1945 and joined the Leeds City Police on 18th January 1946.



Bill outside his home in 2003