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Life as a Prisoner of War

Corporal Percy Fulton

Introduction

Corporal Percy Fulton enlisted in the Royal Berks 1/9/14 as 11965. He must have had some prior military experience as he joined the 1st Battalion in France 23/11/14. He served with the 1st Royal Berks and was captured during the Battle of Loos.

After suffering terribly in several camps he was repatriated via Switzerland in March 1917. He was finally discharged 9/8/18 as unfit and issued with a Silver War Badge (382370)

A selection of his letters appeared for sale on e-Bay in December 2005.

Reading Mercury

The following article appeared in the Reading Mercury of 31/3/1917

HARDSHIPS OF BERKS PRISONER EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY

Corporal P G Fulton Royal Berkshire Regiment who was taken prisoner in the Autumn of 1915 and whose health so suffered under the hardships he received at the hands of the Germans that he has now been transferred to Switzerland, has written an account of his experiences which we publish below. The people of the county of Berkshire and particularly South Berks, have interested themselves very much in the Berkshire prisoners and they have responded extraordinarily well to the appeal made by Colonel W A Mount MP for the aid of the Berkshire prisoners. Mrs Mount is the hon secretary of the Berkshire Prisoner of War Fund.

Corporal Fulton says:-

It is difficult to remember and arrange in sequence all that has happened whilst a prisoner of war in Germany, but I will try to give as much as I can remember.

After being captured a few of us, about 25 in number, of different regiments - ours, the Buffs, Royal Fusiliers, 1st Welsh and Northampton - were sent on to Lille where we were incarcerated in the fortress. We remained for four days, twenty five of us being put in one cell, not bigger than 18ft by 20 ft. The arrangements there were bad in every way. Whilst there we were questioned singly as to what brigade we belonged, who our generals were etc. Needless to say all of us misled them as much as we could. The officer questioning myself became quite ratty because he said that I belonged to the ---- Brigade and I told him I did not. He went on to tell me where we actually were a few days before (in which he was perfectly correct

but I would not let him know) and where we had been for some time. He thereupon brought out his maps and a book to prove to me I was wrong. What I said was actually true (that I was not in the --- Brigade at the time) because ours, the Worcesters, 1st RWF and 1st KRRR were on a sort of mobile column for the few days. Anyhow this upset the dear man and he cleared me out. A few hours after I was sent for again to to be questioned by another man. He treated me civilly at first but that did not last long.

We remained at Lille up to the 9th October 1915 the Germans hoping that there would be some more prisoners coming in but we turned out to be the last batch. We left Lille fortress at 5 pm to march to the station, surrounded by guards and Uhlans riding on either side. The streets were packed in places with people, a lot of whom waved handkerchiefs etc to us. We didn't look so bad (not as some photos I have seen of German prisoners newly taken). One of our men had picked up a safety razor and another had a comb, the two doing duty for us all and scraping the dirt off our uniforms and cleaning our buttons with some grit we did not look so bad after all, although most of us were minus hats. We did not wish the French people at Lille to think we were down on our luck so we made a pretence of laughing and looking as cheeky as possible. Arriving at Lille Station we all entrained and went via Brussels and Cologne to Munster in Westphalia, arriving there at 6 pm the following day. During that time we were each given a thin slice of bread and butter and no more. We were marched into camp where we were given a bowl of fish and potatoes. This camp at Munster was not so bad, the food, of course, being insufficient. It was just pitiful to see how hungry our fellows were. Our daily food consisted of a small ladle of coffee with some bread in the morning, a ladle of soup at midday and a ladle of soup at 6 pm. The above diet is what was given at all the camps I have been in, with the exception of the officers camp at Guterslohe.

I did not remain long at this camp, being sent to Guterslohe in November 1915. There I managed to get into trouble with one of the Feldwebels and was sent to a punishment camp. Leaving Guterslohe at 4 o'clock in the morning I changed trains at Bielefeld and joined a train full of prisoners going through to Soltau via Minden. After a day or two we arrived at Soltau II which is very different from Soltau I, the two camps being separated by a road. We stayed there spending our Christmas and New Year 1915-1916. At this place we were all forced to be shaved, heads and all. Whilst there a man visited us. I mention him as his advice to us did not seem sound. After a good deal of useless palaver I asked him a straight question as to what his advice would be if we were sent to a mine or aons factory. His answer was "You must work or be punished" and he went on to say we had his sympathy. Our reply was that if such was the case NONE of us would knowingly enter a place like that, much less work, irrespective of whatever punishment was meted out to us. We had our answer and it was left now to us as to what should happen.

A few days later a party of 500 men, French and British, myself in that number, left for Sud Wdewech Moor. We marched from the station there to the camp, which is 8 kilometers from the station, in pouring rain, arriving at the camp simply drenched to the skin, thoroughly tired out as the Germans make you carry your two blankets, covering for mattress, pillowslip, two basins and all the other stuff which will prove useful to one in the new camp. There were several Belgians and a few Russians at that camp. We immediately made enquiries as to what sort of a camp it was. Our relief was immense when we were told we should have to dig on the moor.

The next day we were given a rest to settle down and the day following we were all marched out on the moors with a spade apiece to start our day's work at 8 pm [sic] finishing at 2.30 pm, marching back again to camp tired and very cold. A day's work was always measured out for us: if we did not finish we were kept on until we did, sometimes finishing at 4 or 5 pm. The digging was very rough and hard, we having to cut through the grass and heather. The ground being hard with frost, the spade would slip on the frosty surface. Some of the men had been badly wounded but that was of no account there. Those of us who were stronger and harder would help the others to finish their task. To anyone who scoffs at this let him try and dig continuously for 5 hours or more on ground somewhat similar and, under the same food conditions and he will know what it is like. Day after day, week in week out the same thing bar Sundays and those of us who were on the punishment list had to work half a day on Sunday. If one felt ill one could not get off for a day or obtain adequate treatment either. Occasionally some of the men used to collapse out at work, when they were carried in.

In winter the cold was very severe on the moors, everything being so flat for miles around: there was nothing to break the force of the wind.

After a time I was put with others who were making a sand road into the camp. There was an awful brute in charge of this gang. One could relate many incidents of brutality that happened; for instance the following:- A young Frenchman, his name Foch, was a little late with his truck. Without any warning the Gefreiter pulled out his bayonet and slashed the boy over the left shoulder, the blow cutting through his coat etc and inflicting a wound which had to have six stitches put in. No notice was taken of that. The only thing was to grin and bear it. Month after month of this miserable sort of life went on much like what one reads went on in slavery times.

ATTEMPT AT ESCAPE

It had long been in my thoughts to make a bid for freedom, but it was difficult to escape. However the opportunity occurred and, with a small map, compass and food, the latter consisting of six small tins of Oxo cubes, 2 lb chocolate and two small tins of condensed milk - a French Canadian and myself succeeded in getting away, for the time. We had a nasty job getting across the moors, which was full of boggy land and eventually were recaptured six miles from the Holland border. We were returned to our camp after spending a night in the underground cells at Alanpen where we finished off our punishment. During that time we were subjected to pretty stiff treatment.

Of course we were marked men and had to suffer for it. One guard (bless the man) was sorry for us and actually gave me some cigarettes to smoke. But the rest, good heavens! I remember one big brute about 6ft 2 in catching hold of me by the collar of my jacket with one

hand and smashing at my face with the other fist until he was tired. The second in command saw this but turned his back on it. It was always something to them to take it out on a damned Englishman. But we always got some of our own back by taking it smiling. This used to irritate the Germans beyond anything. The work given me after my escape from camp was deepening ditches; this meant always standing in water and as the long sort of boots they gave us for this work used always to leak, it was not too comfortable, especially in October and November. A good stiff piece of work was always measured out for us. Another very trying job was working with the turf-cutting machine. I've seen men come off this job simply too done in to eat or anything else except rest.

The poor Russians used to suffer as much and worse than the British with nobody to send them clothes or comforts as we had.

We had another visit from two consuls (American I think) at Sud Edeweicht Moor camp. We told them all that happened; their visit was the only one which helped us at all. Matters were thoroughly bad at the camp and gradually growing worse. The Commandant in charge of our camp had been a professor at Breslau University (mor shame to him) After Rumania came in with the Allies he was heard to say that he did not wish to see a prisoner in his sight - it would be the worse for him if he did.

A roll call was held every night at 9 o'clock when the inmates of each hut would stand in rows of five to be counted. I mention this as I wish to give an instance of the hold, the brutalities of the German guards had over some of the French, Belgian, Russian and, I am glad to say, only a few British prisoners. One night last October two of our men escaped. After being counted at Appel (roll call) we were dismissed to our quarters, the missing men's places being filled up by others of another hut. Through some treachery the missing men were reported absent. We very soon found the latter to be the case as German guards rushed into our hut and chased the men out for another roll call, some of the prisoners actually moaning with fear as they rushed out. It was a pretty cold night too. Some of the men were in nothing but their shirts, others shirts and drawers and some of the more hardened spirits with a great coat hastily snatched up. Being one of the last to turn out I saw most of the British now lined up in rows of fives but the other poor beggars were actually afraid to go in the front rank as they did not know what was coming off. It was disgusting to think that these German thugs had instilled such fear into these poor devils.

These small solitary camps can be made a hell with no redress. I have seen men kicked so savagely (have had some of that myself) that they have been able only with difficulty and much pain to hobble back to camp after the day's work was done. What I have written here are all FACTS. There are camps in Germany which were all right, governed by men and soldiers; for instance Soltau I, Guterslohe, Munster in Westphalia but God knows if they are still so. People at home have no idea of the sufferings from cold, hunger and brutality that some prisoners have to undergo. Can you blame some of the poor weaker willed souls who have given in to working in mines? I have not heard of any English as workers in munitions factories.

If people at home can help to do things as have been done in the past for these smaller camps you will be helping the men's considerable way to bear their very hard lot.

Luckily for myself I passed the Siss Commission of doctors and am here in very comfortable quarters and look back on all my prison life as a bad dream. I could write more but what is the use. People at home are so misled by accounts of camps written by visitors, who are naturally shown only the best. You never will get a true account written from Germany.

I can well imagine some people saying such things cannot possibly be. "So and so has written such a good account of himself and I know I can believe him" Well he is one of the lucky ones as I have said. All camps are not the same. But some!! If you think for a moment that anything can be done for them you are mistaken. The Germans are an unprincipled, brutal, lying nation. Nothing is too low for them. They will promise all things and never do them. If through reading the above a few people do their best to help the poor fellows left back in Germany, my purpose will be served.