

GREEK CAMPAIGN

Private Elvet Williams, Welch Regiment, 1st Battalion

From Wikipedia: The Welch Regiment

“1941 – The 1st Battalion landed on Crete in February but was overwhelmed by the enemy in fighting at Suda Bay, Canea and Sphakia Beach. Eventually the Battalion reformed in Egypt joining the 4th Indian Division and moved again to the Western Desert.

Around 1400 officers and men of the Regiment were killed or died from wounds or sickness.”

From “Arbeits Kommando”:

Captured in Crete

“The unthought-of had happened. I had often visualised getting killed or being wounded, but never being captured. I had dealt with Italian prisoners in Egypt, and with German prisoners, only a week before, on Crete, but they too had only just been taken. What lay ahead was a closed book I had never thought of reading. Sailing from Liverpool round the Cape in 1940 I had been fully reconciled to exile until the end of the war. Even so, there had always been the hope of an earlier return. Now all chance had gone. Having savaged Europe, swiftly and brutally, the Germans were in process of spilling into the Middle East and Africa. Thoughts of home, of the battle, of captivity, just churned about in my mind.

Camp in Piraeus

Our new home in Piraeus, the port of Athens, was a fairly large compound containing a number of low, wooden huts and several smaller ones in an area of brown earth enclosed by a high, barbed-wire fence. For the first time since capture we were required to give some particulars. Everyone was well aware that he should confine himself to giving name, rank and number, but since we had all been committed to battle complete with badges and flashes, not to mention, as in my own case, with regimental garters, that part of our orders seemed not a little ridiculous. It was hardly surprising that we were asked nothing about our units, but we were asked for our addresses. There seemed little point in refusing: knowing our addresses could hardly have helped the enemy, but might do some of us a lot of good, particularly since we were assured that a short selection of names would be broadcast to England, to the comfort of our families. (In my case the Germans were as good as their word. News of my capture first reached my family via a friend who had heard it from Lord Haw-Haw, broadcasting from Hamburg and Bremen.)

Each long hut could hold over two hundred men lying side by side on long, wooden platforms running the full length of the side walls and in double rows down the centre. The side platforms sloped gently up to the walls, the centre ones backed on to each other to look like long cricket covers. It soon transpired that the camp was an annexe to a hospital situated about a mile away. Its function combined that of convalescent camp and outpatients department. Most prisoners, taken in the battles of Greece in April, had been there some weeks, and their wounds were already on the mend. The casualties who really caught the eye were the dozens of dysentery sufferers, many severe, continually slouching between the huts and the latrines, or, often, strategically squatting within striking distance of the latter, which, providentially, were sited reasonably distant from the sleeping quarters. The most repeated sentence in Piraeus referred to the ability to shoot through the eye of a needle at fifty paces.

Our first taste of food was an evil-smelling, repulsive bowl of sauerkraut which, nevertheless, everyone ate gladly. The food was to remain bad, alternating between thin soup or sauerkraut once every midday, with a ration of coarse, brown bread which most men endeavoured, not always successfully, to keep until evening. A hot drink, neither tea nor ersatz coffee nor the mint tea we were to know so well later on nor, indeed, anything identifiable, was ladled out each morning, and sipped enjoyably because it was hot.

The days soon merged into a shapeless monotony of idleness. The shortage, often complete lack, of the small comforts of normal life hit more and more men with every passing day. In spite of all attempts to conserve them, soap cakes became smaller, razor-blades blunter, and toothpaste tubes emptier. Without

hot water or soap, washing sweaty clothes was not easy. The most desperate shortage of all was that of paper of any kind. How the dysentery cases managed only they themselves knew as degradation was added to sickness which tore at their bowels. For myself, I considered myself more than fortunate. 'The runs' never touched me, and, on my second day, during my only visit to the hospital, I acquired, by sticking it under my pullover, the greater part of an American glossy magazine. It made depressing reading, composed as it was of adverts either for luxuries I'd never been able to afford or for toilet articles I'd have given anything to possess at that moment, and of an article which took pages to prove painstakingly that Britain would probably end up by being able to boast "sure, we lost the war, but our equipment was better". It could very well have been produced by Dr Goebbels for special distribution in P.O.W. compounds. But the stiff, shiny pages went a long way towards solving my own personal hygiene problem.

At the end of June or the beginning of July, a party of us were marched down to the docks where we boarded a small coastal coaler. . . . For three days, and escorted on the port side by a rolling porpoise for most of the way, we sailed slowly up the beautiful, placid waters of the Aegean Sea, along rugged coasts, through clusters of islands looking strangely remote from the turmoil of war.

Salonika

It was early evening when we landed in Salonika. As we filed up the steps to the promenade dozens of cameras clicked at us. Every off-duty soldier, like a uniformed tourist, seemed to have one. It was amazing, for I could not, and still cannot, recall ever seeing a Tommy with a camera. Equally puzzling was that most of the cameras seemed to be directed at me. Only later did it dawn on me that, among the leading file, I had been the only prisoner in tropical shorts. That was the most photographed moment of my life. Later, I visualised my photo in homes throughout Hitler's Reich and, I could not refrain from hoping, on corpses sprinkled all over Russia. One other thing surprised us as we were paraded along the sea-front: convoy after convoy of German horse-drawn transport vehicles, all solidly purpose-built and brand new. The sight was hard to reconcile with Blitzkrieg and Fallschirmjager.

Greater, less palatable surprises lay in store. After entering the camp through two sets of wires and two double gates, we were drawn up in threes at the bottom of a central parade ground, where a sergeant-major, wearing the black beret of the tanks, together with a supporting entourage of Germans, took up position facing us. The sergeant-major called out: "Any Irishmen here?" At first no one moved. The purpose of the question had everyone baffled. Then, just as it seemed there were no Irishmen prepared to admit the fact at such abrupt notice, Harbinson, standing next to me, stepped forward, calling out "the one and only". Taken aback, I watched him being led away on his own. Until that moment, in spite of Sir Roger Casement, it had never occurred to me that, in German eyes, there was any difference between a Paddy and a Taffy.

'Tanky' addressed us: "there wasn't to be any nonsense; the Germans were in charge and we were to carry out their orders." Immediate, instinctive protest rose from the ranks. Unmoved, 'Tanky' cut it all short with the never-to-be-forgotten words: "That will be enough of that. You'll have to listen to the Germans after the war, so you'd better start getting used to it now." It was said with unmistakable conviction. The captive audience let 'Tanky' get on with it. Hating and contemptuous, they heard out the rest of the welcoming speech in silence, and refrained from further interruption even when the speaker assured them that Germany had already won the war and that Russia was already beaten.

The P.O.W. camp at Salonika had unquestionably been a Greek barracks. The main prison compound contained all the central parade-ground of brown earth, with the barrack-rooms for other ranks, including Yugoslavs, running at right-angles up the right side and along the top. The buildings to the left of the parade-ground were separated off by a barbed-wire fence, and housed captured officers, the first I had seen if one excepted the doctors and a Catholic padre at Piraeus. At the bottom of the compound, either side the gates, lay the German blocks, contained within the strong outside wires but divided from the main compound by another fence and gate. Each barrack hut, raised up on brick foundations, consisted of a long room and, at the end farthest from the parade-ground, primitive latrines. From the long room two doors led outside, one at the end facing the parade-ground, the other in the middle facing the next hut. A third door gave access to the latrines.

As at Piraeus, the Germans provided nothing apart from a minimum of food, while the latrines and an unreliable water supply were the only toilet provisions. Medical facilities, of which there was great need, were nowhere in evidence. Not even the crudest of 'eating irons' were issued. Numerous men had to improvise or borrow just to ensure being able to eat at all: empty tins, scrounged during prior weeks of

captivity, were cleaned up and their serrated edges filed smooth. The tins, many with ingenious, bound-on handles, dangled from almost every other waist, their owners determined never to let go of them. It was the same with boots: men who were barefooted remained barefooted, those who had boots hardly let them off their feet, and when they did so they kept them in sight or under the protecting eye of a friend.

The prisoners had to share their accommodation with the rats, their clothes with the lice. By day the rats roamed boldly about the latrines and under the huts: at night their forages penetrated to the barrack-rooms. After only a night among the huddles of men on the floor, new arrivals developed the automatic reflex action which sent leg kicking and arm flailing to speed the loathsome prowlers through the dark, a habit adding greatly to the burden of the dysentery sufferers picking their unlighted ways to and from the latrines.

A more constant, personal and degrading discomfort was the lice. From firm strongholds in seams of vests, pants and shirts, especially ensconced under armpits, the pale, swollen parasites gave their hosts no respite, by day or night. Each fresh, still hopeful, victim, defying all retailed experience, endeavoured to halt the invaders at the first onslaught. A vain folly! All that remained was to follow the time-hallowed prescription: strip, and slaughter each fresh brood, seam by noxious seam, at least twice a day, thereby ensuring that the next day would not be much more uncomfortable than the present.