

Experiences of a Prisoner of War: World War 2 In Germany¹

Re-Print Stephenson Vol 9 No 1

*E Stephenson*²

On 16 December 1943, I was sitting at the Navigator's seat in a very noisy Lancaster bomber over Berlin when something occurred that changed the pattern of my life. We had just dropped 13,000 pounds of bombs... a 4,000 pound "cookie" plus incendiaries and we were stooging along at 163 mph (280 km/hr) taking infra-red photographs for the first time in WW2, when we were attacked from below by a German night fighter which hit the port wing and fuselage, setting the wing on fire and wrecking my instrument panel.

Several hundred gallons of petrol burning less than 20 feet from you is an occasion for rapid action in the way of evacuation of the area, which five of us did before the plane blew up or crashed. We did this through the forward escape hatch and used parachutes.

The difference was astounding:

Out into the cold night air (it was about 2020 hours) count 5, pull the rip cord, a jarring thrust in the thighs and back and ... utter silence. The ground came closer and I could see snow around but I was probably dazed by a blow I had received in the aircraft when a cannon shell hit my instrument panel and glass and metal went everywhere. Anyway, I didn't see the church steeple that snagged my parachute and I hit a wall, causing a fracture of the right epicondyle and a Potts fracture of the right ankle.

I came to in a German doctor's surgery being stitched up with our pilot and bombardier present too. Then we were taken to part of a German maternity hospital under guard in Berlin. My leg and arm were plastered and 2 days later we were taken by train to Frankfurt am-Rhein to Dulag Luft, a holding camp, where we were put in solitary confinement.

The Germans did not heat our cells and a damp plaster on one arm and one leg in the middle of a German winter doesn't induce much sleep.

Next day we were interrogated. Before each operation we'd been reminded at briefing that, if captured, we

would give only rank and name. My interrogator spoke perfect English and began (when he saw my plasters) "Oh! Bad luck! Well how are things at Spilsby"...my home base. A bit disconcerting for a start and he asked a lot of questions but I feigned loss of memory, pointing to the cuts on my head.

After interrogation, we were put back into our cells for a day and another interrogation and after that taken to the transit camp proper. After the guard closed the gate and wrapped a large chain round the post and padlocked it, he uttered in English (probably all he knew) that deathless prose we were to hear so many times "For you, the war is over!"

After Christmas, we were moved to Zagan, Upper Silesia (in the former Polish territory) by cattle-truck (8 horses, 40 men) to Belaria compound of Stalag Luft 3. This was 5 to 6 kilometers away from the main camp which also had a North, South, Centre, East and West compound plus a jail, a hospital and a German 'vorlager'. We were very fortunate at Belaria and indeed at Stalag Luft 3 generally. This was a POW camp for Allied Officers who were flying personnel. It had been planned by Goering himself as a "super" camp because he was a WW1 flyer himself.

Belaria at that stage had 8 huts for accommodation, each with an ablution area with washbasins, 3 or 4 showers, usually cold, and a urinal. Half of one hut was given over to a sick-quarters or 'Lazaret'. Belaria also had a ration store with a kitchen attached and an "abort"...an 8-holer in 2 rows of seats.

The Lazaret had a long room (about 40 ft by 15 ft) with a bench down one side, cup boards underneath and a washing sink. It had an examining couch and stools for patients to sit on while being treated. It had an old micro scope and a hand driven centrifuge.

The rest of the Lazaret contained a room, which was a dormitory for 10 - 12 men in double bunks; a cooking area with a stove fired by wood or brown coal briquettes; plus an Elsan type toilet and wash basin. There was a small room to house an infrared lamp

and a UVL lamp. There were also two cupboards, one for linen and the other for food storage and medical supplies.

I was the camp doctor's first patient at the Lazaret. He was looking for patients as we entered the camp at Belaria. An Irish lad named Mcilroy was another patient. He came from Dublin and when we asked why he was in the RAF he replied with a wicked grin "Well, we can't have these Germans knocking the British about, else who would we fight after the War". He had an old compound fracture of the thigh, which took a hell of a long time to heal and was obviously very painful, but he did not complain once and always had a grin. Another patient was Tommy Hughes who had a badly cut head, with shaven hair and masses of bandages; Ginger Rutherford, a Geordie with a lot of cuts and bruises, and a young spitfire pilot, Stan Griffith, with a huge black-eye and frostbite after losing a boot. We all spent 7- 10 days there but Mcilroy and I were there longer.

Apart from the camp doctor, CAPT Monteuis RAMC, who was captured at St Valery in 1940, there was an Australian medical student who had been a Hampden pilot, Geoff Comish. He had been a POW for nearly 3 years and spoke German. There were 4 WONCOs who between them did the cooking, cleaning, linen washing and attended the fires etc. They were magnificent and one, Peter Brewer, was also a masseur, which was invaluable. These all formed the staff of the Lazaret with German approval.

My arm was taken out of plaster at the end of January 1944 and I spent 1/2 hour 3 times a day "climbing up the wall" to overcome the bruising and avoid ankylosis. The leg had had a walking plaster put on and a heel made of wood with a piece of rubber tyre covering it. This plaster was removed in mid February and I will always be GRATEFUL TO PETE Brewer for his efforts with my rehabilitation.

I spent the next 2 months in the camp general with the other POWs who had arrived at Belaria at the same time. Then the camp doctor asked me to join him and help in the Lazaret as the camp was growing rapidly in numbers.

German Camp Staff and Routine

The German staff were members of the Luftwaffe. Initially in charge was Hauptman Wemer until the number of POWs grew and the Oberst (Colonel) arrived. He had been invalided from the Stalingrad front but I did not discover his name. Werner then became Adjutant and had a Leutnant as Abwehr (Defence) Officer and he was in charge of Felwebel

Glemnitz and several "ferrets". These were either Unteroffiziers or Gefreiters (Corporal or Soldiers) who wore blue dungarees with a belt and a small Mauser pistol. They were also 'armed' with screwdrivers with a very long blade for poking and probing, looking for any contraband. In the camp, POWs were 'on parade' twice daily for roll call and the ferrets used to inspect the huts while we were parading.

Since it is the duty of POWs (especially officers) to escape when possible, much camp activity was geared to acquiring maps, making "ausweiss" (passes), civil clothing from uniforms, photographs and of course tunnelling. This activity was under the control of 'X' wing Commander Bob Tuck, who organised a system that kept tabs on all ferret movements. If it looked like one was getting too curious about activities related to escaping some body (usually a German speaker) would be detailed to engage him in conversation and so head him off.

Originally Belaria was full of POW from Commonwealth Air Forces but extra huts were built to house US Army Air Corps officers as more and more were shot down. This was when numbers in the camp shot up and Dr. Monteuis, who was known as 'Twee', asked me to join the Lazaret staff to help out, about April 1944.

Dr. Monteuis was a very unusual man. His father was French and his mother Spanish. He had very black hair and a black moustache which came down over his mouth and which he frequently chewed, when he was not smoking. He was pigeon-toed and constantly gave the Germans the idea he was a bit mad, walking round the compound pretending he had a dog on a lead. This was completely a pose.

He was fiercely dedicated to his patients, within the very severe limitations of camp life, and used to try and teach his helpers bits of anatomy and physiology during the evenings after work. It was extraordinary how 'busy' we were, just fixing up the POWs with their ailments, with which they reported very readily; after all, there was little else to do. His great philosophy was "patients get better in spite of our efforts and not always because of it" and "Nature had been at this game (of practicing medicine) for a long time and is very good at it."

It is appropriate here to consider differences between the prison camp conditions for Allied POWs held by the enemy. I must emphasize that conditions in the German camps I was associated with were worlds apart from those in Japanese camps. The latter had a total of 132,134 allied prisoners of whom 35,756 died i.e. 27%. Of these, 22,376 were Australians of

whom 7,777 died. The Germans and Italians had almost twice as many, 235,473 with a death rate of 4% (242 Australians).

From comparisons I have from a doctor who was in an Italian camp and from 2 or 3 prisoners who were in both at some time, the German conditions were better.

Belaria had apparently been a cadet training area for the Wehrmacht before it was turned into a prisoner of war camp. To do this, the Germans had separated off some huts to form their admin centre or vorlager and then surrounded the remaining huts with a double row of barbed wire, about 4 metres high, with a gap of a metre between the rows. At ground level, between the rows, coils of barbed wire were laid. Within the perimeter, a wooden rail was placed about half a metre from the ground and 3 metres from the wire to mark the limits of movement for prisoners. On one side of the camp was another compound that housed Russian POWs. On another was a playing field area, also surrounded by barbed wire. The third side was eventually used to build extra huts as the camp was expanded to accommodate extra prisoners. In the time from January 1944 to January a year later, the camp increased from the original 50-60 to over 1100 men.

The German word for POWs is "kriegsgefangenen" which inevitably became shortened to "kriegie". When we arrived, we were the first kriegies apart from 20 or so who had been 'purged' from the North Compound. These were old lags who had escaped once or twice and the Germans sensed something was afoot at North Compound in the way of an escape and removed those they considered ringleaders, including WGCdr Bob Tuck and Geoff Cornish. In fact, Operation 200 (the Great Escape) occurred about 6 weeks later.

The Senior British Officer (SBO) was a Group Captain who abjured us to wash or shower daily (cold water but we could get an occasional hot water dunk in a wooden tub) and shave at least every other day. Shirts and under clothes were to be washed weekly if possible. Hot water was made available twice daily from the camp kitchen in jugs. Soap was either the German 'ersatz' variety or non-existent except in some Red Cross parcels.

The value of these requirements became obvious after one had been a prisoner for a while. It is a shock to the system, to say the least, to be "transported within hours, from a comfortable Officers Mess to a situation where comfort disappeared, food was restricted and you had no freedom except to walk round and round the same piece of dirt every day".

To let go and not bother (and a few did) would have been disastrous for morale.

We were fortunate at Belaria to have a few men who had been prisoners for some time to give us advice on life style change. Furthermore, services sprang up quickly which enabled those who were determined and interested in keeping their lives going. Classes in German, French and even Russian started. Other topics were used to give instruction and a library was started with books sent over the years to POWs. A theatrical group developed and a band consisting of a pianist, a trumpeter, a drummer, and two guitarists, and, of course, activities related to escaping.

Occupations

Occupations in a Prison Camp in Germany	
Skilled	Unskilled ¹
Doctor	Map making
Dentist	Forging
Interpreter	Tailoring
Cook	Photography
Carpenter	Librarian
Musician	Acting
Mining Engineer	Brewing
	Ferret watching
	Electrician
	Scenery painting
	Tin bashing
	Tunneling
	Soil dispersing

¹ The unskilled faction includes jobs which prisoners had in general, not performed before.

Parts of the camp in between huts were used as 'allotments' to grow a few vegetables but the soil was very poor, although potatoes and tomatoes would grow. I can't remember where the seeds came from for this venture.

All these gave some purpose to life. The Germans allowed us to go on to the playing field when it suited them (It was denied for some time after the Great Escape). Soccer was popular and so was cricket. Union was played but the ground was very stony and injuries were common. In the winter, we hacked the frozen ground and made a small circular mound, 3-4 inches high and about 25 metres across on the playing

field and flooded this with water to make an ice rink and play ice hockey, courtesy of skates sent by the Red Cross. Consequently, morale was fairly high and food was reasonable at least initially although this degenerated. Even so, a small proportion of POWs did not take part and “turned their faces to the wall”. Most of these are self-explanatory and are referred to in the text. One hut was converted into a theatre, having been an assembly hall.

This was done by having the one carpenter in our midst making seats from Red Cross boxes in which the parcels were brought to the camp. Activity in this sea involved musicians, actors, painters, electricians and tailors (to make costumes) These gentlemen were also invaluable in altering uniforms to make them like civvy clothes for escape purposes. Most

of the others mentioned were involved in the escape area. Tin bashers were those who used tins obtained from Red Cross parcels to make trays and dishes for cooking purposes. But the same expertise was turned to making long pipes when tunnelling was going on. Using an old kit bag, a rough pump could be made and connected to the pipes so produced to provide at air circulation underground for the tunnelers. This was a feature of the tunnel which let out 78 POWs in the North Camp in 1944.

Food

This consisted of a daily German ration (q.v.) handed out on a room by room basis. Hot water and a barley porridge was prepared in the kitchen where the Red Cross food parcels were stored and issued

Red Cross Rations

Canadian

1 tin Spam (12oz)
 1 tin Corned Beef (12oz)
 1 tin Salmon (8oz)
 1 tin Sardines (8oz)
 1 tin Klim
 1 pkt Coffee or Tea (4oz)
 1 pkt Cheese
 1 tin Biscuits (8oz)
 1 Milk Chocolate (5oz)
 1 pkt Salt & Pepper (1oz)
 1 tin Butter (16oz)
 1 pkt Sugar (8oz)
 1 tin Jam/Marmalade (8oz)
 1 bar Soap (2oz)

British

1 tin Luncheon Meat or Sausages (16oz)
 1 tin Steak & Kidney or Curry & Rice (1 pound)
 1 tin Salmon (8oz)
 1 tin Herrings/Pilchards (8oz)
 1 tin Biscuits (7oz)
 1 bar Chocolate (4oz)
 1 tin Bacon (8oz)
 1 pkt Boiled Sweets (4oz)
 1 tin Cheese (2oz)
 1 bar Soap (2oz)
 1 tin Margarine/Butter (8oz)
 Sugar (4oz)
 Dried Fruit (8oz)
 Tea (2oz)

1 tin Nestles Milk
 1 tin Jam (8oz) or Syrup (4oz)
 1 tin Rolled Oats/meal (5oz)
 1 tin Vegetables (mixed/carrots)
 1 tin Meat/Fish pasta (2oz)
 Salt, Mustard, Pepper or Marmite cubes
 Occasionally:
 tin Cocoa/Extra Biscuits (1/4 pound)
 1 tin Egg Powder (2oz)
 1 tin Apple/Marmalade Puddings
 1 tin Custard/Yorkshire Pudding Powder
 1 tin Creamed Rice

New Zealand

1 tin Corned Mutton (16oz)
 1 tin Beef (16oz)
 1 tin Condensed Milk
 1 tin Cafe-au-Lait
 2 tins Tea (2oz each) & Sugar
 1 tin Honey (6oz)
 1 tin Butter (16oz)
 1 tin Chocolate (4oz)
 1 tin Jam (8oz)
 1 tin Meat & Vegetables (16oz)
 1 tin Cheese (8oz)
 1 pkt Sultanas (8oz)

American

1 tin Spam/More (12oz)
 1 tin Pork Luncheon Meat (12oz)
 1 tin Corned Beef (12oz)
 1 tin Salmon/Tunny (8oz)
 1 tin Sardines/Brisling (6oz)
 1 tin Coffee (3oz)
 1 tin Powdered Milk-Kiim
 1 pkt Sugar (8oz)
 1 tin Jam/Orange Juice or Peanut Butter (6oz)
 2 bars Choc 'D' ration (4oz)
 1 pkt Biscuits (7oz) or Cereal (8oz)
 1 tin margarine (16oz)
 1 pkt Prunes (16oz)
 60-100 Cigarettes
 2 bars Soap (2oz each)
 1 pkt Cheese (8oz)
 1 pkt Pepper/Salt (1oz)
 1 tin Rosemill Pate (6oz)

Australian Bulk

This came 3 or 4 times per week while I was at Belaria.
 It was mostly dried fruit like sultanas, raisins, apple, pear, currants and sugar and was shared out on a weight basis for each man by the ‘catering officer’, a man detailed by the Senior British Officer (SBO) to do the job of controlling the issue of Red Cross Parcels. The Aussies bulk raisins used to get crusty on the outside of the fruit (long time travelling) and yeasty and this was very useful to make alcoholic brew which had quite a kick to it.

weekly under German supervision. These parcels were either British, Canadian, American, or New Zealand, plus an occasional Australian, or Argentine bulk issue. When we arrived, the ration was 1 parcel between 2 men per week and in the heyday became 1 per man per week, but this did not last for long and reduced until when we left Belaria in January 1945 ahead of the Russian advance from the East. It dropped to about 1 between 6. After we arrived at Luckenwalde, south of Berlin in Jan 1945, there were no parcels at all. As the bombing of Germany increased, the rail communications were increasingly weakened. Since the Red Cross parcels came from Geneva, we realised supplies would drop off so we tried to store food.

German Rations

At Balaria: Jan 44 to Jan 45 (Weekly per man approx)	At Luckenwalde: Feb-May 1945 (Daily per man approx)
165 gm Margarine (6 oz)	1/2 cup Mint tea twice daily
165 gm Honey or Jam	2/3 litre Soup (Pea, Cabbage, Meat or Barley)
60 gm Cheese	300 gm Dauerbrot
1800 gm bread (Dauerbrot) (1 loaf = 4 pounds)	25 gm Margarine
1500 gm Potatoes	750 gm Potatoes
160-170 gm Sugar	25 gm Sugar
Vegetables (Swedes, Khol, Rabi, Cabbage, Peas in season)	Salt
100 gm (4oz) Bratlings	c 15 gm meat (in stew)
Pulver or Semolina	30-40 gm per week sausage
50 gm Sausage (Blut wurst or bacon)	50 gm per week Cheese or honey
100-160 gm Meat (mince or beef or pork) per 2 weeks	
Barley 250gm per week usually cooked in the ration store and dished out on a daily basis.	

We could not store much because the Germans used to puncture all the tins at each end and the food would go bad if left too long. However, the tins of meat by Fray Bentos from Argentina were sealed with tin solder. This could be melted off by heating the empty tins and put over the puncture holes made by the Germans and so reseal the tins. Luckily for us, the puncturing took place just before the parcels were issued so the tins were only punctured for a few minutes before we got them and we sealed them quickly. There was of course no cold storage area (other than the camp kitchen) and the temperature at Belaria varied from a maximum in the summer of 40 degrees down to about -10 C in winter.

In addition to the above, we in the Lazaret at Belaria got patient comfort parcels occasionally for food distribution to the patients and on a smaller scale. They were of British, US and Danish origin.

Illness & Injuries

As would be expected, common things were common. Cuts, bruises and sprains were everyday problems. Skin diseases were frequent as cuts tended to become septic but there were numerous cases of impetigo (probably a Strep B.). Sycosis barbi hit several and I recall 2 cases of erysipelas. URTIs were frequent, from rhinitis to tonsillitis to bronchitis; only one or two asthma attacks. And of course "D&V"; the squitters, colleywobbles, Montezuma's revenge.

Clothing

As would be expected, our clothes consisted of the items we were wearing when we were shot down and these would obviously not last for ever. However, army pattern clothing became available, ration controlled, possibly obtained through Red Cross sources but undoubtedly some was material captured by the Germans in various places. We were able to have British army boots, shirts and wool underclothing and later some American greatcoats and gloves were available and kit. In addition, individual Red Cross parcels provided things like scarves, gloves, woollen hats and underclothing. There was no regularity about this and we had to make them last.

Medicaments & Treatment

Supplies came through the courtesy of the Germans and Red Cross via Geneva. Cotton bandages of various widths were available, and we used to wash the soiled ones to use again. Elastoplast was scarce but gauze dressings were available to be used dry or with petroleum jelly or ichthyol or even acriflavine we made up from tablets dissolved in water. Plaster of Paris was in powder form and used with cotton bandages to make splints and plasters. Metal splints like lattice were some times to be had and used again and again, either padded with cotton wool or bandages.

We could not rely on regularity of supply of any of these unless the Luftwaffe agreed to help us out. Generally they were quite helpful. The German doctor was Stabs. Arzt Hildebrand who was a rare specimen having a sense of humor. He would visit every 2 or 3 weeks and in emergencies if he could. Fortunately these occasions were rare. He would arrange for X-rays by having POWs sent under escort to the main camp hospital. Geoff Cornish and I have

LIST OF MEDICAL SUPPLIES (I am relying on memory)	
Bandages	Ung. Hydrarg et Ammon
Elastoplast	Whitfield's Ointment
POP powder	Zinc Oxide Cream (1 tin!)
Syringes (inc. A minim one)	Ichthyol
Ampoules of Sterile Water & sodium chloride	Gentian Violet 1%
Bottles (medicine)	Iodine
Kaoline Powder	Acriflavine Tablets
Tinct opii (scarce)	Menthol Crystals
Aspirins	Tinct Benz Co.
APC (Codeine)	Mist Ipecac.
Prontosil Powder (M&B 693 - Sulphapyridine)	Mist. Pot. Cit
Prontosil Tablets	Calamine Lotion
Evipan sodium (Anaesthetic)	Petroleum Jelly
Ethyl Chloride Spray	Tabs. Sulphaguanidine
Liquor Hammamelis	Lin Meth. Sal.
	Some vitamin tablets
	Possibly Xylocaine

pooled our recollections and at Belaria plus North Compound, over an approximately 2-year period (up to 2000 men), the emergencies were:

- 3 cases of appendicitis requiring surgery
- 1 case of Hodgkin's Disease
- 3 psychiatric cases
- 3 POWs who were shot.

One of the psychiatric cases was under guard on the way to hospital and wandered off disorientated and was shot. It was not serious luckily, but the Luftwaffe was genuinely upset and arranged that any future cases would have a German speaking POW to accompany them. Later a case of deep melancholia was sent to a hospital east of Belaria with Cornish as part of the escort. Returning from the hospital, Geoff offered the guard some cigarettes if they would take him to a hotel for a beer... which they did!

The other shootings were:

A POW got drunk on "kriegie hooch" (made from raisins from Australian bulk issue; soaked in water; the raisins had a crust of sugar and yeast and this fermented). He ran out of his hut at night and collided with a Hundfuhrer, a guard with an Alsatian dog. In the ensuing melee the POW w back to his hut but was shot in the stomach and was taken to hospital. He survived.

In the third case, a kriegie was walking round the camp some time after 'The Great Escape' and touched the rail inside the fence of barbed wire. The trigger-happy guard fired at him and hit him in the

hand causing a fracture of 3 metacarpals. This case was partly managed in the Lazaret and Hildebrand took him for X-rays to watch progress.

Two other cases at Belaria which were unusual were:

A needle stick injury to one of the hospital helpers, which became septic in spite of sulphonamides and osteitis set in requiring amputation of the terminal phalanx. The other was the case of a New Zealander, in his mid 20s, who developed phimosis which required circumcision. This was performed by Monteuis with Cornish giving Evipan. The result was a magnificent piece of surgery involving some 20 sutures. The patient was warned about not having an erection for fear of disastrous surgical consequences. He became so anxious that he organised a "Fire Drill" team consisting of the patient in the bed next to him having a large cardboard fan while on the other side was a patient with a huge chunk of cotton wool and a basin of cold water. On the command "Fire" one man fanned furiously, the other doused with cold sponges and the patient rang a hand bell energetically which was a signal for any member of the staff hearing the alarm to grab the ethyl chloride spray, rush to the ward and extinguish the impending blaze!

Cases in Lazaret: Inpatients & Outpatients

As previously stated common things were common:

Bruises and Sprains: These received Liquor Harnmamelis, a bandage and when appropriate, heat and massage.

Cuts & Wounds: These were usually the result of carelessness or abrasions from falling. Treated with 1% acriflavine, they usually did well. The area the camp was in was a dusty farming area, and this could be a nuisance with larger wounds like burns. Sometimes we used Vaseline with a dressing.

Rhinitis: was treated with inhalations of menthol..

Sore Throats and Tonsillitis: received hot salt water gargles. 2-hrly Bronchitis, received inhalations and mist Ipecac. The more severe and those who were pyrexial would be admit ted to the Lazaret. If it was necessary to add Prontosil, their fluids were pushed with mist. Pot. Cit. If we had it, to reduce the risk of crystalluria, or kidney damage.

Urinary Infections: received mist. Pot. Cit. and rest in bed and fluids ++

Headaches and minor aches: got APC tablets.

Styes: hot spoon bathing... a spoon with cotton wool held by cotton or a piece of small bandage dipped

into hot water and held near the eye.

Diarrhoea: often with vomiting was treated with a. Fluids only for 12-24 hours; if still present;

b. Kaolin mixture sometimes with Tinct Opii. If this worked, the question of how long to continue with medicine (being conscious of conserving resources) arose. Monteuuis would ask, "Can you fart with confidence?" If "yes" generally stop medicine.

More severe cases (frequent bowel motions not seen to be responding to medicine & diet, perhaps pyrexial) were admitted and Twee would perform the 'fork test'... a stool specimen was obtained and if faeces passed through fork prongs, bed and sulphaguanidine was the treatment. Otherwise mobilise slowly with food from the invalid comfort parcels.

Skin Lesions: Tinea cruris & pedis was quite common and usually responded to Whitfield's ointment.

Urticaria: calamine lotion

Impetigo: was quite common and usually responded to Gentian Violet Solution.

Erysipelas: 2 or 3 cases occurred and responded to hot dry packs and Prontosil.

The Long March

In the latter part of January 1944, the whole camp at Belaria was given 6 hours to move to an unknown destination. The Russians were then at Breslau (Wroclaw) some 35km away and snow was 1/2 metre thick on the ground and still falling. The hospital staff were promised a horse and cart to carry medical supplies and our own belongings. In the event there was no horse so we pulled it ourselves. The rest of the POWs took the tables from their rooms, up-turned them, knocked off the legs, nailed them to the table top to make runners and tied a cord to the sledge so produced. Where the nails came from is a mystery but I bet the huts would not stand up in a storm when we left!

We left as a column of about 1000 men and the medical team brought up the rear. We were the doctor, plus 4 medical students (1 an American B17 pilot) and 3 or 4 helpers. At the time we left there were some 80 kriegies with colds, flu or diarrhoea or who were not well enough to march under the conditions. Because he spoke German, Geoff Cornish and one med student were left in charge of them.

Our cart contained as much medical supplies as possible, plus invalid comfort parcels and our own

food and personal items. It was at the end of the column so that any sick marchers could drop out of the column and be picked up as we passed. Our supply of aspirins and APC went down very rapidly.

Guards marched on each side of the column at about 20-25 metre intervals. The SBO walked up and down the column to keep an eye on things and the Oberst (Camp Commandant at Belarta) drove his car with the adjutant periodically up and down the column. We marched about 20km the first day, starting at about 4 am and passing the main Stalag Luft 3 camp (which seemed empty) on the way.

We were housed for the night in the barns of a farm run by Poles who gave the medical team a room to use for sick parade, which took about an hour. We were allowed to sleep in the room and they fed us thick soup. Next morning, we held an early sick parade (0700 hours) mainly of aching legs, blisters and frostbite. We only had one slice of bread for breakfast and had to march 15km that day but we were able to hitch our cart to a horse drawn wagon going our way. We arrived at Gross Selten at 1530 at a large farm run by Germans and they allowed the medics to use an out house which had a boiler room where we were able to sleep. We shared this out house with a Stabs Arzt (doctor) of a German SS panzer division & his staff. They gave us food which they cooked and we talked with them as best we could in bits of English, French and German but the only common language was "dog Latin"! Still, they also had some Schnapps! War is hell!

We stayed there a second day and, being very tired, enjoyed this. The Germans organised 2 sick carts for the next stage of our journey which was to Birkenstadt some 14km further and we arrived again at about 1600 with the light fading at a farm worked by a Russian family, who gave us (the medical team) their own sleeping quarters for a sick room and a bed room. Since the temperature outside was -10 deg C we appreciated this as well as the borsch they fed us that night and the hot coffee and bread we had next morning. We stayed there a second day and had a very heavy sick parade that day. Blisters and 'flu' were rife and the SBO managed to persuade the German commandant to take a few of the sicker POWs to the local army hospital at Muskau. The temperature rose and the snow melted off the road for our next move. Now the kriegies had to carry everything but we found moving our carts easier, especially as the weary guards liked to put their heavy packs on our carts and we made them help with pulling of course. All this time the 400 or so US Army Air Corps who had shared Belaria with us had been our companions but now the Germans separated us and moved them

off in a different direction. We gave them 3 cheers as they pulled out and they went off singing songs like Dixie and McNamara's Band. The Germans just could not understand it; after all they had tried for months to sow dissension subtly. The Oberst just shrugged his shoulders, got into his car and drove off.

The guards shepherded by Feldwebel Glemnitz trudged on and many of them were worse than we. We travelled about 15km that day and later in the morning, the SBO as part of his routine came back to the tail end of the column. The Oberst turned up again (with Hauptman Werner) and he was furious. Wemer, who was not noted for his humor, was chuckling. The Germans had done a head count as we left that morning and now the Oberst found he had "lost" 10 POWs but 16 guards had gone 'wek'

We had started off later that day and it was almost dark when we arrived at our destination but we were allocated a farm outhouse again, fortunately with lights. Sick parade included many with 'rheumatism' for which we only had aspirin and lin. meth sal. But it seemed to work. Blisters were common. We slept in 3 feet of hay that night and German bread and cheese was issued. Next day we walked 7km to Spremberg railway junction, by now out of pre-war Poland and in Germany. We were assembled in 2 large sheds where we found kriegies from East Camp. We were given barley soup and a bread ration. A train arrived with the inevitable cattle trucks and we were taken to Luckenwalde, south-east of Berlin. There, Twee and I took a few really sick men to what turned out to be a British Revier or medical post manned by Irishmen while the rest of the medical team went to Luckenwalde camp.

The whole trip from Belaria had taken 8 days and we had marched over 80km and the rest by rail.

Luckenwalde

We arrived here mid February and the next 3 months to the end of the European conflict were the most uncomfortable and frustrating. Our numbers had been swollen by the addition of POWs from East Camp at Spremberg. We had also been joined there by a New Zealand doctor from East Camp and 2 medical students, one English and one Rhodesian. This was a help as we hardly ever saw any German medical staff and got virtually no supplies from them. We were housed in tall buildings without any subdivision into rooms but with an ablutions and toilet area at one end. Beds were in 3 tier bunks and the medical staff manipulated these in one corner of the building so as to make a square with one half of

one side missing to allow access. One side was 8 two-tier beds earmarked as hospital beds for patients. All personal effects, food store and medical supplies had to be contained in this area, though storage became less of a problem as food ran out and so did medical supplies.

The Luftwaffe from Belaria were replaced by Wehrmacht members in this camp, which was virtually international. As well as the Air Forces contingent were US GI's, plus Dutch, Belgian and Polish civilians, all separated by barbed wire on an international basis.

We received no Red Cross parcels in spite of repeated assurances from the Germans that we would. Since the German ration was very meager we were supposed to be receiving the same ration a German garrison troops; this was partly depressing, since it meant hunger, but partly encouraging as it was due to lack of transport by rail and road owing to bombing and indicated clearly that the Germans' ability to resist much longer was severely diminished. News about the progress of the war was erratic, though a radio was held in the camp that was able to receive the BBC but it had to be constantly dismantled and moved to avoid the Germans finding it. Nevertheless, by the end of March, morale was low and lack of food was a major factor.

In a sense, this was an advantage from a medical point of view. As our medical resources ran out there was less that we could do, other than reassurance to support those with upper respiratory tract infections and diarrhoea etc, but the kriegies were pre-occupied with blotting out their hunger and other ailments lost some of their impact, I suspect.

Later, in April, a German Panzer division was making a final stand in the area and moved around the camp as it retreated from the Russians. The commander sent word that any prisoners found within their lines would be shot on sight. This discouraged any escapes. He also sent a team to supervise surrender of any weapons in the hands of prisoners. These were dumped in a deep water-filled pit just outside our section of the camp and a surprising number turned up. One night, a JU 88 flew low over the camp firing at the advancing Russians and since it was 1 am this caused quite a panic.

In mid-April, the Germans suddenly told us to pack up and marched us to the rail yard. Before we got there, while we were in a deep cutting luckily, we were halted. A force of USAAC Martin Marauder bombers bombed the rail yards, out of the blue ending any prospective trip. We were marched back

to camp, but not before some very resourceful POWs had managed to get to a damaged rail engine and removed its battery and carried it back to camp with them. This was very useful as a source of power for the radio and improved reception so that we had regular news bulletins. This had a major effect in improving our morale and a thoroughly depressing one for the Germans. They dared not interfere at this stage as their radio did not give anything like the real picture of the war and the smart ones could see it was nearly over because they listened to our news readers who passed news about camp.

Then early one morning in May, we woke to find there was not a German guard anywhere. About 3 or 4 hours later, a huge Russian tank rolled into the camp. The kriegies cheered them hilariously, climbing up the wire fences to wave. The Russians simply drove the tanks along some of the fences, flattening them. For about an hour after that, the medical staff were as busy as anything dealing with cuts and abrasions from injured POWs.

Homecoming

Now our troubles really started. The Russians did not have any food. But they instituted a Town Major who gave us written authority to commandeer food supplies; we had 2 Russian speakers among our lot who were loaned small trucks with drivers to go and collect vegetables and eggs from surrounding farms. But to get to the farms they had to cross bridges over canals guarded by Russians who had been told not to let anybody over bridges on pain of death. Since they couldn't read, they refused passage to our fearless food gatherers. Eventually this was overcome and we were able to have some nourishment while the Russians compiled a huge inventory of prisoners, which they insisted on having before we were moved on. One of my friends was talking to a GI during this

period and the GI said they were lousy. "Funny", said Gordon, "I've never seen a louse". Whereon the Yank searched through his shirt and found one! Finally, the Russians loaded us on trucks drove us down autobahns, slipping off road through burning forest to avoid destroyed bridges, the drivers stopping to slake their thirst by sucking petrol up from the tanks till we got to the American sector. The Yanks gave us showers, deloused us with DDT powder sprays, fed us with pork chops, potatoes, peas, angel cake, pineapple and cream sauce all on one plate and gave us a bed. Next day they flew us to Brussels where the Canadians gave us a shower, DDTd us again, gave us food and a bed (after we had 'done' Brussels) and handed us over to the Royal Air Force the next day. They put us in Lancasters and flew us to England.

Back to square one.

The Stephenson Decalogue

1. WAR IS HELL
2. IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE ON THE WINNING SIDE.
3. IT IS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT TO BE ON THE MEDICAL TEAM.
4. DISCIPLINE NOT ONLY KEEPS UP MORALE: IT COMMANDS A MEASURE OF RESPECT AND WARDS OFF THE DANGER OF BRUTALITY BY THE ENEMY.
5. A SENSE OF HUMOUR IS VITAL.
6. HUNGER DESTROYS MORALE QUICKER THAN ANYTHING.
7. ADAPTABILITY IS SINE QUA NON.
8. THERE ARE NO FAT PEOPLE IN PRISON CAMP.
9. HOMOSEXUALITY IS NOT ESSENTIAL.
10. NOR ARE ANTIBIOTICS.

References

1. Stephenson EH. Experiences of a prisoner of war: World War 2 in Germany. *Aust Mil Med* 2000; 9(1), 425-1 .
2. AVM Stephenson AO OBE (Retd.). presently undertakes contract work for the Defence Health Service Branch.