

## POST-GREECE

Driver Ernest Edwards, RASC, 308 Coy

### *Privation*

## 4

### Privation

Once again it was fifty men to a truck and the door shut fast. Men with sores and men with dysentery. Little did we know at the outset just how far we were to travel this time or of how many days and nights we were going to be trapped in these trucks. Trucks which were as hot as hell in daytime and freezing cold at night. In the event, we were on this train for approximately four to five days and nights. The bread and water ran out and I well remember standing in the dark when it was raining, catching the dips of rainwater as they leaked through the roof, without realising that the top surface of the truck was covered in soot from the engines, since there were so many tunnels in the mountain. We arrived in Belgrade main station where we were supposed to be supplied with food and drink from the International Red Cross, but the German officer in charge of our train forbade it. Once again the doors were

## *Privation*

closed on us and not opened again until we reached Maribor, in northern Yugoslavia, about ten miles south of the Austrian border.

When we eventually left the train we were herded off to a large building where we were questioned by two English-speaking German officers. I, personally, didn't say anything except to give my name, rank and number which is all that is required of an ordinary prison of war. We were then marched to a disused Yugoslavian army barracks. The group of men I was with were taken to a large and very long upstairs room packed to the ceiling with bunks, four tiers high. If you were allotted any one of the first three tiers you were restricted to lying down only. You couldn't sit on your bunk because the height between each bunk measured only about two feet. One just crawled in and laid down flat. We still had not received any food since our departure from the train in the morning. At night there were rats running around on the top layer of beds. The room was jammed tight with bodies, all of us filthy and starving. The following day we were taken out in parties of about fifty men to work in the town of Maribor digging out foundations for some large building in one of the main streets. (My wife and I went back there in May 1980 to have a look round. It proved to be a really nostalgic journey.)

The work was very hard, all pick and shovel. We were never given any food at all until mid-day and then it was only potato and mangel soup. This went on for a couple of weeks when our routine was suddenly altered. Every morning before it was light, we were taken from these awful barracks in large coaches out to the woods to a place called Theren, about eight miles from Maribor. We had to cut and clear large strips of forest to build a factory for making parts destined for the German Luftwaffe. Once again it was all pick and shovel work. First, the trees had to be felled, the roots dug out and the foundation

**Prisoner of War Camp**

5499

Date *20 July 1941*

(No. of Camp only; as may be directed by the Commandant of the Camp.)

I have been taken prisoner of war in Germany. I am in good health — ~~slightly wounded~~ (cancel accordingly).

We will be transported from here to another Camp within the next few days. Please don't write until I give new address.

Kindest regards

Christian Name and Surname: *Albert Ernest Edwards*

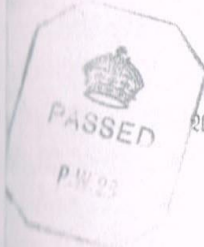
Rank: *Driver*

Detachment: *RASC*

(No further details. Clear legible writing.)

Kriegsgefangenen

Postkarte



Mr. A. T. Edwards  
"Beeshwood"  
High Street,



Empfangsort: *Walton*  
town:  
Land: *England*  
country:  
Landesteil: *Norfolk*  
(Provinz (sw.)  
county:

*Prisoner of War Document*

**The standard notification – good news and bad – following the initial “Missing in Action” letter from the War Office**



### *Privation*

laid. The foundation had to be very deep and we had to use conveyor belts. I well remember that if the soil and stones stopped going off the top of the conveyor belt, the guards were soon down amongst us with their rifle butts.

The mid-day 'meal' was brought out in large boxes and mostly consisted of goulash soup, one bowlful each, and that was it. And then it was back to that indescribable barracks every night, sometimes wet through, to sleep fully clothed until morning when it was off to work again. Until one day I woke up with a sore throat. The diphtheria epidemic had arrived. With several others I was whisked off to a Yugoslavian isolation hospital which already had several other English soldiers in residence. My case had been confirmed by a medical officer of the British Medical Corps who was captured at the same place I was in Greece. First thing on arrival at the hospital I was given a beautiful hot bath and a bed with snow white sheets. The place was run by wonderfully kind sisters who wore the large white-winged hats. The only medical treatment I was given was a very large injection in my rear end with a similarly large hyperdermic needle. I soon began to mend but, unfortunately, some of my new-found friends did not.

Now these new surroundings were very cosy indeed and the next consideration was how long could these improved conditions be made to last? (In another ward down the corridor was a very young Yugoslav boy who was very ill indeed and he had a silver tube protruding from his neck. A beautiful child he was and I well remember him dying in the night and seeing his poor parents arrive.)

Now, back to how we were going to make this stay last a bit longer. In another ward there was a young man with scarlet fever, so I used to go and visit him regularly in the hope that I would catch scarlet fever too, but it did not work out like that. So in due course it was back to the camp at Maribor, just in

## *Privation*

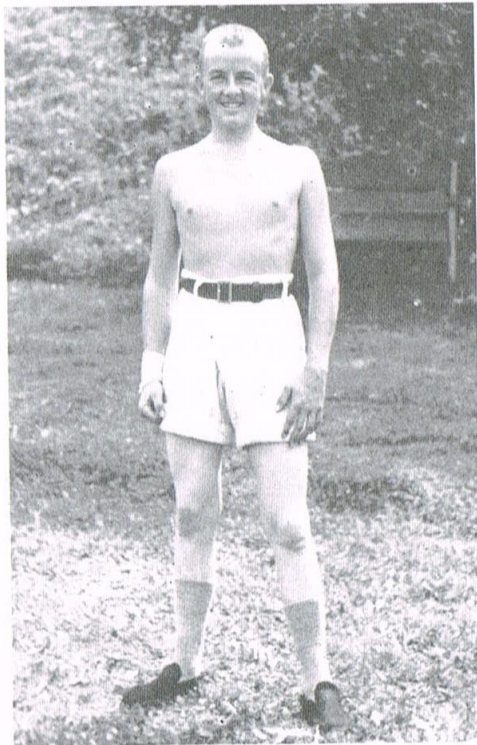
time to receive our first Red Cross parcel. On leaving the isolation hospital I was sent back to the awful camp near the railway station, but a few days later I was included in a party of sixty men and sent to the railway tunnel site at Mislinya. The job there was rebuilding a railway tunnel through the mountain that Marshal Tito's forces had blown up to stop the German army's advance into Yugoslavia. It was a small camp, wired all round, consisting of two rooms, thirty men in each room. The weather was fine and warm on arrival but when winter arrived it became apparent that the walls were so thin you could see through them. So we had to sleep with our clothes on. There were six guards with an unter officer in charge. Our job was a bit more varied. For example, we unloaded very large, long trucks of sand, mixed concrete and broke up old concrete with large hammers. We travelled down the railway to a quarry where civilians were blasting with explosives. We then broke this residue into smaller pieces which we loaded into railway trucks by hand and then unloaded it all again at the tunnel. This was then used to help fill the hole to mend the tunnel. This work was accomplished on a cup of coffee for breakfast, some soup for lunch and soup with something in it for the evening meal.

Just before Christmas 1941 some Red Cross parcels turned up. They didn't arrive very regularly but they certainly saved the day for us because the work was very hard. By now small local trains were getting through and when the large trucks arrived six of us had to unload by hand - two on the truck, two up the bank and another two at the top of the bank. We were expected to get this work done and cleared before the next train came through. It was a tiring job. We also had to haul thirty foot long steel RSS girders though the village street on wooden sledges having first unloaded them from the train. A very dangerous job indeed. We left this camp in late 1943; our party was broken up and we dispersed in different directions.





*Bloated because of diet of  
potatoes and mangols*



*Hair-shaved because of lice*



*Stalag XVIII A Missling*



*P.O.W.'s of Stalag XVIII A*



*Funeral of British P.O.W.*

## *Work on the farm*

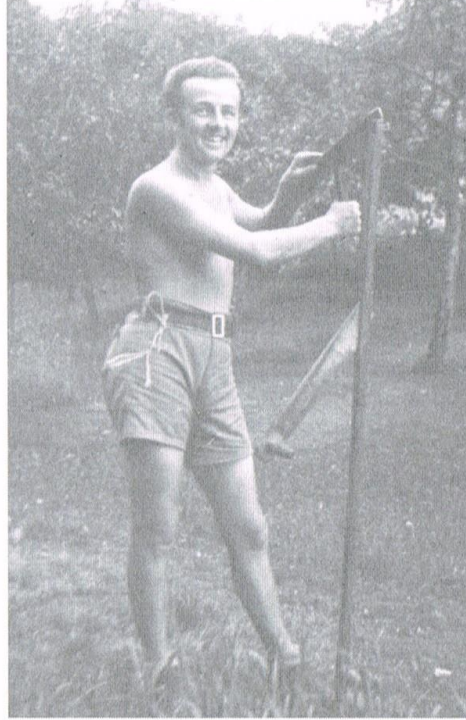
### 5

## Work on the farm

The next camp I was sent to was in the village of Leibnitz in southern Austria where we had to build a new road. I forget how long we were on this job but the routine was pretty normal - out on the old pick and shovel and locked in this small camp every night. Then I was sent on my own to a small farm run by two ladies, one single, one married. This really was a piece of good luck for me. Although the hours were long, the atmosphere was more civilised than on the construction sites. The name of the village was Muttendorf, near Graz. The single lady's brother was a prisoner-of-war in Russia and the married one's husband was a prisoner-of-war of the Americans, so both parties had something in common. For me, anyhow, there were a few extra little perks. My clothes got washed and there was quite a bit of extra food. It was also possible to have a stand-up wash with warm water in a large bucket in the stable that housed the young cows. I learned how to plough the small field



*Work on the farm*



*Cillis Farm*

### *Work on the farm*

with one of these cows and how to scythe the corn at harvest time. Other jobs I had to carry out included hoeing the maize field, carting the corn with the two young cows and taking it from the cart up into the loft.

The married lady of the two had brought her small baby with her. She had come out to the farm to live because the Americans had just begun bombing the city of Graz, which was about ten miles away. When the two ladies went down to the village they would leave me to mind the baby! Now that was a pleasant perk for a young soldier under those circumstances. The aforementioned baby eventually became a talented musician and played with the Graz National Youth Orchestra. These ladies had what I would call a poor standard of living but, having said that, they treated me very well. With my wife I have been back to see them twice and things haven't changed all that much. They told me that after I left the farm my place was taken by an Australian prisoner-of-war. He was still there when the Russian army overran the area and one night he went outside after dark and was shot dead by a Russian soldier.

By this time in the war the American Air Force planes were much in evidence on a daily basis. One day the German Luftwaffe engaged them with their Focke Wolfe 190 fighters. As a consequence, out of the sky there came tumbling down several long range wing tip fuel tanks from the American fighters, which were based in Italy. While I was still at the farm I was afflicted with a series of boils, all in rather important places. There was one in particular which was blind and I was bathing it with hot salt water and was about to lance it with a razor blade when Willi, the German guard, came in and stopped me. He was quite a decent chap really. It cleared up on its own - the boil that is. At the next camp I was sent to there was a British doctor. It was a very large camp with a very spar-



tan, so-called hospital with not too many aids to comfort. There I was held down by one chap while the doctor did his business with the knife. I don't remember being given any anaesthetic. I don't suppose there was any.

The day I had arrived at the farm I met up with a friend of mine with whom I had joined up at Aldershot in 1940. We had parted when I was put in the isolation hospital at Maribor. He was Alf Adams, 188845 RASC, and I was soon named Eddie Edwards, not Ernest. On one occasion while I was at the small farm, I was detailed to go and work as a labourer for one day only at an agricultural research station outside the village. My task involved barrowing earth from a greenhouse and in this greenhouse were some women dressed in striped clothing coloured purple and white. There was also a man wearing a white coat occupied doing something with plants. Rumour had it that he was a member of the SS. This made us think that the women must have come from one of the camps we had been hearing about. This was about all we knew of them. There was one particular phrase which we had picked up from the civilians which, when translated, went something like this. 'If you don't behave in Germany you go up the chimney.'

## 6

### Bombed by the Americans

I was then moved back to Maribor and sent to a large camp which was a factory now producing items for the Luftwaffe. This was the same place to which we were first sent to work digging the foundations for what was destined to be an armaments factory. According to the terms of the Geneva Convention we should not have been working in such a place. Our spokesman brought this matter to the attention of the German commandant whose terse reply was "So what!" The troubling thing for us now was that we could see plainly that as the American bombers kept getting nearer and nearer, it was inevitable that one fine day they would try to take out the factory. And our camp would go with it, for we were situated right inside the factory area.

On arrival at the factory I had joined a gang of about twen-



### *Bombed by the Americans*

ty-five men and was put to work digging slit trenches for the air raids. One advantage about the large camps was that Red Cross parcels were more likely to arrive on time, whereas out in the sticks or up in the mountain areas they could be very unpredictable. We had to dig long, deep trenches to take the main electricity supply from the national grid system to power the factory. After the trenches were dug and the cables put in we then had to fill them - and we were not very fussy about how we did it! For example, quite a few picks and shovels were quickly buried. On one such site I saw two chaps who were nailing two large power supply cables together! The important thing was to remember to be extremely careful not to get caught. Sabotage carried the death penalty. But I often wondered what happened when they switched the electric power on!

I well recall one work party at this particular camp where I was imprisoned. About twenty-five chaps and myself were sent out of the factory area, about two or three miles up the railway line, to extend a branch line. While we were busy (but not too busy, we did not believe in being too industrious) there arrived a completed German 88 millimetre anti-aircraft battery, firing shells nearly as tall as I was. This battery, the officers' quarters and the men's quarters were all set up around the marshalling yard. All very much in our interest. The guns were massive and fortunately they were not fired while we were there close by.

The camp at Maribor was quite well run. Parcels did arrive reasonably on time. We had access to a doctor on the factory site for our minor ailments such as getting a couple of days chopping kindling behind the guards' barracks. This detail was rather cosy compared with the pick and shovel work around the factory. The day always started with just ersatz coffee and any bread that might have been left over from the evening before. Without the Red Cross parcels we would not have lasted very

### *Bombed by the Americans*

long considering the heavy type of work we were expected to do. This applied even more so in the case of those of our men of slighter build and stature.

We had now begun to notice an increase in the American air activity. Sure enough, one fine Tuesday morning at eleven o'clock (I well remember the day and time) the alarm was sounding off very urgently. I was on a work party outside the camp area but still within the bounds of the factory. We looked up at the sky. Coming straight up the valley and dead in line for the factory and our camp were about a dozen American Fortress B17 bombers at about 2,000 feet. They were that low I could plainly read the letters on the fuselage. The bomb doors were open. We all started to run, guards and everybody. But we were too late. Bombs exploded all around us. We fell flat, as stones and earth rained down upon us. Everyone ran out of the factory gates and into a large, open area. After a while, we prisoners of war and the civilians walked back to the site. The devastation was massive. Dead civilians lay around and the new factory offices were in ruins. People's clothing and hats were high up in the trees. As we walked back to the camp area, not surprisingly, the civilians blamed us for the air raid and its consequent casualties and devastation, and we feared for our lives. We wasted no time getting back into the comparative safety of our camp. Having said all this, the bombers missed the factory and the camp by about a hundred and fifty yards.

Now everyone became really worried. How long might it be before the bombers would be back? And we could very well be locked in the camp with nowhere to escape to. As a result of our senior representative speaking to the German commandant about the situation, when the air raid siren sounded in future, everyone was allowed to leave the camp area and go on to the road. We had several false alarms. In fact, if anyone was seen walking faster than normal we assumed that something was going on about which we knew nothing. Every-one was becoming increasingly very nervous indeed. Let's face it, no one wants to be killed by their own forces.



## *The beginning of the end*

### 7

## The beginning of the end

One day when we were out of the camp working, the air raid siren sounded. An Australian lad and I were in the woods together toying with the idea of not returning to the camp. We seriously wondered whether there were any partisans in the woods who might agree to take us away with them and we were leaving it a bit late to be going back to camp. This was not a good idea as we had nothing in our pockets with which to sustain ourselves. As we returned down on to the road to head back to camp, I crossed a lane to a signpost to read what was written on it. From behind a large old barn there appeared a German soldier pointing his machine gun straight at me. We had left it a bit too late to turn back. This soldier marched us both into the nearest village to the police station where we were both incarcerated in the cells. There we discovered several others from our camp who had obviously conceived the



### *The beginning of the end*

same idea of escape. I shall always remember being marched through that village with my hands on top of my head and the police officer telling us that he had been in England before we were born! He also offered me a cigarette from a packet of Goldflake! The black market extended everywhere it seemed. Later, we were marched back to the camp fully expecting to be put in the camp prison. But it was already full up with other wanderers! It turned out that there were even more of our chaps on the run. We learned later that four of them made it home, thanks to a great deal of help from Marshal Tito's partisans. (I visited one of these at his home in Wales. His name was Elvet Williams, who, I'm afraid, died a few years after the war was over. The privations he and his party had to endure while actually with the partisans before they reached the Adriatic coast proved detrimental to his health.) Once these escapees managed to reach the Adriatic coast naval ships of some kind or other took them safely across to Italy. This endeavour was a very risky business and not at all for the faint-hearted. Very few made it as far as I could make out.

While still at the armaments factory we kept all doors and windows open, just off the latch. It was not exactly funny sleeping in the target area. A couple of weeks later a few of us were moved from the camp and I was sent off yet again to a lumber camp in a village up in the mountains to do more tree felling. An elderly guard, who was a member of the Volksum, took me to the railway station where we caught a train to Kapfanberg. From there we took another little train up into the hills as far as the track would go. We then had to walk about three or four miles to a small camp consisting of a large old house surrounded by barbed wire called Buchberg. It was a strange situation to find oneself in, walking along this road miles from anywhere with a German soldier, rifle and all. The old fellow must have been all of sixty-five years old.

### *The beginning of the end*

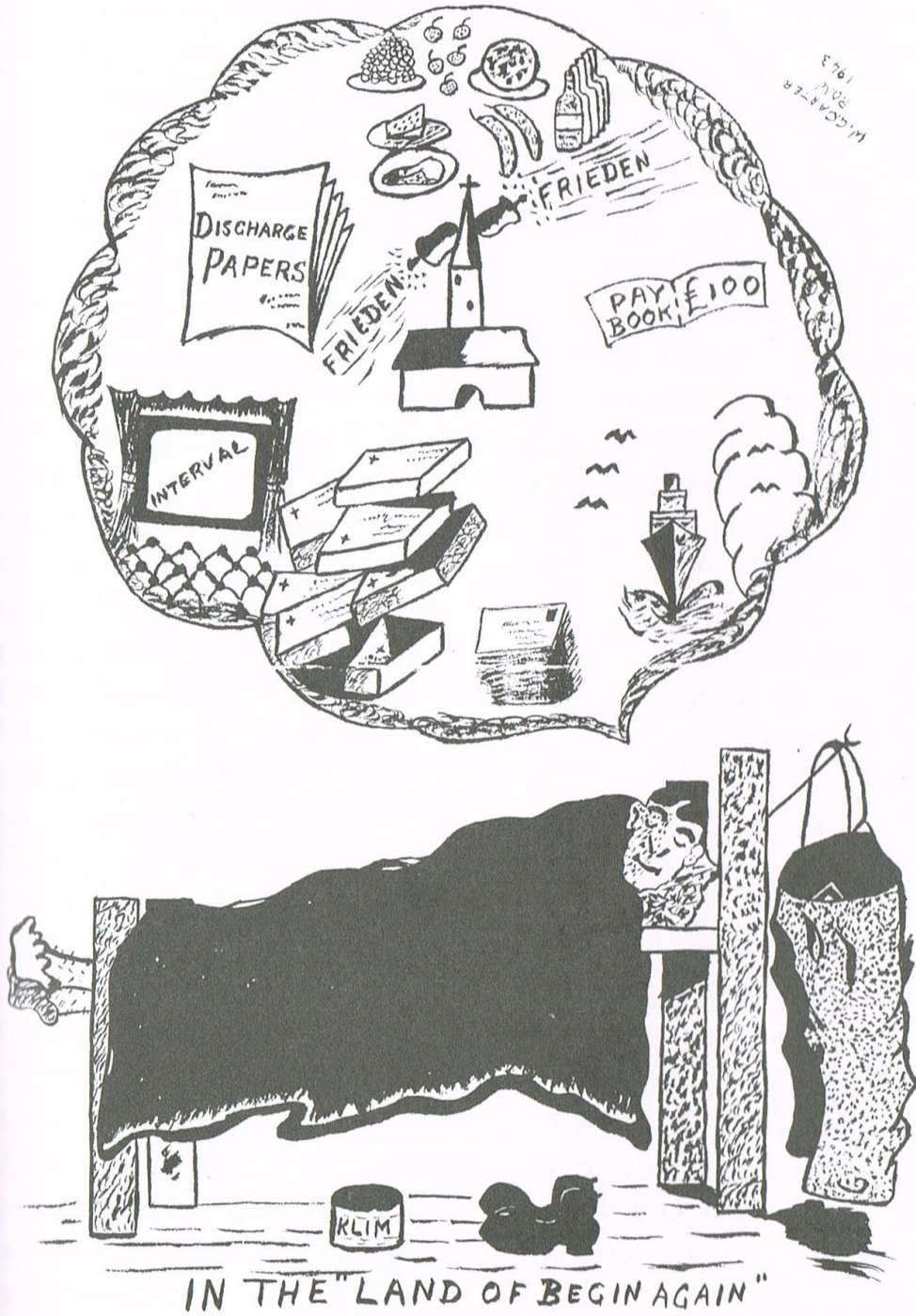
There were about thirty of our chaps there felling trees and sawing them up. A slipway with a river at the bottom was where we had to take some of these long logs and then slide them down. There was a slight bend in the slipway where the logs would become jammed. To me fell the job of freeing the jam with the aid of a long pole. I had to be extremely careful that the pole didn't get stuck when the logs freed or I could have gone down the chute with them! We were at this camp over Christmas 1944 and on Christmas day the guards marched us all down to a small village bar at a place named Aflenz. There the owner gave each one of us one drink and then it was back up to the old, dark house again. This unusually hospitable behaviour indicated to us that it was a fair guess that the end of the war could not be very far away.

Early in the new year, 1945, we left the logging camp and were taken down to a very large camp alongside an industrial area that was being constructed. The camp itself was close by the main railway to Vienna. Our work consisted of unloading railway wagons of bricks, cement and timber railway sleepers. Trucks of cement were not very pleasant to handle when the bags were damaged. The hours were long and tedious, but all-in-all, the camp was reasonable. Being near to the main railway, Red Cross parcels were coming through intermittently.

The American bomber and fighter missions were now occurring very regularly indeed and at this point we noticed a lot of activity on the railway. Afrika Corps tank units in desert camouflage were arriving from Libya and there were long trains heading towards Vienna. One day, one of these trains was attacked by some American Mustang fighters, right by our camp. They also attacked the station killing some station staff and hitting nearby village properties. The driver and crew of one of the trains were killed. The train travelled on unmanned into the next station where it crashed, causing absolute mayhem.



The beginning of the end





### *The beginning of the end*

Later that night, while we were in our bunks, some soldiers from the town near Bruck came and turned us all out of bed. They put us on buses and took us down to the station where we were made to clear the wrecked train and the station buildings.

The next day I was booked in at the local dentist's down in the village for a small dental repair job. When the guard and I arrived at the surgery door we found that in the attack on the train the previous day, one of the American Mustangs that had strafed the station had also riddled the dentist's house with bullets and a cannon shell had gone through the front door. My first thought was that this was a fine time to be coming to the dentists! But he was quite pleasant about it all and remarked that it seemed to him the pilot had overshot his mark while aiming for the train and the station.

At this camp I slept on the top bunk next to the window and as always, the flood lights were on all night. You could see the guards on duty and at this particular time one of them took to walking around late at night with a very nasty-looking Alsatian on a leash. Then, apparently, on one of these patrols, as he was taking the dog back to its cage, it turned on him ferociously and the guard had to shoot it dead. Next morning, said dog was found in our so-called cook house, ready for our so-called soup in the morning. Fortunately for us, someone with a little medical knowledge recognised in time that the dog was diseased!

First thing every morning we used to make ourselves a cup of tea on top of the old turtle stove. But it took rather a long time so an ingenious little chap built an immersion heater from a piece of wood with two pieces of metal tacked to either side at one end. He then fixed this contraption to a long piece of wire with a hook on the end which he connected to the mains system wire which came into the room by the stove. It worked very well. It boiled two pints of water in no time at all, but we found later that the wooden handle was beginning to get damp! So it was abandoned before anyone was electrocuted.

## *Release*

## 8

## Release

In the meantime the camp Commandant got to hear of this and paid our room a visit to see this gadget. He was not amused. Sometime later an incident occurred in our camp that was totally against the rules of the Geneva Convention. We were paid an unscheduled visit by an SS officer and several Gestapo agents. The Camp commandant was absolutely powerless and could do nothing to prevent it. Just as they were about to enter the first hut, one of our chaps who had found a small puppy which he'd named Winston, called it to him by name. The SS officer straightaway drew his pistol and tried to shoot it, but missed. It was a tense moment.

These Gestapo people went on the rampage, tipping beds over, ripping up bedding, breaking the men's toiletries and throwing everything on the floor. They even dug over the small garden plots. One thing everyone had forgotten about was that



## *Release*

members of the night shift - most of whom were our Australian friends - were still in bed. They did not take too kindly to being woken up by these men and reacted quite violently, until they saw the pistols waved under their noses. We were kept standing outside for a very long time. The reason for this, we decided, was that they thought we had a radio hidden. They were correct. For as they came into the camp, the radio went out of the camp via the sewage tank. Suitably well wrapped, of course! The cart driver was well rewarded later. The radio had been brought into camp in small pieces hidden in clothing and paid for in the usual currency, cigarettes. It was then assembled and when working at a certain time of day, it was activated and able to pick up news from the advancing American troops. News from this source was then written down and in the evenings it was brought round to each hut and read out. Look-outs were posted at all doors and windows just in case there was a snap inspection of the camp. The news messages were then destroyed.

During this time we could just begin to hear the guns on the Russian front in the distance, so the Germans decided to move us. Suddenly one morning it was announced that everybody was to go out on to the road with just what they could carry. So off we marched with a party of armed guards, mostly old Volkstum chaps, one or two of whom had bicycles. To carry my bits and pieces of belongings I sewed an old pair of braces onto a kit bag so that everything would be more comfortable than carrying it by hand. The guards were not too bothered about how fast we marched because they, themselves, were not too strong. We rested every so often and we would lie down on our backs and put our feet up against the tree trunks. But when it came time to start walking again it was very painful. But we soldiered on.

We had very little food. In my pockets I had an assortment of biscuits and a few other odds and ends. I can't remember



## *Release*

what else there was but we did a fair bit of thieving from people's gardens! We would stop at night in a small village and sleep in the barns. One morning, prior to setting off again, a stray chicken wandered past the barn door. In a flash it was in an army great coat! I never found out if it ever got cooked. I was walking with five of my friends and we were tired of carrying our packs so we stole a large barrow from someone's yard and put all our gear on board. That made life a little easier, until a few miles up the road two men in an old van caught up with us and demanded it back! The guards saw to it that we returned it. I saw several children's prams being pushed along. They, too, had been 'lifted' from gardens.

Our route then changed direction into more hilly country and soon we were walking in deep snow. Right at the top of this hill was a large bus full of German soldiers, all fast asleep. They were completely stuck. At the time I thought they were a lot better off than fighting on the Russian front. The terrain changed again and we started going downhill into a village called Radstadt. And who should be in residence? None other than Hermann Goering. We didn't see him, but there were some very large staff cars about and we presumed they were SS. We didn't linger. Just a few more miles and there was our final stop, Markt Pongau, over the bridge and a final sit down in the mud after a walk of approximately 124 miles. There were quite a lot of dead horses floating by in the river. The day's routine consisted of sitting around in the mud. There was no food to be had and the water supply finally packed up. The window frames and doors on all the buildings had been used for firewood. After several days of this an American aircraft suddenly appeared. The American 100 Airborne division had arrived - complete with food and cigarettes.

## *Conclusion*



**Ex-POWs waiting it out at Salzburg airfield**

## Conclusion

We were taken to Salzburg aerodrome by truck where we camped out on grass for four or five days. Thence to Rheims airport on an American Dakota C47 leaving all our possessions behind, including our shoes, before boarding. Lancaster bombers then flew us to Haywards Heath where we were taken into a huge tent, stripped and deloused, issued with new uniforms and then fed! I was issued with a train pass home where I was met by a welcome home party followed by a long leave. Before Christmas I was due to go out to fight the Japanese, but the atom bomb was dropped and the rest is history.

Fifty years later, on 6 June 1995, I received the Greek Commemorative Medal presented by the Greek Ambassador, Mr Elias Gounaris, at the Hellenic Centre.

My parents saved my letters home and the following is what I wrote when I was released:





**Boarding a Dakota for the first leg of the flight home**



*Back safe to "Beechwood" Watton to my family and my future*



## *Conclusion*

POW5492 Edwards Albert Ernest  
Stalag XVIICMarkt Pongau  
6 Battalion 24 Company  
Austria

Friday 11th May 1945

Dearest Mother, Father and Bill

Well, here we are with the great day here at long last. Three days ago we were released by American forces. Boy! What a day! It's great to be back on good army rations once again. We are out from behind the wire at last and living in a nice clean field under canvas. There is so much I want to say that I don't know where to start. Just imagine, in a few days we shall be meeting. Dreams come true, at last.

I think the greatest day of my whole life up to the present was when the American infantry reached our camp on the evening of the 8th May. I shall never forget that night. But there is still a greater day ahead than that, that's of course when I land at Beechwood. It will also be wonderful when we cross the Blighty coast.

It is now about midnight and almost everyone is asleep. I am writing this in my tent while everything is silent, except my tent mate who is snoring, and the rain pattering on the tent. I have a nice comfortable bed considering everything. It's a back seat out of a Jerry staff car.

I was just thinking that I have not had a ride in a motor car for over four years. Boy, will that be a treat. I haven't forgotten how to drive, either.

All my love, see you soon.

I remain as always, ever your loving son.

Ernest   XXXX  
          XXXXXX  
          XXXXXX  
          XXXX