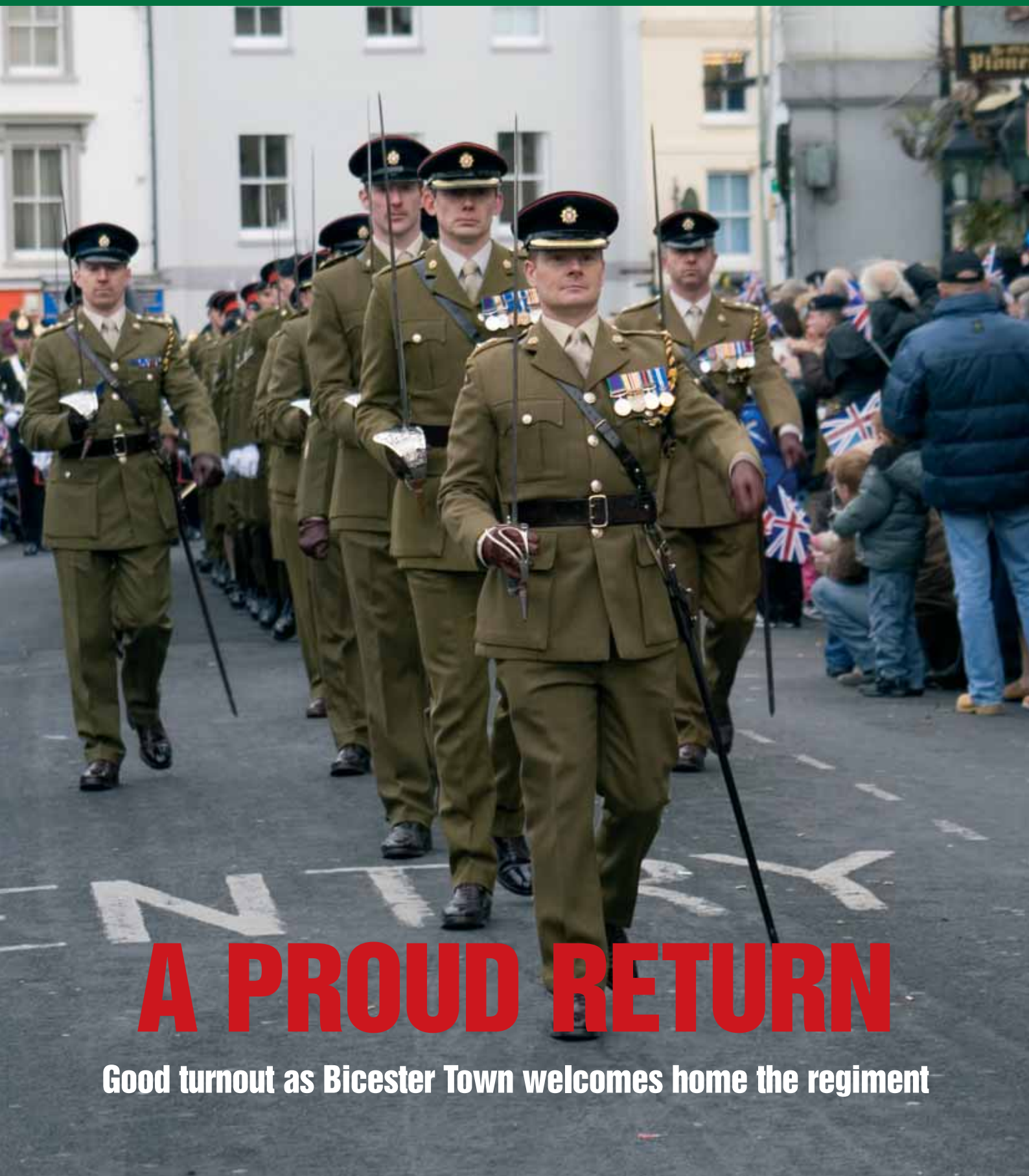
The Pioneer

The Newsletter of the Royal Pioneer Corps Association

MAY 2008

www.royalpioneercorps.co.uk



A PROUD RETURN

Good turnout as Bicester Town welcomes home the regiment

ThePioneer

Front Cover
CO 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC leads the Regiment through Bicester town centre
Picture: Paul Brown

Back Cover
Pte Field receiving The Friend Memorial Trophy from Colonel A Barnes.
Picture: Paul Brown

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We are currently preparing for this year's Reunion Weekend which, once again, will coincide with 23 Pnr Regt's Open Day. A booking form for the weekend is attached, accommodation will be granted on a first come first served basis.

Also attached are the usual draw tickets for the Derby Draw, please give this your support as it helps to fund Association functions. However, if you find that you are unable to sell these tickets and do not wish to purchase them yourself please let me know and future tickets will not be sent to you.

The last 'extended' Newsletter was very well received especially the complete book "It don't cost you a Penny", the complementary messages were appreciated. We have again inserted a complete book regarding the capture and life as a POW of Mr P Weiner, who unfortunately died in 2005.

We have, for the first time, received too many articles for publication in this issue. Thank you for your support, we will endeavour to publish these articles in future editions. We have tried to make this edition as varied as possible with articles from past WWII, National Service and Regular Service together with our current serving Pioneers. Our current Pioneers have had a busy time from operational tours to, at time of writing, completing ceremonial duties in London.

Norman Brown

The following is a message from Brigadier CB Telfer CBE, Chairman of the RPC Association...

It is time for me to stand down as your Chairman and to pass the baton to my successor. By the time you read this that will have been done.

During these last few years we have undertaken significant changes to the way in which we do business as an Association. The merging of our resources with the other Associations within the RLC has been completed with the result that systems and staffing support are now in place which will ensure that our affairs will be efficiently managed for the future.

The way in which benevolent needs are met and the way in which members can keep in touch through Association events is as well assured now as it is possible to be.

I wish to record my thanks to Norman Brown for the excellent way in which he has performed as our Secretary/ Controller and Newsletter editor. The latter in particular has been and continues to be, a resounding success. I also thank the members of the Council for their wise and willing support in conducting Council business. Lastly, I wish to thank you, the membership, for your continuing enthusiastic participation in Association events which makes it all worthwhile.

My very best wishes to you and your families for the future.

C B Telfer

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NEWS IN BRIEF

■ **THE new national Armed Forces Memorial in Staffordshire was dedicated in the presence of HM the Queen on 12 October 2007. It is designed to provide fitting recognition for the British Servicemen and women who have been killed on duty since the end of the Second World War. It is not a war memorial. Alongside the names of those killed in conflict are the names of those killed in training accidents, on peacekeeping missions, or as a result of terrorist action.**

Almost 16,000 names are carved on the huge Portland Stone walls, but this is also a Memorial for the future with room for a further 15,000 names.

Uniquely, the memorial also recognises and acknowledges the courage of family and friends left behind. It is hoped it will play a valuable role in supporting the bereaved as they manage their loss through different stages in their lives.

Admittance to the AFM is free and it is located at the National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire. Visit: www.forcesmemorial.org.uk for further information or call 0207 2182020.

■ SIXTY five serving and retired officers attended the 61st Past and Present Officers' Dinner in the Officers' Mess, 23 Pnr Regt RLC, Bicester on Fri 12 Oct 07. The guests for the evening were Brig CJ Murray CBE – Director RLC and Brig C Blong – Comd 104 Bde.

Brigadier HJ Hickman as President once again chaired the evening.

Details of this year's dinner are shown on page 8.

■ **SIXTY eight members attended the Ladies Dinner night in the WOs' & Sgts' Mess, 23 Pnr Regt RLC on Sat 13 Oct 07. Following an excellent meal live music and a disco were once again provided by Brendon McCann and Tony Eccles (at a greatly reduced rate!) for which the Club is very grateful.**

Details of this year's Ladies Dinner are shown on page 8.

■ ANOTHER successful 39/93 Club Dinner was held at the Red Lion Hotel, Fareham on Saturday 13 October 2007. The club hold two dinners annually, details can be obtained from the Secretary, Les Rowley on 01628 890913.

■ **HRH The Duke of Edinburgh officially opened Westminster Abbey's Field of Remembrance on 8 November 2006. The Duke laid a wooden Remembrance Cross and toured the North Green plots before signing the St Margaret's Church visitor book.**

The Duke of Edinburgh spent a great deal of time speaking to the crowds and stopped at the Royal Pioneer Corps plot to have a long chat to WO2 C Bell (SSM 518 Sqn 23 Pnr Regt RLC), who fronted our plot.

■ ONCE again it was decided to hold a London Lunch following the Field of Remembrance on 8th November 2007 and 14 attended lunch in the Marquis of Westminster restaurant. Two daughters of the late Cpl George Scully GC again joined us for the meal.

The following members attended Mr N Brown, Mr I Easingwood, Col PJ O'Connell, Mr J Kear, Maj PJ Fleming, Col A Barnes, Mr & Mrs G Cooke, WO2 C Bell, SSgt T Faulkner and Mr D Gimes.

Colonel awards the friend trophy

Outstanding year in the regiment for Pte Ford

PRIOR to the presentation of operational medals Pte Matt Ford (518 Sqn) was awarded the Friend Memorial Trophy by Col A Barnes, Chairman (Designate) RPC Association.

The RPC Association decided in 2006 to once again award the Friend Memorial Trophy which was first awarded in 1962, in memory of Maj Gen ALI Friend CBE MC, to the best young shot at the RPC Corps Shoot. Maj Gen Friend was Director of Labour from June 1940 until November 1945. He was also Colonel Commandant from March 1945 until December 1948 as well as Chairman of the RPC Benevolent Fund from March 1942 until November 1945 when he became President of the Fund. In addition to this he was Chairman of the Association when it formed in November 1946 until April 1949 and was the first member of the Association with Membership Number 1. It is now to be awarded to the soldier in the Pioneer CEQ (Regular or TA) who has excelled during the year.

Pte Ford's name will be inscribed on the trophy, he also receives an inscribed silver plate and a cheque for £200.

The citation for the award which was read out during the Parade reads as follows: "Private Ford joined the British Army on 31 May 2004 completing basic training at Army Training Regiment Pirbright. He arrived in 23 Pioneer Regiment on 24 November 2004. The past year has been an extremely demanding one for Pte Ford. Having returned from Op HERRICK 4 in June 2006 he was warned of the impending deployment on Op TELIC 10 in January 2007. Immediately Pte Ford came to the fore, exhibiting an enthusiasm for pre deployment training unseen in most others of the same rank. Always keen to learn new skills he immediately volunteered to be trained as a Team Medic, a role in which he subsequently excelled. On his return from his Team Medic course he began to pass on his new skills to those in his Multiple and the wider Troop. He relished the opportunity to teach and did so in a manner, and with a confidence, that belied his rank. Realising the importance of the skills he had learnt he constantly revised and practiced the drills within his Troop. Quickly establishing himself as a subject matter expert both his Troop Commander and Troop Sergeant relied on him implicitly throughout the tour.

Once deployed on Op TELIC, Pte Ford continued to carry out his own function and help his Multiple Commander at every turn. Prior to any task Pte Ford was always the first to be found checking his Multiple's equipment and assisting the NCOs with pre-patrol planning. His constant offer of help and advice, particularly to the more junior soldiers was typical of his unselfish nature. On the ground Pte Ford proved to be tactically very astute and clearly had an understanding of the wider remit of his role. His command presence, robust approach to the harsh conditions under which he operated and sense of humour gave those around him real confidence. Pte Ford's Multiple was involved in all bar one operation undertaken by 1st Royal Horse Artillery during their deployment.

In summary Pte Ford has had an outstanding year in the Regiment. Confident yet never arrogant, Pte Ford has stood up, on Operations, and delivered. His robust, no-nonsense approach to soldiering has been an example to those around him. His multiple Commander was able to utilise him as an additonal NCO during incidents and in preparing for patrols, something he did with increasing regularity. He is universally respected and admired by those he works with and at this early stage of his career he clearly demonstrates the ability and ambition to have a long and successful career."

Time to start planning

AFTER the success of Veterans Day in 2007 which saw 250 events being held, planning has now started in towns and cities across the UK to celebrate the third National Veterans Day on the 27 June 2008. Events aren't limited to 27 June; many are likely to take place on weekends throughout June and July. Veterans Day is an opportunity for the whole community to celebrate all aspects of veterans and the veterans community.

Veterans Day is both a celebration of the contribution made by all those who have served in the Armed Forces - as well as those in Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets who have served in support of operations – and a means of raising public awareness of Veterans issues. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, said the aim was to ensure the contribution of veterans was "never forgotten".

Veterans are valued, both because of their Service and because of the contribution they continue to make to their community and civil employers through the transferable skills they have acquired in the Armed Forces.

The Veterans Community is highly diverse; all ex-Service personnel are Veterans whatever their age or Service experience.

A wide range of support and advice is available to Veterans through the public, charitable and voluntary sectors.

■ Colonel Baker presenting an operational medal to Pte Cameron, 522 Squadron

Picture: Paul Brown

'Bravo in your honour'

374 operational medals are presented to 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC

IT was a privilege and honour to watch as 374 members of the Regiment were awarded medals for their recent operational tours in Afghanistan (225), Iraq (119) and Former Yugoslavia - Bosnia and Herzegovina (30). Medals were presented by Major General DJ Shouesmith, Brigadier C Blong and Colonel RM Baker.

Private Matt Ford was honoured as the outstanding Private Pioneer Soldier of 2007 and received the Royal Pioneer Corps Association Friend Memorial Trophy.

Lieutenant Gregg McLeod was given the 104 Logistic Support Brigade Commander's Trophy for an outstanding contribution to operations.

General David Shouesmith, the Assistant Chief of Defence Staff, said of Lt McLeod: "He consistently set the highest of standards, remaining focused on his operational role."

The smartness and standard of drill was exceptional and a great credit to the Regiment, it is pleasing to report that Pioneer Standards have not dropped!

The centre pages of this Newsletter contain photographs of these two very successful Parades - The Medal Parade on Saturday 2 February and the Liberty Parade on Sunday 3 February.

The following is a list of the operational deployments made by 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC in 2007:

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA - Mar/Sep 07 - Sqn detached a troop to provide protection to other soldiers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and help shut down operations as Op OCULUS in the Balkans finally drew to a close.

AFGHANISTAN - Camp Bastion - Apr/Nov 07 - The Regimental Headquarters was responsible for running Camp BASTION, the main base and the logistic hub for UK operations in Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN - KPC - Apr/Oct 07 - 187 Squadron was employed in the infantry role, patrolling the streets of Kabul in order to assist the Afghan National Army against the Taliban.

IRAQ - May/Dec 07- 522 Squadron deployed to Iraq, working as part of the force that was patrolling the port of Umm Qasr in the South of Al Bassrah Province. In September they were re-roled, and moved to Basra Airport, just west of the City, where they were responsible for the running of the detention facility for captured insurgents.

AFGHANISTAN - Force Protection 4 LSR - Mar/Sep 07 - 206 Squadron provided a troop (30 soldiers) to protect logistic convoys from Taliban ambush.

AFGHANISTAN - Force Protection RC South - Apr/Oct 07 - 518 Squadron provided force protection for the UK-led NATO Headquarters in Regional Command (South) at Khandahar Airport in Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN - Infantry Det 2 Mercian - Apr/Oct 07 - A troop from 522 Squadron was also detached from the Squadron, and attached to an infantry regiment (2 MERCIAN, formerly 1 Worcestershire and Sherwood Forresters), fighting in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. (For more on this you can go to the Sky Website - Troops Pounding the 10 Dollar Taliban - http://tinyurl.com/2e5a4s)

Details of the Regiment are also shown on the following link: http://tinyurl.com/26dwvb

The following message (one of many received from Association members) was printed on the reverse of the programme for the Medal Parade:

Message from Lt Col (Retd) J Allen now living in Bulgaria "Soldiers all! Young lades, and young men, all of you, an old soldier has been following your progress with much pride. I am really so very happy that you have achieved so much, you are brave, patient, and have the courage to ensure so many obstacles. All that I can say is "BRAVO in your honour!".

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ **MORE than 9,000 veterans, including 25 from the RPC Association, participated in last year's march past and service at the Cenotaph in London.**

The RPC wreath was laid by Mr H Mitten, other members marching were Mr I Easingwood, Mr J Doble, Mr I Dewsnap, Mr J Kear, Mr B O'Donovan, Mr P McPhillips, Mr P Thomas, Mr K Hilton, Mr H Bishop, Mr A Hobbs, Mr T Loveridge, Mr W Pepperell, Mr T Whipps, Mr G McQueen, Mr R Hasker, Mr D Bryant, Mr P Wilmer, Mr S Swallow, Mr N Brown, Mr H Kuijper and Mr S Kuijper. Marching with the Aden Veterans were Mr D Gimes, Mr D James and Mr S Guy.

■ VETERANS, military chiefs, standard-bearers and city dignitaries gathered on Plymouth Hoe to mark the 40th anniversary of the withdrawal of British troops from Aden. A memorial stone was laid in the Garden of Remembrance in memory of all those who died in the war in South Arabia, known as the 'Savage War'. The conflict began in 1955 and ended in 1967.

By the time the British withdrawal from Aden was complete on 29 Nov 67, 167 servicemen and civilians had been killed and hundreds more injured.

Aden veteran David James from Crownhill who served with 518 Coy said afterwards, "It was a special day for veterans and it was marked in a suitable fashion." The ceremony was attended by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, the Lord Lieutenant of Devon and many military officials. Around 130 people went on to attend a reception at the Royal Citadel afterwards.

(It is with regret that Mr David James passed away on 16 Feb 08 after a short illness).

■ **A very successful Northampton Branch Christmas Party was held on Saturday 5 January 2008 when 56 members and guests attended. The event was held in the Comfort Hotel.**

It is appreciated that this event was held after Christmas, the reasons for this were twofold, firstly it is nearly 50% cheaper than in December and secondly some members already had a busy Christmas schedule.

It was pleasing to see former civilian staff from Simpson Barracks attend namely Hazel Perks who was the pay and allowances "God" and Betty Dempster the telephonist who was an expert at getting us the wrong number. A special mention must also be made to John Kear who travelled from Bristol and Brian O'Donovan who travelled from Cambridge. Unfortunately members of the Association did not win the 60's Music Quiz but one table came a respectable second thanks to John and Elaine Yates.

■ THANKS to all who bought tickets for the 2007 Christmas Draw, a profit of £4,200 was made, this helps the Association in its work. The results of the draw were as follows:

1st Prize - £1,000 - Ticket Number 48195 - Mr F Lyle, Dublin.

2nd Prize - £500 - Ticket Number 45062 - Mr FE White, Oxford.

3rd Prize - £200 - Ticket Number 20821 - Pte A Gelling 187 Sqn.

4th Prize - £100 - Ticket No 30178 - Mr M Caldwell, Alness, Ross-shire.

5th Prize - £50 - Ticket Number 20509 - Pte A Sherwood 187 Sqn

Bicester gives a warm welcome

The Regiment is cheered on through the town

THE parade through Bicester town centre on Sunday 3 February 08 was the chance for Bicester Town, Cherwell District and Oxfordshire County Councils to demonstrate their gratitude to the Pioneers and to welcome them home.

The morning started with a church service in St Edburg's church followed at 1100 hrs with a march through Bicester led by the CO, Lt Col SP Wheelton.

Over 1500 people cheered as the Regiment together with the Royal Logistic Corps band passed by.

All the children in the crowd had been given union jacks to wave, which ensured a very colourful display.

The Director RLC, the Town Mayor and the Lord Lieutenant took the salute.

Following the parade the Regiment wheeled off to Pingle Field behind the Bicester Retail Village where a marquee reception with food and music had been laid on. The soldiers and their families chatted with fellow guests while the children they had been reunited with waved union jack flags and played on fairground rides. An afternoon of entertainment ensured, climaxing with a firework display laid on by Bicester Retail Village.

Corporal John Kitchen, who returned from a six-month tour of Afghanistan, said: "It's quite hard to be away from your family for so long, but particularly for the ones left at home, because they don't know what's going on. I was very impressed with the turnout at the parade. The cheering and the clapping made us all feel very proud."

Captain Craig Smith, who was away from his family for three months, said being separated from loved ones was difficult for all involved. He said: "It means a lot because when you are away sometimes you do not really realise that everyone appreciates you back home in the UK". "When you are away you have minimal contact with friends and family and they go through a lot back here as well".

Lance Corporal Lea White had been away from wife Charlee for a year, after two six-month tours of duty in the Falkland Islands and Afghanistan. He said: "I wasn't expecting this many people to turn out, so it's exciting. You see on the news other regiments get it done, but I think it's the first time for us - we're all enjoying it."

Debbie Pickford, the leader of Bicester Town Council, said: "It's quite emotional for the town and for the forces. They have worked extremely hard in places that perhaps none of us realise. Their families are here and they have been lonely and I think it has been a very worthwhile event."

Councillor Les Sibley said: "As a town we really wanted to show our appreciation for what the troops were actually doing in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places of conflict. I think it has been a terrific day and it's nice that the residents of Bicester have turned out in huge numbers to show their appreciation for the work that the armed forces are doing on their behalf."

The weekend was a fantastic opportunity for the Pioneers to receive their medals, to reflect upon their achievements from 2007, to thank their families for their support and to be thanked by the people of Oxfordshire for their hard work. Thanks also to the many association members who attended to give the Regiment their support.

Spot the cuneo mouse

CUNEO painted 'Sword Beach' which shows the activities of the pioneers who were among the first British troops to land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Sword Beach was the codename of one of the five main landing beaches in Operation Neptune, the initial assault phase of Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. By 1st August 1944 there were over 35,500 pioneers in Normandy. D-Day + 79 there were 231 Coys and over 68,000 men.

In most of his paintings Cuneo hid a small mouse (sometimes lifelike, sometimes cartoon-like) which was his trademark and somewhere in this newsletter we have hid a Cuneo mouse!

They can be difficult to detect, and many people enjoy scouring his paintings to find one.

Did you spot the Mouse in the October 2007 Newsletter or are you still looking? It was, of course, on Page 25, photograph number 28, hiding away between the palm trees.

We shall make it a bit bigger for this newsletter.

The first correct entry was from Mr Bob Setterfield (ex Cpl), he will be receiving his prize shortly. Can you spot the mouse in this issue of the newsletter? (and the one on this page does not count!).

The first person that emails me with the location of the mouse will win a prize !

■ Major-Lieutenant Billy Dilkes sporting his new rank

Picture: Norman Brown

Major-Lieutenant

During the medal parade a new rank in the british army was created

REVENGE is sweet as the saying goes! Prior to marching onto the parade ground Captain Billy Dilkes was informed by Lieutenant Shelton that his Sam Browne was twisted at the back and offered to correct it.

Within seconds he had replaced one of Billy's pips with a crown thus creating a new rank of Major-Lieutenant.

Billy was informed of this change as he was actually marching onto the parade.

Whilst being awarded his medal the Adjutant asked the presenting officer, Brigadier C Blong, if he would also present Billy with a "Pip" thereby drawing attention to the crown.

The conversation then went as follows,

"This is going to cost you"

"Yes, Sir",

"At least fifty pounds",

"Yes, Sir".

During his 20 years as a Pioneer Billy was famous for his wind-ups.

It was nice to see the tables turned for once. Lieutenant Shelton is to be congratulated for both the brilliant idea and his sleight of hand!

Citizen soldier, past, present and future

2008 Marks TA 100 – the 100th anniversary of the Territorial Army. The Theme will be "Citizen Soldier Past, Present and Future". National events are been planned at both National and County level during 2008. In Northamptonshire events are being planned with a Parade in Northampton on the 8th June 2008 and a Reception on the 15th October 2008 in the Guildhall.

In Northamptonshire, the Lord Lieutenant Lady Juliet Townsend LVO JP, The Queen's representative in the County is leading the celebrations.

The celebrations will be to thank the TA soldiers of Northamptonshire for their service to the Crown: to pay tribute to TA soldiers from the County who have served on operations over the past few years and employers from Northamptonshire for their past and continuing support to the Territorial Army.

We would wish to see as many TA veterans on parade as possible, including TA serving soldiers and veterans who live in the County but whose units may be located elsewhere in UK, all are most welcome. We invite stories from both veterans and serving members of the TA about their experiences while serving.

Programme for the day and we hope to print some of your stories in this. If you have old photographs of life in the TA especially in its early days or on operations we would like to have them on loan. Please contact: The Chairman, TA100 Northamptonshire, TA Centre, Clare Street. Northampton. NN1 3JQ.

TA 100

RESERVE WITH PRIDE

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ THE Nostalgia Group is once again to hold a meet in Redcar on 13/15 June 2008, last year well over 50 people attended.

It is understood that the hotel used for the venue is already fully booked but arrangements can be made to find suitable nearby accommodation.

For further details of this meet please contact Allan (Sooty) Sutcliffe telephone number 01287 640670.

If you live local why not join them for the Saturday night buffet, the price is only £5 per person. Hope to see you there.

■ **ON 12-19 July 2008, seven men including Maj General Evelyn Webb-Carter, the controller of the Army Benevolent Fund, and well-known historian professor Richard Holmes will set off on a horse ride across England and Wales to raise money for the ABF.**

They will ride in period costume to retrace the historic route taken by Henry Tudor in 1485, as he rode with his Army to meet Richard III at the decisive Battle of Bosworth.

To celebrate their arrival in Bosworth Field, the Leicestershire Committee of the ABF are organising a reception, beating retreat, parachute display, dinner and Professor Richard Holmes will give a battlefield tour.

Tickets are as follows: Displays only @ £5.00 per car. Reception & Displays @ £20 per head. Dinner & Displays @ £50 per head. Reception, Dinner & Displays @ £70 per head.

A booking form can be obtained from ABF East Midlands, Lt Col J Tarr OBE, Tel: 0115 9572103

■ THE 62nd Past and Present Officers Dinner will be held in the Officers' Mess, 23 Pioneer Regiment Royal Logistic Corps, Bicester on Friday 17 October 2008.

Bookings can be made at any time (by 3 Oct 08) to Secretary, Royal Pioneer Corps Association, c/o 23 Pnr Regt Royal Logistic Corps, St David's Bks, Graven Hill, Bicester, Oxon, OX26 6HF.

The cost will remain at £20 per head.

■ **THE WO's and SNCO's Ladies Dinner night will once again to be held in the WOs' and Sgts' Mess, 23 Pnr Regt RLC on Saturday 18 October 2008.**

Full details will be circulated to members in the Club's Newsletter.

■ A LONDON lunch will follow the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey on Thursday 6 November 2008.

It will be held in the Marquis of Westminster, Warwick Road, London (approx 400 yards from Victoria Station).

Bookings can be made to Secretary, RPC Association, c/o 23 Pnr Regt Royal Logistic Corps, St David's Barracks, Graven Hill, Bicester, Oxon, OX26 6HF.

The cost will be £15 per head.

■ **39/93 CLUB holds two dinners annually in March and October at the Red Lion Hotel, Fareham.**

Discounted rates of accommodation have been arranged.

If you would like details of the 39/93 club events please contact the club secretary, Mr Les Rowley on 01628 890913. For personnel who live local to Fareham why not join them for the Saturday night dinner.

Planting of the pioneer crosses

The field of remembrance opens in November

Picture: Norman Brown

THE field of Remembrance will open on Thursday 6 November 08 at 1100 hours, when a short service will be given. Members attending the planting of crosses at the Corps Plot (No 134) are asked to arrive by 1030 hours.

All would be prudent to bring suitable identification as entrance to the Field will involve security checks.

All those attending must be prepared to stay until the reviewing party has departed the Field.

The use of large 'intrusive' camera equipment is not allowed.

The field will be open from 9 to 5.30 hours until Saturday 8 November 2008. Following the Field of Remembrance a 'London Lunch' is to be held.

The Pioneer Romans

23 Pnr Regt Royal Logistic Corps WOs & Sgts Mess has had an oil painting of Roman soldiers in the mess for many years.

However, because it had no significance to Pioneers or Pioneer history it has been hidden away on the stairs leading to the mess accommodation upstairs.

This has now changed thanks to local Oxford artist, Michele Field, who has changed the colours on the soldiers' shields to the Pioneer Red and Green, as seen on the right hand picture. The painting in the left picture is the original.

The painting now hangs with pride in the main bar of the mess for all to see.

If you would like to obtain further details of Michele's paintings please visit this website www.britishartists.co.uk/michele_field

■ Old comrades marching through Bicester during reunion weekend

Picture: Norman Brown

Pioneer Reunion

The reunion weekend is on once again thanks to commanding officer

THE Pioneer Reunion Weekend is once again, thanks to the Commanding Officer 23 Pnr Regt Royal Logistic Corps, to be held at Bicester from 4/6 July 2008.

A Booking Form is enclosed with this Newsletter and the booking form must be returned by Friday 15 June 2008. It is hoped to accommodate all requiring accommodation within St David's Barracks although this will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

Once again there is no requirement to pay for meals in advance as the 'Pay as you Dine' system is now in operation. Meals are served similar to a cafe system where you pay for your meal as you collect it. The more you have the more it will cost you.

There is also a bar within the Dining Room. An advantage of this is that meals are available to a later time. Costs and times of meals are displayed in the dining room.

The provisional programme for the weekend is as follows (this may change):

Fri 6 Jul 07 - 1530 hrs Bring a Boss Cpls Club then invitation to the Sergeants Mess 1800 hrs Dress: Collar/Tie.

Sat 7 Jul 07 - 0900 hrs WOs & SNCOs Pioneer Reunion Club Annual General Meeting to be held in the Sgts Mess. Dress: Collar/Tie.

Church Service - 1100 hrs. Dress: Collar/Tie (War Memorial).

Royal Pioneer Corps Association Annual General Meeting - 1145 hrs Dress: Collar/Tie (Sergeants Mess).

Regimental Open Day - 1330 hrs Dress: Casual (Sports Field).

Pioneer Night/BBQ - 1800 hrs. Dress: Collar/Tie.

Cenotaph Parade 2008

LAST year 25 members of the Association marched at the Cenotaph. This year we have been allocated 30 tickets; these can be obtained on application to the Association on a first come first served basis (it should be noted that 19 tickets have already been requested). Tickets will be distributed in October 2007.

Did you know the original Cenotaph was first prepared as a temporary wood and plaster structure for use as a saluting base in Whitehall during the First World War Victory Parade, held on the 19th July 1919. A decision was taken to re-erect the Cenotaph in a permanent form on the same site. The unveiling of the stone structure on the 11th November 1920 was combined with a ceremony to mark the passing of the body of the Unknown Warrior for re-burial in Westminster Abbey. The first of the annual ceremonies of remembrance took place at the Cenotaph on the same date the following year.

This silence is marked by the firing of a field gun on Horse Guards Parade to begin and end the silence, followed by buglers sounding The Last Post.

Following the Parade it has become the custom for all marchers to have a meal and a drink in the Civil Service Club, Old Scotland Yard (located 250 yards from Whitehall).

Service in West Berlin

Maurice Grange BEM reflects on his service spent in Berlin in the 70's

Report: Maurice Grange BEM
Picture: F. Lee Cockran

IN the early 1970's I was offered a posting to HQ Berlin Infantry Brigade. I realised that this posting could be quite significant, as Berlin was an interesting city. Therefore I had no hesitation in accepting the opportunity of serving in West Berlin.

I realised it would be good experience because Berlin was considered one of the most exciting and probably the most 'sort after' posting available in Europe. One important factor was that West Berlin was behind the 'Iron Curtain' in Eastern Germany, which was still under Russian occupation. Berlin being situated 120 miles in the Russian zone of Eastern Germany. This meant that anyone travelling to Berlin by road, had to travel through the autobahn corridor in the controlled Russian zone to get to West Berlin. With my wife and daughter we motored to the Allies Checkpoint at Helmstadt, and reported to the British control point for briefing. I was given detailed instructions in English French and Russian (but not German) with maps and diagrams of my route, to the checkpoint in West Berlin. After my briefing we then had to proceed to the Russian checkpoint for them to check my documents before we were permitted into the 120-mile long corridor.

The cold war with Russia was very much in evidence as we surveyed the grim border between East and West Germany, which was well fortified with machine gun posts at frequent intervals, and heavily guarded by Russian and East German soldiers. There were double high fences with barbed wire, minefields and rat runs for Alsation dogs, to deter anyone from crossing the border. All military personnel including their families travelling through the corridor are timed in and out again at both ends, to the British and Russians checkpoints. This is also to ensure that no one gets lost or goes missing during the 120-mile autobahn journey as it was forbidden to deviate into East Germany. Any other civilians travelling to West Berlin have to report to the East German checkpoints where their vehicles were searched at the entry and exit points to ensure that they were not smuggling any personnel in their cars.

Travelling through East Germany was quite formidable, as you felt as if you were going back in time. In actual fact you were crossing into the 'iron curtain' into the Russian controlled Soviet Block. Eastern Germany had the appearance of a run down desolate type of third world country, in comparison to Western Germany and other European countries we had visited.

The two lane autobahn had not been maintained or repaired probably since the war, it had large potholes and unmade surfaces, making the driving not only slow but rather precarious. It is not just one straight autobahn to West Berlin and during the journey we had to keep checking the maps and instructions as I changed to other autobahns routes, which skirted around all the main towns. It was forbidden to stop on the journey, or deviate from the official route. The East German government was not recognised by the allies, therefore we were not permitted to recognise the East German police, who patrolled the autobahns.

Eventually after a tedious journey we came to the West Berlin border, which was well fortified, with a large Russian military contingent. My first memory of entering Berlin was driving down the Autobahn stopping at the Russian checkpoint, and watching the Russian guard kicking the snow off my car number plate, to check my vehicle number. I reported into the Russian checkpoint with our passports. Inside the grey building were a couple of chairs and a table with a copy of the Russian Pravda newspaper, and a reception window with a small place to push your passports through, everything else was blanked out, so you couldn't see who you were dealing with.

I waited about 15 minutes while they photocopied or recorded the details from our passports, then we were allowed to proceed to the Allies checkpoints, when at long last we arrived into the beleaguered walled city of West Berlin.

On the approached to the Berlin Russian checkpoint, there was a huge concrete pillow about 40 foot high with a Russian T34 Tank mounted on the top apparently from the battle of Berlin, no doubt to indicate the Russian victory in conquering Berlin. (I don't expect it's still there). After the war Berlin had been divided into four zones or sectors, by agreement with the British, American, Russian, and French governments. Subsequently the Russian's had built the notorious Berlin Wall dividing the city, which was over 103 miles long, surrounding the whole of West Berlin. This was to ensure that the East Germans and East Berliners could not defect to the west. The wall was quite a formidable obstacle, which had caused a lot of controversy and difficulty for anyone wanting to travel between East and West Berlin. Of course there was complete freedom of movement between the other sectors of the city where the allied troops were stationed.

The Commandant and General Officer of HQ Berlin British Sector was Major General Scott-Barrett CBE. MC, who I had previously met when I was on my all arms ceremonial drill course at Pirbright, many years ago when he was a Lt Col. Due to my job at HQ Berlin Infantry Brigade, and HQ Berlin British Sector. I occasionally had to visit his office, and we had some discussions about our previous meetings, in Pirbright, which was quite interesting. I recall a particular incident when the new Barrack Dress came in, I had to go to his office to see if I could supply him with the new outfit. The General was a man on the large size and over six foot in height. Unfortunately none of the normal stock sizes would fit him, so I said it would have to be a special order from UK because of his size. His immediate reply to me was. "I am the right size for a General". To which I just said "absolutely", as I thought there was no other reply I could make to that statement.

There was a very friendly atmosphere between the allied forces and the local Berliners, who realised we were there to give them every support and defence of their city. Although we were vastly outnumbered by the Russian Army who had over ten divisions occupying Eastern Germany. Another consideration at that particular time was that West German troops were not permitted to be stationed in Berlin. All the allied personnel were permitted to cross over into East Berlin at Fredrichstrasse "Checkpoint Charlie" which was manned by the American, British and French forces. This crossing point was the main official crossing point into East Berlin making it quite famous, due to its involvement with some of the various crossing disputes and problems.

Another notorious crossing point was the Glieiniker Bridge where the exchange of prisoners between the Allies and Russia took place.

What is probably not generally known is the British army had a sophisticated surveillance unit stationed in West Berlin. This was called BrixMis whose job it was to travel extensively throughout the Deutsche Demokratische Republic of East Germany and East Berlin, reporting on the strength and movements of Russian troops. Which was a precarious task at times. They also had a villa in Potsdam, which was known as their 'safe house'. They were equipped with fast Opal Kapitan cars for speedy manoeuvres; these cars had the distinctive red BrixMis number plates. All their surveillance information on Russian troop movements was charted on a large wall map of Eastern Germany in the operations room of HQ Berlin British Sector. It was rather scary to see the wall map showing the vast might of the Russian war machine, surrounding the small forces of the allies in West Berlin, particularly as the cold war was still very evident.

While we were living in West Berlin many people in the Eastern Block had tried to escape from East Berlin and many were shot trying to cross the Berlin Wall, which was always a sad occasion. It demonstrated just how determined the Russians and East German authorities, especially the Stasi Secret Police were, to prevent anyone escaping over the border into West Berlin. Occasionally some people managed to escape but not many. I had to make quite a few trips into East Berlin and East Germany, because we were encouraged to visit "over the wall" but only in uniform, both off and on duty. Although security was very tight, we went on what was known as a 'flying the flag' missions. To demonstrate, that we were freely permitted to cross over the border as often as we wished. I was fortunate in purchasing many pieces of Dresden porcelain figurines in Eastern Germany.

Most of the private cars in East Berlin at that time were the little 600cc two stroke Trabant cars with bodies made from hardboard, which to some extent illustrated their low standard of living over there at that time! All the western Allied Forces in Berlin were heavily involved in frequent military exercises, to demonstrate to the Russians, that our Allied Forces were something to be considered. It was also general knowledge that the Russians used to monitor our troop movements, just like we monitored theirs. This also established a good relationship to the West Berliners of our determination to defend and protect their city against any Russian and East German military aggression.

Many people used to visit the wall, as there were watchtowers erected on our side for people to climb up and view over the wall into East Berlin. This was very useful for Berliner's as many of them had relatives in East Berlin whom they had not seen for many years and for many of them it was quite emotional. Of course the East German guards were always looking across with their binoculars at us from their watchtowers. There was a Stasi Secret Police network of 85,000 full-time spies and 170,000 voluntary informers who kept tabs on millions of people in East Berlin and the Deutsche Demokratische Republic. (DDR).

The British forces in West Berlin were paid in British Armed Forces Vouchers for shopping in the NAAFI department stores. However we required Deutchmarks for shopping in West Berlin, East Marks when travelling in East Berlin, Francs for shopping in the French Commissary, and Dollars for shopping in the American Forces PX. The PX had very good quality American food and clothes. This meant we had to have many types of currency depending where we were shopping or visiting. Another incentive point for living in Berlin at that particular time, was that the American forces had their own local Forces Television Service, whereas the

British only had the British Forces Radio service. Therefore we were able to tune into the United States Forces television programmes, as they had some excellent variety shows, which was quite a change from watching all German programmes. We were also able to receive the East Berlin television as well, but their programmes were very heavy propaganda orientated, as the Stasi Secret Police monitored everything that went on in East Berlin!

The museums of West Berlin were quite amazing, all of them being crammed full of priceless artifacts and displaying paintings and treasures from all over the world. I thought that many of them had probably been confiscated by the Nazis when they occupied other countries during the war. Although we were assured that all the Nazi stolen items had been returned, to their original museums! But I must admit I did feel a bit suspicious, as I had never seen so many priceless art treasures and paintings. In one single gallery I saw over 26 Rembrandt's, Ruben's, Vermeer's and Vincent Van Gogh' paintings. Also scores of many more priceless expensive famous works of art and treasurer. West Berlin's museums were indeed a special and unique treasure trove of historical significance.

There were always some interesting places to visit and many were of special significant historical interest from the war and of other interesting historical times. At the end of the war when the Russians had conquered Berlin they were quick to erect a huge memorial to their soldiers who lost their lives in the battle for Berlin. It's a massive display with T34 tanks and guns each side of the memorial with a Russian Solder surmounted on a pillow of marble, which was a befitting and a lasting tribute to their fallen heroes. Unfortunately in their haste to build the memorial they mistakenly erected it on the wrong side of the Brandenburg Gate in the British Zone of Berlin, and not in their own Russian Zone on the other side. This meant that when they erected the Berlin Wall their memorial was on the wrong side of the wall. The monument was guarded by Russian soldiers who in turn are guarded by British Military Police, in order to avoid any incidents. Because many of the Berliners were anti Russian because of the wall.

In spite of being behind the 'iron curtain' and surrounded by the demarcation Berlin Wall, with machine guns and barbed wire, we personally didn't have the feeling of claustrophobia, although some people did. It should be appreciated that the Berlin Wall was over 103 miles long. Most of the time we were not conscious of it except of course when we had to make the journey to East Berlin or through the corridor to West Germany, then we were very aware of the demarcation zones. This was probably due to the city being so large with many open spaces, woods, beautiful lakes, rivers, and lovely countryside.

In the winter we used to go ice-skating on the frozen lakes and in the summer sailing, with our small boat, which was most enjoyable. With the cold war still very much in evidence it was quite obvious that West Berlin was being used as a show place by Western Germany to demonstrate to the Russian Block and East German DDR puppet Government, how affluent life was in the west. With huge modern department stores, offices blocks, and factories and a fast efficient transport and road system. By and large I consider we enjoyed a much higher standard of living than probably anywhere else in Europe, especially in East Berlin and Eastern Germany.

'During the last war the city had been almost totally flattened with the allied bombing'

While I was in Berlin, Rudolph Hess was also there, he was serving life imprisonment in Spandow Prison for war crimes, as he was the last surviving henchman from the war, most of the others having been previously been hanged on conviction of their war crimes. Each week, the security guards from America, Britain, France and Russia took it in turns to guard Hess in Spandow Prison. The British forces had close liaison with the American and French forces stationed in Berlin. I was pleased at the opportunity of attending their parades of 4th of July Independence and the French Bastille Day celebrations, as it was interesting to compare how other armies performed their ceremonial parades.

The HQ Berlin British Sector and HQ Berlin Infantry Brigade were stationed in the 1936 Olympic Stadium, this consisted of a large administrative sports complex. Which meant we could use all these sports facilities including the Olympic swimming pools. Of course we availed ourselves of the opportunity to use these facilities, especially the indoor pool in the winter. The Olympic Stadium also had a sophisticated road system, for controlling the road traffic. This allowed for the 5 lane road system to be converted to 10 lanes to disperse traffic from the stadium. While we were there the system had been computerised for precise control and up to five thousand cars, could be dispersed from the Olympic Stadium in about fifteen minutes. Even though the Olympic Stadium was in the heart of the city.

During the last war the city had been almost totally flattened with the allied bombing. And in the final stages of the war close quarter shelling with tanks and guns by the Russian Army. To actually witness much of the devastation in East Berlin can be quite extraordinary. A little of the devastation was still evident in West Berlin but not much. Although there was a massive rebuilding programme in West Berlin, restoring the city to it's former glory. There was not the same dedicated building programme in East Berlin. Because much of that part of the city was still in a very devastated condition, probably due to lack of funding and interest from the East Berlin DDR puppet Government. Although around Alexander and some parts of East Berlin had been rebuilt and modernised, probably just as a showpiece.

A Captain friend of mine who was a helicopter pilot asked me if I would like a flight around Berlin to see all the sights and interesting places. I was delighted to be offered this chance of a lifetime, these trips were normally only permitted for senior visiting officers. So he landed his helicopter on the car park outside my office and away we flew, I had my camera ready charged to record the event. I must say I was very impressed with everything we saw. As we started to get airborne, I had a wonderful panoramic view of the city unfolding before us. The first place we visited was the Brandenburg Gate and then onto the burnt out shell of the Reichstag, We flew onwards seeing many other places of interest. Then we hovered over Checkpoint Charlie just to see the famous crossing point from above. Everything appeared even more spectacular being viewed from the air. It was extremely interesting as it was quite a unique experience. I suppose it was similar to a private one hours excursion. The flight was wonderful seeing all these historical buildings with the old and new modern styles of architecture, as much of the city was now being rebuilt. I consider I was fortunate to have had such an opportunity to view all the various sights of West Berlin from a helicopter.

West Berlin is a beautiful place, where every street is lined with trees and the city streets are kept clean as the authorities wash and sweep all the roads daily with huge water trucks.

At this time I had developed a reasonable knowledge of the language from previous visits to Germany. Thereby alleviating many of the problems our soldiers experience, when living in a foreign country, because many of them will not attempt to master the language. The three years we spent in Berlin were very happy times, as the city is such an interesting place, with something different to do or see every day.

We visited the burnt out shell of the Reichstag, which Hitler had burnt down in 1933. This had recently been converted into a museum featuring the war and depicting all countries which the Germans had occupied and their various exploits. In fact it was quite an alarming display, showing how Hitler had conquered almost the whole of Europe, North Africa and much of Russia within a very short time. The museum also had an excellent high-class restaurant where we always enjoyed good lunches.

Although we were living in a modern affluent city, with a high standard of living, we were always conscious of the last war and the devastation it had caused to everyone. I made a special effort to visit all the places of interest, as I would never have the chance of seeing many of them again.

I recall a visit to the Plotzensee prison where Colonel Count Claus Von Strauffenburg and his associates were held prisoners after they had tried to assassinate Hitler by planting a bomb in the Wolf's Lair in Ratenburg East Prussia on 20 July 1944.

They were all executed in a most barbarous manner with piano wire; it was quite a gruesome shrine, illustrating more horrors of the Second World War.

The weather in the wintertime in Berlin could be very cruel as the cold ice and snow seemed to last for months. Although the snow was never left on the roads, it was shovelled up and dumped in the rivers as soon as it arrived. I had never experienced such bitter freezing coldness, the temperature dropping down to more than minus 40C. Also with a bitter north wind blowing in from Poland and Siberia, this winter weather was quite noticeable as we were only 50 miles from the Polish border. Although conversely the summers were very hot and pleasant, much to the enjoyment of everyone. This climatic extreme of temperature fluctuation was probably due to the country being land locked with the sea many hundreds of miles away.

Living in West Berlin equated in many respects to any other prosperous capital city, with all the affluent trappings, of expensive shopping, high-class living and nightlife which was second to none. It could boast of over 70 theatres and many concert halls and cinemas where both German and western films were shown. The circumstances between the two cities of Berlin was quite an ironic situation. East Berlin dominated by the Russian puppet Government, the cold war of the iron curtain, and the notorious Berlin Wall, dividing them from the rest of the world. Whereas people living in West Berlin had also the constant reminders of the last war. But it was quite apparent that it now had an affluent lifestyle of luxury wealth and prosperity rising from the ashes of a beleaguered city.

In the British Sector suburbs, not far from the wall is a large district known as the Jewish Quarter, this is where all the Jews lived before the war.

In 1938 Goebbels incited the Nazi Party to run riot against the Jews when the large Hessel Synagogue was burnt to the ground, on what was known as 'Kristallnacht', which was so-called because of all the broken glass which was scattered around the pavements and roads. (Unbeknown to the Gestapo in the same street were some innocent looking business premises, the HQ of an Allied spy-ring, which operated in Berlin during the war). This Kristallnacht incident heralded the beginning of the intensive wave of terror against the Jews, not only in Berlin but also throughout the whole of Germany and other countries that were occupied during the war.

During Kristallnacht the Nazi Party went on a rampage of anti-Jewish violence and destruction, killing as many as 200 people (not counting several hundred suicides), destroying Synagogues and hundreds of Jewish businesses and homes. Some 30,000 Jews were dragged off to concentration camps, where at least another thousand died due to brutal treatment. Many were sent to holding camps and then eventually onto concentration camps for the 'Final Solution' where they were gassed just because they were Jews.

The longer-term effect was to drive 80,000 Jews to emigrate, most leaving behind all their properties in their desperation to escape. In this Jewish Quarter alone 23 Synagogues were destroyed by the Nazis. Thus it was a very depressing and desolate district to see, as all the houses and apartments were boarded up, and the whole area was sealed off to the public. This picturesque neighbourhood previously contained beautiful apartments and houses, which were once the thriving businesses and homes of local Berliners.

It is a depressing sight depicting lots of properties which are now just derelict, where a previous happy community had their life terminated because of their beliefs., I am given to understand that a 40 years 'Possessory Order' was imposed on the Jewish Quarter in case any living relatives come and claim their family property back. Under the circumstances I think that this is rather unlikely.

'The no mans land was covered in sand and swept frequently'

In the Borough of the Tiergarten there is a location which was favoured by the pre-war Diplomatic Corps, many of whom had their embassies there, presumably because it was an upmarket sort after area. This also includes the infamous Japanese Embassy, this is a large mansion in ornate grounds with a high ornamental wall surrounding the property. This property too is all boarded up and has been since the end of the war. At the main entrance are large double wrought iron gates, each featuring a big brass image of the rising sun, depicting the symbol of Japan, with Japanisch Botschaft written in wrought iron. The gates are secured with large iron chains with padlocks which prohibit anyone from entering. Of course there is a new Japanese Embassy in Berlin, but I presume the new diplomatic staff don't wish to be associated with the previous wartime subversive activities of their cousins at this infamous Embassy!

Here is some general information about the Berlin Wall. It was 103 miles long and divided a city in two. The East German DDR Government were humiliated by the tens of thousands of refugees crossing over into West Berlin each year, escaping to the capitalist West seeking a better life style. Prior to the Wall being built nearly three million people had fled from the East – one in every six East Germans.

The German DDR Government was determined to stop it. So erecting the Berlin Wall began in 1961, cutting through rail-way stations of the U-Ban and S-Ban, cemeteries, churches, along canals, isolating houses, and down the middle of streets dividing neighbourhoods. Thus separating families and friends and cutting them off from the outside world.

At first it wasn't much of a deterrent as it was just a small wall with some barbed wire on the top. However, within a short period of time it was soon built up into a huge barrier, guarded by East German Vopos (security police) and Grepos (Grenzpolizei). Eventually it was built to a higher standard which was frightening to some people.

The Wall consisted of two parallel walls three metres in height built with reinforced concrete and barbed wire. Between the two walls, was a levelling space of about 100 metres, which was patrolled by armed guards with ferocious Alsation dogs, with tank traps and land mines in vulnerable places. Watchtowers were erected with machine guns whose job was not only to watch the Wall but also monitor the armed guards, in case they too tried to escape.

At night powerful search lights swept the no mans area, in much the same way as a death camp. The no mans land was covered in sand and swept frequently so that the patrols could watch for footprints, should anyone ever attempt to cross. Trees were felled to improve observation, and death strips and firing lanes were laid in residential areas, actually in Bernauer Strasse a whole row of houses and the Bethlehem Church were demolished as they were in the path of the Wall.

Of course, there were some brave men and women who were determined to get to the West and many lost their lives trying. Some were shot actually climbing on the wall, others killed in the no mans land area, and some were shot trying to swim across the canal and the river Spree.

Near to Friedrichstrasse and Checkpoint Charlie is the Escape Museum depicting all the various methods that the East German people used in order to escape to the West. It is also a befitting monument to the many people who lost their lives attempting to seek a better life style in West Berlin.

The normal the tour of duty in Berlin is for 2 years but I served in Berlin for well over 3 years. Eventually after a very interesting experience of life in West Berlin and East Berlin, during which time we had an enjoyable lifestyle of high sophisticated standards, It was once again time for us to return to our English homeland. We had made many friends both military and civilian, some of which we are still in contact with today.

So it was with a sad heart, but with many happy memories that we left Berlin. ■

Where is tomorrow?

Very moving story of an escape from Nazi Germany

Report: Dorothy Spencer
Picture: Gordon Spencer

Mr Gordon Spencer kindly gave permission to publish this moving story of his mother's traumatic escape from Nazi Germany and her early years in this country - her husband George enlisted into the Pioneer Corps and served in 69 and 87 Companies. Gordon has informed us that his mother changed names in the manuscript he became Michael and his father Paul. He also thinks it is a pity his mother did not continue her story, to which I agree.

I remember distinctly Clive saying to me, "Why don't you write your story, write about what has happened to you in England; the simple truth."

"People are not interested in true stories," I said to him.

"It all depends". This was one of his favourite expressions. "It all depends on how you write it. Some people like coffee after dinner; some like a rest; some like to read a detective story; some like to know about life - particularly other people's lives."

So, with these words in mind, I shall begin to write a truthful story. It is not an easy task because being truthful has caused me many difficulties; but I am made that way and I cannot change.

It should have been the happiest night in my life when my husband Paul was released, after spending seven months in Dachau Concentration Camp but such joy was short lived. The price for freedom was that he left Germany immediately.

It was in August 1939 - my husband had reached England safely and I left my flat in Berlin which we had furnished with so much pride. I took a last look at the dining room, and the Study and after saying something about "seeing you again" to my housekeeper took the hand of Michael, my ten years old son and got into the car which was waiting to take us to the Tempelhof Aerodrome.

Everying was happening so quickly, it was hard to realise that I had left my home for good; that in a very short while I would be leaving my country in which I had spent my whole life to join my husband in England with no knowledge of what might lie ahead.

The flight should have been wonderful, if only my strength and vitality had not been so exhausted by living under such harsh and strained conditions under the Nazi regime. Do I say harsh and strained? What an under-statement! Only the feelings of a caged animal who suddenly finds the door of the cage left open can be compared to the sense of relief I felt, knowing that England and freedom were but a few short hours away.

Not that I was unhappy. It was too great a joy to be together with Paul and Michael, and I quickly resigned myself to my new life in a typical boarding house. We had our meals in a Lyons Corner House and I began to look forward to ordering little dishes which were not easy to select from the complicated menu card; complicated only for me since I was unused to English bills of fare. How difficult I found it always to remember that haunting slogan "save twopence" when so much appetising food surrounded me. I learned very quickly to say "thank you" to everybody. More often than not I was indebted to somebody for a kindness and the time seemed far away when people had said "thank you" to me.

I made an effort to adapt myself to all this strangeness and promised never to look back into my past life. Having my husband at my side made this an easier task. Little did I dream that after ten days of security and sense of peace he would be recalled to his camp in Kent.

It was a great worry for him to leave me among strangers in a strange country, without his guidance and protection but I quickly assured him that I had faced far worse things than this and would try to build a life for myself and our son. The words must have been convincing for he left me with a smile and "I know you will make it; you are so full of courage."

I was soon to learn that courage alone will not help when the language is a handicap because without friends or relations and very little knowledge of travelling about in a large City, there is no one to turn to for advice. For days I visited the public libraries searching through the "Situations Vacant" columns in the daily papers.

The agencies were already tired of my daily calls but not half so tired as I was of hearing always the same answer - "No". No one was in need of my services and my spirit sank lower and lower. How was it possible that no work could be found for such an eager will? I began to wonder how long my strength would hold out; I was getting no further forward and my means were shrinking from day to day.

So it must be that nothing can go on indefinitely. One day I read in the 'Daily Telegraph' an advertisement for a governess to a little girl. I remembered my good education - not so good as that of my brother, who is as different from me as a cup from a saucer only that they are formed of the same material - and also that I nursed and educated my own child; so I seized this opportunity with both hands and asked for an interview. To my great joy this was settled by telephone and eleven o'clock the next day found me inside a house of obviously great wealth waiting nervously to be admitted to the presence of Madame X. As the minutes ticked away my apprehension grew, would Madame approve of me and could I meet her requirements. After waiting what seemed to me an endless time I was in a state of discomfort only comparable to similar feelings when visiting the dentist; I began to wish it were only the dentist. In the stillness of this large house I could hear voices above me and the longer I was left in suspense the more downhearted I became.

At last I was called by a young maid to go upstairs. Madame had not yet made her first appearance of the day and would interview me in her bedroom.

Madame was roughly my age, in her early thirties, but there were many other points where we differed. She was pretty - a doll-like prettiness with big blue eyes and the fairest of hair - I am not pretty. She was of small stature, with good white teeth. I also. She was assuming the role of Grande Dame.

From the beginning I knew it was a pretence. I had known the real thing, where acting a part was unnecessary. Looking back now I realise her acting abilities were sadly lacking, for never could she be the real Grande Dame, try as she might. She appeared to be very sweet - another point where we differed.

Sitting on her bed (which she informed me was straight from Paris) she questioned me intensely as to my capabilities, experience and background. I could see she was impressed at the time by my story, but regretted I could not produce a teacher's or governess's certificate.

"I am sorry, my dear" - how well I knew that phrase! - "I am really sorry; but on second thoughts I have changed my mind about a governess for Jessica. I shall send her to a Nursery School, and should a war break out, which I doubt, I shall go with my whole household and family to the country. However, talking and watching you has given me a new idea. I do a great deal of entertaining giving many dinner and cocktail parties - perhaps you could be of use to me as a Mistress of Ceremonies".

This idea appealed to me, at least I had a job!

And so as Mistress of Ceremonies I fulfilled my duties to the best of my ability. I made quite a success the first evening and during those which followed after, saying with a sweet voice, "Will the ladies please come upstairs - Gentlemen, please leave your hats and coats in the hall."

Serving cocktails and other drinks was quite interesting for me, but of course I was not permitted to take part in the conversation; and whether or not I should

wear an apron on my plain black frock caused quite a problem in the mind of Madame. Finally she came to a decision. "An apron will not be necessary, but of course I expect you take your food with cook in the kitchen."

Eating in the kitchen was compensated by the wonderful opportunities I had of making some remarkable studies of the people who came and went in this pretentious household. It is worth recording the attitude my own sex adopted towards me. They were haughty, only enquiring in a condescending way, "Is the seam of my stocking straight?" or, "Is some powder on my shoulder? Please brush it off." There were a few who were not like this; but instead of a condescending attitude I felt one of pity and unspoken words of, "Poor refugee, Poor soul!" I do not know of which I was more contemptuous. Neither type was worth my special attention.

The menfolk were different. They tried a joke; they asked good humourdly whether they could be of any assistance in my work; they dared to open the door for me - but only when the ladies, their wives, were not looking.

I could not help comparing the sufferings of so many I had left behind in Germany with the empty butterfly existence lived by Madame and her friends.

I was promised some payment for my help; no set figure was mentioned, but in view of the apparent great wealth around, I expected some value for my services. I was already reckoning and planning what I should pay first with it. Maybe Madame forgot her promise, maybe she thought her own bills more important, whatever the reason the days ran into weeks, three to be exact, before I received anything at all. Then, to my great disappointment I was enriched by the generous amount of fifteen shillings, accompanied by Madame's remark, "Thank you for your services, But I am afraid the season is over and we shall be leaving Town for a holiday". In other words my services were no longer required.

With mixed feelings I understood - that the novelty of being gracious to a refugee was over. I was back again where I had started, richer by the meagre fifteen shillings in my pocket but with a wealth of experience in my mind.

The future looked extremely bland and had it not been for the generosity of a certain Society which had the welfare of homeless people in its hands, I fail to see how it would have been possible for either my child or myself to carry on. The assistance was continued until such time as I should find a supporting occupation.

The details in my untiring quest and unsuccessful results in finding work are far too boring to relate; but to me, at the time, it was impossible for anything else to happen.

And then war was declared and everybody was in a state of excitement and fierce, fighting spirit. Paul joined the long line of volunteers immediately. I am proud to remember that he was one of the first to enter the British Army. At such a crisis our personal life together seemed unimportant in comparison. There was no alternative for him; we had suffered too many first-hand experience and it was a debt he felt in honour bound to repay. Revenge is too small word to express the motive of his actions in contributing to the downfall of Hitler.

My child had always been the most precious thing in my life and being with him helped to make up for the dreadful loneliness of life without Paul. To come home and find Michael waiting for me was all the comfort and joy I needed; but it was to prove such a short happiness. The great London evacuation scheme was devised and after careful consideration I was persuaded to send my child for protection and safety into a safe area.

I shall never forget the night before he went. I lay awake all night wanting to hold back the minutes that were to separate me from my child. He was such a little boy, with no knowledge of the English language, and although he was willing to go to a strange life with all the confidence of the very young, I knew he couldn't realise the seriousness of our parting. These things passed through my mind as I lay awake in the darkness. So many people say "I haven't slept a wink all night", and it usually means they have lain awake for one or two hours! I can only remember two sleepless nights in my life - one in Germany when the Gestapo was scheduled to arrest my husband and take him to a concentration camp, and this night when I lay beside my child knowing he was to go to an unknown destination.

'The Gestapo was scheduled to arrest my husband and take him to a concentration camp'

Being separated from my husband was bad enough, but being so often alone I learned to accept it. But without my child it was different. It was indescribable. I couldn't forget how helpless he was. So helpless I learned later that he could not make himself understood in his new surroundings until he cleverly came to the idea of drawing little pictures expressing his various needs. If he was hungry he would draw a loaf of bread; if he was thirsty it would be a tumbler, and so on. It was fortunate I was not aware of such things.

One thing was in my favour about being alone. I thought it would be easier to find work without him; but I only thought so. The difficulty was still there. There was one refusal by telephone which remains in my memory above all others. I must have been very near breaking point, for tears that had been held in check for so long suddenly began to fall and nothing could stop them. The telephone call itself was not the real reason. It was the outcome of so many months of strain and worry. There I was, alone in a telephone box where all the crying in the world was ineffectual, for no one was there to comfort me. In my distress, I spoke aloud "I hate the word 'courage'". This word had set such a standard for me to live by. I only pretend, I am frightened and I am tired; and the responsibility of earning a living is weighing heavily on my shoulders - all this was running through my mind if only there had ben someone to understand these thoughts, someone to hold in my loneliness. It was as a voice in the wilderness. No one heard me, not even Paul who was so far away and would have given his life to ease my burden! I should say not even Paul or Christopher, a friend who belongs to the past and is a part of my life. Because he belongs to the old life he must remain a memory, but a very precious one. Only in this hour of great distress did I feel such a need of either of these men who are so near to my heart.

All my goodwill to forget old times did not exist at this moment. After all, I was a woman with all her frailties and longings for protection, and I was alone.

By now I was finding the English language a little easier - not that this was anything in my favour for my next venture.

The only work which came my was was that of a charwoman. There was a doubt in the mind of the advertiser, also a kindly concern, not as to whether I should suit the job, but whether the job would suit me. It remained to be decided. Would I take the job or was it beneath my dignity. Until this moment I had never had cause to interest myself particularly in this honourable profession of scrubbing floors and washing steps. I remembered there was a saying "Dirty hands make clean money", and money was the most important thing of all to me at this time. Pride is a wonderful possession when your life does not depend on it; it needs the essentials of life as a background. It will not pay rent, food and the other necessities of life. I was not ashamed to accept the offer made to me and so I became a charwoman.

Once I joined the ranks of these back room workers I realised how often they can be passed by and never even noticed. They are automatically ignored and might as well be non existent. Who can pause a moment to give consideration to one who but cleans the steps they have made dirty?

My job was to clean many steps to a large house. There were no houses with more steps in London, I am quite convinced of that! In the early days I scrubbed and scrubbed my soul out of my body and without any shining results, or the steps looking much better. With all the energy expended in my effort I expected marked improvement. Part of my work included the pathway to the street. There I saw my "colleagues" doing a similar job in the houses on either side. The only noticeable difference between us was that they wore hats, such comical headgear which must have been handed down from generation to generation. I remained hatless.

They were efficient and happy in their work, proof of this lying in the whiteness of their steps in comparison with mine. The slogan "Whistle while you work" seemed all the incentive necessary to produce a smiling face. I tried it also, but singing

lightly, with a heavy heart does not work. I remembered my "Char" in Germany singing "Bei Seden auf den Hohon!" I sang "If Tears Could Bring You Back Again!" But with all my attempts to appear an experienced charwoman my best was not good enough and at the end of two weeks I was no longer employed. Goodwill and determination together had not made me into a charwoman.

I realise, thinking it over now, it was my mistake ever to assume such an undertaking. There are race horses and cart horses, each born and bred for their different duties.

While I still maintain that few have time or inclination to give more than a passing glance in any charwoman's direction, there was one exception in my case. In the basement flat of the house in which I worked lived an Englishman. He was quite handsome, youngish, but extremely untidy in his appearance and obviously had only himself to please. Apparently time was no object to him so I concluded there was no necessity for him to work. I quickly sensed that he was interested, or should I say slightly amused, at my poor attempts to make a living, for he never tired of standing near at hand trying to make conversation. He made several suggestions, one being that I should give him an opportunity of helping me in the improvement of my English. The best way of doing this, he assured me, was to go to the 'pictures' with him and see as much of him as possible in my free time. I had not the slightest interest in him or in his suggestions. Frankly I disliked him, he always looked so intensely at me, and I wondered "What is he thinking?" I suffered nervous apprehension when he was near me, of what I cannot explain. So I was very relieved when I knew there was no more chance of his pestering me again with his unwelcome attentions. Not that I always turn away attentions from men in this way. I like attention and wouldn't be womanly if I didn't.

Fortunately there are different kinds of men and I prefer to make my own choice in this direction. I am aware, without any conceit on my part, that I naturally attract men to me. I can recall wonderful memories of times spent in their company and need no further proof. But that was in the dim and far off days; days that were carefree and full of joy. Being worried and unsettled and not knowing what lies ahead leaves no time for private life or passing acquaintances. At this time I saw myself as an automation interested in the hard facts and the realities I had to fight.

So, as I said before, nothing goes on indefinitely, there is always a turning point and mine came when I received my permit to work in a factory that was manufacturing Khaki uniforms. Securing this permit was only possible because my husband was in the Forces; even so it was no easy matter to obtain it, and no one can imagine how thankful I was when at last the permission arrived. It allowed me entry to a factory to become just one more of the 600 war workers.

'Paris had fallen into German hands and the English soldiers were retreating'

I was taught to be a finisher, and the work was quite easy. My fellow workers were either the very young who were too irresponsible to be put in charge of machines, or older women whose fingers were not steady enough to manage them.

I did not dislike this factory life; at least I had something secure and I knew at the end of the week my wages would be waiting for me. For the first time in my life I learned to appreciate the importance of a Time Clock. It was a run for life to clock-in before the hour of eight in the morning and it was just as important a race to clock-out the moment the finishing bell rang. Then work was dropped from busy hands as though the needles were red-hot and going to burn.

The hours were long, particularly with the work occupying my hands alone and leaving me so much time to think. My companions on either side of me were quite good hearted; but when I sometimes paused to glance down the long row of different faces I had the most urgent desire to get away as quickly as possible. I felt I couldn't stand it a moment longer. The Forewoman kept the strictest supervision over us all, but as my hands were busy without interruption all the time, I had no fear of her criticisms.

To be in time for my work each morning I had to catch the Workmen's bus to the City. More often than not I would stand for the whole journey, but this also had its particular compensation since I was able to gain a glimpse at the morning paper over my neighbour's shoulder. It was with a heavy heart I read that Paris had fallen into German hands and the English soldiers were retreating. With them was Paul! All that day I was obsessed with one thought, "When will Paul come home! Will he come back safely or will he be taken prisoner and so be once more in the hands of the Nazis?" Forgotten were my little irritations; they paled in comparison with the danger that now began to threaten my husband. My work became a burden and the atmosphere of the apparently carefree workers did not make the situation any easier to bear. I would hurry home each night always hoping for a letter or any form of message that would allay the fear in my heart.

After days of almost unbearable silence, one evening, as though it were happening in a film story, the telephone bell rang and a voice at the other end said "Darling, I'm back. I'm here in London." I don't remember how I managed to prepare for the great reunion. I bought flowers, I arranged a special meal for my soldier, and for the first time in many weeks I took real pleasure in wearing my smartest dress for such a great occasion.

Once we were together again everything outside our own little world was forgotten for a while. Temporarily all trouble slipped away and if only our child had been with us, I know that such happiness would have been complete.

I had Paul for a matter of hours only, for he had to return to his unit, but this time it was different. I knew he would remain in England and he was within easy reach should I ever need him. I was so certain that nothing more could cause me any further anxiety.

I was totally unprepared for the dreadful shock that was to follow so quickly upon my newly found peace of mind.

A policeman awaited my return home one evening, and with a troubled face but kindly manner asked me "Are you Mrs Spencer? Please sit down and don't be alarmed, but here is a telegram saying that your boy Michael has been kidnapped."

It was some moments before the word "kidnapped" penetrated my mind. I could only recall a letter of a few days previously saying how happy he was in the country and his underlining this statement. I confidently thought there must be some mistake; there must be an explanation to all this. But no, the Police held definite information as to such a thing being possible. Then the realisation hit me with startling suddenness and I immediately reached for the telephone and began a series of frantic enquiries.

It was some time before the true story came to light. I learned that sheer neglect and bad treatment had made it necessary for two well meaning people to take Michael from his present surroundings after obtaining permission from the authorities.


VICTORY EXTRA
BOSTON AMERICAN
FINAL
PARIS FALLS

They had taken him to their own house and in doing so had aroused the person who had so wrongly made him unhappy. To put herself right in the eyes of the accusers the telegram was sent to the police as a form of revenge, in the hope of causing undue worry and trouble to the people who were now protecting my son. She surely had succeeded in causing much complication and excitement.

It was enough for me. I promised there and then that never again would I be separated from my child or leave him to the mercy of other people. So the next day I brought him back to London. I still could not understand why he had underlined "I am happy" in his letter to me, so I asked him. He was reluctant to answer but eventually said, "I thought if I underlined it you would know how unhappy I was". Bless his heart! Had I known, nothing would have prevented me from having him by my side before this event had occurred.

Having Michael with me created a new task. Life with Michael was different. He went to school and I continued with my work. He learned to speak English and was there awaiting my homecoming each night. It was a wonderful time for both of us. Each night as he lay by my side I felt a peace and contentment such as I had not known for a long time. When the German bombers began to purr overhead as soon as night began to fall, I was more settled knowing we were together.

How the blitz began we all know too well and I won't repeat it. We know the horror with which we awaited the bombing and we can never forget the destruction and unhappiness brought upon London. I shared my experience with hundreds of other unfortunate people, hurrying with Michael to a Public Shelter; hurrying for safety with old and young; with the courageous and the frightened - more of them courageous and with a grim smile saying, "We can take it."

It all had its effect upon the boy, for life between the sirens and the shelter is nerve wracking. Paul worried about our safety and he urged and persuaded me to leave London and go to him in Devonshire as soon as possible.

Hurriedly packing a few things for myself and the child, we left behind most of our personal possession stored in London, thinking the blitz would soon be over and we could once more return. I gave up my job and we travelled to Devonshire to Paul and for the first time since we landed at Croydon we three were once more a family.

When I left Germany I had been fortunate enough to save and bring to England trunks containing clothes and household linens and the pick of treasures collected during my married life. The furniture had to be left in the hands of the Nazis, but I was happy to be at least surrounded by these few familiar possessions of ours. I always kept in mind that when the war was over and we settled down to a normal life, at least we would have something of our own to begin again. Clothes we should not have to buy for some years to come and whatever we jointly earned could be used to build up a new home. It was a comforting thought to have been allowed this favour of bringing such things with me to London and these possessions I left stored in London when I joined Paul in Devonshire.

Once again it was not to be; Hitler wanted it differently. All my dreams and plans for the future had been swept away like a straw in a wind. A bomb had destroyed everything. There were no tears, no lamentations, no self-pity. It was just another step down again; but I have never given my heart to things that can be bought with money. The important thing was that we three were together, we were alive.

I called to mind the things that were gone, and although I was convinced that silver candlesticks and linen table sets do nothing towards making one's life happy, I must confess my heart was a little sad remembering my lovely clothes and my shoes which I would never have the chance of replacing. For what woman does not like to look attractive and how can this be achieved without the wherewithal to do so? I couldn't dismiss this thought without a little longing.

Sentiment had no place in this new and strange life. I knew not where the remnants of my home had gone or what had happened to my dearest friends and my family; or where the happy days of my life were. They are the past; my problem lies with the future that is before me.

My immediate future lay in Devonshire. Paul was posted again, but he was still to be in England. Michael and I stayed in the little village where the three of us had been so settled and happy. There was peace here and I liked the green meadows, the tranquil cows and the old-world cottages with their little brightly coloured gardens.

'We can never forget the destruction and unhappiness brought upon London'

A school was found for Michael and the nights were undisturbed. People in such small villages are different from townspeople. They take time to live and do not hurry the hours away. In London I had the feeling I must always hasten along with the crowds although there was nothing about which I need have been in any particular hurry. In the country I had time. Everybody seemed important in London, with little time for friendliness or relaxation. In the country people spoke in a kindly way and showed interest in me. They took the trouble to ask how I had settled down in their village. The greatest excitement occurred when the siren sounded. Nothing every happened, but the village was agog with what might happen. Fortunately life went on unchanged and the horror of bombs and destruction never came to be a reality here.

I lived with the best hearted people who could be found, although throughout their kindness I remained a foreigner. I learned how all-important it was to take precaution against causing any unintentional unpleasantness; how to adapt my particular way of living to theirs; how to express my thanks for the smallest of favours. In such a typical English Village the suspicious and doubts of so many of the local inhabitants made it so essential to stay apart and keep all things to oneself. All had their own friends, their own country people; and with all their kindly interest and friendly enquiries I knew in my heart I was an outsider. I realised this to the full when I attempted to find work. I made the mistake of believing that in a small place such as this, work would be an easy thing to find, far easier than in the town. I met with great politeness and sorry refusals, but always the real reason was an unspoken thought "We dare not employ a German in wartime". Large towns are always so cosmopolitan that a thing like this is of little importance, but here in a quiet, undisturbed English community, a German was a German.

As I could not find work where everyone was aware of my nationality, I applied for work outside the village. Three miles away there was a brush factory and it was here I turned to find my next employment. Here I was accepted and a suggestion was made by the Manager, that to avoid any unnecessary unpleasantness among my fellow workers, I would claim Czechoslovakia as my birthplace. I welcomed this suggestion and wondered why I had not thought of it before. The wages were ridiculously small, but I had no choice in this respect and little was better than nothing; so I began work in the factory.

I had done factory work before and was fully prepared for hard work, but this time it was quite different. Firstly, it was approaching winter and the mornings were dark and cold on the three mile walk to my task. It was lonely, and hedges and gates had to be climbed; cows in the half-light would stupidly refuse to move out of my pathway, and I was never very friendly towards these animals. There was never a companion to walk along with, the roads and fields being deserted at such an early hour. A deep depression settled upon me each morning as I wearily started out on a new day. Thinking back on these things, it could so easily have proven to prelude to suicide. How often did I remember the words from an old German fairy tale, "O! wenn das meine Mutter wusste das Herz in Leibe, Wurde ihr brechon" (Oh! if my mother could know her heart would break). Perhaps it was because it was such a heartbreaking situation that I wished to

keep it to myself, and I bore it and survived it. With icy feet and hands I arrived to begin work at 7.30 each morning.

I had to learn the art of making brushes, using a fine wire in the manufacture which cut into my inexperienced hands. The work was burdensome; it was heavy and uninteresting, and I was not a good factory worker, a thing which I am not ashamed to admit. The girls alongside whom I worked lacked the good humour of the Londoner's. They were inquisitive, asking questions they knew were difficult to answer. A cruel strain that comes only with the inexperience of youth and lack of human understanding. I temporarily forgot that in such a small place each person knew the other as well as their own relatives and I was quick to realise that my claim to Czechoslovakian descent was not believed. To my utter embarrassment this was brought to light by a request one day for me to sing the Czech anthem for all to hear. I had only just learned to sing the English anthem correctly - how could I know the Czech anthem also? I gave the feeble excuse that singing this song brought back too many sad and poignant memories; but I knew by their faces they were triumphant in their mean desire.

The manager amply made up for the difficulties and unhappy moments I had. He realised, and explained in a kindly way, that I was not in my element producing brushes in his factory; but he kept me there until I could find somewhere where there would be more suitable work for me to do. A brush factory is no welfare institution and I was working there purely through the goodness of heart, so I was happier when I was able to be more useful in his office. Even here I was not invaluable to him, but I filled an otherwise empty space for the time being.

After staying with him for a year I managed to find a place for my abilities in the village. I was engaged in a bookshop, my life took on an easier outlook from this moment. The people had gradually accepted me with less reserve and suspicion. They knew by this time that I was not a German in the sense of being an enemy. My husband was fighting with the British against the common enemy and I, perhaps, have suffered far more at the hands of the Nazis than have all the villagers put together.

'The people had gradually accepted me with less reserve and suspicion'

My new and interesting occupation brought me into conversation with many people I had not known before. As desperately as I needed human companionship and company it was still very lonely. These people all had their own friends and interests and I began to discover an intense loneliness which had been slowly developing through the past three years. So eagerly would I have grasped an outstretched hand in friendliness; so desperately did I need a friend of my own, someone with whom to share confidences and to whom I could speak as a free person.

And so it was that into this part of my life and into this mood of mine, came Clive.

Because for so long I had been severed from all personal contacts and intellectual interests I was strongly drawn towards him. From the beginning Clive represented all the qualities and stolidity of his forty years; but had he been years older it would not have made any difference to the gratitude I felt for his companionship. Discovering I was so hungry for company, being with him was like finding harbour after being long at sea. As a high ranked officer he was stationed in the village on war duties. In a sense, I learned he was a refugee like myself - without his loved ones he was quite alone in a strange country. To me he was part of our own sphere and I placed him alongside the old friends who had made up my social life in Germany. Finding him was like discovering water in the desert. I knew he was attracted to me by the many evenings he found my company and as Paul approved of my association with him I was eager to accept him as a real friend. Paul expressed his opinion this way: "Why shouldn't you have him as a friend and have some fun? You deserve it!". If only I had realised that apparently I am not born to fun in that sense of the word!

Analysing Clive, I was quick to notice his secretive mouth which so seldom smiled and his eyes which never conveyed a single thought, but were mostly veiled, so withholding secrets from the world at large. His complete reserve in thought, word and deed was synonymous of a typical Englishman. I have met many of his fellow countrymen but he was unlike them all. Maybe he was genuinely interested in me - maybe he was attracted by me. I still don't know. I only know that he held a great and unusual interest for me, and still does. Later I was to know that his secretiveness was an armour under which lay an extremely primitive streak and what I call reserve was an excuse to keep carefully hidden something which was his alone.

He was a good listener but I found it most difficult trying to find out if he was pleased or not at my efforts in conversation. But this meeting with Clive was not to bring the happiness and companionship I had hoped for. He was not satisfied with the relationship I was content to offer him; he wanted more. A fact which asserted itself as the days went by. He wanted an expression I was not willing to give, an expression of love. It was past his understanding that I was content to keep our friendship on a platonic feeling. To him no real understanding between two people of the opposite sex could ever be achieved without the completeness of what he called love. His idea was, when hungry to eat, when thirsty to drink, when there is a desire to make love, to love. To any man with Clive's outlook I am and will always be a disappointment and so I was to learn that my views on ethics, morale and real love did not appeal to him. So I was quite prepared when he called me stubborn and selfish. How short-sighted he was!

He could have had the best of my thoughts; I could have given him honest affection, but he refused it. Although I tried to make up in other ways for my failings in Clive's eyes, he likened my efforts to a balance sheet, saying, "You can't cover up with little acts of friendship if one desires more".

If I had not known that men like Paul and Christopher did exist, I would not have made such a thorough conviction against Clive. I would have hesitated but I know such men are there; they are the type to suffer more; they are also difficult, but they are great. The greatest thing is they are real. So when I was with Clive, how I wished that he could have been a little more like Christopher and Paul; I could have told him my doubts and my feelings, and he could have helped me so much and been a great comfort. It was a great disappointment, not only because Clive's desires and views were different from mine - those he is

entitled to as an individual - but I spent such a tremendous amount of spiritual strength on him and have gained so little. It was an unequal match.

But withal, after my experiences with him I shall never forget Clive; he will always be a most insistent memory; nor will I ever forget that intermingled with the long spell of depression, realising I was unable to cultivate a human heart, that all too short spell of the hours spent in trying to find each other. A great pity that such an ending should be the fate of one of the most intriguing episodes of my personal life. There are still times in my solitude when I think of him and wish he had left me with a more restful heart.

Once more life ran on more normal lines again. The village was alive with wartime activities. The main topic of conversation was second front and the necessary preparations for it. I remained in my little bookshop during the day and my evenings were occupied with teaching German. Paul was granted seven days' leave and the joy of reunion made us temporarily forget the world outside. We optimistically made plans for our future. Without hope our future life ceases to have a meaning, so bravely we dare to build castles in the air.

How grateful we were for every moment spent together! For families still undivided by war three months passes quickly. That is why I excused the remarks I heard when Paul was home again: "Dear, dear! Another Leave!" In their complacency how could they know, sitting comfortably in their own houses, eating on their own tables, what it meant for us both to imagine it was seven days of real home life. Although my landlady and her family were of the kindest, there still remained two great points which stood in my mind. One, we were always refugees, and two, no matter how much effort was made it was still a home belonging to someone else.

In this way my life went on through four long years. I worked, I was a slave to the alarm clock; I made an occasional visit to the pictures and I became more understanding of the village life with its simple pleasures and aspirations. It was inevitable that the second front should present itself sooner or later and the day which the world of today and tomorrow will always remember as "D Day" burst on us suddenly.

The thought never crossed my mind that Paul would have to go abroad again. But the War Office thought differently. Again, he was one of the first to leave England. Fully appreciating that my life in a war differs only slightly from thousands of other people, is it not absurd, this constant turmoil which gives me no peace! Although I know there is so little peace anywhere in the world today, I cannot help believing that fate has taken a far stronger part in my destiny. By this time I should be prepared for any eventualities. I should be resigned and ready to meet any emergency, but I am not.

The shortest possible notice called me to journey to say "Goodbye" to my Paul. I arrived with Michael in a quite ordinary provincial town crowded with people, which made accommodation almost non-existent, a fact which caused no concern until we had to face reality and found ourselves stranded with nowhere to sleep; and so the fates must have been laughing at the three of us forced to spend the last night together in a dirty, cold waiting room on a railway station. My heart was heavy and my thoughts were sad; but I tried to smile for Paul's sake. I think he knew my thoughts, and both of us felt the tragedy of being homeless. The situation hit me with great force - what a place to say "Goodbye" to one's husband for an indefinite period, maybe for ever!

It is now nearly seven months since that memorable night on the station. Paul has gone and his constant letters are my only joy. The news is good and we dare to speak about an end in sight and of homecoming. The children already choose flags as their favourite toys. The houses are beginning to need a new spring coat. It is winter now, but summer will come and with it, perhaps will come my husband and peace.

The past will be like a dream that never happened. With Paul the future will be full of promise. Once again I shall have my family around me. If life treats me kindly I would wish to be as young as my husband wanted to see me. I would like to take time to live and appreciate a leisure that can only be achieved without a routine day run to the precision of an alarm clock. No alarm clock, please, for me! This is one of my greatest desires. Then I shall never cease to marvel at how enjoyable life can be. All my impatience is gradually being dissolved along with my misfortunes.

Deep in my heart I know there must be a new day. For nothing can hold back the dawn. There will always be a tomorrow and with this thought in mind today is easier to bear. I can wait.

Post-script: Dorothy's son Gordon (Michael in the story) has kindly added the following:

Towards the end of the war my father, Paul, stationed in Bruges as an interpreter in a German prisoner of war camp, of course in British Army uniform. He asked one of the prisoners where did you live in Germany? The man replied Mannheim. My father asked him if he knew a certain restaurant and the prisoner was extremely surprised that an 'English' soldier had such a profound knowledge of Germany!

At the end of the war my father was asked whether he would like to work with the Control Commission in Germany and be made up to Officer rank. He replied thanks for the offer but having been away from my family for six years I would like to go home!

During the war my mother was working for a leading shaving brush manufacturer, Simpson, and immediately after the war father began working as a sales representative for Simpsons, he worked in England, Ireland and Scandinavia.

In 1947 he started his own business supplying department stores and retail chemists with chemist sundries (including shaving brushes). Mother and I helped in the business until it was sold in 1969.

My parents then successfully brought to the UK market the well known American cosmetic company Estee Lauder of which Aramis is the brand name of the men's range. Father was with Estee Lauder until he passed away in 1974.

Mother continued to give talks to ladies groups on Estee Lauder cosmetics until her retirement in 1977.

I joined the English subsidiary of an American company, Pitney Bowes, and went into speciality selling and was with them for six years and a further 13 years with Ascom Hasler UK before retiring. ■

The Association

21,427 members have joined the Royal Pioneer Corps Association

Report: Norman Brown and Jas E Adamson
Picture: RPC photo archive

THE Association was formed in November 1946, and before the end of that year had 1,393 members - only 7 of these are still on our active list today. In 1947 another 3,023 members joined out of which 17 are still on our active list. In 1948 1,365 members joined and only four of these are on our active list.

Since it was formed 21,427 members have joined, unfortunately out of these only 2,155 are on our active list. We know that 1,143 have died and a further 98 transferred to other Regiments/Corps' and probably switched allegiance, but that still leaves a lot of 'Lost' members. If you know or have contact with former colleagues please ascertain if they are receiving the Newsletter, if not please send me their details.

In the first three years of the Association nearly a third of all members joined, this must have been a great achievement. To emphasise the difficulties of those early years I have decided to publish the Hon General Secretary's Report on Progress since the formation of the Association which was prepared for the first Annual General Meeting held at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, London, SW1 on 17 September 1949.

"Without funds, except a Loan of £500 from the Corps Benevolent Fund, the Association commenced operations at 88 Eccleston Square, London, SW1 in November 1946. Its Headquarters are now at 51 St Georges Drive, SW1 and there are 45 Branches. Membership to date is 6765.

Officers - 368 Life Members and 1,312 Annual Members.

Other Ranks - 254 Life Members and 4831 Annual Members.

At the date of this Report approximately 1,500 members are in arrears with their subscriptions, but this applies to most Associations - Renewal Subscriptions arrive daily at HQ.

Owing to the limited capital, practically all of which has been raised by our own efforts, the work and development of the Association has been seriously handicapped. We have not been able to supply essential funds to Branches, and were it not for the loyalty and generosity of our Branches, and particularly the Honorary Officials, we could not have survived.

In the space available, it is impossible to name those who have made these grand efforts, but our thanks are none the less sincere.

A large number of functions and sweepstakes have been organised by HQ since November 1946, and most of them have been financially successful.

The Accounts for the years 1947 and 1948 will show the amount of cash raised by these efforts. Unfortunately our Auditors have not been able to complete them in time to present to this meeting. Copies will be sent to all Branches as quickly as possible.

"The Royal Pioneer" Magazine. It is, I think, generally agreed that the standard of this is high. In spite of all efforts, the circulation is nothing like it should be, and until it is considerably increased, the magazine cannot pay its way. It has been suggested the price be reduced, but the majority of readers do not agree with this. The point as to whether publication can be continued much longer must be settled by those whom you are about to elect at the Annual General Meeting. The task of publishing your journal has been a heavy one. As Founder and Editor, I am much indebted to all contributors, to Mr JW Phillips (Asst Editor) for his invaluable services, and to our printers Messrs Sherren & Son Ltd, Weymouth, who have done so much more than is usually done to help in the heavy work involved. I ask for your full support in the future in trying to increase the circulation and the Advertisements so that a serious cut in the the size of the magazine, or cessation of publication, can be avoided.

Finance. On many occasions since its formation I have been told that our Association should be able to finance all its work by means of the members subscriptions but no one yet has been able to show me how to do it or give the name of any similar association that has ever done this. In fact without the extra efforts made by us in many directions to raise funds the Association would never have developed to the extent it has. All Annual Subscriptions from Branch Members are sent to their Branch and the income of HQ from members on its strength is so small

that it would not cover Annual postages.

Finance is our main anxiety. For a long period I have striven in every possible way to get rid of this, and it is important that every member should be made aware of certain matters which deeply concern us.

Under Army Council Instruction No 1394 of 1944, it is laid down as follows:

"Para 7(a). The action as regards units which have regimental or Corps Association, which permit benefits to all soldiers who have served in the regiment or corps during the war, or their families, or such associations or regiments or corps as have separate funds for the purpose will be as follows:

(i)PRI and Sergeants Mess Funds:

80% to the regimental or corps association or the separate fund as the case may be.

10% to the Army Benevolent Fund (see para 10). 10% to any other approved charitable or benevolent association(s) or organisation(s) for the assistance of all soldiers who have served in the unit, or their families.

(ii) Officers' Mess Funds: as in sub-para (i), if the corps or regimental association, or a separate fund, or other approved association or organisation permits benefits to officers or their families. Otherwise as in sub para b(ii) below."

On 12th January 1949 I felt it necessary to draw the attention of the Trustees of the Association, and the Secretary of the Benevolent Fund to the contents of this ACI and my views regarding same. Rightly or wrongly, I contend that monies from disbanded units since the date of registration of the Association should have been paid to the Association, and not the the Corps Benevolent Fund.

To the end of December 1948, the approximate total of this money is between £18,000 and £19,000. Had we been given a proportion of this sum only, our work in the development of the Association, its Branches, Welfare, etc, would not have suffered as they have, and there is reason to believe that far greater progress would have been made than can now be reported.

However, Committee Members of the Association and of the Benevolent Fund have since my notification to them, been working on proposals which, when completed, in the near future and, if approved by the Authorities, should make it unnecessary for further action to obtain transfer of the amount stated or any part thereof.

The hands of the Benevolent Fund Committee have been somewhat tied by the terms of its Charter. The principal difficulty has been that, contrary to the usual position, our Corps Benevolent Fund was established years before the Old Comrades' Association, it being registered under the War Charities Act in 1941, whilst the Association was registered only in 1946 with the Registrar of Friendly Societies.

It will be seen that difficulties have been by no means easy to overcome. To avoid friction as far as possible, a proposal for the amalgamation of the two bodies was presented to the Charity Commissioners for approval. This was turned down, but conditional approval has been granted for a scheme which will give, in a modified form, what we require, and subject to the approval of your Annual General Meeting, the two organisations will in effect become one. The two organisations will be controlled by a Council, not exceeding thirteen members including the Colonel Commandant, with two Committees, Aid and General Purposes, each not exceeding nine members. The members of these Committees must be composed of Other Ranks as well as Officers and be representative of the whole Association.

If these proposals are not approved, and two organisations must be maintained, then the Committee you elect will have to deal with the problem of money which has been paid to the Benevolent Fund, but which may prove to be the property of the Association.

Apart from this, however, it is clear that the Association is doing much work which the Benevolent Fund could not do, without outside assistance; and the work of the Association is daily becoming more vital and personal to the ex-Pioneer. We are now dealing with almost every class of welfare work, and a glance at a typical list of cases will disclose interesting but at times tragic facts. Nearly all cases came to light through the Association. Subject to my previous remarks, the cash resources are obviously low at the date of this Report, but with the friendly co-operation of members of the Benevolent Fund and Association Committees it has been agreed that the Association's claim for monies expanded on Welfare Work during the past three years should be paid by the Benevolent Fund. On receipt of this money the financial position of HQ and Branches will be eased and of course steps are being taken to raise Funds in other directions.

Donations. Since the inception of the Association, many kind friends have sent in donations ranging from a few pence to

pounds, including £400 sent by the Royal Pioneer Corps Depot over two years ago. I take this opportunity of thanking all concerned for their generous and timely gifts. There are many ways of raising money. These require initiative, drive, staff, and money. Given reasonable assistance with these, in my view there is no reason why the Association should not become a very strong organisation, with great powers for good and very soon be the principal money earner for the Benevolent Fund Branch whose income from disbanded Units and contributions from serving units has now almost ceased.

Publicity. Everyone should know the great difficulties we have had to contend with in this important item. Scarcity and cost of space in the Press, and complete lack of many means of publicity which existed before the war have proved most serious handicaps. We have endeavoured to overcome this as far as possible, but tens of thousands of our Pioneer comrades have never heard of the Association and the valuable work it is doing. I hope that conditions will so improve in the near future, and the keenness of members to increase, that we may at least overcome some of these handicaps.

Important functions and ceremonies have been organised during the past three years including:

(1) Naming of the Locomotive by Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery KG GCB DSO in September 1948.

(2) Parade and Dedication of Branch Standards at St Martin-in-the-Fields in 1948 and 1949.

(3) Film Ball in 1948.

(4) Dinners, Lunches and Reunions in 1947. 1948 and 1949.

(5) Presentation of Standards to Branches by the Lord Mayor of Leeds, Bristol and Portsmouth (several others arranged or being arranged).

(6) Ceremony at St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, on 10 Jul 49 when the Branch Standard of Edinburgh & East of Scotland was handed over for safe keeping.

The above must certainly have helped the Corps and Association to get the right kind of publicity but they are not sufficient for our needs. Negotiations were commenced two years ago with a view to getting on the "Air". An excellent Script was prepared by a well known Pioneer but so far we have met with refusals from those who could and should help. The position will not be left like this - it is the intention to try and get our story put over via the Regional Studios of the BBC, if it cannot be done otherwise.

I cannot conclude this Report without recording how much we are indebted to Lt Col MG Hicks TD, who, as Hon Treasurer, worked for so long and so extremely hard for Association and Benevolent Fund affairs. It is with the greatest regret I have to report his resignation some months ago. We are deeply indebted to him for his valuable assistance. Attention must also be drawn to the special efforts and the time given to our affairs by Lt Cols George, Greenland and Disney. In the last few weeks particularly, they have sacrificed their time to attend many urgent meetings at short notice, as members of a special Sub-Committee to deal with the matter of the proposed amalgamation referred to above - Brigadiers Prynne and Blanchard have on many occasions travelled long distances to attend and support Special Functions in different parts of the UK. Our sincere thanks are due to them all for their ready co-operation.

The time has now come when I must regretfully resign as your Hon General Secretary, and I would like to record my sincere gratitude to all including our HQ Staff who have supported me so loyally in my humble efforts to make the Association worthy of the grand Corps to which we had the honour to belong, I am fully aware of my shortcomings - many things perhaps could and should have been done which may have brought more success - we have learned a great deal. My Successor will at least have the basis of a sound Organisation and lessons of three years effort to work in the future. I wish him all success and the same loyal and generous support which I have had in the past.

There is a great deal to do - the needs of the Association and its work will increase and not decrease for years to come. Only 100% co-operation and effort from Pioneers everywhere can see this job through satisfactorily and up to our old Pioneer Standard of the late War - I hope we shall get that co-operation soon and repeat that if each member will bring in one more Pioneer as quickly as possible our numbers will soon be more in keeping with the strength of the Corps in the days now rapidly becoming only a memory. I realize all members cannot take a very active part in our work, but they can at least be "One of Us".

Surely the good work being done for our ex-comrades is worth a little effort!

Signed Jas E ADAMSON,
Lt Col Hon General Secretary,
LONDON HQ, 9th September 1949. ■

National Service

Some of the highlights of Bill's time as a national serviceman

Report: Bill Goode
Picture: RPC photo archive

THE request for articles in the Newsletter has prompted me to try and relate some of the highlights of my time as a National Serviceman in the Royal Pioneer Corps.

At the age of fourteen I joined the local cadet force The Queens Own Worcestershire Hussars rising to the rank of Cpl. October 1955 at the age of eighteen and working at the old Austin Motor Company the dreaded brown envelope O.H.M.S. arrived informing me to present myself at the Five Ways Worcester for a medical with a view to being selected for National Service for two years. This was very traumatic having never travelled far outside my hometown without an adult. The army was soon to change this.

On arrival there where about thirty of us, we were told to strip to the waist and wait for our names to be called; we would then proceed down a number of cubicles each with its own specialist medical staff or doctor. They poked your ears, checked your teeth, trousers down bend over, (to see if your hat was on straight!) had you cough (check for pneumonia I think) weight and height and a dozen other things. At dinnertime we were given two bob (real money) to spend at the pub across the road. On our return we all lined up in front of a desk to get our results. In front of me was a farm labourer I had got to know "He was Big!" Like the proverbial brick shithouse. Arriving at the desk and giving his name to a sergeant, who began sorting through a load of index cards, wonder of wonders GRADE 3 - no National Service for him. At that moment a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders I thought a hundred and eight pounds, five feet four and a half, I have got no chance. Wrong again! My turn, sergeant takes out a green card, and says, "Not much of you son but all in the right place - Grade A1".

Five months later the second dreaded letter arrived and I found that I had been posted to the Royal Pioneer Corps at Wrexham, what the hell and where is that! Not being on speaking terms with my father "Thought I could rule the house on a pound a week". I took the letter to work, big joke, you are going to dig holes in Taffy land with those that have been down graded from other units.

Well mother must have told dad and a few days later I found myself in his lorry on the way to Snow Hill Station Birmingham. Never a word spoken, but on arrival as I climbed down from the lorry he said, "Got any money?" Having never been given any unless there was work attached to it I thought my luck had changed. I said that I had a few coppers, but if I was expecting more I was wrong. He told me if that's all you have when you come home don't ask for more, there is none. His parting remark was you'll be able to do many things that you have been forbidden to do at home. If you make your bed you'll lie in it and not bring it home to mum and me you know what I mean. I had a pretty good idea. With that he said, "Through that gate learn to take orders and one day maybe, you can give them". At that moment I thought that the old Desert Rat was a Bastard.

Inside Snow Hill Station, hundreds of bodies in utter confusion with shouting and bawling. Somebody shouts Wrexham last carriage, a stampede then followed with arms and legs flying in all directions. The bloke next to me on the train said that as soon as he got there he was off back home.

On arrival at Wrexham we were herded into trucks and taken to Horsley Hall. More shouting and bawling. I won't go into the details as those that may read this are aware of eight weeks of hell that turned boys of all walks of life into men dependant on one another, standards and nightmares that would remain with most of them for the rest of their lives.

About a fortnight into training we were

all marched to the PSO, "what's he when he's about?" I soon found out, Personnel Selection Officer. By now I had learnt name, rank and number and duly recited them. "Right, Private Goode what would you like to do now that you have joined the Royal Pioneer Corps," he said. "Get out of this mob to start with," I said without thinking, observing a glare from my Corporal. The officer then went on to explain that certain intakes contained all those in A1 category and that all trades were open to them after further training. Driver, Storeman, Clerk, PNCOs Course but I was definitely staying in the Royal Pioneer Corps. After a brief glance at the still glaring Corporal I said that I would like to be trained as a driver. Not possible replied the officer, with your back-ground in the cadets you are down for a PNCOs Course. On completion of basic training you will go for NCO training for a further eight weeks, Fall Out!

On visits to the depot at Wrexham we had seen these squads with white bands on their applets going every where at the speed of light, this we had been told was the PNCOs Course. The best two would remain at Wrexham to train further recruits with the remainder having the possibility of a posting near home and promotion at a later date.

If I thought training was hell I was about to meet the devil himself in the guise of "The power over all", Sergeant MARKHAM! Along with another ex-cadet named Hogg five weeks into the course we were by our estimation in the running to return to the depot to train recruits. Having been wrong so many times since joining the Army I was now learning fast and by means that we shall ignore for the moment I was duly posted to 196 Company with a Private Jones.

196 Company is about twenty five miles from my home in Bromsgrove and on my first leave home I was to learn that my father was delivering ballast to the depot on a regular basis and was able to give me lifts when I could acquire a pass. I was now accepted as doing my bit and this old Desert Rat was less of a Bastard. Free beer at the Legion. So here I was, cracked it for the remainder of my two years. Wrong again. One morning before being detailed for work twelve of us were to told to stand fast as the CO wanted a word. He informed us that twelve A1 volunteers were required to proceed to 263 Company at Warwick as standby for Suez, and as we were the only ones in category A1 we were the volunteers.

One hour later we were at Budbrook Barracks and left to our own devices in a hut at the bottom of the camp with a pile of straw and palliasse's and nothing else. For two wonderful days we never saw a soul other than going to the cookhouse. Day three and I think someone must have woken up in the Company Office to the fact that we had arrived. The Sergeant Major was not a happy man blaming us for not informing him of our arrival. As history knows Suez was on then off then on then off and apart from painting trucks and helmets first sand then green and back to sand life was pretty boring with some small breaks to No 1 EST 524 Company working on railway stores preservation.

One night a lad from London said he was to take anyone that wished to go into Warwick in a truck. On arrival the driver parked the truck and we all piled into the nearest pub. Two hours later and well oiled the driver informed us that he had pinched the truck and we had better get back. Back on the truck it was bedlam with it swerving all over the road and some bloke disappearing over the hedge with his bike and me hanging over the back trying to obscure the number plate with my BD blouse. Ditching the truck we made our way over the fields to our hut and into bed fully clothed. I don't think they ever found out who had the truck - well that is until now!

From now on for me it would be the life of a nomad going from Warwick to Salisbury, Warwick, Suez, Whittington, Longmoor, Bordon, Longmoor, Wilton and finishing my time at Longmoor. Doing also two trips to Wrexham for new recruits, one to Royal Signals at Ripon and twice to Steelhouse Lane Police Station Birmingham to collect prisoners.

Having mentioned the event at Warwick here are a few escapades that have remained with me always:

Tilshead - Having fell for the promise of a night in Salisbury if we did a speed march with full backpack of house bricks. Needless to say on our return we were in no fit state to go to Salisbury and anyway it was too late. But like the laughing Sergeant said after vacating the mess for a moment, "It's the taking part that matters." A few days later however I had my revenge. The section had been doing drill for some time under a very hot sun and some of the lads had just about had enough but there was going to be no let up from this Sergeant so I had a plan.

After making deliberate mistakes by yours truly the section was fell out for a smoke break in the shade, but not me. I was drilled up, down, about turn, slope arms, order arms, present arms and various other movements.

By now the Sergeant was beginning to sweat, finally he stopped me and asked if I had had enough, to which I replied, "No, Sergeant." Off I went again. This went on for some time the smoke break for the lads getting longer and longer. As for me I was sweating but I had the advantage, I had been drilled by an expert. The power over all, 'The devil himself, Sergeant MARKHAM!' Finally with sweat streaming down his face, beret askew he fell the rest of the section in to march off. The sun not only shines on the righteous.

Suez - The night Lt Moorhouse went missing, he was later found dead, a chap named Taffy Horne and I were on guard having been told the news and to be extra vigilant as it was thought that the Lieutenant had been kidnapped. We decided there and then that there was going to be no "Halt, who goes there" three times and that we should put one up the spout with the safety catch on just in case.

After returning to the improvised guardroom we were told we had ten minutes to grab a drink and bite at the field cook house.

On our return the Corporal confronted me with one loaded rifle safety catch on and one up the spout. Outcome of this, CO's orders, one week field punishment to coincide with and after a twelve hour working day.

'If I thought training was hell I was about to meet the devil himself'

Longmoor - Back from Suez and I had now been promoted to Lance Corporal and was sent to Wilton for further training with a view to further promotion. On arriving at Sailisbury railway station with everything I owned including rifle and spare magazines all strapped together in parachute order and with newly studded boots I stepped out into the cobbled street. Both feet shot from under me and there I lay on my back and, like a turtle, unable to get up without the assistance of a kindly passer by.

Bordon - Now being promoted to Corporal I was with a detachment of sixteen in charge of the canteen and being under the control of the REME. We were subject to the same barrack-room inspections. A CO's inspection carried with it the reward of being excused inspections for the best billet for one week. We were determined that this would go to the Pioneers, this was achieved the first time. On the night before inspection on the second occasion the lads asked it it would be OK to bring an urn of tea to share with those of the REME in the block. It was agreed providing there was no spillage as the highly polished floor would stain and ruin any chance of a free week from inspections.

After about ten minutes all was forgotten and there was spilt tea everywhere. Being two stories up I instructed the lads to pour the remains through the window.

That night was bitter cold and next morning hearing a commotion from outside we all rushed to the window to find the Sergeant Major on his backside on what we knew to be frozen tea. Nothing was said but we never won again.

The uniniated who read this may thing that being a Royal Pioneer is one big joke. Think again, all Royal Pioneers have tails to tell like the ones above, mostly to relieve the pressures they were put under.

The building blocks that were put in place for me fifty years ago have served me well and many are the times that our motto LABOR OMNIA VINCIT has seen me through.

I am truly grateful and proud that I can say I was in the Royal Pioneer Corps. ■

Somewhere in France

Landing in France on D-Day with 1 section 303 pioneer company

Report: Grandson of Pte Richard Bridge
Picture: RPC photo archive

THE following was was sent by by the grandson of Pte Richard Bridge and describes his grandfather's landing on D-Day with 1 Section 303 Company.

Dearest Doreen

I hope you are well and still smiling. I am in good health and okay. As you will know by now the big show has started and I am in the thick of it. I have got settled down to things now and it is quiet here but for the big guns and the planes going over. We are making progress now. I shall never forget June 6th as long as I live. We had a hell of a time of it for the first few days. We should have been among the first to land with the Commandos.

We got there all right but our craft got it pretty hot. I think we were the luckiest of the lot to get away with it when we tried to land on the beach for Jerry had got his guns trained on us. He shelled us to bits nearly. He was in a concrete strongpoint on the beach and he got eight direct hits on us before we could get away again.

Our ramps were blown away, and we had to go back in mid-channel to offload the wounded and get onto another craft. Our officer Lieutenant Sneezum got both his feet blown off, about four were killed and twenty five wounded on our landing craft.

I was on deck and got hit on the ear with a bit of shrapnel, but it was only a scratch. It was a good job we had to go back a bit for it was just hell. We went ashore at last up to our waists in water, then we had to muck in. After we landed we started work and were not still for forty eight hours.

We had to hunt snipers and caught three up the church tower. I have seen some sights. Our boys have got in well now. I think I have got the worst over, and this is the first rest since it started. I went to Mass last night and received Holy Communion. It was held in one of the hospital tents. We have no grumbles as we are lucky to be alive and kicking. I only hope that our efforts have been worthwhile and that we have peace ever after, for I don't want to have to go through this again. Don't worry, I am okay.

God bless.

Your loving Dad.

The following is an extract from the War Diary of his Company:

6 Jun 44 - Touched down on French Coast on QUEEN RED BEACH but craft hit be enemy shells and so put to sea again. Lt P Sneezum shot in both legs and evacuated.

Coy transferred to another craft and disembarked between 1100 and 1115 hours. 1 officer & 3 ORs wounded

Task was stretcher bearing duties on the beaches.

8 Jun 44 - Stretcher bearing and grave digging. Cpl Surtees – died of wounds, Lt T C Hunt & 5 ORs wounded. ■

Bellow from his office

JUST READ the mag which under your inspired direction goes from strength to strength. Sorry about this bagpipe music but I am not with computer or even a word processor. I write a note now because I have read the letter of Albert Bell, ex 523 Coy. We were there together; he was a good sort.

John Leach who was OC had a childish sense of humour (I am not complaining because most of the Pioneer OCs in those days had none!). He used to bellow from his office in what was a compact spider building and if he wanted his transport he would shout down the corridor "Dinger!, bring on the Wonder Horse".

As Albert says we had an early Champ and TV at that time showed 'Champion The Wonder Horse'.

John Leach did the imprest himself and when he needed the pay sergeant he would holler "Tally Ho" - and it won't surprise you to know that his name was FOX. John Leach is long dead and Joe Black (the 2IC) was nearly 50 when I joined the Coy in 1956 so he too is getting telegrams from the Queen or twinging his harp.

He was a pre-war soldier and I have to believe, a very good one but he was not the cheeriest of men. He bought an off-licence not far from the camp and in the evenings he, of course, served in it. He used to put on a warehouse coat over his Khaki shirt and tie and the OC John Leach, who was from a minor public school and had that built-in snobbery, used to say to me "Have you been in to see him in his tinker's outfit?". Next time our paths cross remind me to give you some Leach/Black highlights. - **Bob Colville**

(It is with regret to report that Bob died suddenly on 29 February 2008)

Cold shivers running down my back

I AM absolutely astonished and excited by your extremely quick response, I cannot thank you enough for the detailed information. In fact I got cold shivers running down my back reading through them.

When I was a child, I am now 60 years of age, I can remember my Father telling us, that is myself and 2 brothers and 4 sisters, some stories about his Army adventures, but unfortunately he never put pen to paper.

When asked if he killed any Germans he would simply reply 'millions' and when asked why he had a leaf attached to one of his medal ribbons his only reply was 'for being first in the NAAFI queue'.

I suppose you would have heard these things many times before but it always amazed me how these old servicemen would introduce humour into everything particularly when one considers what they all must have gone through.

Once again many many thanks and I shall be definitely donating to the RPC Association as you recommend. Best wishes - **George W. Holt**

A green goddess

I WISH to thank you for the Pioneer Newsletter which was most welcomed. I have been reading about the 13 year old in 1939. It brought back memories. When Cpl J Stout wrote that he was stationed at Marlborough Farm Camp, Kineton (251 Coy), and that a soldier was killed and four others were wounded in 1947 because of a bomb exploding.

I was also stationed there with 251 Coy from 1952 to 1954. My friend, Pte Bloomfield, and I were walking to the billet to get ready for guard duty when we heard an explosion. He said that it would be the bomb squad detonating some of the US ammo in one of the fields.

The next minute we saw a green goddess and an ambulance and staff car going to where the blast had originated.

It turned out that a soldier had been killed by a 3.7 shell and one of my friends, Pte King, who was in the ammunition shed was caught in the face by the blast and was taken straight to the MRS.

Another friend, Pte Whitting, and I visited Pte King the next day. I am glad to say that he fully recovered and was soon back to work.

Thanks for bringing back the memories, it wasn't a bad camp. - **RW Stone**

Wow, cool and wizard

ON READING the latest issue of your magazine "The Pioneer", I was amazed at the full contents.

I tried to think of words to express my amazement, but I will only revert to the modern language of my grandchildren which is "Wow!", "Cool" and "Wizard" to praise indeed.

Thank you for your, and your son's, efforts and hard work which I am sure we all appreciate and are very thankful.

Enclosed is a cheque for £90 for Christmas Draw tickets, just send me the £1000 first prize as it will help to cover my expenses as I hope to return to Italy to see the battlefields which I still remember.

After reading my memoirs my son also wishes to travel from Salerno to Mount Cassino.

Yours in comradeship - **George Pringle**

Draw Tickets

I HAVE just realized that I have been filling in Association Christmas Draw Tickets for 50 years this year. Having never won a bean, this maybe my year - I'm only joking!

Have a stress free Christmas.

Ross Bennett

(Ed note: sorry you failed to win again - why not write to Frank Lyle and ask him to share his win!!!)

Old and bold

CONGRATULATIONS ON the Association Magazine! It is really splendid.

All "Old & Bold" plus members of the Regiments' are in your debt (and your son!). Thank you, fond regards

PJ O'Connel
Colonel

Stagging on in some form or other

ONCE AGAIN thanks for the latest edition of The Pioneer, as always nice to see familiar faces, unfortunately I was not able to make the reunion weekend but hope to next year.

Since leaving the Corps I have been employed with HM Prison Service (barring a few months) and still seem to be stagging on in some form or other. Best regards to 23 Regt on their deployments(s) and I wish them all a safe return.

If anyone remembers me and would like to get in touch, my email address is mark.stanley17@btinternet.com.

Best Wishes - **Mark Stanley (24497157)**

"I am going to buy myself out sir..."

I WAS pleased to see that you have raised the Christmas Draw 1st prize to £1,000! Light years ago, when I was Secretary, I raised the prize to £500.

This was considered "mega-big" in those days! So much so, that it was decided that the Group Commander would himself present the cheque to the winner - who turned out to be a Private Soldier.

At the presentation the Colonel asked him what he was going to do with his prize money.

"I am going to buy myself out, Sir!"

General hilarity and confusion all round!

Tony Reynolds

Passing Out

■ **Haxell - last man on right in front, Hawkins, Hope, Holman, Johnson, Hocking, Jay, Jones, Jewell, Hignet, Hick, Hewson, Howard, Jacey, Hacker** Picture: Ivan Haxell

THANKYOU FOR another interesting magazine. I am enclosing a photograph for you to add to your collection of passing out parades.

This one is for Pioneer OCTU, Beckingham, Lincs in Nov/Dec 42 - we were commissioned as from 1 Jan 43.

Some of the names are shown above, out of these 25 I only met two after leaving OCTU. One, 2Lt Hewson, and myself had our first posting together, he was a very nice man and a very good officer. The second was the person I least wanted to see again!.

I regret I could not be at the cenotaph this year but old age (87) plus visual impairment and a small heart problem dictated that I should watch from a warm room at home. Yours sincerely,
Ivan Haxell

Proud to call myself a pioneer

FIRSTLY HAPPY new year to you. Many thanks for the October edition which was a good read as normal, please keep them coming.

Well matey this is a sad but exciting start to 2008, after 28 years as a proud Pioneer, I called it a day and handed in my kit and collected my pension and on the 14 Jan 08, I depart these shores with my wife Lindsay and daughter Molly to Join the Australian Army. But before I go would it be possible to request that the correspondence continue and I receive the Pioneer mag. I am very proud to call myself a PIONEER and will never forget where I came from.

Thank you for keeping the Pioneer name going - **Jay Leach**

Good to catch up with the news

MANY THANKS for the excellent October edition of the Assoc magazine - you have surpassed yourself...again.

It was good to catch up with all the news of the 'Past & Present Weekend' and to learn what 23 Pnr Regt had been up to. I also read with sadness about the death of Maj Larry Smith who lived in Germany for many years. My father-in-law knew him quite well so I will pass the magazine on to him to read.

Regrettably time and distance precludes me heading South in the immediate future.

I hope however the various Remembrance commemorations go well as well as the planned reunion lunches etc.

Please pass on to Pat Flemming and Dick MacDonald my very best wishes when you next see them.
G R Cooper

Brought back a lot of memories

MAY I again say thank you for a great weekend at Bicester for the Medal Parade, it was thoroughly enjoyed.

The Medal Parade, church service and march past was absolutely brilliant. I wish that Les and I could have stayed longer.

For me it brought back a lot of great memories, it was so good that I even stopped and talked to Ginge Field.

I now look forward to the July reunion with my wife Jan. All the very best.
Jimmy Fallon

My eyes are like clarence the lion

YET AGAIN our News Letter excelled itself. I can honestly say it is the only thing I read from cover to cover.

I thought my Passing out Parade was in one of the photos, (3rd down on the right 1st page).

I could make out our Sgt: Evans.

His saying was "you might have made your Mother cry but you wont make me cry".

But when I used the Magnifying glass it was not our section, which was Rhine Section with a blue shoulder cloth band.

Glad the Reunion Weekend went well and the weather was good, maybe next year I will meet you again.

Still can't find the mouse, my eyes are like "Clarence the Lion"

Keep up the good work. Kindest regards,
Gerwyn

I always see some names i recognise

MANY THANKS for the latest edition of the RPC Association Newsletter, I always enjoy reading all the articles, which I find very interesting and I always see some names I recognise from yesteryear.

I'm sure everyone appreciates your efforts and hard work that you put into compiling the Newsletter.

Please keep up the good work. Also I note what you say about requiring articles for inclusion in the Newsletter.

Therefore I'll see if I can produce something in the near future. Best wishes
Maurice Grange
(Ed note: thanks for the article describing your time in Berlin, which is published inside this newsletter).

write to us at:

The Royal Pioneer Corps Association

c/o 23 Pnr Regiment RLC
St Davids Barracks
Graven Hill
Bicester OX26 6HF

or email us at:
royalpioneercorps@googlemail.com

Changing the Guard at Buckingham Palace 5 April 2008

The 15th anniversary of the formation of The RLC on 5 April 2008 saw two Pioneer Sqns mounting and dismounting the guard at Buckingham Palace. This unique event was carried out by 206 Sqn from Bicester and 170 Sqn from Rheindahlen.

In their spare time 170 Sqn managed to find time to build a patio area in the Officers' Mess at St James Palace. To highlight their skills they even managed to build two sentry boxes (to a one-third scale). Lt Col Steve Berry who had travelled to London to watch this unique event tried one of the sentry boxes for size - and surprise surprise it fitted perfectly!

This patio area was officially opened by Col RM Baker the Regimental Colonel who put in the final screw (with difficulty) to the brass plaque mounted in the entrance to the patio and then cut the obligatory ribbon. ■ (More pictures are on page 63)

Pictures: Paul Brown

ThePioneer

■ WO2 C Bell talks to HRH Duke of Edinburgh

■ London Lunch on 8 Nov 07

■ WO2 Bell tries a Chelsea Pensioner's Hat for size

■ Field of Remembrance 2007

■ Arthur & Lilian Cole on their Diamond Anniversary

■ Cenotaph Parade 2007

■ Cenotaph Parade 2007

■ Mr Whipps, first on parade at Cenotaph 2007

■ 39/93 Club Dinner at Fareham

■ 39/93 Club Dinner at Fareham

■ Reunion - J. Ennis, A. Goode, G. Earnshaw

■ 61st Past & Present Officers Dinner Night

■ SNCOs Pnr Reunion Club Dinner Night

■ RH Chelsea - Mr N. Brown, M Hull & Mr I. Dewsnap

■ Cenotaph Parade 2007

■ Cenotaph Parade 2007

■ Cenotaph Parade 2007

■ Belize 1993. Ex Cpl Ross Harrison sent in these pics. LtoR: Yank Blundell, Neil Layton, Tam Rutherford, Ross Harrison, Richie Hodge, Geordie Ringer. Standing Engr called Sinbad, Paulie. Pic 2, Yank Blundell, Richie Hodge, Gary English, Dave Reid. Pic 3, Steve Leslie, Ross Harrison, Stuart Lusher, Tony Curtis.

■ Northampton Branch Christmas Party 5 Jan 08

■ Field of Remembrance 2007

■ Mr David James (Ex 518) at Plymouth memorial

■ Field of Remembrance 2007

■ RSM 23 Regt & SSM 144 Sqn, Buckingham Palace

■ Col M Baker cuts the ribbon to open patio area

■ Mr John Davis at Birkenhead Cenotaph

■ Hats off to Tiny Smalley who married Karen

■ Lt Col S Berry tries a Sentry box for size

The Royal Pioneer Corps Association shop

Please send your cheques payable to *RPC Association* with your order...

Royal Pioneer Corps Association,
c/o 23 Pnr Regiment RLC, St David's Barracks, Graven Hill, Bicester OX26 6HF

◀ **Corps Tie**
A new tie is now available from HQ RPC Association, although keeping the same pattern the new one contains the Corps Badge on the blade of the tie.
£7.50

▲ **Cufflinks**
solid silver
£20

▲ **Cufflinks**
new badge
£5

▲ **Cufflinks**
bronze
£13.50

▲ **Tie Pin**
lovely
£3.50

▲ **Tie Pin**
lovely
£2.00

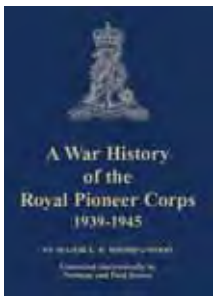
▲ **Wall Shields**
hand painted
£20

▲ **Wall Shields**
85-93 badge
£20

◀ **Blazer Badge**
silk & wire
£7

▲ **Seasons Greetings Cards**
x10
£2.50

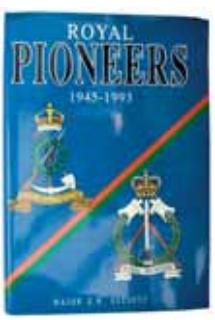
◀ **Blazer Badge**
silk & wire
£7



◀ **"A War History of the Royal Pioneer Corps 1939-45"**
by Major E H Rhodes Wood

This book, long out of print, is now available on CD-Rom at a cost of
£11

◀ **Blazer Badge**
silk & wire
£6



◀ **"Royal Pioneers 1945-1993"**
by Major Bill Elliott

The Post-War History of the Corps was written by Major Bill Elliott, who generously donated his work and rights entirely for the Association's benefit. It was published by Images, Malvern in May 1993 and is on sale in the book shops at £24.
£10

▲ **Bronze Statue**
why not order & collect at Reunion Weekend to save postage
£60 + £5 postage

23 Pioneer Regiment RLC Medal Parade 2-3 February 2008

Pictures: Paul Brown / Norman Brown
















Pictures: Paul Brown












Freedom Lost

The amazing story - 'They lost their freedom fighting for yours'

Report: H P Weiner
Picture: H P Weiner

IT was a beautiful Spring in Greece, 1941... days full of sunshine and bitterly cold nights.

The British Expeditionary Force, sent to bolster the weak and tired Greek Army, was in retreat. The Greeks were exhausted after successfully repulsing the advance of Mussolini's troops from Albania, the countryside was devastated by recent earthquakes. The 'General Metaxas' fortification lines crumbled like paper—mache under the overwhelming power of Hitler's armies, advancing through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. The Luftwaffe's new tool of warfare, the 'Stuka' fighter bombers, were unheard of and there was no defence against them at the time.

Central Greece with its high mountain ranges, provided ideal terrain for the last, half-hearted attempts to stop or slow down the German war machine. A New Zealand armoured division, under the command of General Freyburgh, stationed at the Lainia Pass in Thessaly, found itself short of ammunition, their tanks providing a target for the German dive—bombers who ruled the sky without interference.

The 608th Company of the APMC (Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps) was bivouaced in tents on a mountain plain near the town of Larissa in Central Greece. The men were volunteers who had enlisted in the British Army in Palestine, coming from many different backgrounds. All ranks up to and including second lieutenants were Jewish. The remaining officers and sergeant—major being from old established British and Scottish regiments, seconded to the 'Locally Enlisted' troops, which nicely avoided the use of the word 'Natives.' Their basic training was in Sarafand, Palestine in 1940, then they were posted to Egypt, later to be shipped from Alexandria to Tobruk. The boat which took them was the 'Ulster Prince', a beautiful channel steamer, built for crossing the Irish Sea during peace time, without much conversion towards becoming a troop carrier.

Among other tasks the Company found themselves guarding a squadron of 24 Blenheim bombers in the mountains of central Greece . We would count the number of planes taking off on bombing missions and far too often see only reduced numbers returning to base. It was a time for neither rejoicing nor moral exhilaration.

It was about the same time that Mussolini had lost most of his foothold in North Africa and Tobruk served as a supply port for the British force in the area. Tens of thousands of Italian prisoners of war milled helplessly around Tobruk. There was no need to imprison them, their liberty constrained by the Mediterranean on one side and the desert on the other.

After some two months in Tobruk, engaged in the running of the harbour, the 608th Company was ordered to break camp and again embarked on the 'Ulster Prince'. A soldier is never given any information about his movements, so the men willingly believed that they were heading for home leave. Little did they know that instead, in the not too distant future, they would have to stand impotently by and watch their beloved ship and all their hopes die a slow and merciless death.

The 'Ulster Prince' sailed, as expected, due east along the North African coast for a few days and the mood of the soldiers rose hourly when suddenly, they were awoken from their day dreams by the sound of other ship's horns. They were joining a huge convoy of vessels heading north, funnels, too numerous to count, spreading over the horizon.

Their dream of leave shattered, they disembarked a few days later in the Greek harbour of Piraeus. The whole town came out to greet them with shouts of "Yasso, Yasso - Patrioti", clearly feeling that the arrival of the British Army meant safety for them.

'All ranks up to and including second lieutenants were Jewish'

Germany had not yet declared war on Greece. The German ambassador was still in residence in Athens and the soldiers were warned to beware of spies. One of the locally enlisted men of the 608 Pioneer company was born Hans Paul Weiner. As there was a war going on in which the Germans figured as the enemy of the world, I felt my first forename to be too German and I started calling myself Paul Weiner How right I was can be imagined when a few year later, I found myself a British prisoner of war in German railway compartments. Other captive friends might have addressed me as 'Hans' and half a dozen German travellers might have exclaimed: 'Ja, ja,".

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

I was born in February 1919 in Trautenau, a town in the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. This was a small provincial place of about 10,000 inhabitants, where everybody knew everybody and everyone's business and affairs. My mother was the local beauty. My father was born in Vienna and came to Trautenau as part of the Austrian army, where he married my mother and established himself as a well known businessman.

He never shed his true Viennese image and never renounced his Austrian citizenship. My father also never mastered more than a few words of greeting in Czech. Perhaps it is right to assume that the Viennese are unable to learn foreign languages. You will read in other pages of this article of Viennese characters who unsuccessfully tried to master other languages. Despite this linguistic handicap, my father became a well known toy manufacturer.

He maintained that he did not need a Czech passport, he was a popular and honoured local personality. At one time he declined the chairmanship of the local amateur football club. However, this did not prevent him from employing about half the local players in his factory. Talented players were scouted at clubs all over the country; overnight they became craftsmen in the manufacture of toys, maintaining their amateur status and scoring goals for the local team.

The only disadvantage in being a foreign national was that my father was unable to vote in parliamentary elections. He also had to pay a small annual fee for the state education of my sister and myself. On the other hand, as an Austrian subject through my father, I could not be called up for two years compulsory national service.

The ever-present fear and hate of the German Reich surrounding Czech borders meant that recruits had to undergo stringent and harsh training. Furthermore, I could have run into trouble with the Sudeten Germans for being Jewish.

And so it proved to be in 1940, when I tried to enlist in the Czechoslovakian army in exile in Jerusalem. The recruiting officer understood that I had lived all my life in the Czech republic and that I was keen to join in the fight against Hitler, but he still would not let me enlist. He wanted to refer me to his superiors, and observed: "What would your status be if you fell into German hands and became a Prisoner of War?" How right he was.

It should, however, be mentioned here that a second cousin of mine named Karel Kaufman, born and bred in the same town, joined the Czech forces at the same Jerusalem recruiting office at the same

period of time. His grave number is 298 in the Tobruk Military Cemetery.

Going back a few years in time, we find ourselves in the small town of Trautenau where I concluded five years of high school. However, the teachers indicated to my parents that I was not destined for an academic career. My greatest interest, not unusual for an adolescent, was in automobiles. My father, by special decree, changed my status from minor to major so that I could apply for a driving licence at the early age of 17 years. It was the year 1936, Hitler had been in power for three years and the threat to us from across the border grew day by day. Hitler never forgot to mention in his rantings that first of all the Germans must have the right to live within the German Reich, but that also the Czechoslovakian state had a large minority of three million Germans living within its borders.

My father owned a large two-storey villa that was divided into two separate flats. My family lived in one, and when the other became vacant my father rented it to the newly appointed commandant of the local police. The force was in the process of being reorganized into the national State Police which was officered by Czech nationals whose integrity could be relied upon. The times were full of insecurity and fear for the future, and my father must have found it comforting to have the highest police officer in town.

One day there was a great commotion caused by an aeroplane, always of great interest in those days, circling dangerously low at roof-top level. It made an emergency landing in some fields not far from my home. I had just arrived in front of the family home in my father's car when the police commandant stormed out of the garden gate and ordered me to drive in the direction of the landed plane. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, it was actually quite comical, as the officer, resplendent in helmeted uniform did not dare to sit inside the car, but stood on the running board, hanging on for dear life with one hand, while swinging in the other his unsheathed sabre. On arriving at the landing site, it transpired that it was a friendly aircraft, belonging to the Romanian Air Force. The crew had lost their way and had had to make an emergency landing after running out of fuel.

Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, all newly born states after the collapse of the Austro—Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, formed the 'Little Entente' — a defence alliance of small states underwritten by France, and, as we know today, a treaty not worth the paper it was written on.

This was my first driving experience with some military connotation, there was only one more to follow.

There was, however, a little bright light flickering temporarily at the end of a dark tunnel of those dreadful days. My father's business prospered greatly from 1938 onwards. Many countries were reluctant to import from their previous sources of German merchandise and were looking for new suppliers. So, father obtained, among others, enormous orders from Dutch multiple stores. One day he said to me, as I was working in the factory; "I suppose you should be able to speak a little English by now since I have been paying for your lessons for a very long time. Will you drive to the railway station and collect an Englishman whose firm is very interested in our toys. We can't expect to travel in our bone-shaker, our new Chevrolet will make a good impression. This was my first British connection as the express train traveller was called Marcus Sief from Marks & Spencer.

Being optimistic, probably more out of necessity than conviction, that Hitler would never he able to invade, father moved to larger premises and leased part of a factory of a linen spinners concern belonging to the Steinbrechers, a well known industrial family.

In the following months and despite all the efforts of the authorities, the influence of Nazism from across the borders grew in leaps and bounds. Some old friends, among them longtime communists approached father secretly, sometimes with tears in their eyes and fearfully begged him not to take notice of their changed ways. They said they were forced to lean the way the political winds were blowing.

'What would your status be if you fell into German hands and became a Prisoner of War?'

It was in September 1938 that father told me to take our car away from the villa and drive it into the garage at the factory in case somebody threw a brick through the window. Walking back in the dark, I noticed everywhere young people knocking on doors and windows, informing of Hitler's order by radio to assemble for a midnight torchlight demonstration. Father immediately ordered me to fetch the car back to the house while he packed a few suitcases and the family silver. He booked hotel rooms in the nearest safe Czech inhabited town, fearing that such a night could develop into a pogrom. While the demonstration was of course, against the so called Czech tyranny, with a demand for the return of all Germans into the Reich, Jewish life and property could also have been a very welcome target. He was further able to have a few words with our tennant, the police commandant, who informed him that they were on red alert, though greatly outnumbered and that companies of motorized gendarmes were on their way, and that nevertheless a few days in a less turbulent place could he of no harm. So the family Weiner, five people including my grandmother, left; never to return.

EMIGRATION

President Hacha was summoned to Berlin within the next few days and bluntly ordered to hand over the Sudeten German border regions of Czechoslovakia to Hitler.

Father had lost everything overnight. All the achievements of twenty years hard work, from a penniless Austrian soldier to a rich industrialist were gone with the stroke of a pen. That he came from a poor background could be verified by the fact that he had eighteen brothers and sisters in Vienna. If pressed to answer how grandmother could have had so many children, the only excuse offered was that they were never all alive at the same time.

After a few days at the hotel my family moved to a tiny thatched cottage in a Czech village which had belonged to the maternal side of the family since the 18th century. Within the next few weeks father had made contact with the owner of a loss-making factory of wooden household goods who offered him a partnership. He knew my father could provide the knowledge of manufacture plus the ability to sell merchandise to the remaining Czech counties of the still existing republic and export contacts.

Eventually my family moved to a flat in Prague. We lived in a borough called Vinohrady and this coincidence had some crucial bearing on an episode some years later. At the end of 1938 and the beginning of 1939, the future looked bleak for Europe, for Czechs and for Jews in particular. Everybody wanted to emigrate and long queues started to form at Embassies and Consulates in the early hours of each day. Tens of thousands applied for visas but only small numbers succeeded. Nearly all Latin-American Honorary Consuls sold visas for vast amounts of money. Marks & Spencer offered my father a British work permit. But, while we negotiated with the Home Office for this to include the family and an aged grandmother, German tanks started to move.

Young people, especially, had their minds set on emigrating to other shores and I realised that my limited knowledge in the toy factory would not provide for a livelihood in different parts of the world. So I was able to secure an unpaid apprenticeship as a car mechanic with Chevrolet Motors, father being an old customer; a trade which came in good stead in years to come.

There also existed, however, one avenue for emigration, which was the Jewish illegal immigration into Palestine, a dangerous undertaking limited to younger persons. And, as we know, many a transport, having left Europe, never arrived at their intended destination for years and many perished on the way.

While immigration into Palestine was illegal indeed and the British Foreign Office and the Palestine Government restricted such moves, due to Arab national opposition to an increasing Jewish population. Emigration had to be very legal.

The Gestapo in Prague, by then well established in a large millionaire's villa, supervised this operation with typical German thoroughness. Hundreds of documents in up to ten verified copies had to be submitted and large amounts of money had to be handed over before you were given an exit permit. It may be of interest to note, that at that time, the Germans did not restrict this exodus of young people, even 2 to 3 months after the outbreak of war in 1939, knowing that these able—bodied people were liable to take up arms against Germany. At this stage they were, perhaps, more interested in fermenting Arab uprising against the British in Palestine by means of this increased Jewish immigration.

A number of these 'illegal transports' were organised by various groups or persons who had to have contacts with the Gestapo as the journey started in sealed, Czechoslovakian railway wagons to the river port of Bratislava on the Danube. One man whose name was used as call sign for his transports maintained an office in Prague with a typing—pool of, perhaps, twenty people; such was the paper work involved. This man, while having, in fact, saved thousands of lives from the gas chambers, was reportedly hanged after liberation by a people's Court as a collaborator in the Theresianstadt Concentration Camp in 1945.

For many weeks and months there were countless false departure alarms and the prospective emigrant, having marched to a railway station with his rucksack, after having bid goodbye, perhaps forever to his beloved ones, returned back after a few hours, to await new instructions.

At the Gestapo headquarters everybody had to spend many days queuing starting before dawn. There they took photographs and fingerprinted all ten fingers of each applicant who also had to sign a declaration, that any return to German soil will be punished by death.

The Gestapo were in civilian clothes, but the administration of the complex was run by the dreaded black-uniformed SS. There I had my first close contact and learned my first lesson of how to behave with an SS man of this new master race, its knowledge and comprehension of great value in later years. This young man, in his black uniform, was in charge of about two hundred queueing outside the Gestapo HQ. He had a bit of a problem. Jews were not allowed to use the pedestrian pavement. The large group, however, caused an obstruction in the street and on the villa's side was a 'Keep off the Lawn' sign, so he kept on moving the crowd about, in a dilemma of what to do. Occasionally he went to accost an individual of the queue with sarcastic words such as "Now, what is your profession? But don't tell me that you are a solicitor, doctor or businessman - anyway you have never done an honest days work in your lifetime." The Nazi indoctrination was that the Jews were the parasites of the German people and their ruin.

One morning a real hulk of a man far over six feet tall and incredibly ugly, stood a few feet in front of me in the queue. He looked a bit of a freak and stuck out of the crowd like a sore thumb and soon the SS man approached him. Next I could hear the freak scream at the SS Nazi: "I have been a beer brewer all my life and if you don't believe me then just look at my hands." With these words he thrust a pair of hands into his face.

The SS man's face turned purple, he made an abrupt about-turn and hid from then on in the villa's porch and left us alone. This little episode taught me how to behave with this new master—race and that you achieved nothing with bowing and grovelling, I made good use of this in the following years.

Since March 1939, the German army occupied the entire territory of Czechoslovakia, that is the countries of Bohemia and Moravia. In the province of Slovakia existed a small fascist political party, led by a man called Hlinka, who always aspired separation from the Czech state. This man suddenly sprang to prominence, assisted by Hitler and became a kind of quisling and collaborator, and was hanged after the liberation in 1945. In September 1939 German troops sometimes passed through Prague on their way from the Polish front line. Returning home from my customary queueing for emigration papers, I noticed a large crowd of people moving slowly in a cluster along Wenceslaw's Square, the centre of the capital. Approaching out of curiosity I saw that this group of more than a hundred persons were mostly women and moved in deadly silence. In the centre were a bunch of German army officers, their movements reduced to a crawl, holding their army revolvers in their hands, being spat at by the crowd and drenched in saliva.

In the last days of October 1939, things started happening finally. We left in sealed heavily guarded railway wagons to the town of Bratislava with its riverport on the Danube. There the travellers were shepherded into a large Gymnasium and sports centre, ironically called 'Slobodarna' which means 'Freedom'. Here we were locked up for about ten days, until about a thousand persons were assembled. Later we transferred to a paddle steamer of the DDSG, the Donau Dampfschiffahrts Gesellschaft (Danube Steam Ship Company). Our ship's name was 'Saturnus', a beautiful steamer used for luxury cruises which could accommodate some four hundred passengers. Shortly before departure another large group of about 1000 people arrived direct from Vienna, so the total compliment was about 2000 souls. In spite of the fact that the ship's mast was flying the Swastica flag and the future revised flag of Czechoslavia spirits were high.

The trip from Bratislava took about ten days, passing the shores of Hungary, Bulgaria and finally Romania. The ship came to a halt in the small port of Sulina on the Black Sea. Another ocean—going vessel was to take us through the straits of the Bosphorus and Istanbul to the shores of Palestine. But, there was no other ship waiting and the river had frozen up completely.

None of the travellers were allowed to set foot on Romanian soil, but there was some contact with the local authorities and the Jewish community in Bucharest. Fresh water and coal for the ship were provided plus some bread and supplies for a never changing bean—soup came aboard. There was also the possibility to send letters and you could write to your families that you had left behind and receive an answer within a short time, together with some internationally recognised postal coupons which you could exchange into the local currency. This was quite essential because if a letter arrived for you the postman would stand on a little plank between ship and shore, wave your letter, but would not hand it over, unless you bribed him.

We were stuck there in the ice for about two months, during which time mostly American refugee organisations worked frantically to provide funds to secure an ocean—going vessel with a crew who were prepared to ferry human cargo, not really knowing where or when it was able to disembark the load. By the middle of February 1940 an ancient looking Turkish coal freighter of about five thousand tons named 'Sacariah' arrived. It must have spent many years before in a ship's scrapyard as it was covered with rust. There was also an inch of fine coal dust wherever you touched. While a lot of preparation, planning and money must have been involved, not everything had been foreseen. The coal-freighter could only provide standing room on deck for a limited number of persons and the four holds had to be transformed into living quarters for the by now greatly increased number of refugees up to over three thousand.

'So the family Weiner, left, never to return'

Loads of wood were brought on board and floors, compartments, bunks, staircases, toilets, etc, had to be constructed. Work went on round the the clock, mostly by paraffin hurricane lamps as the ship's generator hardly provided enough electricity for a few bulbs. The first death occurred when two workers fell in darkness into the holds from the ship's deck. Before the journey on the 'Sacariah' started one knew that if God forbid you fell ill, you had no need to worry about diagnosis of your ailment. The SS man in the queue in Prague was not so wrong after all. There were many doctors, surgeons, specialists and consultants on hand, but their healing powers were, of course, restricted to the few medical remedies they could carry in their bags. One would, however, never have realised how many craftsmen, engineers and carpenters were among the refugees and in a short time everybody could settle down to a bunk for sleep at least.

The only heating that existed on board was by your many neighbours body heat. Life must have been not dissimilar to the inside of a beehive, queueing was essential for everything like drinking water, and I woke up in the middle of the night cold and wet but the discomforture was next to my head. I got hold somewhere of a discarded glass bottle which I filled with drinking water. This water froze to ice which in turn broke the bottle during the night.

Toilet facilities were constructed with wooden planks over the side of the ship so that you could sit down facing the centre of the ship without falling backwards overboard. There existed some partitions in these rows of about twenty to thirty toilets, but there was not enough material left to construct doors and one had to sit in full view of a long queue of people with the same predicament. There was, by now, very irregular and very little food available, which resulted in much suffering from constipation or diarrhoea. You would have found out at your peril if you mistakenly joined a constipated line while suffering from the opposite.

The 'Sacariah' eventually set sail in mid—February and at the last moment a special contingent of new travellers arrived on board. They were all young males in black shirts and black riding boots and their leader's name was Eric Jabotinsky.

With the Balfour declaration at the end of the First World War, the British Government promised the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Consequently Zionist movements developed into about three different political parties. There were the middle of the road general Zionists, then there were the left-wing orientated Poale Zion labour movement and a right-wing Revisionist party, whose founder's name was Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose son, Eric, was head of their youth movement called 'Betar', and who openly admitted that they admired Mussolini's fascism.

It would be difficult to ascertain if the German Government used their influence with the then independent Romanians to plant such a controversial political figure on the illegal transport to Palestine, with the design to increase the force of Arab uprising against the British. One can, however, assume that the British Secret Service monitored all transport operations in Europe and must have known of the presence of Eric Jabotinsky's arrival on board the 'Sacariah' minutes before departure. And they were certainly doing something about it.

After sailing from the Romanian port the ship made a detour to the Turkish harbour of Zonguldak to stock up with coal and also a substantial amount of bags of cement. The ship then headed for the Bosphorus canal. In this narrow waterway which separates Europe from Asia, the journey was slightly held up, because of Turkish harbour formalities and the rusty hulk of the boat was riding high in the water and was surrounded by police launches and many small motor boats.

Here I had a big surprise when other fellow passengers came running and shouted: "You are a Weinez from Trautenau - are you not? They are calling your name

with a loudhailer from a motor boat!"

After I made myself known to the people below, I was handed a marvellous food parcel containing non-perishable goods like dried figs, sultanas, dates, chocolate etc, and the sender was a Mrs Rosa Novak, an old school friend of my mother. Somehow, unbeknown to me, this lady must have had the good fortune to he able to emigrate to Istanbul after the destruction of the Jewish community in Trautenau in 1938. My parents and the good Mrs Novak must have been in postal contact and the movements of the illegal transport ship was an open secret, indeed the Romanian Jewish community in Bucharest must have informed the leaders of the Istanbul Kultus Gemeinde of the impending departure of the 'Sacariah' on their way to Palestine.

Out of the Bosphorus the boat sailed full steam ahead for the Dardenelles, but shortly after Gallipoli the boat came to a sudden halt and amid a great bang and lots of hissing steam the rusty old boiler in the engine room had exploded. But the captain of the ship and the motley odd crew of Turks and Greeks, certainly all ex-convicts, knew exactly what they were doing. They mixed the previously loaded cement with water and packed the cracked boiler in concrete and soon the journey continued, but only for a day or two.

The loud explosion of cannon shot across her bow stopped the 'Sacariah' in her path. Behind a small island a British naval vessel appeared and the shot was an order for the Captain to stop and await a boarding party. This boat was a peace time merchantman, painted all grey and pressed into service with the Royal Navy with two guns mounted deck and aft.

Soon a company of the Royal Lancashire Regiment boarded ship in a well rehearsed assault, put up several machine guns and the Captain and the radio were handcuffed. The passengers were informed that the order was to escort the ship straight to Haifa and a lot of swearing, amid a lot of smiles of relief, brought out the news, that the naval vessel had been waiting for many weeks for us to appear on the horizon.

It was now February 1940, six months after the outbreak of war and the British or Palestine Government were therefore not permitting an influx of several thousand immigrants, whose identity they wanted to check. There could be German agents trying to infiltrate into the Middle East. There were previously other illegal transports which were diverted to other parts of the British Empire, but this ship, intercepted on the high seas, was escorted into Haifa harbour.

PALESTINE

It was on the 28th of February 1940, my 21st birthday, that after a couple of weeks waiting outside harbour limits, embarkation began under the strict supervision of the British Army and the Palestine Police. Each immigrant had his name taken and was thoroughly searched and I could practice my knowledge of English. A customs officer pointed to a bar of toilet soap and I explained that this was 'soup' my mother had given me before I left home. The officer's smiling reply was that the 'soup' you get from your mother you drink with a spoon from a plate.

But I commanded a fundamental amount of the English language and it improved soon so much, that I held several positions as interpreter in the ensuing years.

Exactly four hundred immigrants were then carted off by rail to the vast British Army base of Sarafand where a Palestine Police detention centre was waiting for us. The majority of the transport were interned at Atlid near Haifa and all served exactly six months in prison as punishment for illegal entry, without ever having being brought to court and were issued with identity cards on completion of sentence.

The six months imprisonment passed with intensive lectures in English, games and tournaments and visitors were allowed. The four hundred internees were nearly all from Czechoslovakia and there was a high standard of comradeship and culture. A large number joined the Czech army in exile in Palestine, as did a distant cousin of mine, who travelled with me from Prague and we were only parted after my application to join these forces was not dealt with, because of my Austrian passport. There were about a dozen families from my home town living in Tel Aviv at the time, who firstly had long connections with the Zionist movement and were also able to raise the required amount of £1000 for a capitalist certificate of entry into Jerusalem.

'I also did not like the pick and shovel on the badge'

They practically adopted me while being interned and invited me to their home after release. Having free board and lodgings, but desperately short of cash, I tried to find some employment. This was not easy in an after all a strange country at the beginning of war-time.

I found an employer who manufactured wooden souvenirs from cedar wood in Jerusalem's Romema quarter, who had some machinery and employed an old man and a boy and was interested in the wooden toys we made in my father's factory. His wife ran a guesthouse in Beth Hakerem and they offered me a bed in a tiny attic room and promised me some pocket money of which I never saw a piaster.

I succeeded in making about a dozen samples from off-cuts of wood and the local department store (lCd Bo) promised to buy all we could manufacture but I could never get my boss to purchase some raw material. One day a huge Arab in flowing robes arrived at the workshop, carrying a tiny lamb on his left arm and a large stick in his right hand and my two co-workers vanished into thin air. The Arab turned out to be the landlord of the premises, lashed out at everything he could see with his stick because my boss owed him many months of rent and the two workers said later that they could not leave because they could not afford to lose the amount of money they were owed in unpaid wages.

After this episode, I could see that there was no future in this venture and I approached a British Army recruiting centre to see if I could join HM Forces. It was always in my subconscious mind that I wanted to do something positive about the fact that Hitler had robbed me of my home, my family, my hopes and my future and left me a penniless refugee in a strange country.

I prepared my departure from Jerusalem carefully in secret and one night I was gone. I later learned that my boss, looking for me, visited my friends in Tel-Aviv raving that he would buy me out of the British Army, which you could do at the time for a few hundred pounds. The Palestine Pound had at that time the same value as the Pound Sterling. he could not raise the amount of £12 for one cubic metre of wood, so of course I never heard of him again.

Pending my medical, the British Army were glad to have me, (they took anybody) but I must have raised a few eyebrows when I point-blank refused to join the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps. I had been forewarned and I didn't want to join anything auxiliary. I also did not like the pick and shovel on the badge. They informed me that they are only recruiting for this regiment but they later changed their minds and informed me that if I passed an army driving test I could join the Royal Army Service Corps as a driver. So I became PAL/916; the 916th Palestinian RASC driver to enlist. By way of this number I became a bit of a celebrity shortly before the end of the war but thats another story.

So, it must have been September/October 1940 when I became a recruit in the Army Training Centre at Sarafand, the biggest army base in the Middle East. We enjoyed the army life and liked the comradeship even the two months of square-bashing by drill sergeants from various British regiments. We ordinary soldiers were a very mixed lot of the Palestinian Jewish population, ages ranged from 18 to 45 years or more. There were many different backgrounds coming from the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. Then there were old established Palestinian or recent new immigrants or again there were as many different reasons for joining up. The majority of continental backgrounds wanted to fight against Hitler. There were unemployment and economic considerations. Families of serving soldiers were helped by army pay or people joined because they were adventurous or because of unhappy love affairs, wanted to get away from nagging wives or run away from police or court proceedings.

The Jewish Representative Body – The Jewish Agency (in Hebrew 'Sochuth) wanted to contribute in the war effort against Germany but the mandatory government at that time were only prepared to accept volunteers into existing British regiments so the Sochuth arranged with the authorities that they would supply men from the then illegal Jewish Defence Force, the Haganah. These men were intelligent, capable and trained personnel who had their sergeants stripes guaranteed before they crossed the entrance gate of the camp. One of these sergeants who changed his name later to Almogi attained rank as a Cabinet Minister in Israel.

Most of the recruits tried to do their best in training and were ambitious for promotion, Sergeant's pay for instance was about three times the pay of a private, with own quarters and Sergeant's mess.

My English was quite good at that time, I understood every word of the British NCO's, but those orders had to be translated into Hebrew and that's where I failed. So I didn't rate my chances for promotion too high. To my surprise I was promoted to Lance Corporal after a few weeks. Quite a considerable number of sergeants were from Central Europe (I knew one well from Summer camp times in the Zionist youth movement), and they must have proposed my promotion. Those stripes were of great value to me about a year later.

After two months we took part in a customary passing-out parade with a dais full of high ranking officers, even generals of the Dutch free forces to the accompaniment of a band. The corporal trained for the post of Right Marker (a solitary position in front of a company) was ill on the day and I was ordered to fill his place at short notice. Our company was one of the first to pass the generals and when the eyes right order was given, of

course I looked sharp right, I would have never dared not to. By doing so I lost sight of the white line painted on the parade ground and I started to wander about a bit and so did the company behind me. I only realised what I had done when a red-sashed, moustached Regimental Sergeant Major (whom I never saw before) fell in step next to me and told me from the corner of his mouth that I had ruined the entire event and wanted to know my name and number. Besides a few other words I don't want to repeat, he informed me that the only solution to the ensuing problems I would have to cope with from now on, would be desertion or suicide.

Contrary to expectations I never heard of him again until a few weeks later, everybody had to fall in on the parade ground. This very same RSM informed us that a battalion of AMPC, the regiment I refused to join, was leaving for Egypt and were in need of drivers and would we volunteer. I immediately suspected a ruse to encourage enlistment into the dreaded Pioneer Corps. The volunteers had to step forward. I refused, but after some time the ranks around me got thinner and thinner and in the end that very same RSM stood in front of me, noses practically touching and informed me that I must be afraid to go a few hours by train down the road to Egypt unable to disengage myself from mother's apron strings. Little did he know that I had said goodbye to mother about a year ago. I must have been one of the very last to step forward.

As expected, life in the Pioneer Corps was lousy and dreadful and I felt very unhappy and tried to get myself transferred back to the RASC. I knew of an officer in the camp who in 1933 – 35 went to an agricultural college in my home town, emigrated to Palestine, became an officer in the Palestine Police and later transferred to the army. He embraced me warmly, but confided in me that as a Jew he was in no position to pull any strings for me.

One weekend leave I went to visit my godparents' friends in Tel-Aviv and I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Lt O'Brien sitting in their lounge. This officer was quartermaster in our part of the camp and known to everybody. He was a professional soldier, an Irishman, an educated gentleman. My friends were more pleased than usual to see me, I could sense an elated atmosphere that here was one of their clan in uniform. It transpired that Lt O'Brien was seriously courting the daughter of the family. The lady of the house (a lifelong friend of my mother) explained to the officer about my predicament and how unhappy I was in the Pioneer Corps.

IN THE BRITISH ARMY

To the suggestion of a transfer back to the RASC, he praised my excellent English and promised to enroll me in an officers cadet course to be eventually commissioned. Naturally he wanted to show off a bit in front of his girlfriend and later wife. Poor Lt O'Brien was a fine figure of a man but he had an enormous pot-belly and I learned after the war that because of his obesity he had to undergo a course of mercury injections one of which entered his bloodstream with fatal consequences.

I went back to camp that night visualising already all the other ranks saluting. Indeed I did hear from Lt O'Brien a few days later when an order came to report to his office forthwith in the middle of an exercise with earned me a curious look from our drill sergeant. Lt O'Brien acknowledged my salute with a smile, pointed to a trolley and I shifted countless bales of uniforms for the rest of the day.

Some time later we received embarkation leave and after reporting back were informed lo and behold that the ex RASC drivers were to leave separately for Cairo to collect vehicles from a motor pool. About 25 of us spent a marvellous three weeks in Cairo's Ameria leave and transit camp, doing absolutely nothing but reporting for morning roll call. On Saturday some of us went to a beautiful Synagogue, were welcomed, shown round and invited to various homes for a meal.

Some nitwit in the upper echelons must have read in a manual that we had to be issued with God knows how many vehicles and we were waiting for a shipment to arrive in Egypt. Eventually, we left with one tarpaulin–covered lorry and one measly motorbike. In December 1940, the British Army had nothing to share and nothing to spare.

The company was, by now, stationed a few miles outside Alexandria in a huge, tented camp in a desert of sand. One day on CO's orders the company marched to a shower complex under corrugated roofs with two ft. gaps at bottom and top of walls. While marching the 20 minutes to the showers it got rather dark and windy. The sergeant major, unused to desert conditions, cautiously ordered the first section to shower, after all he had his orders. By that time a severe sandstorm was blowing and the men were instantly covered in brown sad from head to foot. Visibility was nil by now, luckily somebody dug up some gasmasks which were donned by the first of the column, as it was impossible to open your eyes and the entire 300 men marched holding hands for hours before they could finally find their way back to camp.

'None of the travellers were allowed to set foot on Romanian soil'

TOBRUK

A few more weeks passed when the company was ordered to board the previously mentioned steamer, 'Ulster Prince', and together with thousands of other troops left Alexandria harbour to travel along the North African coast and to disembark at Tobruk, which was in the beginning of 1941 captured from the Italians and served as the major supply route to the 8th Army. Ships were arriving continuously with war materials and the task of 608 Company was to unload and move all goods to a fleet of hundreds of brand new Fiat lorries, which the Italians had left behind undamaged together with enormous stores of war materials, millions of gallons of petrol in 30 gallon drums which were lightly buried in the sand.

We worked very hard, often 15 hours a day, sometimes to be woken in the middle of the night to unload munitions urgently needed in the fighting. Food was terrible, there was nothing to eat but bully (corned) beef and biscuits. The cooks did their best and served it hot, cold, boiled, fried and grilled but we were actually hungry after a while, because we were unable to swallow any more of it. Fresh bread was, perhaps, once a week as the one field bakery had many units to supply.

Starving were also the many thousands of Italian prisoners of war, who were milling around freely, begging for a last puff of a near finished cigarette. They were a friendly, likeable bunch, being glad the fighting was over for them and indicating a dislike of Mussolini with typical Italian gestures which have also a different meaning relating to the procreation of humans.

I had had 5 hourly lessons per week at high school not such a long time ago in Latin and when I spoke to them they understood and laughed. At that day we had to load an endless line of Fiat lorries with drums of petrol which was very hard work. One of our chaps had previously found a secret passage to an underground store with millions of Italian cigarettes. I told him to get hold of some and I explained in Latin that every prisoner who was willing to work for us, would receive one cigarette right away, which they were not allowed to smoke; not only because of petrol, but the production of this one cigarette would show that they belonged to our work force and would be given four more at the end of the day. Before I realised what was happening I found myself shouting: "Shupito, avanti quatro soldatieri", here, "Oto caretas" there, and in no time we achieved a great deal without too much sweat.

For many years in Czechoslovakia I was a member of a Zionist scout and youth movement (Hashomer Hazair) whose Kibbutz ideology was very much left wing. In summercamp we sang all socialist songs including the Italian Communist hymn, 'Avanti populo - bangera rossa - la triumphera', I well remembered that song in the sands of Africa in the year of 1940. At the end of our first working day we lined up all our Italian POW's to issue the four promised cigarettes and I shouted; "Attentione Bersaglierf' (their regiment) to be followed with 'Avanti Populo' and was immediately drowned in a chorus of Italian voices and they sang very well, but they were at the same time doubling over with laughter. In spite of years of Mussolini's fascism, everyone knew this communist hymn.

The next day we had about a battalion wanting to work for us but we needed only fifty and had to send the rest away. After a few days, the Officer Commanding the entire port of Tobruk (a Lieutenant Colonel) must have heard of our enterprise and came to see us, warned us not to use POWs in transporting munitions and asked me if I spoke Italian to which I carefully replied; "I make myself understood", He then told me that he will soon need my services as an interpreter but it never came to that.

With regularity a few German bombers came about midday, dropped a few bombs on the harbour without causing much damage and flew away. The harbour, however, looked like a ship's cemetery, with many boats sunk or half submerged in the water and extremely difficult to navigate.

One day a large cargo ship was filled to capacity with thousands of Italians so that there was standing room only. As the boat started to move slowly out there was a terrific explosion and hundreds of bodies were thrown into the air and the water was full of people within seconds. We learned, then, that this was one of the Germans' new surprises in war, to drop magnetic mines into the harbour waters, to explode when a ship moved directly over the mine.

We didn't feel too well, when, a few weeks later, the 'Ulster Prince' arrived back in Tobruk and we were ordered to board ship, but the joy of the rumour that we were going on leave was stronger than the fear of the mines, but of course we didn't go home, but joined an enormous convoy of perhaps 15 ships sailing north to Greece.

On board was not only my company, but

several thousand men. We were part of an expeditionary force entering Europe and we felt apprehension of a new and different phase of war, than hitherto in North Africa.

As this story deals only with the happenings to the 608th Pioneer Company and its men, I would like to explain a bit about its structure:

The company was made up of about 10 or 12 sections, each comprising 24 men, 1 sergeant, I corporal, and 1 lance corporal. The Officer Commanding was a Capt Goodlet from the Black Watch, second in command was Capt. Palmer from an English corps. Then there was Sergeant-Major Bunt from the Cameron Highlanders and a Quatermaster Sergeant from the Royal Forresters. The only Jewish officer was 2Lt Lee (formerly Liftschitz). Besides there were company policemen, cooks, medical orderlies and a barber.

'Toilet facilities were constructed with wooden planks over the side of the ship'

Before we left Palestine we were issued with uniforms which originated from the First World War as the new battle dress was in short supply. The rifles were made in Canada in 1917 with 2ft long bayonets, but in insufficient numbers. Only 8 rifles were available per section, so the bayonet were given to the other 8 men, worn unsheafed in their belts like pirates. The remaining 8 men mostly elderly being left with bare hands were supposed to act as auxiliaries to the 'armed' men of an auxiliary company. They — being born around the turn of the century — and being forty or older, were thought to be best suited to start prayers in emergencies. Issue of webbing was also haphazard, so when the riflemen received about 15 rounds of ammunition, counted into the palms of their hands, I found it very uncomfortable in my trouser pockets. Luckily I had got an old shoe bag with string at the top. made by my grandmother from off cuts with a flowery design which I had hanging from my belt with the bullets inside.

After a few days at sea we arrived at the port of Piraeus which is Athens' harbour, disembarked and marched a few miles through streets lined with thousands of Greeks to great jubilation, in spite of the fact that Germany was at that stage not yet at war with Greece. The German Embassy was still there and we were warned of the existence of many German spies.

On the outskirts of Athens was a tented transit camp called 'Old Phaleron' and we spent some time there, being given quite a bit of leave and having a good time. Army pay paid out in drachmas allowed us quite a bit of good living and we were gladly received by the local population.

Eventually the company was moved by train a few hundred miles north near a small town named Larissa near to a mountain plateau where the RAF had already established an airfield with 24 Blenheim bombers. Our job was erecting sandbag shelters and guarding these planes. Germany had by then started the offensive against Greece and we were constantly warned about the danger of enemy parachutists landing in our midst. I credit British Intelligence for knowing something about these paras but they were used only weeks later in the capture of the island of Crete. Our Blenheim bombers took off daily on bombing missions to halt the German advance, but not all returned to base. We also observed German planes occasionally in the morning, but one day we were awakened by a tremendous continuous noise and we saw endless rows of German planes in the sky. There could have been up to 100 planes and we soon lost count. As they were quite a distance from us they appeared to be moving rather slowly and there must have been a considerable number of British anti-aircraft guns in the surrounding hills as the planes were soon greeted with hundreds of shells which exploded with a plume of smoke in the sky. Our 2Lt Lee got terribly agitated, pulled his revolver from its holster and ran about, shouting, 'PARAS, PARAS?"; but he became very embarrassed when he realised that the smoke slowly dispersed and was from these shells and not a parachute. The Germans went to decimate a New Zealand light armoured division who tried to hold a number of strategic mountain passes against the German advance; on our retreat we saw the damage these bombers did. A few days later we noticed that the RAF were packing and the few remaining planes were not expected to return. We also waited for a train to take us south, but learned that the Greek railways personnel had all fled, that Royal Engineers were occasionally moving a few trains at night because German planes attacked all moving stock in daylight. So, all that was left to us was to pack up and march. Part of a beaten army in retreat. We walked endless days in orderly fashion under orders of our OC. It was springtime with beautiful sunshine but with very cold nights. We had no transport so what we could not carry, we did not keep. The Germans were not on our heels, they were probably held up by their long lines of communication. In our minds we wondered if the navy who had brought us to Greece would be able to pick us up again and take us to Blighty.

CAPTURE

There exists a BBC documentary of the war memoirs of Winston Churchill, where, for a few seconds, a few men of 608 Company are seen sitting by the roadside, eating. A broken down, abandoned army lorry with thousands of tins of Ambrosia rice pudding provided us with a welcome meal.

When German planes were approaching the order 'Hitler' was shouted and we dispersed, and after the danger was over, the command was 'Up for Churchill'.

After many days of marching, we arrived at the town and port of Patras with the good news that the 'Ulster Prince' was there to pick us up. The ship was there indeed and there must have been a strong contingent of our anti-aircraft artillery as there was a hell of a fight going on, as the German dive bombers tried to sink the ship. They lost a few planes but in the end the ship got a few direct hits and was soon engulfed in smoke and flames. We witnessed the crew arriving on shore bedraggled and wet, unfortunately most of them were drunk.

Our hopes dashed to nothing, we carried on marching hundreds of miles to the most southerly tip of Greece, the Pelopenes Island which is connected to the mainland by a few bridges over the Gulf of Corinth. We were lucky and hitched a few hours ride by train on this route and were assured that all bridges would be blown up in good time.

Eventually, we arrived at the coast near the small fishing village named Kalamata. Here the countryside and beaches were full of an array of hundreds of abandoned army vehicles. In the midst of all this was a column of about 100 brand new lorries which were not of WD (War Department) make. They were dark green, made in Czechoslovakia by Skoda and all had the same mileage on the clock. They must have arrived in Yugoslavia by train from Czechoslovakia and their only trip was from Belgrade to Kalamata. These lorries were full of wooden crates containing millions of unused Dinar notes. We heard that the entire Yugoslav government was evacuated from this beach some days before. They must have cleared out the stores of their national bank, but had to leave it all behind. To get away from that beach you had to be picked up by rowing boat or had to walk up to your neck in the sea. The wood of these crates gave us excellent material for brewing a cup of tea, the dinar notes were unsuitable as toiletries, but many chaps took a few notes, they were handy for lighting a fire. I took a 1000 dinar note as a souvenir.

We spent a few days on and near these beaches but had to take cover during daytime from German Luftwaffe planes. They had 8 machine-guns mounted on the wings of their Stuka fighters who strafed anything that moved. We even turned our greatcoats inside out because thousands of brass buttons could have glistened in the sunshine and attracted a plane.

No more Greek seaworthy fishing or rowing boats were to be found. During the night the area became as busy as an anthill. There was a brigadier in charge of the evacuation from these beaches and under cover of darkness small navy vessel came to pick up remnants of a destroyed army. These boats had to anchor some distance away, as the beaches were so shallow. After some nights of waiting, it was our turn indeed. We had to wade in single file into the sea up to our waist, in pitch darkness. Members of the first one or two sections got away when the order came to turn back as the boats were full up and had to be away before daylight. It dawned on us that the likelihood of being taken prisoner by Hitler's men became more and more a reality.

Our CO called all remaining sergeants to an emotional handshake and goodbye, thanked us for our service to King and Country and informed us that all organised resistance and movements were stopped and that everybody was on his own. I have heard that two German speaking sergeants from our company were accompanying the brigadier's party with surrender negotiations and marched through the woods shouting; "Nicht shiessen — Parlamentariers".

I had a few NCO friends in our company who came from central European backgrounds like Berlin, Vienna or Prague and we discussed and prepared for the likelihood that we might have to fend for ourselves in the end. This group of about a dozen men had maps and a compass and sprung into action after the CO's goodbye wishes. I was included in this group as I was the only RASC driver and a corporal who was a First World War veteran (he fought under Trumpeldor in Palestine) and whose mother tongue was Greek. He found a Greek villager to act as a guide on a ten hour drive and march over a mountain ridge to another hidden bay away from all the ravages of war, where we would find a small boat to escape. For this service he demanded a very large sum of money, half of which he agreed to accept on completion at the other end of the trip. From hundreds of abandoned vehicles we selected a small pickup truck, loaded it with petrol and provisions all freely laying about the olive groves.

We started off with a sergeant and the guide and myself (driving) in the cab and the rest of the men in the open back of the truck. After some distance the path became narrower and steeper and many times everybody had to help pushing or watching if the offside wheels had enough grip on the often moving rocks and boulders not to fall hundreds of feet down the mountainside. We came to the point when we realized that we had to abandon the truck, pick up our belongings and start marching.

At the start of this now desperate trip I had a greatcoat, a haversack, a backpack, a helmet and now a modern rifle. I could not possibly drive with all these belongings on my body and put them neatly into the open back of the vehicle. As the ride got worse, my friends tried to reduce the weight and started to throw out petrol cans, bully beef cases etc. (unbeknown to me driving in the cab) and anything laying about who nobody claimed ownership went overboard, including my entire provisions. All of a sudden, I found myself high up in the Greek mountain wilderness bareheaded without any personal belongings of my own. No coat against the bitter cold of the night, no cigarettes, no food rations, nothing. I had the feeling of a person who stands in front of his burnt out house in his pyjamas, but, at least he could have found a bank and a Marks & Spencer round the corner.

I never felt so vulnerable in all my life. But, funnily, the first thought that occurred to me at that moment was the loss of my nail clippers. Somebody gave me for my barmitzvah a pair of gold-plated nail clippers. When you are young the thought of death, which was near from many directions, does not occur to you so much and the only thought at the moment was of how am I going to cut my nails in the future.

But, as it so happened, the loss of my coat (not the nail clippers) played an enormously important part in the aspects of my life in the months to come.

The end of daylight was near and we were quite exhausted and rested for a while and when we got up again to follow the mountain path in single file, our Greek villager had disappeared. Perhaps he became afraid that once we could see the end of the journey ahead of us, instead of giving him the second part of the agreed amount of money, we might kill him off and retrieve the first installment. So we had to carry on with the help of the compass but as it was downhill now we knew that the coast could not be far away. As soon as we passed little fields and olive groves we also noticed that we were not the first in this bay. Other troops who must have come over different routes had taken all our promised fishing vessels days before and lots of varied war paraphernalia were left lying about.

I started to look around, picked up a few bits and pieces and a rifle, when I saw a motionless body lying in the shade under a tree. I viewed him for a few minutes, but couldn't notice any blood or wound. I could not ascertain if this body was breathing, but I could not fail to notice that he had a beautiful great—coat on, which was of a pre-war make. He must have been a professional dragoon or gunner in the Royal Horse Artillery as he had the brass insignia of this regiment on his epaulettes and he also had a LCpl stripe on both sides of his coat sleeves. Eventually I touched him with my hoot, noticed that he was not stiff but there was no response otherwise. That's when I gently rolled him over, took his greatcoat off him and found two empty whisky bottles.

My friends, in the meantime, detected a sizeable wooden boat, anchored some distance away in the bay. Two chaps, good swimmers, undressed to their underwear to swim out and pull the boat back to shore. However, they returned soon, ashen faced and empty handed. They reported that the boat was riddled with bullet holes, and that inside, half filled with water, were the bloated bodies of two high ranking officers moving with the swell of the sea. They must have tried their getaway long before us, were spotted by German planes and strafed to death.

We were totally exhausted, had to rest and while nobody mentioned the words it must have been in everybody's mind: What now? There was no way out, and I learned in later years what enormous amount of physical strength the body can muster if there is hope. There were a few who vanished into the Greek mountains and worked for a few weeks or even months on isolated hill farms. They were very welcome as all Greek menfolk were still away in uniform or as prisoners, but their downfall was usually Greek girls' jealousies or Greek gendarmes, with a price on their head from the Germans.

I sat under an olive tree and must have dozed off for a while when I was woken by a commotion near by which sounded like; "They are here — they are here". The next moment I saw a German soldier with the Swastica painted on one side of his helmet, sitting astride a motor bicycle which had a small machine-gun pointing in my direction. The Germans with their efficiency and preparations for war, found of course the ideal mode of transport for this kind of terrain and we were surrounded by hundreds of bikes. The German demanded the handover of my rifle and ammunition and also a hand grenade, which I didn't possess. He must have been as agitated as myself. He spoke in a strong German dialect and his voice broke frequently with emotion. He then led me a short distance to an assembly point for all captured Britshers.

Within 10 – 15 minutes of this encounter, I suddenly realised that the entire conversation with this soldier was in German. I even mimicked his dialect. I felt very uncomfortable for a while but thank God I never saw him again.

Quite a number of weeks were then spent in a hastily erected barbed wire camp on the Peleponese. There were even large numbers of wooden huts and I remember sleeping on floorboards with my water bottle substituting as a pillow. We were thousands of men - the Germans didn't bother to count us. There was water, but there was no food. Maybe once or twice a week we were given a roll in the shape of a large begel with a hole in the centre made of first class white flour, but so hard that you could break it only with a hammer or between two stones. But then you lost so much of it in tiny crumbs. Soaked in water, it became soft and if you could get hold of a drop of olive oil and fry it, it tasted better than anything from Fortnum & Mason's patisserie. These bagels were Italian army issue, left behind in Greece after Mussolini's men were routed by the Greeks shortly before the start of the war.

'The rusty old boiler in the engine room had exploded'

Our German guards were also starving, they told us they were getting only bread and black pudding every day. For that reason they permitted the Greek farmers to approach the barbed wire, to sell us what they could spare. The poor Greek horses and cows must have had a bad time - we ate all the animal fodder we could afford. Empty peapods were a delicacy, you could cook a very filling soup from it. We sold the Greeks whatever we could spare, boots socks, fountain pens, watches and rings. Then one day we were told that Hitler had decreed that one Yugoslav dinar equals one Greek drachma. Perhaps he heard about the billions of dinars left on the beach at Kalamata. I still had a 1000 dinar note as a souvenir in my pocket.

The human being is a herd animal - a loner cannot survive. It would have been a terrible waste of resources to light a fire for one only. You had to buy the firewood too. So for a while we lived quite well on the dinars.

The constitution of every human is as different as anyone's nose. Some can exist on very little, while others suffer terribly from hunger. Starvation also changes many other aspects of natural life instincts. Take a scantily dressed Marilyn Monroe on the left and a foul, mouldy slice of bread on the right and nobody would have even glanced at Marilyn. In spite of the fact that we didn't have any female company for months.

One particular friend of mine was Alfred Palmai, born in Vienna some forty years ago. he was heavily built and has been a professional physical instructor, coach and trainer to the Hacoa Sports Club in Vienna, He sat on a stone crying, "Hob I a hunger. Hob I a hunger," in his Viennese dialect. He hardly spoke any English or Hebrew.

Some weeks after falling into captivity our first guards were replaced by very young members of the elite German parachute regiment in preparation for the airborne attack on the nearby island of Crete. They also had very little to eat and came frequently to talk to us and do a bit of bartering. They were also much more friendly to us, considered us as comrades in arms. You could sense a feeling that they thought we had the fighting behind us while they had theirs in front of them.

Palmai had a beautiful diamond ring which belonged to his late mother and it played on his mind for a long time if he should sell the ring for some food. In the end he haggled endlessly with a parachutist and asked for three loaves of bread, but the German maintained that he had only two at present, but would bring him the third loaf the next day. Palmai was unable to hold back for another day for the third bread and cried while munching a piece, that he will never see the German again and that he was an idiot and that he sold the ring too cheap. How wrong he was.

The German turned up the next day, looking everywhere for Palmai holding the bread in one hand and the ring in the other. He informed Palmai that he could not accept the ring, that he couldn't sleep that night saying something about the values of civilised life and that he had had a good Christian upbringing and if he survived the war he could never confront his mother with the fact that he acquired this ring for a piece of bread from a starving prisoner.

So much for Adolf's 1000 year Reich and the indoctrination of Nazi Germany's Hitler Youth.

THE STORY OF THE ONE WHO GOT AWAY — ALMOST

His name was Ludwig Bleicher - Vicki for

short. He was born in Vienna in 1919 the son of a well to do jeweller. He was an ardent follower of the Zionist Betar movement there. He wisely concluded that a Jewish homeland on the Mediterranean would need sailors in the future and he persuaded his father to enrol him and pay for his education at a naval and maritime college in Civitavecia in Italy. He studied there with another group of perhaps a dozen Jews in 1937 with the full knowledge of Mussolini.

With Hitler's Anschluss of Austria his family (related to the well known Brainins of London's Bond Street) emigrated to America, while Vicki went to Palestine and settled in Haifa. Early in 1940 the British army there recruited and trained volunteers to serve in the Royal Engineers as stevedors. He became an NCO with a strong contingent of experienced dock workers from the port of Haifa. It was the nearest Vicki could do, to be at his beloved sea, and after a few months these Companies were shipped to the port of Saloniki. With the collapse of the British Expeditionary Force in Greece, Vicki, together with another Viennese Jew named Hofbauer or Landauer, tried to escape capture by the German army. They luckily came across a group of ten Australian soldiers who had got hold of a fine boat which they didn't dare sail. Vicki convinced them that he could navigate, even only with the help of the sun and a watch and after collecting some food and water they set sail or started rowing. The danger from air attack was, perhaps, not so imminent then. They sailed and rowed for many days, having virtually exhausted all their supplies, when they sighted land, the coastline of North Africa. They feared that they might encounter only hundreds of miles of desert and certain death without food or water and were overjoyed when they observed from a great distance, people moving about on the beaches. A large group of men were waiting for them on the shore and after they got nearer they saw that they were all Italian soldiers. They had indeed arrived in North Africa, but behind enemy lines.

The 12 sailors were immediately incarcerated in a small compound at an Italian base for a few days. Vicki decided it best not to volunteer his knowledge of Italian but could not help hearing that something suspicious was going on between their jailers. They were informed that a British plane had been shot down over the desert and that the captured pilot would join them soon. That pilot spoke Oxford English but his RAF uniform didn't fit him at all. After a couple of days the pilot was moved from the compound and never returned, and one of the Australians swore that he had recognised him in the camp in the uniform of an Italian officer. After a few more days Vicki and his Viennese companion were handed over to soldiers of the German Afrika Corps. The Italians could not help noticing that there were 10 Australian six—footers with wide brimmed hats and two, after all, Viennese Jews. The two spent six months in the Wiener Landes Gericht (Viennese County Court) when the order arrived that they had to be handed over to a British Prisoner of War camp, signed by Fieldmarshal Herman Goering.

Some weeks passed and we found ourselves locked up in a vast military compound amidst the town of Saloniki. There was nothing but slabs of stone and bricks and mortar. Not a blade of grass. Nothing to eat, Occasionally a drop of soup, strategically placed, so that you could not queue up twice for it. The distribution was made by very trustworthy NCOs with a little tin nailed to a wooden handle. Next to the soup caldron stood, amongst other seniors, a chap who continuously stirred at a prescribed speed so that everybody got his fair share of whatever little this soup consisted and that it should not happen that the first men would get only hot water and the last filled up with the thick gruel from the bottom half. Otherwise there was nothing going in and there was nothing passing out. I sat on the same slab of stone everyday in the sunshine contemplating and taking stock of my mental strength, knowing that every movement of the body would burn up calories which I could not replace. Not far away crouched a chap from my company motionless for ten hours, he had seen a small lizard vanish between some rocks and he hoped the animal would come back the same way. He had nothing else to do, but he had the hope that he might catch the animal (supposed to be very tasty) and he had nothing to lose.

'They had indeed arrived in North Africa, but behind enemy lines'

Over the wall I saw houses and a washing line with something that must have been football jerseys drying in the sun. Football — there is still somewhere in the world where they play football. But of course within a split second my mind moved to the hot dog stand on the football ground of my home town and memories of what I devoured there after a match.

You could hear some fellows arguing about Einstein's theory of relativity, and the next moment they talked about goulash soup, because the same argument had been discussed in the canteen at their university where they ate this marvellous soup and next you would hear somebody shouting; "Shut up you bastards, I can't stand hearing about your blasted soup any more."

After some days or weeks the Germans moved us to a railway station to board about forty men to a truck. All of a sudden everybody was an expert on the exact wording of the Geneva Red Cross Convention. I don't know where the knowledge came from. We remonstrated to the Germans that the convention permits no more than about 26 — 30 prisoners per rail truck. The Germans tried to obey the laws of this convention as best they could. All right they said, all those who entered the trucks voluntarily would end up in a proper POW camp in Germany with three meals a day. End of dispute

Our jailers never adhered to the minimum amount of calories as outlined by the Red Cross. Otherwise, the authority (Wehrmacht Heer) under whose jurisdiction we were held as POWs acted correctly. But there were some transgressions. The Geneva Convention was our bible. It was mentioned daily. You raised your left hand with an open palm with the words: "The Convention says...." And the German said; "I know, I know — but...." If there would not have been a Geneva Convention with their Red Cross parcels I would not have been able to write these words.

The train journey from Greece took us through Yugoslavia where we were shunted into a siding in Belgrade for many days. The train consisted of perhaps as many as 30 cattle trucks.

Our captors realised that if they were not to arrive with corpses at the end of the journey, they had to be somewhat lenient towards us, as long as it would not encourage escapes. They allowed the trucks' sliding doors to be left open in a fixed position about a foot wide, to facilitate a limited contact with the outside world.

We found that a German guard near our gap was actually from Vienna and Palmai was immediately ordered to sit at the opening to start a conversation. The Viennese are a peculiar lot and when one meets another one far from home in strange lands, they start reminiscing about their home town. Where did you live, what school did you go to, where did you work? And they always knew it well - that street and where that tramway turns left and that beisel (a low grade bistro) that sold lovely wine, and the waitress who had a nice arse but was so cross-eyed, she could see Monday and Friday with one glance. The prisoner who held the prime position at the gap of the truck had to be a clever fellow and a bit of a diplomat. A potz (clot) could not have achieved anything, but Palami was excellent. He was given a bar of toilet soap and sent his Viennese friend to see if he could get us something to eat for it. The following evening our guards allowed some civilians to approach the train to give us some lovely grub and they came every evening.

Yugoslavia was overrun by Hitler, but the Jews of Belgrade still lived their normal lives. They heard about the hundreds of Jewish POWs at the railway station and brought us food, preferably after dark. How they heard about us I don't know. It is quite possible that Palami's landsman could have been instrumental in it.

Many years later my parents invited me to spend a holiday with them in Austria. It was at the Kur-Hotel Bad Goisern near Ischl. One evening my father introduced me to some Yugoslav guests at the hotel. There was some intent on my father's side because he knew that they had survived the war as partisans in the mountains and he told them that I had been in the British Army. One word led to another when one man said it was us who came to the railways with food. It transpired that he was somebody in the Belgrade Macabi sports club and that he had known Freddie Palmai for many years and that they had met at many tournaments but he, until then, had not known that Palmai had been a prisoner on that train, but there were so many coaches and it had been dark and expediency was also essential.

The end of the journey was in Austria near the small town of Wolfsberg in a former French POW camp. There was a bit of soup and a slice of bread every day but the camp was too small and after a few days we were split into Arbeits Commandos or working parties and I was back on a train with about 25 others. This time it was in a normal railway carriage, albeit with locked doors. After a few hours travel and passing many stations, I became rather depressed. Opposite me sat a little sephardi Jew who admittedly had never seen the world outside Jerusalem. He said to me that I should report to sick parade and that I am fully entitled to see a doctor. I answered that I am not in pain and that I am all right, to which he retorted; "Why are you crying then?" Oblivious to me some tears must have run down my face. I had memories of these little towns and hamlets when we travelled through with my father, mother and sister in our Chevrolet for a holiday in Velden on the Woertersee, not so

long ago. I said to the Jerusalemite; "Well, you see, I have been here before." What could I tell him? But he must have understood something that I had not even said. He spoke to the chap sitting next to him in Ladino, which is Spanish as it was spoken in the 14th century and still in daily use in many oriental quarters in Palestine. He then produced a piece of bread from his haversack about the size of a box of Swan Vesta matches with the words; "Tikach, Tikach," — take, take.

We left the train in Lienz and marched to our new camp which was lovely. Neat, light, spotlessly clean cabins with washbasins and showers, three tier bunk beds, but, of course, barbed wire fences. The biggest surprise was in the evening, when the Austrian woman who cooked a marvellous soup, shouted; "Anyone for second helpings?" Unbelievable. The norm before this was there was never enough food, if any, and the last got nothing. Our daily work was laying the hardcore stones on a minor road which led to the Grossglockner pass. A very elderly Strassenmeister (foreman) showed us what to do, but he frequently went for a drink and then he had to go for a pee, so we didn't exactly kill ourselves working. But he said something significant when he had a sober spell; "I always knew it, and I always said it — Hitler means war."

Along the road were little small holdings and there was a large heap of last season's rotting potatoes. If you cut the soft, foul part of the potato off and sliced the remainder, you could actually munch it. It did not taste very nice but in spite of the food from the kitchen, the body still craved for something which was lacking. After all, we had not seen any fat, sugar or vitamins for many months.

We worked there for perhaps 2 weeks, when the order came in the middle of the day; down tools — everybody goes back to Wolfsberg without delay. The Germans must have realised that they had made a mistake. First of all quite a few of us spoke German so well that we could have taught at a local school. I worked together with three brothers named Sachs who came from Prague. And secondly, the Swiss border was not really all that far away.

In Wolfsberg we met old friends again. All working parties were being called back. We boarded cattle trucks again, were given a tiny tin of black pudding and a loaf of bread shared between four, with the advice, don't eat it all right away, you never know when there will be more.

But I didn't eat my ration, I could not, I was not hungry any more. I instinctively knew I would never eat it. I had to get rid of it. I gave it to a Sgt Lobel from Icarlsbad, whom I knew from summercamp in Czechoslovakia. He was in the same cattle truck as me and he accepted it only very reluctantly. I don't remember much but it must have been a very long journey. I must have slept a lot, either the truck was not very crowded or my comrades made room for me. At a stop, Popper the medic (he failed his studies) came and took my pulse. I felt totally at peace. When I had a clear moment I tried to think what is going on. I remembered that I had given my food away, I did not mind that - I was not hungry any more. But if you do that, does that signify that you have lost your animal instinct of self preservation - you don't want any more - is that the end? But I was totally calm and fell asleep again.

Then it is pitch dark, I hear shouting; "All out - all out." I am standing on a paradeground, the sun is rising over my head - everything starts to swim in front of my eyes. And I wake up in bed between two white sheets. I have not slept in bed for God knows how long, disregarding white sheets. The bed stood in a ward cramped together with about thirty others. They were all English. Welsh. Scottish. I was the only one of a different kind. They were all very nice to me. They thought that the orderlies who carried me in must have made a mistake and were sure that I had kicked the bucket. After I had a chance to look into a mirror I saw that I was as yellow as a canary. A severe case of jaundice. One inmate poked a thumb over his shoulder in my direction and mumbled something like Royal Hong Kong Hussars, and the whole ward roared with laughter. They then pointed to my coat under my bed, the one I took off the drunk in Greece and said: "A lance corporal are you? Not any more." One produced needle and thread and carefully removed the one stripe from the left sleeve of my coat and sewed it neatly together with the other stripe on the right. "Geneva Convention, man." As a lance corporal you are nothing. A full corporal is a fully fledged non commissioned officer and does not have to work if he doesn't feel like it. This was Stalag Promotion, much in use if one could cheat the Germans. In my case they knew that they didn't have my particulars yet as I have been too ill. This ward was part of a field hospital inside Stalag 8b in Jambsdorf, Upper Silesia. It was one of the biggest British POW camps with perhaps 30,000 inmates. This camp was about 150 miles (as the crow flies) from my birthplace in Czechoslovakia.

The hospital was run by nurses, orderlies, doctors and surgeons, all members of the Royal Army Medical Corps. It must have been left behind with sick and wounded after the fall of France and moved lock, stock and barrel to Upper Silesia, which borders Poland. I spent quite some time at this hospital ward, when they brought a new patient in who had something very wrong with his hands. I asked my neighbour and learned that this fellow didn't like coalmines. So he slit all the joints of his fingers with a razor blade and bandaged his hands with raw onions overnight. And that's why they promoted me to a full corporal.

I was born Hans Paul Weiner, Paul after my uncle who was killed in the First World War. But I never used the name Paul. However, in the months and years to come I completely discarded the name Hans. It was too blatantly German and only provoked unnecessary questions. But it could have been that at the foot of my hospital bed was a board with Hans Paul Weiner' together with my medical data. There was a German colonel, a medical man his title was Oberstabsarzt, who was supposed to have been a bit of a bastard. He made his rounds once in a while together with British doctors and a German soldier with the insignia of their interpreter corps. My neighbour's name on the left was McClochlan and the one on the right was called Richardson, so the colonel snapped at me: "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" - Do you speak German? He must have seen my name and must have heard of the recent arrival of far over a thousand Palestinians at the Stalag camp. I didn't have much time to deliberate, it was not a good idea to answer, "Nix understand," so I said, "Yes sir."

'It was one of the biggest British POW camps with perhaps 30,000 inmates'

"Where were you born?" he shouted at me.

"Trautenau," I said.

Within a split second the German interpreter sits down on my bed, clasps the fingers of his hands together and says;

"Did you know Herr Steinbrecher, had passed away?"

Dead silence — you could hear a pin drop. The colonel shouts, "Weitermachen" (carry on) the interpreter clicks his heels to his superior and I have never seen either of them again.

I believe that the entire episode must have been witnessed by a British doctor named Capt Barber. And in spite of being very yellow, my fellow prisoners never called me Ching Chang Chinaman again.

I knew of course Mr Steinbrecher. He was the landlord and my father was the leaseholder of our factory in my home town. But I never knew who the interpreter was until the war was over. Mr Steinbrecher manufactured a well known high class linen over many decades, which they exported all over the world. The interpreter was this factory's English correspondent and held a senior position with this firm and must have had many dealings with my father over the years. My mother knew more. She knew that he belonged to an English speaking circle, whose members were about 50% Jewish, who met once or twice a month at a very Jewish coffee house named 'Dependance' and assumed that he could not have been much of a Nazi.

After about a fortnight, Capt Barber who always had a friendly smile for me, said that he needed the bed, but he would not send me out into the cold, but had arranged my transfer to a recuperation block, the food was better there.

I met Capt Barber many times during the next few years, luckily not for medical reasons, and became well known to him. When I applied for naturalisation at the Home Office in the early 1950's (I missed an earlier crucial automatic date), I was required to supply the names of two British born character witnesses. I had many relatives and friends but none of them were born in Great Britain, except one who was best man at my wedding in 1947 at a Synagogue in Abbey Road, St. John's Wood. I would not have expected any British friends to falsely state that they knew me well over a number of years and the milkman and my barber would not have been exactly ideally suitable. So I found Dr Barber in the Wimbledon telephone directory (I knew he practiced there before the war) and he said, "Just give my address to the Home Office people and leave the rest to me."

Capt Barber was later promoted to Major by the War Office through the Red Cross. I am convinced his devout services to the health of POWs, which had the imminent advantage that his wife received an increase in her army pay. This was not a Stalag promotion as I knew only of one more such promotion of a private to sergeant by the War Office in London. He was a bit of a schmok (male sex organ) and I inquired of what on earth he could have done to be promoted. Some of my Tel-Aviv friends had the answer. This private had a very attractive sister who was a high class whore on the Tel-Aviv seafront and who only entertained British officers. She must have had some very influential clients in Whitehall and she could boast of the fact that her poor brother was a POW in Germany and that in turn could not have

been detrimental to her business acumen in Tel-Aviv.

In the recuperation barrack there were three tier wooden bunk beds and each needed about a dozen halfinch thick boards, the width of the bed, to keep the palllasse in place, These boards were frequently cut into thin splinters to boil a cup of tea and the Germans refused to resupply them. The minimum of these boards was about 3 - 4 to keep the mattress in place. One day I red-handed caught a little Scottie stealing one of my last absolutely essential bedboards. I got hold of one end of the board but he wouldn't let go either and as none of us had their hands free, he decided to head butt me. I must have had my mouth open as I was just reminding him of what his mother did for a living in the Gorbals of Glasgow when his forehead hit my two strong upper front teeth, as he was much smaller than me, and his face was instantly covered in blood and needing some stitches.

A day later I was ordered to see Capt Barber who informed me that he could not keep me in the recuperation block any longer as I get involved in fights which was dangerous in view of the many amputees present. After he heard my side of the story, he tried to suppress a little grin and shouted, "Dismiss"

While I was still in the hospital compound 33 year old Sgt Elkin died of cancer. We were given permission to order a wreath from outside, there was a funeral party, the hearse was a farmer's horsedrawn cart, kaddish was recited and the Germans fired a volley of blanks over his grave.

It became known in the hospital which treated also sick non British prisoners that there was not a language that I could not speak. I was often called by doctors to speak French (some lessons at school), Polish and Yugoslav (Czech is a related slavonic language). I could speak and swear in Arabic a little bit (six months detention in HM Prison in Sarafand) by Arab prison officers. And, of course, Hebrew by now. Once they called me to an Indian, luckily it turned out that his English was much better than my Gujerati.

One day I was summoned to an operating theatre where an elderly Yugoslav peasant was laying naked on a table, in agony. He had been unable to urinate for some time and the surgeons needed his cooperation. I told him to think of nothing but the mountains and lakes of his homeland and to relax all his tensed up muscles. The doctors had to insert a catheter, but so far it had had no success. It was not a pretty sight and I soon felt like I was floating on clouds and somebody said, "Give him a glass of water."

Next I found myself laying flat on a stretcher looking at the ceiling and an orderly was asking which block the patient was to be carried to and the other retorted, "That is not a patient, that is the effing interpreter."

I was then sent to a compound of only Palestinians where I met old friends.

The Geneva Convention insists that all nationalities have to be housed separately. The Germans tried to convince the Irish that they didn't really belong with the English. They also informed members of the Indian Army that there is a man called Subhas Chandra Bose who was fighting the British Empire from Berlin. There was also an Arab sergeant who it is thought to be a German spy, but nothing came from it.

'Life in the Pioneer Corps was lousy and dreadful'

The German Commanding Officer of the entire Stammlager 8b was a First World War retired Admiral of the German Fleet. I saw him a number of times in the camp. He was known to have been a strict disciplinarian, an extremely correct and fair man and we may have been lucky to have been under his command.

We heard that fifty British officers were shot in cold blood at an officer's POW camp.There was a rumour that an over eager young German subaltern saluted the admiral with 'Heil Hitler' and an outstretched right arm. The admiral's acknowledgement was supposed to have been,

"A snappy army salute will suffice in future."

We have also heard that Winston Churchill has mentioned in Parliament, for German consumption, or has informed Hitler by means of neutral diplomatic channels of the following: should Hitler fail to adhere to the exact legislation of the International Red Cross, i.e. the Geneva Convention regarding the large number of about 1,400 Jewish prisoners captured in Greece, then Churchill will reciprocate with German soldiers captured in Norway.

We are all starving, but in high spirits. The food consists of hot, black water (which has never been near a coffee bean) in the morning; for lunch, there is a thin soup, and in the evening, depending on availability, 4-8 men to a loaf of bread (which must have been baked with the help of potato flour and sawdust). Added to that was a teaspoon of margarine (made from coal) and a bit of jam, sweetened with saccharin (also made from coal).

There are, however, hope and rumours. We shall all be home by Christmas. Red Cross parcels have arrived. There will be one per person or ten will have to share a parcel. There were some parcels before we arrived at Stalag 8b. You could not avoid being told over and over again by inmates who fell into captivity in France or even Norway what goodies these parcels consisted of. Discipline and moral were at the highest level. Superiors were being saluted (especially if the Germans were watching) in a manner that would have brought Sandhurst to shame.

Then, one morning at roll call, we noticed a much greater number of German guards than usual. Absolutely everybody had to get out of the block, no malingerer was left behind. After dismissal, nobody was allowed back and we were all interrogated in a different block, unable to see those that had already been questioned.

When my turn comes, I found myself standing in front of a table at which an Oberleutnant and an interpreter were sitting. This fellow spoke to me in English with an unmistakable New York accent; we had already heard that some first generation Americans had volunteered to fight for their old Fatherland and Hitler. I believe the United States was still neutral at the time. The conversation was in English and when he asks me where I was born, and I say "Trautenau," he says to the Oberleutnant (who was writing at that moment) in German if he heard what I said. But he had heard, looked at me with a friendly face and said, "Your father was an excellent pool player, do you know how he is?" Again, I didn't know who this officer was until some weeks later when I had something to do in the administration block of the camp. I passed a hut with a sign on the door which said, 'Gerichtsoffizier Oberleutnant Dr Yelen'. The moment I read this name I knew the identity of this officer. He was a well known lawyer in our town, a doctor of law. In the German Army he acted in the administration of the law. By the way, 'Yelen' is the unadulterated word for 'doe' in Czech, his forebears were not of teutonic origin.

I was now getting used to life in a large barrack room. It was monotonous, but there were also lots of things going on. Red Cross parcels were, indeed, issued occasionally. This helps a lot and is the centre of much activity and conversation. I constructed myself a little stove from a discarded meat and vegetable tin into which fitted another slightly smaller one with a handle fixed. At the bottom front of the outer tin I cut an opening to house a small can from a Shippam's paste container. Into this container, I put a little beef dripping with a little cloth as a wick and I could brew myself a cup of tea. The tea leaves were used a number of times, eventually dried and rolled into a cigarette. The milk was thick, sweetened, condensed. I often swapped a tin of meat for two tins of milk or jam; the sugar was more important to me and, quantity-wise, I was also better off. An Australian, who came to our block to play chess, noticed my little stove and asked me to make one for him. He frequently smuggled lard from the kitchens (he had made some contacts), which replaced the dripping as fuel. His name was Jack Ellis, we became great friends, he even went to visit my Uncle and Aunt in Byfleet when he had leave and I did not.

In our barrack was one soldier whom nobody could fail to notice because he was abnormally small. Much smaller than King Hussein, more a Ronnie Corbett. At that time I had never spoken to him, he came from a different unit, the Royal Engineers, but I knew he was from Vienna. His name was Franz Meyer, he had white hair and was about 45 years old.

One day our captors announced that they were looking for a master builder to erect a small house or guardroom just outside the perimeter fence. Meyer also applied for the job, he was the holder of an Austrian diploma of a master painter and decorator but he was also an excellent carpenter and builder. If you had the chance to go outside the camp you became automatically an 'Oisher' which is Yiddish for entrepreneur. You could take out chocolate (absolutely none available in Germany) and smuggle anything in. You were immediately approached by various committees inside the camp. The radio operators needed parts for their illicit sets, the escape committee had lists of things they required and were prepared to pay for. You could look for civilians who were prepared to part with musical instruments for the camp orchestra, bribed with chocolate, but officially paid with worthless German Marks.

Now, suddenly, everybody was a builder but nobody had any references. What proof did you have that you built St Paul's Cathedral? But Meyer was not an educated man, but he was very clever and shrewd. All he asked for was a wooden board, some sheets of paper, pencils and ruler and some details. He then submitted three plans which also consisted of a quantity surveyor's estimate. When the German colonel saw what Meyer presented, his lower jaw became unstuck for a while. After he regained his composure, he shouted, "I don't want to see anyone else." and after he found out that Meyer spoke German (he spoke precious little else) he was over the moon and ordered beer for everybody.

Meyer selected a team of about a dozen men, none of whom were solicitors or accountants in civvy street and they did an excellent job.

These 12 men were allowed to carry 6 wicker baskets between them in and out of the camp. Officially, these baskets were destined for carrying firewood but the Germans knew that an extra slice of bread was not much of an enticement to do this hard work and that they had to look the other way sometimes, as long as it did not breach security or facilitate escapes. This working party left the camp gates every morning and were checked and counted several times and the same again on their return. One evening a Hauptmann Richter stood at the camp gates. He was from the Abwehr or Intelligence. He shouted,

"Cpl Meyer, what are you carrying in these baskets?" Everybody knew Meyer by name. Meyer knew that the officer could order the baskets to be tipped over, but that didn't bother him at the moment, he was more worried about a crystal they had finally got hold of for a radio set. Meyer was extremely quick witted, in fact he outwitted the German officer. He jumped to attention, saluted, and shouted,

"Ich melde gehormsamst - I beg to report -I am smuggling 4 loaves of bread." That was followed by a long pause, when the officer replied.

"Thank you for being so honest -lassen sichk gut schmeken - have a nice meal."

Meyer had other qualities too. He had a great sense of humour. He played a whole day a game of chess for 'a chocolate.' He lost, produced a bar from his pocket, broke off a piece about the size of a pea and handed it over to his partner. An argument broke out, but Meyer maintained that the pea is all chocolate not wood or paper and that's all the winner is entitled to as nobody specified anything about how much chocolate before they started. Once a large chess tournament was organised in the entire camp and 2-3 German officers came to watch every day.

Franzl Meyer had left Vienna in 1934. Why? He was not a Zionist, he was not religious at all and he was really too young to plan to be buried in the Holy Land, and Hitler's rantings were not being taken seriously in Austria in 1934. He never gave us an explanation but he confessed that he was married and divorced many times. He told us that he was once married to an orthodox woman for only six weeks. Meyer was very pedantic, but these were not the qualities his religious wife possessed. To compensate for her deficiency she developed an art to get any item like books, shirts, clothes, shoes and tools with a split—second movement behind the closed doors of a wardrobe, but after Meyer opened it all items cascaded down on him avalanche like, and after six weeks he could not take it any more. So somebody suspected that Meyer left Austria because none of the Vienna marriage agencies would have him on their books.

That winter the first Russian POWs arrived at the camp and brought with them lice and with the lice transferred typhus. In spite of the fact that we had absolutely no contact with the Russkies, the lice must have travelled via the German sentries. The lice would thrive with human hair only, everybody had to shave everywhere, I repeat, everywhere, and there was a daily inspection. It was cold, we never had any hot water and it was very unpleasant. Our medical orderly had a nervous breakdown and cried that he had seen enough arse-holes for the rest of his life.

Meyer had finished his building complex in the meantime with great success and much praise.

FARMING

One day I was kneeling in the block compound to polish my mess tin with some sandy soil when I saw two officers' riding boots approaching. It was Hauptmann Richter and I snapped to attention, he asked me where Meyer was and I answered that I would go to look for him but he wanted none of this. "Just give him my regards," he said.

After I spoke to Meyer about his friends in high places, he told me that he has a plan and when he is ready he will let me know and I can join him unless I want to die here of typhus. It transpired that Meyer was told by some German officers after he had finished his building project, that if there should be anything they could do for him, he should let them know. Meyer had had enough of camp life and proposed to the Germans that he would compose a small group of about 10 - 15 NCOs who would volunteer to go out to work under his command on ONE condition; that it had to be on a farm.

And that is how I arrived after a few hours train journey to the village of Lubowitz at the end of February 1941. The farm estate was some distance away from the village, where the well known German poet Eichendorf (Am Brunnen vor dem Tore) was born and lived. His little house was maintained as a shrine. The squire had his residence in the neighbouring village named Eichendorf—Mill, he also had a third farm where he bred horses.

Our farm manager's title was inspector and the squire was to be addressed as 'Herr Chef' which means 'Mr Boss'.

The German soldier who came with us, was supposed to let nobody out of his sight for a moment, was called Wach-Posten or Posten for short. His company's headquarters was in the nearby town of Ratibor from where he got his orders. The local population were nearly all ethnic Poles, who were dominated for a few hundred years by the German or Austro-Hungarian Empire. They still spoke with a Polish dialect, mostly at home and were unable to add up 7 plus 8 in German and had to refer back to Polish. Most of them were blessed with a Polish heart and hated the Germans on the quiet, some were non-committal, and some, a minority wanted to be more papal than the Pope and became Nazis. The boss who leased the three farms for decades spoke no Polish, he was born in West Germany. Our farm manager, the Herr Inspector, an educated man with a degree in agriculture was a fanatical Pole, whose brother-in-law, a well known lawyer in Cracow, was arrested together with the Polish intelligentsia in 1939 and was never seen again.

The farm was a square surrounded by large buildings which included the inspector's house, stables, cowshed, piggery, barns, stores, a forge with workshop and other houses.

The farm labourers lived just outside the gate in terraced houses, free of rent, got all their food and fuel free and were allowed to keep some animals and receive some small salaries. But if they chose to work elsewhere they had to vacate their house.

They were poor, they were not educated, but they were not stupid and they were not dull. They had their Sunday Best but the men's working trousers original material could not be seen anymore as it was patch over patch. The womenfolk wore shoes only in winter and the same went for the smallholders in the village.There was electricity in the village but the farm was not included within the national grid.

'Our quarters were four small rooms, over the piggery'

There were about ten pairs of work horses who were cared for by some elderly farmhands and about fifty cows who never left their cowshed and had to be milked by hand every 8 hours, 365 days of the year. Pigs were bred in large numbers. The inspector and the blacksmith were the only men under fifty freed from military service, because the production of food was rated as important as armaments during wartime. The blacksmith aged about forty became a Nazi party member only for reasons of his personal expediency. He had failed his masters examination and should actually not have been allowed to shoe horses, but during wartime this ruling had to be ignored. The boss hated him, he knew that he stole and that he spied on him, but he could not dispense with him - yet.

Our quarters were four small rooms, freshly whitewashed, over the piggery, accessible by outside wooden stairs. The two front rooms were a day room for us and Posten (our guard) with a desk and bed. The backrooms were our sleeping quarters. In the corridor between the rooms were two benches with enamel wash basins plus a night-time slopping out bucket. The doors should have been locked

after work but this ruling was ignored from the first day as four of our men worked as dairymen and had to get up in the middle of the night to milk and Posten would never have an uninterrupted night's sleep. The rooms were lit by paraffin hurricane lamps.

When we arrived, the countryside was still covered in deep snow, so there was not too much work for us. Meyer said the working party was his creation and we gladly relied on him and knew that he was going to play it by ear, to see how things were going to develop. We made a favourable first impression from the first day, after four chaps started their shift in the cowshed milking. Either they had some experience from home or they had been working in a Kibbutzim.

'He was the only German I knew who hated the Nazis in 1941'

After a few days at the farm we saw a little Mercedes car arriving. Out stepped a tall, elderly gentleman with white hair and an aristocratic appearance. We instantly knew he was the boss, Herr Harhoff. He said to our guard, "I have got these important letters, would you do me the favour and post them for me at the village post office?" He wanted him out of the way. He then beckoned us into the day room and closed the door. His next words were, "Why did you not let me know that you are JUDEN - JEWS?" That sort of address left us speechless for a moment, not able to ponder what other words were to follow, we were not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner, he continued,

"Dr Liftschitz was my solicitor - the best friend I ever had, I was guest of honour at his son's barmitzvah, first they made him wash the streets with a toothbrush and then they kicked him to death, the bastards. You cannot live on the shit rations I have been allocated, but don't worry, there are lentils, barley, peas, pickled tomatoes, gherkins and onions arriving, meat will be a bit short, but a large basket of lard will be here soon, and bread you know already is free, eat as much as you like."

He was the only German I knew who hated the Nazis in 1941 at a time when Hitler was victorious on all fronts. In later years they all knew him as a jumped up painter, who lead a great nation to disaster.

I knew Herr Harrhof intimately in the years to come and felt somewhat sorry for him. He struggled with the dilemma that he did not wish Germany to lose the war, but he hated the idea of a victorious Hitler regime. He must have had close connections with the German aristocracy who in later years unsuccessfully tried to assassinate Adolf.

After Herr Harrhoff wished us good night we sat together for a long time and concluded that our working party could be a good place to be but that we would have to cultivate it cleverly. First impressions, a good name and reputation is imperative.

One evening after about a month of our arrival in Lubowitz the church bells started ringing frantically - there was a fire in the village. Nobody asked us but we came running. There were only women and children and a few decrepit old men about, the others were all in the armed forces. It was us, the English, who led the livestock out of the stables, who manned the horse-drawn fire wagon and started to pump water from the village pond, watched by hundreds of eyes. Then, a few weeks later, a farmer's wife came running, "My child, my child," she screamed, "where is the English sanitaetor (medic)."

His father's name was Zucker, but we knew him only as Sukari. He didn't know much but he knew something.

The child was blue in the face, he got hold of some oil and a fine rubber tube which he inserted into the child's throat and sat with her all night. Somebody nastily said that he stayed there only because of the sick one's beautiful teenage sister, but that was not true. The next day the mother came looking for our medic, fell to her knees crossed herself and started to kiss his hands. We then learned that the doctor was unable to come from town, either the telephone was out of order or he had no more of his allocation of petrol left. But he told the mother that without the Englishman the child would have never survived the night.

There was an unspoken agreement between the inspector and the boss and us. 'We scratch your back and you scratch ours.' But there existed another never mentioned school of thought, especially after the outcome of the war was clear. The boss was an Anglophile and the inspector a Pole and they both hated the Nazis. It was not such a bad idea to have an alibi one day, after the war was over, of how British POWs were treated here. But we also played our part of the bargain. We took an interest in the daily work and work we did, and we sometimes questioned our behaviour, if we were actually supporting the German war effort. But we came to the conclusion that first of all we had the interest of our boss at heart and we could not divorce one idea from the other. He was our benefactor now and much more in the years to come. So we had many friends but we also made enemies in the civilian population.

After the first few weeks had passed we all felt that Meyer had made a mistake within the selection of the original first 12 men of our working party. One corporal named T. was an unpleasant, cantankerous character who had arguments with everyone. He also alienated our guard, did not get on with the farm foreman and was chutzpahdik to the inspector. Meyer told him that he was a misfit and that he would have to go. He quite agreed to go back to the Stalag, he would not work for Germany any longer and was sick and tired of taking orders from yekeshmok Meyer (Jewish-German penis).

We were not quite sure of how to go about this but assumed that T. would eventually be locked up for two weeks in the bunk with bread and water only, but he didn't mind. So we told him that in the morning he should go to the German Posten and report that he is refusing to go to work and is staying in bed. The guard must have informed the inspector and then telephoned his superiors at the guard company's headquarters in town.

The following evening an officer with two feidwebels arrived on bicycles. They asked who is in charge here and Meyer said, "I am," and then who the interpreter is and Meyer said, "I am." We then assembled in the day—room, lit by a parafin lamp, and the officer produced a sheet of paper from his briefcase and read out in great length what must have been something like the riot act. He then called on Meyer to translate. Now everybody present understood more or less enough German and knew already what had been said in German. And Meyer didn't master much of the English language and for all we knew, this German officer could have spoken English better than Meyer himself. But Meyer didn't know much Hebrew either and realised that he found himself in an impossible situation with no time to spare, so he started; "Ha cazin omer (the officer said),"he could say that in Hebrew, but no more. That was followed by a lengthy pause and then Meyer regained his composure and blurted out, "Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Kosher le Pesach, K'neine horre, Shanah haba b'Jerushalayim (New year, Day of Atonement, Kosher for Pesach, beware of the evil eye, next year in Jerusalem). He is running out of words - he is repeating himself, then he has a brain wave and threatens T. with his little forefinger and shouts, "Brit milah, chabibi (circumcision, darling [chabibi is arabic, widely used in Palestine]). Now everybody looks at the ceiling or at their boots but only Palmai (the Viennese are inept to speak a second tongue) can't control himself and he is the only one who is least entitled to burst out laughing as he would not have known any better, pushed his fist into his mouth which results in a terrible gurgling sound.

Later on the officer calls Meyer aside and conveys to him that he is rather disappointed at the behaviour of his fellow prisoners for ridiculing him when he is obviously in great difficulties finding the right words in translation while addressing a group of men in front of an officer. The German Posten who collected us from the Stalag stayed with us for a very long time on the farm. In civvy street he was supposed to have been something like a councillor in a small town and he was not a primitive person. He was the only one we could not bribe, under no circumstances would he have accepted ONE English cigarette and he was a heavy smoker and his ration was, perhaps, 3 cigarettes a day.

All other guards were only too keen to accept anything which originated from Red Cross parcels. These soldiers were being rotated purposely after a few months by the company in the nearby town of Ratibor. They had a difficult position to maintain. First they had to obey their orders from their superiors regarding security plus treatment of POWs. Second, they knew that they had to please the inspector and boss and that army regulations should not interfere with the smooth running of daily farm work. Third, they realised that they had to be on very good terms with their charges, otherwise we would have rebelled. And, lastly, they knew that they had to please everybody in their own interest, they wanted to stay as long as possible on the farm - it was a good place to be. So they gave us to understand - the law cannot be broken, but it can be bent. And there was a lot of bending going on. If something shady was going on, we did not do it in front of the Posten, we had to give him the chance to look the other way. We were on christian name terms with all our Posten except the first one. It was always Karl or Josef or Heinz and they were never locals and never spoke Polish.

Here is an example of something not black or white but rather grey. Fifty sacks of grain had to be delivered to the local flour mill by tractor and trailer, but we loaded fifty two sacks. The fifty first was for the miller himself and the second we took straight in the form of flour to the baker named Hosumbeck, to be eventually transformed into cakes for us. The Germans agreed their duty was guarding POWs, not counting farm produce. I was the only prisoner who had a serious row with our first Posten.

Every prisoner was issued with a letter or card to write home about once a month. All mail was being censored. Your address was only a number. I regularly wrote to my Uncle in England.

I said goodbye to my parents in Prague in October 1939 — that was about one and a half years ago, and I never heard about their fate again and thought they didn't know about my whereabouts and whether I am still alive. I had heard that all Czech Jews were being moved to the Theresianstadt concentration camp. After long consideration, I decided to use one postcard to write to my family in Prague, but not use the same family name on the same message. This card was addressed to a business firm at their registered office in Prague, and I knew that it would be handed over to my father (if he was still there) within hours. And lo and behold there was a reply after a few weeks. They were not surprised at my being a British POW, they knew it. The two German soldiers I met in Stalag 8b reported about Herr Weiner's son in the Sudeten town of Trautenau and everybody knew about my fate. But how did my parents in Prague get this information? During many years of connection with football, my father had a good friend who was a journalist, a sports reporter, named Kandler, whose grandfather's name was Cohen, but nobody knew that. This Kandler got special travel passes as a journalist and came to tell my parents. So they even learned where I was being stationed in Ober Schlesian or Upper Silesia. Film producer's Schiessinger's name implies that his family originated from this area. My parents wanted to know if I was in need of anything they could send me. There were hardly any shortages in Czechoslovakia, actually then the protectorate of Bohemia, during the war years. Their entire work force was intact and they possessed most raw materials. I wrote back that a pair of wellingtons would be very welcome, I was allowed to write that I am working on a farm. My grandmother was ordered to bake some of her speciality cakes, which tasted better the older they were, but my prisoner status was kept a secret.

After my granny wanted to know how it could be possible that nothing was left of the cakes the following day, my mother told her that father gave them away in the office to some schnorrers (Jewish poor).

I also assumed that my family were now forced to wear the yellow star and were not allowed to walk on the pavement, but that my father was still running the business, albeit only from behind the scenes. They were indeed very busy exporting wooden toys to Germany, which in normal times would have been like sending coals to Newcastle, but I feared that their next move would be to the Czech concentration camp of Theresianstadt. This camp is within the vicinity of the town of Teplitz-Schonau and there existed the biggest wholesaler and factor of toys in the country, named Ignatz Kohn associates. Once I wrote asking if they planned to visit Uncle Ignatz and they understood. Neither they nor I knew of the existence of gas ovens at the time. Theresianstadt was, in fact, not an extermination camp.

My father, mother and sister survived the war (my grandmother died of old age) only because of the fact that my father was of Viennese origin — but that is another story.

The arrival of my wellingtons created a sensation, nobody had any except the inspector, nobody had ever seen green wellingtons and they were greatly admired. I pretended that they were British Army issue. Still in the Stalag I bought a brown sleeveless leather jacket which you could wear over the battle—dress or over the greatcoat and which was normally issued to Royal Army Service Corps drivers (now the Royal Corps of Transport). In this attire I pranced about like a general. I was, by then, driving the tractor occasionally and worked as the blacksmith's mate. I much prefered that than to work with a pitchfork and the blacksmith also noticed that I had some technical ability and was very quickly taking up all sorts of mechanical work. I very soon became a welder. The smith and I had to work the tractor in the fields or drive on the roads, besides we had to maintain and repair all farm machinery. We were a great team and he also needed somebody he could trust and rely on. He was about 40 years old, father of five children plus a jealous wife but he was a bit of a philanderer. I was very good at covering up for him when he vanished for a while and his wife came looking. I also felt some sense of achievement at repairing something and I really enjoyed working.

The argument I had with our first posten was about an item in the parcel from my parents. Among other things was also a blue overall which the guard confiscated with great pomp. I very loudly disagreed with him, the overall would have been very handy, but most of all it was something from my family. I became quite hysterical about the fact that he did not let me have that garment but he pointed out that it was purely civilian and against all rules and regulations to be in the possession of a prisoner. And then he said something quite clever which convinced me. "You will not look like a British prisoner in these." And I had to agree.

One day, a group of about 12 teenage Ukranian boys and girls arrived at our farm, begging for some food and offering to do some work. They were transported from occupied Russia in their thousands and forced into slave labour in Germany. The inspector and boss could have made good use of them but labour was not free, workers had to be allocated from the authorities only. The boss took the matter up but after a few days we had to take the tractor and trailer to collect something from the railway station. With the blacksmith driving and a few Brits with a German guard with his rifle we also had to take the Ukranians back to town.

Suddenly we were stopped on the highway by a little car out of which jumped a brownshirt SA man in his dress uniform as yellow as a lemon, perhaps 7 feet tall, thin as a tooth—pick with an incredibly ugly face. He unclasped a little ornamental dagger from his belt, jumped on the wagon and started to hit and kick the Ukranians. If a farmer in England would behave in this manner to his horse on a public road, he would undoubtedly be reported to the RSPCA. It was a shocking display, our soldier left the trailer pretending to go for a pee, the smith (a party member) sat ashen faced in the cab. But one of our sergeants who really didn't speak much German, shouted at the SA man, "Das Germany Cultur, ja, eine thousand jahr, no sehr gut." One of the Ukranian girls whose name was Galina, was a beauty with a fantastic figure, I know - I had a feel - but I could do nothing for her. That episode happened in 1941.

'You will not look like a British prisoner in these'

In the autumn of 1944 I had to deliver a wagon load of potatoes to a factory in town. In the yard stood a number of wooden vats filled with water to be used in case of fire after an air-raid. Next to one of these vats stood Galina and when the uglyfaced SA passed nearby Galina put her hand into the water and splashed him. My heart must have missed a beat, I expected the SA man to take his pistol and shoot her. But nothing like that happened. Ugly face went to another vat and splashed her back. But that was in 1944 when the outcome of the war was clear to all.

It was an early summer's day when I was working all alone in the workshop hidden away behind the forge. Nobody was about except a few clucking chickens, everybody was out in the fields, when a beautiful girl appeared at the workshop door. I had seen her before in the village, you couldn't fail to notice her, but I had never had the chance to speak to her. She had lovely long hair, never wore the customary kerchief on her head and never went barefoot and wouldn't demean herself to work on the farm on a daily basis. In her hand she was carrying a little basket full of cherries, which she placed on the workbench, indicating that they were for me. Then she started talking about the chocolate she had heard that we sometimes received in our parcels, which all Germans called Liebensgaben (gifts of love) and how long it had been since she had tasted chocolate. I reckoned just about as long as I had tasted cherries. Flirting all the time, she suggested that we could play a little game and the winner could demand from the loser absolutely anything he could think of. She took two pairs of cherries, brushed her hair aside and placed them behind her ears and then she wanted me to do the same. I must have been a bit slow, so she leaned quite heavily against me and put two pairs of cherries behind my ears. The winner was supposed to be able to fix the, largest amount of cherries to his body, but without any artificial help whatsoever. After I fixed a pair over a jacket button, she declared that such a thing does not count. I have never played such a game before, but she must have, because before I could think or say anything her blouse was wide open and two sets of cherries were dangling from the nipples of her naked breasts. I believed women wore bras only once in their lifetime then, on their wedding day and then it was probably borrowed. I just stood there speechless but she laughed and wiggled about carefully, I don't know if she was built like that or if it was in anticipation of something on her mind, but I was paralysed and could not move or speak. She then unashamedly stared at a certain part of my anatomy and suggested that unless there would be something fundamentally wrong with me, I should be able now to win the cherry contest easily. Well she had to wait for the bar of chocolate until the distribution of the next Red Cross parcels or aptly translated love present.

As it was rather difficult for me to get into contact with her which I would have liked very much, I decided to send the chocolate by messenger. She acknowledged receipt with a lovely smile but I did not meet her anymore on her own. Next season's cherries ripened, but there were none for me.

Envy and jealousy made us a few enemies who tried to get us removed from the farm. I would not like to imply that WE did not like female company, but there

were a number of factors why the other sex was attracted to us.

Firstly, there were hardly any local menfolk about, then we were mostly young and good-looking, then we wore a uniform, then we were strangers from a different part of the world and further that it was assumed that we would not have 'had it' for a very long time.

Some mothers feared that it would be only a question of time before some of their daughters would become pregnant. It happened indeed, everybody knew who the father was, but the girl swore it was a soldier on leave, who was later reported killed in action on the Russian front. Perhaps we were also only a dirty dozen but we were working with about thirty girls in the fields and barns all day.

These farming community parents had certainly no problem explaining the facts of life to their children. We actually saw girls manually helping sometimes in the procreation of animals, a two ton excited bull may find it difficult to look at his belly. Sex was the talk of the day and there was hardly a sentence without a double meaning.

Here existed a bit of a grey area. Intercourse between a gentile and a Jew was a criminal offence according to Nuremberg civil law. But then we were not civilians and according to German army orders we were not Jews.

Once a week the floors of our and the postens living quarters had to be washed. After he found out that Vicki C Viennese could read German he had to do the job, he told him that he had dropped a letter on the floor and if found — should be placed on his desk. It was a hint that the contents would be of interest to us — they were indeed. It was a circular from the German high command (POW) that Palestinian POWs were not to be addressed as JEWS, they had to be referred to as British/Palestinian prisoners only.

Dwelling on the subject of sex for a little longer it could have been our second summer at the Lubowitz farm, when our wachposten were changed again. The new one was a nice, unassuming fellow and we could never find out why Meyer nicknamed him 'Syphiliticer'. After a few weeks he developed a nasty boil on his lip, reported sick and suddenly the whole place was swarming with German soldiers who confiscated all towels and started to clean and scrub everything. We heard that for health reasons he was relegated to guarding POWs only and that his disease was not dormant any more. The entire commando had to travel to our town of Ratibor where a small local health clinic was established and the officer in charge was Major Barber, whom I already knew from the Stalag. We all had to undergo a Wasserman's blood test. It was assumed that the results would be negative and nothing to worry about. Then one of my friends, shrugging his shoulders, remarked, that only one, namely Paul Weiner had nothing to laugh about for a day or two. I protested and shouted, "Why me, why me?"

'The horse could have been as old as its driver'

Now everybody knew that I was quite friendly with a young mother with three children for some time, but everybody also knew that besides me, the German soldier was also seen to visit her occasionally. But in the end everything was all right.

365 days a year, come rain or shine, a horse and cart was driven to the dairy in town with the milk churns at 5 o'clock in the morning. The coachman must have been over eighty and he tied himself to his seat on the cart with a belt. The moment the horse started to move, he fell asleep and he must have fallen off before. The horse could have been as old as its driver - it knew the way there and back by instinct. The coachman was sometimes given some errands to attend to in town and sometimes a prisoner was entrusted into his care if the latter could find a reason for an excuse to be in town, like going to the dentist.

But this privilege was misused. Onto the cart jumped the prisoner's girlfriend and instead of the dentist, or after, they met at the girl's sister's flat in town and everybody had a good time. The coachman was given something to drink, we were by then already distilling a little bit on the quiet. All this was eventually ruined by the lovers, because they could not behave themselves and be patient and started to canoodle in public on the way to town, which was noticed by other road users and reported.

Perhaps there were other complaints against us, there were always rumours and gossip galore. Then one day the bosses' Mercedes car arrived with two or three gentlemen and were shown around the farm by the boss. On leaving the car refused to start and the boss called for me and said, "Cpl Weiner, can you get my car going?" I had a reputation for fixing or improvising a little bit and I knew already about the lousy synthetic petrol made from coal. The civilians who were from the police of course, investigating complaints from unfriendly civilians, stood by watching, while I put my hand on the air-intake of the carburettor and asked the boss; "Please sir, press the button now," and the engine started right away. I didn't know much but I knew something and this performance of mine was 90% luck and 10% knowledge. But the boss became very agitated and started to shout to his guests, "Now there you have the living proof of what I have been telling you all the time. Everyone of these men is an expert in his field. If you remove the English the place comes to a standstill within days. I don't want any Ukrainian potato—pickers. Our Fuehrer demands in the national interest that WHEELS MUST TURN FOR VICTORY." And they drove off.

Next day the boss told us with a twinkle in his eye, that his uninvited guests didn't leave empty handed either (i.e. at least 1 kg of smoked ham each). This nationalistic outburst of our boss was only a charade in front of the strangers. I met him a few days later at the weighbridge on his other farm. I had to drive there with the empty trailers to have their unloaded weight taken and again after they were full of farm produce, like sugar beet, spinach or cabbage. He greeted me, smiling with his outstretched right arm in the pose of the Hitler salute. I said, "But Herr Harhoff, what's happened with you? Since when have you become a Nazi party member?"

The boss answered, "Party member, my foot. I am indicating to you only that the level of shit we are buried in, is up to our neck under Adolf's leadership."

The make of the tractor I drove had a powerful engine and worked with one piston of a diameter of about 18 inches but had no starter motor. I had to get up (especially in winter) an hour earlier than the others, to heat up a cast-iron bell, to get it going.

One very cold winter morning I got out of bed onto the landing where my washbasin was first in a row of six. Sometimes someone out of sheer kindness, brought some water up the previous evening, from the pump in the courtyard and filled the basins, because this water was less freezing and more like room temperature. I started to wash my hands, with the light of the hurricane paraffin lamp dangling from the ceiling, but my soap did not want to foam. I looked, still half asleep, but no, it was not German substitute soap, it was a first class Canadian make. But then I started to wash my face (and all of a sudden my lips and mouth tasted nothing but saltwater. Within one second I was down in the yard, half dressed, 20 degrees below zero, dowsing my head with gallons of icy water from the pump.

Our German guard came home from the pub, perhaps there was something to drink, and instead of turning right to the slop-out bucket, urinated straight into my wash basin on the left. I was the object of weeks of ridicule and laughter after that - with remarks about my complexion, as if I ever had any pimples before.

There was not very much work in winter for all of us, so Meyer decided to build a rowing boat from some planks of wood after he solved the problem with paint.

There was absolutely not a tin of paint to be found over the whole country. But Meyer had already previously seen a number of containers in a store on the bosses farm, covered with inches of dust and dirt. I asked what these drums contained, nobody had an answer, except that they must have been stored there for perhaps twenty years. Meyer opened one and knew right away what to do. He soon visited a few ironmongers stores in town and came hack with powdery pigment in a few colours of which there was no shortage. From this he mixed and manufactured his own oil paint, which left the boss standing agog with astonishment. The building of the boat took a long time but she was a perfect beauty, supposed to provide a shortcut for workers to some fields on the other side of the river Weichsel or Vysla.

The following year, Meyer had another grand idea. He painted a lifesize hunting scene on the curved staircase walls of Herr Harhoff's mansion. On closer inspection one may have noticed that some of the wildlife like deers and hares could have needed the attention of an orthopaedic surgeon, but the colours were magnificent and the boss showed it proudly to his guests. Nobody could have missed 'Brit POW, Frank Meyer' as the signature.

Then an absolute miracle happened one day. Electricity was to be installed at the farm and the farm workers cottages. We assumed that our boss must have had some contact with army officers in town, who were in charge of various POW working parties in the district. On inspection tours these officers were always invited to the inspector or the bosses house for a 'little snack'. Roast duck or stuffed goose with all the trimmings to finish with real coffee (provided by us — we worked hand in hand in such matters). We believed that one of those officers, after a few drinks (also from our illicit distillery), may have confided to the boss that it must have been quite irregular that a POW camp should exist without electricity, not specifying if it housed 12 or 12,000 men. The boss must have realised that on ground of this information, an application for the supplies of necessary materials from the authorities could be granted.

The cost was immaterial. For the last fifty years the landowners, perhaps the church, were not prepared to pay for the installation to the national grid and the lease holders had no intention to foot the bill for something not contained in their contract. But those were different times in Germany. The mark was worthless and everybody wanted to get rid of it. A deaf person would have bought a piano without hesitation, just to get rid of printed paper. The population still needed the mark to buy food and clothes which were all rationed but there was little else available. The only items still free at the village grocer, we used to call 'the two Ms' - matches and mustard. Because there were no sausages and there was no tobacco. That's why pigment was in abundance and the oil for paint did not exist.

It was very nice to have light bulbs hanging from the ceiling of our rooms and at a number of places of work, but otherwise nothing much changed at our farm (the other estate always had had electricity) but for one thing. The inspector got hold of a good radio.

A German citizen who was caught listening to BBC propaganda lies was sentenced to death. But Vicki Bleicher (who was versatile in shorthand) was every so often ordered to clean the inspector's office, while he was away in the fields. That didn't mean that the inspector was not interested about the frontlines in the west or south or the east of Europe, but he certainly did not listen to the BBC. This inspector was an absolute treasure. He had a German name (Alois Schrey), but was as Polish as Pilsudsky (a Polish Churchill) and had to bring his elderly father to advise him on market gardening, as this was demanded by the ministry of agriculture, much to the resentment of the boss. The inspector brought also a spinster with a curved spine, who spoke only Polish, to cook for us, but she also washed and ironed our clothes. Every other month the poor devil was supposed to have been in love with one of us. Sometimes a chicken, duck or rabbit got lost but found its way to this woman's kitchen who must have been trained by a cordon bleu chef.

The German urban population were starving

In autumn I had to deliver wagons full of beet to the sugar factory in town and youngsters used to wait in narrow streets to harpoon a beet from my trailer with a long nail fixed to the end of an old broomstick. In comparison to these townfolk, we lived like lords. My uncle's family who was a lifelong member of the Social Democratic Party in CSR and was given 48 hours notice in 1938 to decide if he wished to join a train going through Poland to Sweden and then on to England with one suitcase each. The British Labour Party provided the train and visas for 1000 families as a brotherly gesture. That's how my uncle's family came to live in West Byfleet in a large mansion, subsidised by the Czech Trust Fund.

One of my uncle's friends got a job with Carreras Ltd the cigarette manufacturers and told them of a scheme, where relatives could place a standing order for 200 cigarettes per month to be sent to a POW address at costprice. 200 Craven A in tin boxes of 20 arrived for many months, sometimes after long intervals and then 2 or 3 parcels together. One of these packets of cigarettes may have saved a Jewish life.

In later years the composition of our group changed a bit. A member of the milking party became ill and was repatriated long before the end of the war. Meyer travelled back to the Stalag, to look for a replacement and also brought three more prisoners back, so that our party comprised now 15 men. Along came Meyer's company sergeant-major plus one brother and a third brother, who had been captured on the Italian front, was allowed to join us, on compassionate grounds. Another sergeant, built like a giant of about 16 stone in weight also came, he knew something about the manufacture of alcohol.

'It became drinkable and you soon became very tipsy'

Sugarbeet sliced into small pieces was soaked in wooden troughs and then fed to the pigs. If you left such a container standing under warm conditions for sometime, the contents started to ferment. This was then brought to boil on our kitchen stove in a large metal pot to which a tube was welded on. The steam through the tube was led to another contraption in the sink, cooled off with running water from the tap and dripped out slowly as alcohol. It tasted revolting, but mixed with lemon curd from our Red Cross parcels, it became drinkable and you soon became very tipsy. It was soon noted that the kitchen stove was alight all night, by sparks from the chimney and one chap who was locked in the kitchen to keep the fire burning keeled over from the fumes and had to be carried away in the morning, which didn't pass unnoticed.

Now the villagers had a saying that in peacetime you avoided a drunk by crossing the road to the other side. In wartime, everybody came running to the drunk - perhaps they could find out where he got the tipple from.

One day, a group of German soldiers with an officer, all on bicycles, raided our farm and went straight to the kitchen, where a jug of this clear alcohol stood on a windowsill. The officer smelled it and said that this was evidence and went to look for the utensils with which this liquid was produced. Our fat sergeant, who was a man of the world, just needed a few seconds, poured the alcohol into the sink and refilled the jug with water. The officer noticed the difference when he came back, not having found anything else and warned us 'especially you' he said pointing to me (a veiled threat of perhaps not being British born) and that he would be back.

Obviously, some civilians, envious of what we did and they did not dare, reported us. We then abstained from further brewing because of the risk and the shortage of lemon curd.

This fat sergeant had a long standing affair with a uniformed railway woman and transferred to our party because of her. I could never figure out why - she was no spring chicken and she was no great beauty, nor was she a small mieskeit. But she could travel freely on the railways and followed him everywhere. Everybody has his limitations — he was quick to dispose of the alcohol in seconds, but he could not rid himself of that lady.

We only received one bar of chocolate per month in a Red Cross parcel, but Meyer devised a way to exploit this to the most. If the occasion arose that we had to sit in a waiting room like a dentist's or a railway compartment surrounded by civilians, Meyer had always pre-arranged one of his little satirical tricks, he had asked a fellow prisoner to offer him a bit of chocolate, which he then examined, looking at the wrapper and then refused to accept with the remark, "Yak."

Pandemonium usually broke out between the Germans with remarks like, "Did you see that - one of the English offers another a bit of chocolate and that fellow doesn't like the make or the quality. Unbelievable. We have not had any chocolate for years and for these chaps it must be either milk or bitter."

The windows of our two little bedrooms pointed outwards into an orchard. One early evening two gunshot sounds were heard from this direction and a few minutes later one of our chaps came in, ashen faced, followed by our guard holding his rifle, demanding to know what had happened.

We soon found out that our fellow had arranged a meeting in the orchard with a young lady, but she must have been friendly with the blacksmith before, who could have easily been her father's age. The smith must have been enraged about the denial of the girl's favours, found out about the rendezvous somehow, and wanted to teach the young couple a lesson, by firing his hunting rifle over their heads in the orchard.

Our guard in turn blew his top and informed us that he would have to report this incident to the company right away and that nobody was going to threaten his

charges with firearms. The inspector and our boss were also informed.

A few days later I had to go and see the boss in his office and was asked if I was prepared to take the official driving test, to be able to drive the tractor on the public highway. He had already found out, that there were no objections but that the licence was only valid if the prisoner was accompanied by a member of the German armed forces. "But that's only the small print and who has time to read that when there is a war going on?" the boss said. He then told me that this shooting incident was the straw that broke the camel's hack with regard to the blacksmith. Who, he knew, was thieving and spying on him and he decided that the smith's exemption from service in the German army for agricultural requirements should no longer be upheld.

The blacksmith from the other estate would shoe our horses in future. I could have done it, I had had to hold the horse's feet for 2 years, but one single horseshoe nail could sometimes cause blood poisoning and I didn't need that sort of headache.

Our blacksmith was soon gone to the Russian front and I have heard that his wife had remarked that, because of me, she was likely to be made a widow.

In the year of 1944, carpetbombing of Germany reached out to Upper Silesia which besides fertile lands and many coalmines also had important large complexes of heavy industry. Formations of hundreds of American B17s or Flying Fortresses could be observed by day and RAF bombers by night, flying high over our farm, and foil tickertape raining down on us. We did not know about radar or understand the purpose of these little pieces of foil but were pleased about holding something between our fingers, that was from our side, our allies, as if it was a message from home that we were not forgotten.

There was, however, something in the systematic destruction of German industry that had a secondary effect upon us. Our base-camp the Stalag 8b, was at Lambsdorf, near the important railway junction of the town of Oppeln. If this base was hit by bombs, the entire stores of our Red Cross parcels could go up in flames and replacement could take many months with dire effect for all prisoners. Two senior NCOs, both First World War veterans, professional soldiers of impeccable character, were in charge of the camp of tens of thousands of men. They were RSM Sherrif for discipline and RSM Low for administration. Officers (besides medical) were being held at Oflags or Officer's camps. These two NCOs must have impressed upon the German High Command the necessity that the parcels depot must be decentralised, so that if one store should be destroyed, others would be able to fill the gap. The Germans agreed the longer the war lasted, the less they were able to feed prisoners. Our boss, Herr Harhoff, was approached, if he could provide dry, thief-proof storage for parcels and, of course, he could. If Herr Harhoff could do something for the British, ten shire horses could not have held him back.

With this new parcels depot on our farm came also RSM Clancy, a Welshman, who was in charge of all records of goods, which also included bales of uniforms and boots, even toothbrushes, but he had nothing to do with farm work.

We could not ask this RSM for an extra food parcel, but other items he would gladly exchange old for new. I found a pair of soft brown officer's boots, unfortunately a bit small, but out of vanity I took them, hoping that they would stretch in time, but they did not and they nearly killed me a few months later.

Other working parties in the vicinity were ordered to collect their allocations from our farm and we had visitors often, who came by horse and cart or even lorry on Sundays. Because of the shortage of petrol, German lorries had enormous stoves bolted onto their sides or backs which burnt charcoal, which produced a gas on which the engines were supposed to run but sometimes refused.

A frequent visitor was my Major Barber (medical corps), who came to inspect our health together with a few subalterns, but he never even brought a stethoscope with him. After we learned of his impending visit, we sent a welcome party a mile out on the road to greet him. There was then much saluting and handshaking, and after the order of, 'Fall in, by the left, QUICK MARCH' all that was missing was a military band.

'They were like walking skeletons, half frozen'

Major Barber became a personal friend of the boss and the inspector and was always invited for lunch or high tea at their houses, while the German guards ate with the servants in the kitchen. For their return trip to town they sometimes ordered the tractor to be started and to he loaded with a few bales of hay, (after all, one could not waste Hitler's precious diesel oil just like that) and it was then such a coincidence, that I had to drive our colleagues back to their barracks. I don't think the boss would have done that, with the blacksmith still there (him being a member of NSDAP), but he was now far away in Russia.

The pub landlord was the second party member in the village - his name was Prszybilla. I thought that he must have been advised that with such a name, he should have fared better as a paid up member. Our visitors could never have marched back, not only because they ate and drunk too much, but they were burdened down with countless goodies, they could never have carried.

Once a year, always in winter, the boss bought his supply of coal direct from a coalmine. It was quite far away and always a lovely outing for us. We had done this trip before, when the blacksmith was still with us, but in 1944, I was driving and again a few prisoners were needed, to operate the handbrakes on the trailers to avoid jack-knifing, they were also required for coupling the trucks etc. Our guard had to come with us too.

I did not know it then, but this coalmine must have been in the vicinity of Auschwitz, I also did not know of the existence of gas ovens.

At the mine, the trailers had to be driven under a kind of silo, where a lever was opened and the coal started pouring down from above until the trucks were full. Odd pieces of coal fell next to the wagons into the snow and we saw with awe about a dozen concentration camp inmates, in their striped pyjamas who were supposed to pick up these odd pieces, to return it to the trucks, with shovels. These prisoners, all with a yellow star, were young and ghastly looking. They were walking skeletons, half frozen, their feet wrapped in newspapers inside wooden clogs, obviously near to death. They were so emaciated and weak, they had to hold on to the shovels for support to keep them upright and if one fell into the snow, he did not have the strength to get up again. I have never forgot the fright in their eyes lying helpless in the snow, until two others hobbled near, to lift him up.

We later learned that these youngsters were too ill to work underground in the mine, where it was warm and they would have got a bit more watery soup. We instantly knew, that we had to do something for these poor dying creatures, so we positioned ourselves next to them and asked, "Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Miuvish po Poisku?" But they shied away in fear as soon as we approached. They saw a uniform with shining badges and buttons and polished boots and were afraid of us. For all they knew, we could have been Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian or Estonian units each perhaps worse than the Germans.

So we tried again,"Redst Jiddish, varsteyst mamelushon. govarich po Rusku, parle vous Francais?" Nothing. Then one of our fellows, desperate now, raised his arms to heaven and shouted, "Shema Isroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad, (Hear 0 Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One)" words of the beginning of a prayer every Jew will have heard a thousand times.

Only then there was some reaction of disbelief with a gesture of 'YOU? YOU?' and we pointed at each other, 'YES, YES' all of us. Tears were then running down their faces - and ours - they may have thought we came to save them, but what could we do? Luckily, we still had not eaten our sandwiches and a sandwich from Lubowitz farm didn't look like an English cucumber one, but was about an inch thick and a foot long. We also emptied all our pockets and I had a full box of 20 Craven A cigarettes, which I gave to the nearest boy and he just stared at it and I had to press it into his hand.

Our posten noticed that something was going on but we told him, "Karl, you said you had diarrhoea, so go and find yourself a shithouse," Now, I have never been in a concentration camp, but I have been a POW for a few years and I had a good idea of the value of one single cigarette. Sterling and Dollars had value, but whatever little there was, was only priced in cigarettes. And 20 Craven A were a small fortune and I sincerely hoped that my packet could have helped for a long time.

I only learned after the war, that those KZ - inmates were undoubtedly from some Greek islands (and spoke no other language), who were transported to the extermination camps in 1944.

On our way out from the coalmine we noticed a group of about 500 prisoners in their striped pyjamas standing in dead silence, body to body, with not an inch to spare between them, in a perfect rectangular square formation. It gave quite an awesome impression, to see human bodies compacted in such a way. They were an underground workshift, waiting to enter showers after work. Those on the outside ranks must have been very brave, because they were liable to be kicked or beaten. They stood in such close formation for warmth and to uphold those, who could not stand on their own anymore. One of them who quite clearly must have been mentally deranged by now, stood on the very corner outpost of this group, tore his cap from his head and made a deep bow to every person who passed by.

I was, by then, well known in the county as Herr Harhoff's English tractor driver, when I was ordered to deliver something to a neighbouring farm. The elderly squire there invited me in for a drink and I

suspected some deal about chocolate or coffee was on the cards - but I was wrong. He merely wanted a shoulder to cry on and pour his heart out, he didn't dare do that to his friend and neighbour.

He said that I may or may not be aware of the German propaganda machine which daily warned the German population of the horrors that would occur should the Bolshevik - Mongolian hordes ever arrive on German soil. He then led me to his patio door and pointed to the view outside. "This was once our 150 year old orchard," he said. As far as my eyes could see, I saw nothing but three foot high tree stumps.

"They are here," said the farmer, "they are already here, the Russian savages. Only they are in German SS uniform. They were too lazy to bend down, so they cut the trees standing up at the height of their waists, for firewood. They are heavily armed, riding little ponies, barefoot and take orders from nobody but Heinrich Himmler in Berlin. I went to the Burgomaster, the council, the police, nobody wanted to know."

There were an estimated one million Russian deserters under the Russian General Vlasov's command fighting in SS divisions in Germany.

GESTAPO

It was late autumn, the courtyard was deserted, nobody about, only I stood at the anvil in the forge, when I noticed a small, black car driving through the gates. Out stepped four young men in leather coats, unmistakably Gestapo, and came straight for me.

"You are Paul Weiner, you are arrested, you are coming with us," they said. I had a leather apron on and dirty hands and it was also quite chilly, so I demanded to be allowed to wash and change my clothes first. One of the men went with me, opened his jacket and, pointing to a revolver on his belt, said, "One movement that I dislike - and you are dead."

We then drove to town in that little car, myself sitting in the rear between two Gestapo men and their thighs pressing against mine from both sides.

I knew that there was no point in asking questions, but I could not help thinking, "Look at what close proximity they have to sit with a stinking Jew."

We arrived at what I assumed was the prefecture of the Ratibor police station, I was taken up to the second floor, through a door with a sign with three different names on it, all doctors of law with police officer's ranks and departments for SABOTAGE, ESPIONAGE and TREASON.

After a few moments I heard that between 12 and 2 o'clock the office is closed for lunch, and I was led to the cells in the basement. The jailer was an old policeman, clearly brought back from retirement, because he had an enormous beer belly and could not close the buttons of his old uniform. He was quite jolly, offered to bring me a bit of bread and gruel, which I declined - I did not feel like eating at the moment. I had to empty my pockets, hand over shoelaces, belt and braces because he said, "We don't want anything stupid to happen in here, do we." He was quite friendly and said, "Now what on earth have you done?" but then interrupted himself and said, "No - don't tell me, I'll tell you - you are one of those from Alsace-Lorraine."

Well, I had two hours to ponder about what they want me for. Sabotage they could not pin on me. Espionage, I have not been involved in. Treason? Perhaps I have made a mistake after all and should have called myself Charles Wilberforce from Wigan at the start of captivity, but then again - it would not have been any good either.

The Germans knew very well that every soldier is issued with two tags to be worn around his neck (one to stay with the body, the other to be removed for records) with name, number and religion, for burial reasons, so that a Moslem is not buried under a cross. The risk was that I could have been asked to produce my army tags, but I could not have had any with the Wilberforce name. The Germans could have insisted that there exists not a shred of evidence of my real identity, that the uniform could have been stolen and that I am not British at all. I could have been a German-Jewish holidayer who had fled to Greece, remained there illegally and then got hold of a uniform to join the British (Palestinian) units to be evacuated with them to Crete or Egypt.

But that was a school of thought that was in the past, but flashed through my mind, while waiting in the cell.

The Alsace-Lorraine implication I understood immediately. I believe the inhabitants of this area are bi-lingual because possession of this little country changed hands between France and Germany many times over the centuries.

They must have had a French POW in the police cells, whom they considered should have worn a German uniform. That could have been treason and I did not cherish the thought of that, but what did they want from me?

Did they expect a filthy Jew to wear the Fuehrer's uniform with the Swastica on it? But there was another thing that worried me very much in those two hours. Before I was given permission to leave in 1939, the SS in Prague took fingerprints of all my ten fingers (with all their German thoroughness) and I had to sign a declaration, that a return to German soil will carry the death penalty. There goes a case AGAINST the advance of science and technology with the microchip and optic fibre, because a national German computer could have sealed my fate. But, as it was in this case, the CID in Ratibor, had no idea about the activity of the black uniformed SS in Prague, but what was I to know? However, there was one thing crystal clear in my mind. If ever I had to fight for my life, then it was there in the Ratibor police prefecture in October 1944.

'I never realised the resources of strength and courage I could muster'

I never realised the resources of strength and courage I could muster until I was faced with such difficulties. I also took stock of the general situation I found myself in. I was convinced that my days as a British POW were over. I could see myself in striped pyjamas with the yellow star. I knew what that meant, I stood next to KZ - inmates, but I also knew that I was extremely strong and healthy from good food and hard work in open air for years and had the physical resources to draw from, for a few months. Hunger and starvation were no strangers to me. Most of all, I could rejoice and hope. The end of the war was near, it could last only a few more months and these I could survive, wherever I find myself. I did not know about the gas ovens. The Red Army was advancing steadily, I felt quite cocksure and gloating before I had to face my interrogators on the second floor. On the one hand, I was afraid, but on the other hand I had a NECOMEH to be able to witness Hitler's 1,000 year Reich crumble in front of my eyes. I am unable to translate 'Necomeh' for those who do not know the, meaning, but explain with an old saying; 'Necomeh an die Wanzen' (bedbugs). The words are half Yiddish half German. A man stands in front of his burning house, with a grin from ear to ear on his face, rubbing his hands together, as pleased as punch. A neighbour approaches and asks what is all the joy about seeing the property burning down to cinders? The victim explains that he has inherited the house with 100,000 bedbugs, which were sucking his blood for 50 years, and he could never exterminate them. "Now," he said, "they are all dying." The man had a 'necomeh' and I could draw a parallel to myself from it.

Then, back for interrogation, I faced three men in civilian clothes, sitting behind desks and a middle aged lady stenographer. I was asked a great number of questions, when one man made a blatantly anti-semetic remark, straight out of Streicher's Jew hating bible. He wanted to know if I returned to Germany because I had not been able to find any business to cheat, to hawk, to bargain and to beat down in other lands. I nearly lost my temper, jumped with my boots on the wooden floor, holding an imaginary rifle with fixed bayonet in my hands, which made the inkpots dance on the office desks. "You seem to have forgotten that I came back as a non commissioned officer in the uniform of His Majesty with a loaded rifle in my hand." Those who went through basic training in the British Army will remember that the 'bayonette - fix' order positions you with your left foot and left arm forward, the right hand on the trigger of your gun ready to kill in man to man combat.

The immediate reaction to my performance was, that the police officer (probably senior) sitting next to the anti-semite, stretched out his right arm and put his hand on the other's left sleeve, to prevent him to utter another word. It was quite clear to me that they did not wish to create a hostile atmosphere. They succeeded, however, in upsetting my composure completely for a while. It was done with an age-old criminalistic trick, which I came to understand later on.

They asked me what my father did for a living and I said he was a business man. They quietly retorted that my father was the proprietor of a wooden toy factory. That remark pulled the rug away from under my feet and I thought, 'Oh my God, why do they ask questions they seem to know everything.' But they did NOT. Ten minutes ago they did not know my father manufactured toys.

During the interview other people were coming and going with little scraps of paper and one left the door to the adjoining room slightly ajar. I could just see a brown telephone exchange where a woman was frantically turning a handle and hear her demanding if she was speaking to the Police Station in my home town of Trautenau again. They were verifying whatever I said by telephone as best as they could.

There were also far fetched questions and military inquiries, which I declined to answer. I had an impression that they were trying to gain more time, perhaps more telephone information. I was not going to relax my observance for a moment and if it was to be, I was prepared to go under, guns blazing, I was only afraid that the whole

procedure could have repercussions on my parents, wherever they were by now.

Eventually, the questions started to shift ot a different subject. Liebesgaben - Red Cross parcels. What on earth do they want to know now? After quite a while it suddenly dawned on me - it had to do with a German soldier named Alfred R.

We have to leave the Gestapo and go back a few weeks in time to our working party. On a warm Sunday afternoon, a group of comrades from a different locality together with 2 or 3 German soldiers arrived by horse and cart at our farm, to collect their ration of Red Cross parcels from our depot. One of the Germans went around, specially asking for me by name. Somewhere he must have heard about me. That was quite possible. There was a working party near a place called Adersbach - Wechseldorf at the old Czech/German border, where some civilians (most likely from my home town), were disappointed not to have found me.

'I was interned in a solitary cell at a small French POW camp'

We met and I disliked him from the start. I resented his back slapping intimacy, that we were landsmann and that we easily could have sat on the same school bench, when actually he was about ten years older than me.

He was born in the Sudeten town of Reichenberg, had a German father and a Czech mother. He had to enlist, much against his will, into the German Army, was living in Prague, married to a Czech girl who did not even speak German, had a little, very ill daughter, who never in her life has tasted chocolate. He further told me that he had never been a Nazi, that he had been sent back from the Russian front because of some remarks he intentionally made about Hitler, that he had already spent some time in a military prison, all in order to get away from Russia. All that was laid on too thick and too schmaltzi and I did not believe half of it to be true.

For a time I thought him to be a plant from some German authority and I let him talk his head off, while assessing the non-existence of his intelligence. But there was still something in my subconscious which prevented me from telling him to get lost. It was Prague, my last home, where I said goodbye to my parents, with whom I was still in contact as a POW about a year ago. I thought to myself, 'Let's find out where he lived and worked in Prague - if it is true.'

I remarked that I had spent a year studying at a commercial college (the Bergmanova school) there and had lodgings in General Loch's Avenue. He started to slap my back again with delight and blurted out that he was a printer by trade and that he was employed by ORBIS the printers and publishers, who were practically opposite my lodgings and that we must have met at Mrs Pavlickova's patisserie for coffee with her homemade poppyseed yeastcake. Indeed, I ate there nearly every day, I could not afford a proper meal, I spent most of my father's allowance on entertaining girlfriends. Alfred R. was too primitive to capitalise on an alibi from the past, he had just unwittingly stumbled upon, and it was genuine, he could not have known that I once resided in Loch's Avenue.

Orbis GMBH (Ltd) was probably partly owned by Socialist parties in Czechoslovakia, printed and published only red or pink literature and were as close as the TUC to the British Labour Party, and would never have employed a Sudeto-Nazi. My adrenalin started to work double time and I said to Alfred, "I will give you a bar of the finest Canadian chocolate for your sick child - you will have to memorize an address (it was not far away) in Prague - you go there while on leave to the caretaker of a block of flats, you can't make a mistake, she weighs 20 stone, and try to find out if she knows anything about the whereabouts of my parents, sister and grandmother."

The caretaker could be trusted, she was our friend and had in previous years offered to hide some valuables and I still have some Persian rugs in my possession to this day. Now Alfred started to cry, that his wife was mad about sardines, her nerves were so bad that she devoured ten cans a day while she was pregnant, and that she was under pressure from her family and friends that she had to be a slut to have a husband in German uniform, so I gave him a tin of sardines. To oil the wheels better, I handed over two more items from Red Cross parcels, all in all four different things.

Alfred's party had to depart from our farm and I wondered if I would ever hear from him or see him again.

Back to the Gestapo interrogation - the questions remained with tenacity on the subject of the Red Cross parcels only.

All of a sudden something dawned upon me and I said, "I have promised to tell the truth from the beginning - I have nothing to hide (it was the department of sabotage, espionage and treason, after all), but if you insist on this line of questioning, it will involve a member of the German armed forces, if you don't mind hearing about that."

Oh, yes, they wanted to know about that very much in great detail. I was not very worried about the fact that I was actually bribing a German soldier. I knew the German official line and mentality in that respect. They considered the real culprit in such a transaction, as the one who is willing to accept the bribe.

For instance, if a prisoner was caught escaping he was punished. But it was considered by the Germans that it was a prisoner's duty and honour to try to reach the other lines again. The ones who were at fault were those who allowed the escape to materialise in the first place.

The questions about the four items which I gave to Alfred went on for a very long time and they tried every police trick in their manual to make my answers inconsistent. But I stuck to my guns; I gave Alfred one chocolate, one tin of sardines, plus two more items, but I can not remember with certainty what those were. But all that seemed not to be good enough for the Gestapo men, so I finally told them; I have stated that I gave Alfred FOUR items. Four is the number which follows three and precedes five. It is totally immaterial to me and so it should be to you, that if the third item was a bar of toilet soap, in a pink or blue wrapper.

But, of course, there was a reason for all these questions, which I found out at a later occasion. During this interrogation a gentleman entered the room and all present jumped up from their seats. He must have been one of the 'Herr Doctors'. He circled me once with a sardonic expression on his face and said,

"So das ist der Vogel." Vogel is a common German surname but can also be used in an English connotation like 'jail bird', as it means 'bird'. Another translation would be, 'So, that's the geyser.' I chose to ignore the sneer. My hobnailed boots hit the floorboards and I shouted, "The correct name is WEINER not VOGEL?'

The 'Herr Doctor' made an about turn without uttering another syllable and left the room.

I could feel that the atmosphere in the room had changed by now quite a bit. The three officers were quite pleased with themselves or with the results of the proceedings. I have been standing in the vicinity of a huge ceramic—tiled stove and one officer told me.

"Now, why don't you take your coat off?" I had none of it.

"I have been standing here next to this stove since 2 o'clock - I shall carry on, as before."

The three then went to confer to another room and I was left alone with the lady stenographer, who said to me quite friendly,

"Das haben Sie notwendig gehabt." In other words, "You needed that as much as a hole in the head."

These words sounded like music to my ears and very reassuring. They came from an unbiased person, who has been witness to the whole proceedings from the beginning and I felt I handled myself in this situation as best as I could.

Eventually they produced some papers and demanded that I sign on the dotted line. I retorted that I will only put my name to a statement, after I have been able to read the contents of it. That remark earned me a very indignant look, but the officer then read out four type written pages at great length.

It occurred to me for a moment that I am still only hearing a verbal version, but thought that I would be pushing my luck, if I refused again, to sign. I insisted, however, that a post—script be added, that from my part of the whole business there was absolutely nothing else, but that I wished to gain some news about my family. And then I made a mistake and could have kicked myself, the moment I uttered the words,

"Perhaps you also have parents?"

It is a sign of weakness if you appeal for sympathy to the Gestapo, of all people, and out of context with my previous behaviour.

Towards the end of the interrogation, I noticed that a member of the German army, a Feldwebel, has been sitting behind me. whose presence I have hitherto not noticed. I later learned that the Gestapo might need me for further inquiries and wanted to confine me in some prison where they would have stripped me of my uniform, but the Feldwebel insisted that I have to remain within the jurisdiction of the Wehrmacht Heer - the army.

A compromise was then agreed upon and I was interned in a solitary cell at a small French POW camp in town. In total darkness, I must have spent there three or four days and I did not even know if it was day or night. I possessed a Russian black market pocket watch which weighed about a quarter of a pound and it was just as well that I had forgot to wind it up - it ticked so loud, it would not have let me sleep.

Suddenly broad daylight blinded me as a German Feldwebel flung the door to my cell wide open and I jumped to my feet. He addressed me with the words,

"So you are the tractor driver." I was speechless for a moment, then answered,

"Gewesen." The German language has only one single word for refering to something of the past and could best be translated with, 'That's a has been." (sic tractor driving). The Feldwebel laughed and said, "No, no, you're going back there, to

your farm." I did not believe what I just heard but then saw a Scottish sergeant major, resplendant in his kilt, who put an arm around my shoulders and said,

"Very well done, my dear laddie - but then you speak their effing language." A horse and cart was waiting and I made a triumphant return to the Lubowitz farm. Cpl Meyer greeted me in his Viennese slang with the words. "Du schaust aus wie dem Totengraeber von der Schaufel gesprungen." In English, "You look as if you have just been dug up again." (from the grave).

I then heard what happened in the evening of the day of my arrest by the Gestapo. Nobody was about and nobody was to be seen on that fatal morning but everybody knew. My comrades did not call it arrest - they maintained that I had been abducted and they practically roughed up our guard, who swore on his mother's grave that he did not know anything before hand. My friends were not prepared to go to bed and say a prayer for me, but decided on immediate action, unbeknown to the guard.

It must have been about 8 o'clock in the evening, when four men went into the village and confiscated four bicycles. That was no problem, first the villagers were promised that the bicycles will be returned soon and second, the villagers were by now somewhat afraid of us. It was the end of the year 1944 and we were after all members of the victorious allied armies and they would not have dared to refuse a request.

In charge of our working party was now Sergeant Major Smudiak (Royal Engineers). Cpl Meyer had handed over the command of our party to his company Sgt Major. He was a tall, forceful character, a bit of a 'Gewalt—Mensch', who came to Palestine as a small child from Russia and was in civvy street something of a foreman of port workers in Haifa. He was no great friend of mine, I once got very hysterical about something, he was in charge and he slapped my face. I know it was the right thing to do at that moment, we shook hands I forgave him, but I had not forgotten.

Then there was RSM Clancy, the Welshman in charge of the Red Cross depot. The third was Sgt Chaplan, the 16 stone distillery expert, plus another sergeant. These four non - commissioned officers cycled to the company's headquarters in town and hammered on the duty officer's desk with their fists and refused to move until I had been handed over to them or insisted to be imprisoned together with me - disregarding whatever crime I was supposed to have been accused of. It must have been the most unusual scene and was talked about in German army circles for weeks. That a POW tried to escape was quite a common occurrence, that four men together on bicycles at night should do that, had never been heard of. But that the destination of the escape was to be to the headquarters of the company supposed to be guarding them against such an act was found to be quite out of the ordinary and even hilarious.

Certain information must have filtered through by now and the duty officer, by then surrounded by most of his staff was able to quieten down my would be rescuers and convince them that I was no longer in the hands of the Gestapo, but being held at a French POW compound, under Wehrmacht Heer command, until completion of a few more inquiries.

The following had happened; Alfred R. did not get any home leave to go to Prague. Another group of POWs was sent to collect further Red Cross parcels from our depot, but Alfred was not detailed to be one of the guards on this trip. He gave another German soldier a piece of paper, to be handed to me only. The note must have read something like that; 'Your instructions fully memorised, hope to be able to let you have some news soon.'The German soldier went straight to his commanding officer with this note and quite a few alarm bells must have started ringing in a few places. Alfred was arrested, his wife was arrested and his flat in Prague searched. There existed a war psychosis in Germany and placards were to be seen everywhere which warned; 'Don't talk - walls have ears!' Initially, the Germans suspected that they unearthed a link between a British POW to some Czech underground movement via a corrupt German.

Back on the farm, life went on as usual, quite a few inquisitive villagers wanted to know what on earth my offence could have been, to have been arrested by the Gestapo and considered it to be also an achievement to be released again - but I remained stumm. I had to tell the inspector and the boss, of course.

It must have been shortly after Christmas, 1944, when one evening my colleagues asked me if my boots were polished and my uniform nicely pressed. I wanted to know why - as it was the middle of the week - so they told me. I had to get up very early in the morning, a German guard had already arrived and was billeted in the inspector's house for the night and would take me on a long journey by train to the town of Breslau (now Wroclaw), a sequence to my Gestapo arrest. They had information about the whole thing for a long time, but it was a well kept secret, they did not want me to have sleepless nights.

Breslau was a very big city of perhaps one million inhabitants, and I had been there before 1933 eq. Hitler, with my parents on a day's outing across the Czech-German border, in my father's car. My parents' best friend was a Doctor Julius Kohn, an ear, nose and throat specialist, who always told my father that he could not afford to run a car, because he gave most of his medical services free, especially if children were concerned. He was known to feel embarrassed to send out reminders for payment and maintained that if people did not pay, that they must have been hard up. Dr Kohn and his wife were guests in my father's car on one of our trips to Breslau, when we had to cross the frontier post back to Czechoslovakia. The border police were known and feared to be the most chauvinistic Czechs and everybody was assumed to be a smuggler. We had the disadvantage to be considered German speaking Jews, so they were intent on searching us for hours and even started to dismantle the spare tyre, when the officer in charge of the border guard stormed out of his hut and shouted at his men to stop everything forthwith. He then welcomed Dr Kohn with outstretched arms and embraced him (he must have come across the Doctor's passport in his office) and insisted that we all have coffee with him. He confided to my mother that Dr Kohn once saved the officer's daughter's life with an emergency operation and had never accepted payment for his services.

When the British Labour Party offered asylum in England to 1000 brother's families in 1938, Dr Kohn was approached and offered seats on the train ride, provided that he was prepared to act in his capacity as a doctor for the duration of the journey. Other people would have given their right arm at such a chance to escape from Hitler, but Dr Kohn declined. He explained that as a specialist consultant he had not been familiar with general practice ailments for a very long time and he did not feel competent to give a correct diagnosis should he be required to. He could have never reconciled it with his conscience, if he should make a mistake. So he soon perished in a gas oven with his wife.

I had already known Heinz, the German soldier, who took me to Breslau, from some previous occasion. He was so severely wounded in Russia that he could not carry a rifle but was given a revolver instead. He walked with a limp, he could not use his left arm very much and had the left side of his face blown away, so they fitted him with a glass eye which was about one inch below the level of his other, real eye. I knew I would have no trouble with him on our way to Breslau because he could not care less about anything. He was an intelligent fellow and knew how grotesque he looked and was only bitter about the fact that they did not let him die, but patched him together again so horribly.

For me the train journey to Breslau was uneventful, but a middle aged lady, a uniformed railway guard chatted Heinz up, after she made her ticket inspection. Not knowing that I spoke German, she insisted to find out if disregarding of Heinz's terrible injuries, all other parts of his body were still in working order. So they left me sitting alone while they retired to the guard's compartment. Eventually we found the huge garrison in Breslau with many large buildings, where they locked me up in a tiny broom chamber, together with some Canadian murderers or Australian rapists and not enough space to sit with outstretched legs.

'Don't talk - walls have ears!'

The following morning Heinz came and we went through miles of corridors when we met a German soldier under guard, who had all insignia ripped off his uniform. Heinz knew the other guard and stopped him, and I recognised the other prisoner as being Alfred R., who was quite pleased to see me. I heard that he was not worried about his impending court marshal, anything but the Russian front. He knew that even if he would be sentenced to death - execution would be a long time away and the war would be over before that.

Later on I was taken to a courtroom, where five or six German generals were sitting at a table. Alfred R. was also there and he had a German officer as defence counsel, who wore a black gown over his uniform. Somebody asked me if I spoke German and gave me a book to hold in my right hand. I saw that it was Adolf Hitler's 'MEIN KAMPF', when the presiding general started to whisper to one of his colleagues on the left and then again on the right and then all put their heads together and they took the book away. They realised at the last moment that they would be creating the greatest ridicule and mockery to ask a dirty Jew to swear on the Fuehrer's life to speak nothing but the truth. After a few more questions an usher wheeled in a large two tier trolley overloaded with tins and boxes, among them I recognised Czech black bootpolish. They were all contraband items and suddenly I understood why the Gestapo in Ratibor took over an hour to

find out which items I gave to Alfred some weeks ago. They wanted to find out if I was part of a huge black market ring. I realised that my presence was required as witness for the prosecution only and I had to leave, but I never found out Alfred R.'s sentence.

Heinz and I left Breslau in bitter cold and deep snow and we arrived back in the evening at our Lubowitz farm to our biggest surprise. Nobody was there anymore. My belongings were left on my bed and I stared at bare walls of what had been my home for just a few weeks short of three years.

MARCH

My guard Heinz had a note to contact the company for further instructions. The inspector told me that the whole working party were given one or two hours to pack and leave. I went into the kitchen to have something to eat, but was practically drenched by tears from two or three girls. Like wildfire, it became known that I was the only one left, the last link, and the girls wanted to know if I will meet their beloved ones in the Stalag and assure them of their undying love - they were never given the chance to say goodbye and would they ever see them again.

Endless evenings were spent in discussion about our fate at the end of the war, but we never assumed to be called back to the Stalag while the fighting was still going on, and the war was not over.

Back at the Stalag I met old friends I had not seen for years. All working parties were being recalled and the camp was overcrowded and bursting at its seams. There was no space to walk, sit or sleep. Meyer had some disagreement with his old Sgt. Major (whom he had brought to Lubowitz) about how to run the working party and had left for the Stalag some weeks earlier. There he had got into a fight, probably during a game of chess, and had his right forearm in plaster. Meyer was over four foot tall - his playmate (a well known figure named Dovid Bluweis, a Tel-Aviv bus driver) was a six footer. Myeyer hit out at his opponent and broke his own thumb. This misfortune undoubtedly saved Meyer's life, only the strong and fit could survive the following months. With his plaster cast he got himself onto a hospital train to Bavaria in the south and was liberated by American forces.

In the middle of the night we got marching orders. In deep snow and bitter cold, out of tens of thousands of POWs the Palestininans and the Royal Air Force were considered VIPs and were the first ordered to leave camp and march west. There were a few barracks of RAF personnel, an overflow from a different camp. It must have been clear to the German High Command that the Red Army could not he stopped, but they were still far away. It is also a historical fact that concentration camps in these eastern areas were liquidated at that time and inmates were force marched.

We soon had to learn how to adapt to our new conditions. We had to reduce the weight of the loads we were carrying on our backs. Everybody amassed a great variety of things and memorabilia over the years and every item started to weigh a ton and got heavier with every step and had to he discarded. Every prisoner knew that he must never ever part with food and all carried some sort of iron ration. We also wore a blanket rolled into a sausage over our shoulder. Spare clothing was not thrown away but put on. If you had two pairs of long johns, you put them on and you marched in three layers of underwear against the cold. All were in possession of balaclavas over which you wore other head garments. I put my sleeveless leather jacket over my greatcoat. Our column must have consisted of about 5,000 men and both sides of the country roads were littered with an assortment of discarded articles for many miles. We were led by a company of German soldiers, who walked alongside.

After a few days, somebody had a grand idea which was copied by thousands. On a short plank of wood or board a belt or string attached with your belongings and pulled along in the snow or ice, like a sledge. it is still a miracle to me how it was possible to survive under these harsh conditions from approximately January to March 1945, practically without food, in the open, with very rarely ever having some sort of roof over your head for the night. Farm animals did not survive the winters in these parts of Eastern Europe and had to be stabled and wildlife had to he fed by forresters unless they were hibernating but we were human species, and we seemed to be the toughest.

'Our column must have consisted of about 5,000 men'

We must have marched between 10 and 20 miles each day, always avoiding towns. The Germans had to find the right type of village to stay the night and this they arranged by telephone and reconnaissance by bicycle outriders. They had to have the co-operation of the village burgomasters to provide two or three pairs of good horses with carts or wagons to follow the prisoner's column for a day. One of these carts carried the German's rucksacks, the soldiers walked alongside with us with their rifles only, sharing the same fate, swearing and wishing the war was over.

One or two wagons were required to pick up those prisoners who were unable to walk anymore and would have frozen to death. Germany could not permit their landscape to be littered with corpses. The villages had to be big enough to billet the Germans in farmhouses, where they usually found a warm bed and something to eat. Then each farm had to be suitable to provide an enclosure or courtyard for a few hundred prisoners to be locked away to spend the night, with a minimum of soldiers, who had to take turns as watchmen.

Sometimes the selected village was found to be unsuitable after all and after some hours of waiting we were forced to march to a different place miles away. To survive, we had to adapt to these terrible conditions and our Germans had to learn too. Hours before we approached a village the locals were ordered to remove all milk churns from their roadside positions. While we walked we didn't feel the cold but sweated and became thirsty. So it can be imagined how long it took to fill the water bottles with spouts for a few thousand men from one village pump. Then the villagers were ordered never to let a bread or bakery van to be seen, not even empty. We further suggested that large containers such as tin baths should be placed alongside our route, filled with drinking water, so that we then could immerse a water bottle or mess tin for a few moments, without stopping the mile long column for hours. The hope that we might find something to eat at the next overnight stop, drove us on relentlessly. Sometimes, but very seldom, we heard that bread would be distributed at a future road junction. If proved to be true, we lined up eight or ten abreast to receive one loaf between us from a vehicle which may have been ordered from a nearby garrison and was then guarded by Germans with fixed bayonettes. But it was never enough and if half the prisoners received a slice of bread once or twice a week they were considered lucky. When we arrived for an overnight stop, animal fodder like beets or turnips vanished into our stomachs. Sometimes if we found access to a grain store, we cut a small slit into a sack and extracted a few handfuls of wheat. To consume a few single grains we had to be able to make a fire, held a mess tin with a few grains over the flames until they popped up and became soft and could be devoured then singly. It was unavoidable that you found in your mouth a lot of undigestable hard outer skins, which had to be spat out. We deluded ourselves with the belief that about twenty grains of wheat could supply our emaciated bodies with a lot of nutrients.

The warmest place to spend the night was on a dunghill. The chemical process of rotting manure creates heat and as there was only a space for a limited number of marchers, some asked others to cover them up and they slept like in a warm bed. They did not have to be embarrassed about smelling on the following morning. Our column embraced a few thousand bodies who had not washed, shaved, taken off or changed their clothing for weeks and months. We did not notice it ourselves, but have been told that a cloud of indescribable stench disemminated above us. It was also a grave mistake to take your boots off during the night. Your feet may have swollen up and the boots froze rock-hard and you were unable to put them back on again in the morning.

During this 1000 mile march, a soldier in a Polish uniform joined us and asked if he could hide within our group. He must have worked for years in a village and spoke only Polish and Yiddish and must have been able to hide his Jewish identity, until he overheard some of our fellows. He was a genius, his uniform became more British day by day. I could never understand how he functioned. When the column stopped for a short while or over night, he vanished and re-appeared soon with a few cabbage heads or something to eat. Once he returned with an enormous pot full of steaming hot potatoes and salt and he always distributed all to his close new found friends in gratitude for allowing him to be in our midst, he hoped to be able to reach England with us eventually, where he had some relations.

I did not smoke very much during my years on the farm. The German authorities paid us a few pfennigs and about one cigarette a day, if any were available. With Red Cross parcels we usually also got English cigarettes and pipe tobacco and within the last year on the farm, we were at the source of a parcel depot and never went short. Besides that I received 200 Craven A monthly from my uncle in England. Through the years, I must have collected between 20 and 30 airtight tins of pipe tobacco. After I arrived back alone from Breslau's court martial and had to pack my belongings on my last night on the Lubowitz farm, I emptied all tins of tobacco into a little pillow case (it was easier to carry) and I never departed from that. Tobacco was an international currency all over war torn Europe, and my horde was worth a small fortune.

Sometimes the Pole came back from his escapades with empty hands, exhausted and near to tears and then I gave him a tiny

amount of tobacco in the palm of my hand and with an astonished and grateful smile on his face, he was off again, like a weasel, to return soon with something to eat.

During this forced march, sometimes not due west, but north or south, trying to locate a resting place for the night, we overtook a column from a concentration camp. They had an old steel cable about an inch thick and a mile long, across which were hundreds of wooden stakes, fixed two to three feet apart, which were held by three KZ inmates, on each side of the cable. At the end of it were one or two cars attached, full of frozen bodies.

This column moved so slowly that we thought it was stationary. It was clear that most of those unfortunates held on to the wooden poles for support, they were too weak to stand on their own feet and if one fell into the snow, an able one rushed up and helped him to put his hands back to the wooden stave, without gloves in the freezing cold. Historians tell, us that the German order was EVACUATE, the Russians are coming, and evacuation it was. They could not let those walking skeletons die in peace in the camps of Poland.

After walking about two months, now warmer and in slush or mud, the sole of my left boot simply wore out. But not to worry, I have not parted with my spare boots, the officer's brown ones, I chose from a large stock, way back at our Lubowitz depot. I knew that they were a bit tight but hoped they would stretch in time - but my vanity cost me dearly. I soon felt pain in my left foot and after we settled down at the next night's resting place, I had a two inch blister on my heel. Before starting next morning I went on sick—parade, but the medics were not over friendly, as they had to deal with a great number of malingerers, but with seeing my blister, I had no problems. An orderly produced a rusty pair of scissors, cut my blister and stuck a plaster without any gauze over it. That's all he had left, he told me. I limped on in pain for a few hours, then pulled the plaster off put the sock (which had not been washed for two months) back over the raw flesh and continued marching as best as I could. I was unable to put the boot on properly anymore, touched the ground only with the front part of my foot and limped along with the help of a stick. I became one of the stragglers, arrived hours later at the night's stop, had absolutely no strength left and no chance to find anything to eat.

Next morning I hobbled back to sick parade and was confronted by a Captain of the South African Medical Corps who sat on a bale of straw in a barn, together with a German army doctor (who must have been sent from a nearby garrison). The South African, (there were so many) I had never seen before, was engaged in an animated conversation with the German. His parents must have been settlers in Africa, he spoke fluent German, albeit with a strong accent. The two looked at my heel, then asked me to take my trousers off and they saw, as well as I did, that a thin red line went up from my foot, on the inside of my leg, up to my groin. They were unaware that I spoke German and I heard them agree, that I could not be expected to do further marching, otherwise at best I would be in danger of losing my whole leg. They referred me to a medical orderly who made a small cross with iodine into the palm of my left hand. After my remark that the iodine should be applied to my foot, the orderly told me to shut up and not be so bloody clever and walk over to where some carts and horses were standing. There, another medic demanded to see the iodine sign on my palm and then allowed me to climb up on to a cart. I felt rather depressed having heard something about my leg and if the cross perhaps implied something of a terminal meaning, when I saw another prisoner, who was obviously much worse off than me, but he had a small circle on his palm and I felt a bit better, looking forward to where we were going and not having to march again. After a few hours ride we arrived at a small POW camp with neat wooden huts, full of sick Russian prisoners. We were put into a separate building and informed by the Germans that a mug of hot, black water called coffee, in the morning, followed by three boiled potatoes in the afternoon is all they could provide and unless they receive another delivery soon, the issue of three potatoes will be cut to two. Noticing the pitiful state we were in, they informed us, that a large British POW working party were in a camp a few kilometres away and that they were known to have Red Cross parcels. The Germans were prepared to organise a horse and cart and we could send a delegation there to see if they were prepared to let us have some of their food.

This was near a town called Oschatz in Saxonia and our British friends had no idea about the evacuation of Stalag 8b and the forced marches and they gave us a few of their supplies.

Near Oshatz was a huge aerodrome with hundreds of German planes meticulously lined up in deathly silence without any movement over the entire airport. It was spring 1945 and Adolf had not a drop of fuel left for his air force.

The running of the interior of our camp was entirely in Russian hands. The Germans informed us that we would have to make a deal with the Russians, to allow us access to the kitchen. The Germans were not prepared to do more than guard the perimeter fence - they were afraid of lice, cholera and typhus. We were about 30 to 40 Britishers and I was the only one who could easily understand what the Germans had to say. The German I spoke on that march was terrible. It was not advisable to be clever and stick your neck out. Nobody was counting anybody, one prisoner less (or 100 less) would not have been noticed, and my German knowledge was about as good or bad as any Englishman's with a few years in captivity.

'It was spring 1945 and Adolf had not a drop of fuel left for his air force'

So, I had to do my utmost to understand what our jailers had to say and I told them as best as I could, to leave it to me with the Russkies and their kitchen.

What was the advantage of having a packet of Lyons tea and a tin of sweet, condensed milk, if you could not boil any water?

I previously already had a conversation (if you speak Czech, you speak a bit of Russian) with a Russian, who was one of their spokesmen, whose name was Vassily, and we had the use of the kitchen plus some firewood, every afternoon, but it was not for nothing we had to barter with anything that was useful that we still possessed.

We became great friends and I sat together with about ten Russians for a chat. I provided the tea, called 'chay' in Russian; it's the same in the Czech language. One day Vassily gave me a little nudge on the quiet and wanted to know if 'I was a Hebrew', he was a bank clerk in Moscow before the war. Then the Moscovite rolled me one of their machorka cigarettes with a piece of newspaper, which nearly made me cough blood. The cigarette I rolled from Players tobacco was not appreciated.

My foot was cleaned and bandaged in crepe paper and soon healed. Even the German wounded had only paper bandages.

With the help of a little bit of tobacco, I was able to exchange my officer's boots for a comfortable pair of army boots in a reasonable condition.

The bunk bed above me was occupied by a very young looking Englishman, whose public school English I could hardly understand. The poor chap was in terrible agony and only asked for a drop of water occasionally. He suffered from some great continuous internal pain, which did not even let him sleep during the night.

There were about 10 Russian doctors in this camp, whose average age must have been 25 years old and who walked about in white coats, which must have had their last wash way back in Russia. Every other day or so, an elderly German doctor came to inspect the sick or to count how many were well enough to leave the camp. He was a very surly person, but his first call was on the public schoolboy. He used me as an interpreter, but I realised that the doctor had already long ago diagnosed the boy's ailment, and could not help him. The Russian doctors were feared by their compatriots more than the German ones. Any Russian who could not get up in the morning or shout, "Da, Da," was taken by their hands and feet and thrown outside the hut presumed dead.

One day, the German doctor asked me to translate for the boy to inform him that he had secured a hospital bed for him somewhere and that he would be operated on.

After about two to three weeks, twenty to thirty men found ourselves fit enough to leave this camp and were ordered back on the road, guarded by the Germans. On our way we passed through Dresden, but were ordered into an underground shelter, as this famous town was being bombed by the Allies. It was indeed flattened to the ground and we had to spend all day-light hours with a few hundred German civilians in the shelter and we did not feel very comfortable under the circumstances. But the German population were very subdued and ignored us in total silence.

At nightfall we started to move again and met up with another marching group of a few thousand British POWs and I could not find one familiar face. This column was held up in a village and I found myself standing near an old German farmer, who was observing the marchers, with a foot long empty pipe hanging from his mouth. I said to him; You bread - I tobacco, shnell, shnell (quick, quick) and he returned with a nice piece of bread.

The snow was gone, the sun was shining, and the roads we marched on, going west, were primitively marked 'Refugee treck'. The main roads facing east and the frontline, were being kept clear for German Army movements. But we were not the only people on these trecks and the signs were not for our benefit. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of the German civilian population were fleeing from the front and the Russians. They came in an assortment of carts, trucks or wagons, hastily converted into caravans with tarpaulins or living room carpets, drawn by

horses, oxen, cows, tractors, even steam engines. It was an endless uninterrupted column, moving by day and night, overtaking us foot sloggers.

With this sight, I could not help the feeling of some malicious pleasure, a little bit of 'necomeh'. On the one hand, I was one of them, only I was forced to flee, I was homeless, I did know where I would end up once this march was over. On the other hand, I had much more experience, thousands of years more. It was the anti-semites who coined the phrase of 'The Wandering Jew'. These Germans had lived in their homes since the ice age. I could think of opening a roadside consultancy bureau. Moses led us out of Egypt, Hitler led them out of their homes. It was always 'Our beloved Fuehrer' - they deserved him.

'Excrement came running down from all floors through the wire mesh'

But on we walked and marched and we must have weighed by now about half of our normal weight. We stayed at a village where about fifty to one hundred men had to he put up for the night at different small holdings.

We were very lucky to have found a nice barn and a very sympathetic farmer's wife who was visibly shocked by our appearance. She started a fire under a big cauldron in her washhouse and promised to cook soup for us all, if need be all night.

But only the very first were lucky. In our column were a few hundred very recent and very undisciplined American POWs. At their farm they found a few piglets, which they tore to pieces and devoured raw. All the farmer came across was an empty pigsty and blood everywhere and ran hand wringing to the German Oberleutnant.

After that the whole German company came running with fixed bayonettes screaming, "All out." They were enraged as us, as they had to leave their warm farmer's beds and kitchens again.

They led us to a waterlogged quarry where we were left standing all night in freezing water, leaning back to back in couples for support, to sleep in an upright position. The Germans closed the entrance to the quarry with a light machinegun with only a few men. It must have been one of my worst nights, besides the disappointment of having smelled the lovely soup, but not having been able to drink it.

The human brain may be endowed with a varying proportion of intelligence, besides some unrecognised instincts, like automatically raising a forearm to avert a blow to one's head. Shortly after the war I sometimes realised that I was paying undue attention to dustbins. Similar to not failing to notice a pretty girl passing by.

I presume that the optic nerve sends a signal to the brain, that those dustbins are bound to contain remnants of food. Luckily, time is a great healer. I still notice a pretty face across the street.

In the new group I found myself in, after my foot had healed and I could march again, I could not make any friends. I was a loner - a single pin, so to speak. As we were nearer to animals than humans, we had to roam in packs. I knew that I was vulnerable in this state, but long established cliques did not want to accept a newcomer.

We arrived fairly early at a resting place and I found myself in a pleasant barn with dry straw and I still had a sizeable chunk of the bread left that I had exchanged with the old man for tobacco. In high spirits, I left my things in the barn and went to look for some water with my mess tin. I intended to consume small pieces of bread very slowly, interspersed with sips of water. This made the bread swell up in your stomach and made you believe that you were not hungry any more.

Returning to the barn with the water, I experienced the shock of my life. I could see the flap of my haversack wide open and knew the bread was gone. My appeal to some others sitting around was greeted with blank faces, nobody had seen anything, but somebody must have noticed my bread previously. There are no words to describe how down—hearted I felt. I was like a Donald Trump who had been told that all his possessions are the shirt on his back and I threw myself into the straw.

By now well inside Western Germany, we arrived at a dilapidated brick factory which consisted of a number of very high round towers. There were not solid walls but horizontal gaps between each brick of all outside walls and wire—mesh with wooden battens for the many floors.

Once upon a time there must have been a lift, but now only a narrow metal ladder connected each storey. This factory must have once produced a special air-dried brick, as we could see from the nearby clay pits.

The reason why the Germans used such a place to imprison us was quite clear. We were in the west and there was no point to drag us around in circles and there were not enough camps to accommodate us.

These towers had only a small ground level door, which was guarded by two soldiers with machine pistols, so that the Germans could confine a large number of prisoners with a minimum of manpower.

These towers were sheer hell and had no toilet facilities, so that excrement came running down from all floors through the wire mesh. But as there was no intake by mouth, not so much would came out!

One day, a farmer came with a horse and cart on which he had mounted a long, wooden vat which originally was used for the transport of liquid manure. In this container they brought some soup which could only be distributed to the first few floors of the towers because it was not enough for all, besides that the narrow ladder did not permit any movements of hundreds of men. The higher you were the cleaner it was, but you never stood a chance to get something to eat.

I knew exactly how the German system worked and could envisage an office where somebody wrote in a daybook; 'The prisoners are fed with hot soup once a day.' If those in charge were bastards, then they would have written, 'adequately fed'. And I am convinced that these were the words used, because I found out that they were indeed bastards, a few days later.

We noticed not the normal change of guards outside the door, but a great number of soldiers shouting, "Raus, raus," and everybody had to fall in for an impromptu parade.

A German officer, whom I had never seen before, ran about screaming. If he would have marched with us through snow and ice for months he would not have been so pompous any more.

After the order, 'still gestanden' (attention) was given, I heard the officer shout; 'Juden vortreten' (Jews one step forward). I could scarcely believe my ears, I thought I must have been the only one, so I was certainly not going to move. Within the next moment I was violently pushed by somebody behind me, with the words unmistakenly spoken in the East—End jargon of London; "You are a Yid, aintcha?"

I was led to another tower, where I found an already existing group of about thirty Palestininans with many familiar faces and was heartily welcomed by a sergeant who had shared three years with me at the Lubowitz farm.

He was no particular friend of mine, we once had an argument over a young lady, but that was years ago and forgotten, but I suspected that the pleasure of meeting me, was not all sheer love. Indeed, he wanted to know if anything was left of my great horde of tobacco. I was very glad to be among friends, to be able to talk and speculate about the end of the war and our fate and they made room for me immediately. They were placed on the ground floor and had a number of army ground sheets knotted together like a roof and were reasonably sheltered from the 'things' that rained from above. We were there also in the strategic position to get some of the soup.

After a few days, this Jewish group was marched to a railway station where a truck with clean, new straw was waiting for us. We viewed this phenomenon of comparative luxury suspiciously with mixed feelings . We knew the Germans liked to use a carrot to help to smooth proceedings and were relived when we arrived at a huge POW camp after a few hours journey.

This place was called Fallingbostel and was always connected with the military in German history for a few hundred years. The vast army installations are, today, the home of the famous Desert Rats, and Fallingbostel was frequently mentioned during the Gulf War news.

This camp was bursting at its seams with mainly British POWs. Once again, like the first to he marched out of the old Stalag 8b together with the important RAF personnel, we, the Palestininans, were viewed differently by the German High Command and removed from the brick factory. The camp was, however, no sanatorium.

Luckily you could sleep in the open as it was now about the end of March and there was no more space in the many barracks, but there was absolutely nothing to eat. Not a blade of grass could be found in this huge camp. German organisation was in total disarray and only the barbed wire and watch towers were manned. In this camp were several units of recently captured British paratroopers, the sorry remnants of Montgomery's abortive, airborne invasion of Holland in the spring of 1945. In command of these men was a regimental sergeant-major who strutted about with a ten inch waxed moustache and a stave under his arm.

The end of the war was near and the guard around the camp was mounted by German soldiers together with British parachutists in unison.

The Germans went on duty with their rucksacks and all personal belongings, they could never be sure to be able to return to their barracks again. We heard that many Germans insisted that the carrying of the rifle be shared with his British counterpart.

A little bit of soup was probably provided for the paratroopers, but inside the camp the vast kitchens stood idle and there was absolutely nothing to eat.

The future looked good, freedom could he ours at any moment, but it could also take another week or more.

I sat exhausted, leaning against a wall

and drank a little water to prevent dehydration but felt my limbs going numb. I decided to get up and move about a bit without too much effort to avoid burning up any calories which I could not replace.

Then I went back again to my place at the wall and sat in the sunshine, hoping that the rays might do me some good, but something bothered me. I had seen something on my walk that I could not define, it was nothing horrific, it was something warm and pleasant from the past, from my home perhaps.

I thought that I had better try to take stock of my mind and mental strength. I had seen people going totally deranged from the pains of hunger.

Was I afflicted by some form of fata morgana, like a traveller, dying of thirst in a desert, sees an oasis with water before his eyes? It did not let me rest and I got up again, trying to reconstruct my steps to find what I must have encountered.

And suddenly I saw what it was. I had passed a hut with a few hundred prisoners with a different, non British uniform, which attracted my attention.

Now that I heard them talk I recognised that they were Slovaks. It is about the same language as Czech with a softer pronunciation and dialect. My father's house in the suburbs of our town was on the way to our local garrison and I had watched soldiers marching by since I was a little boy.

What I had noticed brought back memories from better times. I remembered the crossed sword uniform buttons and leggings of the Slovaks and they told me their own story. They were once members of the Czechoslovak Army.

The Slovak fascist leader, Hlinka, made them fight alongside the Germans against the Red Army. They later had a chance to surrender, became turncoats and fought with the Russians, but were cut off in the Tatra mountains, fell into German captivity and were transported to Fallingbostel's POW camp. I thought they were lucky not to have been executed by the Germans.

They were very friendly, they must have been in this camp for some time, realised that I had not eaten for days, and offered me some soup. They then told me to visit a real landsmann of mine. He was a Czech RAF pilot from Prague, shot down in the beginning of the war, and now in the tuberculosis unit. They told me how to get into that compound.

It was a barbed wire camp within the camp with a skull and cross bones sign forbidding entry, and I didn't even need the hole in the fence, there were only the sick in their beds, coughing blood, and nobody else about anymore.

I found my fellow countryman and he asked me for a favour - you guessed it - could I try to get him some cigarettes? I was, by then, surrounded by a few patients who could still manage to walk about and they all wanted to smoke. There were all nationalities there, French or Belgians, Poles and Yugoslavs. I don't remember any British, but there were several hundred in all, and all very ill and weak. They had a vast assortment of tins and cans, originating from all over the world. I knew nearby of a few hundred very demoralised Americans because I had seen some Camel cigarettes changing hands. I selected a tin of meat and veg which could be eaten cold and a tin of coffee (it was Swiss instant), I never knew it existed.

All of a sudden I could run, handed the meat and veg over to my friend the sergeant, went to the Americans and demanded two packets of Camels for the coffee, hurried back as fast as my legs could carry me to the sick and handed over only one packet of cigarettes. Then I rushed back to my friend and we opened the meat and veg, but I only ate a few spoonful, I had no peace of mind, I was not hungry anymore. I knew I was sitting on a goldmine and I was going to make hay while the sun was shining.

I must have made 10-20 runs, I made a point of not accepting anything but sealed items and nothing that could be contaminated by tuberculosis and my friend was guarding a large amount of food.

He was instructed not to move under any circumstances (I had not forgotten my lost piece of bread) and even to wet his trousers if need be! I could get him a new pair not with a flick of a finger, but with the flick of a tin, as I realised that I was, by now, a nouveau riche camp millionaire. The next morning, back at the sick compound, one chap told me about his dream of going home, dressed in the fawn coloured American battledress jacket which he called balloon silk, but must have been an early type of nylon. In no time, many of the sick wanted the battledress and the Americans were starving and mad about coffee. In the end, not to arouse suspicion or give somebody ideas, I put on three jackets on top of each other, the smallest first and my own last and I must have looked like the Michellin man when an American had the cheek to ask if I was a Jew.

FREEDOM

Suddenly, it was all over. After four years in captivity, we were free. I heard a commotion, people were all running in one direction and I saw a British tank which had just flattened the entrance gate of the camp. The tank corps chaps chatted with us, threw us some bread from the turrets, got an order over the radio, said, "Sorry - be back in a jiffy," raced a few hundred yards towards a forest, fired a salvo and we saw hundreds of German soldiers coming out with hands over their heads. That's an international sign language we all liked.

'Suddenly, it was over. After four years in captivity, we were free.'

We had to wait a few days for transport to get us to Blighty, and we started to explore the countryside around the camp. A few large, strange depots were to be seen not far away and we soon had the doors broken down. One contained nothing but millions of bottles of '4711' eau de toilette, in all sizes.

After a couple of minutes inside that building you had to rush out, gasping for fresh air. The floors were covered with liquid and broken bottles and I just took a small one as a souvenir. Another store was full of fountain pens and I took one. It was greatly admired a few weeks later in London and I was frequently offered one pound, should I wish to part with it. That's when I remember seeing a Cypriot sergeant, filling a pillowcase with hundreds of fountain pens. Another building was full of tons of Italian spaghetti. Everybody must have taken a few packets, which broke on the way, and a white line of about a mile long over green meadows was aptly called 'spaghetti lane'.

A large lorry convoy came to move us after a few more days. Red Capped military policemen standing across their bikes at a number of road junctions directed our lorries. I also noticed signal corps men laying yellow and blue cables alongside the roads. Next to me sat a fellow from the Royal Corps of Signals I knew and I asked him if such cables are being laid from the hinterland to the front, or the other way round? He gave one look and shouted,

"Bloody hell, they are taking us to the frontline."

Next I thought I had been hit by a bullet with a nasty blow to my head and blood streaming down over my face and assuming that I had kicked the bucket after four years captivity, just having tasted freedom for a few hours. While I stood up carelessly on the fast moving lorry, a partly broken off branch from a tree had hit my head. Somebody bandaged me and I just had a mighty headache.

Heavy artillery were firing nonstop from both sides of the road and jeeps were moving backwards over the fields with two bloodied bodies each just laying over their bonnets.

A British officer came screaming, "About turn, you idiots, the Waffen SS are breaking through our lines, I am crying out for reinforcements and some shithouse sends me unarmed, ex prisoners." It was, of course, the fault of the Military Police. But, eventually, we arrived at an improvised airfield where planes were landing and taking off all the time.

We found a mountain of thousands of assorted tins which a lorry must have dumped on the grassland. There must have been others, but I noticed only apricots in syrup, peaches in syrup, plums in syrup - an endless variety with terrible consequences a little while later. Then I observed a group of officers standing with their backs towards me in the vicinity. It was the shape of the backseat of the trousers and the hair of one of them which attracted my curiosity, and I went to investigate.

She was a captain in the ATS, the first female soldier I ever came across in my life. I must have been a right spectacle with a tin in one hand and a spoon in the other and a bloodied bandage round my head not to mention the state of the uniform I stood up in. She must have become embarrassed at my staring and came over and said with a heavenly smile,

"You all right - corporal?"

We were evacuated in an assortment of planes returning empty to Britain, mine was a Lancaster bomber, sitting on the bare floor, we were then flown to an airfield somewhere in the South of England.

It was a very first for me, I had never been in a plane before. We were about thirty men and our descending from the plane was assisted by two elderly, uniformed ladies with white gloves on, standing on each side of some wooden steps. As my head appeared at the plane's door, one of these kind ladies said to me,

"So glad to have you back, dear boy."

I was a bit non plussed for a moment but then retorted, "Madam, I have never been in England before."

For quite some time after this encounter, I always believed that the WRVS on the lady's uniform stood for 'Women's Royal Varicose Society.'

We all had to pass through a tent where vast amounts of DDT powder were pumped into every opening of our clothing from the neck down, from the trouser legs up, even the part which has a zip nowadays. Afterwards, we were requested to give our names and numbers to some people sitting at trestle tables and I said,

"Corporal Paul Weiner 916/PAL."

A very kind face looked at me for a

moment and then said solemnly, "You don't have to be afraid anymore. Great Britain is a free country."

They suspected that I was afraid to give my real name and number. All other army numbers were seven digits in millions, and they were at a loss at my 916 and I had to explain; I was the 916th RASC driver who joined HM Forces in Palestine and later joined 608 Pioneer Company. We were then led to a hanger where endless rows of tables were prepared by the reception committee for tea, cucumber sandwiches and cakes.

Suddenly somebody requested silence with a cardboard loudhailer. I then heard my name being called and to stand up.

This person further requested all present to raise their cups and drink to the most veteran volunteer, the 916th, in the fight for a just and free world. And they all shouted, 'hip,hip hooray,' and, 'he is a jolly good fellow.

Lorries then took us to an army base where we had a steam bath and everything was taken from us and incinerated. I was just able to save a few photos.

It was evening and, kitted out with new things, we were led to the mess hall where a lot of officers were serving us with sausages, baked beans and chips.

A colonel sat next to me and heaped another lot of sausages on my plate and encouraged me to eat.

Well meant, but the worst thing to do to our five stone, emaciated bodies, and many needed hospital treatment.

But we were some of the first liberated, and I read soon afterwards in a newspaper that a near fatless diet was prescribed for mess halls feeding ex prisoners.

We spent a few more days at that base and each was given an interim army payment of £5.00. Then, it was off to Euston Station where a train was waiting and I was greatly impressed by the upholstered carriages and I remarked that it was nice to provide first class travel for us, only to hear that first class was much better and ours was just ordinary second.

What a difference. In Czechoslovakia you were sitting on hard wooden benches only.

It was about midday when I learned that our train was only due to leave at six o'clock in the evening. Hours to wait, I ventured outside the station and asked a taxi to take me to Hampstead.

A cousin of mine, a Weiner from Vienna, was working there as a housekeeper. The driver said no, he was not going that way, and his motor would not go up the hill anyway. I said,

"Don't you give me that crap, you are talking to an army driver who's just spent years in a POW camp and money is no object."

So I soon arrived at Langland Gardens, NW3 and my cousin had just finished cooking a Hungarian goulash and had not heard from me for over a year.

She telephoned my uncle's family in West Byfleet and some other people, but I got a bit restless, having absconded from Euston Station, so we returned there fairly soon.

My uncle worked at Schmidt's restaurant in Charlotte Street, a schoolfriend, discharged from the Czech Army, came from Dollis Hill.

My uncle's son, my other cousin, came from Byfleet and somebody else from Brondesbury Park, and I was soon surrounded by a group of people kissing me and slapping my back. After the train left somebody said to me,

"You are a bit of a cheat, aren't you. First of all you tell us you have never been here before and now it seems you know half of London." Our final destination was Keele Hall Holding and Transit Camp, near Newcastle – Under - Lyme.

The entire Palestinian contingent of about 1400 men was stationed there for a few months doing absolutely nothing, waiting to be shipped to Palestine to be discharged.

Many soldiers who had no particular ties with London, visited the Jewish communities in Manchester or Leeds, were warmly welcomed and soon married many of the local girls.

I was in the last group to leave Keele Hall, after about six months. One weekend the St John's Wood Synagogue in London's Abbey Road organised an afternoon tea dance for us ex prisoners.

During a game of musical chairs I started to talk to a young lady who made an impression of being very nice, and so she is to this day. She was born in Vienna, of course, with a Czech father, while I was born in Czechoslovakia with a Viennese father.

Two years later we married at the same synagogue, where we first set eyes on each other.

During the month of May 1945, being on leave from Keele Hall, sitting in the sunshine in civilian clothes (my uncle's), on a deck chair in West Byfleet, the postman called with a telegram from the BBC.

The Theresianstadt concentration camp was liberated by the Red Army and the first visiting BBC reporter offered to forward any message from camp survivors, written on a small piece of paper, put into his pockets. The telegram read:

EDWIN WEINER WIFE AND DAUGHTER ALIVE AND WELL.

My parents, sister and grandmother were one day ordered in 1942 to leave Prague, to be sent to the Teresianstadt concentration camp. My grandmother died there soon from heart failure, brought on by the upheaval.

This camp was once a military fort, built a few hundred years ago during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, and was the redlight district, until the existing old walls were found to be an ideal place to imprison the Jews of Bohemia. It was never destined to be an extermination camp.

The cunning Nazis kept it as a show place to invite Swiss and Swedish diplomats, to demonstrate how human the Jews were being treated under German domination.

It was, however, used as a holding and transport station for frequent removal of its inhabitants for 'Resettlement in the East' - liquidation in the gas chambers.

While the outside of the fort was guarded by Czech gendarmes, the entire camp was under the control of the dreaded, black uniformed SS guards, who nearly all originated from Kloster - Neuburg, my father's native town.

My father was put in charge of a small work unit called the 'Bauhof' (building yard) on account of his industrial expertise.

Towards the end of the war, this unit was ordered to manufacture hundreds of light weight wooden suitcases.

The SS knew their days were numbered, they would have to flee and they intended to take their loot with them in these boxes. The inmates nicknamed these boxes 'telach-kisten', part Yiddish, part German for 'runaway-box'. I used one of them as a toolbox until the 1960's.

One day, one of the most ferocious senior SS men, Obersturmbandfuehrer Rahm, overheard my father giving some works instructions in a pronounced Kloster-Neuburg slang. Startled, the SS man called my father aside and spoke to him as if my father were actually a human being.

He further said, "Weiner - you are not going on any transport for 'resettlement in the East', do you understand? No Weiner is going, do you hear? The moment your name is on a transport list, you report to me. Not a day later, not an hour later but right away."

'My father, my mother, my sister - all survived the extermination.'

We know of 2000 years of anti semitism and we had not forgotten the Programmes in the spring of 1938 in Vienna, when the Austrians wanted to be better Nazis than the Germans.

But, could there exist an unknown, chemically activated, electrical brain impulse? Triggered off, perhaps, by the consumption of the famous Viennese drinking water, it might subconsciously temporarily override all hate and create some sort of benevolent linkage, on a personal basis, between a Viennese Jew and a Viennese Gentile.

Scientifically, the above thesis has probably no justification whatsoever, but with their love and unparalleled, deep rooted attachment to Vienna, augmented by distance and time, the Viennese Gentile and the Viennese Jew may have had a common denominator.

I do not believe in miracles. My father, my mother, my sister - all survived the extermination.

The history of the Weiner family dates back a few hundred years. They came from Kloster-Neuburg (Newcastle Cloisters), a township within Greater Vienna.

The cloister, called 'Stift' in German, functions to this day. It was at the time when Jews were forced to live in ghettos and one of my ancestors was a rag and bone man.

Assuming that he spoke Yiddish in those days, he would have pushed his cart through the villages, shouting,

"Alte shiach, alte eacjj?" or in English, "Any old iron?"

Rummaging around one evening back in the ghetto, amongst his day's collected wares, he noticed an item he was not going to melt down. Instead he made his way to the cloister next morning to return a valuable artifact, missing for years and refused to accept any compensation.

For this good and honest deed, the Weiner family were given the freedom of Kloster-Neuburg and were allowed to live in the town, beyond the walls of the ghetto.

My father was born there in 1891 and I knew of a building which once housed master baker Weiner's shop some 200 years ago.

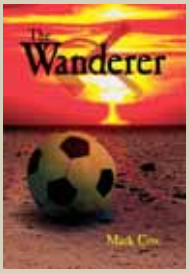
I believe I still have the right of domicile there. I still had it in the year of 1952.

My sister lives in north-west London.

My father died suddenly after lunch in his eightieth year.

My mother reached the good old age of ninety-two. They both rest in peace now together, not too far away from their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren in Golders Green - where else?

In the late 1950's, the West German Government contacted the association of ex POWs in Israel and placed the amount of several million Deutschmarks at their disposal, and I had a pleasant surprise. ■



A socialist at war

This book is also a partial history of the pioneer corps during WWII

Review: Norman Brown
Picture: Supplied

THIS book is a bit of a hybrid. It covers two distinct but related subjects. One is the author's activities and experiences as a soldier in the Second World War. Harry Ratner was an anti-war socialist who did not believe in being a conscientious objector. Instead he went out of his way to be conscripted because he believed the place of revolutionary socialists was with the working class in the factories or the forces. It is an account of his attempt to carry out political propaganda and agitation in the army. Harry paints a vivid picture of life in the forces, conditions in battle and the feelings of his fellow soldiers. The book is also a partial history of the Pioneer Corps during World War 2. This Corps participated in all the major campaigns, France 1940, Greece and Crete, North Africa, the Sicilian and Italian campaigns, the Normandy landings etc. It suffered over 26,000 casualties. Yet it is barely mentioned in official and popular accounts of the war. The author decided to repair this neglect and refresh memories of its exploits. He quotes extensively from a long-out-of print history of the Corps and the Newsletters of the Royal Pioneer Corps Association. The Corps also comprised Britain's "Foreign Legion". It included thousands of Germans, Austrians and other European refugees from Nazi occupied Europe - not only Jews but anti-fascist political exiles who were happy to take up arms against international fascism in the ranks of the Pioneer Corps.

Looking back with hindsight the 87 year old author attempts to draw political lessons from his experiences and those of his comrades.

Although he broke with the Trotskyist movement years ago and is critical of many aspects of Marxism he believes the fight for a better society continues.

A SOCIALIST AT WAR
WITH THE PIONEER CORPS
By Harry Ratner
ISBN 0-9551127-96 Price £6.00

The war with indonesia

Shallow SAS incursions across the border developed into Operation Claret

Review: Norman Brown
Picture: Supplied

FOR over four years, British and Commonwealth forces fought a largely forgotten war against the geopolictical ambitions of Indonesia and 'Mad Doctor' Sukarno.

The author describes post 1945 SE Asia, the rise of Indonesia and its relationship with the Malaysian Federation. Indonesian military philosophies and guerrilla warfare is reviewed, as is a chapter on jungle warfare.

The fighting opened with the Brunei Revolt leading to the dogged defence of Borneo. Shallow SAS incursions across the border developed into Operation Claret when infantry companies then attacked Indonesian bases deep in Kalimantan.

The overthrow of Sukarno and the murderous purging of the Communist Party of Indonesia led with nine months to Indonesia ceasing operations in August

CONFRONTATION:
THE WAR WITH INDONESIA 1962-1966
Foreword by Lord Dennis Healey
Nick van der Bijl
Pen & Sword Military Books; 2007
ISBN 978 1844 1555 958

Pioneer writes first novel

Mark is currently a Provost Corporal at 23 Pioneer Regiment RLC

Review: Norman Brown
Picture: Supplied

THE Wanderer was written to show the different sides of human nature when society breaks down. It also shows man's persistence to create different classes and form segregation, even when mankind is on the brink of extinction.

This is the story of not one person or class but the different people and classes that now reside in a dying world, drawn together to fight against a tyranny that threatens their very existence.

After a nuclear war that almost wiped all life from the planet, one country remained habitable for the last remaining life on Earth, where humans are placed into two classes, those that are privileged are known as 'Vault Dwellers' and are given the opportunity to live in the city sized vaults deep underground were life continues as it did before the holocaust. The Uplanders are those that where deemed unworthy of Earth's last remaining haven and left to walk the scorched earth were only the strong survive. Two people now hold the fate of the Uplanders in their hands, one fights to create a single society and bring the cursed down into the vaults and the other fights to leave them to their fate and through his quenchless thirst for power gain total control of the vaults. It is a battle that will bring together in unison every class to fight for mans right to exist. This is the story of that battle, this is the story of 'The Wanderer'.

About the author: Mark Cox was born in Bolton, Lancashire in 1971. At the age of twenty he joined the Army where he serves to this day. He has served sixteen years in the RPC and is currently a Provost Corporal at 23 Pnr Regt RLC. Due to a severe injury he is no longer able to deploy on operations, and so took up a different challenge - that of an Author.

THE WANDERER By Mark Cox
ISBN: 9781434301956

Last Post

It is with sadness to report the following deaths

WHYTE DAVID (CAPT) 755229
25 Sep 07 Canada (Aged 61)

FORWARD Sidney Robert Ex Sgt (810508)
22 Jun 07 Merriott, Somerset (aged 90). Served in the Corps 1941 - 1946

BATES Charles Edward Ex Pte (13115302)
17 Sep 07 Hartlepool (aged 97) served 1942 - 1946 (303 Coy)

PAYNE G Ex Cpl (24538828)
28 Jul 07 Darlington (Aged 43)

COLLINS PH Ex Sgt (14464186)
26 Aug 07 Yeovil

DUXBURY R Ex Pte (24156826)
26 Nov 06 Stoke on Trent (Aged 53)

MACLAREN DT Ex Cpl (24339991)
13 Nov 07 Blaengarw, Bridgend (Aged 55)

DARBYSHIRE H Ex Pte (1122223)
Nov 07 Bolton (Aged 86)
(Served 41-46 - 13 Coy)

CALDER GT Maj (Retd) MBE
29 Nov 07 Farnborough (Aged 90)
Major Calder joined the AMPC at Skegness in 1940 and later served with 181 Coy with whom he landed in Normandy on D+2.

After being commissioned he served with the Pioneers of the High Commissioned Territories and undertook recruiting missions in Nigeria and South Africa.

In 1947, he began what was to become his lifetime career when he was appointed to the staff of the Command Education College, Palestine, which later moved to Egypt.

Later tours took him to Army College South at Tidworth and Army College North at Welbeck Abbey.

It was in 1953 when he joined the Higher Educational Centre at Aldershot which in 1953 became No 2 Ministry of Defence Resettlement Centre. For the majority of his time, both as a serving officer of the Corps and a civilian, he was Head of the Department of building.

He retired from the Army in 1968 which really meant very little to his life-syle apart from now he did his plastering demonstration in civilian clothes!

George lost count of how many officers of the three services who attended the Household Maintenance Course at Aldershot but in the Senior Officer Book which was not started until 1968 there are recorded the names of at least 3,000 officers of the rank of Colonel and above or equivalent.

The names of at least three former Directors are recorded in this book, including Brig JB Ryall who was awarded the Silver Trowel awarded to the student deemed to have made the most progress during the course. It is possible to say that during his time here he met more senior officers of the three services than anyone in the Army.

On his retirement when asked how he had enjoyed his career he simply replied: "I have enjoyed my work a lot, the job has been full of interest, and I've met the most marvellous people."

MOFFATT A Ex Sgt (22738679)
5 Jan 08 Cowley (Aged 73) - served 1952-1954

NOLAN WJ Ex Pte (13029356)
9 Jan 08 Romford (Aged 92) - served in 73 Coy from 1940-46, landing on Sicily, Salerno and Normandy).

PRESTON J Ex Pte (23587192)
17 Nov 07 Plymouth (Aged 68) served in 196 Coy from 1958-60

SALMON F Capt (Retd)
18 Dec 07 Bielefeld served 1961 to 1989

BUTLER J Ex SSgt
(Clerk) 30 Jan 07 Bramley, Leeds

JAMES D (Ex Pte) (23207234)
16 Feb 08 Plymouth (Aged 68) served 1958-1968 including Aden with 518 Coy.

COLVILLE RS (Bob) Maj (Retd)
28 Feb 08 Leicester

MORAN J (Ex Pte)
23 Feb 08 Erskine Home, Bishopton (Aged 85) (Served from 24 Jul 40 - 25 Jun 46)

WOOLFALL RJ TD Lt Col (Retd)
26 May 07 Ilford (Aged 75)
Lt Col Richard Woolfall was born in Nakuru, Kenya where his father was working as an Engineer with the British Post Office. He grew up in Nairobi and came to Bangor University in 1951.

He was called up for National Service and joined the Army on 4 March 1954 at Crookham, Hants and was commissioned into the Royal Pioneer Corps in 1955.

His widow still has a telegram from his parents in Nairobi congratulating him on his promotion!

An event remembered by a fellow Officer is that Richard as a young National Service Officer in 1956 won the Best Shot in his Company, surprising many especially the long established shooters, his widow still treasures that trophy.

Richard subsequently served with the AER and TAVR and was appointed Major on 31 March 1968 and in June 1969 was awarded the Efficiency Decoration and later received a bar.

He was further promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on 1 June 1974, the first TA Officer in the RPC to be so promoted.

On retiring from this position, Richard transferred to the Regular Army Reserve of Officers from 1 December 1976.

Richard's main interest in retirement was the research of his family's history, extending it to many branches of linked families, with magnificent records sorted and stored on paper and on computer.

PETERS JC (Ex WO1 (RSM)) (23845152)
1 Mar 08 Brackley (Aged 68) (Served in RPC from Jan 68 until Apr 83 with previous service in Royal Husaars, prior to discharge was RSM 23 Group RPC).

CROUCH WJ Capt (Retd)
29 Feb 08 (Aged 95).

WRIGHT JF Capt (Retd)
13 Mar 08 London (Aged 51). Served in 1970's at Northampton, 518 Coy and 3 Bde, Portadown before transferring to SAS.

THORNE RF (Dick) (Ex Sgt 23673640)
17 Nov 05 Warrington (Aged 65). Served in Krefeld, Cyprus, Aden and Bicester.

MRS JOAN ELLIOTT
It is with regret that I have to inform you that Mrs Joan Elliott (wife of the late Major Bill Elliott) died on 13 Feb 08 at the age of 85.

The following are trying to re-establish contact...

RHINE SECTION - OCT 77
It would make my day to contact some of the guys with whom I did my basic training (even Martin Searchfield)

The names I remember are: Instructors Sgt Martin Searchfield, Cpl McNeil and Cpl Terry Coultonby Pte Kyle Mullan, Pte Terry Beadsworth, Pte Tom Lynch, Pte Bates, Pte Dennison, Pte Williams, Pte Lawrence, Pte Rawson, Pte Baker, Pte Thomas, Pte De la Touch, Pte Jones.

Please contact DL Gavin, c/o RPC Association

JIM McDONALD (MACDONALD) born 1919/20
My name is Baerbel-Gerda Schwichtenberg and I am searching for my father.

He served in 44 Company Pioneer Corps and in May 45 was stationed in the village of Estorf (Weser), Germany and from Nov 45 in Langendamn/ Nienburg-Weser. In May 46 he was in Sloug, Berks awaiting a Court Martial. That is all I know about him. If anyone can supply any details whatsoever I would be very grateful. Contact Baerbel-Gerda c/o RPC Association.

140 COMPANY
The grandson of 4208449 Pte Walter Edward RICHARDS (shown left on 3rd photo along above with his brother George centre and brother in law John Davies RASC on right) are trying to contact anyone who might have known them.

Contact: had34@student.open.ac.uk

THOMAS WE (TAFF)
In the Oct 06 Newsletter we published the sad loss of Taff Thomas (4th photo along).

His widow has asked us to correct the entry; he died on 16 Sep 06 at the early age of 52 from a massive heart attack at home.

She is asking for people who knew Taff especially Derek McDonald (their best man), Bluey Joyce, Paddy Breen, Paul Errington and Britton to get in touch. Tel No 0151 677 2943.

PALMER, ADRIAN
known as Adie, amongst other names I'm sure. We served together in 84/85 in 39 Inf Bde, Lisburn and then lost touch. Please contact: ALEC KELLY (ex RCT) on alec77@blueyonder.co.uk

JACOBY, HENRY JACK 13053614)
Ex 219 Coy. Mr HP Sinclair is trying to make contact with his friend Henry Jack Jacoby.

Last known to be living in Kensington, London.

Please contact peter@the sinclairs.co.uk

THORNE, RICHARD FRANCIS (DICK)
Sadly Dick died on 17 November 2005 and his daughter Debbie Chadwick is trying to contact people who knew him, especially K Malone.

Tel no 01925 659929 or you can leave a message on the site www.gonetoosoon.co.uk.

You will need to type in the name RICHARD THORNE and the town WARRINGTON.

Photographic library

We now have over 4,500 photographs in our photographic library

Report: Norman Brown
Picture: Norman Brown

WE now have over 4,500 photographs in our photographic library and are enlarging this as time permits.

The following is an index of this library, those marked * are already copied on CD Roms and are available from the Association at a cost of £2 each.

If you would like copies of the other photographs they can be copied onto CDs (holding approx 250 photos) or onto DVDs (holding approx 1,500), these are available at a cost of £2 or £5 respectively.

Have you any photographs taken whilst serving with the Corps, if so why not send them to us. We will return them within seven days.

The photographs we are very keen to acquire are group photographs with a full list of names.

If we do not keep copies of these now they may be lost for ever. Please send them to RPC Association. ■

KNOWN	
Volume 1*	419
Volume 2*	204
Volume 3*	323
Volume 4*	274
Volume 5*	186
UNKNOWN	
Volume 1*	400
Volume 2*	370
Volume 3	250
Volume 4	200
PASS OUT PARADES	131
REUNION CLUB	
Volume 1*	280
Volume 2	41
REUNION WEEKENDS	
Volume 1*	
Volume 2	270
1970	32
1992	144
1993	11
1996	20
1998	1
1999	1
Unknown	51
REUNION WEEKENDS	
Volume 3	
2001	1
2003	18
2005	42
2007	69

MISC	
Royal Visit 2 Feb 07	25
Reunion Weekend/Liberty Parade 06	170
COMPANIES	
1 (Spanish) Coy	7
21 Coy	1
37 Coy	5
47 Coy	1
63 Coy	4
66 Coy	1
68 Coy (V)	1
74 Coy	3
79 Coy	3
88 Coy	1
135 Coy	1
140 Coy	2
190 Coy	5
193 Coy	1
206 Coy	5
210 Coy	1
219 Coy	4
223 Coy	11
228 Coy	4
240 Coy	16
243 Coy	1
249 Coy	2
207 Coy	1
250 Coy	1
251 Coy	101
260 Coy	16
263 Coy	11
285 Coy	2
303 Coy	1
349 Coy	3

405 Coy	1
518 Coy	35
521 Coy	6
522 Coy	13
523 Coy	1
1831 (EA) Coy	1
1972 (Bechuana)	1
1(BR) Def Coy	2
Fire Fighting Coys	1
GROUPS	
15	3
28	1
30	1
39	192
42	1
45	2
49	1
52	2
64	1
203	1
211 - 149 HQ BAOR/Rheindahlen Garrison	10
No 3 Centre	1
No 4	3
RPC Trg Centre	1
Mauritian Pioneers	42
420 MCLG	3
438 MCLG	3
444 MCLG	23
445 MCLG	2
450 MCLG	6
450 GSO (1945-50)	255
CVHQ RPC	22
Corps of Drums	14
1202 PCLU	11

And finally...

The future of the association is guaranteed as long as members require it

Report: Norman Brown
Picture: Giles

THE Association holds many functions during the year please, if possible, support them. In the article on the early days of the Association you will read that over 21 thousand have joined the Association since its formation.

Unfortunately only 2,468 are currently on the 'Active' list. When you make contact with ex Corps members or ex RLC Pioneers ask if they receive the Newsletter - TELL THEM IT IS FREE! If they do not please send me their address.

We are still endeavouring to enlarge our digital photographic library, do you hold any photographs of your time in the Corps. We are especially looking for Group photographs with names. Photographs will be returned within one week.

Articles for the Newsletter are always welcome but please do not enclose photographs within a word document as they are not of high enough quality for reproduction. Please send original photos, these will be returned within a few days.

In the foreword you will have read that Brig Telfer is to relinquish the post of Chairman. He has served in this appointment during the very important period when we converged our Association with the RLC. He ensured that we obtained the best deal possible and that the future of the Association is guaranteed as long as the members require it. For this we are very grateful. It is pleasing to report that he will continue to serve as a member of the Council.

His place is to be taken by Col Alex Barnes who has been a Council Member for nine years.

I must also thank Col Pat O'Connell who is to retire from the Council this year after serving on it for some fifteen years. His wise council has always been appreciated, we hope he still continues to attend Association functions.

The next issue will be in October and will, of course, contain full details of the Reunion Weekend. I am sure that it will be successful and the weather glorious!

I would also like to end by thanking Lt Col John Starling, our resident historian who is currently establishing a database from the hundreds of thousands of cards and enlistment books from the combined records office.

Here are two examples of some of the more unusual information coming to light from two people who were very keen to join the Army...

Hubert Edgar DENTON
(joined 3 times and was discharged medically 3 times!)
13000039 - Enlisted 27 Oct 39
Discharged 9 Apr 40
13029929 - Enlisted 20 May 40
Discharged 4 Dec 40
13098322 - Enlisted 14 Aug 41
Discharged 30 Dec 41

George ELLIOTT
13000147 - Enlisted 27 Oct 39
Deserter 7 Dec 39
13008983 - Re-enlisted in Pioneer Corps whilst in a state of desertion. ■

"Hullo, Sergeant Major - what have you been doing since you left the Corps in 1998?"

Coming up in the next newsletter ...

■ Reunion weekend report & photos ■ Forthcoming events ■ Your stories ■ Viewpoint
■ News from 23 & 168 Pioneer Regiments ■ Another unpublished complete story ■ Letters

Changing the Guard at Buckingham Palace 5 April 2008

Pictures: Paul Brown / Norman Brown