

## POST-GREECE

Private H.J. 'Bert' Arnold, 189 Field Ambulance, RAMC

From "Tell Them We Were Here" by Edwin Horlington

Archivist's Note: This diversion is highly unusual

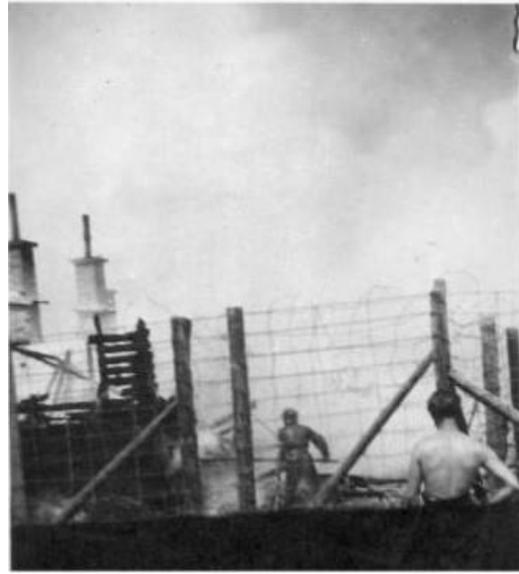
Eventually we were sent to a camp in Yugoslavia where we saw the first Russian prisoners of war. They were in a sorry state, poor fellows. From there we were sent to a camp near Salonika, back in Greece. It was here I contracted dysentery and malaria but after a few weeks in hospital I recovered. From there we went up into Austria to a camp near Klagenfurt.

Some time had elapsed since capture and I had only been allowed to send one postcard to say I was captured but well. I had become separated from all my unit members, so opted to go on working parties instead of remaining in the main camp, where food was mainly potato or carrot soup, very watery. We were close to the Hungarian border and a few of the lads escaped there. We never heard what happened to them. I went to a lumber-jacking camp with several Australians and New Zealanders and was there for several months. By now we had received Red Cross parcels, also mail from home.

I spent the rest of the time at farms and spells in the main camp, Stalag 18A at Wolfsberg. It was here that a member of my unit was killed when the camp was bombed by the Yanks, who mistook it for an SS barracks in the next valley. It was a week before Christmas, 10 December 1944. A group of Liberators circled the camp before attacking out of the sun. The noise of the exploding bombs was colossal. I was spread-eagled under a bunk in the hut. The ground literally shook, with glass shattering and dirt, dust and smoke abounding. I found afterwards that the huts adjacent to ours had been hit and our hospital was demolished. My friend was inside. Needless to say, we all had the jitters for days afterwards.



The British Hospital huts during and after the air raid . . .



... by USAF B-24 Liberator bombers, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1944 (not 10<sup>th</sup> as Edwin or Bert 's typo suggests, above)



The ensuing funerals - here the French ...



... but attended in respect by all the nations involved - including the Germans

## International Red Cross Report, February 1945

From Bert's own personal collection:

Camp Report E.M./J.R.L./G.D./S.B. Germany

### Stalag XVIII A

Visited the 25th February, 1945  
by Mr. E. MAYER.

#### Camp Leader

British: No. 3672 Sgt. Major Bruce STEVENSON.

Strength: 26,470 prisoners, among whom are:  
40 Americans, of whom there are at the head camp - 6  
9,700 British, of whom there are at the head camp - 1,000  
Amongst the Britishers there are:  
2,000 Austrians  
1,500 New Zealanders.

Position and Billets: Great changes have taken place since our last visit. The head camp was fiercely bombed by Allied aircraft on the 18th December 1944 at 12.30 midday. Seventy-two (high) explosive bombs were dropped over the camp, of which 46 fell into the precinct of the camp, killing among others:

10 British prisoners

A dozen huts were entirely or partly destroyed, among them being those for general services and the infirmary.

The town, which is practically a large village, does not present any military objective, in the opinion of the prisoners of war themselves, and it did not get a single bomb. There is no industry in that district. The camp leaders have addressed, through the intermediary of Geneva, some telegrams and letters of protest, asking that such a catastrophe shall not occur again. On the day of our visit, the prisoners were again very uneasy, as five bombs having been dropped some metres away from the camp, dropped by a plane which circled over the camp. In May 1944, four bombs were also dropped over the immediate neighbourhood of the camp.

The prisoners have asked the International Red Cross Committee to point out afresh the position of the camp to the responsible military authorities.

The camp is not overcrowded in spite of the diminution in the number of huts, as many prisoners have since been sent to the detachments. The billeting conditions have not changed much as yet for the prisoners who remain at the camp.

The British have lost their theatre. The two dental surgeries have been destroyed. At the present time, by makeshift means, extractions are possible again, but the dentists have almost exhausted their stock of supplies for dental treatment.

Detachment No. 10.029/G.W. was completely destroyed by bombing on the 19th February 1945. This was a very good detachment of British prisoners which the Delegate visited for the last time in June 1944. During that bombardment, 5 British prisoners were killed, 5 seriously wounded, and 12 slightly wounded.

Food. As in all the Stalags, the question of Food constitutes a more serious problem each day. However, this Stalag is comparatively privileged as transport has been functioning fairly regularly in this region until about a week before the visit of inspection. The prisoners have, therefore, been able to benefit by a considerable supply of parcels from the Red Cross. Nevertheless, in the past few days the dive-bombers seem determined to attack the railways in that locality, so that in the future, in view of the fact that it is a mountainous district, food supplies will be difficult for this Stalag to obtain, if not more difficult for this than for other Stalags.

Clothing: This problem was not gone into very thoroughly at the time of the visit. The camp leaders regularly send lists of clothing that is needed to the International Red Cross Committee. Nevertheless, they fully realize that it will be very difficult in future to send wearing apparel. Also, whilst not satisfied with the condition of the clothing, they are glad to have it even in this precarious condition, knowing that in certain industrial districts in Germany, their comrades are even worse off for clothes than themselves.

Collective Food Parcels:

For the British, 6,000 Invalid Parcels were distributed in January to the various detachments as ordinary food parcels, as the camp leader had no more regular Food Parcels, in hand. Since then, the British have received Food Parcels, and the distribution is assured for March.

The Americans at this Stalag are all wounded or ill, and are at the hospital at Spittal, where they are supplied with food by the British camp leader of the hospital.

Canteen: Non-existent.

Medical Treatment: During the air raids on the 18th December last, the infirmaries were very seriously damaged and were not repaired at once, but patched up laboriously and often with makeshift material. At the present time, the installations in the infirmaries are primitive for all nationalities. This affects the British above all, as they had their hut completely destroyed.

At present they have the use of 60 beds, and the patients are very cramped for space, so that the doctors only keep those who are only slightly ill at the camp: all the serious cases are evacuated to the Army hospital at Spittal.

At the final interview, it was promised that the British should have the use of the infirmary but which is, at present, occupied by the prisoners who are to be repatriated shortly. Thus, the position of the British will be greatly improved in a few days.

A good quantity of the medical stores disappeared during the last raid. It is therefore urgent to have medical supplies sent as soon as possible, especially to the British Senior Medical Officer who has lost the greatest quantity, as well as to the dentists.

The dental surgery was destroyed, and at present, the prisoners of all nationalities use the same dentists chair. Only extractions can be undertaken. It would be useful to have some "paladon" and Teeth sent.

During the December raid, the Medical Corps suffered particularly. The Senior British Medical Officer, Captain D.Wood, R.A.M.C. No.0050 and Captain R.Howe, R.A.M.C. No.43713, as well as Corporal F.G.Lee, R.A.M.C. No.1057, were killed. They have been replaced by: Kinnout P.D.C. Major, R.A.M.C. No.1044 who is acting as chief medical officer.

Beattie R.B. Capt., N.Z.M.C. No.9520.

Spiritual and Intellectual needs:

Religious services at Stalag XVIII A are still well assured by comparison with other Stalags, especially for the detachments. In the raid of the 18th December, the camp chapel was destroyed. Some of the religious objects were happily saved. During the raid, Captain the Rev: J.C.Hobling, C.F. No.1118, was killed.

Theatrical, musical and sporting activities continue at this Stalag. The prisoners are still interested in their recreations, though this is not the case in the Stalags where the prisoners suffer more from hunger.

Correspondence The British receive less and less mail.

Work: The work detachments of Stalag XVIII

On the 4th December 1944, the following order from the "Oberkommando der Wehrmacht" was transmitted orally to the camp leaders of the "C" units :

"Prisoners of war may be compelled to work on earthworks as long as they are not found within range of fire of ground forces. Any refusal will be regarded as a refusal to work and, on that account, will entail punishment ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty"

Discipline: On the whole, the discipline is not severe at this Stalag, and relations between the German authorities and the prisoners are good. Nevertheless, incidents are continually occurring.

Conclusion: On the whole, Stalag XVIII A must be considered as better than most of the German Stalags. Hitherto the food supplies have been comparatively satisfactory. Consequently, the prisoners in the detachments are still able to interest themselves in the organisation of their recreations. Whereas since the raid on the 18th December 1944, everything has been disorganized at the head camp, the prisoners deplore the death of several of their comrades; others have been seriously wounded. The principal camp leaders of all nationalities have insisted that the International Red Cross Committee should intervene so that the bombing of a prisoner of war camp should not occur again, pointing out that Stalag XVIII A could not be of any interest to the Allies as an objective.

To continue Bert's story from TTWWH:

#### BEGINNING OF THE END

In April 1945 some of the camp, including myself, were shifted to Stalag 317, a place called Markt Pongau. It was a grim place. We travelled there in closed railway trucks, barbed wire from floor to ceiling across half the truck. About 25 of us were herded in there, with two guards in the other half. The only ventilation was through a vent high in the side of the truck.

On the journey there was an air raid and the guards left the truck, with us locked in it. Several hours went by before they returned and the train continued its journey. During this spell anyone who needed to urinate had to do it in a boot and empty it out of the air vent. Those who needed to pass anything else did it in a helmet, which was pushed through the wire into the guards' side. They threw it out on their return. We finally had a stop, where each wagon was opened to enable us to relieve ourselves and replenish our water bottles. We were without water for almost a day.

It was at Stalag 317 where we were finally freed by the Americans on Tuesday 8 May 1945. An extract from my diary dated Wednesday 25 April 1945 reads: 'Siren went and two planes seen. Soon over. Weather sunny and warm. Rations 7 to a loaf, one portion of margarine, one ladle of soup, one ladle of coffee.'

We left Salzburg by plane on Wednesday 23 May for Rheims. After a feed and showers we left in a Lancaster, arriving near Worthing, in Sussex. Eventually I arrived home in London on Friday 25 May 1945.

Edwin Horlington's comment at this point:

### Tell Them We Were Here

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Field Marshal Keitel had signed Germany's final act of capitulation on the day Private Bert Arnold was freed by the Americans. All 1,000,000 German troops in Austria and Italy had officially surrendered several days earlier. That surrender - in effect initiated as from 2 May - would take a few days to be physically implemented over so large an area.

The second day of Bert Arnold's freedom coincided with the surrender of Goering, who gave himself up to the Americans. The Red Flag was about to be hoisted over the bomb-scarred Reichstag building in Berlin. The 'Cold War' was about to begin. In Norway, the scene of Private Arnold's earlier war service prior to Greece, the Germans had surrendered on 5 May. Those final three days of captivity at Stalag 317 might have proved more cheerful had such news filtered through at that time.

On Wednesday 16 May 1945 the British Government in London announced the good news: "750,000 troops will be 'demobbed' this year."

Justice had finally been done: and seen to be done).

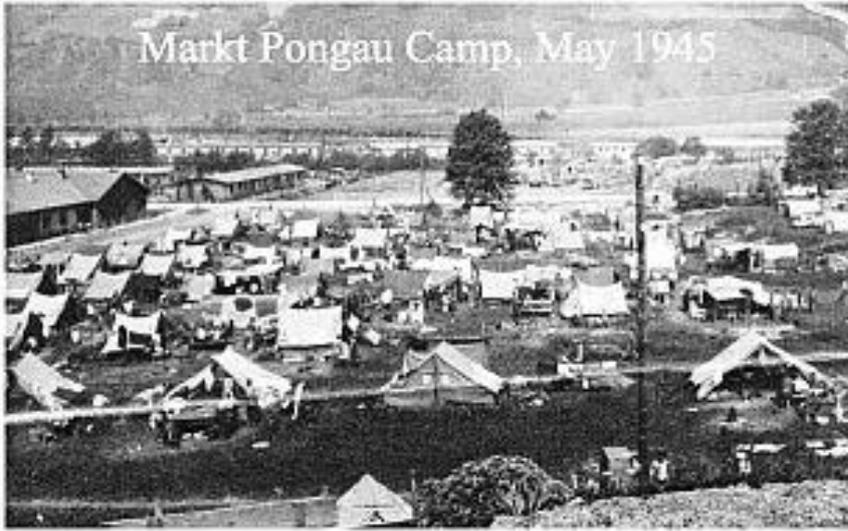
### Additional Notes

The following photographs of the liberation of Stalag XVIIIIC (a.k.a. Stalag 317) and preparation for homeward flight from Salzberg are taken from Ref 15 "Dad - Prisoner of War" by Noah Scott:



Waiting to depart for the airlift home

(Above photo courtesy of Frank Hardy, an ex-PoW. It was taken after the liberation of the camp at Markt Pongau in May 1945 and shows the PoWs being taken from the camp on their way to Salzburg and a flight to the UK. The next two pictures are courtesy of John Gregory and show the PoWs boarding Dakotas at Salzburg airfield.)



**Stalag XVIII C, Markt Pongau just after the German surrender**



**Leaving Markt Pongau at last**



**Waiting at Salzburg airfield**  
(Tom Donaldson 18 Bn, 2NZEF on right of three)



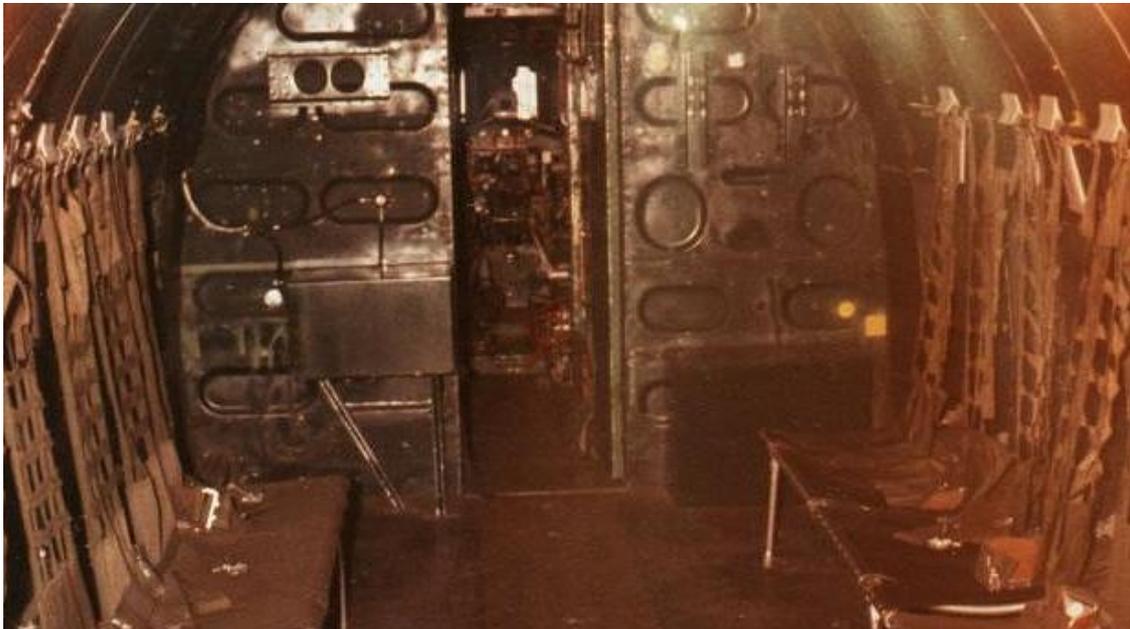
**Encamped at Salzburg (Tom Donaldson centre rear)**



**Leaving Salzburg at last**



**Boarding a Dakota for the first leg home - this is a USAAF Dakota transport which probably took its passengers to northern France (Rheims?) on their first leg home. Norman Scott said he came back in a Liberator bomber which may well have flown direct to southern England.**



**Dakota interior - sparse, but very welcome!**

**Archivist's additional note:** Below is a copy of a recruiting pamphlet donated by Bert Arnold - targeting the disillusioned, the criminal, the extreme right and possibly the Irish! Fortunately they didn't get too many takers - although apparently there were some (see below - its all true).

# Take Your Choice!

ARCTIC  
MOSCOW  
USSR  
ALGERIA  
LIBYA  
EGYPT  
TURKEY  
SUDAN  
ARABIA  
IRAN  
INDIA  
CHINA  
Burma

*If Germany collapses she will become Bolshevick. There is no doubt about this fact.  
The other countries of the Continent are on the way to become Soviet republics.  
England will find herself isolated against a Soviet Europe and a Soviet Asia from the Atlantic to the Pacific.  
This will be the end of your wealth, your trade, your civilization and the end of your Empire!*

*Given to us by the jerries trying to enrol us to fight against the Russians.*



Only a union of all European nations and their common co-operation with the British Empire can safeguard the existence of Europe, of her tradition and her civilization against an aggression from Siberia.

The very existence of the Empire will then be secured and a permanent peace will be guaranteed for our continent after a long period of bloody fratricidal wars.

The present war consequently will be the last European conflict.

Soldiers of all European countries are fighting for this aim united in the European British Peace League.

Turncoat recruiting pamphlet distributed amongst PoWs

## **British Free Corps**

(from Wikipedia website)

In World War 2, the British Free Corps (BFC) or Britisches Freikorps was a unit of the Waffen-SS consisting of British and Dominion prisoners of war who had been recruited by the Nazis. Despite the notoriety of this unit, it was tiny: Adrian Weale's research has identified about 59 men who belonged to this unit at one time or another, some for only a few days, and at no time did it reach more than 27 men in strength — smaller than a contemporary German platoon.

### **Early Plans**

The German Waffen-SS "British Free Corps" was the creation of John Amery, the son of Conservative cabinet minister Leo Amery. Amery lived under the shadow of his father, and strove to prove his own worth; however, these endeavours led to him being declared bankrupt in 1936.

Amery was a staunch anti-Communist and came to embrace the fascist doctrines of Nazi Germany. Confronted with money problems, he left Britain and joined Franco's Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Here, he was awarded a medal of honour while serving as an intelligence officer with Italian "volunteer" forces. It was in Spain that he met the French fascist leader Jacques Doriot. Following the Civil War, Amery and Doriot travelled together to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Italy and Germany before residing in Vichy France. Displeased with their mindset, Amery ran afoul of the Vichy government. He made several attempts to leave France, but was unsuccessful until September 1942, when Hauptmann Werner Plack brought Amery to Berlin to speak to the German English Committee. It was at this meeting that Amery suggested that the Germans form a British anti-Bolshevik legion. Adolf Hitler was impressed by Amery and allowed him to remain in Germany as a guest of the Reich, where he made a series of pro-German radio broadcasts to Britain.

The idea of a British force to fight the Communists languished until Amery met with two Frenchmen, who were part of the LVF (Légion des Volontaires Français) in January 1943. The two LVF men lamented the situation on the Eastern Front, where only Germany was battling the Soviet Union. They felt that they should lend support with their LVF service. Amery rekindled his idea of a British unit and aimed to recruit fifty to a hundred men for propaganda purposes. He wanted to seek out a core of men with which to gain additional members from British POWs. He also suggested that such a unit could provide more recruits for the other military units made up of foreign nationals. (However, the Germans had already raised a number of such units, which were operating under the command of the Waffen-SS.)

So Amery began his recruiting drive for a unit he named "The British Legion of St. George". He made the rounds of POW camps, addressing 40 to 50 inmates from Britain and various Commonwealth countries, and handed out recruiting material. His first efforts at recruitment were complete failures, but he persisted and eventually was rewarded with four recruits: an elderly academic named Logio, Maurice Tanner, Oswald Job, and Kenneth Berry (a 17 year old deckhand on the SS Cymbeline, which was sunk). Logio was released, while Job was recruited by German intelligence, trained as a spy, caught while trying to get into England and hanged March 1944. Thus, Amery ended up with two men, of which only Berry would actually join what was later called the BFC. Amery's link to what became the BFC ended in October 1943 when the Waffen-SS decided Amery's services were no longer needed.

### **German Recruit Efforts**

With the failure of Amery's recruiting efforts, another idea was tried in an attempt to woo POWs into joining the BFC. Given the harsh conditions of POW camps in Germany and the occupied areas, it was decided to form a "holiday camp" for likely recruits from POW camps. Two holiday camps were set up, Special Detachment 999 and Special Detachment 517, both under the umbrella of Stalag IIIId, near Berlin. English-speaking guards were used, overseen by a German intelligence officer, who would use the guards as information gatherers. But a Briton was needed as a possible conduit for volunteers and for this duty, Battery Quartermaster Sergeant John Henry Owen Brown of the Royal Artillery was selected. Brown had been a member of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) before the war, but was also a devout Christian. Captured on the beaches of Dunkirk in May 1940, Brown eventually ended up in a camp at Blechhammer. Given his rank, he was made a foreman of a work detail where he successfully won the confidence of the Germans. With his status, the Germans made him the camp leader of Special Detachment 517.

In reality, Brown had been setting up a black market scheme, smuggling in contraband to give to his men and also to buy off the guards. Later Brown learned the POW message codes created by MI9 and began to operate as (in his words) a "self-made spy". Once he understood his role concerning the "holiday camps", he determined that he was in a unique position to both hinder the formation of this unit and to obtain intelligence — while also making sure the men who came to the camp actually got a holiday. At this time, another Briton, Thomas Cooper (who used the German version of Cooper – Boettcher – as his last name), arrived at the camp. Cooper, unable to obtain public service employment in Britain due to his mother's German nationality, joined the BUF and during a visit of Germany in 1939 was trapped there by the war, and joined the Waffen-SS. He was posted to the SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler (LAH), where he eventually was transferred to the infamous SS "Totenkopf" infantry training battalion, and became a machine-gun instructor with the 5th Totenkopf Regiment and was made an NCO. Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, he was assigned to the Wachbattillon Oranienburg outside Krakow in Poland, where he allegedly told BFC men that he committed atrocities against Soviet and Polish POWs, civilians, and Jewish prisoners. Later, he served as transport driver in the SS-Polizei-Division, which was posted to Schablinov, a town on the Leningrad front, replacing the mangled forces of the Spanish Blue Division. The division was subjected to a Soviet attack on February 13, 1943, Cooper was hit in the legs by shell splinters, evacuated, and awarded the Wound Badge in Silver, becoming the only Englishman to obtain a German combat decoration.

Besides Cooper and the young Berry, a handful of other Britons had drifted into this group. Most notable was Roy Courlander\*, who also used the pseudonym of Reg. The son of a Lithuanian Jew and an English woman, he was serving in the New Zealand army in Greece when captured in 1941. He expressed extreme anti-Russian views, and had participated in Nazi broadcasts for England before he joined. When the first batch of 200 POWs arrived in the camp, Brown and his men did their best to entertain the prisoners while Cooper and other pro-Nazi men worked the crowd, seeking ex-BUF members or other ex-Fascist group members as well as finding out attitudes about the Communists. This treatment displeased many of the POWs, who demanded to be sent back to their camps. To try and calm this, the most senior British POW, one Major-General Fortune, was asked to send a representative to the holiday camp to inspect it; he selected Brigadier Leonard Parrington\*\*, who inspected the facilities, and incorrectly reported it was indeed a holiday camp and the POWs should not worry. Brown did not feel safe in informing Parrington of the purpose of the camp. While Parrington's visit was successful in calming the POWs, this recruiting effort gained only one confirmed recruit, Alfred Vivian Minchin, a merchant seaman whose ship, the SS Empire Ranger, was sunk off Norway by German bombers. Brown, following the first batch, learned of the full scope of the project from Carl Britten, who said he'd been forced into the BFC by Cooper and Leonard Courlander. Brown was unable to persuade Britten to quit the BFC, but MI9 got a very revealing transmission from Brown.

### Later Recruits

A bombing raid against Berlin damaged a good portion of the camp prior to a second batch of POWs being brought in. It was decided to move the men to a requisitioned cafe in the Pankow district, overseen by Wilhelm "Bob" Rosslar, a Germany Army interpreter. Prior to the move, the BFC gained two members, Francis George MacLardy of the Royal Army Medical Corps, (he was captured in Belgium) and Edwin Barnard Martin of the Canadian Essex Scottish Regiment, (Martin was captured at Dieppe in 1942), which brought the strength of the BFC to seven. POWs were brought into the camp once it was repaired, until the recruiting effort was halted in December 1944. Brown reported to the Germans that the handling of the camp fostered distrust among the POWs, and was counter-productive for obtaining recruits for the BFC. Meanwhile Brown, as their front man, continued a dangerous game of gathering intelligence while deterring recruits from joining the BFC, which work gained him the Distinguished Conduct Medal after the war. Oskar Lange, who was overseeing the camps, hit upon another idea to gain recruits, and, he hoped, give him more stature. While the earlier holiday camps only entertained long term POWs, Lange proposed that they take newly captured prisoners, who were still in a state of confusion, and work on them while they were vulnerable at a new camp in Luckenwalde. The camp was commanded by Hauptmann Hellmerich of German intelligence with his chief interrogator, Feldwebel Scharper. Scharper was not above using blackmail to get what he wanted and his tactics included fear, intimidation, and threats to coerce prisoners into joining.

The first group of POWs to be taken to Luckenwalde were mainly from the Italian theatre. One such case was Trooper John Eric Wilson of No.3 Commando which illustrated the techniques used by the camp. Upon arrival, he was stripped, made to watch his uniform get ripped to pieces, and then given a blanket to cover up with. Placed in a cell with just the blanket and fed 250 grams of bread and a pint of cabbage soup, he was only allowed out to empty the waste bucket.

After two days like this, he was taken before an "American", who was in fact Scharper. Wilson was asked his rank (about which Wilson lied, saying he was a staff sergeant), name, number, and date of birth, then returned to his cell. Left alone, a "British POW" would come in from time to time, offer cigarettes and conduct idle chit-chat. The end result was that the isolation and the mistreatment led to him holding on to the "POW" who showed kindness to him. When dragged before Scharper some days later and offered the choice of joining the BFC or staying in solitary, it can be understood why Wilson chose the BFC. With this initial success, it was deemed this method would be the gateway to expanding the BFC and in turn, 14 men were made to join. This including men from such esteemed units as the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Long Range Desert Group.

However, things fell apart when these men, told they would be joining a unit of thousands, arrived at their billets in the cafe, and found the "unit" amounted to a handful of men who were more interested in the opportunity of freedom or were Fascist in their outlook. At this time, Edwin Martin attempted to take advantage of the discord to disrupt the BFC, but it did not have the desired effect. Two of the men broke away from the cafe and got into Holiday Camp 517 to report to Brown who then complained to Cooper. Cooper then addressed the men at the cafe billet and promised that those who did not want to remain could leave. (To prevent the truth about the BFC reaching the general POW population, these men were isolated in a special camp.) By December 1943, the BFC returned to eight men in strength.

In spite of the tiny size of the unit, the Waffen-SS continued to work on the BFC. The first step was to appoint an officer. Because of the nature of the BFC, the candidate had to be trustworthy, have a good understanding of English, be a skilled leader and have excellent administrative skills. This job fell to SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Werner Roepke. A highly educated man, Roepke's grasp of English came from his time as an exchange student before the war. His military service included being a private in the Reichswehr, then as a law man with the Allgemeine-SS, before being called up to serve as a flak officer with the SS-"Wiking" division. He was made the commander of the BFC in November 1943.

## **Formation**

Roepke's first order of business was the name. "The Legion of St. George" was rejected as being too religious and the "British Legion" was also not acceptable since it was in use by a UK World War I veterans group. It was Alfred Minchin who suggested "British Free Corps" after reading about the "Freikorps Danmark" in the English version of Signal magazine. Thus, it was accepted that (though, in correspondence, the unit was sometimes called the "Britisches Freikorps"), officially the name was the "British Free Corps". That settled, Roepke moved on to the purpose of the unit. All the current members told Roepke they wanted to fight the Russians, (which was what the Germans wanted to hear), and so, with that settled, it was ordered that the BFC must swell to create at least a single infantry platoon of 30 men. It was also decreed that no BFC member could be part of any action against British and Commonwealth forces nor could any BFC member be used for intelligence gathering. Until a suitable British officer joined the unit, the BFC would be under German command. Other things worked out included BFC members not having to get the SS blood tattoo, not having to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler, and not being subject to German military law. They would receive pay equal to the German soldiers of their rank. Finally, it was decided to equip the unit with standard SS uniforms with appropriate insignia. Roepke ordered the BFC to be moved to the St. Michaeli Kloster in Hildesheim and also put in an order for 800 sets of the special BFC insignia to the SS clothing department.

Officially, the BFC came into existence on January 1, 1944. By February 1944, the BFC made the move to Hildesheim and the Kloster, which was a converted monastery, now the SS Nordic Study Centre and also the barracks for foreign workers labouring for the SS. Prior to the move, things for the BFC men were pretty idle but after the move, recruiting was to be stepped up. Of the group who left the BFC in December, the rumour that they would be sent to a SS run stalag, caused some of them to rethink their decision and three of them returned to their POW camps. Two new recruits were gained, including Private Thomas Freeman of No 7 Commando of Layforce. (Freeman was to be the only BFC man who did not receive any punishment post-war for his membership.) MI5 stated his only purpose for joining the BFC was to escape and also to sabotage the unit. At this time, Roepke ordered the BFC men to assume false names for official documents but not all did so. The BFC were also issued their first SS field uniforms, but without any insignia. Tasks were now assigned to the BFC members as well, which led to some factionalism. Despite having duties, the majority of the time was spent being idle once simple chores such as cleaning the billets were done.

This idleness gave Freeman a chance to ruin the BFC by going after those who weren't Fascist or strong anti-Communist. By getting them on his side, especially since the main pro-Nazi BFC men were often away from the barracks, Freeman sought to form a rift in the unit. He was able to go on one of the recruiting drives, with the purpose to gain men for his own ends. It netted three volunteers, though one returned to his camp soon after.

In April 1944, the BFC was issued its distinctive insignia, the three lion passant collar tab, the Union Jack arm badge, and the cuff title bearing "British Free Corps" in Gothic script. On the morning of 20 April, Roepke said that the BFC was now fully-fledged (by being issued uniforms, weapons, and pay books), and recruiting could begin in earnest. Promotions were also handed out at this time, with Freeman becoming senior NCO. Following the parade, the BFC members went off to various camps throughout Germany and Austria where they had been interned. The idea, however, was flawed and this recruiting drive netted just six new members. During one such drive, Berry confided to a camp leader his predicament, the leader saying he should seek out the Swiss embassy in Berlin, which Berry did not follow up. Two of these recruits, John Leister and Eric Pleasants, who had been caught up in the war when the Germans occupied the Channel Islands and put them both in camps, were mostly motivated by the opportunity to better food, alcohol and access to women. Pleasants frankly admitted to Minchin and Berry that he "was in it to have a good time."

The recruiting drives brought the BFC to a strength of 23 men. This worried Freeman because if the unit reached 30, then the BFC would be incorporated into the SS Wiking Division and sent into action. To prevent this, Freeman drafted a letter, signed by him and 14 other BFC men (mostly newcomers), requesting they be returned to their camps. Freeman and one other instigator sent to a penal stalag on the charge of mutiny on June 20, 1944. Freeman escaped the stalag in November 1944, and reached Soviet lines where he was repatriated in March 1945. Still, the BFC was rattled and tensions between members were evident, made worse by Cooper's intent to instil SS-style discipline and methods, which was alien to the Englishmen. With Freeman gone, Wilson became senior NCO, which was a mistake given Wilson had lied upon his capture about his rank, and thus had little experience leading men. In August 1944, four more recruits joined the BFC, including Lieutenant William Shearer. However, three of these recruits were blackmailed into enlisting. Two of them were made to join as they had relationships with local women: one had made his girlfriend pregnant, which was an offence punishable by death; the other man's liaison with a woman was discovered by the Gestapo. This addition of men coerced into joining the BFC only damaged morale, and touched off lack-lustre recruiting drives.

Morale continued to decline. A flap over the wearing of the Union Flag arm badge below the German eagle flared up at this time. By this time, many other units wore their national flag on the right sleeve, and some of the BFC men thought the position of the badge was disrespectful to Britain. It took a direct order from Heinrich Himmler to settle the matter by allowing the badge to be worn on the right sleeve if desired. Then there was the addition of Lieutenant Shearer, the first, and only British officer to accept a position in the unit. It was hoped that, at the least, Shearer would provide a token officer presence: however, Shearer was a schizophrenic and refused to put on his BFC uniform or even leave his room. After several weeks, he was returned to the mental asylum from whence he came, and later sent back to England on medical grounds. A last blow was the invasion of France by the Allies.

### **After D-Day**

With the success of the D-Day landings, some of the BFC men saw the writing on the wall and began to look for ways out. An incident involving the arrest of a BFC man for the theft of a pistol blew up, culminating in eight men, including Pleasants, refusing to work setting up a football pitch; all of them were sent to SS punishment camps. Despite this, recruitment was stepped up, with the intent assemble as many volunteers as possible, get them trained for combat, and sent off to the front whether as a unit or as replacements for other units. It was here that Vivian Stranders, a SS-Sturmbannführer, sought to make a bid for power by making a move against Cooper and Roepke, intending to monopolize British recruiting, and perhaps assume command of the BFC. Stranders, originally a British subject, joined the Nazi party in 1932 and took German nationality. After the war began, he was posted to the Waffen-SS as an expert in British affairs.

MacLardy abandoned the BFC, volunteering to join a Waffen-SS medical service unit. Two other men, one of them Courlander, could read the tealeaves and left the BFC by volunteering for service with the war correspondent unit "Kurt Eggers", which was operating on the Western Front. Their ultimate goal was to make for the Allied lines at the first chance. Courlander removed all of the BFC insignia from their uniforms, replacing them with the standard SS patches and rank.

The two men boarded a train for Brussels in the company of a Flemish Waffen-SS unit. Once there, they turned themselves over to the British, becoming the first two BFC men to return to their homeland. Still, problems reigned. Two more recruits were gained, again blackmailed into joining over sexual contact with German women. With all these problems, the commander of the barracks went to Roepke to request the BFC be sent elsewhere. As it turned out, the BFC were indeed going to be moved.

On October 11, 1944, the BFC arrived at Dresden, to begin training as assault pioneers at the Waffen-SS Pioneer School at the Wildermann Kaserne. Here, they would receive instruction in clearing obstacles, removing minefields, use of heavy weapons, demolition, and other tasks required of combat engineers. The BFC was issued with rifles, steel helmets, camouflage uniforms, and gas masks, then set about getting back into physical shape, and given courses in the use of machineguns, flamethrowers, and explosives. Picket and guard duty were assigned to the BFC as well. This attempt to turn the BFC into an actual combat unit came to a stop with the news of Roepke's dismissal. Stranders had been successful in ousting Roepke, replacing him with SS-Obersturmführer Dr. Walther Kuhlich, who was wounded during his stint with SS-"Das Reich", and was unfit for active frontline duty.

Cooper saw no future for himself in the BFC, and asked Wilson, who said he was in a similar frame of mind, to meet in Berlin to request a return to the stalags. The gig was up when Wilson, whose sole reason for going to Berlin was to go womanising, left Cooper high and dry and under arrest, the charge being sabotage of the BFC. Brought before Stranders and Kuhlich, Cooper was shown signed statements by several BFC men accusing him of anti-Nazi acts. A day later, he was formally charged by a SS prosecutor and sent to the LAH, working as a military policeman. Wilson, now in charge of recruiting, had no real intention of working hard to get new blood. Instead, he set about getting ex-BFC men who'd been kicked out back into the fold, notably Pleasants. In this, Wilson was successful. In the winter of 1944 and 1945, several new BFC recruits arrived, and the BFC returned to its training, all the while trying to put up a front to the other soldiers who felt the BFC led a soft life. Pleasants even managed to woo the secretary who worked for Kuhlich, marrying her in February 1945.

Plans were afoot, however, to use the BFC in one last-ditch propaganda ploy. An attempt was made to cause a rift between Josef Stalin and the allied leaders, namely Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. The main effort, called "Operation Koniggratz", attempted to sway British POWs being evacuated from the Polish stalags as the Soviets advanced. The plan was an abject failure and it was pondered how the BFC might be used to play a role in the effort, especially as they were training for combat on the Eastern Front. The BFC, meanwhile, found its morale taking a nose-dive once more, thanks in part to Wilson's lack of leadership and with Kuhlich absent in Berlin. Still, recruits for the BFC arrived, near the close of 1944, including two South Africans. Of these five, three turned out to be genuinely anti-Communist, one of them being swayed by BFC literature, the other two having wanted to initially join the SS Totenkopf Division until Kuhlich talked them into joining the BFC instead. By January 1945, the BFC was up to 27 men, three shy of the magic 30, but by this time the whole BFC idea was considered a total and complete failure. It did not help that six Maoris who had applied to the BFC were rejected by the men on the grounds it was a "whites only" unit. There was also the ongoing problem of having to deal with drunken and AWOL BFC men, notably one man who kept sneaking away to be with his girl.

With Wilson away, Hugh Cowie, a Gordon Highlander, hatched a plan to use his temporary position as senior NCO to escape. Captured in France in 1940, Cowie once tried to escape, was punished, and had been arrested for having a radio. Instead of a court-martial, he agreed to join the BFC the previous June. Cowie's plan was to use the pretext of going on a recruiting drive to obtain documentation for him and five others, join a train to the Eastern Front, lay low somewhere and let the Soviets overtake them. Once on the train, all the men (save one who didn't show), removed their BFC insignia, but were reported to the Gestapo by an innkeeper once they left the train at Olomouc. Cowie and one of the escapees were sent off to isolation camps while the other three agreed to remain with the BFC. The major blow to the already questionable value of this unit came when the Allies bombed Dresden on February 12, 1945, killing some 40,000 people. Some of the members took advantage of this to attempt an escape, but were betrayed to the Gestapo by the girlfriend of one of the plotters; the entire BFC was arrested, except for two members who managed to mingle with POWs being sent west and make their escape.

Still, the Germans attempted to make some use of the unit. After the BFC men were released from jail, they were transferred to Berlin and billeted in a school on the Schonhauser Allee, to wait there while the required steps were taken to put them into the line. It was here that the last "volunteer" came forward, Frank Axon who had been captured in Greece in 1941. Accused of causing a cow to prematurely calf by hitting it, Axon chose service with the BFC over severe punishment. With the prospects of combat looming for a lost cause, the BFC men sought ways out once more.

Three men were provided with British army uniforms by a sympathetic officer who sent them off to escape. Another man, who had a girlfriend with connections to the "Kurt Eggers" Regiment, managed to get transferred there. Pleasants, who had travelled to Prague the previous November to box against the SS police boxing team in the final round of the SS championship, went to the "Peace Camp" to participate in exhibition-bouts with Max Schmeling to the delight of German officers.

On March 8, 1945, the remaining BFC men were brought before Kuhlich who gave each a choice: fight at the front or be sent to an isolation camp. All of them chose to fight. Wilson, in no hurry to go into battle, managed to get himself a slot as liaison between the BFC and Kuhlich's Berlin office. This left Douglas Mardon, a South African POW who had joined in January, in charge of the unit and in shaping up what he had: a grand total of eight men -- he refused to take two men, and Minchin had scabies. Mardon had to move the unit to a training camp in Niemeck, where the BFC men were given training in the use of the Panzerfaust and other tank killing methods. They were also issued with the StG44 (MP44) assault rifle and given training in its use. The unit strength was cut down to seven when one member was transferred after smoking aspirin until he became ill. At last, the Germans would get some use from the BFC.

### **Deployment**

On March 1, 1945, a truck loaded with the tiny BFC travelled to the headquarters of III.(gemanisches) SS-Panzerkorps. During the journey, most members removed their BFC insignia. Upon arrival, the HQ staff was rather shocked at getting a British unit. Being unsure of how to employ the new force, they put the BFC in billets on the western edge of Stettin pending orders on their deployment. While waiting, the BFC came under some brief Soviet mortar and artillery fire but no injuries were reported. However, the manpower was again reduced when one man came down with a severe case of gonorrhoea and was sent away to a military hospital.

On March 22, 1945, orders came in from the HQ that the BFC should move to the headquarters unit of the 11.SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer Grenadier-Division Nordland, located at Angermunde. From there, they would be placed with the divisional armoured reconnaissance battalion (11.SS-Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung) which was stationed in Grussow. Once there, the BFC were assigned to the 3rd Company, equipped with a single Sd.Kfz.251 half-track and a "Schwimmwagen", and received orders to prepare trench lines within the company's perimeter. While the "Nordland" division was currently being held in reserve, the BFC, from their positions, could clearly see the Soviets. The BFC remained in the line for a month, but this shared combat experience failed to unify them and discord was so rampant that Mardon was pressured into seeing if the BFC could be pulled out.

About this time Cooper returns to the story. Having being told he was being transferred to the III.(gemanisches) SS-Panzerkorps, Cooper packed a suitcase with civilian clothing and reported to the Corps HQ in Steinhoeffel on the Oder. There he learned to his surprise, that "ten Britons were somewhere near the front." SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner, commander of IX.SS-Panzer-Armee, then took Cooper to inspect the BFC troops. During the journey, Cooper informed Steiner about the BFC, and advised that this tiny unit had little combat worth, was morally unstable and thus possessed dubious combat value. Steiner agreed, mainly over the post-war legalities of using POWs in combat. After inspecting the BFC, Steiner ordered that the BFC be pulled from the line.

The next day, the BFC left the front and reported to Corps headquarters, where they were issued with rations and travel orders to Templin. There, they would join the transport company of Steiner's headquarters staff. They arrived on April 16, 1945. In the meantime, Wilson, who was supposed to be sending the BFC men their Red Cross parcels (the BFC were still classified as POWs, and thus still received the parcels), chose to hoard them instead and deserted to Berlin on April 9, 1945. To calm the rumblings, Cooper and four BFC men travelled to Berlin on the 17th, to try and locate the parcels. Returning after two days, they found a Hauptsturmführer, in SS panzer uniform, sporting BFC insignia, waiting to take them back to the front.

The officer, Douglas Berneville-Claye, had a penchant for fraud, theft, embellishment and the ability to pass himself off as something he wasn't. Having been booted out of the RAF, he ended up as a commander with the SAS in the Middle East where he was branded as "useless" and "dangerous" by his comrades, and eventually refused to conduct operations with him. He was captured in 1942 by units of the Deutsches Afrikakorps and taken to an Italian POW camp, which he claimed to have broken out of four times. He was then sent to Oflag 79 in Brunswick until removed for his own safety since the POWs had correctly identified him as a German informer. From that point until his appearance in Templin in March 1945, his record is a blank.

Standing before the BFC, Berneville-Claye launched into a speech saying he was an earl's son, a captain in the Coldstream Guards, and would collect two armoured cars to take the BFC into battle — even making the claim that the BFC would have no problems with the British authorities and that Great Britain was going to declare war on the Soviet Union in a few days. Cooper called Berneville-Claye's bluff; the officer took one of the BFC men with him as a driver and drove away. Berneville-Claye eventually changed into a SAS uniform while the driver took up farmers clothing, and they surrendered to the Allies.

There is a persistent rumour that one BFC member, Reg Courlander, took part in the Battle of Berlin, and destroyed a Soviet tank. By this time, Roy Courlander was far behind Allied lines, and the movements of the other members of this unit are clearly known. The only person who can be proved to have seen combat in the uniform of the BFC was their translator "Bob" Rossler, who remained with the Nordland division when it went into battle in Berlin, to fight alongside the Volkssturm, Hitlerjugend, and the other mixed bag units defending the city.

The few remaining BFC members followed Steiner's headquarter unit to Neustrelitz. There they drove trucks, directed traffic, and assisted the evacuations of civilians from the Neustrelitz and Reinershagen area until, on April 29, 1945, Steiner ordered his forces to break contact with the Soviets and make for the western lines to surrender to the US or British. On May 2, Cooper and the men with him surrendered to unit of the US Ninth Army near Schwerin.

Meanwhile Hugh Cowie had organized other former BFC men and seized control of their isolation camp. Heavily armed, they made their way west and also surrendered to the Ninth Army at Schwerin.

### **Aftermath**

While British intelligence had been aware of this unit since Brown's first reports, and had the names of all of its members, it took several weeks for MI5 and Special Branch to track down and detain those involved. Cowie had begun training as a military policeman in Britain when he was arrested. Amery was arrested in northern Italy. Pleasants ended up in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany, and was arrested by the Soviets in 1946 on espionage charges, and spent seven years in a prison camp, then returned home to boast of his dubious status as the reigning middle-weight boxing champion of the Waffen-SS until his death in 1997.

Amery and Cooper were tried for high treason alongside William Joyce (also known as "Lord Haw Haw") and Walter Purdy, and sentenced to death; however Cooper's and Purdy's sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Cooper was released from prison in 1953, and lived in the Far East for a number of years. He returned to the UK in the 1970s and died in 1987. The rest were dealt with under military law: MacLardy was sentenced to life, reduced on appeal to 15; Cowie was sentenced to 15 years, but was released after seven; Wilson got ten years; and Berry, the first recruit, served nine months. Courland was court-martialled by the New Zealand military, sentenced to 15 years, also served only seven. Freeman successfully defended himself on all charges, and was acquitted; MI5 stated his only purpose for joining the BFC was to escape and also to sabotage this unit. Berneville-Claye was acquitted due to lack of evidence, served another year in the army before being discharged for theft, and left the UK to eventually end his days in Australia.

In the middle of 1946, it was learned that three former BFC members had somehow been demobilised and escaped punishment; rather than recalling them to service to face a court-martial, they were merely summoned to an MI5 office, and given a severe warning concerning their future conduct. Freeman, after the war, said he had seen a list of over 1,100 British who applied to fight against the Soviets. Asked why the BFC remained rife with problems and short of recruits despite opportunities like this, he summed it up that the core base of the BFC were "poor types", which contributed to a lack of any respect for the BFC from the start.

\* Roy (a.k.a. Reg) Courlander, Lance Corporal, 18 Battalion, 2NZE  
Stalag XVIII A PoW No. 7222, Arbeitskommando 3/GW, St Egidii, Styria, Austria - joined BFC.

\*\* Leonard Parrington, Brigadier - Senior British Officer ordering surrender to advancing German forces in Kalamata, 29 April 1941.

A number of sources mention the involvement of Brigadier Parrington, This was based on a misunderstanding by some of the British volunteers after Parrington in the summer of 1943 had visited the POW 'holiday camp' at Genshagen, in the southern suburbs of Berlin, as representative of the Senior British POW, Major General Fortune.. Parrington had told the assembled prisoners that he 'knew the purpose of the camp' and the BFC volunteers who were there took this to mean that he approved of the unit. In reality, Parrington had accepted Genshagen at face value as a rest centre for POWs.

### Rogues Gallery



**SS-Unterscharführer Roy  
Courlander, 1944**



**SS-Mann Kenneth Berry and  
SS-Stummann Alfred Minchin,  
with German officers, April 1944**



**British Free Corps uniform - see Union insignia and Armband**

### **Post Script**

Bert died on 26 September 2014. The October 2014 Brotherhood Newsletter notes that at some point after the war Bert worked in a Betting Shop. At various race meetings he spotted that a horse called 'Kalamata' was entered. He would telephone Edwin Horlington, Brotherhood founding father, to give him the tip- off. Apparently they both backed 'Kalamata' several times and lost their stake on each occasion! Ah well – it was a nice comradely thought.