

My Story by Jim Lowe

The home of 49 Lancaster Squadron in 1943 was the delightful Lincolnshire village of Fiskerton.

The main runway was in direct line with the Cathedral at Lincoln five miles away, and as we lifted off I always looked out to port and could see 'Holt Farm', the home of Les and Nancy Blackburn, our very special friends. The peaceful view of the farm, Fiskerton village itself and the Cathedral in front was a sight that had never failed to impress me on the many times we had taken off. Little did I think that as we took off on the evening of August 17th that it would be two long years before I would see it again. Our target on this glorious evening was to be the doodlebug experimental factory at Peenemunde.

The briefing had been specified to take us over Holland and along the Baltic Sea. Briefing had been very precise and detailed and of practical purpose as usual, for example it was necessary to fly at maximum height without using the supercharger to conserve fuel, due to the rather heavy bomb load we were carrying. This consisted of two five hundred pounders, six one thousand pounders and one four thousand pound block buster. We were expected to do considerable damage as it was a virgin target, also a purely military objective.

Our journey across Holland was most peaceful and gave no indication of what was to come.

As we cruised along the Baltic Sea at about ten thousand feet only the odd flack ship made us aware that we were over enemy territory.

By this time it was a beautiful moonlight night - a typical bomber's moon - and as the German coast was visible on our starboard beam we were able to ascertain our position by various landmarks, so that as we approached the target area it was quite simple to pick up our turning point on Rugen island, the twin bays very distinct, ready for the run in.

Opposition up to this stage had been virtually non-existent, only a couple of searchlights and light anti-aircraft guns, just as our intelligence officer had told us at briefing.

The purpose of the operation was now becoming evident, for in the distance we could already see the attack taking place by aircraft of earlier waves.

As we were in the last wave this was possibly the cause of our undoing, for by the time we arrived at the target, the German fighter force had been sent from the Berlin area. As we picked up our turning point and settled down for the run in, we had descended to four thousand feet, this being the safety height for our four-thousand pounder.

The brilliance of the moon influenced our decision to do a visual attack, but as a precaution and double check we kept the stop watch going on a time and distance run. We were now coming up on the target itself, the buildings standing out quite plain against the glare of the fires.

"Bomb doors open" - "Left - left - steady - steady - steady - bombs gone!"

Not that anyone needed telling for as the load left the aircraft it bucked like a living thing. At the instant the bombs were released the rear gunner shouted "Scram port - scram port" and the sky was full of JU 88 night fighters, or rather it seemed to be. The rear gunner gave several bursts from his four brownings as we went across the sights of the JU 88 and suddenly let out a jubilant shout "Got him - he's going down". The once again came the cry "Scram starboard -scram starboard".

The pilot threw the 'Lanc' viciously to the right and as he did so there was a terrific hammering and an awful pungent smell of explosives. Another JU 88 must have been sitting back on the starboard side and as we turned into the one on the port side he must have followed us round and clobbered us. In a very few seconds the port wing was a mass of fire which no extinguisher had any hope of putting out.

By now we were clear of the target area and out over the sea - the way we were burning must have made a wonderful target. By this time all controls were sloppy and the aircraft would not respond. The only course of action now was to bale out! The forward hatch was then jettisoned and I left the aircraft.

As I went out the slip stream took off my right flying boot and as I rolled forward I saw the aircraft pass over me on fire the whole of its length - I offered up a silent prayer for the rest of my comrades whom I was sure did not have time to get out before the aircraft dived to the ground and exploded.

As I floated gently down I now had a chance to collect my scattered wits and suddenly realised that I was over the sea, but thankfully being within sight of the coast I was able to steer the parachute to my advantage. The transformation from the crash and smell of cannon shells to the peace which I was now experiencing was indescribable - the loneliness being hung up there over the coast made me feel as if I was the only person in the world at that moment.

This feeling of well-being was soon to be shattered for as I looked down on the little village which lay beneath me, I could quite easily discern the local population making a circle for me to fall in, and once more I became very concerned as to what was going to happen to me once I landed. No sooner had this thought entered my head when I hit the ground - I experienced a sharp pain in my right leg which I thought I had broken. By this time the first of the 'land watch' was on to me and with a cry of jubilation shouted "for you the war is over" and promptly gave me a kick in the ribs. I was roughly pulled to my feet - it was then I realised what the pain in my leg was - I had broken my foot on landing without my flying boot.

I was then led away to a barn and locked in. I could hear the last notes of our other aircraft as the lads turned for home and their bacon and egg breakfast which to me, just then, seemed to be the most important thing in the world. I looked at my watch and it was just ten minutes past one. I did not know at this stage that in the last few moments, two of my fellow crew members had died.

I sat in the barn until it started to get light then I made an attempt to get out, only to find I had a companion in the form of a rather large Alsatian who was accompanied by a German with a shot gun. Shortly afterwards the door was thrown open and about six of a party of 'land vatch' beckoned for me to join them.

I tried to tell them about my broken foot but they would not listen, and as they were armed I lost the argument. When I stepped outside I could see they had with them about another dozen R.A.F. chaps, also under heavy guard. I looked for some of my crew members but did not see any. We were then paraded through the village and across a couple of fields to a main road.

Whilst crossing the field a solitary figure in R.A.F. uniform approached the party and I was overjoyed to see that it was our flight engineer - he must have just regained consciousness for he came up to me completely ignoring the rest of the party and our captors and asked where we were going!

When we reached the main road our captors stopped a Luftwaffe lorry and we were bundled on board and taken to the local headquarters and put in the guard room, this time under the watchful eyes of Luftwaffe guards. It was here that I met our wireless operator. It was here also we were given our first meal, such as it was, a bowl of boiled corn - hungry as I was by this time I could not eat it!

Once more we were taken outside to board a lorry and taken to Griefswald to a permanent Luftwaffe camp, where once again we were locked in. This time it was a proper cell and solitary confinement. I was here about 10 days with only one meal a day - a bowl of watery pea soup.

At the end of the 10 days we were all taken outside and I was surprised to see that our party now numbered about 40 which included our pilot. Yet again we were herded aboard a lorry and taken to the local railway station and all forty or so of us were locked in a cattle truck. This was the start of a most uncomfortable journey which was to last about 4 days - not once during this time were we allowed to leave the truck. I can leave it to your imagination what things were like towards the end of that trip!

I would have given anything for a hot bath and a shave. Our journey finally ended in a little siding from which we were marched to the well-known Dulag Luft - my first experience of a prison camp.

Dulag Luft was the German interrogation centre and was situated in a suburb of Frankfurt on main and it consisted of a row of Nissen type huts in the grounds of a large hotel.

On arrival we were immediately put into solitary confinement in one of the huts which had been divided up into separate cells of about 6 feet by 8 feet. Once locked in, stock was taken of conditions which at first sight were very grim. At the one end of the cell about 2 feet from the floor were 3 wooden planks and one blanket. This was the provision that was made for sleeping quarters and comprised the total furnishing of my new abode.

It wasn't long before I realised that Nissen huts could have the same effect as an oven, for with the heat of the August sun blazing down on the corrugated shell, the walls soon became too hot to touch. About mid-morning the door crashed open and there stood an armed guard with a mug of watery soup and a slice of black bread. He was accompanied by two more armed guards with rifles. This food was roughly pushed towards me, the guards withdrew, and once more the door clanged shut with the sound of heavy bolts being slid into place. This little episode was enacted every 24 hours and was the only time you saw another person, except for the occasional visit to the toilet.

This again was quite a performance for it was no good leaving things until the last moment, for it took an average 2 hours to attract the attention of the jailer, who would reluctantly come and open the cell and once again, in the company of two armed guards, you were taken to the end of the block where the toilets were situated. This was the pattern of life for the next two weeks. It was at the latter end of these two weeks when the door was thrown open to admit an American who was to provide some sort of company for the rest of my time in that cell.

Sometimes I wonder if it was any advantage for all he could do was to squat on his haunches in the corner of the cell with his head in his hands bemoaning the fact that he was missing "my mother's southern fried chicken — fried in butter" and he kept this up for about ten hours a day, and this, after a couple of weeks of watery soup and black bread!!

He was an extremely lucky man, for I told him if he didn't shut up he would be chewing a mouthful of flying boot, for by this time I was ready to kick him in the teeth.

Then came the day when one glorious sunny afternoon the door crashed open and there once again stood the jailer and his by now familiar two armed guards. They motioned me to follow them and as they were armed I had no option. They led me around to the front of the hotel where there was a lawn almost as big as a football field. In the middle of this lawn was a solitary table with a chair each side. I was motioned to sit on the one chair and by sign language was told to wait. This I did not mind in the least, for at last I was out of the oven of the Nissen hut and in the fresh air.

The guards left me and as I sat there all on my own I considered the possibility of escape, even though my foot was broken. But as I had what would appear to be a casual look round, I could see in the bushes around the field an occasional glimpse of several German steel helmets bobbing about. I then began to get a bit concerned, for without doubt I was completely surrounded by armed guards, and as I sat alone I had the uncanny feeling that any false move on my part and I would have been shot at. I had very quickly learnt the lesson that you can't successfully argue with an enemy who had a loaded rifle, so discretion being the better part of valour, I sat very still.

I sat there about ten or fifteen minutes, keeping a wary eye on the guards who were watching me, knowing full well they were not there for a joke and that this was the serious part of the proceedings.

In a short while I was joined by a Luftwaffe Hauptman, which gave me more comfort as regards my immediate safety, for this was the man who was to interrogate me.

As we had already been told on the Squadron what to expect under such circumstances, I was not surprised when he spoke to me in a very friendly manner in perfect English. His job was to extract from me any information he could possibly get. The first thing he did was to push across the table to me a packet of twenty Players cigarettes, no doubt pilfered from some Red Cross parcel.

This was the first cigarette I had had for about three weeks and in my weakened state, the first few puffs made my head swim and I almost fell off the chair. However, this feeling did not last long and almost before I knew where I was the questions started.

All that the Geneva Convention requires is that you give your number, rank and name. Of course, this would in no way satisfy my interrogator. However, he started off by producing a form with a Red Cross printed on the top. This also we had been warned about as it was a bogus form and had nothing to do with the Red Cross. Then, making sure I had seen this form, he asked me:

"Your number please".

To which I replied "132024".

Following with "Your rank, please".

I replied "Flying Officer" which I was at that time.

"And now your name, please".

"William James Lowe".

Then the trouble started!!

The next question was which Squadron was I from, to which I answered "132024", and where I was stationed. The answer I gave here was Flying Officer, and so for the next few questions that was all I said. As he asked me a question so I answered with either number, rank, or name.

As this went on to say that he became agitated was an understatement and he became more vicious by saying that if I did not answer him, he would have no option but to hand me over to the Gestapo, and that their method of getting answers to questions was far different than his.

This we had also been warned about. However, this outburst did not last long and he tried a totally different approach.

"Surely" he said, "you have a girl friend".

"Yes" I replied.

"And I am sure you would like us to let her know you are well".

To this I said "Yes, I would like that, thank you very much".

"Well", he said with his pen at the ready, "where can we contact her?"
"To which I replied "you can contact her through the Air Ministry, Whitehall, London."

Off he went again, ranting and raving, but as I was only twenty—one at this time and inclined to be a bit niggled from the treatment I had had. In fact the worse I was treated, the more it made me dig my heels in. I didn't care by this time how awkward or cheeky I became, for by now I had had more than enough. Not only that, but after all he was the enemy, and I could not see any reason why I should make his job easy after the hard time he was giving me.

I wondered how much longer he would put up with my cheek and couldn't-care-less attitude, for all this time I was making inroads into his packet of Players.

Once again he calmed down and became friendly again, so much so that he showed me photographs of his wife and two daughters, and for one fleeting moment I thought of asking him for his daughters' phone number — but I thought this would be pushing things a bit — but this was the state of mind I was in by now.

Again the questions - what Squadron, what aircraft, where stationed, etc. After a time when we were both getting nowhere fast he started pleading with me to help him to complete the form before him to satisfy his superiors. As we were once again on 'friendly' terms, I asked him if our roles were reversed, would he, as a German officer and me as an officer in the R.A.F. trying to get the answers to the questions he was asking me, what would be his reaction. To which he smiled and said that he would most probably react in the same way, for he could respect a person who would not divulge any information, and as I would not help him, he would have to help himself. So saying, he got up from the table and went into the hotel, leaving me sitting there, all alone once more, in the middle of the lawn and I had again that very uncomfortable feeling and thinking of the guards I had been in the bushes convinced me I should sit very still.

My interrogator returned after about twenty minutes carrying the largest book I had ever seen. It measured about 3 feet x 2 feet and the pages were of cardboard. This he put on the table in front of him and then sat down again and as he began turning the pages over, I was amazed to see that at the top of each page in full colour was a Squadron Crest. He stopped turning when he came to the page with the 49 Squadron Crest, then he proceeded to fill in the form and answered the questions he had been asking me, 49 Squadron based at Fiskerton, flying Lancasters, where I had trained, etc. but what was more astounding was that he put down that Peenemunde was my 21st bombing raid, which it was.

The only two things he didn't know was were we fitted with radar and what was the bomb load. Of course, I again was very vague and evasive and dodged the questions by going off at a tangent. He must have thought I was a bit dim to be aircrew from the answers I gave him, but he couldn't have been very concerned because he did not push me too hard.

Today, 37 years later, I could still give him the answer to those two questions: Yes, we were fitted with radar and our bomb load that night was 2 five hundred pound, 6 one thousand pound and 1 four thousand pound bombs, all high explosive, but I don't suppose he would be interested today. After I had seen all this I was amazed to say the least, and his comment to me was that his job was easy for within twenty-four hours of a raid he had the complete battle order of the R.A.F. and all he had to do was to sit there and wait for us to come through.

"We knew, of course, which Squadron you were from by the identification letters on your aircraft when it was investigated after it had crashed". "Yes", he said "we have a wonderful espionage system", but, he added rather sorrowfully "I wish we had yours".

With that he picked up his book and packet of Players which I had been smoking like mad, got up from the table, and once again left me sitting there. I did not have long to wait, however, before the now familiar pattern of the two armed guards once again motioned me to follow them. Once more I was returned to my little oven-like cell and locked in.

After about another four days of the treatment as before, I was once more collected by my two armed companions and walked about a mile away - not without a feeling of unease, as I did not know what was to happen - to another part of the camp where I was pushed into a compound and gates of barbed wire were locked behind me, but this time I was pleased to see that I was once again in the company of fellow R.A.F. aircrew.

This was the compound where we were herded together to await shipment to a permanent Prisoner-of-War Camp. I did not know at that time, however, that I was destined for the infamous Stalag Luft III. I must say that once inside this compound conditions, though not good, were an improvement on what I had, up to now, experienced. Never shall I forget the luxury of that first shave and all over wash, the first I had been allowed since being shot down about a month previously.

We were not locked in solitary confinement in cells but were now allowed to walk round the compound and visit other huts. How comparatively pleasant it was to be able to converse with fellow aircrew in English once again. The improved conditions did not last long, however, for within three or four days we were once more herded together, counted again and again you would not think it possible to have so many re-counts for 44 bodies, for this was the total survivors of the 47 aircraft shot down on the Peenemunde raid.

Then, with approximately one guard to each man, we were walked to the local railway station and once more loaded into the ever-waiting cattle-trucks. We were becoming accustomed to this mode of travel by now. After about twenty four hours being locked in here, we eventually got under way. This was another nightmare journey of about a week's duration, although we were allowed out for toilet reasons occasionally, still under strong guard. The reason the journey took so long was because we were continually being shunted into numerous sidings to allow other traffic to proceed and they continually took our engine away for other duties, for according to our guards, they were very short of engines due to the efforts of R.A.F. Mosquitoes running riot on their train busting sorties.

We had one rather disturbing episode on this journey when, for a whole day, we were kept waiting just outside the main station of Berlin and we were hoping that we should be moved before nightfall, as we had been expecting to raid Berlin any time at all. However, it was with great relief when about six o'clock that evening we started to move. Our fears had been justified for we had not been going very long when we stopped again whilst Berlin suffered one of the heaviest raids to date.

After a most uncomfortable journey under very cramped conditions, forty four in one cattle truck, the day came when we were once more shunted into a siding and the door was thrown open and we were confronted by a squad of armed German guards waiting for us to alight, in numbers again about one to each prisoner. With much shouting and pushing we were again lined up for counting, these guards did not seem very sociable, but I suppose after marching from the camp to the siding in full kit on a blazing hot day to collect a scruffy bunch of R.A.F. bodies was not conducive to good relations.

Once they were satisfied with the count, we were immediately surrounded and were started off to walk to the camp. This again was a rather uncomfortable time for not only did we have to contend with the surly attitude of the guards, which was rather explosive to say the least, but also the attitude of the civilian population who were definitely hostile. I was very glad to see that the guards did their job very well and kept them away from us because it was a very tense situation. Once we were clear of the town the tension was eased somewhat.

So we straggled on for about four miles then turned down a narrow road which lead through some woods. It was not far into the woods when once more we came across the familiar barbed wire compound.

This was the entrance to Stalag Luft III.

First of all we were taken to the German administration block where we were ordered to strip off so that our clothes could be searched.

Then came a most degrading episode when naked as we were, we were subjected to a very personal search of our bodies. Believe me, nothing could have got through that search. After these various indignities had been completed we were once more allowed to dress and, in the company of our guards, once more were taken outside and across the compound where another gate of barbed wire was opened for us and we were bundled through into the camp itself.

The huts of the camp were of wooden construction and were built on pedestals so that the floor was about three feet above ground level. This I found out later was to enable the German guards who were facetiously known as "ferrets" to crawl about underneath the floor, not only to listen to our conversation, but also to prevent holes being dug in the floor in an attempt to escape. As I was taking all this in we were surrounded by a great crowd of R.A.F. bods who were throwing questions at us left, right and centre to glean the latest news from home. I was very happy to see some familiar faces amongst them, chaps I had trained with, etc.

One in particular greeted me with "what ho! Lowey".

I knew who this was before I saw him, for I had had this same greeting when I walked into the Beaver Club at Admiralty Arch some two years previously.

In fact, I never knew where next I would hear "what ho! Lowey", for after the Beaver Club I next heard it at I.T.W. (Initial Training Wing) for I was at Torquay at this time. As it was our half-day off on a Wednesday we used to go to Paignton to another I.T.W. who had Thursday afternoons off, and sit on the sea wall and watch the Paignton contingent marching to their various classes, in general, take the mickey out of them.

They did the same to us on Thursdays. It was whilst sitting on the sea wall when a flight went past on their way to class once again I heard the cry "What ho! Lowey".

Next time I heard it was when I was passing a flight office on an airfield in Canada and a window was flung open and once more I hear the by now familiar cry. Next time I heard it I was on leave from the Squadron and was walking through the market place at Dudley.

How it was that Gerry Whitehouse always saw me first I shall never know, and now as I walked into Stalag Luft III, here it was again - "What ho!, Lowey".

Gerry Whitehouse again - he had beaten me there by about three weeks, but it was good to see him for I had seen his name on the casualty list when I was on the Squadron, as he had failed to return from an earlier raid.

When I knew him back home, he had a lovely head of blond hair. Now how changed he was, for as I saw him now he was bald as an egg, and he told me that they were running up on the target when there was a great flash and a bang and he woke up on the ground minus his hair which had burnt off. He did not recall bailing out, and how he got there from about twenty three thousand feet, he had no idea.

We had not been inside the gate many minutes when we were collected by a Squadron Leader and allocated to various huts. I was allocated to Block 6 and I was introduced to the chaps in the "Mess" with whom I was going to spend the next two years.

The "Mess" consisted of a small portion of Block 6 divided off from the rest of the hut by two-tier bunks and one locker per person. There were about twelve such areas inside the hut, each one itself a self-contained mess of about eight to ten persons, so as you can well imagine, it was rather overcrowded.

The "Mess" to which I was allocated consisted of a selection of all aircrew trades and equally diverse civilian occupations. One of them was Pete Watts, one of the most colourful characters I have ever met. He was a Flight Lieutenant with 35 Squadron, a Pathfinder outfit, and he had the D.F.M. I was a long time before I found out how he earned it. It was in 1939 when he was a corporal photographer, and as was common in those days, aircrew was a secondary trade. His job in aircrew was that of air gunner and it was one day prior to the fall of France that he was flying as a gunner in a Lysander, when suddenly at tree-top height, they were attacked by three M.E.109s and Pete, in the rear cockpit with a single Lewis gun, took careful aim and allowing the correct deflection, as calm as if it was a practice exercise, shot down the three attacking aircraft, even though they were far superior aircraft to the Lysander he was flying in.

On returning to base he was granted an immediate award of the D.F.M. and commissioned in the field, and knowing Pete Watts, this was well within his capabilities.

I would add that it was not Pete that told me this but the pilot he was flying with at the time.

Later on I was to be very thankful for knowing Pete Watts, for much later, as I had quite a rough time with domestic troubles back home which, in my present predicament I could do nothing about and this was getting me down, I was very seriously considering ending it all. This was quite easy to do, for all that was necessary was to take a run at the wire surrounding the camp to try and climb it, and the guards would immediately open fire.

However, there must have been some tell-tale signs that things were not as they should be and Pete, being the type of person he was, picked up these signs and as slight as he was, gave me the hiding of my life which brought me to my senses. So without any shadow of doubt, I consider by his action he saved my life. Funny thing was that some time after this episode, we were fooling about and I knocked the stuffing out of Pete, but of course, by now things were different.

Another thing that happened almost as soon as I got in the hut and started talking to my new companions was that Pete Watts said "You're a Brummy" to which I replied most emphatically "No I am not" and proceeded to tell him in no uncertain terms that I was from Dudley and Dudley, I would have him know was twelve miles from Birmingham, but of course, I was now labelled and for the rest of my stay in Stalag Luft III Jim Lowe did not exist but in his stead was a chap known to all as "Brum". In fact this stuck so hard it was quite a novel experience when I came home to answer to Jim once again.

But of course, many moons were to pass and I was to have many more experiences before this was to be.

Another member of the Mess to which I now belonged was a Canadian by the name of Roy Wood who was a Navigator with 35 Squadron, a little tubby fellow with a most jovial disposition, who in civilian life was a tailor. He told me that one day his girl-friend who was a French Canadian, was due to be shipped back to France to a convent.

To prevent this they were married and Roy was only sixteen years old at this time. "In fact", he told me "when my first son was born I was out in the street roller skating". This same son was later to become aircrew whilst his father was in prison camp.

We had not been in the camp long, a couple of days at the most, when all of us new 'kriegies' were told to report to the Admin. Block of the camp where we were once more subjected to an interrogation by one of our own R.A.F. officers and could we find anyone in the camp who could vouch for us. Of course, this was easy in my case, having already met Gerry Whitehouse who was called in to identify me and give the necessary clearance.

I wondered what this was all about but after it was proved that I was bona-fide R.A.F. I was told that in the past the Germans had tried to slip one of their own men into the camp as a spy and of course, the screening was to prevent this.

I found that after I had been cleared the tension that had been felt between myself and my new colleagues was greatly eased and I was then accepted.

I did not take long to settle down to the routine of camp life, for apart from two parades a day for the purpose of being counted, our time was our own. In fact it was a great effort to find something to do or the great bogey of boredom would take over.

Even these parades, or as the Germans said "Appel", were an event for it was during these times we went as far as possible to cause as much trouble as possible, much to the annoyance of our guards.

It would start off by one of the "Goons", which was our name for the uniformed guards section of the German camp staff, striding through the hut making as much noise as he could, shouting "Rouse Rouse: Appel! Appel! Rouse! Rouse! Appel! Appel!" to which he was answered by a various assortment of unprintable remarks from the occupants of the hut who, nevertheless, gradually rolled from their bunks or put away whatever books they were reading and slowly made their way outside where they ambled over to an open patch of ground, still within the confines of the barbed wire.

Slowly, amid much shouting and bawling from the guards, we proceeded to form up in ranks of five deep in blocks representing individual huts. It is amazing how such a simple instruction can be messed about if you wanted it to. Of course, a lot depended on the weather as to how we behaved. If it was a wet and miserable day one would think it was a regiment of guards on parade, for as soon as we were in line the count started, numbers checked and we were dismissed to once more return to the comparative comfort of our respective huts to carry on passing the time as before.

If, on the other hand, it was a fine, sunny day, we would mess things up as much as possible to keep our guards occupied as long as possible. After all, we weren't going into town, so we didn't see why they should.

This was achieved in several different ways, one of the most effective was the use of "rabbits". These were the smallest chaps in the hut who positioned themselves in the centre of the five ranks at the end where the count started. As soon as they had been counted they ducked down between the ranks and quickly scuttled to the other end where they beat the checker to that end and were counted again. This was a very useful ploy for when we knew the count was short, for escape purposes, this would make all appear correct.

Of course, when we knew all was in order, this was done to make the total more than it should be, which of course resulted in a re-count. By doing this we could make a fifteen minute count last three or four hours, it didn't matter to us. One thing we had plenty of was time.

Sometimes it happened that the guards would have a reprisal session and whilst we were all out on parade, another squad of about thirty guards would march into the camp, surround one of the huts to prevent anyone getting back inside and then proceeded to carry out a most thorough search for anything they considered contraband, or bits and pieces which could be used for escape purposes.

Of course, at times we would leave "hidden" where we knew full well they could find it, certain pieces which we considered they would take great satisfaction in confiscating, so that they would then miss the things we prized more.

Whilst all this was going on, we would be standing around the guards outside the hut and playing them up as far as we dare go. That is until we heard the click of a rifle bolt and we were once more the most impeccably behaved crowd you could wish to see until the tension eased and they calmed down again. After all, they were giving us a rough time so we didn't see any reason why we should stand idly by and make their job any easier. And so the days passed - slowly, oh so slowly.

I often joked at one time that it would be nice to have a job where there was no working between meals, but when I had one as I had there, it was sheer purgatory. The position we were in of enforced idleness was the most soul destroying circumstance I have ever known - but it is also well-known that the devil finds work for idle hands.

The first and foremost thought in anyone's mind was that of escape and as this was the prime objective, all worked towards that end in a very highly organised manner, with all activities controlled through the escape committee.

The system was that if an individual came up with an idea of how to get away, he first approached the escape committee and put his idea before them. It was then thoroughly checked re feasibility and that it did not cut across any other activity that was going on at the same time.

When all this was cleared then all talents that were available in the camp, and there were many, were alerted to provide all necessary equipment and were utilised to the full.

Items as were needed such as compasses, maps, timetables, etc. were acquired in the initial stages by bribery, which was the job of another group of 'kriegies'.

As one can imagine, all articles so acquired were strictly contraband and had to be very carefully hidden from the guards.

To ensure that all escape activities could go on as efficiently as possible, it was most important that at all times we knew the number and whereabouts of all German guards within the camp, so it was a job of major importance that all German activities were very accurately logged.

This was done on a rota system of "duty pilots" whose job it was to sit at a window in front of the main gate, in fact the only entrance or exit to the camp, and keep it under constant surveillance, and note all comings and goings of the guards who were referred to by nicknames such as "slim", "popeye", etc.

The first thing that was done as soon as the huts were opened in a morning was to have a scout round and find out who and how many were already in the camp. This information was passed to the "duty pilot" who promptly entered it in the log-book, at the same time noting the comings and goings of other guards and noting the time they entered and left, so that anyone engaged on escape activities only had to call and see the "duty pilot" and knowing who was about, could assess the element of risk involved. In fact this job became so involved that even the German staff would at times come and check the log to such an extent that there was many a guard had reason to be antagonistic towards us when by our book it could be proved that he was missing, when he should have been in the camp, and punishment was administered accordingly.

Another method we had of warning of impending danger was that as soon as a guard appeared in the doorway, a shout went up from the first person who saw him "goon in the block". This was taken up all through the block and in the space of seconds all were aware of his presence. This again became so familiar that the guard himself would sometimes stand in the doorway and shout "goon in the block".

It was not unknown for us to get rid of a guard who was persistently making a nuisance of himself and would not co-operate in some small way.

This again was a very highly organised operation and it was brought about by a 'kriegie' who belonged to the section briefed to look after the guards, and he went out of his way to make a "friend" of the unpopular guard, even to the point where he would appear to fall out with his roommates, who obviously were also in on the plot, but at least it looked good to the unsuspecting guard, who would then be carefully "nursed" by his new—found "friend".

Of course, this would not happen overnight and it may even take a couple of months before the time came to strike. In the meantime, the mutual "friends" would chat together, pass from one to the other such family photographs as were available for perusal and comment. The odd cigarette would be passed to the victim which he would at first refuse, and then reluctantly accept, so the "friendship" flourished. He would be given little snippets of useless information which would cause another "row" between him and his roommates, staged of course.

The day came when the friend learned of when the victim was going on leave. The friend would then meet the victim secretly, by arrangement with his roommates, of course, and slip the by now well and truly brainwashed guard a couple of hundred cigarettes and a couple of bars of chocolate "for the kids" for when he went home, with strict instructions that he must, under no circumstances, let it be known to the other kriegies or his "friend" would come unstuck.

The trap was now ready to be sprung. As soon as the guard left the room with the cigarettes secreted about his person and feeling well pleased with himself, his "friend" would stand at the window and blow his nose. Another 'kriegie' would be looking for this signal from a carefully pre-arranged position and would close the book he was reading, another kriegie would see the book close and bend down and tie his shoelace. This would then alert the 'kriegie' standing idly by the gate who would then very "confidentially" let the gate guard know that "Schultz", who it was known he was not on very good terms with, was open to bribery.

"But for crying out loud, don't let on that I told you, or my mates would fill me in".

He would then walk away from the gate long before "Schultz" got there, knowing full well that as soon as he moved, the German N.C.O. guard commander would be informed.

All that remained now was for the ones who had set the trap to watch from various places in the camp and see the unsuspecting guard leave the camp.

As soon as "Schultz" went through the gate, the N.C.O. would call him into the guard room where he would be searched and of course, the cigarettes and chocolate would be found and he would be accused of accepting bribes, and no matter how much he protested his innocence, the evidence found in his possession proved beyond any doubt. He was immediately charged and more often than not sent to the Russian front. And so the days passed — slowly, oh so slowly.

It was a great day when it was learned that a consignment of mail had arrived, for as one can imagine, this was very erratic and one could get a months' mail in one day. It was a direct link with home and as soon as the letters were received, you would retire to your bunk and sort them out by the date of the postmark, then settle down and read them, oh so very slowly, savouring every word. Then read them again and again until one could have recited them if necessary. Then they were carefully put away to be read and re-read again at some future date. The important thing was it was a link with home. One could feel the atmosphere of longing, even see tears in some cases, and for a time the room was very quiet as each was pre-occupied with his own thoughts.

Who knows what went through the minds of wives, sweethearts or girlfriends who wrote those letters, for surely they must have been a sterling breed to boost moral as they did.

Summer passed on into autumn, autumn into winter. Time did not mean a thing. After all time was the only thing we had plenty of. Still two parades a day, stiff as ramrods, impeccably behaved so that we could get back inside away from the rain and snow. Winter was the worst time for as soon as daylight started to fade we were locked in for the night. No communication with friends from the other blocks to help relieve the boredom and monotony. Not that it would not have been easy to get out of the block during the hours of darkness, but one was very aware of the vicious Alsatian dogs that were turned loose in the compound after we were locked in, also the guards in the watch towers developed very itchy fingers once darkness had closed in.

Escape activities still went on, however, with the production of equipment ready, ever ready, for the slightest possible chance to get somebody away. Compasses to be made, blocks of concentrated food, maps produced, clothes to be modified to look civilian and the hundred and one other items to take care of. This was also the worst time for being caught, producing such things, for being locked in one could not get so much notice of approaching danger in the form of a surprise search party, for it was not uncommon for the door to crash open and everyone shunted outside under armed guard, whatever the state of dress or undress one would be in at the time, and made to stand in the snow whilst the sadistic guards ransacked the hut. So if one was engaged on forbidden occupations, it had to be able to be hidden in a few seconds, for not only did you stand to lose what could be the results of possibly months of patient work, but also finish up in the "cooler", a most uncomfortable place, for a couple of weeks for being caught with it. It must have been very few of us who did not experience this at some time or another during our time of captivity.

Of course, not all activities were to do with escaping, but were still forbidden, for in the compound was a radio loudspeaker extended from the German block over which we used to get newscasts, but as this was the German version as to how the war was progressing we knew it was distorted. So it was decided to build a secret radio so that we may get news direct from the B.B.C. which involved me in what I considered one of the best things I ever produced in Stalag Luft III.

One day I was approached by another kriegie who was a genius on the theory of radio who said to me "Look, Brum, we want to make a radio to be able to get the B.B.C. news and we need a condenser".

"Fair enough, what exactly do you want?" I said.

He replied that he had it all worked out in theory and it could be done with razor blades. He had worked out the area of the razor blades, subtracted the area of the holes and came to the conclusion that "all I want is thirty two razor blades soldered on a nail two millimetres apart" — "Oh, by the way, I want two of them so they would turn to make it possible for tuning". I started by collecting as many razor blades as possible, and once having acquired a good stock, then the problems began.

The solder was painstakingly collected from thousands of little blobs which in those days was the method used to seal bully beef tins. The flux that was needed was the resin which seeped from the wood that the nuts were built with. I soon found out that razor blades could not be soldered until they had been tempered, but as soon as any heat was applied to do this, there was a little click and the razor blade distorted like a withered leaf. Many blades were scrapped trying to get sixty four to do the job. This was eventually overcome by suspending the blade in a bowl of water with just the corner protruding above the surface and blowing a flame across the water until the protruding corner was blue.

So far so good. Now I was in business on a mass production basis. The next step to overcome was to ensure they were two millimetres apart and parallel with each other. This was achieved quite by accident when I found a broken piece of gramophone record and as near as I could measure, with the equipment available, was two millimetres thick. So now it was only a matter of binding together a razor blade and piece of record until the thirty two blades necessary were as one block. To solder them altogether the nail was discarded and a groove cut in the table. The razor blades were then positioned in the groove. The resin and molten solder was then run in this groove. It broke my heart to have to use the hard earned solder so lavishly, but there was no other answer. All that had to be done now was when it had gone cold was to shake out the pieces of gramophone record and fashion a bearing on each end of the solder, go through the whole procedure again and there was the two parts of the condenser. I am proud to say that this was part of the radio which gave us the news of the invasion.

This news, I may say, we were in possession of before our German guards. All that was said was that "Today allied forces landed on the French coast and the first exchanges were in our favour".

But what a historic announcement, morale was boosted sky high!

When this condenser project was finished, to keep myself occupied, with the aid of books from the "reference library" supplied by the Red Cross (God bless them).

I passed the time working out the stresses and strains of the rivets on the Forth Bridge, interesting but useless, but it helped to stop stagnating. Summertime came, the need to keep yourself occupied was greater as the days lengthened. Of course, one of the important things was to keep fit, though there was not much energy to allow one to do this. Walking was one of the ways to do this, when with a companion, one would "bash to circuit". This entailed many miles on a well trodden path within the confines of the camp, as close to the wire as possible. A complete circuit would be perhaps three quarters of a mile and one would just keep walking round and round. Of course, this was also the safest place for discussion, for the circuit was one place where talk could go on in private, be the subject escape, family, or whatever. At least the guards could not sneak up and bear what was going on.

Periodically word would go round that a new bunch of 'kriegies' were expected and a crowd would gather around the gate in the hope that one might recognise a familiar face, another link with home. No matter how remote this would be, it was something to talk about. Latest news from one's own Squadron was a real boost. Home at that time was a very long way away.

Of course, it was not all sombre and dramatic. Humour also played a great part, for without a sense of humour life would not have been worth living. Like the time a lorry drove into the camp to deliver goods. It was the only time I can recall this happening and as can well be imagined, this, as far as the Germans were concerned, was courting disaster, for no sooner had the two guards climbed out when a diversion was laid on in the form of a "fight", much to the amusement of the guards who, while being so engrossed as to what was going on, did not see the tool kit belonging to the lorry being stolen. Not only was this stolen, but later on as the lorry left the camp a few yards down the road it crashed into a wall. Upon investigation it was found the brake rods had also been stolen. This could well be the reason no other lorries were allowed inside the camp. All goods in future were delivered by hand truck.

I think one of the cheekiest episodes, although it could have been most dangerous, that was pulled off was the day we were paid a visit by a high ranking German officer. Once again a diversion was laid on and the net result was the theft from his car of his gloves, torch and, of all things, his cypher book. Shortly after he left there was the greatest uproar I was ever to witness. Not that the cypher book was any good to us, but the gloves and torch were valuable additions to the escape equipment. The outcome was that the camp was invaded by more guards than I thought the German army possessed, more or less one guard to each one of us, whilst another party made such a thorough search of the camp they almost wrecked it, only to draw a blank, and for a time the situation was very tense until in desperation the officer concerned said that he didn't care about the gloves or torch but could he please have his cipher book back. After a time it was arranged that this would be found during a further search. I have often wondered what his feelings were, after a couple of days of anguish, when he opened the book and found rubber stamped on the inside cover "Passed by British Board of Censors, Stalag Luft III".

And so the days passed. Slowly, oh so slowly.

The summer passed again into autumn — autumn into winter — once again the long, long nights. Anything to pass the time, chess, draughts, various classes. We even built our own theatre, mainly from Red Cross boxes — as I said, anything to pass the time.

This was the pattern of life until nine-thirty one mid-February night, Nineteen Forty Five, when the door was flung open and a party of German guards rushed in shouting "Rouse! Rouse! Be ready to move in thirty minutes". This was to move us out of the way of advancing Russian troops. Just imagine the upheaval this caused. About four feet of snow outside and all we could take with us was what we could carry!

Great priority was given to the amount of cigarettes we could carry for it had been proved conclusively in the past that these were the most valuable commodity we had got as they were good currency for bartering purposes. We were ready to move out in the thirty minutes then we heard there would be a delay until three o'clock in the morning.

This gave us some valuable time which was spent hurriedly knocking together the most outrageous forms of transport one could contrive, mostly in the form of some type of sledge to cope with the conditions we had to face outside. We finally moved out about six o'clock in the morning, again with about one guard per 'kriegie'.

That was the start of what was to be a nightmare of a journey.

The first day we covered about twenty miles, using only side roads and country lanes. This was to leave the main roads free for military traffic. So we struggled on through the freezing conditions. That night we were all herded into a farmyard.

The farmyards were built in the form of a hollow square with only the one entrance, so once in there, it was almost as secure as the camp we had left that morning. Once inside, we were left to our own devices as to how we ate or slept. My own particular quarters - shared with about 12 others - was a pig sty which thankfully had the pigs removed and had just been hosed out. I had slept on a concrete floor before, but a concrete floor wet and in the middle of winter was a hundred times worse. The next night the same procedure was followed, only this time I was more fortunate as I was in a stable and was able to sleep alongside a horse which was much warmer. This was the way it was for a whole week.

Of course, we went as slowly as possible, hoping that the Russian Army would catch up with us. This made our guards frantic for the last thing that they wanted to see were the Russians, and on several occasions the atmosphere was rather tense and explosive. One good thing about this episode, however, was that we had a change in diet, for as we left the farms it was common to see 'kriegies' looking rather bulky and if one opened his coat, you would see a couple of chickens or rabbits, or even, in some cases, a little pig hanging around his belt. I have often wondered if the farmers were compensated for the stock they lost, for I must add, we were not given these goodies.

We just helped ourselves as we went along. One amusing episode was, one day we came across a Panzer Unit complete with tanks who were retreating from the Russians, but could go no further as they had not got any petrol.

Their Commanding Officer was with them and someone had given him a goose as it was his birthday. Needless to say, he did not have the goose very long as some of the lads had stolen it and it was eaten before he found out. When he did all Hell broke loose. Never had I seen a man in such an uncontrollable rage. The situation was rather dicey for a time. He was finally consoled with 100 cigarettes and two bars of chocolate. What we would have done without our stock of cigarettes and how we used them I do not know. I think it must have been his first experience of prisoners-of-war. If there had been some petrol he would have had fears for his tanks also.

After about a week of this life-style during which we had covered about 120 miles of agony, at the end of the week we were turned from the side road we were on down a woodland track, when after about two miles we came across what looked like a deserted prison camp, but a more depressing hell-hole I have never been in.

From the outside it was the familiar pattern of a barbed wire compound within which were built half a dozen or so huts, different construction, though, as they were brick-built up to about four feet, then timber, with window frames but no doors and just plain earth floors, with no furniture whatsoever, so where you stood was where you sat and slept.

By the end of the month we were once more settled and organised into prison camp life, though by no means as comfortable as we were back at Stalag Luft III, though one must realise the word 'comfortable' is only relative. We still had our illegal radio which we, by devious means, had been able to get through a couple of searches.

Food by this time was our main concern, for the tide of war had cut us off from our supply of Red Cross food parcels and our rations were very meagre, being once more half a litre of watery soup and one slice of black bread per day.

As the days went by, in the usual pattern of two parades a day for counting, we could sense a growing tenseness amongst the guards, for they, like us, knew the Russians were getting closer and that it was only a matter of time before they caught up with us. After about two months of this existence we could hear the gunfire of the Russian advance.

This, of course, became a very dangerous time, which we tended to overlook in our excitement. The guards attitude to us by this time had changed considerably and they tried to become most friendly - even Es far as asking us to sign notes that they had treated us well - to which they were given an unprintable answer.

Then one morning in mid-April we awoke to find we were alone and that during the night the guards had all taken off and left us. This left us then in a most uncomfortable position as we were then stuck between the two fronts between the retreating German Army and the advancing Russians. We were in this position for about another week, hearing the shells whining over us and hoping that none dropped short. April 20th dawned bright and sunny. I shall always remember that date, it being Hitler's birthday, when suddenly out of the woods appeared a Russian tank. As soon as he saw us he stopped and waited for his Commander who came forward to ascertain who we were. Fortunately for us we had in the camp a Russian speaking kriegie who explained who we were and the predicament we were in. Without any more ado the Russian tank driver started up and proceeded to drive around the compound demolishing all the barbed wire.

The trouble was, whilst doing this he also demolished the poles carrying the electricity supply, which meant we had neither light nor water, which had to be pumped by electric pump. This then meant we were at last free but behind the Russian lines. The problem of the light and water situation was soon solved by a Russian Captain who told the local Mayor to get it fixed - or else. Needless to say we soon had light and water, even though the Mayor was insistent that he hadn't got anyone to do the job. It was amazing what, the threat of a spell in Siberia could do.

From then on the camp was transformed. We just went out and from local houses and shops, amidst many protestations from the local populace, which we totally ignored, helped ourselves to whatever we wanted, and for the first time since captivity had a proper bed to sleep in with real sheets and blankets, bedside tables and cabinets, even to a cuckoo clock ticking away on the wall.

We just took what we wanted - radios, food, anything. In fact life became almost enjoyable, though it was still dangerous to wander too far from camp, or one was quite liable to be shot at and this I may say happened too often for comfort.

This "idyllic" life went on for about six weeks while arrangements were being made for us to be taken home.

But that, again, is another story.