

A PRISONERS OF WAR CAMP

By J. M. MacLENNAN, late Captain H.L.I. and A. E. Corps

It was towards the end of 1916 that I was ordered to proceed (as Kipling remarks, one is never by any chance permitted to "go" in either Service!) as adjutant to a Prisoners of War Camp in the north of Scotland, and as few people, either in or out of the Army, knew anything of the working of these camps, it may be interesting to raise a corner of the curtain now.

The situation of the Camp in which I served was an ideal one. It lay on the crest of the spur running west from Inverness and commanded a truly magnificent view to the east, to the north, and to the west. Below us, on the other side of the silver strip of the Beaully Firth, lay the green and fertile Black Isle, while beyond lay the great Bens of Ross and Sutherland, overtopped by the massive bulk of Ben Wyvis. Behind rose the silent hills and the open spaces, "the free hill and the glooming glen," and on every side lay scattered an inexhaustible store of beauty and grandeur, what Goethe so aptly described as the living, visible garment of God. There was something in the unruffled calm of nature which made war seem a petty and childish thing and very far away.

Our Camp was a small one, a working camp of two hundred prisoners engaged in wood-cutting, a detachment of the great parent camp at Stobs, near Hawick, where there were about 5,000 of our temporary guests in residence. The Camp staff consisted of three officers, the Commandant, myself, and an interpreter, together with the sergeant-major, and two provost-sergeants who divided the work between them, one being in charge of the work in the woods, and the other being responsible for the compound. The guards were found by the Royal Defence Corps, the successors of the pre-war National Reservists, and were under the charge of one of their own officers. A good many of these men were of the Chelsea Pensioner type, and while the spirit was willing enough the flesh was woefully weak.

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With the exception of the Mess, the Camp buildings consisted of the ordinary Army huts. The prisoners, or "P/Ws" as they were usually referred to, had seven living huts, together with the usual Camp offices, kitchen, hospital, and stores, the whole surrounded by a barbed wire fence twelve feet high. Sentry boxes were built at a height of six feet above ground, and were reached by a wooden stair-way in the rear. There was one at each corner of the compound and main Guard Room with two cells at the gate. The Guard buildings were practically identical with those of the prisoners, except that they had no hospital, men of the Guard being treated, when necessary, at the military hospital in Inverness.

The Royal Engineers had laid on an excellent water supply, and lighting in the huts was supplied by oil lamps. The compound was illuminated at night by half a dozen acetylene gas flares which showed up everything almost as clearly as daylight. The Germans were rather scared at first in case their Zeppelins bombed the place under the impression that it was a factory of some sort; but they were told they could either "like it or lump it" and we heard no more complaints. Fortunately we had no visits from aircraft, although I heard later that at least two German camps in France had been bombed and several of the prisoners killed or wounded. The poetic justice of it rather appealed to me.

With the interior economy of the Guard the Camp staff had little to do, and so long as the necessary guards were found and did their work, we never interfered. In our O.C. Guard we were particularly fortunate. A cheerier, more helpful colleague it would have been hard to find.

It will probably sound strange to many to hear that with the interior working of the compound we interfered but little either, yet such was the case. Under their Camp Captain, a *feld-weibel* or sergeant-major, the prisoners were responsible for everything inside their own camp, and it says much for their system that it was a very rare occurrence for the Commandant or myself to offer any criticism.

The usual day's work did not vary much. Breakfast was at 7.30 a.m., and the working parties paraded at 7.45 a.m. By 8 o'clock, or shortly afterwards, they had started work. In the woods each squad numbered six men under one of their number as foreman. Their work consisted of cutting, peeling, snedding and stacking. The work was hard, and it was easy to note the difference between some of the trained Bavarian wood-cutters and those who had not tried the work before.

These squads were paid on a piece-work basis, and the weekly pay-sheet formed a very good barometer of the work done. According to regulations a "P/W" who is employed must be paid at the ordinary rate of working pay of the British soldier. When I arrived at the Camp I found that the prisoners were working on the third rate of one penny per hour, and I speedily came to the conclusion that the output was not what it ought to be. The Germans knew they were paid a penny every hour whether they cut two trees or twenty, so why cut more than two? It was human nature, of course, but it did not pay the country. The Commandant and I accordingly worked out a scheme of piece-work by which the men were paid so much per tree cut and so much per foot peeled and stacked. The wily German was somewhat annoyed at first, but he was given no choice in the matter. In the end, when he found that he could make considerably more money in the course of a week, he began to put his back into it, and the output grew by leaps and bounds.

Our scheme was criticized on the score of giving the Germans so much money; but personally I took the view that it was better to pay them more and get more out of them. The country wanted the wood badly, and the wood was not forthcoming under the old system. Under the new system we got a great deal more work done with far less trouble. It was quite amusing to see how rapidly the lazy man of the squad became the most unpopular man in it.

As I have said, the weekly pay-sheet was an excellent chart of the work done. The professional wood-cutters from Bavaria earned, under the new system, from three to six times what some of the other squads earned in a week. When I left the Camp the record was held by a squad of six Bavarians who had earned close on £6 in a week, or very nearly £1 per man. As against that, however, some squads could not earn what they had been getting under the old system of payment.

A sawmill was established outside the Camp, and many of the bigger trees were cut up on the spot. The men employed here were all practical sawyers, with a first-class engineer in charge of the engine-house.

To transport the wood to the station we built a light bogie railway from the farthest point of the wood down to Bunchrew, and a loading party at the station transferred the wood to the trucks as it arrived. An effort was made later to run a ropeway to Lentan, but, from what I heard, it did not appear to have been a success.

The nearer squads came in for a light meal about 1 o'clock, and

every one ceased work at 5 p.m., when they had the chief meal of the day. Those who were working farthest from the Camp had a haversack ration with them, and so lost no time through coming in.

The ration question at this time had its amusing, as well as its serious, side. Most of us remember the tremendous newspaper campaign that went on concerning the way P/Ws were overfed and underworked, and for a time it was almost unsafe to show one's face in Inverness. How far the newspaper campaign was propaganda work I cannot say, but I do know that a great deal of it was misleading, to say the least of it. I know that I should not have cared to tackle the work the P/Ws did on the food they got. A man was allowed 9 ounces of bread (about two or three slices) and 4 ounces of hard biscuit per day; 4 ounces of meat, which included bone, three times per week, with 10 ounces of salt herring or 2 ounces of Chinese bacon on the other four days. What Chinese bacon was I never discovered, but it certainly did not look appetizing. They got an ounce of oatmeal and an ounce of cheese per day, but these could be increased to two ounces on the medical officer's recommendation. An ounce of sugar, an ounce of rice, half an ounce of margarine, quarter of an ounce of tea and the same of salt, together with a pound of potatoes, completed the scale.

Most people will be prepared to admit that there was no great danger here of overfeeding, and my batman, one of the prisoners, told me that sometimes the men who did not smoke were so hungry that they could not sleep at night.

The prisoners had their own canteen in the compound, but in the matter of food it did not help them much. All articles containing meat of any kind, sugar, jam, butter, or the like were prohibited. An exception was made in the case of horse-flesh and liver sausage, which were purchased from a firm in Glasgow, but everything else which was at all scarce was rigorously excluded. The chief sales consisted of tobacco and cigarettes.

The majority of the men got parcels, and these helped them considerably. Unfortunately it took so long on the road for the parcels to reach them (usually about five or six weeks), that much of the food was bad when it arrived. Bread, potatoes, beet sugar, and German tobacco (poisonous stuff) formed a considerable portion of the contents.

All letters and parcels were, of course, censored by the interpreter, but this task was practically a sinecure with us.

The Office staff consisted of one British clerk and two or three German assistants, all good workers and excellent English speakers.

In fact, most of the assistance required by the staff was found by the P/Ws. The Guard had few enough men for their own duties, and it relieved matters considerably to employ P/Ws when we could. Both the Mess staff and the batmen were Germans, and I am afraid some of our visitors were very dubious about our employing a German cook. They were sure we would be poisoned some day!

I was rather interested to find how much keener the Germans were to pick up our language than our men were to learn German. The majority could make themselves understood, and many, so far as accent went, might have been taken for Scotsmen. Several carried small pocket dictionaries about with them, and hunted up each new word they heard.

There was a very laughable incident over the language question on one occasion. We had a visit from some ladies of a Prisoners' Aid Society, and one of the ladies, who seemed to pride herself on her command of German, held forth at great length to one of the P/Ws. He evidently could make little of it, and after she had repeated her remarks two or three times, he said in fluent English, "Pardon me, madam, if you will speak English, I will understand you better!" He had been a clerk in a big London office, Whiteley's I think, for several years. I am afraid I was to blame in not telling her earlier.

In Camp the routine was much the same as in barracks. The Camp Captain came over to the Orderly Room each morning at 10 o'clock for orders. All routine matters concerning P/Ws were handed over to him to be dealt with, and he returned with everything complete when the Commandant held his Orderly Room at mid-day. This was usually a matter of form, as it was seldom there were any prisoners to be dealt with. At 11 a.m. I had the ordinary barrack inspection, accompanied by both sergeant-majors, British and German. Most of the rest of the day was taken up with office work. A soldier has a fair number of forms, from his attestation form to his regimental conduct sheet, but Heaven preserve me from ever again dealing with P/W forms! Each of them had almost sufficient to paper his hut!

The P/W huts were models of neatness and cleanliness. Each hut had two orderlies, and the best men seemed to be picked for the work. Everything inside the huts was spotless. The kitchen, however, was my particular pride. Some of our regimental cook-houses are not just as clean as they might be, and the cooks are very often the dirtiest-looking sweeps in the regiment, so that the contrast

was all the greater. Everything shone like the proverbial new pin, and the cooks were always in spotless white duck, complete even to the cap. The cooking was typically German, tasteful, well-cooked and well-served, and not a scrap was wasted.

The relations between ourselves and the prisoners were of the best. A certain amount of irritation was at times, of course, unavoidable on both sides, but matters soon came back to normal. Only twice was there an escape, and in each case it was done, not to get away, but as a means of drawing attention to a disagreement inside the compound. The men, with few exceptions—and these were speedily weeded out—were decent, kindly fellows, grateful for a kindness, and very willing to help. They were, indeed, very like the best type of our own men, and, once we had tested them, we allowed them a certain amount of freedom, more so perhaps than the strict letter of regulations laid down, but never once was our trust abused. They were more sentimental on the surface, and had a simple, childish vein that was not apparent in our men.

Some amusing stories could be told of the P/Ws and their escort, but one must suffice. I have remarked that many of the Guard were old men, and there were many for whom the work was obviously too heavy, but there was no help for it; we simply had to carry on with the men at our disposal. I had gone along to the sawmill one afternoon about the time the working parties were coming in, when I saw the station party coming up minus their escort, but with one of the Germans—rather a large, fierce-looking gentleman—carrying a rifle over his shoulder. I did not know them so well at this time, and visions of a guard having been murdered, and a subsequent attack upon the staff, flashed across my mind. I found, however, that it was merely a case of the escort being tired out, so they had wheeled the old man along in their hand-cart—where he had fallen sound asleep—and the prisoner had carried his rifle for him!

The P/Ws found their recreation in music and handwork. They were all very fine singers, and their Choral Society was well worth listening to, while it goes without saying that many were instrumentalists of no mean order, and the camp orchestra was as good as one can hear in any first-class theatre. The Camp Captain was organist in one of the big German cathedrals, and was a particularly fine pianist and violinist. I managed to arrange several concerts for the Guard during the winter, and I received a great deal of help from him. We were also much indebted to Mr. Roderick Macleod, the great Gaelic tenor, who several times brought out a concert party from Inverness for the Guard.

They had a strong amateur theatrical society, and many of them showed high histrionic talent. Particularly fine were some of their Christmas plays, through most of which ran a strong religious vein.

All their entertainments finished up with the famous *Deutsch-land über Alles*, and I noticed that every man sang every verse. I could not help wondering how many of our men could sing every verse of our National Anthem?

Quite a number of the men spent their evenings making toys and nick-nacks, which for the most part were purchased by the men of the Guard. Some of them, of course, were toy-makers in civil life, but even so their work was marvellously good. For delicate, intricate work, done not under the best conditions, I question if it could have been beaten in the most up-to-date factory. It was here that they displayed the German temperament—careful, methodical, and painstaking.

The P/Ws did not display the same love of games that our men did, although several of them were very good "Soccer" players. One corporal had played several times for Germany in international matches, and had played against both Celtic and Rangers in their Continental tours.

As regards the war, the prisoners' attitude in general was very much against it. We had, of course, none of the real Prussian "sabre-rattlers," and so a much truer appreciation of the German attitude towards the war could be arrived at. The men were quite convinced that the war was the worst thing that could have happened to Germany, and even then could see the political and commercial ruin that was looming in front of their beloved fatherland. The general impression was that, had the Kaiser and the Prussian military party had patience, Germany would have been supreme in another half-century. The result was that the Kaiser was most unpopular. Much to my surprise, the Crown Prince and Hindenburg were their popular idols. Hindenburg I could understand, but I must admit that their feelings towards the former were surprising, until I began to find that there were wheels within wheels, and that there was a side to the Crown Prince's character of which we in this country were ignorant.

Although somewhat weary of captivity—the majority were 1914 or early 1915 prisoners—they were all, with two exceptions, quite glad to be where they were. The exceptions were two youngsters, boys of the upper wealthy class who served as probationary *feldwebels* for a year before being given a Regular commission, and so becoming members of the military caste. Like a good many of

our own youngsters, they saw only the heroic side of war, and were very sick at being out of it all. The older men took the view that it was better to be a live prisoner in Scotland than a dead soldier in France.

My life there was an interesting experience, and gave me an insight into—and, I must admit, an admiration for—many things in the German character, and much that I learned stood me in good stead a year or two later when I found myself stationed on the Rhine. That our method of dealing with the prisoners was appreciated I also found out. I had the good fortune to meet the mother of one of my P/Ws when on outpost duty on the edge of the Neutral Zone, and the good lady simply "mothered" me during my stay there—a clear case of "Cast your bread upon the waters."

Before I went to the Camp I, like a great many more of my countrymen, was prejudiced against the German. But in the Camp, it was my fortune to make several good friends among the enemy, some of whom I have met, and enjoyed meeting, since hostilities ceased.

