



Route taken by the author and his friends to the American lines April and May 1945

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April 1945, 5 pm. A clatter of horses' hooves galloping through the main road of the camp. "Hell!" said someone, "they're Russians. Cossacks."

We're free! Free! At last! After 906 days!

So ironically we were freed by cavalry in this day of armoured and mechanised warfare. We go out to survey the scene. Tinhead's body and that of that bloody coalshed blonde murderer lie outside the wire. As does that of Hauptmann Koenig. He wasn't a bad beggar.

The Stabsfeldwebel had been spared – but not for long. The Russian POWs didn't take long to tell their mates about the whippings they'd had to endure from this animal, so one leg was tied to a Cossack's stirrup iron and he galloped round and round until the horse's hooves had kicked the Jerry's skull in. It didn't worry us. Serve the bastard right, was our reaction. As ye live, so shall ye die.

And the southern wire in the Ruskis' compound? They bent it down just by sheer weight of numbers. The ones next to the barbs must have been well padded. Over they went to a nearby farmhouse past a couple of German corpses. Apart from the Stabsfeldwebel, they had shot every German who remained out of hand. They cut the throats of all in the house, dragged out the bath and lit a fire under it. They then got some potatoes from a field and made a huge stew. Their first decent feed in God knows how long.

Freedom! Nothing like it! John Cleeve and I went out to see what was what outside and to scrounge some food. We went to a farmhouse (or was it a little village?) a mile or two away and went inside. The thunder of a Russian field gun was still being heard. There was a lot of beautiful china and glassware in the house as well as two very frightened little German children. We did our best to calm them and did not touch anything in the house. We suddenly felt sorry for the bastards and also as if we were interlopers who had no right to be there at all.

There was a large 'Panzer Faust' grenade resting against a wall which we took great care to avoid. And a day or two later I believe, a British sergeant-major who fancied himself as a 'delouser' of such things, had a go at it and blew himself to Kingdom Come.

Would you believe it?

But our emotions did not and could not extend to food. I killed a piglet which we carried back, together with a fowl or two. And, for the record, John Cleeve and I were at any rate the first chaps from our hut to go 'outside'.

In days the whole district had just about been cleaned out. Our Russian POWs had left only a day or two later through the east gate, and I clearly remember the long, long column slowly walking eastward to home – and probably without any food but that which they could find on the way.

Dick Osborn told us too that the New Zealand soldier Ward had come out of hiding and had had a yarn with him about the 'hows and wherefores' of being hidden from the Huns for some 19 months. I did not meet this chap but good luck to him. He deserved it.

Now one doesn't convert from semi starvation to normal eating habits without paying. I woke up early one morning while it was still dark with the most hellish 'barbed wire' pain in the belly you could possibly imagine. Christ! To the latrine! Quick! Must hurry! Might make it! I failed.

We knew now the Russians and the Yanks had met at Torgau, a town some twenty miles downriver from us. Here was history in the making such as I had never witnessed before and never will again.

And women in the front line, or near enough to it. The two we saw on one of our food forays were fairly large and looked like military police I'd say, as they were directing traffic. You wouldn't have wanted to try