

Life in a German Prisoner of War Camp by R H Eeles

SITUATION:

Stalag Luft 3 was situated approximately one mile outside the town of Sagan in south eastern Germany, a small but important town due to its strategic position as a rail junction. With a population of 25,000, Sagan lay roughly halfway between Berlin and Breslau, some 75 miles south east of Berlin and within 6~ miles of the old Czechoslovakian border.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CAMP:

The Camp was built in a vast clearing in a pinewood forest and the inmates of the outer compounds thus had no outside vision beyond a vast impenetrable panorama of coniferous trees.

Within the camp were five separate compounds each containing between 500 and 1,000 men. All prisoners were of Allied aircrew origin, including Naval airmen, but the Americans were for some unknown reason segregated and occupied a compound of their own.

I served my time in the East Compound which by the end of 1944 housed close on one thousand men, due to the brisk trade in shot down planes following ever increasing aerial warfare over Germany and occupied territory during the invasion year.

HUTS, CONTENTS:

East Compound consisted of 8 wooden huts, constructed approximately 18 inches above ground surface level and each split into 10 rooms, ultimately housing up to 14 men per room roughly the size of an average household living room.

The total contents of each room were a table, bench and small stove. Sleeping arrangements comprised of two tier bunks with wood slats supporting a palliasse of straw. The upper bunks frequently collapsed if the occupant was unduly restless, thus causing obvious havoc below. Another reason for collapse was a shortage of slats, as during tunnelling operations a levy was imposed on each bunk, the slats making ideal support for tunnel structures.

An issue of one blanket per man was totally inadequate during the winter months and a ration of coal bricks, being meagre, was normally reserved for cooking purposes only.

GOON BOXES AND WARNING WIRE:

The compounds were surrounded by high barbed wire fences with sentry boxes on stilts, referred to by us as goon boxes, which were sited at frequent intervals along the boundaries of the camp. These were manned at all times and during darkness swivelling searchlights constantly swept the compounds.

Ten feet inside the barbed wire surround was a single trip or warning wire, and if anyone crossed this the nearest sentries would automatically open fire. Needless to say every new entrant had the importance of this wire instilled into him upon arrival.

FERRETS:

The compounds were continuously patrolled by men we nicknamed "ferrets". These men wore overalls and their tools in trade were a steel rod and a torch.

They were always on the lookout for tunnelling activities and frequently disappeared under huts for long intervals where they hoped to trace evidence of tunnelling, or alternatively overhear conversation of an incriminating nature.

DUTY PILOT:

To counteract the attentions of the ferrets, the camp had in operation a "Duty Pilot" system in the hut room nearest the single entrance gate and his responsibility was to have available at all times a record of all ferrets inside the wire. Consequently their whereabouts were always known.

The ferrets obviously became aware of this practice eventually and one of the regulars was in the habit of walking over to the duty pilot to request that his arrival and departure be recorded.

RADIO AND BBC NEWS:

One of several reasons why it was essential to know the precise whereabouts of the ferrets was on account of the illicit camp radio, whereby we obtained the BBC news daily. This was an activity where the operators could not afford to be caught out and in fact they never were.

The normal method of news circulation was for an announcer to visit each hut in turn and read out the news whilst wary eyes kept a sharp look out for any ferret movements nearby.

FREEDOM OF THE COMPOUND:

In normal circumstances, prisoners had the freedom of the compound during hours of daylight unless an air raid was in progress, in which case everyone was locked in their huts and the windows shuttered.

CAMP INMATES:

The camp inmates were a cosmopolitan lot and included many vocations. For interest, and in no particular order, I will reel off a small cross section — Tram Conductor, Millionaires son, Waiter, Lord, Publican, Racehorse Trainer (Marcus Marsh), Politician (Aidan Crawley), Dance Band Leader, Professional Dancer, Cowboy, Veterinary Surgeon, University Don, Detective, Cobbler, Jockey, Dietician (I think he had a lean time of it), Radio Announcer, Texas Ranger, Canadian Mounted Policeman, Professional Gambler, Bookie, Piano Tuner and believe it if you will, a self confessed Burglar, Pickpocket and Pimp.

FOOD SUPPLIES:

A typical daily food ration was 1/9th of a standard loaf of black bread, a bowl of soup, two potatoes and a small quantity of ersatz margarine and jam. Occasionally there was a hand out of vegetables in season and a small quantity of meat, often rumoured to be horsemeat, but nevertheless consumed without undue complaint.

RED CROSS PARCELS:

Fortunately, an issue of Red Cross parcels took place weekly which supplemented the diet and everyone concerned will be forever grateful to this Organisation.

These parcels came from all sources, but were primarily of American, British, Canadian and New Zealand origin.

The normal issue was one parcel per person, and this obviously added considerable interest to an otherwise drab menu.

Odd cases can be recalled where the contents of an entire parcel were consumed at one sitting, but in the main, syndicates were formed to pool resources so varying the somewhat monotonous diet still further.

Towards autumn 1944 however supplies became short and we had to manage for a time on half a parcel weekly.

Two very useful commodities, included in most parcels, were cigarettes and dried fruit.

THE MART:

Cigarettes were the camp currency for a Mart and regular auction sales were held. Amongst goods offered were tinned foods from Red Cross parcels, clothing and in fact any article capable of barter.

THE STILL:

Dried fruits were used for a far more interesting and devastating purpose. Fermented raisins were the starter for a highly potent alcoholic brew but early in 1944 the numerous homemade stills in operation were forbidden by the Camp Commandant due to rowdy parties and unruly and rebellious behaviour. This ban was enforced by the simple expedient of removing the offending ingredients directly from the Red Cross parcels before collection.

EAST COMPOUND WOODEN HORSE ESCAPE:

No reference to prison camps generally would be complete unless some comment was made to escape efforts.

The East Compound was considered the most difficult to escape from partly due to the light sandy nature of the soil and although close on 40 traditional tunnels were started from mid 1942 onwards, not a single one was successful. This lack of success promoted thought in other directions and in July 1943 the Wooden Horse escape was set in being, which resulted in three officers making a clear getaway on the 29th October of that year, eventually returning to England safely.

Very briefly, this escape involved a home made vaulting horse being placed in the same spot daily within 10 yards of the camp boundary with two men concealed inside and whilst other inmates of the camp were regularly invited to keep fit by vaulting exercises, a tunnel fairly quickly developed below ground, the whole operation from start to finish taking some four months.

ESCAPE:

The North Compound was notorious for large scale escape operations and it was from this compound of Stalag Luft 3 that a mass outbreak of 80 prisoners took place in March 1944 through a tunnel nicknamed "Harry" which exceeded 350 feet, in length and 30 feet in depth. Unfortunately, it was this escape which led to the shooting of 50 officers and following this tragic event, all future attempts at escape were prohibited by the Senior British Officer.

It is of passing interest to know that in addition to this tunnel two others of almost similar size in the same compound were in an advanced stage of construction, which said a great deal for the prisoners' security arrangements.

CIRCUIT BASHING:

To refer back to the warning wire, it was common practice to walk round this for exercise — known as circuit bashing and a complete circuit of the East Compound measured 932 yards. One had to walk warily at times as some danger always lurked in the background. We had for instance a 9 hole golf course made by the golfing enthusiasts who performed quite creditably with home made clubs and balls. Nevertheless a raucous "fore" occasionally made one duck for cover. Regrettably, there was no 19th hole. Incidentally, a home made golf ball cost 200 cigarettes on the Mart.

SPORT:

Football, cricket, and baseball introduced by our Canadian colleagues constituted the major camp sports. In the depth of winter we also had a home made ice skating rink. The Canadians excelled at this, and staged some exciting ice hockey games. During summer our normal attire was a pair of shorts only and we thus acquired a deep sun tan. A new inmate behind the wire was therefore instantly recognised as such.

POOL:

A small pool was sited in the camp for fire precaution purposes, but was frequently used for ducking a hapless or inexperienced referee who had incurred the displeasure of some sportsman or other.

STUDY:

Academically, one could delve into many subjects as a plentiful supply of books had built up over the years, mainly due to the efforts of the Swiss Red Cross who were our Protecting Power.

DRAMATICS:

Dramatics also played a prominent part in camp life and productions took place monthly. These performances included what is today called "Drag" but needless to say they hardly came up to Danny La Rue standards.

CAMP ORCHESTRA:

The shows were normally accompanied by the Camp Orchestra whose signature tune, somewhat appropriately, was "Time on my Hands". In spite of continuous practice, their performances left much to be desired and being confined to camp as it were, one could not always get out of earshot.

GUARDS:

We did not normally encounter any problems with the guards who in the main were either elderly or unfit for active duty and they did not interfere with us provided we complied with camp regulations.

By mid 1944 most of them showed no interest in the war and gave the impression that as far as Germany was concerned the conflict was as good as lost.

APPELLS:

To ensure that no one played truant, two roll calls known as Appells, took place daily, but there were also random hut checks for suspected irregularities, when all the occupants were locked out of their hut for several hours whilst a thorough search took place. This did not matter unduly in summer, but was unwelcome in winter. It was on such occasions that lectures for the politically minded by our budding M.P. or dancing lessons by our Professional Dancer held some appeal.

I have often wondered subsequently what some of us must have looked like doing a slow, slow, quick, quick, slow to a record of Victor Sylvester, but the only witness at the time was a labouring gramophone of unknown origin and vintage.

CONCLUSION:

The foregoing has been intended as an illustration of every day life in Stalag Luft 3 up to early January 1945 when the rapid Russian advance from the east necessitated our speedy removal elsewhere but in spite of the Holiday Camp image I may have unintentionally created, life was frequently boring and frustrating.