

## Volume 2 Section 354-08

### Life as a Prisoner of War

# 6406 Sergeant Alfred Denham

Sergeant Alfred George Denham lived at New Cottages, Temple Road, Cowley, Oxford. He had enlisted at Reading 29/10/1901 and was serving with the 1st Battalion when war broke out. He was one of the Old Contemptibles who went to France with the BEF on the 13th August 1914. He had been wounded in an ambush when on patrol on the 21st September on the ridge above La Metz Farm. When the patrol withdrew he was left behind and was captured by the Germans. A short time later a German was shot dead on October 10th and in his pocket was one of Denham's dog tags which led to fears that he had died.

He was in Wittenburg Camp from 11th November 1914 to November 29th 1915 when he was transferred to Holland and repatriated in an exchange of prisoners in December 1915. He spent some time at Queen Alexandra's Hospital on Millbank in London and must have recovered enough for light duties as he was still serving at the end of the war, having been awarded the DCM for his efforts which was gazetted 30/1/1920. He was renumbered 5328089.

## The Questionnaire

When he returned to England he was examined by W A Bulkeley-Evans on behalf of the Committee on Treatment of Prisoners. His responses to a standard questionnaire can be found on page 212 of WO161/98 at the National Archives. This is divided up into a number of main topics most of which cover several different points. The numbering used below reflects the original questionnaire.

### 7 - accommodation

- a) *lodging* on floor, two mattresses between three men these were never changed
- b) *heating* - insufficient
- c) *washing facilities* - one water pipe for 1800 men
- d) *sanitary arrangements* - bad but were building more latrines
- e) *hospital* - bad in the early stages but improved later

### 8 - food

- a) *supplied by Germans* - bad, potatoe soup and crushed meal, rarely any meat

- b) *canteen* - fair but a scarcity

- c) *things to purchase* - margarine, tobacco, tins of salt fish - expensive

- d) *from England* - tins of meat, butter, cheese, tea, sugar, cocoa - in bad state at first improved later.

### 9 Clothing (from Germans)

one shirt on arrival. One shirt on leaving hospital, one pair of drawers

### 10 Exercise

daily marching around enclosure - no games allowed

### 11 Recreation

cards and other games but not supplied by Germans - smoking allowed all day for last nine months.

### 12 Religious services

Church of England on Sunday mornings conducted by Mr Fowler

### 13 Employment

About 400 British were employed building a factory close to the camp. We were paid 3.90 marks per week - prisoners never forced to make munitions.

### 14 Discipline

No information given by Germans on regulations but prisoners expected to know them. offences included using lights other than those under regulations or selling rations of bread. Punishments included being tied to a post for two hours.

### 15 General treatment

Bad in early stages but improved greatly later. Saw Pte Pearse of Queens Westminster Rifles who was in bed attacked by sentries dog but while it tore his sleeve it did not actually bite him. Complaints were made and there was no recurrence - Prisoners who spoke German given better treatment.

### 16 Illnesses

We had an epidemic of typhus. I spent three months in hospital - bad at first but good after arrival of English

doctors.

## 17 Postal arrangements

Letters and parcels arrived regularly after the typhus epidemic died down. Letters were opened by the censor in his own office, occasionally things were taken from parcels, nothing was prohibited. Allowed to write two letters monthly and send one postcard each week. Letters were sometimes not forwarded and no information given.

## 18 Visits of American Ambassador

Two were made with a fortnight's interval. we were allowed to speak alone but there were no preparations made beforehand. After his visits there were great improvements, eg treatment of NCOs, no cruelty in the bath, dog nuisance ceased.

## 19 General conditions

conditions improved greatly during stay in camp, especially after visit of American Ambassador

## 20 Other information

Reports that parcels, the bulk of which were English, were opened by Russians and French acting as assistants to the censor when English might have been employed in opening their own parcels. No soap given out in first five months, later soft soap was given out.

## 21 Assessment of examiner

Sgt Denham is intelligent and reliable.

## Other Reports

He was mentioned by two other former prisoners in their reports.

Sgt Frank Ward of the KOYLI reported on page 220 of WO161/98:-

I was in the room (some were playing cards at the table) when Sergeant Alfred Denham No 6406 Berkshire Regiment was attacked by a dog which the sentry brought in and let loose, but fortunately it only tore the sleeve of his coat

He also named the American Ambassador as Mr Gerard.

Pte John Bunn of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers reported on page 221 of WO161/98

There were also a lot of dogs - eight or nine - wolfhounds and savages led about on chains. If a crowd of prisoners congregated at all two men with a dog would go among them, let out a bit of chain and disperse the prisoners. One British prisoner, a sergeant Denham, was bitten on the arm by a dog in passing.

Both of these men provided a lot of detailed information

about Wittenburg Camp

## References

WO161/98 pages 212, 220 and 221

Reading Mercury 21/11/1914, 6/11/1915

Reading Standard 8/1/1916

1st Bn War Diary 21/9/14

China Dragons Tales - 1st Bn page 18