

## Otley, England

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When we arrived at the camp the big gates were opened, we were assembled inside, and they were closed behind us again. We got our first look at our new camp commander. He informed us through an interpreter about the rules and regulations of camp life. Then he made our mouths water by telling us that we would be receiving three hot meals a day. What that really meant, we soon found out.

We were divided up in groups of 100 men. There were ten tents in a row with ten of us occupying one tent, which was built to accommodate three British soldiers comfortably. So when ten of us lay down to sleep, our legs crossed in the middle. It was especially uncomfortable for those with long legs. I happen to have short legs, so if I pulled them up just a little, no one crossed mine.

Our beds consisted of a thin sack filled with straw lying directly on the bare ground. The British army had wooden platforms so that the air could circulate underneath their straw sacks. It was not long before our sacks started to rot underneath us because the ground was very damp.

Everything apart from the sleeping area was in the open, washrooms and toilets, etc. We had no belongings except for that which we wore. One knife per tent was issued each morning to divide the food.

For breakfast we had a cup of porridge with a little black tea. The porridge came in a galvanized container large enough to feed 100 men. However, 80% of it was water. Besides this we only got one slice of bread to last us all day, along with some more tea. In the late

afternoon we received a little butter and a little cheese and again more tea. The butter and cheese was about one inch square and had to be divided among ten of us. So much for our three hot meals a day.

There were working commandos for those of us who did not have a rank. According to the Geneva Convention, no one with a rank could be made to work unless they volunteered. This meant that I didn't have to go to work if I decided not to.

We could either work for a farmer or in a brickyard, where they manufactured clay bricks of all kinds, and dozens of varieties of pipes. These were then fired in very large ovens, in temperatures of up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The ovens had to be loaded and unloaded at maximum temperature because they couldn't afford to cool the ovens down and then heat them up again. I was fortunate not to have to work in a commando like that because those who were assigned to such jobs burned their eyebrows off in the intense heat.

Gradually my fellow prisoners were assigned to working commandos. The majority of them worked for small farmers. They were all right because they received food from the people they worked for. The rest of us were getting very weak. So it didn't take long until I also volunteered to go to work. We were promised a bigger daily ration if we worked.

One morning I was asked to help out preparing food for the kitchen. There were about 20 of us sitting at tables, which were arranged in squares, with two guards watching us. We had to take the leaves off cabbages to prepare them for cooking. The guards had to make sure we didn't eat anything.

I kept my eyes on both of them and when I thought they weren't looking in my direction I quickly stuffed a small cabbage leaf under my shirt. So before we were through I had tucked away quite a few leaves. That would be something to fill my empty stomach. I hoped that we would not be searched before we returned to our tents. Luckily all went well. Back in my tent, I had to find a place to eat my cabbage leaves without being seen by anyone. Otherwise I might be reported by one of my fellow prisoners. Such things happened.

Our camp held about 3000 men. Next to us, separated by a 10-foot high fence, was another camp with a capacity of 2000 men, and then a much smaller camp, which held only navy and army officers. I

learned that a lot of these officers were submarine commanders who had obeyed the British order to bring their submarines into a designated British harbor and surrender.

There was a forbidden zone of ten feet on either side of the fence, which we were not allowed to enter and we were not permitted to talk with anyone on the other side of the fence. Once it happened that a man from our camp saw his brother in one of the adjacent camps. Their joy was so great that they both ran to the fence and one of them was then shot dead by a guard. The next morning during roll call, we were told that the guard had overreacted and had been relieved of his post.

Life in the camp became very boring. Many hours in the day we just walked around to get a little exercise and to pass the time.

April 16<sup>th</sup> was my birthday. I was 21 years old. Throughout the day I was very quiet and withdrawn. My thoughts went back to my home, my family, and my brother who was a fighter pilot, flying an ME109. Although we never heard any news, everyone knew that the war could not go on much longer. I wondered how far the allied forces had penetrated into Germany and how my family was faring. I had not heard anything from them for a long time. My father and three sisters were at home and I hoped they were all right. My mother had died of pneumonia during the war.

The weather became very wet. It rained without stopping for about three days. As the camp was situated on the side of a hill the water started rushing down through our tents. Those of us who were not yet working sat huddled in our tents shivering, but at least we managed to keep dry.

Those who were out working, however, and being transported back and forth on open trucks, were not so fortunate. They were soaking wet when they arrived back at the camp. There was no place to dry anything, so they had no choice but to lie down at night wearing their wet clothes, hoping they would be dried out by morning. We had only one set of clothes, so there was nothing to change into.

As the rain persisted, we were given a spade and pickax, one set for each ten tents. We were expected to dig a trench around each tent so that we could dry out. The problem was that we were so weak none of us could dig for more than five minutes at a time. The trenches

proved very helpful as it rained on and off for the rest of the month. Many of us got sick with colds and other related problems. In the early days of May we finally dried out.

One morning at roll call I was assigned to a farm commando with another three men. We were given a tag with the number 78 on it. That was our commando number by which the farmer would recognize us.

The next morning all the working commandos assembled near the gate. They were then picked up in horse-drawn carts, small pickup trucks or even cars.

Our farmer arrived in a Morris Minor station wagon. We held up our card showing the number 78. The guard checked the farmer's card and then opened the gate to let us out.

Without saying anything, the farmer motioned to us to follow him. He was of medium build and rather small for a farmer, with a weather-beaten face and rugged appearance, but he had kind blue eyes under his bushy eyebrows. He wore long rubber boots covered in mud. The four of us greeted our farmer with, "Good morning"—we knew how to say that—and then climbed one by one into the station wagon. After we had driven about 20 minutes, no one saying a word, we arrived at a medium size farm.

The farmer pulled up in the yard outside some horse stables. After we got out he turned to us and asked the inevitable question, "Do you speak English?" We shrugged our shoulders and said, "No." I did understand some English by now so I said, "A little." From that moment on I was selected as spokesman for our group.

The farmer had many horses. The manure in the stables was so high that he could hardly get the horses through the doors. It looked as though they had not been cleaned out for years. It was our job to remove the manure and carry it in wheelbarrows to an enclosure away from the house. We were very weak but we tried to do the work as fast as possible because we wanted to make a good impression.

By about midday we were pretty exhausted. It was very hard work forking up manure because it must have been packed down over a period of several years.

From the time we started working the farmer was busy somewhere else. When we saw him again he told us to take a break. We sat down

to rest and for quite some time he stood there watching us. Then he asked where our lunch was. We shrugged our shoulders and made him understand that we had none. He then told me that he wanted to see our jackets. After checking all our pockets and finding nothing, he went back to the house and came back with a letter from the British Command. He showed me where it said that we were being well fed in the camp and need not be given food. I tried to explain to him that we were given only one slice of bread a day. With an astonished look on his face he went back to the house.

Since we didn't know how long a lunch break he wanted us to take we decided to start working again after we had rested for about 15 minutes. Just then the farmer arrived. He was carrying a huge plate full of sausages. They were freshly fried and smelled delicious. Not far behind him came his wife with two bowls full of French fries. Both the farmer and his wife stood watching us in amazement while we were consuming this delicious meal, and we couldn't say, "Thank you," enough. The meal was then followed by a nice cup of hot tea. How good it felt to have a full stomach after going hungry for so long.

The rest of the day we worked harder than ever. I was hoping that this job would last as long as I was a prisoner of war. Unfortunately it lasted only two weeks. When we returned to camp one night we were told that we wouldn't be returning to the farmer. The officers from the adjacent camp had decided that they wanted to go to work. There were other commandos, but they preferred the small jobs with the farmers. We had to give way to the officers' request.