Raymond Stewart Middleton

BACKGROUND AND POSTWAR OUTLINE

This story of "my war" was written in 1985 to tell my family of my experiences, based almost entirely on memory, since I kept no diary and was not allowed to do so in POW Camps.

I was born on 10 March 1917, the third of five sons, in Victoria Park WA. My father Edward Stewart Middleton, born in NSW in 1885 had moved to WA after my grandfather, also Edward Stewart Middleton had joined the goldrush to Coolgardie in the 1890s. My mother was Violet Brittain who came of a Pioneering WA family – her mother descended from a Swan River Settler arrived in 1830, and her father a farmer but earlier a worker on the Perth-Eucla Telegraph line. Her Grandfather was James Brittain, who arrived as a 2 year old in 1853, and as a Contractor employed convict labour to make bricks in East Perth – now Queens Gardens and also built the Perth Town Hall, the Deanery, Government House and many other Perth landmarks.

Post-war I returned to the State Treasury Department, then transferred to Perth Technical College, was Lecturer and Senior Lecturer for six years while completing a B.A. Degree at UWA and teacher training all part-time. In 1967 I was recruited to start the first School of Accounting and Business Studies at the then Lae Institute of Higher Education, now the University of Technology. In 1973 I accepted a contract to start the School of Accountancy and Business Studies at the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education – now the Southern Cross University, till retirement in 1978. I then moved to Derby WA to run an Accounting practice for the Uniting Church Northern Synod (based in Darwin) since there were then no service based in the Kimberleys, primarily to give help to four Aboriginal communities, as well as any other residents. In all these moves, I was supported by my wife, born Orma Perry, whom I married in 1946. She worked teaching in Perth, Lae and Derby and then in the accounting office.

We retired to Perth in late 1982, and live now in a Retirement Village. I am Village Treasurer and Finance Committee head, am a Life Member of Rockingham RSL, still active with Fremantle Legacy, and am the Editor of "Tobruk to Borneo" the quarterly Journal of 2/28th Battalion and 24 Anti-Tank Coy Association. My wife and I travel three to four times a year to Europe, Asia, Africa, America or within Australia. We have three married children, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren and are generally blessed with good health.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 1680 DAYS

Perhaps more than most small boys, I was always fascinated with weapons. As the third of five brothers, I grew up in a male oriented society, where mother battled to exert a modifying influence. Childhood games moved from bow and arrow and spear to swords and rifles, with surprising omission of Great War Artillery, gas and machine guns.

Chemistry – exclusively a male subject in 1930 Perth Modern School – had as its first lesson, “Separating the ingredients of gunpowder”. Alan, brother number 2, two years my senior, had used it in 1928 to make explosives, as was customary. But he took it further, packed some into a sealed-end brass tube, filed a touch hole, jammed it into a piece of electric conduit, and had ball bearings as deadly missiles. All went well till the charge of powder was increased, and backfire broke a bone in his hand. I was vexed mainly because it limited my turn at explosive making because of family bans.

Despite the depression in which my family was a victim of “the dole” I was allowed to complete my Junior before joining the “Boy Wanted” queues. However I was lucky, and actually gave notice twice as I moved on to better jobs (7/6d per week, then 11/6d per week, then 13/6d per week) and never was without work, till I resigned fifty years later.

Since organised sport was beyond our means – other than home-made bats etc. – I indulged my fascination with guns, and in 1933 joined the 11th Battalion Cadet Unit, later at age 18 transferring to the 11th Battalion Militia, where I became a fair shot with rifle, Lewis and Vickers.

In September 1939, my father prevailed on me to finish my studies (in Accountancy) rather than rush to enlist in the 2nd AIF. A compulsory camp at Melville for three months in October – December 1939 confirmed my bent, since I was a Sergeant, and was recommended for a Commission in early 1940.

The papers came in May, asking me to report for Medical Exam for Lieutenant – but I had responded to the invasion of France by enlisting as a Private, and on 15 May with a group mostly still in Uniform of the Militia I entrained to Northam and exchanged serge for a cotton giggle-suit to start basic training with the 2/16 Battalion.

I tried to enter the Intelligence Section – my Militia experience – but found that several other Militia I Section Sergeants were there ahead of me – and I could not match them as artists or photographers.

In disgust, I applied to transfer to the now-forming 2/28th Battalion and to my surprise a belated instruction to report to Melville duly arrived. I found that as Substantive Corporal (after a concentrated Command School at Guildford in June) I would duplicate their I Section, but accepted Colonel Lloyd’s request that I take over the Non-Tradesman Section of 5 Platoon.

So with the 2/28 I moved to Northam, trained or rather drilled, and in due course after pre-embarkation leave, entrained on 3 January 1941 to join a big convoy in Fremantle.

As would be expected in a volunteer army, we were a mixed bag. In mid May 1940 my own number on enlistment was WX2745 – itself a sharp increase in that week. The "phoney war" had not attracted large numbers in 1939 and 1940, and even in 1940 the Empire Air Training Scheme did not take large numbers into the Air Crew training, though it was undoubtedly an elite for the more educated or plane oriented. I was told by an early enlistee with Warrant rank in the Pay Corps that of the first 1000 AIF, nearly 40% claimed for two dependent families – which meant de facto wives very largely in that era. Many of my group came from strange motives – one told me he had received an income tax bill of £40. Most had Anglo or Irish names, and there is a great future source of PhD thesis on country of birth and origins (as has recently been done for the Great War enlistment).

I had in my Platoon a Canadian, a Kiwi and an Anglo-Indian – 10% of foreign birth plus many of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish origins.

We were shipped by Oilers from Fremantle wharf to the Aquitania, which was unable to anchor close in, and as last aboard, found ourselves on "G" deck, well below the waterline. The fast convoy which included the Queen Mary took only 7 days to Colombo, where we were given some hours leave, then transhipped onto a Dutch freighter, the "New Zealand". We climbed into the first hold, then out and up, down to Second hold, and then repeated for the third, each carrying full equipment, sea kit bag and rifle, and by then each order was greeted with "Baaaaa!" as a pack of driven sheep. It drove our officers so mad that – apart from improving their organisational performance – Battalion Routine orders came out, "Other Ranks will refrain from baa-ing on receipt of orders."

Several weeks on a slower convoy, very careful with blackouts as we entered the Red Sea near Italian occupied Eritrea, then glorious nights on deck watching the Northern Stars rise and the Southern Cross recede as we cruised north. We were streaming paravanes against mines, and apart from flying fish landing on deck, the only novelty was a midnight crash as an unlit Arab Dhow hit a paravane – the damage to itself probably severe.

We entered the Suez Canal, the German planes dropped mines ahead. So we anchored for 3 days in the Great Bitter Lake, presumably while minesweepers cleared our path. We were told one ship carrying transport blew up on a magnetic mine we'd probably already crossed.

We disembarked at El Kantara – where rail lines ran each side between Cairo and Tel Aviv – on to a shrill whistling train where we dangled our feet from cattle wagons and watched the desert go past. Many comments about square wheels, till we detrained at El Majdal, near Gaza on 2 February 1941, and were driven in civilian trucks to Khassa. This was the middle of the brief rainy season, and the site was covered with pools and deep mud. Luckily 2/16 had "hosted us", pitched tents, cooks prepared a meal, and we had date palm frames to lift our palliasses above the mud. Bill Beazley, 6'6" and over 16 stone alone broke through. The

rains eased, and we marched and trained in the orange groves till the call came for the 6th Division to move to Greece.

On 26 March 1941 we entrained to the end of the railway in Mersa Matruh, the aim being for 9th Division to pursue training, while garrisoning captured Libya. Here for the first time 2/28 Battalion met 2/11 of 6th Division, who were returning triumphant from their successes. We played a memorable football match, but I saw little as I shivered with the flu for two days.

Next day the battalion embussed, 30 men plus all their gear per 3 ton truck, and bumped along the Italian built road to Tobruk, arriving on a dusty plateau some miles from the harbour on April 1, a rather too appropriate day. Our sister battalion, 2/43rd, also stayed in Tobruk to share garrison duty. At that point 24 Brigade was incomplete – 2/32 Battalion had not arrived.

Our other Brigades were sent deeper into Libya, where despite our unbelief, Germans were already advancing. Right until Good Friday, 10 April, when the first German attack occurred, many other ranks labelled the official story as a training device – their actual term was "**** bullshit". The unit had only two 15 cwt utility trucks, till we cannibalised the wrecks of Italian diesel trucks.

The dismounted Carrier Platoon (awaiting their vehicles) manned 1914-18 model 75mm guns obligingly left by the Italians, mostly without sights and known as the Bush Artillery, and I captained a 47mm Breda Anti-Tank gun. I had a two-hour demonstration by an Artillery type, then was returned to the Unit as an instructor.

After the first attack by Rommel was repulsed, the 20th Brigade broke through into Tobruk along the Derna Road, so we were transferred to a quiet sector further east along the long perimeter. Here we had scattered posts a long way apart, where we kept four hours on, four hours off, for days on end. One night a fog descended as I left one post, and I blundered on lost. An hour later I found a wrecked truck, where I waited until dawn and found my way back. I realised then I'd twice crossed the main minefield, apparently mostly anti-tank type.

One night a warning came of a pending Tank attack on our front. We drove several miles to a 47mm anti-tank gun without its trail, and towed it back with boxes of Armour Piercing ammunition, set it up using sand bags as support (in lieu of the trail) and waited two hours for dawn – but no attack. The daylight showed that despite reassurances given to me, all the shells were loaded with only blank fuses (for transport) so the tanks would have had a ball. I cursed my Lieutenant.

I received orders to take a few men and start using the newly designated Toburk Cemetery – my introduction to a less pleasant job. Another sidelight of the times related to motivation. We had only light, pointed spades and picks (Italian) which could not break through the limestone cap-rock which lay only 6 inches below the dust. Over came the salvo of heavy shells dropping all round. We heard later

that the Canberra from off-shore was aiming at German positions. But those 8" drop shots did wonders. We broke through the cap-rock within the hour, which was useful when Luftwaffe planes came over a zero feet to avoid the heavy anti-aircraft, after having bombed the town or harbour, since a mutual strafe was normal. I once broke my 100-yard record to reach my A/A Bren when the alarm sounded and I was drawing bully stew. The ME 110 was so low I had to detach the gun from its stand and use the sandbag rest. I managed a burst in it, and twin guns winked at me. I found bullets in bags each side of my head.

About 26 May, I was ordered to take a man and clear the "red Devils" – Italian hand grenades scattered plentifully over the area, many damaged. I tested each with a ten-foot pole, and if safe, my offsider (Wally Armstrong) put them into a sack. One played up, and a hummock directed a full load at me, some 20 plus scratches or shrapnel pieces. The Regimental Aid Post found that I was using up too many field dressings, so sent me into Tobruk Hospital, situated near the harbour and right beside a battery of 3.7"" heavy A/A guns. The Stukas carried on as usual, and we were instructed to be under our beds during the frequent air raids. I recall helping the Wardsmen (no nurses in Tobruk) to hold down an elderly merchant seaman who was thoroughly bomb-happy. He'd just been torpedoed for the second time <u>this</u> war – and had survived another in the Atlantic, I think in 1918. My left eye was in pain, and I recall being rammed up to a huge magnet trying to extract the offending shrapnel, but without success.

The doctors decided to return me to Egypt for eye surgery, so one dark night in June 1941 with many other patients I was driven to a rickety wharf and loaded on to an Australian destroyer, either the Vendetta or the Vampire, which brought rations, ammunition, fuel and reinforcements and evacuated the wounded. Ours was an undisturbed trip to Alexandria, whence we were transferred to a <u>very</u> British hospital. Nurses were officers who had no truck with mere patients, beyond dressing the bed alignment for inspection, and checking the official red blanket was folded over unwillingly hot feet. If we <u>did</u> want attention we merely kicked a blanket – at which they materialised to tidy up, not to tend to other ranks. We were told what a trial we were – "Fortunately all you Aussies will be sent on to your own hospital soon." It couldn't be soon enough. The only pleasant memory was of borrowing crutches and attending a NAAFI Concert being given by "The Middle Easters" where for the first time I heard "Begin the Beguine". Shortly came a hospital train, which took all the troublesome Aussies to the 2nd Australian General Hospital, after we'd been ferried across the canal at El Kantara. It was a relief to be treated as a patient instead of a cipher or pest.

As my eye required a specialist not available there, within a few days I was given a warrant and told to report to 15th Scottish Hospital in Cairo. By now I could walk unaided, so duly found my way to what was a requisitioned Obstetrics hospital. Here a very Scottish eye surgeon was learning by doing. He removed so many eyes that we took devilish delight in warning newcomers of his three day softening-up technique in getting acceptance of its removal.

In over six weeks only two patients in the eye ward, to my knowledge, kept both eyes. I refused, as did Jack Barlow, a Tommy Tank driver, who I attended when, after his retina was sown back, he was compelled to stay prone for several weeks. In an unsuccessful operation, I watched and listened while my left eye was cut and magnet thrust into the incision. Afterwards, they concluded that it was aluminium, so non-magnetic. Thus it should not rust, and might eventually dissolve.

My Brother Alan arrived in Egypt and came to see me on June 21. As a Pilot Officer he had no bother getting me half-day leave. He brought me several items which a hospital run as a naval station never provided, and rang as my operation was scheduled on 29th. He was visited again on July 5/6 on 24-hour leave from his training. He was posted to 223 Squadron on July 8, had his first Maryland flight on July 15, and on July 18 I was summonsed to the Hospital CO to be told of his death.

I was granted early release, and stayed – illegally – at General Blamey's personal staff headquarters while I contacted RAAF Headquarters and found out where he was buried. Next day I hitch-hiked for hours till I found it at Fayid, on the west bank of the Great Bitter Lake. It was a very new cemetery, so I made sure no pictures went home. I slept with his old Squadron near Ismalia – at least, I tried when the mosquitos had had their fill – then used my rail warrant via Kentara again into Palestine, and rejoined the Battalion's training and reinforcements depot at Mughazi. After some weeks, when I found I could not wear boots because of tenderness on the ankle, I was X-rayed, then operated on in Gaza Hospital. They found no more shrapnel, only thick scar tissue, so back I was sent to Mughazi.

Brother Len had meantime arrived in Egypt, and managed to get the 'Gaza Hospital' address from the Army Post Office. So he and Blue McClure (his pilot) travelled up, found I'd just left, and visited me at Mughazi. They stayed overnight with us, and had to rejoin that same 223 Squadron Alan had been in, the next day. So I saw him off for what turned out to be the last time.

Meanwhile the Battalion returned from Tobruk, and I rejoined it in time to meet the wet weather at Kilo 89 Camp. Christmas was cold and wet, with snow on Jerusalem and the Hebron Hills, but of course it did halt the Germans who were outside Moscow.

In January 1942 the Battalion embussed for Syria (actually Lebanon) to take over the defence of Tripoli in case of an advance by Germans through (or with) Turkey from the North. There is only a narrow coastal plain with the mountains rising quite sharply. Snow had fallen there too, but it and the rain eased and a pleasant springtime followed.

While Ninth Division was a very united group, it was very unhappy to be idling in Lebanon while the Japs appeared to be surging on towards Australia. Morale

was low after Singapore fell and “Dear John” letters became all too common. Though the local people were mostly friendly we felt lost and forgotten.

However, Rommel’s attack in North Africa changed things, and gave purpose for our presence in the Middle East. After the Germans broke the Gazala line, they swept on, captured Tobruk with full supplies and plenty of transport, and were enable to drive on over the Egyptian border, taking Mersa Matruh, and reaching El Alamein, where only 40 miles had to be guarded, as it could not be outflanked. Panic hit the British brass. The Navy HQ was moved from Alexandria to Haifa – en-route losing our own Submarine Mother Ship, torpedoed by a U-Boat. Troops were called in from Abyssinia, from Iraq, from Palestine and the Aussies from Syria.

Joking that as usual we’d be south for the desert summer, we embussed first to Alexandria, where 2/28th waited in reserve while our sister battalions went to the line. However within a few days we were called forward as General Auchinlek mounted repeated attacks to stop the Afrika Korps.

In ten days we mounted one daylight and two night attacks, but what our official Battalion history recorded as “confusion over orders” was called by us “Foul ups” – as near as can be put politely. I guess that one in three enemy shells did <u>not</u> explode as we tramped through the daylight barrage – a great relief as some were a bit close. One blew off webbing on Bill Jones who got up, put it on again and said, “I’ve been hit”. I shall always recall Nugget Campbell, rifle still slung, leading blind Jimmy Ward who clung on to his bayonet scabbard. When our company was wheeled in the middle of a battle and told to fall back, as we had advanced too far, we found ourselves on a rocky flat between Panzers and a British tank squadron, shooting at eachother a foot over our heads as we hugged the ground. That’s when I ripped off my gas mask from my chest and threw it away.

On July 26 we launched a night attack which I see from official histories was the last of the First Battle of Alamein. We reached our objective – Myteriya or Ruin Bridge – and were able to fill a couple of sand bags to cover a shallow sangar on the rock. We took many prisoners, but while the anti-tank and transport were crossing the minefield an 88mm got busy, lighting up the narrow path cleared. Some vehicles tried to go around the obstacles – and hit mines – so only 6 out of 16 guns made it, and few trucks.

Came dawn on 27 July, when a British tank unit was to join us. The minefields beat them, and some 40 panzers came instead, wiped out the anti-tank guns and routed us out of our holes. A mortar laden 15cwt truck tried to make a run for hit, it was hit and burnt a few yards from where Jack Fitzharding and I huddled under our sandbags, unable to move for exploding mortar bombs. At last as explosions eased, Jack from the sheltered end of our L-shaped slit crawled out and said “*!!*!*” I hurriedly joined him and faced a German half-track aiming a 3-pounder and a machine gun at us, as an NCO called, “Come out Aussie”. We didn’t

argue, we walked off in our shorts, shirt, tin hat. Even our smokes and rations were left in webbing – no room in our doover. One chap bent, to pick up his, and a 9mm Mauser aimed at his head went through his helmet and 'creased' him. We got the message.

Numbed by events, we were assembled and marched several miles west, ironically losing several men to our own Artillery belatedly trying to stop the panzers reaching us, and then we were handed over to the Italian Army. (All prisoners in North Africa were made their responsibility.) We were searched, loaded into big diesel trucks, and driven to the British-built POW cage at Fuka (or was it El Daba?). We slept in the open and at dawn we re-mounted and bumped along all day till we stopped at a beach near Derna. Here we were allowed a swim – first wash for two days – before sleeping on the beach. Tin hats on edge make fair pillows.

Though we were lightly guarded, we were 150 miles from anywhere in the desert, with no food or water, only enemy posts en route, so had little scope or inclination to try to escape. Later we regretted losing even that slender chance, bit it remains a might-have-been. Next day on to Benghazi camp, where we were added to some 10,000 POW, mainly South Africans caught in Tobruk, British RASC, and a handful of Kiwis. The last had little, like us were captured in action, but shared their blankets with us – while the Afrikaans men with packs, kit bags and four blankets each kept their distance and their belongings. Our camp was a stretch of desert inland from a small salt pan, with town and harbour about 3 miles north. Some more Aussies came in later from "The Palms", another camp a few miles away, but altogether we numbered less than 400. On an official ration of 800 calories per day, with no salt and one teaspoon of sugar few included, we weakened quickly, got dizzy if we stood up. We spent much of our time over August, September and October sitting delousing – we couldn't escape them, or the fleas at night. One 50 gram tin of Italian bully (we called it Abyssinian mountain goat) and two biscuits per day plus fifteen cigarettes per week, made trading welcome – if one had the goods.

Late in September the Long Range Desert group launched attacks on Tobruk, Barce and Benghazi, with aims of interrupting supplies fro the coming offensive by Rommel. The first two were partially successful, but we lost two ships at Tobruk. When the British came towards Benghazi, they been spotted and were met by an armoured column. We heard the firing, and I identified the British weapons as we lay in our Italian ground-sheet with hip-holes dug in the mud. Next day in came the prisoners – from almost every unit in U.K. I knew because I'd managed to join a working party writing up Red Cross records – whence the Vatican broadcast names of many to relieve anxious families. Our wages were 10 cigarettes a day <u>plus</u> a chance to trade on even terms. I sold my watch – actually Len's. I'd swapped him last time we met, for enough rice to feed my section for several days. Most POWs had lost their watches as we were being mustered in El Alamein – a young German grabbed a dozen. Luckily I had a

short sleeved jumper – found in a wrecked 2/32 truck – draped over my left wrist, at the right time.

Occasional bombers came out to attack the harbour, and we all stood and cheered when in October a flight of Liberators started a fire on the wharf and shortly it blew up a laden tanker. We watched big bits of ship rise 2000 feet in the air. The Italian response was to deny us the weekly teaspoon of sugar – it had been "destroyed".

Shiploads of POW were being sent over to Italy in returning Supply boats. Most of my section preferred to wait, anticipating relief, but Des Jones went across in the Nino Bixio, which was torpedoed by a British submarine, with some lives lost. He survived OK but one 2/28 chap who climbed on a raft with many others drifted on the Mediterranean for nine days before two survivors were picked up out of over twenty – by an Italian destroyer. One, a kiwi, gave me his paybook to hand in as evidence of his death.

On November 4 an Australian pilot came in to the camp, and when I asked re Len his face fell. He told me his plane had been hit on November 2, and only one parachute was seen. In came a recently arrived Aussie, who'd been in Derna Hospital when the lone airman (not Len) had died of burns there. So I faced the job of writing home and breaking the news that "Missing" did not leave any hope in this case.

By mid-November we were the last left in camp, and daily we hoped for relief – but a supply ship pulled in to the port. Some 600 men were packed on it, crammed into an open hold, only a day or two before the town was re-taken. We straggled aboard, riddled with dysentery and diarrhoea and infested with body lice, ravenously hungry, and in no time broke open the lower hold and found huge supplies of tinned beans and sacks of walnuts and almonds. We ate beans cold from the tins in great quantities, and our stomachs responded but revolted.

Some South African health Sergeants performed an excellent job of arranging 40 gallon drums in the hold, as the 24 hour queue to crude over-board toilets never lessened. A week later we stopped suddenly at the eastern end of the Corinth Canal. We were unloaded and searched, as someone had found deceased Italian officer's effects – including a Beretta pistol. Then aboard again, and a quick trip through the Corinth Canal – watching a train cross 100 feet overhead. Next day we arrived and unloaded at Taranto Naval Base, in the "instep" of Italy. We marched off to a barber – who used electric clippers over heads and chins. We'd not had even safety razors for nearly four months, let alone scissors. Then a blessed warm shower and we shivered in the open air in the nude while all our rags went through the fumigator – a huge wooden staved cask on wheels into which steam was pressurized. Because they overfilled them the heat was just enough to hatch to lice eggs, so our clothes came back literally crawling.

Next came a train (closed van) ride to Tuturano, a small town near Brindisi, and a 6 kilometre walk to the Camp. This had been a transit camp for years, but was made permanent at this point. It was filled to capacity – some 6000 whites in our compound, and 4000 Indians in an adjoining compound. We had had in Benghazi one only Aussie Aboriginal who'd been put on the basis of skin colour, with some South African blacks. He'd begged to escape them, and we persuaded the Italians that he ranked as an honorary Aryan. They shrugged but reckoned it was our own funeral, and was he glad to rejoin us!

As usual, we'd moved north into the brief winter – mostly rain but we welcomed the issue of ex-Yugoslav army jacket and trousers. Those who swapped our own boots for new Italian boots quickly regretted it. The soles were belly leather or cardboard and quickly fell to pieces.

Rations were watery soup twice a day plus a minute bun called bread, so Red Cross parcels became the prime goal – one between two men weekly. Some camps worked on 1 parcel daily per six men, as they punctured all tins so to prevent storage or sale. Talk was of meals and recipes, and we literally dreamed of food, till the end of the rains in March or April restored our hopes. I recall six of us forcing a 6'3" South African to wash – he had not been near water for months – and he tried to wash while still wearing his greatcoat. We pulled it off, and it almost walked alone with lice and dirt. Then and each year thereafter, winter brought Red Cross parcel shortages, just when our needs were greatest. British bombing was the usual excuse, but we felt it was a little of "let them suffer too."

With summer, health improved, concert parties organised and, "tin tappers" became universal. With empty parcel tins, elaborate fire places with outside flues were built. Forced draughts and turning fans allowed a whole meal to be cooked with only a cardboard box for fuel. Each day started with a count taken by the senior Italian Mareschellio counting aloud as we marched past in fives, "Cinque, dici, quindisi, venti, venti-cinque.." So he was, of course "Chinka chink". We got needed exercise by moving blank files in each nominal hundred men, so the count varied, and round and round we'd go till an averaging produced the desired result. This was before the first soup, so was on very empty stomachs, and cigarettes became even more a desirable currency plus appetite suppressants.

Many working parties went out, with promises of a higher ration scale and of course chances of trading with civilians. Boredom and hunger combined to drive me to volunteer. NCOs were not compelled, though some were wanted as hut and camp leaders for each party. I joined a group already working at a distillery. Grapes crushed in Autumn were stored in a huge concrete tank, then in the non-wine season were loaded by hand into sacks, transferred to fermentation vats, and processed, probably into power alcohol, since fuel was so scarce. After this second use, the mush was spread by hand in the courtyard outside our barracks, attracting flies to the feast. After thorough drying, the residue was loaded onto a

shaker where sacks of grape seeds emerged for horse feed, and the dried leaf was compressed into coal-substitute briquettes. The work was boring rather than hard, and our treatment was humane. Within a month I planned an escape together with a 2/43 chap – but my diarrhoea put paid to any attempts to walk the length of Italy. So I gave him my stored rations, helped him over an eight foot wall (not very tightly guarded) and we used a dummy for two days to get him free. The panic which followed discovery of "man missing" can only be called Comic Opera, as a detachment of troops – with fixed bayonets – lined our path between beds and cookhouse. The whole party was returned to Campo and the only complaints were from those who'd bought the weekly issue of rough red wine and now missed it.

Earlier I'd tried to push the same fellow to leave the main camp by stripping and pushing clothes ahead along a 15" storm drain. Claustrophobia and the likelihood of getting stuck finished that – and it transpired there was barbed wire jammed at the exit end. We heard of the capture of Tunisia, and felt our relief was close.

To save our boots for the coming winter, most of us spent the summer barefoot. One day in October I stepped on a jagged, rusty half bully beef tin. I trailed blood to the Camp Infirmary where I was given an enormous anti-tetanus injection and put to bed in SHEETS – but found next day that the beds were infested with crab lice, not to be confused with body lice we'd largely beaten. I had to shave all body hair and take special ointment and disinfection. Medical facilities were scarce – as I found when a double tooth decayed. When I couldn't stand it any longer I joined the dentist's queue, watching those before me faint or yell as teethe were pulled without anaesthetic. As the lesser evil I let them pull it.

Then came the order to move. I could not yet bear footwear, so I was put with the "Maladas" in the 3rd class compartment with our own Glasgow-born Italian guard, providing hot water from the engine at every stop. We rode north along the Adriatic coast for several days and at Rimini we looked hopefully at San Marino, which was nominally independent and neutral. Here we turned north-east, past Venice into the Freuli region, stopping at Udine, and detraining at the small town of Cividale, near which was a long established Campo 57, but policed by pairs of hated Carabiniere in Tricorne hats. It was headquarters from which thousands went to working parties. Following Allied successes in Sicily, the Italians changed sides – and we awoke to find German troops had ousted Italians round the wire. Those out working in many cases fared better, and many reached Switzerland and some fought with Partisans. We became German propaganda a "British captured in Italy" and were given a rough time. In batches of fifty we were marched to trains. Every exit guarded heavily, and warned that if one escaped, the rest of the group died. Here we were sealed into wagons and sent north, with a young Nazi tormenting us through a hole in the roof, and preventing anyone from breaking locks or lifting floor planks.

One train went to Austria, we learnt later, to a big camp there. Ours unloaded us for a week in a siding deep in a valley in the Alps, with snow on peaks far above,

in a transit camp where we first met bed bugs – and were they hungry! A mass grave beside the railway marked, we were told, a site where a locked trainload of Russians and Ukrainians arrived after 3 weeks without food or water, sometime in July or August.

On again to Sudetenland and Gorlitz, some of the disputed area so blithely given away to Hitler by Neville Chamberlain. This was Stalag VIIA, headquarters for working parties and definitely a hungry camp. We quickly saw salvation in a working party, so a number of us went to a site in Upper Silesia near Beuthen on the old Polish border, hoping for more food and trade. I was one of a dozen hut commanders in a group of 370 in fairly comfortable huts, each with a central pot-belly stove. Ours had a pile of burnt sulphur, where it had been fumigated, so no beg bugs. Our first job (a hut full of about 20) was carrying building materials on a skeleton steel frame where a pulverised-coal power station was being extended. With winter, walking in army boots on girders was dangerous – one Aussie fell and died – and was buried with a military salute because "He was working for the Fatherland". We needed the 'Hand-schue' or mittens to carry steel without losing skin, apart from keeping warm.

Next our team was moved to a site a couple of kilometres away, where the spoil from extension to a coalmine was heaped over a swampy patch. Here we were told to excavate by shovel a hollow 60' x 30' x 8' deep – to shelter prefabricated buildings on brick piers. We took so long that a dozen Russian teenage civilians, obviously orphans from Russia, were sent to help us. They were cheerful, tough, street urchins.

I ran a section of the black market, and we had our moments when surprise searches were mounted at the gate. I recall holding up my arms as nonchalantly as I could while in my handschue I held items of trade. Our midday soup, usually of cattle turnip, was carted out to the site, and we carried back the empty dixie to the cookhouse. One day or German guard said, "Gestapo at gate" – so we stopped and transferred illegal bread etc. into the dixie and as we stood for the search the carriers sauntered off with the container into and through the cookhouse.

Here I learnt that prior to our arrival 1000 Jews had been housed in the camp, and the Trustees for self-appointed leaders got extra food if they whipped the others – the only mention of camps I heard until troops entered Dachau. Our Camp Commander, known only as John the Bastard, had reportedly shot an Englishman in bed when the 5% "Kranke" or "Sick quota" was excelled and he'd refused to budge. He (John) had provided the firing party for saluting our casualty, yet he turned his Alsatian on to me once, and I watched him make a Russian POW dance with bullets at his feet – he'd dared to scrounge at our rubbish tip. Thirty men were wanted for underground mining, where shoring up was becoming a luxury. John announced he'd drawn names from a hat – and that included all the hut commanders. We protested, enough that we had a say in another draw, but I knew time was up.

Again I developed a toothache. After two sleepless nights I paraded sick and was taken to the local dentist, who wanted to fill the tooth. In agony I said "No, get it out!" and he did.

I put in for recall to camp and in due course I went, via Breslau, to Stalag VIIIB, at Lamsdorf, near Teschen. This was a huge camp with at least six separate compounds, a city of some 10,000 men, many coming and going to the 50,000 out working from it. Naturally it was overran with NCOs, as they didn't have to accept work. This camp held a lot of British 51st Division captured in 1940 in France, many by now wire happy. I was told later that the 'D' Day landing triggered more who 'snapped'. Each barrack had 100 three-tier beds, luckily only half occupied, since bed boards had often disappeared for firewood or escape tunnels. Organisation was good, and sergeant hut commanders (plentiful) reported daily to "L'Homme de Conference", a British permanent W.O., and somehow returned to give us the BBC News. We messed with 10 per table, one of ours being a Palestine-enlisted German Jew, protected as a British POW. He translated the German newspapers and on a large wall map showed the fronts in Europe – carefully as admitted by Jerry, not as told by BBC. Contract bridge was played seriously, only that and poker survived. The gamblers with Canadian connections played poker for high stakes – since Canadians could send parcels of 1000 smokes cheaply. One prisoner received 10,000 in a day, as mail caught up. I know I received my first welcome parcels from home with warm woollen underwear – welcome when for three weeks the temperature stayed at –15^{o}C. It was fine and sunny but clothes dried out on the sunny side, froze on the other. Skating was popular by the British on the 50' x 50' concrete tank holding water for fire fighting. When that thawed, a POW body was found in it, never identified I believe. A regular market existed where most things could be bought for cigarettes. I heard that one chap bought a passage to Sweden for 50,000 cigarettes. In the huts it was cold but we coped, though washing in the concrete troughs with open windows between each pair of huts was a trial.

A Tommy sergeant showed me how to crochet. Using a big hook carved from a toothbrush handle, I set out to crochet a blanket. This involved collecting hundreds of pairs of old socks and cardigans, washing them in the icy water with limited ersatz soap, unpicking them and re winding the balls of 15 to 20 ply wool. It weighed over 10 lbs and gave me a lot of pleasure. I often wonder whether the Frenchman I gave it to after my release used it.

A full branch of London University operated, using prisoners with suitable background. I prepared for Inter. B. Com. Exam – but mail was delayed for six weeks so we were disqualified from sitting. My lecturer for my French option had been taking that as his major from University of WA and similar skills were widespread.

Many incidents were unusual. In winter the night urinal in the concrete porch overflowed and froze. Responding to complaints, prisoners used the deep drain

covered with barbed wire at the compound boundary about 20' outside rather than the 100 yards to the main toilets. By the time of the thaw, a sheet of ice six feet high cover 25 feet of barbed wire.

Stills were common in camps, using food parcel prunes and raisins to produce alcohol – sometimes with serious results. The Germans took the matter seriously and made raids on stills. I watched one day as word of a raid preceded the guards. A handful of raisins were scattered, and we enjoyed the spectacle of two Jerries carrying off a huge tub of urine for investigation.

In midsummer, daylight was from 3.15am to 10.30pm, and tomatoes grew and ripened in only six weeks. Spirits were brighter in warm weather, and the war news was encouraging. The Pacific campaign got scarcely a mention. Germany was far too busy on the Russian front, and even to be sent to the west to face British or Yank troops was to them a relief – there were few prisoners taken on the eastern front.

As Christmas 1944 drew near, so did the advancing Russians, and the Germans became panicky. All fit POW were given their Christmas Red Cross parcel and sent off in a long column to march across Germany. It was well below zero and on the dirt roads…all wheel marks had frozen into waves with no grip for army boots with steel horseshoes, so slipping and falling was constant. After about three hours I tried to drink some of the tea, which I'd put into my water bottle almost boiling, but it had frozen solid. We spent a night at a sort of Joint Venture State Farm – except that it was Hitler's Germany, we'd have said a Commune, but at least it gave some shelter. Next morning on again, into a snowstorm, with the same slipping and falling. I carried on for some hours, and decided it was time to leave the column.

Shortly after, in a flurry of snow, I ducked aside as the column passed a small hamlet and climbed into a haystack to try to sleep and to ease my bruises. Snow fell for 24 hours, and when a Russian prisoner farm labourer came in for some hay I merely told him in German I was ill and he left disinterestedly. Hours later, a German with rifle and fixed bayonet came looking ferocious till I told my tale. He conducted me amiably to a local jail, organised a ration of coal for fire, and I traded my spare boots for a large loaf of black bread. Next day he requisitioned a horse-drawn sleigh and drove me back to Lamsdorf where only a few hundred, perhaps 1000 were left. We had no "appel" or count, no internal guards, and burnt internal fences for warmth while cheering on the Russians, even when spent bullets landed in the camp.

Then, of all things, the Protecting Power (i.e. Swiss Red Cross) complained that we were under fire. So the Germans sent a train for us and we were loaded into the usual "Hommes 40, Chevalls 8" wagons – but we were 41, locked with no toilet and only two days rations of bread and sausage. In eight days the doors were opened twice, once in central Prague station, where a few fellows managed to disappear. When Allied planes were reported, the valuable engine left us,

locked up and immobile, while guards got clear of the train and set up machine guns in case we made a break. Luckily we seem to have been less attractive than other targets offering.

It was early March 1945 when we detrained at Bad Kissingen in Bavaria, to a very hungry camp (i.e. no Red Cross supplies). Work parties were necessary, so about 30 of us entrained for a short journey, then a 12 kilometre walk after dark to a village midway between Wurzberg and Schweinfurt. A heavy air-raid was in progress; later we learned it was a thousand bomber raid on Wurzberg, so the guards were jumpy – even forbade smoking. Why a Lancaster bomber would deviate from burning a city for a flaring match I can't imagine. We were billeted in the Gasthaus – the only hotel in the village whose name I never learnt, with barbed wire at the windows, and guards outside, and were allotted to farmers in the area. With a Sydney trainee schoolteacher, I was allotted to a Nunnery, there running its own farm. The elderly nuns (Hitler apparently took a generation into Hitler Youth and Strength Through Joy) sniffed at our lack of milking skills, so we escaped the 5am chores of mucking out the stalled cattle as well. As hay was scarce, we got the job of using wicker baskets and rakes to load cartloads, each 2 tons, of leaves from a nearby forest on to a cart pulled by a cow who was allowed a lower milk quota because she did dray horse duty. The pile of leaves made the midden for fertilizer, since their 1945 quota, which I helped collect, was five 20kg bags of Potato Manure E.

Next we were told to rake a 2-hectare paddock to remove any stick, stone or bone which could damage growth or cutting of hay, since in March, growth was zero. There were lots of burnt-out incendiaries scattered over the fields, apparently from a raid some months earlier. The nuns said they just saved their church but lost some outbuildings. As 14-18 hours of raking with a taciturn man was a trifle monotonous, I was glad when we were roused out to help clean out the wrecked headquarters of the Order.

We left at 4am in a truck with a ration of fuel and a permit to enter Wurzberg – we saw why, as the area about 4 kilometres square was flattened, and only one granite-faced slab identified what had been an imposing Priory. Troops and forced labour were clearing the streets. We were told 60,000 died, mostly in collapsed cellars, but that most were East Europeans (i.e. foreign labourers). Several nuns had been killed, but most of the cellars were intact, and we carried out and loaded many jars of fruit preserved without sugar. We ate and ate as we worked, found a bottle of Hungarian Tokay brandy and cigars (for visitors?) and of course filled our haversacks. Some twelve hours later we returned using the Autobahn, with the two of us POW as spotters, as it was a happy hunting ground for US Tomahawk fighters to destroy transport. The bead-counting of some of the elderly nuns – who couldn't get off the trucks unless we put down the ladder – must have kept them away, so we returned exhausted but sated. On return as a reward we were given a special treat – a sausage and a bottle of beer. We looked in despair and wished we were pelicans.

Next day came distant but closing artillery fire, as a US column made a deep penetration towards Frankfurt-am-Main. All POW in the area were hastily rounded up and marched South-East, away from the firing. We were several hundred, a motley group with even a few recently captured Yanks. Their stomachs hadn't shrunk yet, so they were pitiful, eating green potatoes and raw potatoes from fields, worsening violent stomach cramps and diarrhoea. Within 12 hours I ducked off quietly, and headed west – towards the Allied front.

The Main River, a tributary of the Rhine, cuts westward across the grain of the country, so only a narrow valley beside the river is level and of course road, rail and people are there. Parallelling the river at a safe distance meant switchback walking, gaining perhaps a mile in each two. Already the gunfire was waning, I gathered a rebuff for the Allied attack, so when at dark I reached an isolated farmhouse I climbed unobserved into the two level haybarn, and rested up and hoped, meanwhile hearing sounds of normal farm family from the nearby house. Next day was silent so I waited until dark, climbed down, knocked, and told the farmer I was lost, sick and hungry. The German family took me in, shared their meal, then insisted I sleep beside the fire. Next day the man – elderly of course or he could not be out of uniform – gave me a piece of bread and a cup of ersatz coffee and said, "I'm going this way. You go now. I've never seen you."

I tried the cross-country walk a few hours longer, and realised I was getting nowhere. So I followed the next downhill road, joined up with two Belgian POW in uniform. They told me they were conscripted to filling shells in a munitions factory – "But whenever the German is not looking that shell won't work". Remembering our experience at Ruin Ridge with shells that didn't explode, I told them I was grateful, and they had saved many Allied lives. They told me all roads and bridges were tightly guarded, and without an Ausweis or pass, no one could get far. So at the next village I farewelled them, limped in (not put on, boots hurt where the foot was cut) and I reported I was left behind by my group. Briefly I was jailed with two recently captured Tommies, and fed.

About 70 POW were collected, and set out guarded by a handful of 'C' class old soldiers, mostly missing fingers or toes from frostbite in Russia. Except for one blonde prototype young Nazi, they were tolerant and easygoing. He alone was hectoring and inclined to use a rifle butt. The first day was a 12 hour march and carrying a pack made my foot agonizing – so I managed to purloin a handcart, which two of us pulled, two pushed, in which we could carry all gear. One old Jerry, who said he'd been on the Western front in 1918, offered us cigarettes to load <u>his</u> pack on our wagon, so we lasted that first terrible day, over 30 miles of hill and dale. Then the pace slowed.

For some three weeks we wended south and east, our guards cannily using only back roads. At any time of the day we could see up to 200 Allied planes overhead, usually at three different levels, all heading for different targets. I recall seeing only one German fighter sneaking home at tree top level. We were usually billeted in a barn – there were several hysterical outbursts at prisoners

smoking in three-level haysheds full of hay. If there were potatoes we had an issue, but it was infrequent.

As we climbed the headwaters of the Danube I heard my first cuckoo, which greatly cheered the Tommies as a harbinger of spring. Some of the villages were remote. In one hamlet, the homes had no chimneys – merely a central open fireplace with a hole in the centre of the domed roof – almost cone shaped. The one food issue was bean-flour, and we used the sole village oven in the square and tried to make bread. It was leaden, filling and disastrous for our stomachs.

One dawn we crossed the Danube near Ingolstadt, and camped about six miles south in a hamlet overlooking that town. While we watched, two flights each of three bombers peeled off from the ever present sky armada, and dived onto Ingolstadt. A massive fireball rose high in the air, and the shockwave reached us. I was told the factory there made odd-calibre ammunition for captured British, US, Russian, French etc. weapons, but whatever, the result was clear. Only frightened women, children and very old men were left in the village so we were quite hard put trying to calm them.

At the next billet we spent a day or two, as obviously all movement was getting harder. There was no issue, so two of us scouted around for anything edible. I had a woollen singlet to trade if needed. I heard a hen cackle, so I dived into the back of the farm and collected the egg immediately – before any child was sent to collect it. Next few paces put us at the rear of a house where a chained Alsation set up a savage racket. As the woman came to the door, I decided to get on with a trade – the dog meant business. To our surprise, she invited us both inside, fed us on a sausage and ersatz coffee, was obviously kind to and attached to a young Polish girl worker. As we were leaving, she whispered, “Don’t tell anyone” and pressed an egg into my hand – while the one stolen from her bulged in my pocket. We looked at each other and felt really guilty.

Our march slowed further, and stopped on about April 20, as apparently troops retreating from the east met those retreating from the west. The much-vaunted “Bavarian Redoubt” was stalled before it was established. So we stayed in a three-storey farm barn, because we all knew the end was very near, and the few guards merely shrugged and told us that French SS volunteers were in the vicinity. As they had nothing to lose, and faced a grim future, they tended to shoot on sight. Each night came an artillery barrage, getting louder – but all we saw were old over-60 Home Guards, putting up futile wooden barriers to stop the invaders.

On April 24 all prisoners were “roused” at dawn, and put on the road without even a count. I dived into the haystack – as did two Tommies, and waited there quietly for several hours, watching a convoy of tanks, sandbagged at the turrets against rockets, manned by fit-looking typed in coal scuttle helmets. We three wondering where Jerry got all this equipment, when I saw “U.S” and a white star

on each gun-barrel. “It’s the Yanks!” I called out and ran downstairs – realising they’d changed from the British style steel helmet. We were greeted with, “Hiya!, Have a carton of smokes fellas. Any of you want to come along and interpret for us?” We declined – German not up to required standard – and set out along the line of incoming column, a continuous line of trucks and men.

First we stopped and provided the makings (from the Yanks) and asked a German Hausfrau to prepare a meal for us. This she did, and while we ate, an alert Yank with Tommy Gun burst in, searching for hiding troops. Our paybooks and accents (and uniforms) convinced him we weren’t escaping Nazis. Before long we found a long jeep going against the traffic, with space for us, and heading for Nuremburg, so grabbed it at once.

Some hours later, we joined the thousands of ex-POW camping on the edge of Nuremberg airstrip, and some pompous, well-meaning doctor tried to put us on half rations is case we over-ate. Apart from speaking our minds, and queuing several times each meal for back-ups, we crossed to the 3rd US Army lines, where units were preparing to move further forward. The immediately gave us a whole case of ‘C’ ration packs. We ate seven meals per day while we waited out a belated snowstorm, which delayed transport planes. Finally on April 28, 1945, we were loaded onto a DC3 and flew to UK. We slept a lot on the trip, finally landed at night north of Reading, at a British bomber base, where we were made comfortable, then learned that our Yank navigator had flown in error over Dunkirk, still held by the defiant Germans, and we’d nearly been shot down. Just as well we were sleepy.

Next day we entrained to London, revelling in the pocket –handkerchief farms, then to the ex-POW Reception Centre at Brighton (or was it Bournemouth?). In three days we were processed – interrogated, medically inspected, reclothed, re-equipped – and sent on leave in time to join the VE celebrations in London, which are a kaleidoscope of memories and impressions. I then took a crowded train to Sheffield and day or two with Jack Barlow, who had kept in touch since he’d been repatriated with less than 10% of sight. He had married and I found his wife Dorothy in bed with their newly-born first child. Back in London, already having changed in a month from 7½ stone (48kg) to 11 stone (75kg) before I stopped compulsive eating.

After only two weeks’ leave we were recalled to join the “Dominion Monarch” sailing out of Liverpool taking 3,000 troops aboard, mostly Royal Navy bound for the Pacific theatre of war. Six hundred Aussie ex-POW were a rather spoilt, disruptive group who refused to accept a kipper as an adequate breakfast. Many went on strike before we left UK – and many who wished were allowed ashore – where they promptly took more leave. Most, like me, felt that four years away from home was enough, and we were allowed all we could eat as long as it wasn’t wasted. We sailed under strict black-out to Panama; as we entered the Canal, blackout was lifted in the Atlantic but of course the Pacific Ocean was very much still at war. So we sailed south with escort in a southerly loop,

passing within 50 miles of the Galapagos Islands. We sighted nothing till Sydney Heads on June 18 1945, thirty days out of Liverpool.

We had only two days at Sydney Show Ground – taken to concerts and escorted to the Zoo, then a seven-day trip (in seats!) by train to Perth, arriving to be met by our families and given an option of early discharge, which I took on August 2.

Around the world in 1680 days, all for free. Who wouldn't join the army?

A well-known TV program in black and white days used to close off each week with, "There are eight million such stories – this has been one of them."

And certainly each man's was different.