



Not the Image but Reality: British POW Experiences In Italian and German Camps

Peter Liddle & Ian Whitehead

[Peter Liddle](#) has a long-standing commitment to the study of captivity and for some years too has worked with Dr Ian Whitehead from the University of Derby in a number of publications related to the First and Second World Wars. Here they try to get behind the image we may have derived from a whole range of sources of what captivity was like, to the reality of barbed-wire enclosed existence.



From the papers of Sub Lt
H R Taylor RNVR, a
prisoner at Marlag 0

Most people will have an image of life as a British POW in a German or Italian camp, during the Second World War. More often than not it will be one heavily influenced by British war films, or probably the output of Hollywood. Predominant are exciting stories of escape and attempts to outwit the guards. Throughout, the POWs, in the hands of fellow Europeans, are usually depicted as well treated. Incidents of brutality and maltreatment, apart from those following upon 'The Great Escape', usually are limited, in the minds of filmmakers and audiences, to the context of Japanese prison camps. However, letters, diaries and recollections held in the Second World War Experience Centre,¹ enable us to trace the real experiences of British POWs, from initial capture through to their life in Italian and German prison camps. In these accounts we are confronted with the grim realities of POW life, the boring grind of the diurnal round in the camp, and also with some evidence of deliberate maltreatment. This article provides some indication of how men coped with these conditions and the collective effort made to sustain morale.

The article also covers the lasting impression that POW life left on men and highlights the difficulty of achieving a generalised picture. On the one hand, there were men for whom the experience was grim, moulded by exposure to acts of inhumanity that bred a hatred for their captors. Yet, on the other hand, there were men who present a less embittered and more positive assessment of life as a POW.

POW life, of course, begins with the moment of capture. For the most part, this appears to have come by surprise, been reached swiftly and left bitter disappointment. From that time on, the daily existence of the captured British troops was very largely dependent upon the degree of respect and consideration that they received from their captors. The quality of this treatment depended upon the morale and organisation of the enemy. POW life also varied from place to place, reflecting the influence of such factors as climate, the nationality and political doctrine of their captors or the attitudes of individual camp commandants. This variety of circumstances does much to explain the variety of POW testimony.



For Major Harry Sell, life as a POW began in June 1942, in the Western Desert. He was amongst a batch of prisoners held at Mersa Matruh, housed in barbed wire cages originally built by the British to hold expected enemy POWs. Too good a job had been made of their construction, making escape impossible. However, decent latrines had, at least, been constructed and the Germans provided the men with two biscuits and a quarter pint of water. They also allowed Sell to visit the cage where the British other ranks were being held. Here he was able to assist with the application of Field Dressings for the wounded. But, the German attitude to Indian POWs was markedly different. They were held in a separate cage and had been "starved for several days as a reprisal for alleged mutilations of German dead and wounded".

Conditions for all the POWs deteriorated when the Germans handed them over to their Italian allies, who left their captives exposed to the sun for three days without food or water. There followed a journey back down the Lines of Communication to Tobruk, where the brutality continued - the Italian authorities doing nothing to restrain the actions of their men. A Gurkha soldier had his back broken by a blow from a sentry's rifle, producing no other response than laughter from the assembled Italian officers. Meanwhile, conditions in the compound at Tobruk were "grim". It was cramped, had no sanitation and the guards, according to Harry Sell, "amuse[d] themselves by throwing in hand grenades".

Another diarist, P. Hainsworth, also captured at Mersa Matruh, recorded the problems encountered on the journey down the lines. He too presents a picture of relative German efficiency and Italian neglect:

[At Sidi Barani] water was getting a very serious matter. No one seemed to have any authority to get us any. In the end we all were more or less mobbing every vehicle which stopped and begging them for wasser and aqua. Some had 4½ gall. containers that they lobbed out as far as possible at about an average quantity of ¼ pint per man. It wasn't a particularly pleasant sight to see a huge crowd of thirsty prisoners pushing to obtain little more than a mouthful of brackish or rusty but nevertheless wet water. I don't know what the reason was - whether the Jerries as a rule carried more spare water than the Itis or whether our plight found a softer spot in the hearts of the German troops. But it is a fact that we were turned away from a much greater proportion of the Iti wagons dry mouthed than from the Jerry vehicles.

By these means, the men managed to procure enough water for themselves, Hainsworth concluding, "we didn't do so badly". The intervention of a German officer brought further relief:

The following morning, July 1st, a Jerry officer who could speak some English stopped by the roadside and we told him what the situation was. He said it was really no concern of his, but all the same he began stopping empty Jerry wagons that were travelling towards Sollum.

After reaching Tobruk, the POWs were then sent on to Derna. J E Jenkins, who had been captured in June 1942, recorded the hardship of this journey in his diary: "We went via Tmimi



to Derna and had a most horrible night in the rain during which a chap was shot. I have never felt so disillusioned in my life before."

At Derna, Hainsworth found himself in Italian hands. He gives a fairly positive account of the treatment that POWs received there:

In most ways the camp at Derna was an improvement over our previous conditions. The part we were most grateful for was the almost unlimited supply of water. Although we drew the water from tanks they were usually filled three times a day which was sufficient for all our needs as long as none was wasted ... The food situation was a little easier. It still wasn't enough to get fat on but it was certainly better to have the knowledge that rations would be in pretty well to time. They consisted of one tin of Iti bully weighing about ½ lb to be shared between two and four large Iti hard-tack biscuits between three and in the late afternoon a medium ladleful of veg and mac soup.

Sell's next destination was also Derna, but he provides a less favourable assessment of the conditions he was held in. He writes that a Beau Geste type fort was where the POWs were housed. Here they were crammed into a narrow, dark cell. He describes the scene as rather like Newgate Gaol circa 1600. It was so dirty and cramped that "even the Italian commandant allow[ed] us outside for a breather". From Derna they were transported to Barce, under the guard of Askaris, who generally mistreated their charges, on one occasion clubbing an elderly colonel, struggling to climb unaided into a truck. Barce itself, however, was the one place where Sell records more humane Italian treatment:

We were given a good helping of macaroni stew and a bread roll - it seemed weeks since such a luxury came our way. This was the only camp where the Commandant was reasonable, that is, if the word 'reasonable' can be applied to not going out of the way to impose further hardships. His own son, however, was a prisoner in India.

There was nothing reasonable about treatment at their next camp, in Benghazi:

Our quarters were grimly overcrowded, lice and fleas abounded, any food was a disgusting mess, an open cess-pit in the yard bred millions of flies which swarmed over everything. But even this was a luxury spot compared with the Other Ranks compounds. Here, overcrowding prevented men from lying down; they were exposed to the sun and without latrines. Applications for tools to dig latrines were jeered at. A few handfuls of biscuits were thrown over the wire to be scrambled for by ravenous men. The weak got nothing and did not survive, dysentery was raging and nothing was done.

For the Indian prisoners conditions were still worse. They were kept without food or water, but were tormented by the sight of both being stacked up outside their compound. An attempt was made to bribe these men; the Italians offering them water in exchange for a commitment to fight the British in Burma. The offer was contemptuously dismissed. The treatment meted out to the Allied POWs in North Africa was condemned by Sell:

There can be no excuse: it was a back area where humane treatment could have been given out but, instead, studied torment was an officially sponsored policy.



None of the accounts of capture so far discussed make mention of interrogation by the enemy. It is likely that the sheer numbers of POWs made widespread interrogation impracticable. In any case, it is possible that the generally favourable course of the War for the Axis meant there was no great sense of a need to question prisoners. Interrogation however was standard for evaders and escapers, all RAF aircrew and for those judged to hold useful intelligence. It followed a pattern familiar from goodness knows how many books and some films, information to be extorted by guile, by attractive inducement and by physical and mental coercion.

An RAF evader captured in the foothills of the Pyrenees, [Stan Hope](#), received brutal treatment which led in due course to his conceding information:

This was in Bayonne. I was in prison, a military prison. They took me out and there was an officer who could speak very good English and he interrogated us and he showed me a photograph of one of these guides. He said, do you know this fellow and I said, no, I don't know him. He is just a man we met or not but anyway he seemed to think I knew him and he ordered the Sergeant that was there to take me out in the corridor and he gave me a good going over and I always remember this.

There were two other men with him as well. So I couldn't do anything much about it but I got very indignant. I remember that. I got very mad. Anyway, he gave me a going over in the face. He punched me in the face and took me back in again and I said, I didn't know the man. I said, I am not sure. It could be him. I don't know. I don't know one Frenchman from another. That is the way I put it. Anyway, I remember this Sergeant when he finished with me. He sort of shrugged his shoulders as if to say I can't help this. I have got to do it. This is my orders. He felt sorry for me. I knew it. He hit me because he had to do it and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say there you are, I have to do it. I always remember that. An extraordinary thing. Anyway this interrogation went on for quite a long time. I remember once they fetched us out about 4 o'clock in the night and that was about identifying somebody or other. I forgot who it was but I know I was scared stiff. We were scared stiff all the time. When we were first caught we were lined up against the wall and told we were going to be shot. One of them had his dog tags and he pulled them out and said, we are RAF. So they took us down to interrogation. I got beaten up there too.

This man finished up in the Gestapo prison in Fresnes, in Paris, where he was further weakened physically and mentally before being transferred to a POW camp.

The journey from surrender to POW camp for RAF personnel could involve transit through a bombed city, which exposed them to civilian anger and insult. Their destination was a processing camp near Frankfurt, Dulag Luft, usually by lorry or train, but for other men, soldiers of the BEF in 1940, men captured in Greece or Crete in 1941 and North Africa in 1941 or 1942, there were longer journeys to be endured; for many, days of exhausting marches, scanty food and water. For others, crowded ship transport, ironically at hazard of British Naval or air attack, would be their fate.



Men captured in North Africa were in due course transported to Europe. Harry Sell was amongst those POWs who were sent to Italy. He was flown in a Caproni bomber and landed at Lecce airport, where the conditions were a great contrast to what he had left behind:

everything was super expensive looking and we expected an immense cream coloured Packard car to zoom up complete with a dazzling film beauty.

Instead they were taken by lorries and then train on to their transit camp at Bari. Sell records that Bari station was only 8km from the camp but the journey on foot "in our condition seemed like a death march. Our food since capture had been very small, clothing was bad and boots badly broken." Prior to entry in the camp the men were searched and deloused. The camp itself was "a well built place of stone with plenty of running water". That, however, was the limit of the amenities.

Camp life at Bari was nothing out of the ordinary according to Sell. There was the usual round of roll calls, and the food was generally meagre, with bread the mainstay. Dysentery was rife and he himself succumbed. The principal incident centred on a Greek, who had passed himself off as a British servicemen when captured trying to assist escaping British officers. His lack of English was nearly his undoing until his fellow POWs managed to convince the Italian guards that he was an Irishman who spoke only Gaelic.

After a few weeks, Sell was moved to his permanent camp - *Campo Concentramento P.G. 21*. The camp housed over 1,000 men and was:

about 300yds sq. and surrounded by a wall some 12 feet high. A single entrance is cordoned off by a double-aproned barbed wire fence and the quarters of 600 Italian guards. Inside are the U bungalows each leg of which house some 300 men on double tier bunks. The bungalows are of cement on stone tiled floors and no heating.

One bungalow had single beds - this was the hospital. But, although staffed by conscientious Italian doctors, it had no equipment. All serious cases had to be sent to a civilian hospital.

Bathing and eating facilities were also inadequate:

The bathroom and latrines are well appointed with chromium knobs but being typically Italian do not work - besides there is no water. The Cookhouse is also well built but the only utensils are huge cauldrons of about 300 litres with ladles to match. The personal issue is half a double bunk, a stool, a palliasse stuffed with grass, two blankets and sheets together with a few tables possibly one between 30 (seating capacity 6). There is not an issue of knife, fork, or spoon, mug or plate. Each person has a receptacle made by himself from a tin salvaged from the garbage dump.

Eventually, after pressure from the British Government to abide by the Geneva Convention, the Italian authorities did provide eating utensils, though only on payment of extortionate prices. Until then, the POWs had to fight a food war with their captors. The Red Cross food issue came in tins, but the prisoners were denied tins, other than the two allowed them for eating and drinking. This made for difficulties:

we place our [food] parcels in a locked room and by a very carefully worked out means of supervision draw one tin daily, empty the contents into our own tin and leave



the original tin under guard. Life is rather complex - I want a tin of cocoa and present myself at the store at the appropriate time. The cocoa is decanted into my 'mug'. I am now the proud owner of a quarter of a pound of cocoa but have nowhere to put it; before I can get my brew from the cookhouse I must eat my cocoa. Similar conditions apply over jam, milk, margarine etc. The net result is that we smuggle tins in which to keep our food, this is discovered by the Italians who confiscate all tins including those in the store and pour the contents in a heap on the floor. What a waste - a week's food for 1,000 men - fish, jam, condensed milk, cocoa, tea, sugar - in one heap.

The camp walls, wrote Sell: "[are] whitewashed stone relieved by reminders that the Sentries have been instructed to shoot. Lighting is by 20 watt bulbs in the high ceilings controlled from outside the camp. They are not sufficient to allow reading but enough to cause annoyance as they remain lit all night - some are painted blue."

The routine of camp life included a weekly strip search of rooms. There was also random strip searching of the men. Each day there were two roll calls, "with one at irregular intervals for good measure".

Conditions in the camp were generally poor and according to Sell it was infamous as "the worst camp in Italy". Certainly, the Italian authorities missed no opportunity "to add to the straws loading the camel's back," with their reluctance to grant even the basic facilities of day-to-day existence. Water for ablutions had to be drawn from a well. There was no supply of fresh clothes - men had to make do and mend, which became increasingly difficult. In particular, when pants could no longer be repaired, "the last resort [was] to cut a hole in the middle of our blanket, stick the head through and wear the ensemble 'comme Mexican'". As the weather grew colder, the shortage of clothing led to "an epidemic of colds in the innards" and jaundice became widespread so that the men, "dressed in the fantastic garb," resembled Chinese brigands. As life in the camp became ever more extreme, tension mounted amongst the POWs. The men were also driven to increasingly desperate measures: "all kinds of misdemeanours are rife such as petty pilfering of clothing and food. One or two are caught and beaten up and when a Padre falls to the pangs of hunger and takes a piece of bread from a sleeping comrade his bedding and belongings are thrown down the well - he narrowly misses joining them."

Stealing from fellow prisoners was looked upon gravely and could result in severe consequences for the culprit. [Geoff Steer](#), held in a German POW camp, recalled one such incident:

After Christmas the weather got worse, snowing and freezing fog, but we still had to go to work. My socks were worn out so I cut a piece of my blanket off to make two foot-rags to go to work in, then take them off to work. We went about a fortnight without parcels through the weather being bad and one day, coming in from work, we were told somebody had been stealing from us while we were working. A trap was set and the culprit was caught. It turned out to be one of our men - British. The Committee found him guilty of the worst crime in the Army, stealing another man's rations. It was worse in a POW camp.



He was handed over to the Captain of the camp, who gave him seven days in the cooler. The cooler as we called it was a small brick building, 6 feet by 6 feet and 7 feet high with a steel door and an opening one foot square with bars and no glass. There was a wooden bed and an earth floor. He was allowed his overcoat and one blanket, nothing else, not even shaving tackle. He had one slice of dry bread and a pint of water a day. His toilet was a five-gallon drum and if he wanted to see out, he stood on the bed. After the first day he started shouting to be let out. The Jerries told him if he continued shouting he would stay in another week.

When let out we watched from the windows, so did all the camp. The guard opened the door but the lads had to carry him out, back to the living quarters where it was warm and sat him by the stove. I think he could have put his hands on the stove and not feel it. He looked terrible, especially with seven days of stubble on his face. His face, fingers and toes all had frost bite, his eyes were bloodshot and he stank like a sewer. The first job was to get his clothes off. No matter what he had done he was still one of our comrades. Part of his toes came away with his socks. We got him under the shower and while some of the lads sponged him down we washed his clothes and hung them up round the stove. You could dry anything in under an hour round it.

After a few weeks he recovered enough to return to work but he was never the same man after that.

The Senior British Officer (SBO) played a key part in dealing with such miscreants as well as liaising with the camp commandant. A good SBO was an important factor in the maintenance of morale and securing decent conditions for the POWs. A bad one might have the reverse effect. Many of the inmates in Sell's camp felt that the SBO was far too soft in pressing the Italians for improvements. According to Sell, he lacked the character to command the confidence of the men in such circumstances. Raised tension in the camp nearly produced a full-scale confrontation between the POWs and the guards, as frustration with the SBO's impotent leadership spilled over. It was only the Camp Commandant's decision to call off his guards that calmed things down, thus showing "more sense than was to be expected". The SBO made a futile attempt to court martial one of the ringleaders of the agitation. Soon after, his request was granted for a transfer to another camp. The morale of the POWs was boosted by this show of opposition and it emboldened them to make further shows of disobedience, which generally succeeded in causing upset and irritation in the camp administration. It also appeared that the camp was becoming a centre for 'difficult' POWs:

our camp is being turned into a 'Devil's Island' as new arrivals are from other camps and have their documents stamped 'Turbulenti'. Similarly those sent from our camp are what may be termed amenable to discipline.

Certainly, the systematic neglect of POWs, described, by Sell, appears absent from the recollections of Ernest Hall:

Life in an Italian prison camp in the north of Italy was one of boredom and low-grade misery. We were herded into bitterly cold jerry-built barracks, counted daily by the guards, given starvation rations supplemented by spasmodic deliveries of Red Cross



parcels. Most of the time we were louse-infested. No, the guards weren't brutal. They were living pretty miserable lives themselves. Good friends died of starvation related disease. The Italian Camp Commandant recorded their deaths in a notice on the camp noticeboard adding, 'Great honour to the soldier who has given his life for his country - signed Guiseppe Ferrari, Cavalry Colonel'.

The intervention of the Church produced some improvement in conditions for Sell and the other inmates of *Campo Concentramento P.G. 21*. A Roman Catholic prisoner was the only man allowed out of the camp, in order to attend Mass. He managed to give the priest an indication of their conditions and through him word reached the Vatican. A Papal Nuncio inspected the camp and, after expressing astonishment at the men's attire, 'gave an imperial rocket to the commandant'. The result was an improvement in supplies, including the distribution of Red Cross clothing parcels, which contained a great coat, battledress, two vests, two pairs of pants, a shirt, two pairs of socks and a pair of boots. Within the camp, enterprising individuals had also begun advertising their skills as tailors, offering for example to transform a blanket into a suit or three Italian kitchen cloths into a kilt. One 'firm' took payment on a points scheme (5 points for a good pair of socks, 4 points for a pair with one hole, 3 points for a pair with 2) whilst another listed "mouthfuls of hot rice including Weevils, licks of jam ration, [and] cheese as possible means of settling the account".



From the POW Log of Capt W S
Chambers of 5th Btn East Yorkshire
Regt. Oflag V, A Mess, Weinsberg 1944

The men did their best to entertain themselves. At Christmas, various cocktails were created from whatever illicit alcohol the men had been able to get their hands on, and members of the Entertainment Committee treated them to a show by some 'Ladies'. In the natural run of camp life, the men devised games that usually succeeded in annoying the guards. For example, in one bungalow a giant game of snakes and ladders was painted on the floor, with a forked-tongued Mussolini at the head of the snake. The Italians painted it out and posted a sentry to prevent its reappearance. Various clubs and societies were organised, educational programmes were established and those with musical talent put on concerts and opera recitals. Particular excitement was caused by the organisation of a cricket match:

The enthusiasm is fantastic and we all form into groups to produce something as instructed by the committee. The ingenuity to improvise by skill, theft or bribery from the Ites provide many morale boosting episodes. Some volunteer for the Cooler to thief the boots from some off duty guard taking his siesta from which the balls are to be made. An Orderly is bribed to get two white coats for the Umpires. The Whites are made from sheets spirited from the QM Store. The Roller, Screen and Pavilion are fabricated from bed boards, frames and cardboard. The broom handles suddenly shorten into stumps and bails. Finally the Commandant and his Officers lose the paint earmarked to paint their quarters and Mess.



When the day of the game arrived, the Italians were initially apprehensive of what was afoot. As the match got under way, however, there was no attempt to intervene. Concern rapidly turned into bemusement. The Commandant was moved to the simple conclusion: "*Dimenti - Dimenti, tutti Dimenti*".

Such entertainment and leisure pursuits were a feature of life in many Italian and German camps. It is also quite wrong to presume that concert parties, plays, orchestras, art and language classes and craft skills were restricted to officer camps. In the Centre there is full documentation of what must clearly have been simply superb dramatic productions and other cultural activities at *Stalag VIII B*, Lamsdorf, in Silesia which had its own school with forty three tutors, a 500 seat theatre, a symphony orchestra, a dance band, international football, cricket and athletics. *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night* were produced at the theatre with a leading actor, a future star of stage, film and TV screen, Denholm Elliot, in major roles. There was also even a carnival with Canadian soldiers dressed as Red Indians with shaven heads, imitation tomahawks, war dancing and whooping and a space man in his space ship with an entourage of metal-clad spacemen and girls, the metal from cans in parcels.

Of course a good deal of improvisation might be necessary unless exceptional circumstances allowed for the hiring of music and instruments, costume and other needs. A French officer helped Alistair Bannerman in some of his needs at his officer's camp. He made furniture out of Red Cross boxes:

Long Johns served as knee breeches, wigs were made out of newspaper and glue, a sort of *papier maché*. It was for 'School for Scandal' and it was a great success. I remember at the end I couldn't hear any clapping but it was because it was so cold everyone was wearing woollen gloves.

The most serious 'sport' of all was that of attempting escape. Harry Sell noted that there were:

so many tunnels in course of construction that it is a marvel that any of the buildings remain standing. The detection of them is a full time job for the Security Officer and we keep two men and a boy busy cementing up the holes they find.

However, by the middle of 1943 his Italian captors were increasingly preoccupied with their own fate, "becoming more interested with what kind of a smashing they will get should the War pass through Italy". The mood of the Italians dramatically transformed: "We want to be your friends, we did not want to fight, O the terrible *Tedeschi*". The inmates of *P.G. 21* greeted Italy's surrender in September 1943 with wild rejoicing. At last they were free men again: "BATHS - FOOD - CLOTHES - FREEDOM. No more Filth, Lice, Hunger, Cold, Wet or restrictions or torments."

The instructions issued to the POWs were to sit tight, accept the cooperation and protection of their new Italian allies and await the arrival of British troops. German troops, however, arrived first. The years of captivity were not over for Sell. He tasted freedom but was recaptured by the Germans. He was held at Marisch Trubau and later at Brunswick. In captivity, he continued to engage in a battle of wits with his captors, hiding radios and planning escapes. He was also exposed to further examples of maltreatment, but found the



Germans less easy to ridicule than the Italians, seeing the latter as "a Comic Opera lot" by comparison.

When the POWs were transferred to Germany they were often provided with a shocking insight into the realities of the Third Reich. James Witte writes that his first destination was a transit camp, at Jacobstahl, which had previously been a Jewish extermination camp:

We were housed in the same barracks as were the Jews and slept in the same tiers of bunks. The lavatory was a pole over a pit which was once cleaned out by the inmates with their bare hands. We were not, however, subjected to such terrible indignities. The German guards - badly wounded soldiers from the Eastern Front - were quite decent and as shocked as we were with the place. We sat on some mounds to eat our midday meal, a thin mixture of Kohlrabi soup... when one of the Guards told us we were sitting on dead Jews ... We leapt to our feet in horror And each morning we watched a melancholy procession of Russians carrying corpses to a lime-pit and tipping the bodies in unceremoniously. Fortunately we were not at Jacobstahl very long.

Ernest Hall was sent to a German processing camp, *Stalag IVB*. On his arrival he was struck that it was rather like a concentration camp, though potentially how much it resembled one only became apparent to him after the War:

We had to strip and take a shower in a vast communal shower chamber where we dried off under jets of warm air pumped from outlets in the ceiling. It was only after the War that I appreciated how easily that shower chamber could have been converted into a gas chamber.

The German processing of prisoners involved delousing them, taking their photograph and fingerprints, inoculating them and having them medically examined. Clarence Thackrah, recalled:

we had our hair cropped with a machine used to cut horses' hair. We were lined up and worked in threes - one turned the handle, one manipulated the cutting head and one had his head shaved. This device, with inexperienced lads, was a dangerous weapon. It wasn't only the hair that was cut. Then we undressed, our clothes were thrown into the delouser, then we went under the shower, then walked through the door of the shower room and two Russian girls with a bucket of thick brown disinfectant gave you a dab under each arm and a nice splash on your private parts, all sense of modesty long gone. The final act was an Italian doctor, for inoculation and vaccination.

This was a less than hygienic procedure, which left some with hugely swollen arms. Following the medical examination, the POWs were issued with a fresh British uniform, supplied by the Red Cross, and assigned to a camp.

There was a superficial uniformity to the camps in Germany: a wired enclosure with wooden lookout towers holding perhaps searchlights, machine-guns and armed personnel, a grid-like pattern of wooden huts raised above the ground, bunks in tiers of three with a narrow corridor from end to end perhaps with a central enclosed stove, outside the barracks, ancillary buildings for both guards and camp facilities, a delousing hut, fuel and vegetable stores, a



hospital, recreation area, punishment barracks etc, but the similarities hide individual features - the nature of the ground and its suitability for escape tunnelling - sand, soil, clay, even stone, the proximity of woods, river, rail and road and, of course, the Swiss frontier or indeed other frontiers which potentially held some measure of opportunity for continued evasion. Officers' camps could be as described above but also in old buildings, castles, forts adapted for a new purpose.

Of all his time in captivity Robert Lee remembers *Stalag IVB* as the lowest point, the most degrading, but the routine at *Stalag IVB* of course mirrored that of the camps. Phil Darby has written:

The camp was divided into two halves by an axis road which ran the full length of the camp. End-on to this were the accommodation huts, separated from the road by a wire fence. There were probably forty of these, large, close together and very decrepit. These, in turn, were grouped into smaller compounds to separate the Russian, French, Dutch, Belgians and British personnel; the conditions under which the Russians lived were well below those of the other nationalities, and little better than total squalor. Provision was also made, in a small compound, to enable men, forced to work in local industries, to return for redeployment. The RAF compound was at the end of the axis road and housed about fifteen hundred men. It was to this that I was taken.

My first impression was very depressing. Everything looked, and was, very run-down. The entrance to the hut was at the opposite end to the road and a short distance away stood the latrines unit. Beyond this was an open space which we used for exercise and the Germans for counting and haranguing. Inside, the bunks were arranged in units of six, three tiers high, with a narrow central aisle. There were probably ten sets of these bunks in each hut, together with a small stove and a few tables. I was allocated a top bunk, halfway along the hut, from which I could survey everything that was going on. The disadvantage, however, was that a visit to the latrines at night required a ten-foot descent in total darkness, and a corresponding climb back after the perilous exercise of negotiating the various obstacles and bodies which littered the floor. It was a journey never undertaken lightly.

Darby's memories cover the distribution of food, the shortage of food, the hunger, the cold and the consequences:

Food distribution and the curfew at darkness were rituals we grew to accept. The food - bread and potatoes - was issued to the hut in bulk and divided up by a team that had accepted the responsibility. Fortunately, the scheme had been devised before I arrived and was usually in loaf form and, on most occasions, it was a case of one between seven or one between twelve, as the calculations decreed. Much the same applied to the potatoes, which by the time we received them were little more than 'mush', and of course, that is what they were called. I doubt very much whether without the supplement of the occasional Red Cross parcel, the rations would have been sufficient to sustain life over a lengthy period.



Indeed, we were all becoming painfully thin. A corollary of this was that with the low temperatures and inadequate food we were not able to hold our water and every night degenerated into a continuous procession to latrines. We also learned that when we were in a weak state any rapid movement would cause a black-out. To sit up in bed in a hurry would precipitate a rapid return to the horizontal. Fortunately, we were able to see the funny side of each other's problems.

In the winter of 1943/4 we were very, very cold and weak. Few of us possessed any clothing other than that which we were wearing, and how to avoid spending the night shivering was a problem which beset us all. Anything which could insulate us from the cold was somehow applied to our bodies. Preparing for the night was little more than rolling in our blanket and shivering - 'synchronised shivering' it was called.

Needless to say, much thought was devoted to this problem. There was a stove in the hut, but insufficient fuel to keep it alight for more than a few hours. Other than burning the beds, which was sometimes proposed, the alternative was to acquire more coal from the fuel dump situated near the main entrance. To this end, the 'fuel fatigue' was devised. Each night a party of six men, with faces blacked and wearing such items of dark clothing as existed, would leave the hut, traverse the whole length of the camp, burrow through the wire into the fuel compound, fill their bags and return to base by the same route. The following night a different six would go, use the same hole in the wire, and generally repeat the exercise. It was just as well that the fuel dump was sufficiently large to ensure that the coal was not missed. We knew we were taking outrageous risks to remain warm, but the instinct to survive was strong."

Their German captors often required from POWs work outside of the camps. Ernest Hall was assigned to the railway sidings at Zittau, where he unloaded the railway trucks. Witte did similar work. He recalls how he took the opportunity to sabotage the German war effort as best he could:

We soon found out how to put produce destined for Halle in the wagon going to Magdeburg, and so on. But had we realised at the time the immense dangers we were running in making fools out of the Germans, we would never have played such foolish pranks. The penalty for tampering with the system, sabotage in effect, meant the concentration camp of which we were in ignorance at the time. Today, knowing the full horrors of such places makes me shudder when I think of the risks I ran in subsequent months.

The British found themselves working alongside not only POWs from other Allied nations, but also civilian slave labour from regions of Soviet Russia and from Poland. It was prisoners from these countries, regarded as *Untermenschen* in Nazi ideology, who were targeted for the harshest treatment. Russian prisoners were especially badly dealt with. At Jacobstahl, Witte witnessed Russian POWs being "systematically worked



From the papers of C E Symons. He was captured in Crete and worked at a quarry in northern Czechoslovakia



and starved to death". Sell writes that they were transferred to the camps in cramped railway carriages and many died along the way. On arrival, they had dogs set on them to round them out of the trains. The Germans fed the Russians poorly on scraps, such as potato peelings. The British did their best to relieve the suffering of their Allies. When he worked in the kitchens, Sell endeavoured to peel the potatoes thickly, so that the Germans got smaller spuds and the Russians thicker peelings. At Englesdorf, in 1943, Witte writes that:

with Red Cross parcels, the British POWs lived well As we had no need for German soup, we gave it to the Russians. Because they were starving, they fought over it like wild animals; the dish got knocked over and the soup spilt, so we made them line up and dished each man out with a proper portion. The Germans looked on cynically, but they knew in their heart of hearts that we were doing the right thing. The Russians regarded us with great favour but the Gestapo and the SS put a stop to the soup issue. There was nothing we could do except look after the Russians clandestinely.

Certainly, without Red Cross parcels, life in German hands would have been barely supportable. The German-provided swill of potato and gristle-meat stew was patently inadequate. With the contents of parcels not always matching the needs or desires of the recipients, bartering was the answer; most regularly over the cigarettes received by the nonsmoker. John Killick remembers the exchange and barter at his camp being quite sophisticated. It was:

based on a currency called bully Marks. You fixed a price for a tin of bully beef at X hundred bully Marks and anything else was priced in relative terms. There were no actual notes or anything like that. It was barter, but everything had its value. A bar of chocolate, whatever it might be. You could trade your bully Marks for cups of tea or whatever ... some people towards Christmas of 1944 were enterprising enough to take the prunes and the raisins and what not out of the Red Cross parcels and they unscrewed the light shades from the ceiling which were glass bulbs and brewed up this stuff under their beds and eventually managed to distil it into a clear white spirit which took the roof off your mouth but there it was. Very enterprising of them I felt.

Work on farms, in factories and in coal mines, something required of 'men in the ranks', could be physically very demanding of prisoners weakened by poor diet and food shortage but it could also be welcomed as bringing a measure of freedom and for some an orientation exercise if escape were to be attempted and even opportunity for escape. [Geoff Steer](#) described such circumstances which ended tragically, early in 1945:

Meanwhile we carried on working at the pit. I was put on another job of work, this time with Karl, shot-firing. After about a month I was on my own blowing coal faces for my mates and making it easy for them to get their stint of coal out. During one Sunday in February two American lads got in one of the coal wagons which always went away before we went back to camp. They had about an hour before the guards knew they had gone. We arrived back at camp about 6 o'clock, had our pig swill and some of our parcels. At about 10 o'clock the Captain came across to announce with a smile that the lads had been shot in a marshalling yard while trying to escape. My



thoughts were at the time that these people had a lot to answer for and our time would come.

Steer recalled an American shot in their barracks for an insulting remark to a guard and the strictest discipline in the mines where he worked.

There is much evidence of gratuitous violence and humiliation being inflicted by the Germans. Stan Hope, mentioned above as a victim at capture, experienced German brutality again during a ship and rail transfer from a camp in East Prussia to *Stalag Luft IV*:

They took us by train to the nearest station to the camp. We found out afterwards we were about 3 or 4 kilometres from the camp which was in a wooded area. There was a road, a sort of sandy track up to the camp and they started us off marching with all our kit of course. We had all the stuff that we could carry and in the woods at each side, the officer in charge of the march had stationed young Marines. He had got them from the docks at Stettin or wherever and told them horror stories about our bombing civilians in Germany. In fact, we heard afterwards that his family had been lost in a bombing raid which was the reason for this hatred and he started us running up the road. We lost our kit. We were set on by Alsatian dogs. We were stabbed in the back with bayonets. We were threatened with guns. The horrible thing that happened was that we concertinered. The ones at the front would slow down. The ones at the back would push in to them and then we would all get crowded together and the young Marines jumped in then and stabbed us.

One or two did get quite severely stabbed. I got a prod in the backside and it healed up very quickly. It was nothing much but several people did get injured and several of them were handcuffed together and when one of them went down he dragged the other one with him and the dogs used to set about them then and I believe one or two of the fellows tried to kick the dogs but whether that worked or not. . [I don't know].

It was horrible. I have never been so frightened in all my life. I remember that my mouth was so dry. I could hardly swallow. We just didn't know what was happening and eventually we did arrive at the camp and they managed to get some doctors to attend to the wounded. We were all exhausted and laid on the ground. We had lost our kit. Some had managed to keep their kit but very few and we never saw that kit again. It was all confiscated.

For men at the end of their tether the last dregs of their physical capacity would be still further drained by the long marches to be endured from numerous camps as, from East and West in 1945, the Allies advanced into Germany. Some simply fell by the wayside exhausted and bereft of all spirit for survival. If not dragged up and on by fellow marchers they could have been dispatched by guards or have slipped into oblivion in the cold. There were further tragedies as low-flying Allied fighters strafed what one presumes the pilots saw as a column of retreating troops.



In the Centre, there is a graphic diary of a march from Poland into Germany, that of Herbert Cumming:

18/1/45

For some time now there have been strong rumours, particularly from the Poles working on the mines, that we will be moved shortly. The Russian advance has been very steady and the Germans have been digging defensive positions round the camp area for some time. We are still waiting for our Xmas parcels to arrive from the Reynard Mines.

Later

We have just been told to pack everything and be ready to move at an hour's notice. There is great bustle and excitement and we are cooking and eating all we won't be able to carry. I have just come from the Staffroom where I spooned a tin of condensed milk on my own and regretfully had to decline a tin of jam which they offered me. We are due to get a parcel among three men when we leave the camp. We are expecting to leave early in the morning.

19/1/45

We are all ready to move and our packs are heavy with all we can carry and more. I have a Canadian Parcel intact and beans and stuff for making porridge which ought to last some time. Gordon Maasdorp and Jack Richter have asked me to join up with them and share everything on the trip and this will probably suit us all. We have been told that we will have to march for from five to eight days and we are not looking forward to it. New kit is being thrown out to the chaps and there is terrible waste of everything which should have been issued earlier on.

Later

We have arrived at the Millowitz Coal Mine - 15 Kilos off - after a terrible march in the snow. Tons of things were thrown away by chaps who found them too heavy. Jack has been feeling very sick and had a terrible time, but we are in bungalows here and he is in bed and we are preparing a very good supper. I am insisting on planning our rations to last as long as possible as I am very dubious of Gerry being able to feed us regularly. We were left waiting in the snow for 4½ hours while they decided where to put us and it was bitterly cold. Eight chaps hid away at Nikwa, and two guards were left behind to look for them and we hear they were shot, but we don't believe them.

23/1/45

Human endurance is a thing at which to marvel. What we have gone through in the last 24 hours we would never have dreamed possible before. After a terrible night, during which a chap was sleeping right on top of me, we were woken up at 1.30 a.m. and told to pack and be ready to march immediately. We were told to discard anything but food and essentials, so we decided to do away with our sleigh as the ground was very rough. We were then marched at a terrific pace, past thousands of Russian prisoners and kept going for hours without a rest. When we were finally given a ten minute rest, we were absolutely exhausted and the 3 of us decided we must throw



away anything we could possibly do without, so we each discarded our second blanket and all clothing except what we were wearing - except socks. We were pressed on again as the Russians were so close - in fact their gunfire seemed very close. When we finally arrived at a farm barn that evening we had covered 43 kilos. Tons of the chaps fell out of the road and we passed quite a few corpses of Russians who couldn't keep up with the main body. During the march we were wet with perspiration and yet our hands were numb with cold. Just before reaching the farm we crossed the river Oder, close to Ratibor.

27/1/45

We have been sleeping in barns every night, usually marching about 30 kilos a day. Our boots always freeze overnight and my feet are beginning to give a lot of trouble, as they are all swollen and sore. This morning I cut my boots in order to ease them, but I am afraid I'm in for a lot of trouble with them. We passed through Benthem, Gleiwitz and Leobschutz. We were told we could get rations tomorrow, but they are simply forcing us on with broken promises. At every stop more chaps remain behind. This morning I sneaked off early and got into the kitchen, with our Gerry leaders, and cooked up some porridge and even pinched some of their milk to add to it. Jack and Gordon were amazed and say they don't know how I manage these things. I also managed to scrounge some bread which helped things on. I don't know what we would have done without our Red X parcels which we brought with us.

Got 2 kilos of bread for some tea at Gratz and also very meagre rations, so we can keep from starving a bit longer. Has been snowing consistently and bitterly cold but today is a nice day. Last night 12 chaps were sent to Hospital by transport with frost bite and pneumonia and they were refused admittance and forced to march back to our quarters, as there was no room for them. I am terrified of getting sick, as the Gerry organisation is completely disrupted and you can depend on getting no help whatsoever. The only thing that keeps us going is the good war news and the thought of all we can look forward to when we get out of all this. I have been getting rheumatism in my left shoulder and it has been very painful. At some of the barns the farmers cook up a few spuds for us and we usually get hot water for a brew, so this augments our miserable rations a little. The chaps are beginning to get desperate and rush madly for any morsel of food - it is a pitiable sight. We are all losing condition rapidly and look unshaven and haggard. Washing is out of the question, as we usually get to our sleeping quarters after dark, and the guards won't let us out again. Odd chaps are escaping but they are pretty sure of being recaptured or die of exposure as the civvies are too afraid of the consequences to give any assistance.

They marched for six more weeks, right across Czechoslovakia, approximately 650 miles from start to finish until the unexpected sight of Red Cross lorries and parcels eased their suffering and heralded liberation.

Harry Sell's outrage at German brutality and misconduct is manifest in his account, with one particular incident making a lasting impression: "I have a private score to settle with one Gfr. Rebut for blowing out the brains of a Gurhka Officer in Brunswick just for the fun of it".



Sell's record of life in the camp provided vital evidence in securing the conviction of Oberst von Strehle, the Commandant at Brunswick, for ill-treatment of prisoners. Another man, J. Barber, took direct action in the face of SS brutality on the farm where he was sent to work alongside other POWs and civilian slave labour. He struck a guard who had been beating Polish children on the farm. Barber only narrowly escaped execution because the army, which had a record of bad feeling towards the SS and the Gestapo, ran the court martial that dealt with him. After the War, the Polish ambassador praised Barber for his brave stand.

In total, Harry Sell presents his POW experiences as a picture of "organised maltreatment" in the hands of his German and Italian captors. However subjective his evidence may be, it is thoughtprovoking. The maltreatment of British prisoners in the Far East, established without doubt, is more widely known, but there is evidence enough of brutality under Axis hands. Often this seems to have resulted from disorganisation and inefficiency, but on some occasions there was wilful neglect and some savagery. It is equally clear that in the worst circumstances the British seem to have been treated less badly than other nationalities - particularly with regards to treatment by the SS and the Gestapo. Of course the notorious exception to this lies in the aftermath of the 'Great Escape'.

It is clear that some men suffered deep long-term scars, both physical and psychological, as a result of their experiences in the German and Italian camps. However, the legacy was not all negative. Quite apart from educational, cultural and professional advance through study, there was time to think and plan, time for self-analysis. Some men emerged with an unusually acquired independence. They had grown in self-awareness and self-confidence, more tolerant too, with a well-balanced sense of priorities. Thus, alongside the experiences of ill-treatment we should also remember that some men look back with less resentment of their POW days. Ernest Hall, for example, has a generally positive recollection of his captors and his years in detention:

Our guards weren't too bad - a couple of them were really likeable and I've often thought of them and hoped that they got home safely at the end I shall never forget my experiences as a POW - but my memories are by no means wholly negative ones. I sometimes think that it was in that prison camp in Italy and in the railway sidings and in the streets of Zittau that I finally grew up. I have nothing to forgive. Nor, I think, do either the Italians or the Germans have anything for which to forgive me.



In this article we have chosen not to deal with escape activity as a studied response to the overemphasis on this in book and film and as we review what we have written we feel we ourselves may have under-emphasised one central problem faced by every long-term prisoner with his loss of freedom and his subjection to a range of hardships - coping with boredom. There is a poem in a POW autograph album which expresses the problem with appropriate monotony. It seems fitting that the verses might be quoted as our conclusion:

*Bloody Bridge all bloody day
Learning how to bloody play
Mr. Blackwood's bloody way
Bloody, bloody, bloody.*

*Bloody girlfriend drops me flat
Like a dog on bloody mat
Gets a Yank like bloody that
Bloody, bloody, bloody.*

*Now I've reached the bloody end
Nearly round the bloody bend
That's the general bloody trend
Bloody, bloody, bloody.*

Endnotes

The Second World War Experience Centre in Leeds holds all papers quoted in this article.