



## *Guests of the Third Reich* by Anthony Richards.

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Anthony Richards, head of Documents and Sound at the Imperial War Museums, intelligently organizes this collection of some twenty-two prisoners' first-person accounts, diaries, and audio recordings.<sup>1</sup> Apart from rare moments of derring-do, their daily-life stories center on mind-crushing boredom and empty stomachs mostly absent from films like *The Great Escape* (1963), *Colditz* (1955), the British-free comedy-drama *Stalag 17* (1953), or the long-running *Hogan's Heroes* TV series. Richards includes some material on the experience of Italian-<sup>2</sup> and Russian-held POWs.

Not surprisingly, given his sources,<sup>3</sup> the author concentrates on British and Commonwealth POWs. Many of the Britons sympathized with and felt privileged compared to the starved and roughly handled Poles and Russians in nearby POW housing units. The Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva conventions and German prison guards and higher-ups acted accordingly in their treatment of Western or Eastern POWs.

Chapter titles include "Captured," "Life in Captivity," "Food, Parcels and Letters," "Entertainment," "Escaping." Others concern specific sites such as Stalag Luft III, a Luftwaffe-run camp for RAF and US Army Air Corps personnel, and the infamous "Colditz." Still others discuss "Work," "Final Days," when cranky German guards awaited an end to their ugly, often criminal tasks, and "Repatriation." Thirty half-tone photographs (and a painting of a priceless Red Cross war parcel) enrich stories of comradeship and occasional thievery. Food containers were censored for material that might be useful in fashioning escape equipment. Both sides censored correspondence for useful information.

The inmates of these POW camps were treated far better than were the Germans' own fellow nationals, some of whom they herded into filthy and cruel concentration, labor, and death camps. There were rules for the treatment of military captives: they had the right to refuse detailed interrogation, keep their possessions, and practice their faiths. Their rations were supposed to be as good as their captors'.<sup>4</sup> Prisons were generally staffed according to service branch:<sup>5</sup> German naval

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1. Richards' connecting narrative appears in Roman type, while the soldiers' quotations—about half of the text—are set in italics.

2. The British found Italian guards harsher than their German counterparts (45). When the Italian armistice was signed (Sept. 1943), their POWs were relocated to Germany. The result was that some British prisoners endured five years of imprisonment.

3. The first-person accounts come from IWM archives, private papers, one MI9 debriefing, and sound recordings.

4. Toward the war's end, sometimes POWs, due to Red Cross packages, ate better than their German guards. Sometimes their prized tins of food were stolen. One group managed to buy a local turkey and enraged their guards!

5. The Reich devised special *Lager* vocabulary for different camps: *Oflag* (for officers), *Dulag* (i.e., *Durchgang* or transit camp for airmen sent for interrogation), *Marlag* (for mariners), *Milag* (interned seamen), *Stalag* (main camp), plus *Straflag* (penal sites) and *Sonderlag* (high-security confinements) (10-12).

personnel ran camps for British sailors,<sup>6</sup> Luftwaffe troopers guarded airmen, and German soldiers operated camps for British army troops, the first and largest contingent of prisoners—of a grand total of 250,000 POWs,<sup>7</sup> 45,000 were taken at Dunkirk and 12,500 on Crete.

Food, not sex, most preoccupied the lethargic, semi-starved captives: they thought of roast beef more than of women. Crumpled and dirty cigarettes provided a better barter currency than did *Lagergeld* (camp Marks). Besides letters, the understandably irregular mail brought clothing and food. Two roll calls left much of the day free for officers with nothing to do and all day to do it (60).

British and Commonwealth Red Cross parcels supplied both essential food items and materiel for potential escapees. The men watched carefully as these things were shared out; every room had its own distribution leader. Potatoes were rare among prisoners of the Italians because the Germans shipped them to their own troops. Fresh fruit was nearly unobtainable. Tins and crates supplied mugs, utensils, flowerpots, and fuel for cooking and heating. In one case at Colditz, scavenged wood produced struts for a glider escape vehicle (chap. 7), never catapulted because the war ended.

Letters allowed prisoners, once registered and settled, to let their worried wives and children know they were still alive. Despite the short distance involved, mail often took over a month to arrive. And the news it bore could be painful: Richards mentions letters informing men that their girlfriends and wives had sought comfort elsewhere. The Joint War Organization urged those writing letters not to appear too happy (76) lest they trouble prisoners suffering unmitigated boredom.

The POWs had the leisure to devise all sorts of entertainment, a relief for them and even for their captors, who calculated that men sewing costumes for a show were less likely to be digging escape tunnels. Mimes and dramas featured men dressed as women in serious roles for, as Wilfrid Sutton drolly put it, a “captive audience.” German soldiers and censors enjoyed these shows. Choirs, bands, and orchestras flourished as well, thanks to instruments sent from Britain through the Red Cross.

The men laid out football and cricket fields within the barbed wire and enjoyed golf clubs sent from England. Board games and books were allowed, although works by Jewish and leftist authors were confiscated. Educational courses included the awarding of Honours Degrees in many disciplines, despite paper being in short supply. Birdwatching flourished and pet cats reduced rat populations. Each man received a ration of fifty cigarettes a week. The Geneva Conventions permitted German lessons but not gambling. Although listening to BBC transmissions was strictly forbidden (119), most camps had hidden wireless sets and reporters to summarize the British news (such as the D-Day landings!). Officers and NCOs were housed separately.

German commanders sometimes dragooned enlisted men for labor battalions and up to seven-day work-weeks with a 5:30 a.m. roll call for ten hours of work a day.<sup>8</sup> Sub-zero temperatures in winter tortured the malnourished bodies of men working in rags. The Geneva conventions ex-

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6. Fewer sailors survived their ships sinking both in the Navy and the Merchant Marine. A German submarine took prisoner Captain Monckton commanding a frozen beef supply ship, but the Germans left his crew to survive in lifeboats (7-10). There was no room for the ship’s crew on the cramped sub and the German officers wanted to elicit useful information.

7. American POW numbers remained lower than British, 95,000, since the United States entered the war later and did not suffer wholesale captures during early German advances to the Atlantic.

8. The epigraph of the “Work” chapter, “*Arbeit mach [sic] frei*,” is out of place, even blasphemous here.

empted officers and NCOs. *Arbeitskommandos* (sub-camps) housed industrial workers, miners, and farm hands. Some found such work a relief from immobility, but others, already on a subsistence diet, were worked nearly to death.

As many as 21,500 British inmates and their close allies escaped such camps during the war, but that constituted less than 0.5 percent of the POWs. There were fierce reprisals for injuring guards, but escape held an ambiguous place in international law; for instance, a recaptured officer could suffer no worse than thirty days of solitary confinement—a perquisite of rank. Treatment was harsher when SS men guarded POW camps. German “ferrets” roamed the camps looking for contraband and eavesdropping. Escape required ingenuity in counterfeiting documents<sup>9</sup> and in planning and executing a route from deep within Germany. The strength to walk many miles in bad weather, audacity in bluffing, and language skills all came second to good luck at each stage of the journey from camp gates to German border-guards on the Baltic coasts or the Swiss frontier.

In Stalag Luft III, one escape attempt involved a “wooden horse” (i.e., a gymnast’s vaulting horse) placed each day over the entrance to a hundred-foot tunnel which was covered up again in the evening. Three men escaped this camp’s East Compound in October 1943 (132). Six months later came the great escape in which seventy-six prisoners got outside the wire. Seventy-three were recaptured and fifty were executed (illegally) at Hitler’s order. Two hundred and twenty others were ready to run when the alarm sounded. As Soviet soldiers approached, the Nazis evacuated the camp’s prisoners in late January 1945, in wild winter weather, leaving behind some 55,000 Red Cross food parcels, and 2.5 million cigarettes (136). Brutal forced marches<sup>10</sup> killed many of the famished POWs.

Hermann Göring claimed Colditz Castle (Oflag IV-B) was “escape-proof.” Some thirty-plus successful attempts proved him wrong. Colditz held prisoners of special value, for example Churchill’s nephew, Giles Romilly, as well as recaptured escaped Allied officers. Only one confirmed fatality occurred. Life there was far better than in typical POW camps; men like Lt. Col. Milts Reid marveled at their (relatively) pleasant lodgings—hot water and single beds (143). As the war progressed, escape became more difficult and attempts dwindled. Some soldiers thought it safer to stay inside Colditz than to try to reach neutral Switzerland or Allied lines. Americans liberated Colditz prisoners on 16 April 1945.

“Final Days” describes changes in POW camps in late summer 1943 for Italy and early 1945 for the crumbling Third Reich. Welcome news was counterbalanced by a decline in the quantity and quality of food supplies, as Allied airmen destroyed roads, rail lines, and production sites. POWs in Italy who expected repatriation after the Fascists surrendered were shipped to Germany in nasty transports. Freight cars jammed with POWs were repeatedly shunted aside. One bucket served for human waste and tiny air slots near the top of the car furnished the only ventilation. Red Cross parcels were bombed by the Allies—so the Germans alleged—or stolen by starving captors. Months-long marches, even over 1,000 kilometers in freezing weather, were forced on starving men, some suffering from dysentery. They received no hot food as they slogged west and north away from the advancing Soviet armies. Roughly 240,000 POWs marching under guard were sometimes mistakenly strafed by Allied aircraft. The Germans were quite ready to separate from their prisoners (189). Liberation from the Nazi war machine was sudden and disorienting. Some

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9. Cut potatoes and linoleum provided satisfactory etching surfaces.

10. The first leg covered thirty-four miles in twenty-seven hours.

British and Commonwealth soldiers advanced from German POWs to Soviet POWs. Marched east to Odessa, they were told to forage for their food, as the Red Army did.

Repatriation provides a cheerful final chapter. Ten thousand British and Commonwealth men, out of action for mental or physical reasons, were exchanged and repatriated during the war. A few feigned illness, but a board of British, German, and Swiss doctors had to approve each case. Stanley Doughty described his painfully long exchange at Lausanne (199–203) capped with Swiss soap, a hot shower, and chocolate. Return home was often awkward and trauma festered. When Eric Monkton reached his home rail station, he was so thin that his wife did not recognize him. W.G. Harvey and his spouse felt so estranged that weeks passed before they resumed marital relations. The truth is that most of these men nearly died twice for their country—in battle and as prisoners. We remain in their debt, as do all free and civilized peoples.