

## Sawtry, England

## 33

Life at the camp had changed so much since the beginning of 1948. With so many repatriations taking place, the number of prisoners in all the camps had shrunk. Some smaller camps had been completely dissolved and the prisoners moved into our camp. Rumors circulated for a while that our camp would be dissolved too and we would be moved to Sawtry, closer to Peterborough. The uncertainty made me very uneasy.

I did not see Jack for nearly two weeks after I got back, and I hoped that he had not been transferred to another camp. One morning he walked into my office. He had just returned from leave. He asked me if I noticed anything different about him. While looking him over, I noticed he had been promoted to sergeant, and congratulated him on his promotion.

The news I had from home was not very good. My sisters were very worried about my father's health. They also told me that one of our neighbors, who was also a prisoner of war in England and lived on the same street as us, had come home. They wondered when I would be released. Since my brother was reported missing, they were very much looking forward to having me back home. They also mentioned that our neighbor from across the street came home from a prison camp in Russia. He died just a week later.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the advice from Sue's mother, to go back to my loved ones, was the right thing to do.

Sue sent me a registered parcel and a letter. The parcel contained cigarettes, candy, and a tie. In her letter she told me that she was planning to come and visit me at Connington, together with her cousin Lorna, some time in early spring. She asked me to make inquiries about where

they could stay for a week. I was thrilled that she was planning to come, but I would much prefer if she could come alone.

I decided to write a letter to Sue's parents. I thanked them for all the kindness they had shown me during my stay at their house and for the parcels they had sent to my family in Germany. Then I told them how I felt about their daughter and asked them to please let her come and visit me on her own. I made them a promise that I would never do anything, which they might disapprove of.

Next morning, Jack came into my office with a long list of names of all those to be repatriated from our camp. My name was not on it. He did not know what determined who went home, and who didn't, but he thought there was a good chance that I would be one of the last to go, probably in May. He was almost sure that he himself would be around until the very end. It depended entirely on the commander, as he was the one who made up the list.

With many men being transferred to our camp, and just as many leaving to go home, my work at the post office was hectic. Whenever we were not working, we were free to leave the confines of the camp and go wherever we wanted, as long as we signed out at the guardhouse, and signed back in before 10 p.m. All the restrictions about not being able to fraternize had been lifted completely.

Anyone who married a British subject could apply for permission to stay in England. There was a big article in the newspaper, which said that any English girl who married a German POW, no matter in which country they decided to live, could keep her British nationality. Sue was very quick to send that clipping for me to read.

Finally I received a letter from Sue in which she told me that she intended to visit me on her own, without her cousin, some time in April. She had made the arrangements with her employer and asked me to please find a family where she could stay. Her parents were very pleased with my letter and had no objections to her coming to see me. Now I had a lot to look forward to and plan for and we could talk about the future with a bit more certainty. Some of our men, especially those with no home to go to, had got married and stayed in England. Marrying Sue and staying here would have been an easier way out, but neither of us would have had any peace, wondering how my family was doing.

Extracts of a letter dated March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948

*My own dearest sweetheart Ursula,*

*Many thanks, my dear, for the lovely letter I received yesterday. I am so very happy that your parents were pleased with my letter and that they felt it was OK for you to come and visit me by yourself.*

*With every breath I breathe, I think of you and I can't begin to tell you how happy I feel, knowing that this spring time we will be able to spend a week together.*

*I learned from Jack that I will definitely be staying here at the camp till the end of April, hopefully even till May. We should have a most wonderful week together. I have befriended a nice family. They live not far from my office and they are willing to let you stay with them. They have had people staying with them before. The fee for bed and breakfast is very minimal. I could easily afford to pay it. There is even a possibility that you could have breakfast and any other meals with me at the sergeant's mess.*

*When you say in your letter that you saw some of our boys walking through the streets of Bradford, you can't imagine how terrible it makes me feel, knowing that, if I was there now, I would be able to see you almost every day. However things have worked out better for us than I ever imagined.*

*I would like nothing better than to spend Easter with you and your family. However, the way things are at the moment, I don't think they would let me go. Please remember My Darling that wherever I go, I will carry you along in my heart. You are in my thoughts every minute of my days and before I go to sleep. You are in my dreams, and the very first thought that comes to my mind when I wake up in the mornings, is you. You are everything to me.*

*Well darling, the mail has now arrived and I must get busy sorting, and deliver it. I'll say bye, bye till my next letter.*

*I love and adore you with all my heart and remain with lots of kisses  
Yours Karl.*

I waited anxiously for a reply from Sue. The first thing I did every day was to search through the mail for a letter from her. More and more men were being repatriated. One time we were down to around 500 men.

There were still rumors about being moved to another camp.

Whenever I had a chance, I took Struppie for a walk through the farmland. I just loved the springtime. Everything was so lush and green. Struppie had fun trying to chase the colorful dragonflies every time we passed the pond where we sat with Sue and her family the previous summer.

Walking with Struppie reminded me that very soon I would have to look for someone who would give him a good home. I had grown to like him so much that I knew I was going to miss him very much when I had to let him go. I kept thinking that he must have come from a farm or a house from this neighborhood when he first appeared on the doorstep of my office. However, among the many people I met while walking Struppie, no one ever said that they had seen him before. One thing was for sure; I could not just leave him there. I wanted him to have a good home. I could picture him sitting in front of my empty Nissen hut, fretting for me after I had left.

One morning the camp commander (major) came to my office and spent nearly half an hour with me. He said that it looked as if we would be staying at our camp till at least the end of April. Then those of us who were still here would all be repatriated and the camp would be closed down. He was going to write a memo to our German commander to let everyone know. The Sawtry camp would be shut down and absorbed by us, so we would be almost a thousand men again, and I would have my hands full with the extra mail. However, with the pending repatriations there was nowhere near the volume of mail that there used to be. I myself had already told my people in Germany not to write any more.

That evening I needed to go for a walk. I wanted to remember the time when I first met Sue and I wanted to think about the future. Seeing the spring flowers and the beautiful green meadows uplifted me as they had done so many times before. I could see myself being married to Sue, although the word marriage had never come up in our conversations so far.

While I was meditating and enjoying the scenery, a farmer came walking by, who I had seen before when Sue and I were sitting in the same spot. I started a conversation with him. He wanted to know who Struppie belonged to. I answered that he had been my faithful companion for almost two years and that, since I was to be repatriated in about a month's time, I was hoping to find a good home for him. The farmer bent

down to stroke Struppie, who first growled at him and then accepted his friendship by wagging his tail.

The farmer pointed out his farm to me, just across the fields. He said that his wife would probably like to have Struppie as a companion around the farm, and he could do with a good rat catcher. We arranged for the farmer and his wife to come by one evening so that she could have a look at Struppie.

The next day there was a letter for me from Sue, telling me that she was planning to be in Connington by the 17th of April, one day after my birthday and she would be staying for one week. I was relieved to know we would see each other again before I left.

Struppie and I went for a long walk. I wanted the farmer's wife to meet with him and I wanted him to see his future home.

As we approached the farm, Struppie became very alert and excited. Since I was not sure what animals might be running loose, I put him on his lead. The first thing I noticed was that everything was very clean and well kept. I rang the doorbell. Evidently there was no dog, otherwise it would have announced our arrival.

When the front door opened the lady seemed pleased to see us. To my amazement, Struppie did not growl at her and accepted being stroked without a murmur. The farmer's wife told me that her husband was in the field but if I had the time she would gladly make a cup of tea for me.

We sat down at the table to talk about Struppie. I told her that I was very relieved to know she was willing to take care of him. I asked her about the other animals on the farm. She said there were some cats, which lived in the barns, but they were not domesticated and very shy. She didn't think there would be any problems with Struppie.

While we were enjoying the tea and biscuits, Struppie made himself very much at home, lying under the table. I told the lady that I would like to keep him until my repatriation.

Everything was turning out so well, but I couldn't wait to see Sue again and the days in the camp sometimes seemed endless. Though I was busy in the post office, my mind was mainly occupied with two things. One was Sue's forthcoming visit; the other was preparing myself to go home to my family and the village where I was born.

I knew it was going to be different from six years ago, when I left as a young air force volunteer. Now I was going back to a country occupied

by French forces, and devastated by six years of war. I didn't know what to expect or even what I was going to do. I hoped that the company, where I had served my apprenticeship, was still operating. Even if it wasn't, I had a good profession and the prospect of finding work was not too remote.

About three days before Sue's arrival I received a beautiful hand-painted birthday card from her. I had forgotten that my 24th birthday was only two days away, my third birthday in captivity. She also wrote that she would be coming by bus from Peterborough, and it would drop her off outside the camp gate.

That evening I went into the British orderly room and asked if I could make a phone call to my girlfriend. Sue's parents did not have a telephone, but their neighbors did, and they had once told Sue that they would be willing to fetch her to the phone if I needed to call her. One of the orderlies dialed the number for me and finally Sue was on the other end of the line. She was as nervous as I was and could hardly speak. I just managed to tell her that I had received her letter, I loved her, and that I would be waiting for her at the camp gate when she arrived.

I awoke very early on April 17<sup>th</sup> 1948. The weather forecast was good. I had lain my trousers underneath my bed sheet overnight, a trick I had learned during my air force days. With my body heat and weight, the trousers got somewhat pressed. I had a freshly washed shirt to put on and my shoes were polished. Everything was set and my heart was racing.

I went earlier than usual to pick up the mail as I would need to have everything ready and delivered by two.

Jack came into my office at around nine o'clock to help me sort the mail. Then he took all the mail belonging to the British staff and said he would take care of it. What a good friend he was.

I had finished my work before noon, which gave me plenty of time to prepare myself. Everyone I met called out to me to have fun. It seemed half the British staff knew about Sue's visit and probably half of Connington too.