

Hard
Tears
&
Soft
Laughter

James William Lauder

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Foreword

When the last ships left the beaches of Dieppe on the 19th of August, 1942, more than 2700 dead and wounded were left behind. 1,949 Canadians were captured. Of these, 586 were wounded, and all spent the remainder of the war as prisoners of war. Approximately 180 of the injured Dieppe survivors were sent to the POW hospital in the village of Obermassfeld, Thuringen, Germany. James William Lauder, of the Canadian Essex Scottish Regiment, was one of those men. He was twenty-four years of age. This is his story.

When I was growing up, my dad rarely spoke of the war, but somehow, I knew that it had had a profound effect on him. This was made more evident when I became aware of his writing a book about his experience as a POW; a book that I did not have an opportunity to read until much later.

Although he had begun to inquire about publishing his memoir, serious illness intervened. My father passed away in 1979 of lung cancer at what would now be considered the young age of 61. I acquired the original manuscript along with his war journal, drawings, and other related documents. I finally had the opportunity to read the manuscript but then set it aside to pursue family and career.

In 2015, at the annual Remembrance Day ceremony, a ceremony that has always been important to me, his experiences came to mind again, and I suddenly felt compelled to try and publish his book. This would be honouring his memory, a memorial to him that at least to me, seemed long overdue.

Except for a few very minor changes, the text is as it was written. The process of editing the manuscript and the reviewing of photos, drawings, poems and cartoons to include in the finished product, brought me closer to my dad. I have always described him as a real gentleman. He was a kind, loving and gentle man but could be as tough as nails when the situation demanded. He worked hard to support our family, was always helpful to the larger family and loyal to those he worked for or who worked under him.

j a m e s w i l l i a m l a u d e r

In his professional life, he worked as a graphic artist for an advertising company in Windsor, Ontario. In his spare time, he produced some fine art and many cartoons for the local newspaper and other publications.

Jimmie Arthur Lauder

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Although most of the names in this book have been changed, the story is true. The political and military statements presented are not necessarily completely factual, for the Privates were few and far between who knew what the war was all about. We did what the officers told us to do and, being somewhat biased; I sometimes entertain the sneaky suspicion that that was part of the reason there were so many snafus here and there.

The language used is the language of soldiers and should perhaps be modified to some degree yet, even as a young boy, I was rather disappointed when I read of the snarling, one-eyed pirate saying, “Darn.” And so it would be ridiculous to have a Canadian soldier express his feelings by saying, “Oh heck, that darn German just shot off my arm.” It didn’t come out that way.

This is the story of one soldier, or a lot of soldiers, caught in the buzz saw of Dieppe, torn up and tagged out, then forced to watch the war come to its filthy end behind barbed wire. The sudden shame of captivity stings his bowels, but it is not long before he pushes away the self-pity and the condemnation of his seniors and comes up with his own Ecclesiastes to keep him going. He has used it before, and in his own way, he knows there is a time to laugh and a time to weep, and he knows there is a hell of a lot more besides. He knows how to steal and to give away his last cigarette; he knows how to kill and how to comfort a man as he’s slipping towards death. He knows how to swear violently, and he knows how to pray. It’s pretty hard to get him to pray but, by God, when he does it is usually for somebody else. He knows how to die and is privileged to know how to live. And he really knows how to live. He lives it up; he laughs it up and curses it up and down. Yes, he knows how to live but sometimes the living ain’t for long. Old soldiers never die, but the young ones do.

Before you conclude that this is a morbid tale of woe, first remember that the Private has an ace in the hole. He knows how to laugh and if you can laugh, brother, you’ve got it made. Most Privates come out of the war wiser, more mature and mellowed enough to cope with the complicated system of civilized confusion yet the retrospective summation of the whole affair makes you wonder just what the whole war was all about, who won it, and how much was won. We silently applaud the officers we had cursed and ridiculed when the show was on the road, knowing even then that they had carried the heaviest pack. In the darkest days of prison life, we knew enough

unforgettable truths to realize that they had to do the winning if the world was going to find an acceptable reason for being.

So this book is just a small piece of the action yet big enough to stir my memory and bring back moments of hard tears and soft laughter. Maybe Stan Loomis had the right idea about who wins a war. I remember a night when the booze was being poured heavily, and we both were in a state of ersatz happiness. The pain of privation was washed away for that night at least, and we were quite content with the way of things. Stan was the happiest. He grinned like a pixie as he took another slug of the home-made rotgut and his eyes almost spit tears as the strong drink went down. “Everybody wins a prize,” he croaked, “If you live, you’ve won your own little war. If you get killed — well you get a cross don’t you?”

James William Lauder

Chapter 1:

Beach assault a disaster

The history books that tell the story of the Second World War will probably allot a paragraph or two to the Dieppe Raid. They will list the casualties, itemize the losses and emphasize the glory, tone down the excuses and then pass on to a more victorious piece of the war that makes better reading. To me, it was the whole damn war. I spent half a day trying to get into Germany and three years wanting to get out.

The Dieppe raid got off to a bad start, sagged in the middle and became a shambles at the end. The courage was there, born in a hurry, born with the discipline of seasoned troops and by men new to the game. The German mortars, with a seemingly endless supply of shells and an unpredictable ability to pick and choose their targets, did the major part of cutting the landing party to bloody bits. The men fought with hard, stubborn determination in their effort to get to the centre of Dieppe. Reckless bravery was packed into every tight minute of the grim morning, yet the collapse of the raid seemed inevitable the moment your heavy boots hit the wet shale and sand, and you sped for the protection of the sea wall.

The August sun was hot, sending its rays down through a beautiful clear blue sky onto the hectic beach. I crouched over one of the many wounded who had found a bit of safety in a large hole in the sand just back of the sea wall. For a medic who had spent more than two years in England putting Band-Aids on route march blisters and dispensing bismuth to pampered lead-swingers to suddenly find himself wallowing in blood and torn flesh, it was indeed a fast promotion. I pushed Andy's intestines back under the skin, like stuffing a chicken and told him that everything was going to be okay. He knew I was a goddamn liar but acted as if he seemed to get a bit of comfort from a kind word. I wanted to leave as there were so many more that needed help but he hung onto me, his face bleary and gawky like a drunk on his last legs looking for a reason for me to stay. "Cigarette..." he gurgled. I fumbled for my pack and managed to get one into his rubbery lips. I struck a match, and at the same moment a mortar bomb exploded behind him and finished him off. He shielded me from the blast, yet I pushed his bloody body away from me without a second

look and made my way out of the hole onto the open beach to work on a British Marine who had his arm completely stripped of flesh and muscle. “Cut the silly thing off,” he said almost as if it was a bothersome wart “But you had better fix your own foot first.” I did have three pieces of shrapnel in my foot, but they were neat little holes with little bleeding, so I ignored his advice. In fact, if it was worse than I thought the shoe would hold it together, so I went about the business of cutting off his silly arm. The bones were practically pulverized, and it was just a matter of cutting a bit of flesh to finish the work done by the mortar. The mortar shelling began to intensify, and before the job was completed, we had to eat the sand more times than enough.

The Marine officer eyed the well-packed field dressing that covered the stump and calmly chuckled. “The way this thing is going I feel your fine bit of work will be a bloody waste of time.” “It’s a bitch,” I muttered and was amazed at my own calmness. “You better follow me back to the hole.” I said, “It’s safer there.”

We began crawling back to the indentation which, without planning, had become a natural First Aid depot to which the wounded were being carried or who’d come in under their own power. Suddenly we pulled up short, buried our faces in the hot sand and hung on as a cluster of mortar bombs ganged up on the hole like a pan of popcorn gone haywire. When the sand and shale settled down we could see that there wasn’t much use of us going forward; neither of us was a trained mortician.

Murphy, accompanied by a small group of men, came out from behind the protection of a slope of land and made his way over to us moving fast but with caution. He dropped to his knees beside me, and I could see that the back of his uniform was shattered and the flesh looked like it had been lashed by a wire bullwhip. He brushed aside my feeble offer of help. “Never mind that, let’s just get to hell out of here,” he groaned, the words coming up from his lungs as if each one was a day’s work. “It’s a washout. We got orders to make it back to the beach — the Navy is going to try and pick us up.” We didn’t answer, just hobbled our way along the shell-torn beach, hitting the dirt when the Germans’ anger came too close, giving what help we could to others, and passing the word along to those still going through the motions of fighting a war. We reached a breakwater built of heavy salt-stained timbers running at right angles to the beach but into the rising tide.

Most of the boys wearily sought protection from the continuing gunfire by hugging close to the breakwater as they looked hungrily out to the empty sea. The number of men increased, and as their hopes of evacuation grew less and less, they all seemed to end up pressing close to the stout timbers of the ancient wood. A bit of Army training stuck with me, and I broke from the herd crawling a good 50 feet away to the shelter of a crippled tank that belched out smoke like a factory doing overtime. With my knees and elbows, I scratched out a makeshift foxhole and settled down. An ME 109 screamed down, tearing a bloody hole in the wall-huggers and I watched the action with no satisfaction from my good judgment. I was utterly drained of all feelings for my cohorts or myself. To hell with it was the summation of my interest, so I lay in my trench waiting for it to end. It had to end in rescue, capture or death and I didn’t give a damn which piece of the triangle was to be my fate. I had seen enough heroes, dead men, blood and flying guts for one day; the never-ending blast of mortar bombs, machinegun fire, and exploding shells had

lost their ability to disturb my dulled brain. A spurt of machinegun fire bounced off the useless tank, kicking up a racket like a small boy running a stick along a picket fence. I watched from under the rim of my helmet and knew that I was finished with it all, yet not too finished to lose the desire to have a cigarette. Gotta have a cigarette.

I shook a fag out of my crumpled pack, spat the sand out of my mouth and propped myself up on my tired elbows as I lit a match. I sucked in a lungful of the stuff and enjoyed it. The second drag was accompanied by a mortar blast, and a piece of the shrapnel found my greedy mouth wide open. It was like the proverbial mule had kicked me. It was a knockout punch, ending my career as a fighting Canadian as suddenly as it had started.

Chapter 2:

Waking up wounded, a prisoner

It was all over when consciousness returned. I found myself on a railway siding in the centre of Dieppe in the company of many more of the wounded. My mouth was filled with blood, severe pain racked my broken jaw, but the repelling sight around me hurt the most. I was struck by sudden despair that burns like a fire in your belly when I saw the tattered, dirty remains of Canada's finest troops lying like a pile of rubbish guarded casually by a small number of German soldiers. Prisoners — a small word but damn hard to swallow the first time.

A string of boxcars had been shunted into position in front of us. A large Army truck was dumping bales of straw onto the ground and French men and women who had been ordered to, or volunteered, were breaking open the bales and spreading out the straw inside the cars. They worked fast, breaking from the task when they saw a chance to do a kindness to a wounded man. The guards frowned on this but did let them do a small bit of nursing. They watched the French closely, yet to us, the German soldier's attitude was cold and disinterested as if winning the fight and getting through the battle unmarked and alive was reward enough. The heat of the sun had lessened as it lowered on the horizon and the French were put to work filling the cars with the wounded. Those that could walk stumbled to their feet and climbed aboard while the more seriously wounded were carried into the cars. Groans and feverish shrieks filled the area as the inexperienced people mishandled the men causing broken bones to grind together and wounds to re-open and spill blood. No stretchers were available, and the guarded French were distraught by their inability to handle the men correctly, yet their eyes were tender and filled with tears. "Oh Christ lemme get there by myself!" protested Murphy when two of the civilians tried to lift him from the ground. He struggled to his feet, and I could see that his back was brown with dried blood. Small rivulets of bright red trickled down where the careless hands had opened up the wounds. A French girl and a fellow helped me hobble to the boxcar door and assisted me to climb aboard. They chattered wildly as we moved forward — their words hissing out in urgent whispering as they tried to tell me something, but nothing registered for I knew little French. I shrugged my shoulders and used one small word...merci. They paused for a moment looking at

me sadly and then rushed away to help others. Along the siding came a German soldier pushing a handcart filled with loaves of black bread. He wore a battered service cap, a grimy undershirt and, except for the olive green of his pants that showed at the bottom of a grease-smearing apron, looked and acted the part played by any cook in any army. Into every boxcar, he tossed a few loaves of bread and said something about water being brought up shortly. His toothless smile was assuring, but like all military cooks he was loose with his promises and the water never came.

The boxcar was heavy with the sweet dusty smell of straw, the scent of manure lingering from the last commercial shipment. It was not offensive because the top half of the car and the sliding door was built with slats to allow plenty of air for its usual cargo, cattle. It was hell for the most severely wounded occupants. The welcomed numbness that accompanies a wound when a man is hit was beginning to give way to vivid pain, and the blood oozed freely as the quickly applied field dressings began to lose their grip. When the guards slammed the door, and the train shunted its way out of the city of Dieppe, the groaning started for real. I sat staring past my bare feet watching twilight dissolve into night. Any soldier or bum will tell you that riding a boxcar thinly supplied with straw or excelsior is a painful task even if one is in the best of health. The rumbling and jerky sway of the vehicle chews at your bones, bruises your flesh and makes the balmiest summer night troublesome...and much too long. When the bones are cracked, the flesh torn, and the spirit broken, the night is agony at its highest pitch. The smell of straw was competing with the sickening odours of sweat and stale blood as I tried to cut out from my mind the suffering that was around me. The darkness couldn't close my ears to the voices of my companions who had suddenly stopped their carousing happy lives in England and now were a mass of cursing, snarling, begging men caught in the mesh of their own bravado. I sat there aching — aching more in my mind than in the flesh — slowly filling with despair. My throat hurt as I quietly learned that I hadn't forgotten how to cry.

“For Christ's sake, turn me over. God, turn me over.” The voice was behind me. I searched around in the darkness until my hand felt the speaker. “What's the matter?” I muttered...a stupid question. “God, turn me over — I'm gonna die.” He was lying on his stomach with his face jammed in the dirt and straw. My fingers reached under him and found a damp field dressing or bandage of some kind in the centre of his chest. Blood seeped through my fingers, and he sobbed like a child when he felt my hand. “Put me on my back — I can't breathe.” I rolled him over very gently, but the movement brought a whispered shriek from him. His muted outcry stimulated the suffering around us as others answered in chorus as if it was an offstage cue. I finished the job and tried to say something, but nothing came. Fixing the field dressing and wiping the filth from his face was better than conversation. I lit him and myself a cigarette.

“Don't set the straw on fire,” protested a voice in the darkness “Those goddamn cigarettes will burn us out yet!” “Oh, go to hell,” I snapped back getting some warped pleasure out of being able to vent my anger on anyone willing to listen. An argument, a goddamn good stiff argument would be welcomed, but all that came back was a muttered curse.

His lips were dry and cracked yet he sucked in the smoke like an eager child attacking its mother's breast. But the smoke hurt and, in the glow of the cigarette, I saw his eyes fill with tears, and

he began to cough violently. I butted his cigarette on the floor, rubbing the cinder with spit as a small precaution.

“Take it easy, man. Take it easy,” I said, talking to him and myself at the same time. He didn’t thank me, just grabbed my hand and would not let go. I couldn’t sit up anymore, so I used the upper part of his leg for a pillow. No familiarity or recognition could be found in the sobbing voice, and the match flame had only built his face into grotesque highlights and shadows.

“I’m gonna die...”

I didn’t argue with him, he needed blood, he needed water, he needed the helping hand of God and I saw none of these things riding the rattler with us. I hadn’t heard a prayer all day. The heavier the wound, the filthier the word and the adjectives ran amok as the bodies sagged down in death. Why doesn’t somebody pray out loud — get a revival going? Sure, stir up the Christian blood in us — stand together in our crusade for freedom. Sure, and I’d be up there with the first to tell the pseudo-bible pusher to shut his goddamn mouth. Bitterness is the brother of defeat, the sister of self-pity and I had a big family on my back. In sudden anger, I shook free of the clammy hand that held on like a leech. I clenched my fist close to me like a spoiled brat, unwilling to share anything with his playmates, but loneliness came with possession, so I searched the smelly darkness for my friend. I found warmth in his feeble grasp and began to wonder which of us needed the other the most. A solitary man, I had been lonely in the melting pot of Piccadilly, in the gayest Soho pubs and the tented camps of Borden, yet the loneliness of this man-packed rattler was the heaviest sense of longing that my heart had ever felt.

“Oh, Christ, I’m gonna die...”

I fell asleep trying to figure out the identity of my new friend. I awoke in the morning holding hands with a dead man.

The train was standing, and the guard slid open the door with a shattering bang. In the dimness of the early light, I could see that my companion for the night was a stranger to me. His tunic, stained with blood and grime, had the shoulder patch of the Royal Regiment.

We were in Rouen. The efficiency of the German Army was back in action. Ambulances, trucks and horse-drawn carts were pulled up in line beside the railway siding waiting to haul us away to a French hospital that had been cleared for our use. Strangely, few had died on the overnight trip yet the spirit of everyone was killed. Sullen men sat up in the straw unable to cope with the newness of their way of life. The brilliant red of blood had turned to a muddy brown, and the complete absence of toilet facilities had made many a stinking mess. I saw a half loaf of the black bread tangled in the wet straw uneaten. I had no desire for food, just a drink of water.

As cramped muscles came back into play again, the groaning and cursing returned. The cursing had no feeling, no emotion, just words, monotonously repeated as if it was as functional and necessary as breathing. The terse sharp commands of the German officers set the medics to work. The stench gave them the incentive to clear the cars quickly and be done with us. The French people, commandeered to assist the soldiers, were greeted by a discouraging sight as they

saw the glorious Canadian army removed from the train yet we seemed beyond caring and met their wide-eyed dismay with dead faces and hopeless eyes.

Roughly and quickly we were put aboard vehicles and taken away. The roughness was not the revengeful kind but the work of experts who, through experience, knew all the tricks of handling wounded men, friend or foe. As the truck bounced its way through the town, it was hard to bring anything into focus until it ground to a stop in front of the hospital, a huge gray building guarded by but a few soldiers who walked with their rifles slung over their shoulders. They knew we could cause little trouble and watched us with curiosity and boredom boxed together. The structure was massive and ancient yet quite capable of containing the two things my miserable body desired. My desires fitted into any age, any location, any political or military circumstance: I wanted a speedy bowel movement and a drink of water.

It was only a stop-over. The hospital at Rouen was just a place to examine the patients and re-dress the wounds. Emergency operations were made on those soldiers who were so badly injured that further travel or delay would mean death. The removal of bullets and shrapnel still lodged in the fellows was necessary, and the doctors worked around the clock digging out iron, sewing up slashes and amputating hopelessly shattered limbs. Slowly the wounded were cleaned up, patched up, catalogued, separated and, for some, hauled away to the morgue. We lay in bed these two days with very little to do but wait.

Everyone was on the same diet — thin soup, potatoes and black bread. I could drink the soup but would stare at the remainder of the grubstake with despair for the injury to my jaw made eating hard food impossible. I found out later that the upper jaw was cracked and contained a piece of shrapnel about the size of a dime. The fellow on the next bed saw my situation and, with his body propped up on his one good arm, he spoke to me.

“Hey, I’ll trade you for your soup. You take this consommé and gimme your spuds and bread. It ain’t much of a bargain but, Jesus, I sure could go for some more.”

“Well, I can’t eat the lousey stuff, so it’s okay with me,” I muttered through my clenched teeth as I started to hand over the food. He saw I had difficulties managing my wounded foot, so he swung his feet to the ground and negotiated the trade. I had examined the shrapnel wounds in my foot and found that they were small, but the leg would be useless for a while. Although three pellets had found their way into the ankle, the foot was still in one piece. The small deal was the first taste of co-operation, the thing we were to find later to be the essence of prison life. The whole background of the life was to give to each other, sacrifice, bargain and to hell with the dollar and the pound note. I let him talk — my speech was painful, and he was garrulous.

“I wasn’t on the beach ten minutes before I got hit. Man, I got to thinking the whole damn war was aimed at me! I was running around the beach as if a bee was up my ass and mortars were trying to blast it out. Where did they get them all? Must have been a regiment of mortar men in that town. Man, they really poured it onto our company — you’re in ‘C’ company, ain’t you? How did Billy Canton make out?” I told him that I had seen him hit by a mortar blast and, more than likely, he was dead. His pleasant grin faded for a moment as he seemed to be playing around with a memory. He started again with a touch of sadness in his voice. “Jesus...them mortar

bombs...played poker with Billy on the ship last night out. He won, and that's supposed to be a bad omen, ain't it? But what the hell, I won too and I don't seem to have done so bad. This fin of mine has a big hunk out of it, but the shrapnel went clean through, took a bit of bone with it, but I don't think I'll lose it."

His words flowed like water from a tap punctuated only by short silences when he munched on a piece of potato or popped a hunk of bread into his mouth. Talk was medicine to him, and I shared the relief it gave.

Harry Edwards. I knew him only to the extent that one becomes acquainted by being in the same regiment. A drink in a pub, a weak cup of tea during a break in the Aldershot NAAFI and the many other small ways that our lives touched together made it easy for us to throw together a friendship in a hurry. We had coffee given to us, and in the midst of drinking it a German orderly came and took away my storyteller. A loneliness crept into me as I watched him slowly walking towards the room that had been set up for a mass production observation and small surgery theatre. I sipped on the cool mint-flavoured coffee and lit a cigarette. I checked the content of the pack and found that I had but eleven left. The fellow in the next bed lay looking at the ceiling ignoring his meagre rations. I needed my cigarettes badly but eagerness to converse won out.

"Cigarette?" I said.

His eyes caught mine for a fleeting moment then returned to the ceiling. His lips were making words, but nothing came out. Perhaps he was French-Canadian, I thought, so I slowly lowered my feet to the floor and leaned over to him. I asked him if I could help him eat or at least get a sip or two of coffee down. I felt foolish as I ventured to use the few French words I knew. He stared past me, and suddenly tears piled up in his eyes, and he cried out "Christ, leave me alone!" He was crying — he threw his body over and buried his face in the rough pillow. I put my hand on his shoulder to offer him some kind of comfort, but a shiver was returned as if he loathed the touch, so I sheepishly crawled back to my pad. My foot was aching horribly, and the tightness in my throat that could not be blamed on gunfire annoyed me.

My other companion was returning down the middle of the double row of beds, through the crowd of wounded men and hospital equipment. He was carrying a steaming can with his good arm, and the other was clothed in a sparkling new white dressing. He sat down on the side of his bed with a grunt.

"I thought for a minute the bastards were going to chop this pin of mine off, but the German M.O. just put one of those temporary jobs on it and then told me to 'raus.' I got us a bucket of this coffee stuff — bummed it from the squarehead Goon. I tried to snag a couple of spuds, but he got all riled up and chased me out of the kitchen. This life ain't going to be no bed of roses..."

He was smiling as he filled my cup with coffee. The lump went out of my throat as the first swig of the hot liquid went down. "What's with him?" asked Harry as he saw my occasional uneasy glance at the other fellow. The explanation was vague and perhaps encumbered with the feeling of guilt that I held for being unable to help the fellow but Harry waved it away as a small thing.

“Aw, he’ll get over it.” He let it go at that, summing up the whole affair with the conclusion that, whether this life be strewn with roses or not, he wasn’t going to lose any sleep over it. On one side was a fellow so heart sick that, regardless how severe were his wounds, they were small compared to the agony in his mind. On the other side was a man who takes his wounds, his defeat, the humility and all that goes with sudden capture as if it was run of the mill routine. Lying in the middle, I wondered in which direction I would drift as time went by.

“Aren’t you afraid?” I questioned, looking at my companion and thinking of myself.

“Afraid now? No, not a bit. I’ve been fixed up by the docs, fed, watered and put in a stall. What’s gonna happen in the future doesn’t bother me one damn bit. It’ll come so I don’t worry now about things I can’t do anything about.”

“Do you want your medal now or later?” I asked, giving him a bit of tongue-in-cheek.

“Balls — don’t get no ideas that I’m brave. Hell, no — I was shaking in my boots when that A.L.C. was chugging its way to that miserable beach. Man I saw them bombs splashing high in the water close to the tub, and my blood ran colder than a frozen fish’s asshole and when the machineguns started to bang out tunes on the front end — well! I was ready to flip.”

He paused for a moment, and I flipped him a cigarette. He sucked in a lungful of the smoke and then exploded:

“You know what? I was more scared of having the guys figure I was afraid than I was of the bombs! Does that make sense? The only thing that gave me the guts to get out of that potential hearse and hit the beach was the faces of the other guys. They too were afraid to let on that they had the wind up. I saw their eyes bug out, their lips quiver on the edge of a phony grin and the tips of their fingers slowly grow white from gripping their rifles too tight so’s their hands wouldn’t shake. Christ, we were all scared — not yellow, mind you, but plain scared of the fear of having this known kept us going. I was scared, Jimmie boy, when I hit that beach, and I don’t mind admitting it now.”

“Yeah and amen.” I answered, quietly remembering a medic and another fellow talking about ‘Scared Harry’. They remembered him standing on the sea wall, crouched down like a bull ape gone berserk with a Tommy gun. Every burp of his Thompson was punctuated by vicious words that were aimed in the same direction as the bullets and sounded just about as deadly. His action was not without purpose for he was giving cover to a couple of S.B.’s (stretcher bearers) who were pinned down by enemy fire as they tried to haul in several fellows hit while trying to advance through the twisted crazy barbed wire — concertina wire that doesn’t seem to want to go anywhere except where you want to go. They quickly jumped to the chance while Harry covered, carrying their bleeding companions over the wall. The wall was a scant two feet high yet tough enough to give ample protection from rifle and machinegun fire.

“Fire from behind the wall, you damn fool!” shouted one of the stretcher-bearers as two of them rushed back into the wire for more casualties but Harry ignored the man — kept shooting and shouting his heart out to whoever cared to listen. As each clip emptied he inserted a new one

and thought up some new profanity. He stood on the wall like an over-zealous actor on stage for the first time. The medics were able to bring two more wounded men in — one stayed with them while the other scrambled back into the wire just before the mortars came into play. The medic hit the dirt as a string of bombs followed the course of the wall as if the Germans had plotted the range well in advance as the raid with a final spurt of bullets Harry was blown from the wall back onto the sand and sharp shale.

He lay shaking for a moment then struggled to his feet. He stared, almost amazed, at the missing sleeve of his jacket and the red blood bubbling from his torn arm. The flesh hung like a rich piece of beef ready for the grill as he searched through the rubble for his gun. He found it, shot a quick blast inshore, then got back on the wall. Three wounded men were now dead — chopped up in the wire, but the one S.B. was having a hell of a time trying to evade the crap aimed in his direction. The slightest motion on his part started a machinegunner into action, and he would have to dive back into the flesh tearing wire. Harry seemed to know the position of the gunner for he shut him up with one burst of his Tommy gun.

“Haul your ass!” he screamed at the hesitant victim, and the authority of his tone set the guy in motion. He didn’t make the wall — caught a slug in the back and piled up at Harry’s feet. With a look of disgust on his face, he tossed his gun behind the wall and dropped down beside the wounded fellow. He slung him over his shoulder like a side of beef, and the two bleeding men tumbled over the wall together.

Crouching over his charge in the meagre protection of the wall he sat panting, watching the boy’s life run out. He watched him quietly die; he watched the blood ooze slowly through the filth of his own arm and down his fingers. Then, if ever, his emotions ran wild. He leaped to his feet, grabbed the rifle of a dead man and, with a screaming curse, he headed for the wall again. Abruptly as his uncontrolled anger started, it was chopped off by a mortar blast. The stinging spray of sand and shale sent him smashing into the wall — his wall.

He curled up and lay quietly with his part of the action over. It was a bitch while it lasted...

“That’s the way it is, Jim. We haven’t the foggiest about what is going to happen so we have to take the good days and squeeze out as much pleasure as we can. Then, when the hard times come, we’ll have the strength to yell like a son-of-a-bitch. Take these cigarettes — we both know we are low on butts but wouldn’t it be silly to suffer every puff just because we don’t know where the next pack is coming from? Well, it’s the same right across the board — enjoy what you have now and to hell with what’s coming. I can do it — it’s my nature, and I’m happily stuck with it.”

I agreed with him and figured I could follow his philosophy to a large degree yet mentally I held a quick inventory of our tobacco supply and decided to ease up on my smoking. We debated the subject of worrying for a time and finally concluded that a small amount of consternation wouldn’t do any harm.

“I hear they’re gonna ship us cattle out of here tomorrow. Did you hear anything about it?”

“Yeah,” I answered, remembering the story that a fellow had handed to me as he cruised about the hospital trying to find a close friend that he hoped was still alive, “The ones that didn’t get nicked will go to a camp up north — near Poland, I think. The wounded, like you and me, are supposed to end up somewhere in the middle of Germany.”

“God!” cut in Harry, “The middle of Germany — that sounds like a trip to purgatory.”

“Well, this spot is supposed to be staffed by a bunch of British soldiers. Doctors and the like who were caught when France fell.”

“I hope so,” said Harry, looking glumly at his arm, “The German pill-pushers were okay, but I like to hear the doctor speak Canadian when he’s deciding to either patch me up or whack off a limb.”

I remembered when the German surgeon probed about in my mouth there was no hostility yet his manner was brusque and unsympathetic. He didn’t touch my foot, just looked at it and had an orderly put my name down on a list then, with a grunt, he dismissed me with a wave of his hand. After all, we were the enemy who had just spent a day killing and maiming his countrymen and should be thankful for the attention we were receiving. The doctors were doing a commendable job.

We talked the day through, interrupted occasionally by visitors who were able to walk or limp to our area. No matter what their words were, they all seemed to carry with them an atmosphere of reservation, a clinging stigma of a loser — of being unable to predict their future or how they would cope with it. The feeling of utter hopelessness that had clung like a leech on the first day of capture had gone, and only honest concern remained. They were different — no longer boys, they were men. Men who had maturity thrown at them roughly and in haste, whether they liked it or not, and it was comforting to see that so few had pushed the panic button. It was normal to be unhappy and self-conscious over defeat yet it was no reason to be overly morose.

We talked the day into night, and when the hospital lights were dimmed, we whispered. In the subdued hustle and bustle of the hospital, we unconsciously listened to the clinking of instruments, the murmur of voices droning from the operating theatre and the monotonous but effective noises of doctors still working. We whispered low as if not wanting to be drowned out by the constant groans of some around us or the sudden shrieks that jarred the darkness. We whispered as my other neighbour, still alone with himself, sobbed deep in his throat. We whispered as a coarse venomous curse echoed through the ward and was ridiculed by a spurt of happy laughter. We whispered...we whispered until sleep rescued us from our wonderment.

The hospital train was different in every way from the first mode of transportation supplied by the enemy. The coaches were completely filled with double-decked beds except the front end which was built to accommodate medical equipment. It consisted of a good sized sink with shelves above and below holding urinals, bedpans, wash basins and other small utensils used to help the orderlies keep each coach independent. A small closed-in lavatory, built on the lines of any railway, completed the set-up. A special coach was catering to the whole train for meals. The eating utensils and the cutlery were brought in with the meals and carried away in a large metal tub.

The food was much better and with larger servings and, luckily, I again found myself occupying the bed across from Harry. I was still cursed with the inability to eat anything solid, so we continued to exchange our food. Looking back, I feel that Harry, being the smartest of the two of us, made damn sure that we were put together. At breakfast, he took my two slices of bread and gave me his two hard-boiled eggs. He had to be content with the four slices of bread but cautioned me to lay aside my extra eggs for dinner. It was wise, for at noon the meal was more black bread, hard potatoes, and a heavy meaty soup, or probably meant to be stew. He ate this with relish as I mashed the boiled eggs past my immobile teeth. It was painful, yet hunger made it enjoyable, and Harry always saved me a bit of the soup juice to put a lid on the meal. The coffee was a weird tasting brew, but I've drunk worse in some of our Canadian hamburger joints.

"This coffee stuff would make a fine mint julep if it had a slug of gin in it," said Harry as I passed him a cigarette. I checked the pack and found four lonely fags left.

"You hang onto your butts after this, and I'll try to mooch offa the other guys."

"Hell no," I protested, "This is a sad share-the-wealth program, but I gotta keep my end up, too."

"That's what I'm thinking about," he answered, imitating my hissing voice and grinning widely, "If I can cop a few from the other fellows around here, those four will live longer...besides, there's a guy up at the far end with a couple of unopened packs and if I can't con him out of a few fags — well, I must be slipping."

Before he could leave his bed, there was another check-up or 'bed check' as it was called. It seemed as if the Germans were never content with the previous count. An hour never passed without armed guards travelling through the coaches counting heads. They would count each bed with pointed fingers waving about and then form a small huddle over a pad. A few guttural comments would ensue, a frown, and then they would repeat the performance. Another debate — markings with a pencil, shaking their close-cropped heads they would sigh and travel on to the next coach. After every count someone would call them a bunch of dumb bastards forgetting that dumb bastards of the same nationality had caught us.

The wheels of the train clicked along the iron rails monotonously lulling us to sleep for we had nothing to do but talk. The windows afforded us no view for they were painted white like the rest of the interior. None of the more seriously wounded men were in our coach, and the heavy groaning was at a minimum. I lay almost contented, half asleep until Harry returned from one of his missions carrying a can of coffee.

"Where in hell did you get that?" I gasped, hurting my teeth with surprise. It was about six o'clock in the evening, and we had had to be content with water when we found out that there were only two meals to be served every day.

"You know those two French Canadians who are on this coach as workers? Well, I told them to tell the squarehead, one that speaks French, that your jaw was in such a mess that you just can't eat anything but could go for some coffee. The Frog was anxious to help — too anxious — so when he gets the brew, I found out what bugged him. He's going to bust out of this tin can after

dark. He and the other pea-souper are going out the crapper window after dark, and he wants my boots — lost his at Dieppe.”

“The train’s going too fast, Harry.”

Harry poured me a drink into the cup I had stolen from the hospital at Rouen — he drank his from the can. “Seems they conversed with a French babe at Rouen and she told them the approximate time that the train would have to slow down to a crawl — some area that has been badly smashed by bombs, just before we cross the border into Germany. Gave them an address too.”

“Why don’t you go!” I whispered.

“They said no and meant it.” He frowned then broke into a grin and added: “but I got two decks of Philip Morris for my boots so lets light up!”

I got my first job as a stooge when the evening came, and the car was lit up only by a run of dark blue lights above us. Their glow was just bright enough to cut out the blackness and give the occupants sufficient light to navigate to the toilet. The signal that the move was being made would be when the fellows passed my bed. They would remove the boots that lay at my feet, and as I could see the other end of the coach, I was to groan heavily and follow it with a sob if any German guard was to come through the door. After they had made the break, Harry was to go through the motions of answering the call of nature and lock the window.

The time crawled, and the nerves in my injured foot tingled when I wiggled my toes to assure myself that the boots were still there.

When the two French Canadians slipped quietly by and took away the boots as they passed, I glued my eyes to the door. It was a seemingly long wait as I lay as stiff as a corpse and about as happy as one. Finally, the train whistle wailed out in agony as it groaned down to a slower pace. You could hear the click of the wheels space the time out slower as they ran over the joints of the separate pieces of rail but my heart beat faster with apprehension, and my eyes became bugged from looking at that damn door. My foot began to roar with pain, and I found myself shivering from lying too stiffly.

Take it easy, man, I thought, take it easy, this is no skin off your nose. It sounded good, yet I couldn’t relax and bring my part of the action down to its proper unimportance. The train came almost to a standstill then, with a wild blast of the whistle, she suddenly picked up speed on the straightaway. I sagged down into my bed and knew that they had either made the break or had loused it up and I didn’t give a damn which way it came out.

“Gotta match?”

I jerked up in surprise and in the dim blue haze saw Harry handing me a fag. In the glow of the match, I asked him the question with my eyes.

“Yeah man, smooth as silk, “ he whispered, “Get the slop out and we’ll drink the poor buggers a toast.”

He told me that he had watched them through the window as they disappeared into the outside darkness. I pulled his can of coffee from under the bed, making sure that I didn't grab the urinal although the difference was dubious, and we sipped silently on the cold brew. It was horrible but wet. We decided to curl up and get some sleep as the morning check-up might be hectic, and as I fell asleep I dimly heard the train whistle whine and Harry's opinion of it:

"Jesus..."

Activity started early in the morning. The train pulled onto a siding to pick up coal, or water, or perhaps to allow some other train to high-ball through. The shunting and erratic movement of the coaches awakened us and the whispering, and small groans came before sun up. We could see the weary guard awaiting his relief — he looked through the glass door occasionally, but his interest was vague as he suffered from boredom as does any guard in charge of the harmless.

"Should be a check-up any minute," said Harry. He didn't add anything to this, but I could see that he wasn't too happy about our future.

"Remember, never worry about the future," I said, imitating his easy-going nature.

"Balls to you," he muttered.

A head from the bunk above me swung down, and the long black hair of Roy Turner hung like the beard of a Chinese monk. He looked at me with his upside down eyes and spoke:

"Heard you guys last night — know all about the break. What are you going to do?"

"Yeah," answered Harry, "What should we do? Guess we should get our heads together and make sure our stories jive."

"You better fill me in," suggested Roy, "I just know what I heard you guys talking about and ..."

"No," "I answered sharply, "All of us fellows just keep our yaps shut and play dumb. We can't build a story and if their interrogators are anything like ours they will tie us in knots in minutes. We got no story — we know from nothing."

Activity at the end of the coach decided our tactics for us as the inevitable counters unlocked the coach door and began counting and pointing. They finally reached the end of the coach and stopped. The Counter sleepily quoted a number, and the guard with the pencil and notebook checked the amount. The Pencil-pusher frowned, and the Counter frowned back.

"Was ist los?" said the Counter and, after a whispered debate, they started checking again. They found the beds full but suddenly realized that the arbeiter (workers) were missing. They banged on the glass window and called the guard in. The words were a tangle of unintelligible sounds to us, but the waving of arms and the horrified look in the guards' eyes told us that the game was up. The Counter left in haste while the Pencil-pusher and the guard argued furiously. The guard stared wildly up and down the coach trying to find the missing men — almost tore the hinges off the lavatory as he looked inside. He upset three urinals as he tried to see just anything. He sprang to attention when the Counter returned with an officer. The three of them stood stiffly

at attention as one of them explained the situation to the officer who stood arms akimbo with distaste on his haughty German face.

With an impatient jerk of his arm, he ordered them to count again, and they stumbled down the centre of the coach in utter confusion like the Three Stooges going to the electric chair. They gave up half-way down the coach and came back to face the officer. More words rocked the coach, and the poor guard stood trembling at attention as the bitterness of the officer's rage tore at his eardrums. Suddenly he stopped yelling — he gave a short order, and they all left.

The remaining silence rang in your ears like the aftermath of a naval barrage until somebody cut it with an astonished statement.

“Now what in hell was that!”

“The two guys that worked as orderlies bailed out last night.”

“Jesus, that does it.”

“Yeah, I noticed they weren't around this morning but I figured they were working somewhere else. I know a bit of Jerry talk and what I make of it...well, they just ain't here no more.”

“Jesus.”

Jesus is always getting into the act.

But a few minutes had gone by before the officer returned with a soldier holding the rank of a Corporal who seemed to be the more intelligent looking of the two. He talked quietly to the officer and then turned to us. He was very polite.

“Gentlemen, apparently, last night, two of your comrades escaped from this hospital train. They were detailed to take care of you and are bound by honour not to escape or assist others to escape. Some of you must know of what means they employed and at what time of night it occurred. As these men have violated a section of the Geneva Convention, it is your duty to inform us immediately...”

As he talked in a soft, soothing voice, he slowly paced up and down the coach smiling like a vacuum cleaner salesman. He paused for a moment and let his message sink in, but his smile disappeared when a small voice, muffled by a blanket, told him to do something sexual. He repeated his message almost word for word with only the tone changed. The response was even less, for the sex advisor used discretion and kept his opinion under the blanket.

He returned to the officer, and after a few words they went to the far end of the coach and began to question the men individually. The mumbled words of the interpreter could be heard, but only the words of the prisoners were loud enough to understand. Everyone seemed to answer loudly so all could hear and avert suspicion of collaboration yet the answers were incomprehensible without the questions. It was not until they got to Harry, across from me, did I get the gist of the interrogation.

“Did you see the men go?”

“No.” answered Harry.

“When did they go?”

“I don’t know.”

“What time did they go?”

Harry didn’t answer.

“What time did they go?” The German repeated.

“I don’t know, goddamnit, I don’t know bugger all!”

The officer above us sensed Harry’s insolence and yelled down at him, slapping his holster as he spoke. The interpreter sighed and went on.

“Apparently you do not wish to talk so I will ask no more. I must warn you that if I do not get information from you, we will take this train out of town, put this coach on a siding by itself and shoot all the occupants. This is war, and somebody in this coach knows all about the escape. If you want to die for them, I think it is a silly price to pay for stubbornness.”

Harry said nothing but the blood rushed to his face as he propped himself up on his good elbow and let his angry eyes burn into those of the interpreter who shied away and turned to me. “He can’t talk,” yelled Harry reaching out with his bandaged arm at the man’s shoulder. The standing officer took a dim view of his sudden action, and with a curse, he kicked at his head. Instinct brought Harry’s bad arm up in defence, and the blow brought a sickening groan as he dropped back onto the bed. The Corporal’s words droned at me, but I didn’t listen as I could not take my eyes off Harry’s face. It was like clay — sick with pain he stared into space refusing to groan again for the officer’s satisfaction. I couldn’t or wouldn’t say a word until I exploded a mouthful of air, spit and blood down onto the interpreter’s shiny jackboots. He was furious, and with the flat of his hand, he pushed my head back on the rough pillow. German words flowed from his lips as he wiped his soiled boots on my blanket and stood up to question Turner.

I lay shaking with rage and confusion twisted together in utter humiliation. I whispered every swear word I could think of and beat the hell out of the side of the coach with my fist but got no satisfaction from my stupidity, no comfort, no pride. I looked over at Harry and wanted to blast him for trying to help me and give him some comfort in his pain. His pain was still intense, yet he was still able to squeeze up a smile and toss a coy wink at me.

Take it easy, man, I thought, take it easy. How can the bat of an eyelash drive the confusion from you and let you glide smoothly and settle down for the next move? It can, and it did, and I slipped down in my bunk content that Harry, Roy and I, the three who knew, had stumbled through our first test with some kind of success.

The questioning ended, the officer stood by while the interpreter repeated his threat of death and when he was rewarded with silence they both walked out of the coach. They frowned through the glass at us and then disappeared.

“What in hell we going to do?” asked a nervous voice.

“Nothing, I guess. Just sweat it out and see what happens.”

“But they’re going to shoot us. I don’t want to die for a couple of Frenchmen.”

“French Canadians, you freak” The voice spoke English well yet there was a distinct touch of Quebec that established his ancestry.

“Well, we could give a phony tale...”

“Aw, shut up,” said Turner in disgust.

“We could give a phony tale,” repeated the nervous voice at the far end of the coach, “Say we saw them cut out at, say eleven o’clock...”

“What if they did get off at eleven? Fine deal!”

“Well, we gotta do something!”

Turner’s voice above me bellowed again:

“F’Christ sake, shut up. If the bastards come back again, we all say nothing. Those two Frogs took a chance while we lay on our fat asses looking at the ceiling and we have to cover for them. The book says that it’s the duty of prisoners to try and escape — this honour system the squarehead speaks about is a bucket of crap. Besides, I think this shooting business is another bucket of crap.”

“Oh, I think they mean business — I mean the shooting but you’re right about keeping quiet — we’ve got to protect the fellows who escaped.” It was the French Canadian speaking, and his voice was a mixture of agreeing with Turner but resenting the Frog tag pinned on the tail of troops from his province.

“You’re right.” answered Turner, “We do like the book says — name, rank, and number — nothing else.”

Roy’s speech was a short one, yet it held too much truth to permit anyone to venture an argument. It brought to mind a line from an old English poem that reads that a soldier’s life is very hard — says Alice.

“Name, rank and number,” whispered Harry who looked like an angel who had misplaced his halo.

“It was nice knowing you, name rank and number,” I said.

“Balls.” was his angelic reply.

The wheels of the train began their turning again, taking us deeper into Germany. Left alone with my thoughts, my imagination was all too capable of portraying the many possibilities of my near future, and I found the confidence that I had hastily built begin to fall apart. I lay breathing hard, feeling my heart beat fast for the first time. I was surprised to find myself not afraid of death as much as I was afraid of how I would die. Afraid I'd look afraid when the firing began to cut us down. A twice-told tale yet you only die once, and the preparation for it is never a dull story. The possibility of death is a strange fear — fear of the scope of your ability — exciting, like the fear of your inability to appear worldly in the eyes of the first girl, you fumbled through the manipulations of seduction.

I watched the faces of all the men whom I could see from my bunk, and each seemed to be transformed into something new. Each, in his own way, whether their eyes were staring into space, clamped tightly shut or just looking around, was filled with wonderment. Wondering what the hell to do when the chips run out.

I wanted to talk to someone, but Harry had his back to me. I watched Joe Land hobble up the coach towards me, and as he was about to pass, I tugged at his pant leg. He was a huge man who, even with his pants torn and his knee bandaged, had the tall and stately bearing of a guardsman. He glared down at me as I spoke.

“What do you think, Joe?” I asked, lamely

“Well, I don't know, but at the moment I got kidney trouble.”

He laughed and headed for the lavatory. Joe wouldn't let a chance to talk slip by — he began talking back in '39 when he was a recruit just as green as I was and since then he had never slowed down. He loved to talk, argue and complain and, although he often skirted around the truth just to make a gab-fest more interesting, it was a pleasure to hear him speak. His patter was far removed from the run-of-the-mill soldier, and half the time you didn't know what he was talking about but, for some unknown reason, you listened. Moments later he returned, and without an invitation, he sat on the side of my bed. He wanted to talk and had found an audience. He eased his stiff leg into a comfortable position, ran his forefinger along his trim moustache and grunted out a short sentence:

“It's illogical.”

I waited for more to come but silence prevailed, and it seemed as if he had summed up our whole situation with two curt words. I waited still longer until I figured that perhaps I should give him a few words.

“What's illogical?”

“The whole thing — it's illogical to think that these squareheaded goons would shoot us. What good would it do? Punishment is awarded for two things — one is to punish you for something you did, and the other is so you won't do the same crime again.”

Another ponderous pause and I had to comment to get him going again.

“So?” I asked with all my eloquence.

“So they’re not going to shoot us. We didn’t do anything, so there is no reason for them to punish us for that, and as far as punishing us so that we won’t do something again, well, we wouldn’t be alive to do something again and all they would have would be a bunch of leaky corpses cluttering up the roadside. It’s illogical to think that anyone would be stupid enough to pull a stunt like that. That’s it — stupid.”

“You think then maybe it’s a bluff?”

He liked that, a full sentence from me.

“That’s more like it — a bluff. Now if these animal crackers had said that they were going to shoot us one at a time or in terrified twos and let us simmer over who was going to be first, next or last then I’d be sweating. Yes, Jimmie boy, it’s strictly a bluff.”

He reached over to Harry and nudged his shoulder.

“It’s a bluff — ain’t it, Harry?” No answer resulted, so he swung his heavy frame over to his bunk. He looked closer at Harry’s face that was turned to the wall and returned to look at me with a big grin of contentment.

“See,” he said, “Harry’s calling their bluff — the old bastard is sound asleep!”

He got up and left me with a deep laugh shaking his heavy body. He didn’t give a damn whether he had convinced me or not — he had convinced himself and went chuckling his way back to his comfortable paillasse (straw mattress). He left behind a ray of hope to play around with if nothing else. Poker is my game. I can handle a bluff with a measure of perfection, but I like playing with money, not little old me.

In the army, a rumour grows like a weed moments after the seed has been planted and sometimes bears fruit. The beginning can be in any place, and the ending can be anything, yet trying to find the source or the reason for the rumour is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. For instance, a bored Private with little else to say could tell his buddy as they sit drinking a warm beer in a NAFFI¹ that he sure hopes the Colonel doesn’t push them out on a route march next weekend. He’s got a date with a lush bit next Saturday night, and it would just be like the Colonel to louse up the deal with a route march. His buddy grunts finishes off the beer and wanders back to the barracks. He asks his Corporal if he knows anything about a route march next Saturday and the two-striper doesn’t want to be considered one who is not in the know, so he indicates that there is a possibility, but it hasn’t been finalized as yet. The guy on the next bed stops polishing his boots and with a mouthful of dirty adjectives takes off and spreads the word around. It isn’t long before the whole damn regiment is playing around with the idea of a route march come next Saturday.

Finally, the Colonel’s batman asks the Colonel as casually as possible if there is anything special he wishes done in connection with the march. The senior officer is stoned for a moment; then,

1 Navy Army & Air Force Institutes (the UK, a store for service members)

after a short period of serious thinking, he concludes that it is about time that the outfit did wear out a bit of shoe leather. By god, we'll have a big one — march out on Saturday morning — sleep on the moor and march back Sunday. Bloody good idea — I better go see the adjutant...

Yes, rumours grow like weeds. Joe Land was limping towards me again with his pleasant grin wider than usual. He dropped himself onto my bed and spoke.

“See, I told you it was a lot of bull.”

“Bull, what bull?” inquired Harry, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“I told you they weren't going to shoot us.”

“You didn't tell me nothing.”

“I told Jimmy, dummy, you was pounding your pillow.

“What did you tell him that was so damn historic?”

“I just told him what I told you — they ain't going to shoot us.”

“Big deal, I'm disappointed,” answered Harry, unconvinced.

“Wait a minute,” I cut in, “You got a new theory, some news or a dirty joke?”

Joe's eyes sparkled as he continued in his slow manner:

“Lemme tell you. Know that officer?”

“Yeah.”

“And the two-hooked interpreter?”

“And the guards?”

“Yes, yes, yes. But f'Christ sake get on with the story!” I said, irritated with his aggravating habit of cliff-hanging with his tongue.

“Lemme tell you. About ten minutes after those fellows left the coach, they and the rest of the guards left the train. In fact, the whole company of squareheads that were guarding us was relieved and sent back to Rouen. A completely new company took over.”

“Who told you this?” I said.

“That guy up by me who speaks German. He talked to the new guard, and he didn't say a word about the break. The squarehead just said that they had taken over for the rest of the trip.”

“Could be a caper to put us off our mark,” said Harry.

“I don't think so. I told Jim it was all a bluff.”

I saw Roy Turner struggling down the middle of the coach from the lavatory looking pale, and in difficulties, so I asked Joe to give him a hand. He did, and when they got within hearing distance, I gave Roy a blast.

“You shouldn’t get out of that bed, Roy. That shot in your stomach may be small, but it’s dangerous, and you should lay flat on your back until the M.O.s work over you.”

“Jesus, I just can’t use a bottle — bottles are to drink out of. I bloat up like a barrage balloon but, so help me, I can’t do a thing until I’m looking down a toilet bowl.”

Joe eased him back into his bunk, and he grinned with relief even though his face was pale and drawn, aging him far past his twenty years. His was not an actual stomach wound but too close for comfort, and the German doctors had done temporary surgery and ordered his transport to be classified as a litter case until he was hospitalized.

“Say,” he said, “I heard from the French Canadian that the guard was changed just before we pulled out of the stop where the squareheads gave us a lecture on how to be nice to Germans and stay alive.”

The rumour was taking root.

“Yeah, and he thinks the guards who took off didn’t say a word to the new guards.”

“That’s the way I figure it,” said a new voice. “They left hoping the escape would go unnoticed or not blamed on them particularly when we reach Obermassfeld.”

“Obermassfeld?” I asked, “What’s that?”

“That’s where we’re going,” returned the new voice, “I thought everyone knew we were going to Obermassfeld.”

“Joe, Harry and I looked at one another blankly and agreed silently that everyone should know we were going to Obermassfeld – wherever in hell that was.

The rumour grew into truth as we later heard the rattle of tin and saw dinner being brought to us. The interpreter had cancelled our breakfast saying bitterly that he and his officer saw no need for feeding condemned men. Now that the grub was on its way up it seemed as if the lid had been put on the punishment episode and suddenly we found ourselves hungry.

The train rattled its way through the outskirts of Wasungen, bypassed the town of Walldorf, then found time to highball through the village in the valley called Jerusalem before it cut its speed down to a crawl as it entered the crowded city of Meiningen. Then, to bring the journey to an end, it coasted the seven kilometres down the wooded valley to the old village of Obermassfeld.

