

THE BREAD RATION

Stalag 3D Teltow in Germany was a POW camp and it did have it's lighter moments.

Mind you, at the time I did not think it was so amusing.

However the bread ration was to some extent like a Three Stooges movie.

A whistle would be blown and one man from each room would gather at the center wire to await the guard who would unlock the padlock and open the barbed wire encrusted wooden gate.

In summer time it was not so bad but in winter time when it was bitterly cold it was no fun waiting by that gate for the guard to come from the cookhouse to unlock the padlock.

Since the gate also had a guard posted on it when it was locked the lads gathered at the gate would try to engage the guard in conversation.

Feet would be stamping on the snow packed ground and some with wooden clogs and bits of cloth wrapped round their feet to keep them warm would be unwrapping them and rubbing their feet to get better circulation.

One bloke might wander a bit closer to the gate and try to engage the guard in conversation, always a good way to pick up bits of info.

"Yo' bin in Germany long then mate?" the happy wanderer would ask pleasantly.

The guard who was stood sideways to the men at the gate and not having moved recently looked like a waxworks exhibit.

Someone suggested, "appn' 'e froze durin' t' neet (night)

But we knew someone was home when the steel helmet slowly rotated like one of the main turrets on the Bismark getting ready to hurl a shell at an enemy ship.

Two beady eyes surveyed the bloke who has spoken through the wire.

As the front of the steel helmet lined up on the bloke who had spoken all we could see were the whites of eyes peering out from the dark of the steel helmet and the up turned collar.

We knew it was alive because vapour consistent with breathing was coming out of the dark space just below the eyes.

The front of the upturned collar had a thin coating of ice on it where the moisture from the guards breath had frozen.

But the answer was short and sharp, " rous mit ihr" and roughly translated to "f-k off"

"Oh tha's bloody charmin' tha' is" someone would warble, "y' try to be nice an' wot dyer get"

Someone else stuck his face up to the wire and snarled, "wait till we get Red Cross parcels yu miserable c-t, you can have the string off mine then yu cin go f-n' hang yer sel' " and left the wire with his middle finger stuck up in a defiant ride gesture.

Since there were ten rooms to a barracks and there were four barracks, and not all the rooms were full some sixteen men would go to the cookhouse to collect the bread ration for each room.

Most rooms had ten men in them.

"Wonder what smelly cheese we'll get today T' one inmate drawled casually.

"Well if it's that muck with the bike solution round it they can keep it and shove it up their arse" said one Jock bloke.

" that's probably where it came from in the first place" replied a bloke busy shaving a bit of wood into a model Spitfire's body.

Another bloke came in and flung himself down on his bunk, "f-k this for a game of soldiers", he mumbled.

"What's wrong Dicko old mate, cheer up, the bread will be here soon." said one bloke laid reading.

" Yea, f-n' sawdust and wheat ears an' one bite an' its gone" replied Dicko bitterly.

"D'yu reckon we will ever get any Red Cross parcels in a little dump like this?" queried the book reader.

" Yu'll just have to wait and see old mate same as every one else, the Germans have been short on food and just about everything else since the last war".

The door opened and the bloke who had gone to fetch the bread rations was back.

He put the food down on the table like it was the last supper he was preparing.

There were two oblong loaves of bread for the ten men in this room.

Ten little pats of margarine about the size of a sugar lump.

A teaspoon full of jam per man that looked like red axle grease and tasted like it.

So this was today's ration. Potato soup would be served at about 5 p.m.in the evening.

The ritual of cutting the bread was surpassed only by the ritual that accompanied the sacrifice of a young maiden to King Kong on the Savage Island somewhere in the South Seas.

One thing that was established as a rule was each loaf was equal in weight.

All that remained now was to give each man a share and not a crumb more of one of the loaves.

Since there were ten men then it followed each loaf would be divided into five pieces.

The wooden ruler would be taken down from it's resting place on the ledge and it would be held to the loaf.

But sometimes a loaf would be malformed, one end would be smaller and the opposite end would be bigger.

No problem, the extra size at one end would be cut off, then the bread would be cut into five parts.

The bits that had been shaved off would be hacked to smaller pieces so that each ration had a little sliver of bread to go with it.

Someone would have a gripe, "mine is not as big as his".

A voice from the bed area would suggest, "Have you tried rubbing it?"

Another voice would quip, "not on these rations mate"

Then there would be the weighing ritual.

If some one was not happy with his lot then out came the scales.

Two tin lids with string attaching them to a wooden cross stick with a bit of string in the middle to hold it.

The drill with this apparatus was put a bit of bread on one side and then another bit on the other side and whittle at the heavier then share the crumbs.

The bloke reading the book would some times insert a bit of commentary as the bread was being weighed.

He would put down his book and watch the capers of this bread farce and suddenly erupt with, " you'll wear the f-n' bread out before you get chance to eat it.

The jam was unique in that when put in the mouth and chewed it stuck to the teeth until next day like a boxer's gum shield.

The main meal of the day was served between five and six o'clock P.M. It varied, some times we got sauerkraut (cabbage pickled in vinegar) but mostly it was potato soup.

About a pint of soup per man, and the easiest quickest way to describe it would be to compare it to making a hot cup of Oxo where one boils a pint of water then drops into it a cube of potato the size of a sugar cube and crush it.

Someone once chortled, "I got meat in mine" Someone else said, I don't believe you, show us" The bloke held up a drowned fly.

Tom Barker 1999

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