

The lid literally came off the Stalag when the news came through concerning the "D" day landings on the 6th June, 1944, and the fact that the long awaited Second Front had commenced. Great excitement pervaded throughout each, and every compound in the camp with the Normandy landings proving to be the only topic of the day, the subject of food was, for once, temporarily forgotten. Such a degree of euphoria was reached that quite a few of the old lags ~~were~~ allowed themselves to be carried away to great emotional heights to talk excitedly, and sincerely about being home for Christmas. Their optimism had obviously reached a record high, but they were answered by quite a few hardened pessimistic characters who replied, without a trace of a smile, "Yes, but which bloody Christmas?". Nevertheless, it was great news at the time, and morale throughout the camp was now sky high. Our illicit wireless sets were now working overtime, and the BBC news was now even more eagerly anticipated than ever before by each, and every barrack hut complement. This state of affairs continued throughout the following months or so until it was evident that the overall military situation was going our way, despite the temporary setbacks of Arnhem, and later the German Ardennes counter offensive.

It was certainly obvious to all that the Christmas forecast was a much too optimistic bet for the end of the "Krieg", and a return to the U.K. so life went on normally with the camp conditions a wee bit easier than hitherto plus the added interest of sporting activities to watch, and play. Red Cross food parcels were still running at one parcel per man per week, and our "Brew King" was still managing to provide a minimum of two brews of tea per day, wood stocks permitting.

It goes without saying that our sanguine dispositions were on a higher plane during last few months of the late summer of 44. This state of affairs was enhanced by an incident which took place during one extremely sunny day in September. At around high noon a host of very excited airmen seemed to be cavorting around outside our barrack hut ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ their antics being accompanied by a series of gesticulations and ~~a~~ unintelligible shouts. Several of them then ran into our barrack hut to be more informative. Still in a state of high excitement with arms waving they shouted "The Yanks are here, get off your backsides, and come out and watch this ~~big~~ bloody lot". No repetition was necessary, and at once I and everybody present in our hut ceased to be interested in whatever we were doing to immediately run out into the open compound. Occupants of our other barracks had the same train of thought, and soon ~~our~~ compound was alive with envious airmen shouting and cheering like hell, it being the first time we had witnessed any Allied bombers in action over this neck of the woods.

Shaded by each pair of hands, all eyes sparkling with anticipation, were looking skywards to eventually witness a wonderful sight. Way up in the blue yonder a large group of USAAF four engined bombers, which were either B17 Flying Fortresses or B24 Liberators, probably both, flying in tight box formations were at that ~~time~~ moment passing over a point near our Stalag at a probable height of between twenty five and thirty thousand feet. The sky was blue, and cloudless as we stood with heads back, and necks craned as five miles above ~~us~~ us all we could discern was a host of miniature silhouettes gleaming silver in the sun with conspicuous vapour trails streaming in their wake. I did not notice any German fighter activity, but the Upper Silesian industrial area heavy flak was only about ten minutes away. I should think they had flown from bases in Italy, and no doubt the Yank formations were bound for the industrial targets of Silesia either Gleiwitz, but probably Blechhammer an approximate distance of fifty miles or so from our P.C.W. camp. This heavenly spectacle was stimulating to say the least, especially for all we ex-aviators, and proved to be the first of several such sorties carried out in the Silesian area by the Yank daylight bombers.

I was aware of the presence of British P.C.W. working parties in both areas I have mentioned as probable targets, and at the time had hoped that none of these Army lads would be involved at the business end of the bombing. The very presence and sight of those Yank bombers was another morale booster, and it is true to state that more than my thoughts were with their crews. Having been a "penguin" for a period which had then lasted eighteen months I would have dearly loved to ~~have~~ have been in their shoes looking down from a great height occupying a crew

position inside a bombing aircraft. Yes, those were my thoughts at the time a wee bit fanciful maybe, but I soon descended from cloud nine-when I heard a stentorian voice loudly echoing from the confines of my barrack hut 16A which concerned that familiar kriegie phrase "Soup Up". Quite a few of my comrades stood their ground gazing skywards but the formations had quickly disappeared from sight, the show seemed over so I turned around and with hands in pockets trudged towards our hut, everything was back to normal, I was still a kriegie.

Stalag conditions began to deteriorate during the month of October 44, and although we knew that Red Cross food parcels were still being shipped, the general distribution had been adversely affected by the overall military situation. By the following month Stalag stocks in the Red Cross store had dwindled to such an extent that the weekly issue had been reduced to half a parcel per man, belts had now to be tightened.

The bitter cold weather had now commenced, and the first snowfalls began on 11th November, compelling most of us to remain indoors, once more the bridge sessions occupied most of our time. After a period of three weeks existence on a half parcel issue the camp stock of Red Cross parcels ran out completely, the cupboard was bare. This sad situation meant that every kriegie had to try and survive solely on the very sparse German rations, the future now seemed very bleak, there was no doubt that lean and hungry days lay ahead.

The arrival of the month of December saw me confined to my bunk suffering from a very heavy cold, at least I was conserving my energy laid as I was on my back. During the previous five months the main topic of conversational interest had been the Allied Invasion of Europe, and its subsequent progress, but now with starvation staring us in the face the only subject discussed was FOOD. Now that the food parcels had run out, "latrine" rumours were abounding right, left, and centre, and as each day slowly passed by the Stalag grapevine constantly circulated the same old story which implied that a load of food parcels had arrived in camp that day, of course these acts of repetition were only inventions of the mind, dreams of wishful thinking. However, in the wake of all these "latrine" rumours, an official announcement was made in our barrack hut which disclosed the great news that twenty thousand Red Cross food parcels (including twelve thousand special Xmas parcels) had in fact been sent from Geneva on the 6th December. Pending arrival of these parcels it was then announced that we would be issued with a half parcel per man on the 19th, 23rd, and 30th December. On the face of it that information it certainly seemed as if we might be issued with a Xmas parcel after all, even a half parcel would suffice. On hearing this welcome bit of news smiling faces had begun to return, but from a physical point of view we were now looking slightly on the weedy side, and the keep fit fanatics had been noticeably reducing in numbers. Very, very few kriegies left the confines of the barracks, in the prevailing conditions the warmest place was in the "sack" which helped to neutralise the double discomfort of a lack of food and the sub zero temperatures outside. At this juncture I must admit I spent most of my time "pit bashing", but I was not the only one by any means during those grim months when most kriegies looked as glum as the weather outdoors. No fuel was available for the barrack stove, coal "briquettes" were a thing of the past the ration we were formerly issued with had been hopelessly inadequate anyway. Our daily brews of tea had also long disappeared, and the poor old "Brew King" was temporarily out of a job. My source of information, a small diary written in now fading pencil, does not indicate when the food parcels arrived, but there is a description of the 1944 Xmas parcel contents. On that evidence, despite a gap in my old memory banks, it is fairly obvious that we were issued with, at least, a half parcel per man.

The contents were similiar to those of the previous year's parcel which I described fully in an earlier passage, and it was really great to enjoy a bit of Xmas cheer after enduring two very lean months. It was obvious now to all the inmates that as far as we in Lamsdorf were concerned the state of affairs militarily was rapidly approaching boiling point. The Eastern front was moving nearer and nearer to Upper Silesia, and Stalag 8 B, the BBC news bulletins inferred that the Russian steamroller was advancing very rapidly towards the Breslau, and our area. Even the camp loudspeakers news broadcasts, and the Volkischer Beobachter (Nazi media) could not hide the fact that the writing was on the wall for the Third Reich. Despite enduring what seemed to be a long miserable, cold and hungry winter our morale in the RAF compound was still as high as ever. During the early days of January 45 therefore the current latrine rumours, which were always manifold, did not concern the usual subject food parcels, instead a new subject arose to take pride of place, Evacuation.

In view of the rapid advance of the Russian armies across Poland towards Silesia, and the river Oder the rumours were rife throughout the camp that the Stalag would be evacuated. The cautious kriegies amongst our milling throng made a few

preliminary preparations just in case, and I too made sure I would be in possession of a good, strong pair of boots. Somehow I managed to scrounge a pair of good Army boots, which I thought would stand the rough going in the extreme wintry conditions we were certain to encounter. I could tell that something was in the wind, call it intuition, but a tense atmosphere hung around the camp. Sure enough events then began to happen very quick with hectic German activity in and around our Compound, and an hour or so later our Compound leader was ordered to prepare the whole of our RAF contingent for more or less immediate evacuation on foot. As key prisoners we were the vanguard, the first to be marched out, and only a few hours notice was given for preparation.

Inside my barrack 16 A the scene resembled somethin akin to a January Sale with bods dashing about hurriedly preparing their packs in readiness for the trek. The same scenario was being carried out in the other seven barracks comprising our compound. The state of uproar continued during the preparations some lads did not know what to pack or alternatively what to leave behind. Fortunately I did not have that problem, I had very little to take with me only various articles of underclothing, eating utensils which had been fashioned from Red Cross tins, a dixie, towel and soap, a thin blanket, no cigarettes at all, and that was about my lot my kitbag was only three quarters full. Most of the lads were really heavily laden, and cannot have realised what a long, perilous marathon it would turn out to be. Most of my comrade had been kriegies a lot longer than myself, and had in the process accumulated quite a lot of gear of one sort or another. Some of the Canadian Air Force lads had in their possession great quantities of cigarettes, all of which vastly increased their weight load. Lots of personal possessions, and various other things necessarily had to be left behind, there was no baggage car on this trip.

One or two of our more enterprising larger combines had, somehow or other, managed to procure or hastily construct some sort of sledge to drag along stacked with all their kit, a bloody good idea, I thought at the time. I attired myself with as much clothing as I could wear in apparent comfort under my greatcoat, and finished up with balaclava helmet pulled over my Glengarry side cap, thus equipped I was ready for the fray. The German officer in charge of the operation, a Hauptmann, was rushing about in typical fashion, shouting like a maniac as he ordered his lesser minions into action. Meanwhile we heavily burdened airmen had hurriedly formed up in barrack order on the parade ground of our compound. Facing his total complement of approximately eleven hundred men our RAF Compound Leader spoke a few words of encouragement and advice before the Deutschers then took charge. With a final flourish the Germans stirred the head of our column into action, and off we marched through the gates of our compound for the last time, flanked by a host of guards. Many Army kriegies looked on sympathetically as our RAF column headed in the direction of the Stalag main gates. The arrangements for this forced march evacuation were obvious panic moves on the part of the Germans, and were without thought or organization as subsequent events would prove. On the way out of the camp, ^{THE COLUMN} slowed down as we approached the Red Cross stores building to finally come to a halt. This was an obvious stop, and as we sluggishly filed past the building in column order each man was issued with one Red Cross food parcel. When it came to my turn I received a Canadian parcel, which suited me admirably, arguably it was the best a kriegie could receive. Always an optimist, I thought we might also receive a few cigarettes but this did not happen, as far as I knew they must have had some tobacco in the stores. I may have been wrong in this assumption, but if not it was a bad show as they were hundreds like me in the column without a cigarette to their name. That single Red Cross food parcel was the last we would ever receive, but we were not aware of this at the time. A few hundred yards further on, without giving a backward glance, the long column of muffled RAF kriegies passed through the portals of Stalag 8 B (the camp had actually been renamed Stalag 344, but it was, and always has been 8B to me) for the final time, no regrets as far as I was concerned, the date was 13th January, 1945. I do not know what happened to the remaining Army P.O.W.'s, no doubt sometime after we had left most of them were also evacuated in various columns to take devious routes. I think some of them were taken through Czechoslovakia, and thence into Southern Germany.

The weather could not not have been much worse, it was really terrible, the terrain was snow covered, and it ~~had~~ was freezing hard as we reached a point several kilometres beyond Landsdorf with the temperature now well below zero.

The initial stages of this march proved to be a positive nightmare, being so bloody grim I have never forgotten these first hours. As darkness fell the snow underfoot had frozen hard making conditions bad enough for ordinary marching pace, the icy roads were like glass. Utterly disregarding all these factors the panicky Hauptmann in charge really hustled us along at a ridiculously fast rate, he was ranting away at his guards who responded by forcing our column to proceed at almost doubling pace with the assistance of their rifle butts.

The bloody Germans continued with these forcing tactics, in fact we had to endure them for hours well into the night, as we staggered ^{ON} slipping and stumbling along the dark, bleak Silesian country roads. This night's march was a disaster, not without casualties for throughout these dark hours exhausted, heavily laden kriegies collapsed, and fell by the wayside in droves. The embittered majority, which included myself, who would survive the night could only give vent to their feelings with various vocal obscene expressions aimed ^{SINGULARLY} at the German Hauptmann in charge.

UNCHARITABLE

The march Fuhrer, this ~~SS~~ Hauptmann, by virtue of his actions must have thought the Russians were breathing down our necks, he really had the breeze up, although they were advancing across Poland at breakneck speed the Russkis were still some miles away, and they had yet to cross the barrier that was the River Oder. With what little breath, and energy we had in reserve, further expressive obscenities continued to be levelled against the officer, and his underlings, the most common one again implied the questionable legitimacy of their parents. Every kriegie in the column was on the point of exhaustion after enduring the first six or seven hours of this rat race in the dark, wintry freezing conditions, tired leg muscles badly needed a rest. Not one kriegie was aware of which direction we were heading in the darkness, and for that matter nobody really cared, all I wanted was ^{to} get my head down.

Suddenly, somewhere in the midst of nowhere, an apt description of the bleak Silesian countryside, the column was brought to a halt by the bawling Deutschers.

I was not the only one to give a huge sigh of relief, as I glanced at my watch with the aid of a lighted match I was ~~surprised~~ surprised to see that the time was 11 pm, I had not realised ~~that~~ we had been on the go for so long a period. We were then herded into a large barn which had a thick covering of straw. Inside the barn I had been carried along somewhere in the centre of the milling throng, and when it seemed the mass of moving bodies had come to a stop, I just sank down thankfully on the straw at that particular spot, grateful for the rest. Packed in like sardines, every inch of space was occupied, we were practically laying on each other, all absolutely "knackered", a term I think aptly described our condition. Now that everybody was bedded down the big question was "how to get out to relieve one's self, a seemingly impossible task over such a mass of packed bodies in the darkness. Nevertheless it it was a necessary evil, and at various intervals throughout the night innumerable

sleeping kriegies were stepped upon in the process. Unfortunately there was no alternative to the problem, and in the best service slang, choice expletives were showered on the unfortunate lads with the pressing need.

Just before I went to sleep I decided to take off my boots in order to rest my tired feet. I then placed them well down amongst the deep straw in a position which would be under my sleeping body. This well meaning action proved to be my first big mistake of this march, and I simply could not believe my eyes when I awoke the following morning from my sleep of exhaustion. The bloody boots were frozen solid Jesus, it must have been an ~~extra~~ ultra cold, icy night, and to think they were hidden in deep straw underneath my body, it was hard to believe. After many exerting attempts it was not possible to get them on my feet, what a ~~bad~~ predicament after one day's march. I did not fancy being left behind, there was safety in numbers, however I found a likely solution to my problem. Outside the barn I found that some of the lads had built a few small fires in order to boil water for brews of tea before the recommencement of the march. Ignoring the icy cold ground under my stockinged feet I attempted to thaw out my rigid boots over one of the fires. This action was only partly successful, despite my efforts the offending footwear remained slightly stiff. The column was about ready to be on the move so, due to the time factor, I had no option but to put the boots on my feet, and though they chafed my skin afterwards

I had to keep going but within a few hours the leather eased to become pliable. That tactless mistake was not repeated during the remainder of the march, the bloody things remained on my feet ^{throughout} the following seven or eight weeks. During these first few days the grim weather did not relent at all continuing to be bitter cold, with the snow still with us, and the temperatures well below zero.

At this stage it was apparent that the German officer in charge of our march had really no fixed idea as to where, and what we were heading for. It was obvious that no orderly plan was in operation concerning either the route or arrangements for picking up rations at selected rendezvous, instead it seemed as if we were continuing to rely on hit or miss tactics and panic moves. In such circumstances for days on end our long column traipsed all over and around the flat, uninteresting, snow covered Silesian landscape, and while doing so I saw very little signs of any human habitation in the locality though we kept to small country lanes and roads. No doubt the rough weather kept them indoors, sensible people. Cold and hungry, as we trudged steadily through the snow we were certainly messed about, and seemed to be marching in both zigzag and circular routes around the Upper Silesian countryside in the area below and west of Breslau (Now Wroclaw) seemingly to avoid the advancing Russians who were thereabouts or approaching the River Oder. The Russkis were said to be confronting the fortress town of Breslau, which would later be surrounded, and laid siege to while at the same time bypassed by ^{other} units of the First Ukrainian Front.

The First Ukrainian Front army under the command of Marshall Konev had launched three spearhead attacks which were apparently at that time aimed at Breslau, and both north and south of this town. The latter spearhead was heading in our direction but unfortunately not quite fast enough, and in fact the Russians were always some miles behind us. The food situation was really desperate, our solitary Red Cross food parcel would not last very long, and the Germans were living up to their reputation and not supplying us with any food at all. We had to survive three or four days at a time without any bread ration before at the odd selected rendezvous a bread lorry would unexpectedly turn up, but these occasions were few and far between. No doubt our RAF leader did remonstrate on our behalf at the Germans failure to issue some sort of food, but it failed to make any difference to our plight, we continued to be cold and hungry. In the prevalent conditions we certainly could have used another food parcel on leaving the Stalag, and in retrospect it was also my opinion that our own Camp authorities could possibly have done better by us, but in saying that I was not aware of the total camp stock of food parcels at that time. I knew it was possible the Red Cross stocks were limited, and I was also aware that they were still a hell of a lot of P.O.W.'s left behind in Stalag 8 B.

After the first few days the German strategy continued in the same vein our column was still being hustled along covering many kilometres in the same old zig zag pattern without making a great deal of progress in a straight line to the west. Even the guards proved to be unaware of each daily destination of our marching column, it certainly was a case of the blind leading the blind. No fixed arrangements for sleeping quarters en route had evidently been planned, and at the conclusion of each days march in the pitch darkness we would be herded into any old derelict barns or factory buildings that were readily available in that particular locality. At the termination of these daily footslogging sessions despite being cold and weary I and countless others would somehow find that little bit of extra energy to rush forward and try to obtain the best bed positions in respect of warmth, and lack of draughts. Cold winds blew through the many apertures, and broken windows in these barns, also holes in the roofs did not help matters. In such an environment it was every man for himself when it came to the bedding down stakes, genteel methods had no place on this march.

The Silesian residents of this bleak, snow covered country area, of whom I saw very little, had numerous windfalls, and must have really thought their fortunes had changed for the better. The reason was simply that many of the now exhausted airmen broken by the pace of this hellish march, the grim conditions endured and . . . mainly the burdens of weight now began to ditch, and abandon all manner of kit together with personal belongings over a wide area of the countryside. The strain was now beginning to tell, and some of the loads carried were just too much to bear. Personal belongings of all types were strewn and scattered all over miles of the bleak, snow covered terrain which gave a visual appearance of innumerable black dots amidst a totally white background. Inevitably these involuntary donations would be picked up fortuitously by the various local residents few though they seemed to be. Quite a ~~number~~^{number} of my fellow marchers had definitely overburdened themselves, no doubt loth to leave anything behind in the camp, and at the same time being blissfully unaware of the privations they would have to endure on this severe forced march. A great many ^{more} would drop out through exhaustion, various illnesses, and some would die. All manner of things were dumped even boxes of cigarettes, what sacrilege, why these were off loaded I cannot comprehend, a sheer waste when they could easily have been shared out amongst the deserving cases, like me for instance, I was one of many without a cigarette to his name.

As we were plodding slowly but steadily across the flat wilderness which was the Silesian plain, the sky became really dark, and a fierce blizzard of considerable severity hit us with biting strong gale force winds and thick driving snow. In the very limited visibility the arctic like conditions were reminiscent of the "Trail of 98" in the Yukon, at least that's how it struck me. Our long column was now longer than ever because of the blizzard, indeed it had lost all semblance to a column being well strung out as long gaps materialised with up to a hundred yards separating struggling groups, and individuals. Snow covered bodies, bent forward, struggled on against the elements with balaclava helmets now coming into their own, and only my eyes were uncovered as I battled on steadfastly with head down and shoulders hunched, a white snow covered apparition. During this stage of the march at the height of the blizzard I could not see any of the guards anywhere around they seemed to have disappeared from the flanks. I guessed the crafty buggers were riding on the attendant wagon at the rear of the column along with the Officer in charge, they certainly did not seem to be on foot negotiating the gale force snowstorm. I certainly did not see any point in trying to escape at this juncture in such Siberian like conditions, miles from anywhere with no chance at all of obtaining any food. After five or six days of our aimless meandering around the Silesian countryside it was now evident that the haphazard route was at long last beginning to take shape, as it now seemed that we were heading in a north westerly direction towards the town of LEIGNITZ (Legnica) which on a straight line was a distance of seventy kilometres from Breslau (Wroclaw). Our column entered, and passed straight through the town of Leignitz heading more or less due west for GORLITZ which we now understood from the attendant Germans was to be our next port of call, Stalag 8 A being the prison camp in which our RAF contingent would rest for a few days before continuing on our way westwards.

As our column entered the outskirts of the town of Leignitz I noticed that fortifications had been hurriedly constructed with road blocks in operation flanked by several machine gun nests. Many tank traps were in evidence too. Our food situation was now beginning to reach the critical stage, for despite the promises of the German Hauptmann in charge of our march no bread rations had been forthcoming. For days on end he kept fobbing us off with the same old story that at the next stop a bread lorry would be waiting for us, it very rarely was. Yes, as far as we were concerned the Hauptmann was not exactly a popular figure. No doubt he had his troubles, but it was evident that the chaotic progress of this march was in step with the general ~~...~~ disintegration of the Third Reich. On the odd occasion we did meet up with the evasive bread lorry all that we received was a very small ration per man which when cut up consisted of only three slices, and at the most this was happening only three times a week. My food parcel, received on our departure from Iamsdorf, was now very nearly on its last legs, nothing much being left of its contents. Surprisingly, one night the bread lorry did turn up as promised, but instead of the usual black bread we were each handed a small cardboard box which contained what the Germans called "Nackebrot". I can only describe the contents as being a sort of crisp bread, wafer style, slightly similar to our Ryvita. The box held about six of these fairly long wafers, and they were very quickly disposed of, not very filling though, but in the circumstances, though inadequate the "Nackebrot" was better than receiving nothing at all.

The distance from Leignitz to Gorlitz was somewhere in the region of one hundred kilometres as the crow flies, but we were ^{not} bloody crows, and in the process never travelled a more or less straight route being always taken indirectly along winding minor roads, and lanes which was always the long way around. Our contingent at the termination of each days march either slept in fields, barns or old factory buildings up to this point. The weather was still bitterly cold, but fortunately the snow had ceased. The harsh conditions persisted, and were the cause of our ranks continuing to thin out as many more of our lads fell by the wayside suffering from exhaustion, bad feet, dysentery, and other ailments, I did not know what happened to most of them, but evidently many of them were picked up afterwards as quite a large number were on hand waiting at Stalag 8 A, Gorlitz when our column eventually arrived at that camp.

Approaching Gorlitz the general situation was one of apparent total confusion, it ^{visually} appeared that the Germans were beginning to fall apart at the seams. The roads were conspicuously choked with most of the time with all sorts of different forms of transport, including carts. As well as P.O.W.'s on forced marches, hundreds of refugees with their carts piled high with their worldly goods were heading west to avoid the advancing Russians, and German military units seemed to be heading both ways. At one stage we passed by a Russian P.O.W. convey, these poor souls lived a grey, desperate existence for hunger was with them all and every day.

The Russki kriegies looked like scarecrows, with their grimy ingrained faces, and emaciated angular features wearing tattered clothing with footpads around their feet. About fifty of these poor buggers were chained to a combined harness from which they were pulling or dragging a bloody great sledge like contraption, which was piled high with gear. The Russian P.O.W.'s were treated like animals, and in this case they were certainly working like horses. Hundreds of thousands of them died in captivity many of them from typhus epidemics, in their weakened condition they had little or no resistance to disease, while on the other hand thousands were simply shot out of hand. In comparison with their lot we were lucky, during normal P.O.W. existence we had Red Cross food parcels, medicines etc available to us the poor old Russians had nothing, badly treated they just died.

Further along our route another pitiful sight presented itself which made our hackles rise. Our column passed by a fairly large party of Hungarian Jewess's who were shuffling along the road heading in the opposite direction to us, apparently heading east, escorted by a number of hardfaced, black uniformed S.S. guards. What was to be their fate was a matter for conjecture, but at that stage of the war we RAF kriegies well wishers hoped that these unfortunate females would survive. As each section of our long column passed them by the lads gave them the loudest vocal encouragement. At the same time many of our lads threw caution to the winds to aim a chorus of hisses, and jeers at the glowering S.S. thugs, they were taking a chance certainly of being on the painful end of a gun butt or even shot.

After thirteen days of grim marching in adverse conditions of all types with little or no rations from the Germans, ^{to sustain us} we staggered through the gates of Stalag 8 A, Gorlitz. As far as we airmen were concerned I thought 8 B, Lamsdorf was a grim enough camp, but this Stalag was much worse, a really depressing looking place, with a gloomy forlorn atmosphere. A peculiar smell hung around this prison camp which I find difficult to describe, but it gave me a distinct feeling of foreboding. The first impression that ran through my mind was that I would be very relieved when we left this camp to get on the move again, and sample some fresh air. Stalag 8 A was populated by Russian, Belgian, and French F.O.W.'s in the main with several other European nationalities thrown in. The French and Belgian barrack huts were palaces compared with the Russian quarters. During our few days rest in this camp myself and a few mates meandered around the compounds taking the opportunity to look around the huts, and observe from the "kriegie" angle how the other half lived. While the others, who must have been residents for a few years, seemed to be well organised, and comfortably placed, the Russians in direct contrast had only a roof above their heads, and had to endure bare, wooden table like bunks to rest on. The smell in their austere, and no doubt verminous barrack huts was terrible, there was no doubt that the Germans treated them abominably but there was nothing the poor old Musckis could do about it, only suffer. It transpired that the French and Belgians received one Red Cross parcel per month, while our emaciated Russian friends received sweet nothing at all, no Red Cross food for them or us for that matter in that camp. During the two weeks we had been on the road a total of nearly three hundred of our RAF lads had dropped out by the wayside through either exhaustion or illness. Fortunately some of them were picked up along the route to rejoin our column at Gorlitz, and so continue the march westwards with their comrades. Rough and rigorous as this long distance endurance test was, the very thought that we were slowly but surely plodding our way in a westerly direction towards either our British or American armies gave us the will power to keep going, physical and illness problems being the only drawbacks. There was no doubt that even more leaner days were ahead, we were existing now on small rations of bread, and soup on alternate days. The bread when it turned up was invariably new, and the small pittance did not go very far, most of us disposed of the ~~meagre~~ meagre ration almost immediately. In all our Lamsdorf RAF contingent rested for ^{almost} a week at Stalag 8 A, and during that time the F.O.W.'s on the move had arrived too. With our physical batteries recharged the 8 B RAF column was reassembled, packs at the ready, and without a flourish we marched out of Stalag 8 A, Gorlitz on a dull Saturday morning early in the month of February, by which time the advancing Russian forces had crossed the River Oder south of Breslau. Before leaving Gorlitz we were issued with two days rations by the Germans. Despite this we were still hungry, but we felt slightly more lively than hitherto following our rest period, and that day plodded steadily onwards to cover nineteen kilometres to a place called Marienbach. The scene was much the same as ever, once again we were herded into a large barn for the night where some of the wide boys re-enacted their rush for the best bed positions.

Fortunately the following days effort was only a short jaunt in comparison, being only a mere twelve kilometres to a small village named Weissenberg where we lined up for a spot of hot coffee, ersatz or not it certainly took the chill away. While continuing in a westerly direction it appeared that the town of Bautzen some twenty kilometres distant was to be our next port of call. During the ~~next~~ evening as our column slowly entered the outskirts of Bautzen groups of German soldiers were on hand strengthening recently erected defences on both sides of the main road blocks, and ^{step by step} tank traps. It was evident from the ~~pre~~ preparations that they were expecting the Russians at some time or other who were obviously steadily continuing their onward trend. Somewhere in the midst of Bautzen the column was finally called to a halt outside what looked very much like a military establishment, with ^{Wehrmacht} uniforms much in evidence. We were to be billeted for the night in Bautzen Army barracks to begin what proved to be a fairly regular attachment with the German Army in respect of sleeping quarters.

It would be a change from derelict barns, and old factory buildings. That night therefore was the first of many others to follow in which we would be the guests of the Wehrmacht, and although this meant sleeping on concrete floors, at this stage of the game acute discomfort meant nothing to me, I could now take it all in my stride. The most important item was food, however sparse, it was necessary to keep the legs mobile. In this connection we were indeed fortunate for if followed that accommodation in Military institutions meant that we were always certain of receiving some sort of food which enabled us to keep ticking over, even if it was only coffee and an issue of soup, which in fact proved to be the usual Wehrmacht hand out. That in fact is exactly what we received after a long wait in the cold as our lengthy column queued up before bedding down in haphazard fashion on the concrete floor of the gymnasium in Bautzen barracks. Stretched out fully dressed, including my great coat, I wrapped my only blanket around me, and using my kitbag as a pillow I was very soon in a sleep of exhaustion. Breakfast the following morning was only a cup of coffee before we were on the move again heading eternally westwards seemingly towards Kamenz, a long drag of twenty six kilometres with the column slightly reducing in numbers as more lads in blue unable to continue dropped out by the wayside. The contents of my Canadian food parcel had all been demolished, except for the large tin of Klim milk powder of which a small amount still remained. I had even tried a concoction of this very good milk powder mixed with snow in my tin mug, which did not prove very successful or palatable, really a waste of good material.

This particularly severe forced-march up to now had all the hallmarks of organised chaos. Chaotic is certainly the only word to describe how this day progressed, the German organisation under pressure was in my estimation bloody awful, and a real "cock up" was the result.

Our march Fuhrer, the irresponsible German officer, well remembered for his panicky measures on that exacting first night of the march when he and his minions forced us to double on the icy roads with the help of rifle butts, had no idea where our next port of call was to be. Once again he relentlessly drove us forward, as I and the other weary footsloggers lurched on and on well beyond Kamenz, our original intended stop. It was well past late evening as our column weaved along unsteadily in the darkness all absolutely on our shins. At this late hour we had covered at a very slow pace thirty five kilometres, when at long last a crescendo of shouting and bawling in Teutonic terms indicated that we had at last arrived somewhere, it proved to be another Wehrmacht "hotel". The time was just after nine pm, and at this late hour we had just concluded one of our longest daily footslogging sessions.

We then lined up four or five deep for the only meal of the day coffee and soup, our tongues were literally hanging out. This was the night of the 13th February, and very soon after we had been shepherded into the large barrack gymnasium to sleep out the night the air raid sirens started wailing, and in no time at all every German above the ground had disappeared from view. It was a black, starry night, and twenty thousand feet above us the boys of Bomber Command were heading for nearby Dresden, which proved to be one of the many devastating raids of the war, it certainly proved to be the most controversial.

In the circumstances kriegies were wandering all over the barracks. During the confusion, despite our fatigue, I and a few mates walked out of the barracks, and wandered up the nearby village to watch the bombing raid from a small church on top of a hill, all the Germans had gone to ground. Dresden was not very far away from our present position being some fifteen miles or so to the south. In the distance the city was a mass of flames, and fires, and I could see the reflection of the bomb bursts on the near horizon. The scene reminded very much of the first Thousand raid on Cologne, except in comparison this appeared to be a real "milk run", a piece of cake as there was no opposition at all from what I saw, perhaps one searchlight, but no flak. It looked like a soft touch for the four engined boys. It made me feel really envious to think that in a few more hours the crews would be landing back at their bases to enjoy a breakfast of bacon and egg, lucky lads. It was no exaggeration when I quote that every Deutsche in the vicinity was under cover in the shelters, and for that matter we could have scarpered, but where to? With no food available, in poor physical condition where could we have gone at this stage of the proceedings. The point of conflict had reached the stage at which there was safety in numbers, wandering aboard in ones and twos was asking to be shot out of hand by either SS troops or their Gestapo. Having been an eye witness, admittedly a long distance spectator, little did I realise the adverse publicity the Dresden raid, and Bomber Command would receive in later years, what sheer bloody hypocrisy.

Needless to say my mates and I did not overstep the mark, and returned to the barracks, and our concrete floor beds without mishap well before any Germans commenced to run around, so we felt quite pleased with ourselves after such a caper, weary or not. In the wake of that hectic night it was almost twelve noon before our RAF column was organised to eventually get under way at ^{5.30} obvious the Germans would keep us well clear of the Dresden area, and this assumption proved correct as we slowly made our way due west to finish up at a place called Konigsbruk, and its Army barracks. This time we happened to be the guests of a Panzer brigade who apparently were expecting us as they had erected four large marquee tents on the barrack square which were sufficient to house our RAF contingent for the night. The German tank men conspicuous in their dark uniforms did not seem to resent our intrusion, but also stationed in these barracks ^{was} a detachment of Hitler Youth who were arrogant little bastards, and accordingly acted very belligerently towards various members of our kriegie column, being RAF I was aware that we were not exactly popular.

In our condition and circumstances all we could do was to grin, and bear it, those young German fanatics were real Nazis. The following day's march turned out to be only a short stint of fifteen kilometres, but this distance was not achieved in a clear cut manner. Somewhere around the half way mark our column came abruptly to a halt being ordered to fall out. Our kriegie mass divided to recline on the grass verges occupying both sides of the road, we would remain thus for quite a long period of time. We did not mind the rest, and while doing just this many a group gave vent to their feelings using, once familiar, typical aircrew m jargon, the gist of which was not very complimentary to the Germans in control of this epic march.

Then barbed wire had gone, but our present predicament, in every way, was even more precarious.

The German Hauptmann had given the order to halt, but then suddenly disappeared from the scene, leaving his subordinates holding the baby. ~~Actually he~~ Actually he had gone on in front, obviously in search of an appropriate billet for the following nights rest. Some time later he returned, apparently triumphant, to urge his lesser minions on, and extract our resting column from the hedge rows to continue our travels.

Evidently he had found a large State farm in the locality. A few miles further on the place came into view, and following the usual preliminaries we were bedded down in a colossal barn, truthfully I had never before, or since for that matter, set eyes on a larger one, it was a tremendous size. When at last all had settled ~~down~~ inside this huge barn the German guards left us to it. Now that the coast was clear, myself, and ~~several~~ several other lads decided to explore the vast upper reaches of the interior of the barn to engage in a spot of foraging. The ensuing search was reasonably successful, I found a few vegetables, a couple of eggs, and I also filled my greatcoat pockets with a supply of dried clover leaf, having had a sudden brainwave that the stuff would conveniently roll in the German cigarette papers I had in my battledress pocket. I had not indulged in a smoke of any description for a period of nearly two months so obviously I ~~had~~ now had plans, but would I enjoy smoking dried clover leaf?

After by passing Dresden we were now heading in a southwesterly direction, and after leaving the State Farm at Kalkreith our column headed towards the River Elbe, and the town of MEISSEN, which was about twenty kilometres distant. Once again we spent the night in yet another Army barracks just outside Meissen, and before we retired our very extensive snake like queue spent most of the evening waiting patiently for the usual issue of soup, dixies at the ready.

The following day we crossed a bridge over the River Elbe, the valley of which presented a very picturesque, and imposing sight, then marched through the town of Meissen to then progress along the west bank of the Elbe in the general direction of Leipzig.

After an hour or two of conversational marching we deviated due west, at which point my thoughts switched to my greatcoat pockets, and the dried clover leaf. Yes, I decided that the time was ripe to try a smoke, but would the mixture roll? I decided to give it a go anyway, and while shambling along slowly I somewhat laboriously managed to accomplish the task, duly lit up to continue on my way alongside "Jacko", an oppo of mine. At the time the column was tramping over a cobbled thoroughfare, and whilst puffing away at my home made clover leaf cigarette, mysteriously I could not feel the hard stones beneath my boots, it was as if I was walking on soft, fleecy clouds.

I experienced the queer sensation of a detached being walking on air, my head was foggy as if I was being slowly drugged, which of course I was. My mate "Jacko" thought it was highly amusing, but after that experience clover leaf fags were definitely out as far as I was concerned, and I quickly disposed of the remainder of the narcotic like weed reposing inside my greatcoat pockets. The only other similar experience, or experiment if you like, was an abortive attempt to smoke dry tea leaves in a pipe, which produced an entirely different, but equally dangerous result to the clover leaf episode. This time I was lucky I did not lose the lining of my tongue.

After cramming the dried tea leaves into the bowl of my pipe, I then lit up, the ensuing effect was devastating, to say the least. I took several good drags on the pipe, and the inhaling effect was similar to a blow torch jet of flame down my throat, my eyes protruded, and a cold sweat appeared on my brow. With a silent oath I quickly withdrew the pipe, and muttered softly to my oppo "Never again".

Needles to say those "one off" experiments were not repeated during the remainder of the march, I swore I would contain myself, wait patiently, and anticipate the bliss of enjoyment when I would ultimately smoke the real McCoy, a Virginia cigarettex.

Slowly pushing on in a westerly direction our column was now in an area in which air raid warnings were becoming more and more frequent, and during various days large formations of USAAF four engined bombers passed above us flying at a height of between twenty five and thirty thousand feet. Numerous heavy flak batteries were constantly in action against the Yank box formations, and in the process showered our column with fragments of dropping shrapnel. During these air raid warnings with bombing aircraft overhead, or in close proximity the Germans halted our column to disperse us along the wooded sides of the road for a modicum of protection. When all seemed quiet our column was reorganised, and from this point a further eighteen kilometres was covered to LOMMAZISCH where in long queues we patiently awaited an issue of soup. Despite the long intervals between the issue of the very small bread ration there was always a few kriegies who throw caution to the winds, and flogged their meagre hunk of bread for a few cigarettes. Considering the weak and hungry condition of most participants in this forced march, I thought that was a ridiculous deal. Following a quick selection of Wehrmacht barracks for our nightly kip we reverted this time to the usual make shift quarters, a collection of old barns for the impending nights rest.

The following day we were immobile, a rest day, and in common with the majority of my fellow marchers I was horizontal for most of the day never stirring a muscle, and ironically it was a Sunday. The days rest must have benefitted our guards, for on Monday morning they were right on the ball chasing everybody around, roosting one and all with excessive zeal coupled with the old familiar verbal accompaniment of "Raus" "Aufstehen" etc. It was evident that the German Hauptmann had given orders that an early start to the days march was required.

This they achieved, and we subsequently tramped twenty kilometres to the town of DOBELN, arriving about three pm to be involved once again in a long drawn out process as our column lined up for an issue of soup. In our situation time meant nothing at all to us, and much later we were billeted inside a large gymnasium the floor of which was liberally covered with a layer of straw, such luxury. This covering of straw proved to be beneficial as the old bones were becoming more and more prominent. My legs were now literally just skin and bone, there was no doubt that we were all quickly approaching a distinct similarity to walking skeletons. Air raid warnings were now a regular occurrence with USAAF four engined bombers pounding away at

Central German targets during each day. The air battles were taking place out of our range of vision although several four engined kites had been seen going down in the distance. Slowly wending our way along the country roads in our customary zig zag fashion it seemed as if we were heading in the direction of Leipzig. Twenty kilometres further on our column came to halt somewhere inside the town of LEISNIG where we visited a further Army establishment, another hard floor to sleep on.

Our complement was indeed fortunate at this venue as we obtained a reasonable amount of substantial food, the first time for many days. It was hard to believe, but we were issued with five days rations of bread, and a portion of tinned meat. The total bread ration amounted to two and two fifths loaves between two men. We had never seen so much bread since leaving the Stalag, and understandably some of the lads went berserk at this unexpected windfall. Instead of rationing themselves in an endeavour to make the food last they had a real tuck in as though it really was the last supper, while on the other hand a very small minority exchanged part of their bread rations for the inevitable cigarettes.

That was not for me, no sirree, survival was the name of the game, and accordingly I intended to make my rations last several days at least, perhaps even the whole five days. Former P.O.W. combines were now a thing of the past, and had been so for quite some time, during the current grim conditions it was now every man for himself. On 20th February weary, grimy, and footsore, but slightly rejuvenated by our unexpected windfall in respect of food rations, we left LEISNIG to laboriously cover twenty three kilometres before being called to a halt at BAD LAUSICK where we slept the night in a group of small, draughty barns. I thought our luck was really changing now as prior to continuing our march we were issued with coffee and soup, a novelty as far as the latter was concerned for that explicit time of day. BORNA was our next scheduled stop, a mere twelve kilometres was all we had to travel. Our column was ordered to halt just outside this town, and the guards

motioned us to fall out, and rest in the hedgerows on each side of the road, the reason being that an air road was in progress. Many eyes switched skywards, I could not see any aircraft, but there seemed to be an abundance of heavy flak bursts dotted around the sky. After some considerable time it was apparent that the all clear had been given as we were then galvanised into action to move on. Our column then entered the town to spend the night in yet another Wehrmacht barracks, and at this stage of the march the concrete floors now seemed to be excessively hard, and uncomfortable. The reason was simply that my bones were becoming more and more prominent.

The following morning it was ten am before we were finally assembled in some sort of orderly formation to proceed further, and at this point we were now well into our second month of this marathon trek across Germany. We ambled on, an apt description, but trudged is probably the correct word, for another twenty eight kilometres when we spent the night in a small place by the name of WURCHWITZ. Air raid warnings were commonplace with the Yank daylight bomber boys still pounding away, and the opposing Germans countering by filling the sky with myriad heavy flak bursts. Whilst on the road we passed through a badly bombed village or was it a very small town, which had sustained very severe damage, evidently Yank daylight formations were the guilty culprits. I could not understand, and neither could other lads, why an insignificant place like that had been bombed. The village seemed deserted, it should have been it was more or less in ruins, and certainly did not contain anything remotely resembling military value. From what I could see, as we trudged through the debris, it had previously been a small community of what had previously been dwelling houses. At the conclusion of the day's march we shared the delights of a large barn which at some time or other sustained some bomb damage, almost all the roof slates were missing as a result. Falling out after the days march I was quick off the mark, and so managed to obtain a good sleeping position that was free

from the many cold, icy draughts that were eddying throughout the barn. Perhaps I can reiterate that it was every man for himself during these chaotic conditions, sometimes I was fortunate while other times perhaps not, one had to take the rough with the smooth, and press on. One thing was certain, I found out during the onward course of this forced march, with its physical privations, and lack of food, that when the chips are really down one finds out in stark reality who are the real friends, and mates. Quite a lot of the Stalag combines fell out with each other for various reasons, some split up quite early on in the march, I was one such individual involved.

Many dysentery cases were left behind, at different intervals during the march, miles from anywhere to be abandoned, and left to languish in barns, many of these unfortunates simply faded away as they laid in the straw, and died, there being no medical help in the immediate vicinity. Of course, some were lucky, and were rescued to finish up safely in nearby Stalags. On this march it was vital if at all possible to endeavour to keep going regardless, but for many it proved impossible.

the very latest "Gen" according to our own RAF leader, based on information he had received from our incompetent "friend" the German Hauptmann, was the news that we should be arriving at a Stalag on Saturday, 24th February, which hardly seemed credible as today was the day on which it was all supposed to happen.

In common with most of my comrades around me I accepted this information with a wry smile, we had heard such fairy tales before, and not one RAF kriegie was inclined to believe anything his German officer said or promised. He was ^{51st Pz Div} stringing us along with empty promises, as far as he was concerned it was anything for a quiet life, in reality I am sure he did not know the real answer to our predicament. It was, and always ^{was} evident that his random arrangements only progressed from day to day depending entirely on what accommodation he could find for the following night, not that he would have admitted that this was the case. In the morning of the 24th, the day in question, with the column mobile, the march continued with many of the lads apprehensive of the outcome. We kriegies were proved right in our convictions as no Stalag appeared at the end of the days march. Contrarily this session was the shortest hike to date, and was probably so for the whole trek as we only covered ten kilometres to the town of ZEITZ where for the umpteenth time we found ourselves once again guests of the Wehrmacht inside one of the air barrack buildings. The floors might be hard, but at least the cold, icy draughts were absent. Soup, our staple diet, constituted the whole of the menu, it was not very salubrious, but it was just enough to keep us going.

The German guards accompanying our column on this extra long walking tour of the Reich were more or less in the same condition as I was, "knackered" that is, and probably just as fed up as we kriegies, although obviously they sampled a hell of a lot more food than us. From a physical point of view they seemed to be in a worse state as most of them were middle aged, and all these very much older men were members of the "Volksturm" (Peoples Army) which was an organisation familiar to our own Home Guard. I was aware that some of these veterans had been travelling on the supply wagons at the rear of the column, no doubt feeling slightly worse for wear. Many of the younger, fit soldiers of the Wehrmacht who had originally started out with our RAF column from Stalag 8 B, Lamsdorf had long gone having been transferred from guard duties to fighting units. These soldiers, of course, had been replaced by the "Volksturm" personnel, but we still retained our German C.O.

Monday 25th February duly dawned, we were still staggering along in even more depleted numbers than any more had fallen by the wayside suffering from dysentery, bad feet, exhaustion etc. all these physical problems still taking their toll, "Junior" Wright, one of my former barrack mates was said to be suffering from the disease "Beri beri". No doubt some of these unfortunate kriegies could be picked up, others would not be so fortunate. Meanwhile the promised destination, that mythical Stalag was as yet nowhere in sight, and the day seemed endless with everybody more or less absolutely shagged. We could scarcely put one foot in front of the other as the epic slog carried on and on relentlessly. Our situation had once again reached the chaotic stage, we had already very painfully travelled a distance of thirty kilometres throughout the day, and the bloody Germans were still driving us on, to what that was the question. We passed very slowly through the small town of EISENBERG, and shambled onward for another seven or eight kilometres before at long last, loud guttural shouts of command brought our almost static column to a halt, the question on most lips echoed the words "is it our Stalag"?. Training my eyes in an effort to penetrate the pitch darkness I could not see a sign of my barbed wire fences, and in our weary, bedraggled condition we could not have really cared less. All I wanted to do was to get my head down, and rest, nothing else seemed important.

A closer look was not needed to scrutinize our quarters for the night, it certainly was no Stalag being nothing more than the usual large barn. In consequence of our marathon all day stint during which we marched fortyx kilometres the Germans informed us that the following day would be spent resting, phew a day off from footslogging. Just as well too, the morrow proved to be a bloody cold day, but regardless of the consequences I spent the morning wandering around the immediate locality in what turned out to be a successful foraging sortie. Amalgamating my spoils of war in a dixie I brought to the boil a mixture which contained wheat, brussel sprouts, a few greens, and ~~Sauerkraut~~^{SEYFRAU} potatoes over a fire one of the lads had got going. The rough and ready concoction if nothing else was hot and filling, a very pleasant sensation. After six weeks of this forced march, most of it carried out in desperate snowy weather, and constant below zero temperatures, I and all the other RAF kriegies were now very weak, grimy, and constantly hungry, we all had lost a terrific amount of body weight. The only item of clothing I had taken off my person at any time during this endurance test was my boots, and this was performed once only with disastrous effects at the conclusion of the initial days march.

Today 27th February the pace of this epic marathon was slower than ever, in effect it was only a slow trudge, we had nothing to eat all day, and how we managed to keep going during the twenty kilometres covered to JENA I will never know. On entering this fairly large town we were accommodated in our favourite "five star hotel" another German Army barracks to recline once more on a concrete "bed" with the old kitbag my ever present pillow. The long line of browned off RAF kriegies had to wait until almost eight pm before we received our first eats of the day, I should say soup of the day. It was an even longer wait for the unfortunate lads towards the end of the well, strung out queue of starving bodies.

We now took little notice of the daily air raid warnings, and although I did not see any formations up above the Yank bombers were always in action somewhere near. It is 28th February today, the day I took off from RAF Croft for the last time, at approximately nine thirty pm it would be exactly two years since I hit the silk over Belle Isle, some anniversary I must say.

Before leaving Jena military barracks our contingent was at last issued with some substantial food which was desperately needed, and consisted of two days rations of bread, and tinned meat. I and the majority of my comrades in the process of slowly starving made short work of this welcome legacy, and consumed most of the grub there and then before our column got under way. This action was certainly necessary to fortify my strength for the impending days march, my legs are now just working from memory, and all the other lads are in the same boat. Our column is still meandering in a westerly direction, but only very, very slowly, and consequently we only managed to travel twelve kilometres throughout the whole of the morning. Shortly after one pm we came to a halt at a State farm where we would stay for the night. One of my mates "Jacko", and myself volunteered to dig latrines. No, I was not mad, my sole purpose was to obtain a double issue of soup, which was hot, but very watery. Our German officer I/C spoke a few words to us which were notable for a distinct absence of logic, when he informed all, and sundry that an announcement had been made in the German media to the effect that the bread ration had been cut by a hundred grammes, and that there was now a grave shortage of potatoes in the Reich. As far as it concerned us, this was a ridiculous statement, it was indeed a big laugh, being of no consequence at all. We hardly received any bread, and certainly we had not received a single potato since our Stalag days.

Stalag days are now but a memory, we had a tendency to moan about the conditions endured then, but in comparison with our current predicament they were a dream. After my spell of latrine digging, which because of my run down physical condition took a hell of a long time to complete, I had the good fortune to indulge in a strip down wash during the late afternoon, the first for many weeks, it felt good, invigorating to say the least, but the old legs looked in poor shape, emaciated was the word, being just skin and bone.

It now seemed apparent that the Germans in charge had lost their penchant to hustle our column, and it seems now that there is no hurry at all in the onward advance of the march as we slowly amalgamated to sluggishly amble off around midday of the 1st March.

Crawling along at a snails pace we only covered a distance of twelve kilometres to MEILLINGEN at which ^{point} the very long column which had been increased when we left Stalag 8 A, Gorlitz, was then separated into two parties. The party or column I was attached to was, in the main, the original RAF contingent from Lamsdorf, or what remained of them.

Before we started off on this portion of the march we were informed that our ultimate destination was now CFLAG 9 A which was situated somewhere south of Kassel, near Marburg, a mere one hundred and fifty kilometres further west from this starting point. At long last the end seemed to be in sight, the information ~~was~~ appeared to be genuine this time, and it was a relief to have a specific target to aim at. We left Meillingen about one pm, and covered thirty kilometres at a very slow pace arriving at LINDEBACH at a late hour in the pitch black darkness of night, I was about on my knees, exhausted.

The following day was noteworthy for the spells of indecision by the German officer in charge mainly due to the many air raid warnings, but after several false starts he eventually made up his mind, and we moved off again around one pm. After some considerable time on the road our column then passed through the first really large town which was ERFURT, where I saw much evidence of heavy bomb damage in the town centre. Along the busy main streets hundreds of German civilians stopped to watch our progress as we shambled along, some just stared at us as if we had just come out of the Ark, most gave us the bird shouting and jeering, coupled with what must have been the juiciest German verbal obscenities, but one thing was certain we looked anything but "terrorflieger". Despite the many shouts and jeers, the blue uniforms were a dead giveaway, we were not attacked or showered with ~~missiles~~ missiles, but there was one person with a small helping of sympathy for our plight, a small girl, who made a sudden impromptu dash from the nearby pavement to hurriedly thrust into the hands of the nearest RAF kriegie a small loaf of bread after which she ran off very quickly, to be immediately lost in the crowd lining the pavements. What a lucky lad, there was no doubt that the gift was gratefully received, the bemused recipient could hardly believe his eyes.

After leaving the town of Erfurt we again meandered in typical zig zag fashion still heading roughly in a westerly direction along the country roads. Finally we came to a stop at SCHIBELEL about seven thirty pm with another twenty five kilometres under our belts.

We lined up for an issue of bread and meat which I disposed of there and then. I am afraid I was now feeling much the worse for wear, the weather was foul, it was bitter cold and it had been snowing all day. On the 4th March our RAF leader, and the German officer got together for a few words after which we were informed that only a weeks marching remained before we reached our objective, Cflag 9 A, but the question was, could I last another week.

Due to the poor physical condition of the surviving members of our RAF column the 4th March was a rest day, we certainly needed it. I had been feeling well below par for the past few days, but at the conclusion of the following days march I was looking ghastly, a walking zombie. At this point approximately thirty kilometres from the town of EISENACH I had reached the limit of my endurance, and my condition became progressively worse during the course of the night, I was now really ill with a very high temperature. On the following morning, the 6th March, ironically my 25th birthday, I was in a very bad way, and laid motionless on my covering of straw completely clothed, including my greatcoat. Unable to move, I like many others in the prevailing harsh conditions had finally, and utterly succumbed to a virulent bout of Amoebic dysentery.

In the course of a few hours I found myself in an embarrassingly, dirty, and horrible condition as continuous discharges of excretia, blood and mucus saturated my person. During the morning this process continued, I had to discard, and somehow dispose of my long combination underwear, which was in a sorry and horrible state. I was too weak to stand on my feet, and continued to lay on my back in the straw for the remainder of the morning with liquid faeces exuding from me constantly. With my body from the waist downwards saturated with a combination of excretia, and mucus I was indeed a picture of gloom, and wretchedness.

Much later in the morning, being unable to move without assistance, several of the lads lifted me to heave me aboard the horse drawn sick cart in which I had the company of several other similar unfortunates. Thus, positioned at the rear of our marching column we slowly made our way to the town of Eisenach, a journey of thirty kilometres to the west. During the hours spent on the journey my condition rapidly deteriorated I felt really miserable and uncomfortable everything was still exuding from my person. My greatcoat, and everything I was wearing underneath was soaked through with liquid faeces, even my kitbag upon which I was reclining did not escape being soiled. By the time I arrived at Eisenach I was not aware of what was happening around me, and on the point of collapse. I felt so ill I simply did not care about anything or anybody. Since that day I have never experienced such a morbid feeling, that's for sure. What a way to celebrate one's birthday.

Whoever was in charge of the sick conveyance sent me and eight other serious cases, ^{also} suffering from dysentery, to a Polish and Russian Lazarette of sorts, which was situated somewhere in the locality. Our party was placed aboard another horse drawn wagon, and what a journey it proved to be as we negotiated some very rough country roads. Innumerable jolts and bumps precluded any chance of a comfortable ride, and I was relieved when we arrived at our destination. We were very well treated at this establishment, but it was no hospital being just a rough and ready P.O.W. barrack hut. The inmates possessed nothing in the way of medicines or tablets to administer to us. I did not eat anything whilst reclining in this hut, and remained helplessly immobile on my bunk with faeces, blood and mucus still exuding from me. The only treatment our East European friends could administer was the use of charcoal taken by oral means, which did not seem to benefit me at all. The only decent item of clothing not completely fouled was my battle dress tunic. My uniform trousers now had an uncomfortable inside lining throughout of coagulating slime, mucus etc, and now resembled a pair of "moleskins".

I had no shirts or underwear in reserve so I was really up against it, the outlook looked bleak. My survivor's luck however held, but whichever way one looked at my predicament, I was bloody fortunate at this crucial period to find myself in the right place at the right time, because on the 9th March I was moved somewhat fortuitously from my well meaning but primitive Polish and Russian friends. I am convinced that otherwise I would have slowly, and silently drifted into oblivion. I do not recollect whose decision it was, but none the less I was a very lucky kriegie to be then transported along with the other eight sick lads to the nearest railway station. Our destination was a British P.O.W. hospital at OBERMASSFELD which was near MEINENGEN, about forty miles south of Eisenach.

During the train journey we had to endure several longish delays, and we finally arrived about 11.30 pm on the night of Friday, 9th March. Although one might think my opinion was biased, Bermassfeld proved to be a marvellous P.O.W. Hospital, it certainly "saved my bacon", and the German Kommandant doctor was thankfully a good, humane individual. I was, without any doubt, a very lucky RAF kriegie to be so near at hand to such an establishment in my hour of need, many others on the march with similar ailments had not been so fortunate, and had been forsaken to repose on the straw floors of country barns with little hope of any necessary medical assistance on hand in the areas.

Bermassfeld Hospital, *originally attached to Stalag IX C,* was situated on a sort of island being surrounded on three sides by water, the river being the Werra. The houses and courtyard faced the main road, and along the three sides of the river stretched a barbed wire fence, armed sentries patrolled the road together with the entire stretch of the barbed wire enclosure. Just below the footbridge and the outer barbed wire fence a weir stretched across the river, and the locale presented a picturesque view. The main road to Bamberg ran along the frontage of the hospital, and roads connecting led to Meiningen, and Grimmenthal, alongside the hospital was a milk factory, all the locality being in the district of Thuringia, Central Germany. Our sick party had to undergo a four ^{hour} wait at the local railway station, and only with power kept me from wilting under the strain as I patiently stuck it out, until our own P.O.W. hospital orderlies eventually arrived with a cart upon which we were all conveyed to, our new abode.

Upon arrival we were provided with coffee, and a helping of some sort of stew, which tasted lovely but nevertheless went straight through my system, I was still in a hell of a mess. The medical orderlies were a good set of lads, with me in a helpless condition they unceremoniously stripped all my soiled uniform, shirt etc off me, a gruesome task, to then lay me down on a stretcher.

The necessary manoeuvre as I was unable to stand up, and in this position I was carried to the hot showers. With plenty of able assistance I experienced a shower whilst horizontal on my stretcher, no mean feat I can tell you. Afterwards, despite my very weak but vehement protests one of the orderlies proceeded in a business like manner to cut and shave off all my pride and joy, my wavy Auburn locks, was I disgusted. No doubt, with me being a forced march victim, they obviously deduced I was lousy, and were taking no chances. The operation continued, and my complete head of hair quickly disappeared, a real "Yul Brynner" appeared in its place, I was now as bald as a badger. I really looked the part now, a typical Belsen type, as I had lost about four stone in weight the transformation was complete.

Clean pyjamas were put on me before I was transferred to a room or ward which I would think could be classed nowadays as an Intensive care unit. I can recall that they were only three occupants in this room when I was put to bed late that night, it was actually in the early hours of the morning. When I awoke very much later that morning one of my room mates unfortunately had died sometime during the night. One of the other occupant's had Cholera, all were very seriously ill. I found it was necessary to sleep on a bedpan, but nevertheless still found I had to discard my pyjamas after making a mess of them. Whilst laying in bed I kept thinking how fortunate I was to be in the position I now was, being pretty sure I would not have recovered from this virulent type of dysentery the way things had looked to be going.

The British medical officer I was closely concerned with was one of several in the Hospital who had previously served in an Airborne unit, having been captured at Arnhem in late 1944. I cannot speak too highly of him, he really took good care of me. At the outset my treatment concerned the then new antibiotic M and B tablets, and I cannot emphasise how fortunate I was to receive such a medical care. This involved me taking one M and B tablet every two hours during the first three days, and at the same time I was on a liquid diet. At the conclusion of this period I was moved to another, small ward which consisted of only four beds. Alongside me in the next bed was a Royal Navy matelot, I cannot recall his name, but he informed me that he only weighed five stone, Jesus, I thought I was a bad case at a mere eight stone, but he was only a small chap. This poor matelot was burdened with massive bed sores on his hip bones, in my limited hospital experience I had not seen bigger ones. I do not know what eventually happened to him afterwards, but we enjoyed many a cup of Horlicks together during the short time I spent in this particular ward. All the Red Cross food from the parcels, together with the German rations, went into the hospital kitchen to be cooked for communal feeding, and of course special diets. Each patient received in pers on the residue of the parcel which consisted of cigarettes, chocolate bars, and usually a bar of sugar. The hospital stock of Red Cross food parcels seemed to be mainly made up of the American type. During my period of kriegie existence I had not come across an American parcel, but I had heard that they contained a packet or two of cigarettes besides food. My first share of such a parcel was eighty American cigarettes, and two chocolate bars, consequently I, felt on top of the world, the outlook was now looking rosy, with fringe benefits too. I had not enjoyed the luxury of a good Virginia cigarette for almost three months so when I eventually got on my feet the first fag was really savoured, and slowly enjoyed, a few minutes of sheer bliss. Several days later all the dysentery cases, I think they were eight or nine of us, were moved to Hut 2/3 to enjoy the luxury of spring beds, what a life, after two months of hell on the forced march this was truly heaven. I was then placed on a special diet which was recommended by the German doctor in charge of the Hospital. I was still very weak, but was slowly improving, and I now weighed fifty kilos or one hundred and ten pounds, so I reckon I had lost fifty pounds in weight altogether due to the forced march. My special diet on a daily basis was as follows.

7.30 am. Forridgex and milk, coffee, white bread and butter.
10.00 am. Coffee.
11.30 am. Dinner;- Usually mashed potatoes, gravy, Yorkshire pudding, Spam or bully beef. which was followed by a sweet of either pineapple or Rice pudding.
1700 hrs;- Tea, which consisted of either salmon or cold meat plus bread and butter, one egg, cheese, and coffee.
1930 hrs;- Cup of cocoa.

Now that memm, although a special diet for specified individuals, by any standards was really something extraordinary for a P.O.W. hospital in Germany, but the kudos once again belong to the International Red Cross Organisation through whose channels came all the necessities, including medical supplies.

I think that most P.O.W. occupants would agree that Obermassfeld was a really happy hospital, and I together with all the other inmates were wholly indebted to our Medical Officers, and their staff for the exemplary fashion in which they looked after us all. My health had improved considerably during the previous fortnight despite a slight relapse and a spell of vomiting which thankfully only lasted a few days. I was then able to walk around the room progressively for several hours throughout each day.

My sojourn in Ward 2/3 lasted almost three weeks, and during this period the special diet worked wonders for my stomach, and intestinal ailments. So much improvement was made that by the end of the month I was considered well enough to be moved to one of the main hospital wards, and so join other patients to now participate in normal communal feeding. The normal diet, which obviously lacked the quality of the special diet, consisted of wholesome food made up from a combination of Red Cross food parcel items, and the sparse German rations, to be then dished up by the cookhouse. These meals were pretty good, being of a reasonable standard despite the current shortage of Red Cross food parcels.

In this respect all the hospital inmates had been restricted to a weekly issue of one half of a parcel per man during the previous three weeks. Of course, all we actually received was the cigarettes, and chocolate bar the food items went to the cookhouse.

Throughout my entire spell of captivity I had managed to hold on to the Elgin wristwatch I had borrowed from Johnny Ward, the rear gunner on ^{our} ill fated last trip, despite many offers of innumerable cigarettes from would be buyers. This hospital was no exception as I was again offered a considerable number of the noxious weed for the said watch. Inevitably the answer was always in the negative, it was not mine to barter. I had always planned to return the watch to Johnny's parents when the war came to its close.

The shooting war was now rapidly catching up with me, today was one of absorbing interest with intense fighter activity in the skies above the locality of our hospital. Several P 51 Mustang aircraft were keenly observed in offensive action as they dived down to a low level strafing German positions with cannon and machine gun fire, to then perform violent "split arsed" turns as they speedily climbed away. Not to be outdone the "old firm" was also involved in this area as bomb carrying Spitfires helped to keep the pot boiling, and Jerry's head down, it was all good fun to watch, and many were the cheers.

From my vantage point at the hospital ward window I had also witnessed many German Army units retreating or pulling back towards the East along the nearby roads. It was obvious that the corridor between east and west was now rapidly shrinking, and the air raid warnings were constant, it would seem that the end was not too far away.

On 1st April all the bed patients occupying the small wards were moved over to the main hospital, and as a precautionary safety measure large white cotton sheets with a large Red Cross prominently displayed thereon in red paint were draped on the roof of the main hospital building in order to forestall, and prevent any shelling of the Hospital complex by either side. The following day, which was Easter Sunday, was one spent in extreme anticipation by all hospital inmates, but disappointingly nothing happened.

However during the early evening the German guards who normally patrolled the barbed wire perimeter of the Hospital suddenly packed up, and abandoned their positions. Such an exigency had obviously been catered for as, in no time at all, our own guards then took over.

Events were now beginning to unfold very quickly, and it appeared that our British Medical Officers held an impromptu meeting with the German doctor Kommandant in view of the rapidly changing situation. The Kommandant apparently had already received orders from his superiors to evacuate the Hospital, but

had declined to do anything about it. Following his discussions with our Officers it was evident that an agreement of some sort had been reached amicably between the Kommandant, and our Medical Officers.

The overall situation outside our hospital seemed to be ripe for some sort of confrontation. I could see from my position in the ward that there was intense Wehrmacht activity in the locality with machine gun nests being set up surrounded by sandbag fortifications. These fully equipped German soldiers were scurrying about like ants on the roads outside, and some were busy placing road blocks in position. The view certainly presented a serious drawback to our situation, on the face of things it looked as if we Kriegie hospital inmates would find ourselves caught in the middle of a shooting match when or if our forces arrived. It was true to say that during the onward course of that night, conversations were rife, when constant discussions on the impending situation overruled the natural need for sleep. Inevitably, the subject of the all night debate became real when at approximately nine am of the following morning, which was Easter Monday 2nd April, 1945, the Americans arrived. Shortly after breakfast the first shots were heard being a mixture of sporadic rifle fire, and the deeper sounds of heavy bursts of machine gun fire from the German units in the village. The hastily erected defensive gun positions on the road adjacent to our Hospital had been very quickly evacuated, no doubt with American tanks in the offing these German troops had seen the light, and had probably withdrawn to the village to join other of their units. At precisely nine forty five am the first American tanks, and armoured vehicles rolled steadfastly by along the road running alongside our hospital. Some resistance was being offered by a few German units in the nearby village further up the road, we could hear spasmodic exchanges of rifle fire, the bark of machine guns, and then the sound of much heavier gunfire from the U.S. Army tanks. The Yank armoured column passed us by, and pushed on in pursuit of the retreating Germans. The hastily placed white sheets depicting our status with the words Red Cross, and "P.O.W." inscribed on them undoubtedly saved the prominent Hospital building from being shelled, and saved a few Kriegie lives. After being liberated we were told by one of the Yank officer's that it had been the intention to shell such a prominent building, but they had eventually realised the significance of the displayed sheets in good time, bloody good job, too.

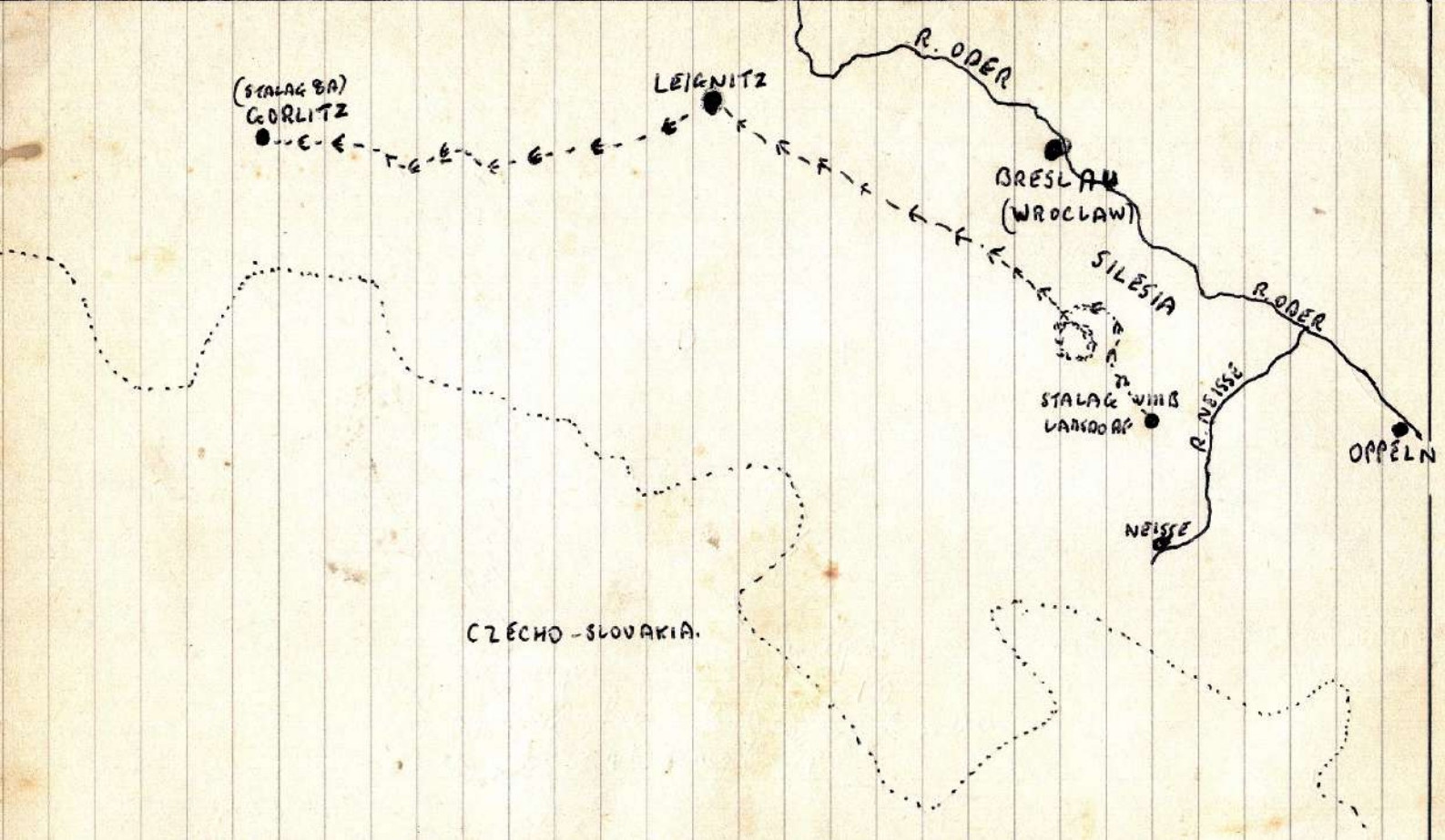
In the wake of the advancing armoured vehicles followed the good old infantry lads, the "G.I.'s". Wearing broad grins they came sauntering through the wards of the Hospital, amidst a crescendo of nonstop cheering, to encounter numerous over enthusiastic slaps on the back. Shoulder slinging their M.I. carbines these Third Army Yank G.I.'s were really enjoying their role as our liberators, and all seemed to be as happy as indeed we were. They strolled around handing out cigarettes, Hershey chocolate bars, and "K" ration packs to various overjoyed Kriegies. We were free at last, the entire hospital was in a state of uproar, but who cared, this was an incredible occasion which would remain in our memory banks for a very long time. It was both a lighthearted, and lightheaded point of duration, and in such circumstances one could excuse the many bursts of hysterical laughter. Without any doubt this moment was an emotional milestone.

Apart from the bed patients, some of whom were in traction, walking patients like myself had previously been laying face downwards on the floor of the ward before the first G.I.'s arrived on the scene. This manoeuvre had been a necessary antic as plenty of lethal hardware was flying about outside the building.

The aftermath of liberation continued in full swing for quite a time, it was a morning of mornings, and in the Christmas like atmosphere jubilant Kriegies were singing, and dancing while others were delirious with laughter as they attempted to scoff the contents of their free "K" ration packs. After two years under the yoke I was no longer a prisoner, it was hard to believe, and how quickly it had all happened, like a dream come true. Fortunately for all the Kriegie hospital inmates the Germans did not put up a hard fight in our immediate vicinity, maybe there was a variety of reasons for this, but I think the main one was the superior American armoured strength.

Approx 20 miles to land.

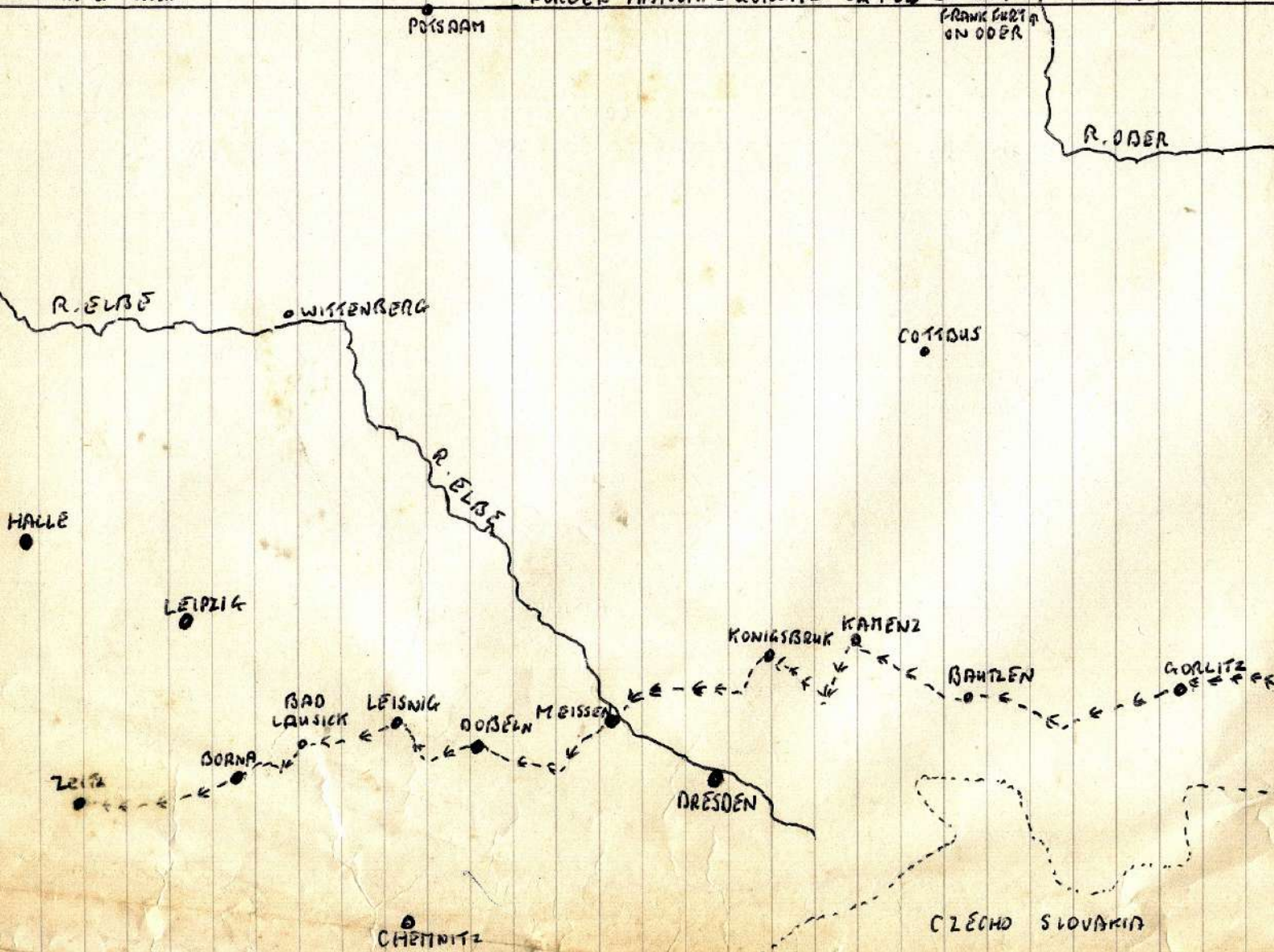
STAGE I
THE FIRST THIRTEEN DAYS OF THE MARCH - 17 JAN 45 - 26 JAN.



STAGE II

FORCED MARCH - GORLITZ SIX FEB - ZEITZ 22 Feb.

20 miles to lunch.



approx 20 miles to link.

STAGE III
FORCED MARCH

ZEITZ 23 Feb - EISENACH 6th March

HANDOVER

BRUNSWICK

MAGDEBURG

CENTRAL GERMANY

KÖLLINGEN

HALLE

KASSEL

