



British Army Captain Denis Swinney

Denis was born in 1913 in Morpeth, Northumberland and went to Sedbergh school. He joined the Territorials in 1937 and was commissioned in the Royal Engineers, going to France with the 50th Northumbrian Division in January 1940. After the long retreat from Arras to Dunkirk he got his men away in folding boats from the beach at Bray Dunes.

Back in England the company were engaged in mine laying on the South Coast for the expected German invasion. In April 1941 the Division went to the Middle East and eventually fought in the Gazala battle in North Africa in 1942. The company was captured by a German Panzer Division. Denis was taken to Gavi and then to Cheiti in Italy, where he escaped by jumping from the train when being taken to Germany. After two months in the mountains he was recaptured and taken to Brunswick. In April 1945 the American Armoured Divisions were fighting towards Berlin and Denis painted the fires from the POW camp. Two days later the prisoners were freed.

After the war Denis returned to his family and to Swinney Engineering, later becoming Chairman and Managing Director. At the age of 72 he retired and devoted himself to painting.



June 1942 after the Gazala battle.
Captured in Western desert.
By a sergeant major of the 25 panzer division.
We were hidden under a piece of corrugated iron.



Denis. Nov. 1941 M.E.F. Haifa



Denis. Nov. 1941 M.E.F. Haifa



Transcript of Audio Clip

On the evacuation from Dunkirk:

In the picture of Dunkirk, it's taken at dawn when there was still a lot of activity on the beach, but by late afternoon it had all disappeared and there was no more evacuations from the beach because the German guns had got too near to the sea and the ships had had to be withdrawn, and it was all over, there was no more, any further evacuation had to be from Dunkirk itself which was all hell let loose. So I had, there were six of us left on the beach, practically by ourselves by then. So I went up the beach and eventually found an old motorboat, rusted up and on its side and I thought we might get this into the sea, which eventually we did. There were, the six people who were left were the doctor, the French interpreter, who was a Paris barrister, and the REME officer and two of his men so we heaved and pushed and eventually we got it into the sea, with the strength of despair perhaps, because there wasn't much other hope by then. When we started to row of course they were very indifferent rowers and they wandered around this way and that, first one side pulling too hard or whatever and we kept hitting, bumping on the bottom, but eventually when we did get organised and we got into the breakers, we couldn't pull it, it was a heavy old boat, and we couldn't pull it through the breakers, with a, there was an on-shore wind and waves, it was too much, try as we might. But before, when we were still trying, a little motorboat, a small motorboat came along, probably from the Thames, with two old chaps and they held out a rope and brought their boat as back as far as they dared, and held out a rope and shouted "Row, lads, row" and we really laid into it and he backed his boat in, very courageously, because his prop by that time must have been scraping the bottom when he went down and if he'd ruined his motorboat, because there was nobody else around, he'd have been lost and we were full of admiration for him. Eventually when he got back as far as he could, he threw a rope and the second time he threw it, we caught it and he pulled us out through the waves into the open sea and he pulled us out to a mine sweeper. The sailors just took us and threw us on the deck of the mine sweeper and we just fell, and I don't know about the others, most of them just fell asleep, I fell asleep instantly and I didn't wake up until somebody bumped me and said they could see the White Cliffs of Dover and we were home.



Dunkirk: the Evacuation.
This was painted soon after Denis returned home and shows the rowing boat in which he managed to escape, as discussed in his tape transcript.

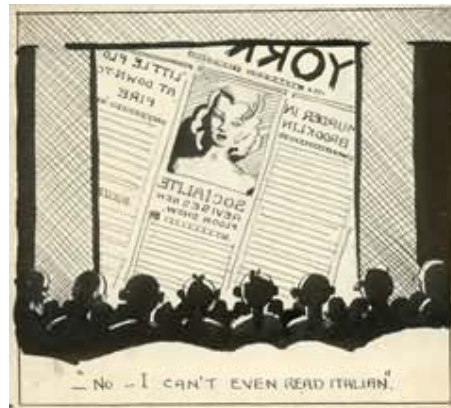
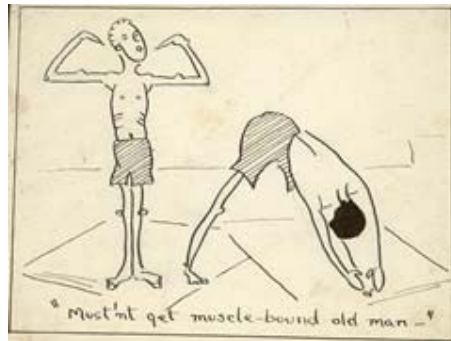


Inventory of the Donation

- Book: *Art in the bag* (4 pages on Swinney, pp 32-35) published for the Oflag 79 art club, 1948
- Oflag 79 P.O.W. identity card including chest x-ray.
- Photographs
- German letter
- Large set of original artwork including 20 paintings and 14 cartoons
- Tape-recorded



Gavi castle. N Italy POW camp.



SWINNEY 1385/VVF	
Name: SWINNEY Denis	
Rank: Sergeant	
Regiment: 1st Airborne Division	
Date of Birth: 1915	
Place of Birth: [Redacted]	
Blood Group: [Redacted]	
Religion: [Redacted]	
Marital Status: [Redacted]	
Service Number: [Redacted]	
Date of Entry: [Redacted]	
Date of Discharge: [Redacted]	
Remarks: [Redacted]	

Denis Swinney's Oflag 79 P.O.W. card complete with chest x-ray!



View painted from the window of the POW camp in the fortress of Gavi in Northern Italy



Prisoners in the sun. Oflag 79-Brunswick 1944.



German boys (painted from a magazine illustration)

Diary Extracts - Brunswick 1945

19th Feb

The art club is producing a book and John Dugdale has asked me to contribute. As he wants each artist shown in the book we all have to draw each other. "Smudge" Smith who is doing me starts tomorrow - fortunately he has a distinctive face but I cannot say that I am looking forward to the job.

March 8

Very feeble now and always cold.

Breakfast	slice of bread and ersatz coffee
Lunch	" " " and three potatoes
Tea	Mint tea is provided but much as I need a hot drink I cannot get it down
Dinner	Soup (cabbage barley or turnip)

Twice a week it has a little minced German meat in it.



His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales admires some of Denis Swinney's artwork on his visit to the Centre in February 2001.



By keeping still it is possible to live on this, though not possible to avoid thinking of food all day, but it does not provide any warmth. The heating system works only at weekends.

The lights go out every evening at eight because of the constant air raids, and we sit in greatcoats planning wonderful meals in the dark.

2nd April

I have been gathering some clothes together for a camp near here of ORs who have walked from Poland.

They were marched away when the Russians attacked and walked for 40 days and sleeping in the open or in barns and eating bread. They are now in a very bad state without proper clothes or parcels.



After the air raid: Brunswick.
"There was an aircraft and engine works beside the camp and the Americans destroyed it on 24 August 1944. All the German barrack buildings were destroyed and many German guards killed. This sketch was made at the time as soon as I had washed at the leaking fire brigade hose. The prisoners made holes in the hose themselves to get water to wash in."

The Allies are about 70 miles away, but they are still coming on.

If only the Russians would start now.

Diary Extracts - Brunswick 1945

12th [April]

Noise all night but the rumours are that part of Brunswick is occupied by the American 9th Army. . . .

After breakfast I was out in the bathroom shaving when there was a shout. Some French workers ran along the road outside. Then there came a great moaning shouting cry and everyone ran out of the buildings.

I went out and ran up to the top of the camp, where hundreds and hundreds of prisoners were running to the gate shouting. Into the main gate came a small



A camp theatre production: "A School for Scandal" Oflag 79, Brunswick, 1944

grubby American sergeant carrying an automatic rifle.

At the gate stood a Jeep which in an instant was covered with men like a branch under a swarm of bees.



Soon there were two thousand men round the gate making a high babble of excited talk, which was cut to silence by a double crash.

In an instant everyone disappeared but the mortars stopped and the party began again.

The Americans said afterwards that they did not know that the camp was here. They had seen the buildings across the plain and not liking the look of it they debated taking it to pieces. . . .

I went and touched the Jeep - just to be sure, but it was the smell of exhaust smoke that really got me.

13th

Since the Americans came we have just eaten and eaten.

I cannot write of all the small things that mean so much to us. Just cutting a thick slice of bread, wonderful!

We cannot eat very much at one sitting, but on the other hand we are always hungry. Already I feel much stronger, and at last really warm.

Parties of officers have been out in the town collecting supplies all day.

The Russians are drunk already and chasing the population round. I do not blame them in the least after having seen how they were treated.

At Mooseburg (?) the Russians were put into the next compound to us when they were taken out of the train. They were locked in box cars for a month. One lot had not been fed for ten days and as they marched along they would dive down and scoop up water from pools on the ground. We threw them tins of food and they went for it like wild animals. Because of this their officers wrote a very good letter thanking us, and asking if we would send the food in bulk so that they could issue it properly.

'These men are maddened with hunger' they explained, 'also some of them are from Siberia and are not educated'.

We did send supplies but the Germans soon stopped this. After that we arranged a piece of pipe through the wire and poured German soup through to them in bucketsful.



Liberation April 1945. "Second army fighting towards Manner painted in great excitement at the time. The painting shows the Autobahn to Berlin."



A page from Denis Swinney's P.O.W logbook - part of the entry for April 13th, 1945



The Germans never went into the compound without their dogs, but one day a dog got in with out his keeper.

Soon after the Russians threw the skin back over the wire.

In spite of all that the Germans could do to them the Russians were never defeated, as the French often were. They worked so slowly that it was impossible to see any progress. When they settled in they were set to work cutting wood. So much of this was got through the wire to us under the nose of the sentry that the wood pile got smaller every day instead of larger.

Now they are free and at the moment in complete control of Brunswick.

The Germans of course brought women and children in the box cars as well as soldiers. Millions of Ukranians were packed in trains and have worked here as slaves for years there are 12,000,000 foreign workers here of whom about half are unpaid slaves like our 'Russian grandmothers'.

At the top of the camp the Luftwaffe had a small workshop in which worked some of these Ukranian women. They looked cold and old shuffling about in rags.

They stand outside the wire now about a dozen women some old men and lots of children. They are completely silent.

Now they have clothes, food, everything, but for them I think it is too late. They do not seem to be able to smile.