Bart's War Diary

written by Bas (Bart) Buitendijk

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Introduction

It was in the year 1997 that I visited my uncle Bas and aunt Helen in Canada for the first time. I was on a round trip through the west side of Canada with a group of people and we should stay a few days at the island Vancouver. Just on the ferry, on its way to the island, I looked up the phone number of my family. Beforehand I didn't realize that I would nearly pass their home. I didn't took a copy of their address with me. Canada is so tremendous big, so the chance of meeting them seemed to be so small ...
My arrival, which I announced only one day before by phone, was a big surprise. I got a warm welcome in the home of my aunt and uncle. Their children, now married, where also invited. I still remember that nice evening. However I had to leave already at the end of the evening, because my travel group, who was camping some kilometers ahead, had to leave again very early the next morning.

What I received during that stay in my family's house was a document on file, containing a story my uncle had written many years ago. At that time it had been recently translated and typed over in English, by a friend of the family. The original story was hand written in a book by my uncle Bas and it was his diary written during the second world war.

For better understanding, first some history about my uncle Bas, so far I know the details. It must have been somewhere in the years around 1950, that one of my father brothers, so uncle Bas, left The Netherlands. He married an Australian girl and they have lived for some years in Australia. For reasons I don't know, they divorced. Rather soon my uncle Bas married again with an English lady and she became my aunt Helen. They emigrated to Canada and Bas took up his profession again in building houses. As you might be reading in the next story, my uncle was a carpenter. So in Canada, at the island Vancouver, he made a good living in building houses from wood. Also the house in Sidney, Vancouver, my uncle and aunt have lived in was build by himself.

The story which is now waiting for reading is the personal diary from his years between 1941 and 1945 when he worked in Germany. It was necessary, because in The Netherlands, workman were forced to work in Germany. Bas felt it obligatory to work there, because then he could earn some money for helping his family in The Netherlands.

Probably the story is original written in Dutch, but translated to English. This is because of his staying in Canada from 1951 up to 2007, the English language became his natural language. He never forgot the Dutch language, but through the years more Dutch words disappeared and English words appeared in his letters and phone calls to my father. The real first name of my uncle is Bas, but in Canada that name was difficult to pronounce, so he called himself Bart.

I must admit that I almost forgot the existence of this story. In 1997 I received the text file and all the years up to now it was stored on my computers without reading it. Recently I found the text back again, I started reading it and I kept reading. It is very well written and is exciting to read. The first chapter is mostly a day to day description, but the last chapters are really thrilling. During reading I got very respectful about my uncle. He has been very courageous and always tried to help his comrades and the civilian population in Germany. Throughout the whole story there is a red line of hunger and fear. It is praiseworthy that during that very difficult years he still kept his sense of humor.

After reading I regret, that I have never known my uncle very well. He left The Netherlands when I was, let's guess, four years old. Later on I have seen him and my aunt Helen only once and a while when they were in The Netherlands. That happens only once in the ten years, I believe for visiting all the members of the big family. The visit in the year 1997 to my aunt and uncle was probably the best occasion to get to know my uncle, but it was short. Only an afternoon and a evening.

The next occasion was in the year 2007. Now my visit was very well prepared. It was planned that I should stay for two nights at the self made wooden house in Sidney. However, about two days before my arrival, my uncle got very ill and needed an urgent hospital stay. Luckily I had the opportunity to visit him in the hospital. Sad enough a lot of his memory and his willing for communication had gone already. He didn't recognize me, that seems not to be strange. I handed over some pictures of the house in Amsterdam were he was raised up. The house was still there in 2007, so I could make pictures before my travel. It seemed that he was not able to recognize his old house or he refused to talk about it. Shortly after my stay and after traveling through Canada I got the message from my aunt that Bas/Bart had passed away. The subject of that e-mail was just 'update'. I still must have that e-mail.

Now you can continue with reading the story of my uncle 'Bart's War Diary', and I think it is fascinating and it should be published.

Piet Buitendijk, January 2017

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CHAPTER 1 - Labour camp

I was twenty years old when the German army attacked Holland in 1940. The war only lasted five days, and I watched the German tanks roll into my birthplace, Amsterdam. They came thundering by all day from morning until night, and the Dutch people watched them with grim faces. They gave them no greeting, except for a few traitors, which we called N.S.B'ers.
Pretty soon the Germans took control of everything, and as long as we didn't stand in their way they did not bother us too much.

After about six months they started a big propaganda campaign for work in Germany. They wanted the Dutchmen to go and work in Germany so that they could send the German men to the front. Everywhere on the billboards appeared pictures of Dutch men with big smiles, and saying "I am happy because I work in Germany", and all kinds of other nonsense. Naturally not many men wanted to leave their families and go to Germany to work for the enemy.
So the Germans took steps to make us go. They began to forbid employers in Holland to hire men of a certain age, including my own. So when I went to the unemployment office, I found out that the only work I could get was in Germany. They did not use any force yet, but my situation became hopeless. Our family consisted of ten people - my parents and five brothers and three sisters. Only two of my brothers made any money, and my father made only 25 guilders a week, so the rest of us were freeloaders. We all had to eat, and before the first year of the German occupation was over, we found ourselves fighting over the last potato on the table.

So I was forced to go back to the employment office, and then they got me. I was told to be at the railroad station the next week at a certain hour, very early in the morning. My mother came with me to the train. The station was crowded with men with their wives, children sweethearts and mothers, many in tears. The men were sombre and were surrounded by German soldiers and Dutch policemen.
Then the Germans yelled "einsteigen", and all the men boarded the train. Soon we were on our way, but we did not know where we were going. The train was slow and stopped at many towns and cities to pick up more men. When we finally reached the German border the train seemed endless. We came to a stop and our names were called off to see if we were all present. This took at least an hour or two, and then we were off again.

For the first time in my life I was traveling through a strange country. I had never seen a mountain before, so at first it was very interesting. However it was a long trip and we all got weary and wondered where we were going. After sitting a day and a night in the train we were allowed to get out and stretch our legs. Then another day and night, and after three days and two nights riding in that train we found out that we were in Czechoslovakia at a place called Brux. Here we got off the train and were taken to barracks. We slept three beds high, and the food was not bad. There were large open pit brown coal mines in Brux, and the coal was being used by the Germans to make oil and gasoline for war machinery. They wanted us to build huge factories nearby for refining.

The bosses were all German, and the workers were Czechoslovakians, Dutch and thousands of French prisoners of war. The French were treated like beasts and made to work hard, and after work they went back behind stackel wire in prison camps. We, the Dutch, were free to move around as long as we reported for work each day. We worked with the Czechoslovakians, who had a fierce hatred against the Germans, but they were made to work just like us. They worked

very slowly and sabotaged all they could, telling us to do likewise. If any of us worked too hard, they would threaten to beat us up. Mostly we quite agreed with them. However, in comparison with what was to come later, we were not badly off! We were well fed and not bothered too much, and we got paid in marks. But at that time I thought it was terrible and I wanted to get out. So I got a group of seven other Dutchmen together, and one night we sneaked out of the barracks and got onto a train to Saksen. Saksen is a province in Germany, and we went to the capital city, Dresden. We did not try to go back into Holland because we knew that we would not get over the border without papers.

In Dresden we had a whale of a time. We were all carpenters and worked for private outfits. We were afraid that the Germans in Brux would get after us, but they never did. They probably thought that we got back over the Dutch border, and in Dresden nobody asked questions, because men were badly needed with so many young men at the front.
Dresden is a beautiful city. Never before or after have I seen such a beautiful city, and we had a good time there. A few years later, however, I heard it had been flattened by English and American bombers.

Our good time was cut short when the Groene Polizei caught up with us. We were asked where we had come from and we told them that we had come from Holland by ourselves, and they accepted that, as it appeared they were busy with the war and had no means of checking up our story, and our papers appeared O.K. But now the Groene Polizei registered us in Dresden and we were made to work where they wanted us, which was on war building projects. As it was getting close to Christmas, I wanted to get back to Holland somehow, but we were not given a furlough. However, we met a Dutch printer who had lived in Germany for many years, and he made a stamp in our passport that would allow us to get over the border. He worked for the Groene Polizei and he knew all the different stamps that the Polizei used, and he helped fellows like us. He put the furlough stamp in our passports and filled in the date, and soon we were on our way home and spent Christmas in Amsterdam.

That was the first trip to Germany and I had no intention of going back, but the unemployment office knew we were back, and only a few days after Christmas I got a notice to report at the office. They told me I had to go straight back to Germany. I was told I could go with a Dutch contractor who picked up men for Germany, or the office would send me to Berlin. So I chose to go with the Dutch contractor as I figured it would be easier.

I was given two days to get ready and my mother came with me to the train for the second time. It was just as before, many crying relatives and sad looking men boarding the train. After all, we were not going for the fun of it, we were being forced to go to Germany or they would pick us up. It was quite something to not even be allowed to stay in one's own country, and not know when you would ever get back. The Dutch contractor said that we would get a furlough every three months, but we did not believe him.
Anyway, we boarded the train and off we went. We went through several big Germany cities, and we saw the signs of war. The roof of the railroad station in Keulen had been blown off and rails and several platforms were gone. It was in the middle of the night that we drove through Elsas Lotharingen. It was full moon and we could see that most of the villages were flattened out by bombs. We arrived in Aumetz at five o'clock in the morning when it was still dark. We were taken from the train and bussed to a camp. The camp was a real mess. The barracks were in a semi circle and made of steel frames and sheet metal. It was pouring with rain and the noise was deafening, and it was miserable and cold. There were no blankets and no food.

We refused to go to work until things were organized, and instead we went into the town. The town was a terrible sight. Many of the houses had been destroyed or they were full of holes. At first I wondered why, but then we realized that we were right in the middle of the war between the Maginot and the Siegfried line, and that this had recently been a battlefield. The people were evacuated to France 180 miles away when the fighting started and when they came back they found their towns in ruins. Piles of shells and live ammunition could be found in the district.

The next day after our arrival our Dutch employers, who were collaborating with the Germans, had organized food and blankets, and then we were expected to work. They began piling the potatoes high, to encourage us to stay, but that was short lived. Within a couple of days it was soup morning and evening, with soup and cabbage at lunch time, which they tried to make tasty by pouring in too much salt.
Our job was to rebuild the villages in the area. About twenty men, all carpenters, were sent to work in a little village, to replace roof tiles and windows. Even if the tiles were fine, we still had to replace them. At one point we ran out of nails and when we asked for replacements we were told to wait. We were forbidden to ask again, and we spent two weeks lying in the sun behind the houses before the nails arrived!

Without any notice we were moved to another camp in Wollmeringen. For the first few days we were once again treated to special meals, then we were back to the soup, soup and more soup. I got to know the kitchen girl quite well and she used to slip me a piece of meat or a slice of ham when she got the chance.

A group of us were split between three farms. I had to walk three miles downhill in the morning and the same uphill to get home. The roads by these three farms had been blown up to prevent the Germans from getting through, but the farmhouses had also received a lot of damage. The owners were in France. The house I was working on had been open to the elements for a year or so. We replaced the roof, new window frames and rebuilt the damaged interior, till once again we ran out of material. We helped the widowed farmer's wife to bring in the hay and spent the next three weeks laying on the bales and soaking up the sunshine.
The food supply was getting worse and was down to dishwater color and consistency. We crumbled bread in it if we could get some, but we had to eat whatever we were given in order to keep up our strength. At one point it was so bad that we poured it back into the pot and returned it to the kitchen in protest. Then we went hungry. The soup was thicker in the evening, as they were beginning to realize we couldn't work any more if we didn't eat something. The watery rubbish went in one end, and a visit to the W.C. an hour later meant it was gone again.

We were right on the border with Luxembourg, and one night we crept through the woods and crossed the border and saw for ourselves a way to better our lives. We harassed the camp superintendent until we received a pass to cross the border.
In our village, bread was only available with ration coupons, but in Luxembourg you only had to raise two fingers in a victory for England sign, and you could have anything without a coupon. Not only did the Luxemburgers love the Dutch queen as she was the Great Duchess of Luxembourg, but they were convinced the Germans were going to lose the war.
When we went into the first bakery and told them we were Dutch, we got so many coupons pushed on us that the four of us were able to buy two pounds of bread each. Riches beyond our wildest dreams. Then they took us to a cafe for a cup of coffee. They asked us if we

believed in victory for England, and when we said, "Of course," we were supplied with as much coffee and cake as we could consume. Paradise!

Saturday, 2nd August, 1941

Saturday was the day we received our 'wages' and worked only half a day. Two of us, armed with our five Marks each, made a beeline for Luxembourg. Not only were we able to buy another two-pound loaf of bread each, but we were given sugar, salt and pepper, tomatoes and a bag of biscuits.
On a previous visit we received ration coupons from a lady who had more coupons than money. She could barely make ends meet. In return for coupons and cash, she took over the washing of our clothes. We brought quite a bit of trade her way, which eased her plight, and she managed to get fresh roasted meat for many of us in return for money.
Our canteen this evening was worse than ever. The tables were still there, but the chairs had gone. Like animals we had to sit on the floor to eat our meagre meal. Whilst there we were told that we were moving out on Monday to Driedenhofen.

Sunday. 3rd August, 1941

On Sunday we went to the city of Luxembourg. Although the trip by train was very beautiful, it was a disappointing trip. In a cafe we met two Dutchmen who had lived in Luxembourg for twenty years. They treated us to free drinks and we asked for news from Holland. However, we quickly realized that they were fascist collaborators with Germany and quickly took our leave. We caught the train back to Dudelingen and walked back through the town. As we walked we heard the sounds of a big party coming from the depths of a bar. "That's the kind of noise that Dutchmen make when they are having fun", I explained to my friend. "Let's go and see". The place was indeed full of the Dutch contingent, all drunk. I quickly made my exit, knowing what would await them when they returned to camp.
We prepared to leave Diedenhofen on Monday morning at 5 in the morning, and the bus was to pick ten of us up at 6 a.m.. We had all our belongings packed in our cases in double quick time. We waited until 6 a.m. then 7 a.m., and by 11 a.m. we decided to unpack and put everything away again. I decided to look as if I was going to work, but made for the town, where I had a beer, and bought some bread and tomatoes. On my way back to the barracks I was set upon by a couple of the supervisors, who were almost foaming at the mouth. The bus had finally arrived and I was nowhere to be found. Tough luck, I thought, I'd enjoyed my trip into town.

The following morning the bus turned up in time and off we went on another magical mystery tour. In Vixum we picked up ten more Dutchmen who were going to work with us. We were all carpenters in one group again. Once we arrived in Diedenhofen, the nightmare began again. We were put to work with our good clothes on and our suitcases next to us. Complaining did no good. The police just told us to change our clothes from the cases next to us. They didn't plan to feed us either that day. Their soldiers on the front were starving, so why should we be fed.
We simply downed tools and walked to the nearest village for a meal and arrived back at the work site at 5 o'clock in time to go home. Home was to be a pleasant surprise. We were

brought to a lovely house, all 20 of us. There were many lovely big rooms, plenty of bedrooms and we even had cupboards to put our things in and a lovely conversation room. I thought it was too good to be true. We heard that the nearest town was ten miles away, and it was a mile there and back twice a day to the canteen in the army base.
Our straw beds had to be picked up a mile away too. We had no chairs, but in no time at all we had made twenty chairs. We quickly discovered that the water was turned off too, and we had to wash under the pump in the middle of the village like everyone else.

Wednesday, 6th August, 1941

Work is going well. We are living in Ginigen, but working in Diedenhofen. The bus picks us up each morning and drops us off at night. And we get the chance to buy bread and tomatoes in the lunch break.

Thursday, 7th August, 1941

I didn't go to work yesterday, as my mate was sick and there's not much work one can do alone. I still had a table and a few benches to make, so I let the bus go without me. We had to pick up our breakfasts between 6 and 6:30 am, and as my mate picked his and mine up at the same time, I got to have a sleep in. After the table and benches were made, I went for a walk and picked blackberries. That evening we celebrated the birthday of one of my mates in the local bar. The same mate had to put me to bed! A lovely day all in all.

Today we discovered a spot on the edge of the Moxel river where you can swim. Then I sneaked out of work to try and buy some food, but there wasn't a tomato left in the town. At lunch time we dived into the local for a beer, and met a Frenchman who was just skin and bone. When he heard we were Dutch, he joined us. He told us that he had been in the first World War and had been injured several times. Each time he recovered and was sent back to the front, until he was gassed and sent home. He was sick for two years after that and had been operated on at least ten times. Boy, did he ever hate the Germans. With this latest war, he's suffering again from lack of fresh food and his health problems are returning. This is only one of the many tales we hear on our travels.

Ensass Lothringen is always in the war. One minute it's German and the next French, back and forth. We walked along the streets begging for bread coupons, and were lucky enough to get enough for a 2 lb. loaf. Walking home that evening we saw a fire in the distance and heard shooting. The Allied planes are a regular sight in the sky above us, but we remain safe as we are so far away from a major town.

Saturday, 9th August, 1941

I didn't do much today, as my mate is sick again, and they don't know what to do with me. I walked into town, but there's nothing left to buy. Even if you had a coupon for white bread, you only got a loaf of black bread. Now there isn't even a crumb to be had. We only get dishwater soup twice a day, and we were told that not only was the bread gone, but there were no more potatoes either.

Went for a swim today, I needed the wash. The current was strong, but I risked it. I lay in the sun to dry off, but was covered with cow flies. Having got rid of those, I walked through a cloud of mosquitoes and had to use my handkerchief to guard my eyes, nose and mouth.
We decided to visit the cinema this evening in Uckange, a large town the other side of the Mosel river. The bridges have all been blown up, so we had to use the ferry. The cinemas here show the most horrific propaganda films and reduce the audience to tears. They wouldn't have dared show them in Holland, as the people would have laughed out loud at such a web of lies and fascist rubbish.
After we left the cinema, we found quite by accident a lovely little wine bar that served warm meals too, almost unheard of now. We ate and drank to our fill before making our way homewards. I was a little drunk, but it helped to banish reality for a few hours. Reality was that the ferry was closed for the night and we had to make our way along the banks of the river until we found a little bridge over a waterfall. The Mosel is about 150 meters wide at this point, and over an area of about 50 meters the water was a boiling, screaming, foaming mass. What elation as you watched it thundering over the dam into the misty depths from our position on the bridge.

Sunday, 10th August, 1941

For the fourth Sunday in a row it has poured with rain. I decided to stay in bed till 11:30. After lunch we decided to play a game of snooker for the rest of the afternoon. We had a little after dinner nap and then retired to the bar again for a game of cards. I even managed to earn a mark. On the way home we decided to do a little scrumping in a plum orchard. What a great feast!

Monday, 11th August, 1941

The soup today was so delicious I threw the whole lot down the W.C.. Our boss, Symons, arrived with the news that we were going to be on the move again, back to Wermelange, and that the bus would be picking me and my co-workers up the following day.
We had a real treat tonight, macaroni with two eggs on top. Must have been somebody's birthday! We decided to hold a farewell party in the local bar. We played Dutch tunes on the harmonica. The French loved it so much that every time we pretended to stop, another round of drinks were quickly brought to our table. So it was goodbye once again.

Tuesday, 12th August, 1941

Well, here we are back in Wollmeringen. I hate it. Our last house in Ginzebierg was much nicer, although we didn't have much to eat there. Living in barracks once more will take a lot of getting used to. Needless to say we didn't get fed that day. We bought some firewood from the Germans and hot-footed into town and swapped the four sacks of wood for 3 pounds of bread coupons. The bread duly purchased, we decided to climb the nearest hill and look for the wild fruit that grew there in abundance. We feasted that night on bread covered with wild strawberries, raspberries, blackberries. On the way down through the woods we discovered a whole area full of edible mushrooms. A mental note was made to collect these as soon as we could. It all sounds idyllic, but far from the truth. The hillsides are littered with land mines.

Bunkers and dug-outs also abound, full of spent ammunition.
Much to our surprise, the food was edible that evening. Won't last I can tell you!
A rumor reached us that our current boss had been offered the chance to unload six of us onto a German company who would pay us half what we were now getting. The only way he could get rid of us was if we didn't do our job well. For the next few weeks we jumped at every job given and gave him no choice but to leave us alone. I didn't care less what work I did as long as the 40 gilders a week ended up in my bank account in Holland.
Our standard of living got worse by the day. We held a meeting and put our complaints on paper, along with the insistence that changes must be made immediately. Two men were deputized to deliver our complaints to the 'arbeidsfront'. They were allowed to hand over their list of grievances and were promised a reply shortly. That evening the food improved dramatically. I guess Symons was scared that his rotten tricks campaign would backfire on him. As we all guessed, within two days we were back to those heaving pans of gruel once again. The smell from those famous hole-in-the-ground toilets got worse daily. They were never cleaned and those 'items' that failed to hit the hole dead center lay there for everyone to tread in on their next visit.

Most morning, Symons was too lazy to turn the main water on and we couldn't even wash. There was a small stream that flowed past our barracks, but at this time of the year it was dried up. So we just didn't wash. To supplement our diet we had made good use of all the orchards around us. They were mostly plum, and we considered it our right to help ourselves. Unfortunately, the owners didn't think so, and the orchards are now policed to keep us at bay. We are no longer allowed to use the country lanes and are forced to keep to main highways. A crafty vicar close by didn't need the police. He used to chase us with a big plank of wood. We could also buy the plums from him for a small amount.

Thursday, 14th August, 1941

It has rained here for 24 hours non-stop, and we can't work today. The food was pig swill masquerading under the culinary title of "cabbage soup", and we had it served up for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There is still no seating in the canteen and we either stand or sit on the floor to eat. We made a few benches with the available wood we had, but when we arrived in the canteen the Belgians were occupying the benches.

Friday, 15th August, 1941

At last we have some nice weather. What a pleasure to feel some warmth after all the cold and wet. We had some trouble from the boss, Symons. He had received complaints that the Dutch only sat around all day complaining and pinching the neighbors plums. As a result of his lack of supervision the foreman had been demoted and he was no longer responsible for our leave permits or pocket money. The Germans had taken over the total supervision of the barracks. When the subject of leave permits came up, he told us that we needn't bother coming back from leave because he would have found people to replace us.
My pocket money was not paid in full for several weeks, and I found I couldn't afford any bread this week. I went along to a plum orchard in order to 'purchase' a couple of pounds, and whilst doing so managed to eat my way through 3 kilos of them. Funny, they taste so much better when you pinch them!

Saturday, 16th August

What a night we had! I've never heard thunder like it, and the lightening was nothing like I had experienced in Holland. We were terrified when the lightening struck the barracks and the lights went out. We were not required to work that day. The lunch was soup, which was so thin I think they actually had used the washing up water. I poured my bowl of soup down the drain and went along to the vicar and bought 2 kilos of plums.
In the afternoon I went into Dudelingen to look for food, but I couldn't find any. I took the train to Esch, but there was no food there either. I bought a new harmonica and a few postcards, but unfortunately you can't eat these! Reluctantly I made my was back and finished up the day with the last few plums and a piece of stale bread. My finances were so critical that I had to stay in the barracks all week with no fresh milk, bread or plums (unless I pinched some!).

Sunday, 17th August, 1941

It is raining again, the fifth Sunday in a row. Six Dutchmen arrived by bike from Vixum, and Symons was in charge of them also. There are now many Dutchmen in Lotharingen, and many Amsterdamers like me. All the Dutch, within a circle of 10 kms, kept in touch with one another. We were all strung out in little groups and were able to discuss the way we were being treated. This helped us to keep our sanity in this godforsaken country. All the unkept promises of good accommodation, food and pocket money in return for work was turning into a nightmare over which we had no control. Many of the men in our barracks spent their pocket money getting drunk every Sunday. Wish I could afford one beer!

Monday, 18th August, 1941

Monday is always blue in our barracks, with everyone hung over from the night before. I couldn't be bothered to work and went and sat in the plum trees till I couldn't eat any more plums. I promised myself to stop stealing, but I haven't a single penny left and I have to eat. I borrowed some money to buy a packet of cigarettes. Lunch was a bowl of warm water with lumps of uncooked cabbage floating in it, and they wondered why I refused to work. I had to eat it otherwise I would have keeled over from hunger.
I had to break the lock on my bedside cupboard, as I had lost my key. Hey Ho! They will steal the contents before I wake up! I think it's time to write a letter home, but I can't afford the stamp.

Tuesday, 19th August

Today our building materials arrived and at last we can do some work. Actually, after doing nothing for so long, we really couldn't be bothered working. We brought the lumber into the barracks and went off to find a hay bale to lay in. I paid a visit to the vicar for some blue plums, but they were finished. I sighed, but they had kept me alive for months. I await in eager anticipation for the ripening of the yellow plums, apples and pears, and we have also discovered some hazelnut trees. These would keep me going for a few months longer. I was able to face the pig swill soup with a lighter heart this evening, just thinking about the fruit in the coming weeks.

Wednesday, 20th August

What a surprise this evening. After a day of hard work (the time goes a lot quicker when you work!) we received a really special meal. Potatoes with red cabbage and fried sausage. A real Dutch treat. Today I received 40 marks from home. I will have to guard it with my life from the thieves lurking in our barracks. There is one man who is totally obsessed with the fact that I keep a diary, and every night when I settle down to write he is hovering over me trying to read what I am writing.

Thursday, 21st August, 1941

The food is getting better and it appears our complaints have been acted upon, but we still have nothing to sit on in the W.C. and it gets filthier by the day. I have made a little stool for myself, but each time I need it I have to chuck somebody off first. I am seeing an Italian girl at the moment, and I asked her to come to the fair in Luxembourg city. She is a little reluctant because her parents are not too keen that she's going out with a Dutchman. They are more concerned with what the neighbors will say. It's fine if we stay in the village, but heaven help us if we are seen walking in the direction of the woods.

We now have a Dutch Nazi with us. Nasty piece of work. He reckons we are all brain dead and is convinced that no power in the world can beat the might of Germany. If there are any problems in a country, it is always the Jews who get the blame.
I don't think about taking leave any more, and I don't think about home much now. I have been here two months and only received two letters and a few postcards from my sister, Corrie. It was my turn to collect and distribute the mail, and although there was a large pile, there was nothing for me. The 40 marks that I received from my parents didn't even contain a letter.
Last week I ended up in a part of Dudelingen that I hadn't seen before. I was staggered to see how much street fighting there had been. The houses had been sieved with bullets. Further up, blocks of houses had been flattened by bombs, big ones by the look of the heavy iron joists that had been bent like straws in the wind. I hadn't seen much damage in Luxembourg. The most damage in the area was in Lotharingen, which was why we were all there to repair the damage. Lotharingen was being rebuilt, but the French had to pay for it, although it had now been annexed to Germany. As we walked home each evening, the roads are lined with bomb craters now. Some of them are 100 meters long and 50 wide and filled with rainwater. The houses along the roadside had simply been blown away. Pieces of the houses could be seen 100 meters away in fields. One of the land mine craters I saw yesterday had the skeleton of a deer in it.

Friday, 22nd August, 1941

I was a little hasty exulting over the meal improvement. Today it was worse than ever before. The soup at lunch-time was nothing more than cabbage water, but what we had tonight defies the imagination. A grey, sticky mass. I took a mouthful, but I balked and made a dash for the stream behind the canteen to wash my mouth out. We were also given a lump of bread each. It must have been two weeks old and was covered in mold. If you scraped the mold off, there was nothing left.
Symons appeared on the scene today and I tackled him about our leave and paid transport that

was part of our contract and which we were entitled to every three months. The bastard laughed in our faces and even refused to pay us our pocket money for the week. I am having great difficulty not touching the 40 marks I have, and I had to borrow some money this week. I haven't had a beer or a cigarette in a week.

Saturday, 23rd August, 1941

It was quite a nice day today and I decided to sun bathe instead of working. Saturdays we finish at 1 o'clock and after lunch we made for the bath house in Dudelingen for a welcome wash. I went looking for cigars, but there was none to be had in the whole town. What we did manage to get was a loaf of white bread, the sort we used to buy in Amsterdam before the war. What a treat!
We decided to see a film that evening, and 15 of us set out to walk into town. There were five rows of three men, all of us singing our heads off. The people we met en route laughed and waved. They know the Dutchmen now, and their never ending search for a loaf of bread. We passed a band playing in a small park, but they stopped playing as we walked past. Guess the competition was too great.
When we came out of the cinema it was pitch black. Arm in arm we started off back to camp, singing as we went. Before we got very far we were stopped by the police, forbidden to sing and warned that there was a midnight curfew. We hurried over the border from Luxembourg as fast as we could.
In Ensass Lothringen there was no curfew and we followed the sound of music into a local bar. We once more broke out into full song, oiled with a beer or two, and before we knew it we were back out on the street again! We arrived back at camp sober, something that has never happened before on a Saturday night!
When we arrived back at the barracks, one of the men already home was as drunk as a skunk. When I settled down at the table to write this diary, he sat down next to me and started rolling live hand grenades along the table in my direction. We removed him from the table and dumped him in bed. Within a few minutes, he was out of bed again, and walking around outside in the pouring rain in just his underpants, shouting curses in our direction.

Monday, 25th August, 1941

Didn't get around to writing the diary yesterday. I came home drunk last night. I made up for what I missed on Saturday night!
Before lunch I went into Kanfen to buy some cigarettes. I got some from the mayor, who was a fat and cheerful man. He owned a little bar in Kanfen, and we had a drink together.
For a Sunday, the lunch was disgusting. I feel sure my family in Holland is eating a lot better.
My one and only true comrade and I decided to go and look for some fun in Dudelingen. There wasn't much going on there, so we decided to see a film again. When we left the cinema at 7 o'clock, it was time to find a bar with some life in it. We found just the place that we had been looking for, a large bar, bustling with people, music and fun. At about 8 o'clock a bunch of Luxembourgers came rolling in and the band started playing English and Luxembourg songs, and we all joined in with gusto.
When the landlord's son-in-law arrived, things heated up. He was well oiled already and staged his own floor show, singing and dancing his way around the room. I sung my lungs out along with the rest. Too good to last. The Green Police came steaming in and the room went silent.

English and Luxembourg songs are strictly forbidden. However, the landlord's son-in-law just kept on singing and shouting "To hell with the Green Police, Hitler and the rest of the stinking German race." A couple of the waiters tried to shut him up, without success, and by this time he was ready to wade in and start a punch up with the Police. We acted as if he was with us, we surrounded him, grabbed our coats and frog marched him out of the bar as fast as we could. As we left we were applauded, and they shouted out, "Auf wiederzene, crazy Dutchmen."

It was too bad that we had to leave as we were having such a ball, so we decided to look for another bar. We found more Luxembourgers to sing with and the beer was flowing once again. The Luxembourgers were stocking up for the coming week as the 10 o'clock curfew was being reinstated as punishment for not being German enough and for leaning towards the British. All over Luxembourg there were bill boards with the text "Speak German, Be German, Think German." A lost cause. They may speak German in Luxembourg, but there the similarity ends. Back in the barracks we found that a fight was in progress between a man who had lent one mark to his mate and now wanted it back. His mate, who was already in bed, had refused to return it, and the fight was getting out of hand. The man who had lent the mark was grabbing for a knife, but luckily I just was able to hide it in time. He was raging that someone had nicked his knife and decided to use his fists instead. The man in bed sprung up and dashed outside screaming and running to the office of the camp boss. Coward. This was the same man who was playing with the hand grenades the other evening.

Monday, 25th August, 1941

Today we had to work twice as hard. The boss has been in a rotten mood for days and today was threatening to stop our home leave if we didn't get a move on. He told me not to pick up the mail, but I did it anyway. Joy, there was a parcel for me. I had asked for goodies, but all I got was a jumper and packet of cigarettes. Not even a letter. I hadn't heard from home for weeks, so if they can't be bothered to write, then neither shall I. I haven't written for some time now and I don't intend to write again till I hear from them. (I learned later that the reason there was no letter from home was because it was known that the Germans made a practice of intercepting letters.)
The problem this time with the picking up of the mail was that there was also a letter for the boss. I didn't dare give it to him or he would have known I had acted against his orders. Instead I left it in the barracks. However, when I arrived at work he was waiting for me. I was very late and he was in a rage. Lies come quickly to me these days, and I fobbed him off with a tale. "What a web we weave..... ". When I explained to my mate what had happened, he said that the reason for the boss being in such a bad mood lately was that he was waiting for an express letter from his son, and it still hadn't come. Yes, the letter I had for him was the one he was waiting for. My mate persuaded me to rush off back to the barracks and get the letter, and pretend I had forgotten to give it to him yesterday. I did, and was back in under an hour. When I reached the farm yard, there were all my mates and the boss, sitting in the hay and laughing their heads off at me. When I had asked my mate for advice, the boss was listening around the corner and heard the whole tale. He was so pleased to get his letter that he let me off and has been in a better mood ever since. The trouble with me is that when I am up to no good, the first person I bump into is the boss, but when I need him, he's nowhere to be found!
Food was good tonight. Macaroni and cooked plums. I ate so much I couldn't move for the rest of the evening.

Tuesday, 26th August, 1941

During the night I was wakened by another 'tin tray' thunderstorm. The noise of the cloud burst on the tin roof of the barracks was horrendous. A hurricane was raging outside and I was waiting for the roof to lift off. When I put the light on over my bed it revealed that the whole barracks was awake and sitting bolt upright in their beds, with pure terror written on their faces. I didn't get long to study their faces as lightening struck the electric cables and the lights went out. It earthed into the stream outside, just as last time. Thank God. It would have killed me otherwise.

As morning approached, the storm ebbed a little, but there was no chance of getting food or going to work, as the little stream outside was now a raging torrent and it had flooded the whole camp. We spent the day in the pouring rain, up to our knees in water, clearing the stream of debris and mopping up around the camp. The drainage system couldn't cope either, and as fast as we cleaned one area, the drains spurted out more debris and sand.
If this wasn't enough, there were more rows in the barracks. Not only do we have our own Dutch nazi, he was honest about it from the beginning, but we discovered there were a few other closet fascists. The atmosphere in the barracks is getting worse by the day.
Today I talked to the farmer and his wife at the farm I am helping to rebuild. They assured me that if this rain continued for another week, the harvest would be ruined. They had a smile on their faces when they said it! They were convinced that the loss of the harvest would be the end of the war. An army can't exist without food. They were going hungry themselves, but lived with the fact that if they had no food then neither did the Germans, as they had to hand over everything they grew to them.

In talking with the French one realizes how much stronger they resent the Germans than even the Dutch do. About 300,000 people live in Dudelingen, but only about 60 fascists. They all fought for France against Germany in the First World War, and still wear their army headgear although it's strictly forbidden to do so. The camp boss wants to set up a band and is looking for musicians. I've given in my name as a trumpet player.

Wednesday, 27th August, 1941

We really worked hard today. I had to haul buckets full of concrete till my back was breaking. The farmer's wife said we could help ourselves to the plums in the orchard, but they were all pinched before they were even ripe. I was back to buying them in the village, and ate my fill today. I tried to find other orchards, but the farmers had picked them already, and possibly hidden the fruit. They turned as little as possible over to the Germans.
My vicar invited me last week to come and get some plums and drink coffee with him. When I turned up today, he just poked his head around the door and when he saw me he slammed the door in my face. The man is mad!

In Wermelange the population are busy preparing for winter. Outside each house the pile of logs gets bigger every day. They collect them from the woods during the day, and each evening every member of the family pitches in to saw them into manageable sizes. The women are making wooden casks full of blueberry, raspberry and blackberry jam. The fruit is collected in the woods by the young daughters dressed in men's clothes and carrying huge baskets.

Thursday, 28th August, 1941

We had an air raid warning during the night, and we all listened as numerous Allied army planes which we call 'tommies' flew overhead. On our way to work this morning we could hear shooting. I guess they were going for the tommies on their return journey, but we had no other air raid warning. We don't often see any troops or hear fighting in this area, but yesterday they came through our village with the guns firing. What they were after was a mystery.
The food today was excellent: potatoes and red cabbage with a meat ball.
One of the men in our group received a letter today from a friend in Dormond giving his change of address. His friend told him of the heavy bombing, the nights in the shelter and the horror of the night when his own house got a direct hit. That was some change of address letter!

My comrade has been sent to Diedenhofen. I'm really upset with the decision because there are only a few decent blokes left. The rest are either loud mouthed or raging fascists. I haven't even got a girlfriend any more. I discovered that my last girlfriend was a leading light in the Hitler Youth movement.

I have been hauling buckets full of concrete for two days now. I'm a carpenter by trade and I hate doing this type of work. Whoever invented corrugated iron barracks needs hanging. The barracks are always freezing so that you wake up stiff in the morning. The moonlight leads the way to the stream, where we wash before trying to chew on stale old plain bread. I can't eat the garlic sausage they supply with the bread as it makes my stomach heave. Then there is a two kilometer walk to work, and instead of doing carpentry work, I have to haul steel girders and lay bricks. Then its lunch, and time for the daily bowl of 'washing up water'. Then just when your back is giving in, it's time for the 2 km walk back to the barracks. Hunger is rampant until the arrival of the slop they call food.

The evenings during the week are endless, as there is invariably no money left to buy a beer, and the female population are all cows. The weekends are not too bad because you have the money and time to find some entertainment, but the money is gone in a flash. It's difficult for a person to live for any length of time without a cozy, homely atmosphere and decent food, and it is only the money that I'm able to put into the bank each week that keeps me sane.

Friday, 29th August, 1941

This morning we sent the garlic sausage back. Enough is enough. More concrete faced me when I arrived at the farm. I complained to the boss of a bad headache and after many heated words I was back to my carpentry. It is apple and pear time and I took enough fruit back to the barracks with me to last for a few weeks. The farmer's niece was visiting today and she asked me to go with her to the orchard. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't the sight of a tree groaning with plums! Still, when we had picked enough and I had eaten a stomach full, it was back to work. My locker now has enough fruit to last me for weeks.

The food was good this evening for a change. Macaroni with meat and a lump of pickled cucumber and a tomato. I don't like pickles, so I swapped mine for another tomato and everyone was happy. The boss must be crazy. He wants us to work Sundays in exchange for extra pocket money. Some of the old cronies in the group were all for it, but us younger ones

put our foot down. We only get one whole day off a week, and we were determined it would stay that way. We won, but the old cronies were muttering among themselves half the night. This was abruptly halted when the air raid warning went off, and we all had to leave our beds for the shelter. The night watchman told us later that he saw about 60 Allied planes going over. I wonder how many will come back.

Saturday, 30th August, 1941

We worked extra hard this morning clearing away floors and iron girders, and were allowed to leave an hour early. I didn't go to Dudelingen with the others, but stayed behind to do some chores that I had sadly neglected of late. This afternoon we had to walk to a farm close by to buy some milk, and because it was raining so hard the farmer's wife invited us in till the storm was over. They were busy frying frogs legs! They had been out in the fields all morning looking for the big green frogs, and they were now cleaned and lined up on the side ready for the pan. Five were already sizzling in the pan, next to a pot full of mushrooms and dandelions all ready cooked for the table. They invited me to stay and eat, but my stomach heaved at the thought and I invented an excuse and left quickly.
In the evening a couple of blokes in another barracks invited me to come and eat with them. They had managed to gather together fresh bread and had honey, jam, sugar and tomatoes to go with it. I don't know how they got them, but it was delicious. They also told me that they had seen 180 sacks of potatoes being delivered to the basement of the canteen, so that should last us for a while.

Sunday, 31st August, 1941

Had a fun day today. I went to the fair in Luxembourg city. I went alone, as I had discovered that my girlfriend was a member of the Hitler Youth movement. In the city I was amazed at the number of old men and women who were begging on the streets. I had heard of a new order that made Luxembourg Germans take care of their old people. I guess I was wrong. I found a little cafe full of anti-German Luxembourgers. As it was the Dutch Queen's birthday, always a public holiday in Holland, they tuned in their radio so I could listen to Radio Hilversum.
The fair was very big and I enjoyed myself to the full. My 10 marks pocket money was soon gone, however, and my last ride was down a zig zag chute, at the end of which you were shot over a hot air vent which made your hair stand on end. After my turn, I stood at the bottom and watched the women coming down, and when they reached the hot air vent their skirts shot up to reveal their knickers. Great laugh. One woman will never forget that ride. She had no knickers on at all, and was watched by a few hundred people!
On the way back home I called in at a bar in Dudelingen for a beer. A couple of lovely girls played Dutch songs for me on the piano. I must make a point of going back there. When I arrived back in the barracks there was a cold bowl of soup waiting for me.

Monday, 1st September, 1941

It was warm and sunny today and I decided to sunbathe. The boss is in Holland at present. Trouble is brewing again. We have just heard that our home leave will be in two groups, the second leaving when the first returns. We all want to be in the first group, and when they

suggested that the single men were all in the second group, all hell broke loose. We have just as much right to leave as the married men. When the married men suggested that the boss should decide, we vetoed that too. I can just see all those brown noses getting in the first group.
There are 75 Belgians in the camp, and we are always having arguments with them. They sit on our benches, push in front at the canteen, and they act as if they don't understand what you are saying. Often Belgians would be standing behind you in the queue for food, eating the meal they have already picked up, and lining up for another one.
This evening they had pulled the same trick and two of them were sitting down on our benches with two portions of food each. When we went to get our food there was none left. Tonight an end came for the lot of them. The camp commander came into the canteen when everyone was in and looked at the over laden plates of the Belgians and the empty plates of the Dutch. He was furious. Apparently they had even been selling food to the people outside the camp. He promised an end of these tactics and more supervision would be provided at meal times. The Belgian contingent left the canteen, carefully avoiding our eyes.

Tuesday, 2nd September, 1941

September has started well. The sunshine is very welcome to us and to the farmers who are harvesting. I made a W.C. at work today. All the workers continue to use the orchards as a toilet, and you can't walk through them anymore for the excrement. That is how I got me the title of the 'shithouse carpenter'.

The boys were telling me today that when they went for a walk in Dudelingen on Sunday they met a troupe of German army men. The boys should have given the Hitler salute when they met them, but they just continued walking along with their hands in their pockets. The Germans fired warning shots over their heads, and the people on the street dived into the alleyways.
That evening I pasted the room full of half naked women. My room mates found it a great improvement and I was rewarded with a few beers.

Thursday, 4th September, 1941

Yesterday we were shipped out to Nondkeil in three coaches. We were instructed to hoist the four walls of a granary into place by the end of the day. Don't ask me how we managed it, but we did. It was 8 p.m. by the time we finished, and, as our boss had not thought about supplying us with food for the day, we were starving. As luck would have it, when we got back to the barracks there was a good warm meal awaiting us. We just fell into bed that night, but were woken up by air raid sirens. The night sky was black with Allied aircraft.

My boss received a letter from my brother, Jan, who would like to work here with me. The boss wasn't too optimistic about his chances, however, and he proved right.

Benches have finally appeared in the canteen just as we are going home on leave. I am still not getting much mail from home. Three letters in nine weeks. Cigarettes are now on ration and we can only get three a day.

Saturday, 6th September, 1941

It is now time for the first group to take their home leave. If they don't go now the second group will be delayed. We will have to confront the boss to find out what he has decided. This afternoon three of us went into Dudelingen and I bought a nice book by Karl May for 4 marks. In an Italian bakery we were able to buy a large tart and some small cakes with ration coupons. I could have had four new girl friends today if I'd been in the mood. I'm still smarting over the mistake I made with the other girlfriend.

We no sooner had got home and into bed when all hell broke loose in our barracks. One of the Dutchmen arrived home drunk as a skunk and singing the "Internationale" at the top of his voice. Before he could enter the camp, three fascists had jumped him and beaten him black and blue. When we heard this we were out of our beds in a flash and went looking for the three German bastards. The noise woke up the whole village, but we kept on looking for them. We heard from one man that he'd seen them fleeing into the forest. So that was the end of that. Oh how I wish I could have found them and given them a taste of their own medicine. The night finally ended with a laugh. We had just arrived back in camp and who should we see sneaking back along a dark pathway but the boss with a girl. The boss is married and this sure wasn't his wife. We sneaked ahead and removed the walkway planks of the little bridge over the stream. Sure enough in the dark they started to cross the bridge and dropped like stones into the water. Their screams woke the whole camp up. Lights went on and there was one mightily embarrassed camp commander, dripping wet and very angry. Needless to say we made ourselves scarce before he could spot who was responsible.

Sunday, 7th September, 1941

After the lack of sleep last night I decided to have a quiet day communing with nature. I wandered through the forest and along narrow paths up into the hills. Here was a wealth of nature's bounty. I found hazelnuts, walnuts and chestnuts. The wild raspberries and strawberries were the best I had ever tasted.

My biggest surprise was the deserted hideaways, bunkers and trenches. Even a field kitchen that belonged to the French. I walked into one of the bunkers and through a long narrow corridor until I found a little enclosure, just big enough for one man. There were two little holes in the wall, one just big enough for a machine gun and through the other hole I had a view of the whole hillside before me. The French were able to defend the whole area without they or their guns being seen. The floor was littered with empty ammunition cases and grenade shrapnel.

Another hill was denuded of trees and undergrowth, and I came across old trenches that stretched around the whole circumference of the hill. These had all been filled in.
I sat down to enjoy the panorama and the warm sunshine, but it wasn't for long. Two military planes came screaming out of nowhere from behind me, right over my head, diving down to the foot of the hill and flying fast and very low over the fields and forests, before disappearing as quickly as they came.

On my way back to camp I talked to a women I knew who had just returned from Metz. She said she was waiting for her train in Metz station and had watched a hospital train from the

eastern front arrive. She had watched as they unloaded the train of 50 carriages full to the brim with seriously injured soldiers. The horror of what she had seen was still visible in her eyes. My day of quiet reflection and peace was shattered as I tried to imagine the unforgettable scene she portrayed.

Friday, 12th September, 1941

I have been in bed since Tuesday with a heavy cold. The doctor came to see me and gave me some powerful potions that helped with the fever, but I still feel pretty rotten. Decent food would have helped, but that is too much to expect! I haven't seen a potato for at least a week. I heard that the kitchen girls enjoy fried potatoes and bacon, so I guess they are stealing from us. After having my meals delivered to me this week, it was a pleasant change to eat in the canteen this evening. I am feeling a little better.

A Dutchman started work here last week. As he had lived in Belgium for 20 years he was housed with the Belgian group working for a German firm. Today he developed a headache and had to sit down. When his boss saw him sitting he was sacked on the spot and had to leave camp without food, money or travel allowance. The Belgians ignored the plight he was in so it was up to us Dutch to give him some food, and we had a whip around to pay his fare back to Belgium. We decided that the Belgians deserved Germans, both must have swinging bricks in place of hearts.
Air raid sirens went off at 11 p.m. and it was 5 a.m. before the all- clear.

Saturday, 15th September, 1941

I had to report myself better to the doctor today, or risk having my pay docked in Holland. I feel a lot better and I have the weekend ahead of me before I have to report for work. I went looking for cigarettes, but there were none to be found.

Monday, 15th September, 1941

We had house arrest yesterday because it never stopped raining, and we spent most of the day lounging on our beds. When we went to the canteen this morning there was no food as Symons hadn't paid them to get stuff in. So it was back to our beds, no food, no work. By three o'clock, though, we were able to eat something and put in a few hours of work.

Tuesday, 16th September, 1941

When I awoke this morning I was stiff with the cold. During the night there was a heavy frost and the barracks were freezing, so what's it going to be like in the winter?! Trying to wash in the freezing stream is getting me down. A wash area was under construction, but it was stopped half-way through. One of our lads, who had arrived back from Dudelingers after picking apples, told us he could get a cigarette supply for us and we gave him ten marks. He was back in a few hours with 60 packets of them! Before he left, we gave him another 10 marks to bring another supply tomorrow. More air raid warnings during the night.

Wednesday, 17th September, 1941

Well I suppose there had to come a time when our dirty tricks came to an end. The boss arrived at work about an hour after our lunch time should have ended. He screamed and shouted, but we explained that we had started late and were now just finished. He accepted this explanation and left again. Two hours later he came back again and we were still sitting there. We saw him coming and flew in all directions, round the orchards, behind the house, but he had seen us. The air was blue when he had finished with us, and the upshot of it was that our home leave was postponed. We heard later that our foreman had been found drunk in the local bar and that our leave had been postponed because of his lack of supervision. He hadn't touched a drop of liquor in years up to that time, and now he was feeling guilty.
Tonight we didn't get much sleep. The tommies started flying over at about 9 p.m. There must have been hundreds of them. At 1 a.m. the second wave passed over. The noise was thunderous and the numbers mind-bending. What I would give to know what was really happening outside in the war zone.

Thursday, 18th September, 1941

More air raids during the night with alarms breaking up our sleep again. In the dim light of dawn, as we were going for our breakfast, we saw a German plane limping home. It had lost its propeller and just managed to land on a nearby hillside.
Today I received a book from my sister and a letter from home. The first in a month. Nice surprise! Symons is now checking that we are working every day, and told us we would all be taking home leave together. Hope it's soon.

Saturday, 20th September, 1941

This afternoon we went to Dudelingen earlier than usual. I told everyone that we were off on home leave shortly and we were inundated with coupon-free food and goodies. The Belgians are presently on home leave, and we enjoyed a peaceful meal in the canteen and had second helpings for the first time in months.

Sunday, 21st September, 1941

Oh, how the power of 'home leave' affects the camp. Symons is terrified we won't come back, and the food is flowing as never before. We were even able to buy cigarettes and tobacco in the canteen today. We are all in a holiday mood and anxious to get off, and we spent a great afternoon in town and in the bars. After the evening meal I decided to have an early night.

Monday, 22nd September, 1941

We have been really lucky with the weather since the beginning of September, and it is really good to feel the warmth of the sun. Today workmen have been working like beavers in the camp to finish the wash houses, making the canteen more hospitable, and wood-burning stoves have been installed in all the barracks. Charming....just as we are all going home.

Tuesday, 23rd September, 1941

Today we really put our skates on, because we have concrete to lay before we go on leave. As it happened we were finished by 3 o'clock and left immediately for town to do some last minute shopping for our leave. We planned a farewell party for this evening. The cook promised to provide beer, wine and some females, but none showed up. Great party!

Wednesday, 24th September, 1941

This is the day before we leave and everyone is a little nervous. We spent the day packing our cases and doing some more last minute shopping. The party tonight was a blast. The canteen had enough beer and wine for everybody, and we drunk ourselves into a stupor until 3 o'clock in the morning. We had to be up at 4 a.m. to catch our train...hey ho!! Home at last!

Thursday, 6th November 1941

Here we are back in Ensass Lothringen, but not in Wermelange. The train back was terrible. We couldn't travel further than Bettemburg in Luxembourg that night. All this hassle because we missed the fast train in Koblenz. At first they were just going to leave us on the platform all night till the first train out at 5 a.m. When the station master realized we were Dutch he unlocked the waiting room, lit the fire and we were bedded down there for the night. It was a bit hard trying to sleep on wooden benches, worse even than a table. We didn't close an eye, but at least we were warm and dry.

We caught the train at 5 o'clock and arrived in Dudelange at 7 a.m. It was still pitch black and we had an hour's walk ahead of us to the camp. We left our cases in the care of the station master. We arrived at 8 o'clock in Wollmeringen and the outline of the camp and the iron barracks rose out of the morning mist like an apparition. I shuddered at the thought of going back to the camp after the home comforts so recently enjoyed.

We first made a bee line for the canteen for something to drink. The Belgians filled the place, still eating their breakfast before leaving for work. We decided to check into the barracks first, but they were locked. However, we climbed in through a little window and unlocked the door from the inside. Everything was changed inside. Some beds and cupboards were gone, the bedding too. It was freezing cold, but we were so tired we just flopped onto the bare beds and fell asleep.

A couple of hours later I awoke, blue from cold. We went to the canteen to see if we could get something to eat, but there was nothing. There was nothing for us at lunchtime either, so we decided to see what we could get in the village. When we returned, the foreman told us that he had just spoken to Symons on the telephone, and we were not stopping here but moving on to Metz in the morning. That was all well and good, but our stomachs were grumbling and no-one seemed to care. That evening we ate in luxury at the local hotel, the boss paying for the lot.

The next afternoon we were off again. Our cases were still waiting for us at the station and we picked them up on our way. It was dark when we arrived in Metz and no-one seemed to know where the camp was. We had to wait for nearly an hour before someone came to meet us. We had to leave our cases in the station once again and catch the No. 7 tram to a dark and dreary slum area of town. Our destination was a deserted army barracks, which still stank of its previous occupiers, and the room we were allocated was so filthy we refused to even consider it. In the end we had to accept it as there was no way we could find anything else before tomorrow. We set to and cleared and cleaned the pig sty, and tried to make it fit to sleep in. We were given some food and bedding, but no pillow. As I settled down to try and sleep I realized that my mattress was full of fleas! The horror of it all kept me awake the whole night.

The next morning we were not expected to work, so we set to and scrubbed the place from front to back. The mattresses were beaten until we managed to get rid of the flees. The camp is very big and very creepy and made us all shudder. We had a meeting among ourselves that evening and decided we were not going to accept it as suitable accommodation. The following evening we held another meeting, this time with Symons present. He was pressured into finding alternative accommodation and as we were living in a large city, we demanded more pocket money. He sat there shaking with nerves and promised us everything.

Sure enough he arrived two days later to move us to the center of Metz and a deserted block of army housing. We had to walk for nearly an hour with all our luggage, and then back again to pick up our bedding. Although our group was given one of the bigger dormitories, there were no cupboards. The beds were lined up along the walls and down the center of the room were long tables. Food was not delivered here, so we had to fetch it ourselves. I was one of a group of four who were designated to collect the food. There were more Dutch in the block and we had to collect their food too. Every morning we go up at 4 o'clock and walked to the careers school to collect coffee and deliver it back to the housing block. We were also asked to collect and deliver coffee to the army camp that we had just left. By the time all this was done it was 7 o'clock, and just as all the others were leaving for work, we dived back into bed for another three hours' sleep. We were free from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and used the time to find a restaurant for some food and a bar for a beer. We now had 25 marks pocket money. At 5 o'clock we set off to collect and deliver the evening meals. If we sped it up a bit we were home for 7:30 and then we could eat.

The beauty of this housing complex was that there were sitting rooms where you could spend the evening instead of being forced to roam the streets for entertainment. Some of us played musical instruments, banjo or mouth organ. Some sat and read, listening to us singing. Even a few card schools were taking shape. What a change from what we were used to. Some evenings it got a bit rowdy and the foreman would bawl and curse us for the noise and remind us of the fact that we were supposed to be in bed by 10:30. We pretended we couldn't understand his German and his face would get so purple with anger he had to charge back out the door slamming it hard behind him.

Things were quiet for a week. We carried out our catering detail in our best suits and we were now recognized as we did our daily rounds. We were able to get bread off the ration and we discovered a little coffee shop where we could pop in for coffee and cake on our rounds. It was a good life, and we were living decently for the first time since we arrived in Germany. I knew it wouldn't last, and it didn't. Within two weeks we were told we had to move out to allow 500,000 Spanish soldiers a few days rest on their way to the eastern front.

The next day Symons arrived to take us to our new accommodation, which turned out to be a very large career training school. There were already 1000 foreign workers in residence. Each had a single bed and a wash basin. They were good beds too. The trouble was that the place was so full we had to remove the single beds and replace them with double ones.
The room we were allocated belonged to the Italian contingent. The walls were plastered with posters of Hitler and Mussolini. The Italians were on leave, but when they came back and saw that they had to sleep two to a bed they got very nasty. They made it so unpleasant for us that one morning we just upped, packed our bags and went back to the army housing block.
The foreman was raging, but we were determined. Our employer was even angrier and arrived at the housing block to kick us back to the school. It was still as we left it. There were no chairs to sit on, and nothing to heat the place, and so we decided to spend our evenings in the local bar, which resulted in our rolling home each night as drunk as fiddler's britches.

One night I returned at 1:30 a.m. and was so drunk that I awoke the whole room of men. The Italians were so angry they grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and shot me into a cupboard and laid it, doors down, on the floor. I kicked, screamed and swore like a trouper till they let me out and threw me on my bed. The next morning the Dutch contingent was called into the canteen and the lot of us were sacked. I was furious. I was hoping to hang on till Christmas.

The next evening we were paid 60 marks each. That evening I got drunk again and I don't remember coming home or getting into bed. The next morning I was shaken awake by one of the boys telling me to get a move on as it was 4 a.m. and we had to leave immediately. My case was quickly packed and we were off, but not before we had an argument with the cook because she had refused to give us bread for our journey. In the end we got it and were on our way back to Holland.

I stayed in Holland for three weeks before being shipped out to Berlin. We were lucky the train went straight through to Berlin without having to change umpteen times. In Berlin we left the train and joined the underground to the outskirts of town, but we still had to walk for half an hour with our heavy cases. We arrived in our camp and collected our bedding, knives, forks, spoons and other bits we would need. The camp foreman was concerned that we hadn't eaten yet (that made a pleasant change), and led us to the canteen. We got a bowl served to us which made my stomach heave. It looked like cat sick, was sticky looking and stunk to high heaven. I handed it back.

We were then led to our room, which was unheated, and freezing cold. The foreman told us to report for work in the morning and that made us angry. We were allowed two travel days, and tomorrow was the second. He was unimpressed with our protests and slammed the door behind him when he left. An office worker took us to our work the following morning, a half-hour walk through the outskirts of Berlin. What a shock that was. Dirty little houses, most of them papered on the outside with tarmac sheets, no water pipes, just pumps in the garden, which of course would freeze up any time now. The streets were unmade and were a river of mud. Walking on them was impossible as the mud came up to one's ankles. So this is Berlin! When we arrived at our destination I looked for the building we were to repair. But in fact there was an enormous canopy of camouflage material set up just 50 cm above the biggest hole in the ground I had ever seen. Yes, I was to help build a bunker, and a very large one! Although we were supposed to be carpenters, within minutes we were once again humping hods of concrete. I decided not to complain but just get on with it, vowing that this would be the only day I would do it. Building a bunker for the MOF was not what I had in mind when I agreed to work in Germany. We were expected to work a 10 hour day too.
When we returned to base that night, it was to a bowl of turnip soup, revolting. We chucked it out and ate the bread we had brought from home. They had installed some heating today and we made sure it was going full blast all night.

My fellow workers were a rough lot, but I was lucky enough to have my comrade with me again and we decided to stick together and try to ignore the others. The weekend was a pretty dismal experience. Bars with not beer, cinemas that only show propaganda films, no pretty girls to flirt with and a general feeling of misery. We stayed home on Sunday and our room mates had organized a few card schools. These were very rough games, and there were a few men there that were gambling the money that should have gone home to their wives. The evening meal was turnip soup again. I am going to get very hungry on this diet. With the evening meal they give you a piece of bread and a wafer thin slice of worst for breakfast the next day. However, because the soup is so revolting, you eat the bread and worst for dinner instead and then you have nothing left for the morning.

The men in our group are the roughest I have ever worked with. If you have to use the toilet during the night, you have to get dressed first and walk the 25 meters in the cold to the W.C. A lot of the bastards in our hut are too lazy and simply urinate against the outside of the barracks

walls, some even against the wall inside the hallway. There is always some sort of trouble going on and we all end up paying for it. Our cigarette ration has been canceled, and I guess the food is also punishment too. People queue for hours in the city just to buy one or two cigarettes. I queued for two hours once, and when it was my turn they had sold out.

To try and get out of this place, I started rows with all the bosses I could find. Our Dutch boss is van der Velde of van de Velde & Streubel. Streubel is the German half of the operation and the one with the most say in the firm. Van der Velde stood and criticized my concreting this morning and I got mad and told him that if he couldn't find carpenters work for me then I was resigning. He didn't take the bait and walked off. He is just the pimp who shanghai's the workers. A dismal excuse for a man. The bunker we are constructing is Weermacht work, and van der Velde is a traitor.

Our lunch was once again Bunker soup. Plain water with lumps of raw cabbage floating in it. You have to eat it just to get rid of the hunger pangs. One day if was even too bad to eat. We took the eight kettles back to the food tent and emptied them in the entrance. We went and sat in the labourers' tent and refused to go back to work. The German bosses were so incensed they rang the Green Police and when they arrived they threatened to shoot us if we didn't go back to work. Faced with that kind of threat there is no alternative, and we went back to the bunker. As soon as the police had gone we all downed tools and walked home. Once there we washed, changed and went into town in search of food. We found a cafe and stuffed ourselves with excellent soup and salads until our stomachs ached.

The following day we went back to work and the soup was a lot better, but the peace was broken when we discovered that bread was being stolen from our eating tent. Dutchmen stealing from each other meant that we had reached an all time low, especially as we all had the same meager rations. This stealing went on for a week, but the thief slipped up and we caught him. He was beaten to a pulp by the group and fell into a heap in the corner of the tent. The police were called and the boy was carted off. A few days later he arrived back at work and that's when we went on strike. We refused to lift a finger until the chap was sacked. There was no way we were going to have the thief back again. Van der Velde collected him and he was sacked and sent home.

Van der Velde is getting very angry with me. He is checking me constantly, but I just go my own way, arriving late, taking long lunch breaks and leaving early, spending the day wandering around with my hands in my pockets. Every time he shouts, I reply "sack me then", but he never does. One of the lads in our group was absent for a week and when he returned he was sacked on the spot.....brilliant I thought, that's what I have to do.

The next morning I didn't go to work, but went into the city to look for another boss for a week. The railway had nothing to offer, but they did give me the name of a carpenter who worked for the railway. He even gave me a train ticket to get me there. I found him and he employed me on the spot. Great I thought, as I warmed my hands by the fire and started work. I had worked there for two days when the carpenter decided to approach van der Velde to try and free me up to work for him full time. He was refused, and he nearly landed himself in a whole heap of trouble. He was not allowed to employ anyone who was not in possession of a note to say he was unemployed, and flouting these rules could cost him a 3000 marks fine or a three year jail sentence. I was paid my wage in double quick time and had to leave quickly before the pair of us were in deep trouble.

I returned to the bunker the next day as I needed the money, and once again I started my intimidation campaign. This time, however, the German boss had had enough of me and he told me that the police would be along to pick me up because he was charging me with sabotage! Whew. The next morning I went to work, but kept out of sight of the German boss. When no police arrived I decided to do some work and when I eventually saw a Green Policeman arrive, I ducked for cover. He had not come for me thankfully, but for another of the group who had been caught stealing.

It's been raining non stop now for weeks and the road we use is impassable, that is unless you want to sink up to your knees in the mud. I don't know how the occupants of the houses manage to do their shopping. We now walk along the railway track, which is fairly easy.
I still can't seem to get myself sacked. At lunchtime we went on strike again when we saw and smelled the bunker soup arrive. The strike was over quickly as the police arrived and threatened to shoot us. They now have guards on duty to prevent us from striking again.
Christmas is getting closer and our bread ration is getting less without any explanation.
Two weeks before Christmas we were invited to a party in one of the canteens. On the evening of the party we all had to cram into one canteen as the other one was being decorated and laid out for the party. I had to queue for two hours for my meal that night, but at least it was worth it. At 8 o'clock we all trooped into the party room. They really had been hard at work. There were long tables covered in white cloths, laid with 700 paper plates. On each plate was a Christmas fruit loaf, two bottles of beer, a box of chocolates, 10 cigarettes and a small cigar. A band was playing and a group of Hitler youth were singing.
When we had all sat down, the camp commander began to make a speech. The name of Hitler began to crop up in every sentence and the complaints could be heard all over the room. He told us that we had the Fuhrer to thank for the lovely party this evening, which would continue until 11 p.m. It was about 8:30 p.m. when he finished his speech, but before he had sat down, the first of the men began creeping out of the room with their gifts under their arms. More followed them and by 8.45 p.m. the last group stood up to take their leave. The band was playing at full volume and the camp commander was screaming that the party was due to continue until 11 p.m. The last group ignored him and they too left. We were in hysterics. There was the poor commander left in his beautifully decorated room, the band and Hitler youth, and no one there to enjoy it!

A week after the party the food supply got worse. They had of course to recoup the money they had spent on the party. Three hundred men went on Christmas home leave, and I discovered that van der Velde had gone too. I was staggered because I wanted to pester him my leave. Out of the blue, all those remaining in Berlin were given a free ticket to celebrate Christmas with all the other foreigners stranded in Berlin. There was every conceivable nationality present in an enormous ballroom in one of the mansions in town. Something had to spoil it and, yes, they managed it again. A film company arrived to record how much the foreigners were enjoying life in Berlin. I can imagine how many cinemas would be showing the film within a week.

Thursday, 1st january 1942

We had to work on New Year's day (1942), unloading wagons full of sand. We were offered overtime for the work, and if we worked till lunchtime we would still be paid for the full eight hours. I should have known better than to trust them. It took us till 5 p.m. to move the frozen sand. After that I did no more work. The German boss was purple with rage and threatened me twice more with the police. "Shit on you," I told him, "I just want out of this dump as soon as possible." He told me that when van der Velde came back I would be out faster than I came in. In the meanwhile another thief was active in our barracks and had been caught. This was all unknown to us until he was put on a table in the canteen and forced to admit to us all that he was a thief and had stolen money as well as our bread. A howl went up from us all and we made a dive for the table, but the Police whisked him away before we could get our hands on him.

When van der Velde returned from leave with the rest of the gang, the food got worse than ever. We didn't even get bunker soup offered to us because we had tipped it out into the food tent a couple more times. The minute I saw van der Velde I tackled him about my leaving, but he flatly refused. However, the next day I got it! The German boss had obviously had a lot to tell van der Velde and he was rigid with rage. "You leave tomorrow," he told me. "Thank you boss," I said, and turned on my heel and hot footed it back to the barracks, via the nearest bar, where I celebrated in true style.

When I got back to the barracks there was a letter waiting for me from my brother Jan. He was working in Batenow and the very next day I caught the train to pay him a visit. He had cooked my favourite Dutch meal, with lots of fresh bread to go with it. I ate until my stomach was full, the first time in six weeks, and stayed the night in his barrack room. The following day I made my way back to Berlin.

I reported to the employment office for a new job and as luck would have it they had one for me. It was for a furniture maker, and there was a room there for me. The owner's wife ran a tobacconist shop, so I also had my smokes. The boss's wife collected my ration coupons and I started work. I was now officially a private employee.

It came as a shock to realize that the boss's wife was not going to provide me with my meals, and I had to eat in restaurants. The food was excellent, but expensive, and I was not earning that much. I worked 48 hours a week from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. When the income tax, cost of my room and the restaurant meals were deducted, there was nothing left over. Not much of a boss upon reflection, but I decided that I had a good roof over my head and enough money for good food, so I should be content. It would do until something better came along.

The evenings were spent with the family in their sitting room listening to the radio. I couldn't sit in my room as there was no heating and it was 25 degrees below freezing. Many evenings they had hordes of visitors. When they knew I was Dutch, the first thing they asked was if I had coffee beans. I explained that life in Holland was as bad as in Germany. They had been fed propaganda that we lived the life of old Reilly in spite of the war. They were sick and tired of the war, and they cursed Hitler and all that he was doing to the German people.
My new boss was very nice to me for the first week, and we worked together well. But by the end of the second week things began to change. He wanted to pay me less money and work longer hours. I refused, and asked for my papers to leave. I was sick and tired of Berlin and just

wanted to go home. He agreed, but as it was Saturday, I would normally have had to wait until Monday to get my travel papers stamped and collect my visa. However I tried to persuade them to stamp my papers right away. The agent screamed at me that all the Dutch should be tossed into the sea with their ears cut off, but I just pretended I couldn't understand him. In the end they relented and I made a hasty departure while it was safe.

Saturday, 18th July 1942

I arrived back in Holland for a well earned rest. But this was not to be for long. I was soon rounded up and shipped out to Germany. This time it was to West Falen. Total shambles greeted me there. We arrived late in the day, in the pitch black, with no lights anywhere, and were shown into a camp barracks which housed 2000 men. There were no lights in the barracks either. We had to collect our equipment in the dark. With my arms full of bedding and pots and pans, I plunged into a deep crater, and it took me fifteen minutes to retrieve all my bits and pieces.

Although the next day was a Sunday, our rest day, we were taken to our new work. It was the enormous Heidrierwerken in Scholven. The site was many kilometers square, but was totally camouflaged, and a great distance from the main road. It was just like a city in itself. I was delegated to a group of sand shifters. So much for my carpentry again.
The site was an hour's walk from our camp. The French and Russian prisoners of war were delivered and collected by buses, but we had to walk. When we arrived back at camp in the evening we had to stand in a queue for two hours to get our evening meal.... potatoes in their skins and half cooked vegetables that hadn't even been washed. Most of the potatoes were so rotten you couldn't eat them.

At least the men in the barracks were fun to be with, and we got our cigarette ration without any bother. If we ran short, the Belgians always seemed to have an endless supply. I was put to work with a group of Germans and designated to fetch their lunch from the site canteen. Our soup was dishwater, but needless to say the German rations were a lot better. I used to collect four German lunches, which were pencil written on a scrap of paper. It wasn't too much of an effort to change the 4 to a 5, and I was able to have a decent meal, hastily eaten on the way back to site!

In West Falen there were thousands of prisoners of war, from all countries, but the biggest group were Russians. The Poles got the biggest beatings. I don't know if they were given any food, but is wouldn't have been much. There were a couple of Poles working in our camp and they used to empty the dustbins every night looking for scraps. We were hungry too, and the only food they were liable to find in the bins were rotten potatoes, hair from the camp barber and the sweepings from the floor. They would always be found by the bins, ramming their mouths full of whatever they could find.

There were hundreds of prisoners of war in our camp, all dressed in black. They were not soldiers but were volunteers who had tried to escape. We were not allowed to talk to them, but once, when passing them, we heard a Dutchman begging for a cigarette. We were not allowed to give them anything, but we got into the habit of walking past and casually dropping our lighted cigarettes on the ground, where they were hastily picked up. All prisoners from the jails in Germany were forced to work, even the women. I once saw a group of German women,

about fifty or so, and they were all murderesses, and severely punished. It was eerie watching those sad faces as they passed by, all dressed in black and all with clogs on. Germany is just one big prison if you ask me.

We were only in that camp for three weeks before we were moved to Wanne Eickel by bus. When we first saw the camp we were terrified. It was completely surrounded by two meter high barbed wire fences. We naturally thought they intended to keep us locked up, but quickly discovered it was also home to Russian political prisoners. We were free to come and go as we pleased, but we had to pass the guards at the gate and that meant we couldn't smuggle anything into the camp that we had managed to buy from the farmers. The biggest surprise was the way they took care of us. Good food three times a day, full quota of cigarettes and even a tot of cognac each night. We thought we had come from hell and right into paradise. The food was paradise, but the air raids were hell. Sometimes there were six air raids during each day and night. I didn't dare go to bed at night. It sounded as though the world was coming to an end, and I was just waiting for a bomb to land on our barracks with my name on it. The first evening I stood there shaking with fright, but after a few weeks I got used to laying in bed and listening to the ground to air defenses shooting into the night. The area was ripe for bombing because of the number of factories and coal mines in the area.

We were put to work in a coal mine, as they needed an extra factory building. We had two bosses, a German and a Dutchman. The German gave us one instruction and the Dutchman gave us another. The German returned and accused us of sabotage, and so it went on. The Dutchman eventually disappeared and we were left alone with the German. We were expected to work ten hours a day, and fortunately the coal mine was only a 20 minute walk from our camp. The food was okay at first, although it was only the same old soup, and it quickly got boring. The cigarette ration soon dried up, but luckily the Belgians always had a good supply to sell to us.

The Russian political prisoners were billeted in our barracks and ate in the same canteen. It made us sick to our stomachs to see the way these people were mishandled each and every day. It all happened right in front of our eyes. We would be eating in the canteen and the Russians had to file in one by one, remove the cap from their shaved heads and queue up for their meal. If they made a wrong move they were beaten to a pulp with wooden truncheons. Their fellow prisoners used to dive under the tables to escape the eye of the warder.
At the end of a meal, if some of the prisoners had worked particularly well, they were allowed an extra bowl of soup. However, they couldn't wait to get outside and escape the eye of the prison warden. This particular day they were pressing against the mesh gate that covered the door of the canteen. The warden let a few through but slammed the fence back in the faces of the rest, whereupon the wardens started beating the faces to pulp that were pressed up against the wire. This sort of thing happens every day in one way or another. Some of the prisoners are only children, but they escape nothing that is being dealt out. A boy of 14 had his spine smashed by one of the wardens. He was so badly hurt that he walked with this face nearly touching the ground. One day they took him out and shot him because he couldn't work anymore.

Whole families are brought to the camp - men, women and children. One day three girls came. They were totally hysterical and lay on the ground screaming. In the end the police had to pick them up and carry them to their barracks. It seems that the pretty ones get the heaviest work, humping 50 kilos of cement, iron girders and even mining the coal. The girls arrive at the camp

looking young and strong, but within a week, when they return from work in the evenings, clothed in men's gear and wearing clogs, they look black, lifeless and old. There is something every day to turn our stomachs and give more reason for us to grieve for them.
One of the German workers on the site began to treat me like the prisoners all around us. One day he drove me so crazy I went for him, but he was strong and got the better of me and tossed me into a deep hole. My Dutch comrades saw what happened, and pitched in to teach him a lesson. He was as nice as nine-pence after that, even when I dropped an iron girder on his foot and broke it. He didn't say a word!

With all this going on around us, we decided we couldn't put up with it a minute longer and we decided on a 'moonlight flit'. We didn't have our paperwork, but if we were caught we would probably be shot whether we had our papers or not. That night the first group of two left, and then another four, then another six. These men were going to Holland and had to leave their luggage behind to be able to walk past the guard on the gate. Now it was my turn, but my comrade and I needed our luggage, as I had decided to go to Saarbrukken to an old Dutch boss of mine. As we couldn't walk out through the gate with our luggage, we tried tossing our cases over the barbed wire fence, but each time a guard on patrol would come along. It seemed that as soon as one had passed another came along.
We decided to wait until a stormy night when it was pelting with rain before escaping. The boys remaining in the barracks had offered to help us. One of them went to the guard at the gate and told him that he was off for a beer in the village. Instead he went around the wire fence till he found one of the patrol guards and led him away from the fence on a flimsy excuse. This gave me and my comrade enough time to clamber over the fence with our cases flying over after us.

It was a ten minute walk to the tram, and we were soaked to the skin. There was a Green Policeman also waiting at the tram stop, but he said nothing... we sighed with relief. He was on his way home and probably too wet and miserable to bother with us. Twenty minutes later we dropped our cases off in Bockem Station in the left luggage office, where they would remain for a few days until we had earned enough money back at the camp for food and for the journey.

Two days later several of our mates were moving to another barracks, and we were able to give them our bags of food and work clothes to carry past the guard for us. We retrieved them on the outside and we were on our way. We picked our cases up at Bochem Station, and bought two tickets for Saarbrukken. We realized later that one should never buy a ticket to one's ultimate destination, but step by step along the route, so that the excuse of going on a few days holiday could be used. The train for Cologne was in the station waiting and we ran up the steps so as not to miss it. "HALT" we heard bellowed behind us. We turned to see two members of the state Secret Police behind us. They wanted to see our papers. We had no work discharge papers or a travel document, but just our pass and that ticket to Saarbrukken. Lies were not going to get us free.

The Police said they were going to take us to our employer in Dortmond, and as we boarded the train back to Dortmond we watched the train for Cologne pulling out of the station without us. It is with great regret that I later learned we had been betrayed by our own Dutch comrades in the barracks, and the police had been standing there waiting for us. During the ten minute train journey I was staggered to see that not one house had been left standing. They had all been bombed flat by the English. In Dortmond we were taken straight to the local

prison, and not to our boss as we were at first told. In the prison we had to give our names. All our personal belongings were taken from us - money, belt, ties, cufflinks, etc. - and put in our cases. These cases were then tossed onto a pile of about 200 other cases. We were then taken to our cell, and there we sat like a couple of murderers. We were made to sit on a wooden bench from 6 am till 7 pm. After 7 pm we were allowed to lie down. When we tried to lie down during the day we were beaten with a wooden pole. When we asked how long we were going to be held, we were beaten again, and that was our only answer each time we asked a question.

To help pass the time we made a draughts board from the blackout curtain, but eventually we were too scared to get it out in case we were beaten again. We had been in prison for twelve days. We chalked the days up on the wall with a piece of stone. On the thirteenth day we were collected from our cell. We thought - "We are free" - wrong again! We were bundled into a police van en route for the headquarters of the Gestapo. With us were 3 Russians, 2 Polish, 3 Germans and 2 French girls. We were all going to be questioned by the Gestapo.
When it was my turn I talked my head off, pleading that it was all a misunderstanding, and that as my comrade spoke no German, I was pleading for him also. I told him we were volunteer workers on our way to a new boss. I guess he believed me and we had to sign a paper promising we would work well and not try to run away again. In return for signing he promised we would be free very soon.

It wasn't as soon as I had hoped! The days were long as we waited, my ears straining to hear our cell number mentioned outside. One day the door opened and I sprung to my feet expecting to be led out, but in walked a German General with his son. I guessed him to be about 12 years of age. They stood in front of me, the guard was screaming at me to state my name and rank, but the General realized that I was not military and didn't quite know what to do. I greeted him to a "Good Morning" in Dutch, and for my trouble I got an almighty slap around the head, and I thought it was coming apart. My comrade got the same treatment because he was still laying on his bed. That is the kind of bastards the Germans are. Although they may not know who you are or what you've done, they just lash out anyway.

Eight days after the interview by the Gestapo we were taken out of the prison, but not to be freed. We were put into yet another police van that was already full to bursting of Russians and brought to Herna and another prison. We were the only two Dutchmen among hundreds of Russians, and we were all packed into one large cell. What a degradation that was. There were no toilets and everyone was forced to use the floor. The smell was so diabolical that it was difficult to draw one's breath.

There were iron beds with a strong coarse sheet of hessian laid on them and we were expected to sleep on the iron grid. We rolled our jackets up to act as a pillow and our coats doubled up as a blanket. Before the 6 am breakfast we had to walk in circles around the exercise yard, but if you stopped for a second you were set upon by Russians with sticks who had been appointed as wardens to punish their own men. Most of the Russians had the most horrifying wounds on their faces and bodies.

The following morning my comrade and I, along with two Russians, were detailed to clean up the basement cell we were using. As we emptied the piles of excrement into the bins we spied two men walking along. We recognized our two Dutch bosses and immediately started screaming for help. The Russian set upon us with a stick, and we were back inside before we

could attract their attention. As luck would have it they had come to get us free. That evening we were out of the prison, after having been there for 21 days.

When we arrived back in the barracks we were warmly welcomed by our old work mates who had stayed behind, and they sympathized with us over the imprisonment. They were going off on leave the following day and their cases were packed and ready to go. Originally there were 50 of us that came to these barracks, and now there will be only six of us left. We learned that the group of four that escaped a few days before us were picked up and had also spent time in the prison. They had been there for 16 days and returned to camp with shaved heads. I guess we were luckier. They were due for home leave in two weeks, but we had to wait for four weeks.

The food had improved since we had been away. I guess they figured that it was more likely we might stay around if the food was better. At last the time came for some home leave and I had a great time in Amsterdam. I had a steady girlfriend there and it was good to be able to spend time with her.
Soon it was back to the employment office, where I requested a transfer, which I got. It's a good job they gave me a transfer, because I had no intention of going back to Wanne Eickel, as no Dutchmen ever went back there and I would be the only one there. All the arrangements were sorted out satisfactorily and I was off to Zweckel this time. When I arrived I was greeted by my old comrade and was pleasantly surprised to see the small but good barracks. Even the food was great. And if this wasn't enough, I got a job as a carpenter in a sawmill next to the coal mines in Zweckel. The money was good too, and it stayed that way. The food supply took a nose dive when our camp had to house 300 Ukrainians. We had to down tools in the sawmill in order to build extra barracks for them, but life still remained good.

At one stage we had to build prison barracks for 600 Russian prisoners of war. It went against all my principles to have to build prisons for the Germans, but we didn't have a choice, we just had to get on with it. We had to put bars at the windows and surround the barracks with barbed wire. The food even improved in the weeks that we played host to the soldiers billeted in the camp. Every day the camp bosses trouped off to the station to pick up the expected Russian P.O.W's., and each day they came back empty handed. The one day that they decided not to bother anymore was the one day the prisoners did arrive, accompanied by another troupe of soldiers!

The following week I saw acts of brutality to the prisoners that turned the stomach. How was it possible that human beings could treat other human beings in such a way. Prisoners were handed truncheons and expected to deal out punishment to their own people. When punishment was metered out, the prisoner was stripped to the waist and if their countrymen didn't beat him hard enough, the soldiers took over and beat him to a pulp before your eyes. I once saw 20 Russians beaten one after the other and all because they didn't form an orderly queue for their meal. You could hear their screams on the other side of the camp. The group of 20 looked like skeletons after about a week. They were all expected to work 900 meters deep in the coal mines. I heard from one of our gang that they were dying on their feet. I was mighty glad when the barracks were completed and I could get out to the sawmill again.

The bombs were still flying around our ears, day and night. One night the air raid warning seemed more insistent than before and I decided to go to the shelter. I am glad I did. A British bomber plane landed the most magnificent direct hit I have ever seen. He took out an 18

carriage munitions train with beautiful precision, and he even managed to take out a lot of the surrounding area in the attempt. The night sky was flame-colored from all the fires as far as the eye could see.

It's Christmas 1942 and I am back in Amsterdam on leave. There's no place like 'mokum'.

CHAPTER 2 - Bombardments

Mid-1944 - one and a half years later

For the past one and a half years I have kept this diary buried in my house in Amsterdam, where no one would find it. If it got into the wrong hands it would be too dangerous for me. At the moment I am back home in Amsterdam. As I have to wait a month before I leave again, I have decided to dig it up from it's hiding place and tell you a few tales about Hofrika. The reason I have this free time is that my denture was being repaired and the dentist's surgery got a direct hit, so now I have to wait for a new one to be made. I regret that I have forgotten a lot of what has gone on in the last 18 months, but some things stick out in my memory for different reasons.

The British Air Force was getting tougher by the day, and even I decided that it was time to spend more time in the shelters. One evening the Germans gave us a bottle of Schnapps. We later learned that they only gave foreigners Schnapps when they knew that danger was imminent. Mind you I think the Schnapps was more dangerous to us than any bomb. It was rough, and highly flammable.
We had a bloke in our barracks by the name of Karel Holsteeg. I can only describe his face as being like a bulldog. One night we got him drunk on the Schnapps, and when he was almost comatose, we painted him from head to foot to look like an Indian warrior. We than paraded him round all the other barracks and then tied him to a flagpole in the yard. In one of the other barracks a fight had broken out among the Italian contingent. The air raid siren started screaming and before we could get Karel untied, the all clear sounded. We were just dragging him back to his bed when the bombs started falling round the camp. Terrified, we fled to the shelter. Just as we got to the doorway of the shelter, a blast of air from a dropped bomb shot us inside like bullets.

When we dared to take a peek outside, it was to see 11 of the barracks burning, the flames leaping up into the night. We made a dash to see if any of the men were still inside, but later heard they had all dived into the forest for cover. We worked with the camp fire fighters for fours to rescue what we could from the barracks, but it was impossible to get very close without being singed. I was totally incensed when I heard that a bunch of Hollanders had gone on a rampage and looted the barracks that had escaped the bombs and fire. Whole barracks had been cleaned out of money, cigarettes, food and possessions.

The canteen was in flames and was full of cigarettes, bread, beer, kegs of wine and much more. I checked with the camp commander if we should try and save as much as we could, and he agreed. He even supplied us with a sledgehammer to smash open the locked doors.
When we had broken open the door of the cellar it was obvious we couldn't go any further, so we formed a chain and all the supplies were tossed up the stairs to the outside in double quick time. Loose cigarettes were quickly scooped up and stashed in our pockets. I saw my comrade disappearing in the direction of our barracks rolling a keg of wine in front of him. When I got back to the barracks and emptied my pockets, I had 400 cigarettes, and hid them in the ceiling safe I had created. I must admit to this looting, but this looting was not from my comrades, but from the Germans. They hadn't done me any favors.

All of a sudden we panicked when we realized that we had forgotton all about Karel in the uproar. He was nowhere to be found, so we immediately set off to find him. There he was, still

drunk and painted up as an Indian, rolling round the camp directing the fire fighting operations, even to the tune of poking the Germans in the back and telling them to work faster. They didn't even react. They thought that some mad man had gotten into the camp. We hustled him away before they got wise to him.
When he discovered that he had missed out on the plundering of the cigarette supply he was furious and went to the camp police to complain that, although he had done most of the fire fighting (he never lifted a finger), he hadn't even had a cigarette as thanks. They gave him a packet. The police also came round to thank us for our help and gave us a packet of cigarettes as thanks. If they only knew!

Before we could put out the rest of the flames, the British Air Force was back with as much power as before. This time, however, they were shooting at us. We had to leave the fire fighting activities and dive for shelter. The large barracks next to ours is home to about 1000 Russian political prisoners. Men with wives and children, young girls and boys all alone and about 20 babies. Most of the babies had unknown fathers, and the mothers were little more than children themselves. Because the Russians were starving, the girls would oblige any man around in return for a crust of bread. A lot of the men they went with were of other nationalities, even German. As a carpenter I was kept busy building cradles for the babies.
The barracks next to the political prisoners was home to the Russian P.O.Ws. As luck would have it they were moved the day before a bomb made a direct hit on the camp and their barracks in particular. If they hadn't been moved, 1000 men would have been wiped out in a flash.

When we all returned from the shelters the next day, it was to discover that a year's work had been wiped out overnight. My boss was in tears. We had to start all over again.
Not long after that, we had home leave again, and I was invited by "The Bulldog" to visit his house one night. His family was just as weird as he was. They sat around the table all night telling ghost stories. They have an attic where they store oak beams for use in the future. At night the noise from the attic is horrendous, just as if the oak beams were being shunted around, but when someone would go to investigate, the beams would be where they should be and all would go quiet. However, the minute they went back downstairs, the noise would start all over again. They told of weird happenings in the local church yard and 'grave' stories. A total bunch of loonies.

Having said all that, he did have a lovely sister, but she was just as queer as the others. I asked her out and she accepted on the condition that there would be no kissing or touching, because she didn't like it. I was only allowed to walk arm in arm, and not hold hands. Like brother, like sister, so I guess I won't be adding a bulldog to my family.

My leave was over much too quickly, and there was no chance of staying in Amsterdam. I would be rounded up before nightfall. My return to Zweckel was greeted with the air raid siren, and a couple of bombs aimed at the housing estates. Although the bombardment wasn't nearly as bad as in Berlin or Cologne, it still terrifies the living daylights out of the population every time the siren starts wailing. Each night I have to hurry home, collect my bowl of soup, drink it quickly before the sirens start.

The lights go out the minute the siren sounds and there you sit in the pitch black, grabbing and packing meagre possessions and bedding before making your way to the shelter. We were not allowed to stay in the barracks ever since the last bomb started fires. The Germans trip over

their feet running for the shelters in an effort to be first. Many of the Germans spend the night in the shelters whether there is an alarm or not. Each night we see them dragging their bedding, prams and pushchairs and screaming kids. The next morning we watch them dragging the whole mess back again. How long will they stick it out, I wonder.

I hadn't been long back from leave when Gelsenberg, close to our camp, was bombarded, and 48 Flemish men were killed outright. They had arrived from Belgium just two hours before the bomb fell, and were in the barracks unpacking their bags and settling in. I went to look at the disaster area, and all that remained was a pile of rubble. What a horrible way to meet your Maker. All the Belgians in the area were asked to attend the funeral in their blue work overalls, and they all did so.

Zweckel was getting its fair share of bombing, and we were asked to tour the houses still standing and see what we could do to help with the repairs. The faces of those people will remain with me forever. They stood there wringing their hands and looking at their roofless, windowless homes. Some didn't even have a home anymore. The Russian prisoners of war were employed in clearing the rubble of demolished houses, or replacing the tiles on remaining houses. The gruel they lived on didn't give them the energy needed for these tasks, and their progress was slow. I felt guilty that when we entered a house to start repairs, we received good food and drink from the owners in the hope that we would work harder and finish the work quickly.

I would walk into a house with my tool kit and ask the lady of the house if she needed repair work. Her face would light up. In this particular house she and her husband and children were trying to sleep in rooms with no windows or doors and were freezing to death. At another house there was a very sick child and my first job was to put glass in the windows of the bedroom. At another house they told me not to bother because they would be killed before the week was out anyway.
I listened to one and all, sad and sorry stories and manic depression, and the acceptance that they would probably not live much longer. Hitler has a lot to answer for. He should come and see what he has done to his own people, never mind the people he had declared war on. I was able to help many, many people in these devastated streets and in return they fed me well and pressed cigarettes into my hand. Many gave me ration coupons also.

At one of the houses there was a girl who kept asking me to take her out. I took her up on the offer and we had a few nights out, but when she realized that I didn't have pockets full of Dutch goodies to give her, she dropped me like a stone. Another woman I visited had lost more than 50 kilos in weight in the last 18 months, all the result of nerves. She showed me a photograph of herself before....a happy, fat woman without a care in the world. Now she was skinny, with hanging folds of skin and enormous bags under her eyes. She had been in the hospital in Gladbeck when it had received a direct hit. There were more than a hundred people killed as a result. In the cellar where she had lain, several were killed outright. They had sent her home immediately, but two days later her house was hit too, taking out all the doors and windows. Just listening to her gave me an attack of the nerves. The hell of war was never more painful.

On one occasion I was working in the house of a young couple with two small children. Her husband was a miner and worked nights. I finished the house on the Saturday morning and she and her sister were busy cleaning up. The sister was 19 years of age and asked me to stay and

help with the clearing up. I was free that afternoon so I agreed. I also offered to make pancakes and chocolate milk for the evening meal, and they agreed. We had a really enjoyable evening and I was a regular guest. At a certain moment I realized it was time to stop. The mother was a nervous wreck as a result of the bombardments, and at meal times she would ram the food into the children's mouths till they gagged. She used to beat them for no reason at all. She was in a terrible state with hands that shook like leaves in the wind. One day she appeared with a cat-o-nine tails and started laying into the children. I took it off her, comforted the children and walked out of the house never to return.

CHAPTER 3 - Concentration Camp

10th June 1945 (16 months later)

I can once again pick up my diary. I am home on leave.

Last year on the 18th March 1944 I was also on leave and decided to see a film in the local flea pit. I shall never forget the film. It was called "Dawn", but for me it was sunset. When the film finished and the lights went up, we gasped in shock. The whole theater was sealed off by the Green Police. No escape. They told the men to remain sitting and the women were asked to leave. When the women were gone, we were called into the Hall, one by one. There an officer sat on a stool in front of an open cellar door, and requested to see our papers. Old men and young boys were allowed out of the theater, but the rest, me included, disappeared into the cellar. The women remained outside the doors looking in and calling to their men. For several women the emotion was too much and they fainted clean away.

When the Police had finished their filtering process, there were about 75 men in the cellar. I wasn't too afraid because I had valid papers. After a while they removed half of us, and a little later it was my turn. There were police vans waiting for us outside and we were loaded into them and taken to the Europestraat. There we were interviewed - but 'interviewed' is not the right word - as we were brought before the commandant and told whether you were to be sent home or remain there. He had decided beforehand, and kept our papers.
Of the 75 men, 68 were allowed home and 7 remained. I was one of the seven. When I was called they accused me of hiding from the regime. I disagreed and told him that my papers were in order, but he just shook his head and told me to get back in line. I felt the blood draining from my face. One minute you're in the cinema and the next minute you're a prisoner. We were loaded back into the police vans and at 2:30 a.m. we arrived at the prison on the Amstelveenseweg. The minute we walked in we were pounced upon by Dutch SS, brats of 18 years old, who spun us around to face the wall and gave us an almighty kick up the backside that brought tears to my eyes.

We were told to turn around when our name was called. Then we had to removed our socks, ties, collars, belts, etc. as if we were murderers or something, and were led away one by one to separate cells that were up three flights of iron stairs. I was shoved into a cell and a heavy door was slammed behind me. I found myself in a two-man cell with cold stone walls. Four men were laying on straw mattresses on the ground, rubbing sleep from their eyes as though the slamming of the door indicated that it was time to get up. There was one straw mattress over and I let myself slump down on it, planning suicide at the first possible moment. I was devastated at what was happening to me and scared senseless at what was going to happen. The four men stared at me for a while and then began to ask me what I had done and how I had been picked up. Their concern raised my spirits a little and I told them the story. In response they told me theirs.

The first was a butcher on the Amstelveenseweg. He was about 60, and he had sold meat on the black market and got four years. The second was a man of about 30 and he worked for Fokker, building aircraft. Without asking permission, he had taken five days off work to nurse his sick wife. When he returned to work he was arrested and thrown in jail. The third member was a boy of 18 who was accused of sabotage in a factory.

The fourth member had been in hiding, and when he was warned that the Police were on their way to arrest him, he dived out the back door. He was spotted and the Police began shooting at him. Unfortunately they hit a young girl instead. He dived into another house and out the back door, over the fences, through gardens and over roofs. It was only when he tripped and fell into a canal that the Police caught up with him. They bundled him into a car and drove away along the street where he lived. Unseen by the Police, he managed to toss a wallet with 3000 gilders out of the car to his father who was standing in front of their house.

I didn't sleep much that first night and it was 7 a.m. when a ram on the door indicated it was time to get up. We first had to pile the mattresses on top of one another with the bedding folded neatly and laid on top of them, and then we were given a small bucket of water with which to wash. Coffee and two slices of stale bread followed. Then it was time to clean the cell and wait till we were let out for exercise at 11 a.m. At 12 midday we received a meal from the Red Cross. Not bad at all, and then it was time to sit again. Sitting in a cell and waiting for who knows what is soul destroying. Our evening meal was four slices of bread and we had to be in bed by 9 p.m. That was the daily routine, day in and day out.

Sometimes of an evening we had the company of one of the Dutch SS 'children'. He would lurch into the cell, drunk out of his mind, and start tapping on the cell wall with his key. It's strictly forbidden in the prison to communicate between cells in this way, and when he got a reply from the next cell he dived in there and carted the culprit off to the punishment cell. I was never there, but I heard some horror stories that made my blood run cold. The 18 year old boy was released a week later, and was he ever happy. His face said it all. We felt sad it was not one of us. Four days later a young boy was brought in. He had been beaten hard and long until he confessed to being Jewish.

The very next morning we were woken up at 4 a.m. and made to stand in the corridor. There must have been about 250 standing there. Our personal possessions were returned to us and we were once more made to face the wall and the little bastards of the Dutch SS were let loose to beat us up at will. We were led outside to the courtyard and made to wait. I was given my first cigarette in weeks and it made me dizzy and it really didn't taste good at all. The massive entrance doors were opened and revealed a row of trams in an area that had been sealed off. Outside the area were thousands of people waiting. They had been tipped off by the Red Cross that we were being transported to Amersfoort. The Red Cross were brilliant in all they did for the prisoners, giving us food packages in the prison which kept us alive. We were marched out through the gates onto the trams, which set off in the direction of the Weteringschans to pick up 250 men from a detention center there, and then we carried on to Central Station. Five hundred prisoners were escorted by 300 Amsterdam Police. These police must have been the biggest black market racketeers that ever walked on the face of the earth. Their pockets were stuffed full of tobacco and cigarettes, which they tried to sell to us at exorbitant prices. They wanted our ration books, telling us that we wouldn't be needing them where we were going. I was offered a packet of cigarettes for my book, and when I agreed and handed it over, all I got was one cigarette. Our own countrymen ripping us off. A sad day.

We were put on a train and taken to Amersfoort station, from where we walked for half an hour, five abreast, surrounded by rows of policemen. When we reached the camp, we were marched through the double doors into the "Rose Garden" as it was named. We had all heard of the "Rose Garden" of Amersfoort. It sent shivers down my spine. It was used for torturing prisoners. It is a rectangle of ground, surrounded by barbed wire. It was at the front of the

parade ground where the morning head count of prisoners took place. The whole camp was surrounded by a double barbed wire fence at least six meters high, and in between the two fences were enormous rolls of barbed wire. If you managed to scale the first fence you had to get through the rolls of barbed wire before you reached the second fence ..... totally impossible.

The first hours that we were made to stand in the Rose Garden were for me in particular the worst. I had eaten eight apples from my Red Cross box, one after the other because I was so hungry, but I was now in trouble. I needed to use the toilet and there was none available. Later in the day they brought a bucket into the area and we all made a dive for it, and as I was further away, I still had to wait for ages before I could get near it. When I finally got possession of it I could hardly do what I wanted because they were trying to pull me off again. All this was watched by the prisoners in the exercise yard, with sad faces and shaved heads. The camp commander had rounded up a simple tradesman from the village that stood outside the camp watching the inmates. He was instructed to stone anyone who tried to urinate outside of the designated bucket. One of the younger men was in such need that he urinated in a corner of the yard and was immediately stoned by the tradesman. The commander grabbed him by the neck and frog marched him off to a hut on the side of the compound. The poor lad was forced to lean over a chair and he received 25 lashes on his bare bottom. It was supposed to be a lesson for us.

The exercise yard was full of other prisoners, with their heads shaved and their pale faces watching us. They frantically screamed questions at us and we shouted back with questions for them. We threw them cigarettes and chunks of bread, but they dared not pick them up for fear of a beating. Many of the lads were so hungry and longing for a cigarette that they decided to risk it, but they were severely beaten. We turned away, no longer able to watch what was obviously in store for us.

As the afternoon wore on we were taken out of the infamous yard, one by one, and into a wooden hut. It was evening before my turn came to be called. Once in the hut I was stripped of all my possessions yet again, my name was entered in the books and I was given my prison number. From there I was sent to the clothing hut, where I was made to strip naked, and my clothes were put into a paper bag and my prison number written on it. In another part of the hut I was given clogs and foot cloths before being marched out into the cold, still as naked as the day I was born.

I was taken to a barracks and through an open window that had wooden steps in front of it. Once through the window I found myself in the wash room where 50 other naked men stood against the wall. When there were 75 of us lined up, the window was closed and a doctor arrived to inspect us. He appeared to be looking for lice. If he found any, then the man was made to stand on a wooden bench, where he was soaped and shaved of every hair on his body. After that process, it was time for a bath and the issue of underpants with long legs and vests. The underpants I received could be safely tucked under my chin and the vest practically reached to my toes.

We were once again shunted outside, where a huge collection of old, lice ridden, military uniforms had been piled high. The whole process had been a waste of time. We had to scramble to find the best items that fitted and I ended up with a pair of trousers that ended high above my ankles and a jacket with no buttons on it. The process of head shaving was

postponed till the next day and we were led to our barracks. I was put in a large stone barracks which housed 600 men, with three tiered bunk beds. The barracks were divided into four sections, and each section had a head honcho. He was responsible for the supply of food and to see that we appeared at roll call each morning in an orderly fashion. He had a truncheon that ensured a speedy response to his orders. I was given a bed and a blanket and decided that I had had more than enough for one day and went straight to bed.

Little did I know that they had an 8 pm bed roll call. I had only just fallen asleep when I was woken up again. I had to stick my bare feet out of the bed and a German SS'er filed past checking they were clean. If they were not, the punishment was a beating or made to do push ups all night long. It was half an hour before I could go back to sleep and I was exhausted. Less then three hours later I was woken up yet again for another bed count. This time we had to stand next to our beds while we were counted. They must have counted us ten times before they left. We were then made to stand for another hour before they came back and said we could go back to bed.
I asked the head man why we had the last roll call, and if it was done every night. He said it was not every night, but very often, simply because the Germans couldn't count. Tonight they thought they were missing six prisoners, and once they thought they had more prisoners than they should have had.

We were not given food in the mornings, but were given a piece of bread the night before, and that had to do for breakfast as well. Nobody saved the bread, firstly because they were too hungry, and secondly it would have been nicked from under your pillow while you slept.
Roll call was at 7 am, and if you didn't spring out of bed the minute the bell rang, the truncheons came into action, and oh how they loved the chance to beat the living daylight out of us. I'm not talking of the Germans, I'm talking of my own countrymen, prisoners like me. They volunteer for the job and receive perks in return. The better they perform the more perks.

The roll call was carried out on the large parade ground. Each barrack formed a separate block. We were lined up in rows, and if the line was crooked, look out!. When this was done, a tall, skinny bloke of about 25 years old arrived to inspect us. Cap off, cap on, eyes right, eyes left, stand to attention, and then stand easy. When the call for stand to attention came, all thousand prisoners were expected to slap the heels of their clogs together in total unison. If not, then it was repeated till it was right. The commandant then arrived with a list in his hand, and block by block we had to count down ourselves, turn to our neighbor and scream our number in his ear. If you didn't scream loud enough or forgot the number, it earned you a boot in the backside and a trip to the Rose Garden, where you spent the rest of the day calling out the number till your voice gave up.

After this roll call, there was a work roll call. When a command was given the entire population broke ranks and after about five minutes of what seemed like walking around in circles, groups began to form, all of different sizes. The men who had gone underground and the contract breakers worked outside the camp in Amersfoort or Soesterberg, but the political prisoners who had a red circle of material sewn on the back of their jackets, were not allowed to leave the camp and were forced to chop wood and do gymnastics all day. There were vicars and priests among this group and we called them the red balls.
The first day, those of us who had just arrived were singled out, as we still had long hair. We were instructed to get our heads shaved and do gymnastics and marching for the rest of the

day. What a day that was, marching between the barracks, left, right, left, right, caps on, caps off, backwards and forwards all morning. At the end of that morning most of us were in desperate need of a W.C., but when we asked if we could be excused, all hell broke loose. We were forced back onto the main parade ground and they set about us with those truncheons. It was nothing to see a bloke with a hole in his head and the blood streaming down his face and neck. On top of that we were forced to spend the rest of the day doing gymnastics, without a jacket and naked to the waist. We had to stay outside whatever the weather, and only allowed inside for the miserable bowl of gruel at 12 o'clock.

That was the way we spent our time in Amersfoort, day in, day out. The long roll calls three times a day were a nightmare, they seemed to take forever. The evening sessions were the worst. They took hours, and when it didn't go properly you started to shake from terror because they could make you stand out there in the freezing cold for the rest of the evening, and if necessary half the night as well. It wasn't unusual to see a prisoner faint clean away from total exhaustion.
There was one roll call when I was standing in the second row. Without any warning, the chap in front of me fell forward, face down on the ground. His teeth broke off and flew in every direction. As the roll call was still in progress, he was left on the ground for another hour. When we were disbanded, the SS bastards walked over to him and kicked him in the head a few times before we were allowed to drag him away to the camp hospital. I've lost count of the number of men dragged to the hospital, only to die the same day. There were also cases of men collapsing on the ground and lying there with their legs and arms shuddering, before going very quiet for a while, then standing up as if nothing had happened.

On the third day of my stay I was allocated to a group of 75 men and an outside job in Amaf, a machinery factory in Amersfoort. As we marched out of the entrance, we learned that it was guarded by a Dutch traitor and torturer, and we had to take our caps off as we passed him. It was a three quarters of an hour walk to the factory, and we had to march in formation, singing our heads off. Not because we were happy, but because we had to, and if we didn't, the truncheons would encourage us to do better. The first day we were very new to the marching business, and oh how they rained those blows down on us. We marched through Amersfoort and the population stood and stared as we passed by. No one laughing, no one poking fun at our shaved heads or uniforms, just sad faced men and crying women. If they saw a chance, they pressed things into our hands.

It was a relief when we arrived at the factory. At least I had some work to concentrate on and it passed the time, but above all they fed you two slices of bread in the mornings and a decent sized warm meal at midday. The first day in the factory there was a party organized for the personnel, not for us of course, but for the staff. Normally we wouldn't see the rest of the staff as they were instructed to keep well away from us. But this particular day we had to stand up in front of a whole gathering and sing three songs. I have never been more embarrassed in my whole life, standing there with my shaved head and ill fitting clothes.

At 5 o'clock it was time to march back to the camp, but halfway there we had to leave the road and walk into the wood, sit down in a half circle, and get singing lessons. One of the group was singled out to be the conductor, and we were taught songs which we had to learn by heart before we left the woods. When the singing was over, men were picked at random and they had to stand up in front and tell dirty jokes and a few other disgusting performances, that I don't even want to tell you about. When this was all over, the command was given to be on

the road and to line up in ten seconds - something that was practically impossible. If it didn't happen, then we had to sit down and then try it again, again and again until it worked.
One of their favorite tricks was to make us lie on our stomachs and use our elbows to propel us forward. Legs had to be dragged behind us, not used. I've known the day when we had to return to camp on our elbows. Utter torture. I've also seen the day when we were made to squat, sitting on our heals, with our arms outstretched, for as long as half an hour. Just five minutes and you've had it.

Once back in the camp it was time for the evening roll call. This lasted sometimes for hours. When that was over there was little time to rest before the 8 pm roll call. Then if that went off without a hitch, it was time to collapse in bed until the next morning.

I had worked in the factory for about a week when I was called to report for transport to Germany. Oh, what a feeling of joy welled up inside me. I was now a free man and back to Germany to work. What a bitter disappointment when I later discovered that this was not the case. Apparently, when you have been called for transportation, it can take all of ten days before you leave, and meanwhile you have to remain inside camp until called for. So it was back to the marching, gymnastics and truncheon dodging. One morning I sneaked off to the W.C. barrack and was followed by a few others. Unfortunately we were spotted and they were waiting for us at the door. We had to leave the barrack through a barrage of truncheons and, although I took an almighty jump to clear the door, I still managed to get a black eye. The chaps still inside were beaten black and blue whilst sitting on the pot with their trousers around their ankles. One of the chaps was so badly beaten his face swelled up to twice the size, and if that was not enough he was made to stand in the Rose Garden the rest of the day as an example to us all.

The worst torture I have seen was meted out to a man when his comrades discovered he was a Jew. They dragged him out of the barracks and into the Rose Garden, and there he was made to squat on his heels, arms outstretched in front of him, and pump himself up to a standing position and then squat again, and then back up. This started early in the morning and went on through the rest of the day. He fell over constantly and the SS kicked him till he was back up again. By the evening he was more dead than alive when they placed a 5 kilo rifle across his arms and made him continue. He was tortured to death before our eyes.

It was Easter Sunday, and one of the truncheon brigade was taught a lesson he will never forget - he was killed. Good news for us, but the down side was that the whole camp had to pay for it when no one owned up. That afternoon 6000 of us were lined up, five to a row, and the rows stretched around the huge parade ground in a complete circle. A young Dutch SS'er stood in the middle of the circle with a whip in his hand and made us run as hard as was possible for about ten minutes. Then at the crack of the whip, we had to fall flat on our faces in the mud and puddles, trying to avoid the clogs of the men in front of you. If your face wasn't down in the mud and water as far as it could go, then the SS'er helped by standing on your head until it was.
This went on for an hour, and then it was time for a little walking on your elbows, dragging yourself forward as fast as you could. The bastard let us do that for a half hour before making us stand up and get back into line. The SS'er then asked the person who was responsible for the death of the torturer, to step forward. Needless to say, no one was willing to sign his own death warrant by owning up. They made us do gymnastics until 10 o'clock that night, and without food we were sent straight to bed.

Nothing much happened the next few days, but the day dawned when we were to be taken out of this hell hole. As a parting shot, we were made to run naked around the parade ground for a couple of hours. Then we had to have a head inspection by one of the SS'ers, who stood on a table to judge if our heads were shaved enough, and surprise, surprise, he passed us all. We were then reunited with the clothes we arrived in. Once we had changed, we were transferred to Barracks 3, and there we had to wait until midnight for the transport. If we had stayed there much longer the lice would have eaten us alive.

Three days previously, we had filled in forms requesting our families to forward our clothes from home. The cases had arrived and were piled high in the yard outside the barracks. It was pitch black and impossible to sort one case from another. Eventually they put a spot light on the pile and we were able to find our own case. Most of us, including me, found their case. But for many of the group there was nothing. They had to leave without clothes. I couldn't wait to open my case and see if there was food or cigarettes inside, but there was nothing. Nice family I've got!

It was 2.30 am before we finally marched through the floodlit main gate, to be greeted by the sight of two long rows of police. There must have been about 400 of them, enough to tell me that this didn't look very much like imminent freedom for yours truly. Once we were through the main gate we had to be counted. They must have counted us ten times before they got it right and we could march off. This time we didn't march over the main road, but through the woods, which of course were pitch black, and many of the men decided to make a dive for freedom. Funnily enough those who were recaptured didn't even receive punishment, they were just pushed back into the line as if nothing had happened!

The march through Amersfoort also offered many of the group the chance to make a run for it, and many of them succeeded, diving into houses which were unlocked and where families were obviously waiting to help where they could. The march continued through the town to the station, where a long train was waiting for us. Amid much cursing and complaining, we were bundled into the carriages. Once the police were on board, the doors were locked behind us. Each carriage had two of the rotters to guard us. It's normal procedure, when a train of prisoners is being transported, for the Red Cross to deliver food parcels for the journey. They had done so this time, but the police and SS'ers ate the lot.

Just before the train was due to leave the station, a man arrived at the window of our carriage banging and screaming. He was one of the station staff, and the police unlocked the door to let him in. The man sprung into the carriage and his arms flew around the neck of one of our men, and they hugged each other frantically. It was his brother-in-law, and he had caught wind of the transportation. In desperation he had made his way down the full length of the train until he at last found him. He pushed a large bag into the hands of his brother-in-law and with a final embrace he was out of the train just as it was pulling away. The contents of the bag were very precious to him, but he shared the generous amount of bread, milk and cookies with his mates. There were also letters from home which brought a smile to his face.

It was a real old bone shaker of a train, and it crawled along at a snail's pace. Our carriage was blue with cigarette smoke because they wouldn't allow a window open in case we tried to make a break for it. It was dawn when we arrived in Arnhem Station and they were already busy on the platforms. We ground to a halt, but no-one was in danger of getting into our train, as one look at our 500 shaven heads would soon change their minds. We were on our way

fairly quickly, picking up speed as we left the station platform. Suddenly we heard the breaking of glass, screaming from the people on the platform and the sound of pistol shots. It turned out that a chap in the next carriage to us had broken the window and sprung out of the moving train. The police pulled the emergency stop chain which brought the train to a shuddering halt. Unfortunately the chap didn't get far, and the police brought him back to the train, once again with no punishment.

When we reached the border station of Bentheim, the train stopped and the Commandant got out to talk to the customs men. This didn't take long and soon we were on our way again, leaving Holland and once more entering this hell hole of a country, Germany. I had expected the Police to leave the train at the border as they normally do, but this time they didn't.
After a few hours the train stopped in the middle of nowhere, and we saw the train driver, the Commandant and a few policemen talking on the track beside the train. Once they got back in the train we started going backwards until the train reached a junction. We changed to another track and then we started moving forwards again. A few more times backwards and forwards, and we finally stopped at the perimeter of an air field on what was obviously a goods line. All around us were goods trains full of stones, and Italians were hard at work unloading. Guards with rifles stood on each wagon.

Here we had to disembark and stand in rows of five. It was then we seriously began to doubt if we would be freed after all. Escape was also out of the question with the air field on one side and endless stretches of open land on the other, as far as the eye could see. We were marched onto the air field and straight across it. In fact we marched for nearly an hour, and still there was no perimeter in sight, just acres of fields interspersed with concrete take off and landing strips, and a couple of planes. The whole area was peppered with bomb craters, one after the other. One of the take off strips had bomb craters along its whole length.
Eventually buildings appeared on the horizon, and as we got closer we saw barracks too, then as we got even closer, barbed wire fences appeared, indicating the end of the air field. We arrived on a road with barracks on either side, and when we saw the double row of barbed wire fences we realized there was a camp on either side, just like Amersfoort, but this time there were no rolls of barbed wire between the double fence. Three hundred of us were marched into the right hand camp and the main gate was closed and locked behind us. The other 800 men went left into the other camp, why we couldn't understand, as it was full of Italian POW's.

All three hundred of us were put in one barrack, which consisted of 10 small rooms, 30 to a room. On each side of the room stood five bunk beds, three beds high, without straw mattresses. They left us sitting there for eight hours, and as it got dark we were issued with mattresses but no blanket, and half a bowl of soup. It had been 24 hours since our last meal, which was in Amersfoort and was only a cup of soup, in barracks that were crawling with lice. We crawled into bed early. There was nothing to say to each other, and you couldn't even walk outside as it was only two steps to the barbed wire. When it was dark, the windows were locked and heavy roller blinds were pulled down on the outside and padlocked. The doors were also locked and padlocked.

I didn't sleep much that night because of the heat. I was on the top bunk almost hitting the ceiling and the smell of sweat from 30 unwashed bodies crammed into a small and hermetically sealed room was disgusting. The ceiling was black with flies and when the light went on they dropped like a rain shower, buzzing around the beds. I was glad when it was 7 am

and time to get up. The shutters were opened and the windows and doors were unlocked and thrown open, and I gulped in the luxury of fresh air.

Outside stood a troupe of armed soldiers waiting for us. No food was offered and we were told to line up outside in rows of three. Then the soldiers lined up along the flanks. The air field commandant arrived to tell us that we were being put to work. He guessed we were surprised not to be freed, as promised, but stressed that we still had time to serve and it was to be here on the air field where there was a lot of work to be done, and when it was completed there was a chance we would be free. We had to put any ideas of escaping out of our heads, as we were told that those who tried would be hanged or shot to death in front of their comrades, and those not obeying the wardens orders would be beaten to death. Well, at least we knew what to expect. There was at least six months work here and no guarantee we would ever finish. An air field is never finished in war time. As quickly as you make repairs it gets bombed again.

We were divided into groups of 18, and each group was allocated an armed soldier, who was responsible for guarding us, for work delegation, for shooting us if we tried to escape and for beating us if we didn't work hard enough. The last responsibility he took to like a duck to water.

We were marched onto the air field and once again had to walk to the other side of the field where there was a work hut. Here we were given a shovel with a long handle and a spade. Our job was to fill the bomb craters in the take-off strip. I got the worst job. Our gang had to fill one of the biggest craters; it must have been six meters deep and about 25 meters across, with enormous chunks of concrete scattered all over the place. It was our job to fill the crater with the blocks of concrete, but if the blocks were too big, we had to break them down first with a sledge hammer. Some of them were almost immovable, but if we didn't find a way in double quick time, the soldier was there with his instruments of torture. Some of the mountains of concrete blocks were so impossible that we had to dig the ground away from underneath so they fell into the hole. This was a dangerous business, as we had to spring to safety when the blocks started falling.

The weather didn't help either. We were forced to continue work during a rain storm. The guards donned their bad weather gear, but we were forced to work in jackets and trousers. I was lucky that I had work clothes that had been sent from home to Amersfoort before I left there. During the day I found out that the air field was Viegerhorst Hopsten in the Rheine area. When the ten hour work day was over, we marched back again to the camp. We had not eaten all day and were ravenous and praying we would be fed. That evening we were given a gruel of peelings and a piece of moldy bread. The bread was intended for breakfast the following day, but naturally we were all so hungry that we ate it with the pig swill they called soup. The need for cigarettes had got to many of the men and they were swapping their chunk of bread for cigarettes. Not me, I was too hungry.

At 5 a.m. the next morning we were awoken by soldiers streaming into the room screaming for us to get up. If we weren't quick enough, they lunged at the beds with their bayonets. They gave us ten minutes to get washed and dressed and use the W.C. The wash hut had five taps for 300 men. Don't ask me how we did it, but with a bayonet pricking your rear, you manage. Outside we were lined up in our rows of three and counted. It took them ten counts before they decided that there were still 300 of us. After all that, we had only been marching for ten

minutes when one of the lads dropped down a gully alongside the road, and within seconds we saw him disappear from sight among the long grass and scrub. The soldiers were lined up on our right, and they didn't have a clear view of the left flank, and he was never seen again, having at least 24 hours head start before the next head count.

Today we didn't have to move concrete blocks. The Italian POW's were already on the site and working on them. We were destined to start creating a new take off and landing strip. We had to remove acres of grass sods, trees, uneven ground and whatever else that stood in the way: this to include even cottages and farm houses. The area concerned was about 2 km long by 1 km wide. The grass sods had to be piled high along the intended strip to form a protective wall in the case of an air raid. Little did I know how soon we would be grateful for that cover.
That very afternoon the air raid siren sounded, but we were forced to keep on working. Within a few minutes a couple of British bomber planes came into view and started circling over the air field. The command to seek shelter was bawled in haste by our guard, who even gave us permission to dive into the gully round the field. The bomber planes were coming lower and lower and their wheels practically touched the tops of the barracks. The ground defense guns were blasting out their ammunition, some flying directly over our heads. The planes also started firing, and one moment they flew directly over my head, shooting like maniacs.
The guard had just started to climb out of the gully when he saw the belly of a plane, and he dropped like a stone back into the spot where I was hiding. He landed on top of me and his boots slammed like a hammer onto my head. A lad in front of me caught a bullet in his back and lay there groaning in terrible agony. I had the shakes and was trembling from head to toe, convinced that my time had come. Eventually they left, and we climbed out of the ditch and went back to our work. A casual glance around me confirmed that many of the lads had used the confusion to escape. I saw one lad bury himself in a pile of grass sods, just leaving a tiny hole for air, and a couple of others crawling on their stomachs into the tall grass in the ditch to wait for nightfall.

At roll call the next morning all hell broke loose when they were eventually missed, and a gang of soldiers were sent to look for them. With a bit of luck the lads would be miles away by now, and soldiers on foot would never catch up with them. Our guard was punished and ended up in the guard house on a diet of bread and water. When we next went to the air field we had to put our jackets and caps in a pile and collect them again when we went home. No one would try and escape with a shaved head and no jacket. This was the best escape deterrent they could have thought of.

If I tried to tell you everything that happened in this camp I would need another couple of chapters. Suffice to say that on many occasions I tried to escape, but each time I was thwarted. One day we were given the job of clearing a wood of trees. I managed to accumulate a nice pile of branches and twigs in a ditch, planning to dive under the pile at the first opportunity, but that chance never came. The next day we were back to the fields to dig the grass sods. When the field was clear, a truck arrived with stones and we had the job of covering the whole take-off strip with them, 20 cm deep. After climbing in and out of these trucks all day, and then eating the evening's excuse for a meal, we fell into our beds in an exhausted sleep, only to be woken up because a train-load of stones had arrived. Of we had to go to unload the train instead of getting some much needed rest. Sometimes we got back to the barracks at about 3 a.m. and we had just two hours to sleep before the 5 a.m. wake-up call.

After a few days of this treatment, walking became a problem, feet felt like lead bricks and legs

were trembling underneath you. We didn't walk home, we just dragged our legs along. The guards tried to insist that we sing on the way home, but they could have shot me dead, because there was no way I was going to sing.

A couple of weeks later we made a start on the removal of land next to the take-off strip, which was about 2 meters too high. They had two trains which were used to remove the soil. When one was full and left the site, the other would arrive. The soldiers thought up a plan to make us work even harder. The ones who removed the most soil in a day would get a loaf of bread in the evening, and the slower ones would be treated to a beating.
The farm workers in our group were the only ones capable of such hard labor. Us city lads didn't have it in us. I tried so hard, but in the end I strained my back so badly that the pain became too much to bear. I couldn't sit, stand or lay down. When I went to the commandant to ask for something to get rid of the pain, he battered me on my back with the wooden butt of his rifle.

When we appealed to the farmers in the group to slow down a little or we city lads would die in the process, they just laughed and accused us of being bone idle. I tried to reason with them that we were all prisoners together, but they were too stupid to listen or try to understand what we were saying. The food we received was dismal. Soup made from vegetable peelings, and bread covered with mold. If I had nothing and saw someone eating their moldy bread, I was so jealous I could have killed him, but instead I stuffed my head under the pillow and cried from hunger and misery.

One day I saw a lad pushing clothing through the barbed wire fence and in return receiving bread and cigarettes, and gradually we all started dealing this way. We received very little in return, and the soldiers enjoyed exploiting our hunger for gain. My good winter coat fetched a miserly amount of tobacco, from which I made four cigarettes. These cigarettes I exchanged for a piece of bread or a bowl of peelings soup. When the cigarettes were all gone, I started swapping more and more of my clothes until there was not much left from the two suitcases full that I brought with me.

There was a period of two weeks when the hunger got more than I could bear and I had nothing left to swap. I had managed to smuggle letters out to my brother in Gladbeck and my parents in Holland. We were allowed to receive letters and parcels, but were not allowed to send any communications out of the camp. One morning to my delight I received two parcels and couldn't open them fast enough. One was from my brother, Jan, and contained two loaves of bread and the most delicious piece of cake I can ever remember eating since before the war started. I sat on my bed and ate two slices of the bread. Oh goodness, suddenly I accumulated so many friends. The day before they had ignored me, but now they were climbing all over me with Bas this, and Bas that. I would have to carry all my newly acquired riches around with me from now on, otherwise they would be stolen the first time I turned my back on them.

It is a fact that hunger turns a person into a thief, and those that were caught was given no mercy. This time we were assembled outside and the thief was brought in front of us. Truncheons were given to a couple of our group and they had to beat him senseless. If they didn't strike hard enough, three of the soldiers helped them. They beat him so hard that he was unconscious when he hit the ground, and then they still had to continue the beating. They were breathless when they finished and the thief was dead. A deadly warning to would-be thieves.

One of the blackest periods in the camp was when three new guards arrived. One of them seemed to be quite a nice chap, and he always wore a pair of white trousers. He turned out to be the camp executioner! In the morning he would charge through the doorway screaming at us to get up, and lunging at all the beds with his bayonet, which was always in readiness on his rifle. He ran from one room to the other, and even if you were out of bed he would poke you and scream at us for not being outside already. We were given no time to eat, wash or use the toilet before we were frog marched off to work, with the instructions to sing as we went. Even if we were working as hard as we could, he would still be behind you lashing out with the butt of his rifle or his bayonet. We had never seen anyone as inhuman as this bastard.

The other two also needed hanging. They were two very small men. One had a flat nose, spoke as if he had a hair lip, and was a nancy boy to boot. The other could have been his twin, but had a very large nose that turned upwards about 45 degrees, and heaven help you if that nose pointed in your direction, because then you started to wish you were dead already. They didn't carry rifles, but enormous truncheons. It turned out that they were selected and trained to deal out punishment at the camps. They were given their own 'penal colony' on the air field. The day after their arrival they had their first customer! Anyone who appeared to be unwilling was carted off to these guys. I know how it all works because I was there twice.

On the air field next to the train tracks there was a ten meter high mountain of asphalt chips ready to be mixed with hot tar for the runway surface. The chips wouldn't allow themselves to be shoveled up, and they slid down as fast as you threw a spade full up. Our instructions were to move the mountain of chips a meter away from the railway line, a totally impossible task. You could shovel for a week and not make a scrap of difference, but you sure had to make a try. If you didn't try hard enough according to them, then another of your group was singled out to beat the living daylights out of you. He of course didn't hit too hard, so the henchmen added their muscle until the 'offender' was battered to a pulp, and then you got the same treatment afterwards.

We had another very young under-officer with a truncheon under his arm, who took delight in standing over you, wringing his hands, and telling you that he was in the mood that day to beat the brains out of you. A few of his little quirks was to make you dig a bomb crater out with your bare hands, or to run across a newly mowed field of corn in your bare feet till the blood was flowing. One of his little tricks was to fire at you when you were sitting on the W.C. Actually, you couldn't call it a W.C. as it was a long trench with a piece of wood placed over it to sit on. He would wait until you had just sat down, and then start firing over your head. As most of us had diarrhea, the seconds he allowed us was not enough, but we had to spring up with our trousers around our ankles and charge back to work, with him firing in the ground around our feet if we didn't move fast enough.

As a complete contrast, we also had a real nut case as a guard. He was all sweetness and light, didn't make us work hard and liked to sit around with us on the ground and chat. He talked utter nonsense and promised us our freedom the next day because he had talked to the Commandant. All fantasy of course. He was always playing with his rifle and practicing on theoretical enemies. If he saw a plane in the sky he slumped on the ground and took up a defensive stand, rifle pointing skywards. He didn't differentiate between British or German planes either. That man was very mentally challenged, but at least we were safe when he was in charge.

The day arrived when a group of us decided to make a break for it. We had managed to lay our hands on a pair of pliers to cut through the barbed wire and had loosened the screws in the padlock of the door in preparation. That night after the guards had locked us in, we waited a short while and quietly removed the screws and slowly opened the door and crept out. There were guards patrolling the side perimeters of the camp, but none at the back of the camp where our door opened out. One of my mates from Amsterdam offered to cut the double barbed wire fence and crawled on his hands and knees to the wire. Lying flat on his back he worked quickly and quietly and it took him nearly an hour to make a hole big enough for us to crawl through. The chaps who were going with me were crowded into the hallway, 200 men, nervous and excited and making far too much noise, which was dangerous.
The wire was cut and the chap arrived back in the barracks covered in dirt and sweat. I will never know why he made this sacrifice for us, he was not even going with us. One by one the men crept out, crawled through the wire and disappeared into the night. I was seventh in line to go and was barely out of the doorway when a machine gun started to fire and all hell broke loose. Guards were shouting and shooting and the search lights were switched on around the camp. In ten seconds flat we were all back in our beds and laid deadly still under the blankets. The guards and soldiers came charging in through the still open door and kicked us all out of bed for a head count, but of course six were missing.

They searched the barracks for the pliers, but we had thrown them high up onto the top of a cupboard and they didn't find them. They screamed we would be sorry for this and were ordered back to bed. They nailed the door shut and went to search for the ones who had escaped. Our punishment was light the next day because they had managed to catch all six of the chaps, and they were now in the penal colony working on the pile of asphalt chips. So that was the escape that wasn't. Better luck next time.

Next time came very soon. I was attached to a new group of seven men and we had to camouflage the aircraft in the woods surrounding the air field. There was one civilian German who was a builder and one soldier to guard us, and they were both O.K. guys. The work was hard but reasonable. We had to make enough room between trees to let a plane in, cover the tops of the remaining trees with camouflage and build hollow brick walls around three sides of the plane, which were then filled with sand. Sometimes we finished an hour or so earlier than the other chaps and we even got a ride back to camp in a truck.
One Sunday they brought us back to the camp at about one o'clock in the afternoon. All the rest of the chaps were due to work until 6 pm, and there was only one guard walking around the perimeter. The gate was still unlocked, so if I wanted a chance to escape, then this was it. I rushed into the washroom and peeled off my lice-ridden work clothes and shoved them into the furnace under the hot water tank. I washed quickly and thoroughly and dressed in my last remaining decent suit that I had been saving for this moment. I plastered my inch long hair with some brillcream to flatten it, and was ready to go. I had sold my suitcases, so I had nothing to take with me. I slid my bare feet into my shoes, put 30 marks into my pocket and a packet of cigarette papers in case I could find a few butts on the road. Three butts would make a welcome cigarette.

Our camp was in the forest and close to a curve in the road. I waited until the lone guard had turned the corner and I slipped out of the camp and into the forest. I was now a target for any soldier I came across. They now shot to kill at escapees. I carried on through the woods until I had rounded the bend in the road. To carry on through the woods was not a good idea as it would arouse suspicion. As I was dressed smartly, apart from no socks, I decided to bluff it out

and walk openly along the road. If it didn't work out, then I was dead meat. I spoke German very well by now, and as I was well dressed I might just scrape through. I realized later that I was probably too well dressed to pass as a farm laborer.

I was about one mile from the camp when I saw one of the camp officers coming towards me. He would recognize me instantly, and therefore I dived into the undergrowth and carried on walking through the woods. After about an hour I decided to try the road again. There was no one in sight and I started walking again. It was warm weather and I was sweating like a pig. After another hour I saw the first soldier. He was part of the outside guard whose job was to capture escapees. This cordon was about 20 miles in circumference I had heard. It was intended to be a deterrent for potential bolters like me. As he had seen me I could no longer avoid him, so I straightened my shoulders and walked towards him. My first test was imminent.
My heart was in my mouth. I started to whistle a confident tune and adopt my most casual walk. When I came face to face with him he started to say something, but changed his mind, and I strolled past him. I had three more like him, and not one of them asked me a thing. My accent would have given me away and I would have been asked for my papers. I didn't have a scrap of paper on me!

So far so good. I knew that when they discovered I was missing they would search in all directions that led to Holland, so I decided to go east and deeper into Germany. I took my directions from the sun, but I didn't have a clue where the road was leading me. I was surrounded by apple and pear trees and they were a welcome sight. I hadn't eaten in 36 hours and was starving, and they served well to fill my aching stomach. I stuffed my pockets full to eat later.

I finally reached a little village where quite a lot of police were in evidence. It was Sunday and the local church was emptying of worshipers. I tagged onto the stream and strolled with them till I was through the village and out the other side. By the time darkness fell, I had been walking for 35 kilometers. My feet were covered in bleeding blisters because my sock less feet were in shoes that were too big for me. I had to look for a place to hide for the night, but I was on a long straight road with a railway line on one side and a river on the other, and so I was forced to walk for several more miles. I was exhausted and ready to give up when I spotted a side road crossing the railway line. I turned in there and continued along until I came to a wheat field. There were other people on the road who would become suspicious if I dived into the wheat, so I carried on for yet another hour, until at last I found a spot. It was in a ditch covered in reeds and shrubs and I slipped down into the undergrowth. It was a bit cramped, but I was safe and would try and get some sleep.

Sleep never caught up with me that night because too much was going on around me. People and soldiers were back and forth all night, and I daren't move in case they heard me. The night was cold and misty, and by the morning I was blue with cold and as stiff as a post and very hungry. My hair stood on end, and I had to rub my head through the trees to get enough dew to help flatten it down again. I had slept in my shirt and used my jacket as a pillow, so I dressed and straightened myself out and checked that the road was clear of people, then I ventured out into the unknown.

I had decided the night before to try to get to Gladbeck, as my brother Jan was in a work camp there. I had been there before and the commandant knew me, so hopefully he would accept

me without too many questions. This was really my only chance. I tired sooner that day and could find no fruit trees to plunder for food. After a couple of hours I reached the town of Osnabruck and decided to venture into the town and look for food. It was also safer to be among people. Everything was on coupons here except the national dish of Kartoffel salad. I found a restaurant in a cellar that looked inviting and went in. I had a table to myself and ordered a beer. I had to wait an hour until midday before they would start serving. Three people came and sat at my table, a soldier and a man and woman, and they tried to draw me into their conversation. This didn't suit me one little bit. They remarked on my accent and I told them I worked in Gladbeck and had been visiting my brother in the Osnabruck hospital. When my food arrived I wolfed it down and made a hasty departure. You can't trust anyone these days and I was very nervous because of my escapee status.

When I walked back on the street, I felt sore and stiff from sitting for more than an hour, and realized my feet were not going to make the 125 kilometers I still had to walk to Gladbeck. I decided to take a risk and go by train, although nobody was allowed to travel further than 100 kilometers without written permission. To get permission you had to explain where you were going and why, so I thought I would just buy a ticket to Munster first. At the departure gate there were two Green Police checking tickets and asking questions of the people holding them. As I couldn't risk that kind of confrontation, I returned to a restroom to contemplate my next move.

I have always believed in God, so I prayed to the Lord to help me out of this hole. I told Him I couldn't walk another step and just had to get on that train. When I walked out of the restroom, the Green Police were gone from the gate, and I was able to walk straight through and onto the platform. There were more checks going on there, so I mingled with a group of women and children and was left well alone. There were no questions asked when I boarded the train either. God had answered my prayers and I would never forget it.

Unfortunately I had to stand the whole two hours it took to get to Munster, and my poor feet burned as if they were on fire. In Munster I was still a little scared and I asked a teenage boy to buy me a ticket to Essen, which he did for a mark tip, and asked no questions either. I had five hours to wait for the train, so I decided to go into town and look for another off-ration meal. I found a nice place and ordered the meal. I was still waiting for this to arrive when a soldier and a women walked in. I nearly died on the spot from shock. It was the executioner in white trousers from my old camp. I didn't give him the chance to spot me. I turned my head quickly in the other direction, stood up and casually walked out of the restaurant without getting the precious meal I had ordered. To be safe I bought a cinema ticket and sat in the warm, dark interior for the next couple of hours. I nodded off to sleep and woke as the cinema lights went up at the end of the evening. I then walked the streets until it was time to catch the train, and boarded it without any trouble.

I stayed on the train until it reached Gelsenkirchen and disembarked there instead of Essen, where I knew I could catch a tram which would save me a long walk. I caught the last tram, but it didn't go any further than Horst and that was still ten kilometers from Gladbeck. I started out on my last ten kilometers walk in the pitch dark, having to make many detours to avoid bomb craters and bombs lying in the middle of the road which had failed to explode. A few times I had to run for cover from the British air force carrying out raids overhead. The British were having a very busy night.

Finally Gladbeck was reached, and from there it was only a couple of miles to Zweckel where my brother Jan's camp was, and where I too had been for two years, so it was more like coming home, after all I had been through since I left there. I had to sprint the last few miles as the sky was full of Allied planes raining bombs down on nearby towns. I made it to the air raid shelter in Zweckel, and after an hour there, made my way to the camp, which to my surprise was now surrounded with a barbed wire fence. I couldn't find the main gate in the dark, and it would look a bit suspicious if I was found climbing the wired fence to get in, instead of out! So I was lucky that a gang of men who had been hiding in the shelter were making their way back into the camp. I just tagged along at the back and followed them in.

Although it had been a year since I was there, I could still find my way around, and went to the barracks that used to house the Dutch contingent. It was as good a place as any to start. I poked my head around the door and asked if the Hollanders were still here. Although it was 3 am, I got a Dutch reply back. The lights went on and I was surprised to see so many of my old mates still here. They too were surprised to see me and yelled at my brother, Jan, to wake up as his brother Bas was here. I had a lot to tell them, and after my brother had given me a loaf of bread to eat, we talked well into the dawn.

The next morning I had to present myself to the camp commandant. He knew me still, but didn't know the story behind my being here. I told him I had come back from sick leave and had been robbed of my passport en route. He swallowed the story and sent me to the kitchen to be fed. The girls were a bit skeptical about my story as I looked so sick and skinny, but they played along with me.

The next day I was re-employed by me old German boss and life started all over again. I was not really free, but a lot freer than I had been in the concentration camp. Within a few days trouble reared its ugly head again. Hundreds of Allied bombers flew over, dropping bombs nearer and nearer to our camp. Then one night they dropped a regiment of parachutists over our area, who escaped into the countryside. The Germans couldn't find them, and that's where we came into the picture.
The Germans were convinced that, as we were allies, we would help the parachutists if we got the chance. We were therefore confined to our barracks until further notice. We all complained bitterly, but security was tight and we had to show our pass to leave and enter the camp.

The war now seemed to us to be coming to a climax, and therefore an end. The Allied army was on the other side of the river Rhein and fighting for all they were worth. Their small aeroplanes, which we nicknamed Jabos, filled the sky. They arrived at 7 o'clock each morning and were in the air until dark. They shot at anything that moved - trains, cars, trucks, and I must say they made a real good job of bombing factories too. They dived to reach their targets, skimming the trees as the bombs flew out of them like confetti, then screaming back into a steep climb once their load was dropped, with their on board guns firing to cover their retreat. Air raid sirens blared off and on for about ten hours every day, and it seemed that they met with very little resistance. When darkness came, the heavy bombers took over.
It was not long before the Americans crossed the Rhein river, and we tried to stay within reach of an air raid shelter at all times. We rushed to work in the morning and immediately dropped into the bunkers where we could watch the Jabos dive. The whine they made coming down sent shivers through my whole body.

Early one morning I was sent to do a job on the outskirts of town which involved crossing a bridge spanning a railway line 20 feet below. I was just about to cross the bridge when I heard the familiar whine above me, and turned to see a Jabo diving straight at me, shooting as he came. As the bullets sprayed around my feet, I made an almighty dive to the bank alongside the railway line, and slid down as fast as I could. My toolbox slid down behind me and landed with a clang on the rails. Boy, was I ever scared! When the Jabo left I picked myself up and made for the nearest shelter, not to come out for the rest of the day.

Once it was dark there was usually a short lull before the next battering. That was when I would run and get my food, eat it and make it back to the shelter before the heavy bomber planes appeared. I had made myself a little stool to sit on while I was in the shelter, and instead of going to bed at night, I would sit on it all night in the shelter. Most of the civilian population and a large portion of the foreign workers had also decided that this was the safest place to be. My brother, Jan, was a lot braver and stayed in the camp. I was scared stiff and stayed in the shelter, which was to pay off later.

The shelter we used was near our camp and on top of a coal mine, where there was a huge mountain of stone about 40 feet high, that had been excavated from the mine. The miners had dug tunnels through the middle of the mountain and lined them with concrete. Although water leaked through every crevice in the concrete, it was the safest place in town and was full to overflowing each night with villagers sleeping on the ground. The air was foul, the ground was wet, and there was cursing and screaming and crying children all night. Once in a while we had to move when the water started pouring in through cervices in the ceiling. Candles could not be used because they would burn up the little oxygen that we had, so we had to sit in the pitch black. As people spent more and more time down in the shelter, flash lights and miners' lamps were installed.

As the weeks progressed and the slaughter outside got worse, many people would stay in the shelter permanently, and as there were no toilets or washing facilities the stench was terrible. Only the bravest went out to look for food. I had to leave each day to go to work, trying to rebuild things when everything around us was being bombed flat.
It was March 21st, 1945 when the American bomber planes flew over us throwing out millions of leaflets instead of bombs. They warned us that the area had been declared a dead zone and civilians were advised to leave immediately. I didn't see a leaflet as the Germans didn't allow anyone to pick them up or read them, but I heard from one of my mates that managed to hide one in his pocket. Needless to say the Germans didn't allow us to leave.

The next morning it was much too quiet in the sky and I had a gut feeling that something terrible was about to happen, and it did. I was standing in line for my food when the sirens went off. We had three types of alarm. The first warned that planes might be heading this way, the second was the full alarm that they were heading this way, and the acute alarm that sounded when the bombing started. The alarm that sounded now was the full alarm and I grabbed my mate by the arm and told him this was a big one and we sprinted for the coal mine shelter, with the acute alarm sounding as we ran. Just as we dived head first into the tunnel entrance the first bomb made a direct hit on the top of our stone mountain. The noise was ear splitting, the concrete walls cracked and gusts of warm air were forced at an enormous speed along the tunnels, where women and children were screaming hysterically. It was like hell. The sensation is hard to describe, of the terror of bombs falling on top of you and the anguish of what would happen next.

There was silence - the tunnel inhabitants waiting with baited breath for the next onslaught. Within five minutes the drone of the planes was heard, and the sound of bombs reaching their target shook our mountain once again. How much longer would our walls hold out we wondered. It was as though the end of the world had come. We suffered four more of these onslaughts one after the other, and by the fourth one we were all just a quivering mass of humanity, huddled together in small groups, holding onto one another as if this would somehow help us. I kept my eye on the roof of the tunnel expecting it to succumb at any time, but it survived the bombardment.

Things stayed quiet for some time after that. Someone arrived in the tunnel to tell us that the whole village was in ruins. The villagers wailed hysterically and made a stampede to the tunnel entrance. There was a dead woman at the entrance, and once she had been laid to one side, then we left the tunnel to view the devastation for ourselves. There was nothing left of the village, but clouds of smoke and pockets of fire as far as the eye could see. Then to my horror I saw planes in the distance heading our way again. I screamed to everyone to get back inside, but the villagers were still trying desperately to get out and see for themselves what had happened to their village and homes. Everyone was running wild, screaming and crying and trying to get out, while we were pushing and shoving and trying to get back in again. When the first bomb fell, the traffic rapidly changed direction.

It was late afternoon when the all-clear finally sounded. We all streamed out of the tunnels to face the total and utter devastation that was waiting for us. The village was now totally flattened and burned out and we left the villagers to their misery and made a run for the camp. At least that was our intention. The roads had gone and with them our sense of direction. Every street was flattened and we had no idea in which direction the camp was. When we finally reached our destination we stared in horror at the scene confronting us. The camp and its six enormous barracks were just smoking ruins, the result of direct hits by fire bombs and phosphor bombs.

The first thing we came across was a corpse, naked apart from his shoes, burned black, no hair and a large hole in his head, laying in a pool of his own blood. We recognized him as Marian, a young polish man. We found another body lying head first down the concrete steps to the cellar. He was so burned you could see the bones of his arms and legs through the scant covering of skin. He was burnt black too, but he was face down on the steps and his face was untouched. We recognized him as Joep, a young Belgian, and one of our own room mates. We found another friend who was in the sick bay when the bombs fell. His skeleton was still on his iron frame bed.

We made our way to the camp shelter to look for the rest of our comrades. The shelter was a ditch about 7 feet deep and 4 feet wide, with 4 inch concrete slabs for the walls and roof. This was covered by three feet of earth. The shelter was built in a zig zag fashion about 500 feet long with three entrances. Many of the men had used the shelter along with all the female kitchen staff. The shelter had received four direct hits with smaller bombs and all the entrances were closed up, but a hole in the roof had served as an escape hatch for the survivors. I don't know how many men died in there, but the kitchen girls had been lucky and were all safe.
I went in search of my brother, Jan, who seldom went to the shelters, but preferred to stay in bed when the alarm sounded at night. He swore he slept better when the bombs were falling and there was shooting all around him! It was fortunate that this last raid was a daylight raid, because where his bed stood was now a big hole in the ground as it had received a direct hit. I

found him safe and sound later. The camp next to us was also completely destroyed and about 50 men killed. A number of barracks in the Russian POW camp were still intact. As the Russians had moved out recently, we were given these barracks for the time being. It was a strange world now. So many people were dead, the village was gone and all nationalities were together in one enormous barrack room. We had no possessions, only the clothes we stood up in, no money and no comforts.

Fortunately none of the Hollanders had been killed, and as the Dutch contingent was only 19 strong, we managed to get a room to ourselves. We were still scared to go to bed, as shells were continuing to fly over the area, and our barracks was the only thing left to bomb.
The reason for the terrible bombardment we had suffered was to clear the road for the allied army to move up, but the Germans were still fighting like mad. We could hear the roar of the front coming closer and closer. It never stopped, day or night, and we could see the shells flying past. This particular night the shells were whistling over our barracks in ever increasing numbers. We were all very, very scared and decided to sleep with our clothes on in case we needed to get out fast. We even took turns to mount a guard, but nothing happened.
The following day we stayed close to the camp and shelters, and stole some food from the store in case we needed extra supplies in the shelters, but the day passed with nothing untoward happening. We knew the front was close now. The Germans were still fighting on, but the air was full of Allied fighter planes and we saw no German planes in the air. Maybe they had none left. We got some sleep that night, as we were getting used to the shells from the big guns.

The next morning however was like a nightmare. The Allied army had moved very fast during the night, the roar of the big guns was deafening and the ground vibrated under our feet. Shells were flying everywhere and the Allied planes were shooting at anything and everything. The camp commandant insisted I went to work at the local grocery shop that had been damaged. It was half an hour's walk to get there, a walk through hell. There was no one on the streets, and when I reached the shop it was closed, with a sign on the door saying they would be open between 12 and 1 p.m. only. A bunker built to house 2000 people was just across the street from the shop and I decided to wait there.
At 12 o'clock I went back to the shop. They explained they only opened for this hour because it was always the quietest part of the day. The owners told me not to bother trying to repair anything because it would just be bombed again. Instead they were busy selling their whole stock, no coupons, just money. They loaded me down with bread, butter, sugar, cheese and sweets. They said they sympathized with the life we were forced to lead, and they wanted to help by giving me this food for free. They told me I could return after dark and they would have a lot more stuff for me and my comrades.

When I returned to camp loaded down with my windfall, my brother, Jan, advised me to build a wooden suitcase to store the food. He felt that once the front had passed us, we would have to fend for ourselves, and it would be wise to ration the food from the start in case we were able to make a run for it in the very near future. That night we were both planning to go back to the shop and stock up, but when the time came to leave, it was impossible. The front had arrived and were just a half-hour's walk away.

It was impossible to stay in the barracks, as the shells were now accompanied by machine gun bullets and they were flying over the camp as well as through the camp. We headed for the shelters, but to our anger they were already full of Germans who told us they were not for

foreigners, and that we had to find our own shelter. There was then a scene of blind panic, with men and women of all nationalities running around trying to find cover in ruins, ditches and open basements in ruined buildings. I led our group to the coal mine, but that too was already full. Eventually we found a kind of dug-out under a huge pile of coal from the mine. There was a tunnel inside and we followed it down. It was lined with wood supports and moisture was running down the walls. Finally we reached the end of the tunnel and emerged into a large cave about 30 feet underground. Although it was damp and the floor awash with water, we decided we would be safe here till the front had passed.
A Russian girl was already installed and was boiling potatoes in a pail of water. She had a container in which the coal was burning, and a pail of water sat on top and was boiling away quite nicely. At least we had an ample supply of coal and water! Jan and I and the rest of the group set about gathering wooden planks, which we laid on the floor to provide us with a dry spot where we could sit and sleep. We had brought our blankets with us too.
Once we were installed Jan and I decided we should go and look for more food in case we were stuck in the cave for several days. We had no sooner poked our heads out of the hole when shells started whistling past us. My brother yelled at me to lie down, but I panicked and started to run down the coal hill, with shells landing all around me. I just kept on running and escaped, then we both dived back into the hole and stayed there.

During the night we could hear the fighting going on over our heads. A couple of times I went to the entrance to see what was happening. I heard the machine guns and heavy artillery blasting away and I even saw the German army retreating. They were pulling their cannons with horses, as they must have run out of fuel as well as aircraft.
When morning came, after a brief sleep, we were blue with cold, stiff and wet, but alive. Jan and I had food in our suitcase, but the other chaps had nothing and so they decided to go outside to search for a meal. They were back very quickly with the news that a horse had been killed close by and they needed help to cut it up and bring it back to the cave. None of us felt much like venturing out into the battlefield, but the thought of all that ready food made us change our minds. A group of five men set out and an hour later they were back loaded down with great chunks of horse meat. The horse's legs came with horse shoes and all. The meat was hung from the ceiling and skinned. The fire was built and soon big chunks of horse meat were cooking merrily away in a pail of water. The water became a hot soup and the taste was good. We ate the chunks of meat straight from the pail, eating as much as we could for the first time in a long while.

We spent the whole of the next day in the hole again. We kept hoping we would be soon liberated by the Americans, but the Germans were still very much the bosses and the front was further away now. On one mission outside to find out exactly what was happening, we were told that the Germans were rounding up all the foreign workers and taking them further inland. We decided to lay low and keep quiet till this danger was over.

CHAPTER 4 - The march to freedom

We didn't realize, however, that smoke from our fire was blowing out of our hide-out and this was seen by a cruel and wicked monster of a woman, the wife of a Russian Camp Commandant, who was known for committing acts of atrocity to the Russian prisoners and other foreigners. We heard she was on the hit list once the war was over. She came and told us that we could stay in the cave and we would be safe, but we didn't trust her. Before we could decide on a plan of action, our hide-out was invaded by a bunch of the People's Police and we were ordered to gather up our things and join the others outside in preparation for a move to mid-Germany. We explained that as Hollanders we were not obliged to go. They left to check on this, but were soon back again, with rifles pointing at us, threatening to shoot if we didn't move out pronto.
They gave us no time to grab anything for the journey and we were forced to leave our precious horse meat behind. They marched us back to the old Russian camp where about a thousand foreign workers were lined up at the kitchen barracks waiting for food. The food had been promised to us before the march, but standing in the long line-up was a dangerous place to be. Although the front was further away now, the Germans were still firmly in control and shells were still flying around the camp. A couple of shells whistled past us and exploded in the barracks close by. Everybody jumped and dived for cover. My brother and I were together the whole time now and we dived down the steps of the basement cellar, but the door was locked and no amount of pushing and shoving could open it. A group of Russian men and women, wild with fear, had managed to break open a boarded up window and we all piled in there instead.

The bombing was over and the Russians left again. My brother suggested we stay put in the basement and hide till everyone had gone. I didn't want to as I was scared in case the building received another direct hit, so we went back outside. If I had listened to my brother we could have saved ourselves from the sheer hell that was still to come.
We finally got some food - spinach soup, bread and sugar for the march. We were marched out earlier than predicted because of the heavy shelling from the Americans. There were about a thousand of us - Hollanders, French, Belgians totaling about 60, and the rest were all Russian. Soldiers in uniform, children, civilian men and women and prisoner of war. I shall never forget the faces of the German people as we marched past. I think they were relieved to see us go, fearing reprisals for the way we had been treated. Allied planes circled above us, quite low, but they didn't attack us, and I prayed that they would realize who we all were, in spite of the many uniforms they could see in our long column of humanity. Thank God they flew off and left us in peace.

Our journey from Gladbeck revealed that the devastation was not limited to Zweckel. In Gladbeck there were a few buildings still standing, and we were marched to one of them, an old school. We had the chance to rest now for a while, but the German army had set up their artillery in the school play ground and were firing at the Americans, and the noise was deafening. We dived for cover every time they fired. When we had rested, we were sent outside to stand in the play ground next to the artillery.

What I feared now happened. The Americans had pin-pointed the school and shells were raining all around us. We scattered in all directions, and I could hear the crying and yelling of the wounded. I headed for a hole in the wall and climbed in. As luck would have it I had landed on a stairwell to the concrete bunker. I didn't know where my brother Jan was, but hoped he was safe.

The firing only lasted ten minutes, but it stopped the Germans firing. Four of the Russians had been killed, some Germans and a number of others were wounded. While I was sitting in the stairwell of the bunker, I saw a hatch in the wall open and a German looked out. I begged him to let me in, but he said nothing and closed the hatch in my face.
When the shelling stopped we were rounded up once again and marched off to the east. We looked back and saw that Zweckel was now in American hands. The sky was red and great clouds of smoke billowed into the heavens. It looked as though the coal mine and oil storage tanks had been shelled and were on fire.

Some time later we marched into the outskirts of a town. One side was farmland and on the other side were small blocks of houses. Soon the shells started whistling over our heads yet again. A plane had been circling low above us and had taken off again. It must have informed the American artillery that we were a military column because of all the people in uniform, as they flew in and aimed directly at us, scattering the column. Once again we dived for whatever cover we could find.

I don't know how many people were killed or wounded, but in no time flat the rest of us had disappeared into ditches or grass verges. I lay on the ground behind a house, my brother Jan was with me. A Russian girl next to me had been hit and her leg was an open mass of flesh and blood. They were firing at us from Zweckel, the place we had so recently come from.
The firing continued and we realized that we had to move as soon as possible. We could hear the canons firing, one after the other, and seconds later they exploded around us. We listened for the firing and then made a mad dash to the next block, which were 30 feet apart. We were flat on our stomachs by the time the shells arrived. A few shells landed on the block we were hiding behind and we were showered with stone, glass and other debris.
My brother and I didn't really get hurt. I lost my suitcase with our food and clothes, but my brother found it again. He led me all the way, and never showed fear. He was very pale, but that was all. He always knew the right thing to do, and that was how we got out of the firing line without a scratch. We never looked back and I don't know what happened to the others, it was every man for himself. We found out later that all our Dutch comrades had escaped unhurt.

The People's Police rounded up what was left of the original 1000-strong column. We were still closely guarded and the road was marked by arrows. If you veered off this straight path you were liable to be shot. We heard later that foreign workers were being marched out of every town up and down the country, but as yet we hadn't seen any of them. We were walking faster now, trying to get as far away from the front line as possible. After keeping up this pace for an hour we were allowed to rest by the road side, but there was another German stronghold close by, firing at the Allies. We were soon off again, desperate to get more space between us and the front line, but as fast as we walked, the front line moved faster. We passed more German artillery and assumed we were now safe, but the Germans caught up with us again and went ahead. I came to the chilling conclusion that we were now at the back of the line, with the Germans firing over the heads of their own troops and us in the direction of the approaching Allies. We were in constant danger and I lost count of the times we had to hit the deck as shells whistled past or exploded near us.

Jan and I had eaten something that didn't agree with us and we had terrible cramp in our stomachs. We had to stop every 15 minutes to squat alongside the road, and by night we had trouble catching up with the column. We walked most of the night and it was very late before

we were allowed to rest. We had reached the outskirts of Gelsenkirchen. By this time most of the column had belly ache and they were all busy fertilizing the gardens and lawns of the houses close to the road..
We rested for only half an hour and were off again. We walked for hours in the pitch black night before we were allowed another rest. I was half dead with exhaustion and slumped down on the grass verge and fell asleep in spite of the pouring rain and storm that was raging around me. When they woke me up I was soaked to the skin and as cold as ice. We kept walking until dawn. A Russian women who was walking just ahead of me gave birth to a baby in the middle of the road. The blood was running down her legs and into her shoes. She was in a terrible mess. Nobody offered to help her and the German Police had to force two Russian men to carry her.

A little later we were stopped again and waited for hours in the storm and rain. We hoped that they might put us in a camp here, but we sat outside all morning. The Russians built themselves a big fire to try and get warm, and we all followed suit. Soon there were about 50 fires burning away, drying clothes and warming frozen bodies.
It was noon and we were ordered to march again. Things were quiet now and we could hear the front both to the left, right and ahead of us. We figured out that the Allies had surrounded the area and were circling us. We later found out this was true. The Germans were trying to make us walk faster and faster in order to escape the circle. We were secretly praying that as we were in the circle we would soon be free.
We walked through many villages that day and gradually our group got bigger and bigger as we picked up another group at each village we passed through. When we finally reached Castrop Rauxel we were about 3000 strong, all foreign workers. The police had little control over such a large group. In one village our Dutch group sat in front of a house and were treated to mugs of coffee by the owner. Oh, that coffee tasted good after all we had been through.

CHAPTER 5 - Freedom at Last

Things were steadily getting more and more confused, and it was obvious the Police had no idea what to do with us. We had noticed small groups of Russians taking off on their own. One of the Belgians suggested we group together with them and organize our own 'disappearance'. He suggested we walk casually away in groups of 5 or 6 and meet at the corner of the road that led to the main highway to Essen. We did just that, and once we were out of sight, we ran to the meeting point. The others were waiting when we got there, but there was no sign of the Belgium ring leader, and now nobody knew what to do. They all wanted to go in different directions, but the majority agreed that going back to Essen was our best bet. We would meet up with the advancing front somewhere along the road. The danger was that the road was constantly under fire and we were liable to walk right into the line of fire.
We agreed to take the risk and set off. On the other side of the bridge we walked straight into the arms of a bunch of soldiers who threatened to shoot us if we didn't get back into the column. A few groups managed to slink off in other directions without being seen, but Jan and I decided to stay with the group of fugitives, which seemed to us to be the safest option.
We were just setting off again when several hundred Allied bomber planes came thundering over us. Scared witless we dived into the nearest ditch and buried our heads in the undergrowth, but nothing happened. We were not their target.

When we got back into town it was to discover that the column of 3000 had evaporated, along with the Police! They must have all sneaked off in the confusion. There were just a few of us left, and not knowing what was going on, we hung around the town awaiting developments. When nightfall arrived, so did most of the fugitives. They had been stopped wherever they were and sent back. Finally, when most of the column was assembled, the Police also appeared from nowhere, and we were ordered to march. We complained bitterly that we needed food and sleep and we were promised these when we reached a camp two hours march away. When we arrived, the camp turned out to be an iron ore mine. There was a building built of slats through which the wind blew clean through, and this was where we had to sleep. The food was non-existent. The mine was awful, so Jan and I went looking for something else. We found a building that was not open to the elements. It was a machine shop, closed and warm. Although we had to sleep on the iron floor, covered in oil and grease, we slept well that night. The next morning we marched again. The front was getting closer again and we were stiff and hungry. They had given us absolutely nothing to eat since we left Zweckel and didn't make any attempt to look for any. Jan and I still had our suitcase with a little food, but we didn't dare eat more than two slices of bread a day. We sucked on some sugar lumps at another desperate time. The other marchers had nothing, and you could see them getting thinner by the day. One chap just slumped on the roadside in front of us and we were unable to pick him up. We gave him a chunk of our bread and left him there.

We walked all day again, and more and more people joined the column. It began to look as though there were millions in the group, fugitives of every nationality. It would be impossible to feed this many people. Russian women were walking with bundles on their backs that were bigger than themselves. They had crying children with them that they pushed in home made prams. Some of the group had wheels under their big suitcases.

We walked yet another two days and night. The next day we came across a potato field where we set up fires and roasted the potatoes in their skins, which helped our hunger. The roads were still marked with white arrows, and a message warning us that anybody straying off the

road would be shot. The road didn't take us through towns anymore because the Germans were scared of us. We were thousands and thousands of hungry foreigners who blamed the Germans for their suffering.
The road we were now on was surrounded by farms, many of which had recently harvested their crop of sugar beet. The beets were stored in long shallow trenches and covered with earth. The heaped up earth was a sign of buried treasure for the starving column. When we left the area there wasn't a single beet left. People were munching them raw as they walked. Unfortunately they made my throat very sore so I had to quit that way of satisfying hunger.
Our group of western fugitives were always treated a little better than the others. There were several hundred of us now. Our police guard had been the same group of men for the whole route and we knew them well now. That night they found a hay barn for us to sleep in and even rustled up something for us to eat. A farmer's wife made us a huge kettle of soup, and although it smelled revolting, we were so hungry we would have eaten anything. She promised us more the next morning. We slept well in the hay that night, although we were wakened a few times by exploding shells close by, but we were so totally exhausted we couldn't have cared less if they had killed us.
The following morning we washed ourselves in the farm yard well. It was the first wash in four days of marching. The farmer's wife arrived with another kettle of the soup. The night before it was dark and I couldn't see what I was eating, but in the morning light I could. It was pig food, made with rotting potatoes, vegetable waste, peelings of all kinds. A large amount of hair and other oddments were floating around in it. I had eaten it the night before, but I'd rather have died than eat it again that morning.

Three more days of marching and misery followed. There seemed to be no end to our suffering. We saw no more food, and the speed we had to walk got faster and faster as our torturers desperately tried to avoid the circle the Allies were obviously forming. We dragged our feet, praying we would be trapped in the circle. As it turned out, we were.
After seven days of this torture and deprivation, we arrived on the outskirts of Lipstad. The Americans were expected here at any time and the Germans were getting ready to blow up the last remaining bridge over the river Lippe. The police tried to hurry us over the bridge, but the demolition crew said there wasn't enough time and told the police to make a dash for it now and leave us behind. They did just that, and ran like scared rabbits over the bridge with seconds to spare before it was blown sky high.
We danced, screamed for joy and embraced each other. We were free at last. Our western group was on its own now and we immediately set out in the direction of Holland.
We didn't return the way we came because the millions of refugees still in the column were still making for the non-existent bridge. There were going to be some very surprised police and soldiers any time now and we decided it was best to avoid them.
We followed a road going north-west instead of west, walking with a spring in our step, but we saw no one. Every step we now took would bring us closer to home. Things however were not as easy as we thought, because although we were in the circle, the Germans were still fighting from the inside, and there would be no hope for us until the Allies finished them off.
We kept going in our chosen direction, earnestly looking for some haven of rest that would provide a roof over our heads and something to eat whilst the Germans and Allies fought it out. We walked on for a few hours and arrived on the outskirts of the village of Hovestad. Here they had white flags and sheets draped from houses and official buildings. They had decided to give up without a fight, I guess.

We were now 60 men strong, and we decided to be cautious and wait a while, so we sat on the side of the road. It was 5 pm and we proposed to enter the village at 7 pm. We could see the church steeple with its white sheet on top quite clearly from where we sat, but it was unusually quiet on the streets, with not a soul to be seen. For some reason we didn't trust this. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion, which sent the ground under us a-trembling, and a big column of smoke rose up from the village. We couldn't figure out what had happened, and then we saw people running through the fields from all directions, towards the village.
At the same time a man was cycling by on his way to the village, so we stopped him and asked what was going on. He told us that the last retreating Germans had blown up a bridge in the center of the village, and the population had been evacuated before the explosion. Everyone was now running back to make sure that their homes were intact. The invading army was expected in the village within the hour, and all the German soldiers had left. The Mayor had told them to surrender without violence. This was just the news we had hoped to hear, and we moved into the village.

When we reached the bridge that was blown up we were horrified to see a couple of heavily armed German soldiers standing there. They had decided to stay and defend the village after all. This meant that the Allies would now have to flatten the village to gain control. It was too bad that we had no guns or we could have got rid of those soldiers with no trouble at all. The soldiers gave us some very suspicious looks, but they said nothing.

We went in search of shelter and food for the night, but this was difficult because many village houses were in shambles from the bomb damage and they had no food to share with us. The Belgians in our group wanted to leave the village and find a hay barn for the night, but the Hollanders wanted to stay in the village. After a lot of talking we split up, and seven Hollanders, including me and my brother Jan, stayed, while the rest left.
Our chances of finding shelter would be better with our small group, and we asked a person passing by for help. He led us through the village to a large castle by the river. A moat surrounded the castle and we walked over a draw bridge and into a courtyard. A door into the castle stood open and we walked through it. The entrance led us down to a basement, very large, with tall brick pillars, rounded arches and tall ceilings. Windows, set high in the walls, looked out over the water in the moat. The basement was full of people, as it was used by the villagers as a bomb shelter. Many were now too frightened to go back to the village and were bedding down for the night. Nobody paid any attention to us and we found a corner under a stairway all to ourselves, and stretched out on the brick floor.

Two hours later we were approached by a young woman who wanted to know who we were and where we had come from. As we told her our story she gazed at us in stunned, silent shock. She could see for herself we were half starved, our bodies so skinny we rattled, our clothes in tatters, and our embarrassment at the disgusting, filthy, state we were in.
She turned out to be the cook of the castle and promised us food immediately. Soon afterwards she arrived back with an enormous pile of sandwiches. All we wanted to do was to cram them into our mouths, but we tried to eat politely.

Later she returned with the owners of the castle, a Baron and Baroness. They talked to us for a while. They were lovely people, true aristocrats. A short while after another pile of sandwiches arrived, with something to drink. Also they supplied us with blankets and pillows, and we settled down to sleep, safe, warm and well fed.

The following day we met the rest of the Baron's family, along with many other people hiding in their basement. They asked us many questions, and our answers were received with total horror and disbelief. Nobody had any idea what was going on in Germany and not a clue about the cruelty to prisoners in German care.
Meanwhile, firing had started up again outside. It was the German artillery that was firing at the village of Herzveld on the other side of the river. The castle was on the banks of the river Lippe, and across the river the Allied army had taken possession of Herzveld. White flags and sheets were hanging out for all to see, and people just assumed that the Allies had arrived, but far from it. We were waiting with baited breath for the arrival of the American liberators, but that was not to be. Now that the bridge had been bombed, the Americans decided to change course, considering us too small to bother about, and they passed us by. It was two weeks before they arrived here in Hovestad.

The Baron and Baroness were very good to us and fed us four times a day. We were unable to leave our hide-out as the shells were still raining down on us - first a load from the Germans, followed by a supply from the Americans. The Mayor of Hovestad had been ordered by the S.S. to remove the white flags, as they were determined to defend the village, and were shelling the Americans across the river. Shells landed in the moat, and water splashed through the broken windows, but fortunately none made it into our basement.
After a few days it was quiet again. The Castle was badly damaged, and we decided to do some work to repay the Baron for his generous hospitality. There was a lot to do and the Baron asked us to make a start on the stable roofs. No sooner had we climbed onto the roof than the shelling started again. We had to beat a hasty retreat to the basement. This happened six times. Each time we showed our faces on the roof the shelling started again. Guess what, it was the Americans firing at us. They must have taken us for German soldiers. We gave up in the end and settled for work inside. A lot of carpentry work was needed and I set out to mend the broken doors, locks and windows. It was five days before there was a cease fire in the area and we started repairing the castle in earnest. Most of us were tradesmen, and we wanted to show our heart-felt gratitude to the Baron and his family.

The evenings were a lot of fun. The castle personnel would gather in one of the barns and they made their own music. There were Russian and German maids, Russian men who played accordions and we all danced and got drunk on home-made whiskey and vodka. Our health and sanity was improving and it seemed impossible that we had arrived here more dead than alive a few weeks ago.
Life went on in this vein for several weeks more. The castle looked a lot better now and we had repaired most of the damage. One morning the Baroness asked us to gather in the courtyard as the Americans were there and waiting for us. Our feet sprouted wings as we rushed up to meet our liberators. Yes, there they were. I have never been so pleased to see anyone in my whole life. An officer gave us a speech, but we didn't understand him, and as the Baroness spoke English, she translated for us. What he had to say was mostly for the benefit of the Germans, imposed curfew, and the surrender of guns and ammunition. The Baroness introduced us as Hollanders and we received 5-star treatment from them. They pressed chocolate and cigarettes on us. Oh the luxury of that first cigarette. It had been months since my last one. The evenings were special. The Germans were ruled by the curfew, but we sat outside with the Americans and they would tell us their stories, as far as we could understand them. Many spoke German, and that made it a lot easier. We had as much chocolate and cigarettes as we could handle.
Another week went by and there was still no sign of us leaving the castle. We went to the

Commander for permission to leave and it was refused. But we decided to leave anyway, and if necessary walk the 300 or so kilometers to Amsterdam. We made our farewells to the Baron and Baroness, their family and staff. They loaded us down with food for the journey and waved us goodbye as we left. Our 300 kilometer journey was no longer than 300 feet!
A ferry now had replaced the bridge across the river, and American soldiers picked us up on the other side and took us to Herzveld. There we were handed over to the commander, who told us it was dangerous to try and travel anywhere at the moment because fighting was still going on in the area. We would be stopped and sent back no matter where we went. We were taken to a schoolroom in the village, given mattresses and blankets and told to make ourselves comfortable. We asked for, and got, tools and lumber and we set about building beds for ourselves. The soldiers helped us and we knocked up a whole roomful of beds, ready for a possible influx in the coming days. As well as providing us with our sleeping arrangements, they fed us lots of good food.

We lived like kings for a week, together with another 300 refugees who had recently arrived in the village. The Americans separated us by nationality in case transport was available at short notice. After a few weeks, army trucks arrived to pick us up and take us to a farm where we were deloused. We had to strip, and they sprayed us with white powder. I don't know why they bothered because our home for the next few days was a factory. Our beds had been placed in and around machines, and everything was covered in oil. We shared this factory with refugees of every nationality, including Russians. The Russians were crawling with lice as big as marbles, and within days we had inherited an ample supply and were crawling with them too. The Americans stretched white tape around the factory perimeter and we were not allowed beyond it. They were good to us and fed us well. A few days later we were sent back to the school and segregated once again, and the Dutch contingent were given their own room. We stayed there for a week and had a really good time with lots of fun. We were not allowed into the town, but the town came to us in the form of girls and prostitutes.

Eventually the great day arrived and we were loaded into trucks and soon we were heading for Holland. In Munster we had to get off at a former concentration camp where thousands of other Hollanders were waiting for transport home. We received coupons with which to buy food, and deloused once again. We were given an enormous meal before we left and packets of food for the journey. It took me the rest of the day and night to find a place in one of the trucks. If you didn't find a place, you had to stay because there was simply too many men and not enough transportation.

We left the trucks and crossed the border on foot, screaming and yelling with joy that we were back in Holland. It was too late for the customs and we were led to an empty bar, where we slept on the floor. The next day we reported to customs and were deloused yet again.
We were cooped up in the town of Glanerbrug for a week, but they tried to make us comfortable with lots of good food and music. We were served by girls with shaved heads, which was a punishment for going out with Germans.
The next stop was Enschede and another delousing. It was a double dose this time, just to make sure. We had to go through miles of red tape, and we each had to answer hundreds of questions. We stayed there for three weeks, and by now we were getting thoroughly tired of it all.

On the 4th June, 1945, we finally went home. We were driven into Amsterdam on a flat bed trailer and each one of the 80 men were dropped off at his own home.

Source: The Times Colonist, Victoria, BC, 2008-03-08

Buitendyk, Bastiaan (Bart) Passed peacefully away on March 4th 2008, at the age of 88 years. He leaves behind his loving wife, Helen, his two children, Alison (David) and Peter (Lise), and five grandchildren, Shannon and Colin Gill, and Jacques, Sophie and Kevin Buitendyk.

He is also survived by a son, Bart Jr., from his first marriage, who resides in Holland. Bart was born in Amsterdam, Holland, on January 13, 1920, the fourth child in a family of eight. He was 20 when the Second World War started, and was in forced labor and concentration camps during its duration.

From 1946 to 1949 he served as a volunteer with the Dutch Army in Indonesia. In 1951 he immigrated to Canada, and worked as a Building Contractor in the Sidney area for around 35 years, building approximately 40 houses on the Peninsula, many of which were large waterfront houses. Over the years he gained a high reputation for quality workmanship.

Bart was a member of the local Bethel Baptist Church for 35 years. He was a wonderful father and husband, and is leaving a lasting positive legacy to the next generation. The family would like to thank the staff of the Extended Care Unit of Saanich Peninsula Hospital for their loving care of Bart during the six months he was residing there.