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Life as a Prisoner of War

33037 Pte Harold Stanley

Introduction

Harold Stanley from 101 Upper Thomas Street, Aston was born about 1895 and joined the Royal Berks around November 1916. He had been an electrician in civilian life.

He was serving with the 1st Royal Berks at Oppy when he was captured during the Battle of Arras. He was first reported wounded and missing in Reading Mercury of 13/7/1917 and a week later as being a POW. He was repatriated via Holland just before the war ended. His debriefing was done by H H Ramsden Walker who described Stanley thus:- "This witness is reliable and fairly intelligent"

Capture

3rd to 6th May 1917

He was captured at Oppy Wood on the 3rd May 1917 having been knocked unconscious by a bullet in the head.

On 3rd May 1917 about 3.45 am the regiment attacked the enemy at Oppy Wood and gained their objective. About 7 am however the enemy counterattacked and the regiment suffered heavily and had many casualties and was ordered to retire. Whilst retiring I took cover in a shell hole but on looking about me was hit in the head with a rifle bullet fired by a German sniper. I lost consciousness and remained so for most of the day.

I came to late in the afternoon to discover a German soldier looking down into the shell hole who placed a hand grenade at my side near my hip as I lay in the shell crater. After the German had left me I saw another Hun in a trench about 10 yards away throw a hand grenade at me which fell across my feet. I quickly picked it up and tried to hurl it back but it exploded and wounded me in my right hand and at the same time the grenade at my side exploded and wounded me in the hip. Wounded in three places I lay in the shell crater all that night but managed to bind up my wounded hand with my field dressing.

In the morning of the 4th May two German stretcher bearers came and carried me into the neighbouring trench. I was left in the trench for two days and nights. I was given some coffee and brandy to drink and cigarettes to smoke but was told by the Germans that they had no food to offer me

Hospitals

6th May to 14th November 1917

I was taken on a stretcher on the 6th May to a monastery

at Douai where I was provided with coffee and a bowl of soup and shortly afterwards underwent an operation for the wounds in my head and hip.

I was removed by train to Tournai on the 10th May where I remained until the 22nd May 1917 being well treated in the meanwhile but owing to shortage of doctors my wounds were only dressed twice whilst staying there.

I left Tournai on the 22nd May 1917 in a hospital train for Hameln. I was well treated on the journey. There were German Red Cross nurses in charge of the wounded, all of whom were British.

I arrived at Hameln on the 25th May where I remained until 7th November 1917. I was fairly well treated at Hameln but the food was bad. There was no meat and a great shortage of bread and until I received my biscuits from Berne at the end of July I was well nigh starved.

I left Hameln Hospital on the 7th November for the camp where I remained a week. I don't know the name of the commandant and don't complain of the treatment.

Linden

Nov 14th to Dec 25th 1917

I was moved by ordinary train to Linden on the 14th November 1917 and I commenced work at a wagon factory helping to make wagons at 6.30 am on the following morning. I had breakfast at 8.30 using the food sent in my parcels from Berne and England. I never drank the coffee concoction provided by the Germans. At 12.30 I had an hour and a half for dinner consisting of mangel-wurzel soup and more of the contents of my parcels. I worked from 2 pm to 6.30 pm when I had a meal of maize soup. A small ration of bread was provided each day but I never could eat it.

I was paid 5 marks 10 pfennigs wages a week of six days. Once a month I had to work on a Sunday. I was billeted at the factory and slept on straw sacks on the floor. The sanitary arrangements were bad. There was one wc for 84 men. The wc was in a corner of the room we slept in and fed in, screened off by boards.

In and out of Hospital

Dec 25th 1917 to 20th September 1918

During my stay I was constantly breaking down owing to my wounds and on the 25th December 1917 I was moved to Hanover Hospital where I remained until the 9th January 1918. The doctor's name was Young. He was a German and very clever. I was well treated and had good food and attendance including drugs.

I returned to the wagon factory, Linden, on the 9th January 1918 where I remained until the 18th April. I hurt my hand and had to return to Hanover Hospital where I was again well looked after by Dr Young, and well fed, my food consisting of eatable bread (civilian) sausage,

jam, meat and fish daily.

There were 500 to 1000 patients at this hospital of various nationalities. I noticed no favouritism, all nationalities were treated alike. The sanitary arrangements were good.

As already stated my uniform and belongings were taken from me at Douai and being a bed patient I was not furnished with hospital clothing until October 1917 at Hameln. In July I received my clothing from England which I used when at the wagon factory, Linden and out of hospital. I was discharged from the Hanover Hospital for the last time on 16th July 1918, and returned to Hameln camp on that day.

Salt Mines

July 16th to Oct 12th 1918

On the 20th September 1918 I was sent to work in the salt mine at Friedrichshall. There were six working days a week. We were billeted in barracks and at 5 am I was paraded with about 300 other prisoners of various nationalities in the barracks after which I went to the bathroom where I changed into my working clothing and I then descended into the mine in a cage holding 14 men.

When I reached the part of the mine where I had to work I was at first ordered to fill the mine wagons with rock salt. My task was to fill 20 wagons in eight hours, each wagon held about a ton of salt. Some of the prisoners could do this, notably the Russians, but the most I could fill was six wagons as I was weak and soon my nose and ears began to bleed from the effects of the exertion. After trying me for two days with the same result I was taken from this work and employed pushing the wagons along the trolley lines in the drifts of the mine.

The hours for work were from 6 am to 9.30 when there was half an hour for breakfast, consisting of civilian bread (eatable) and water. I returned to work from 10 o'clock to 1.15 pm. If we had finished our work we could then go up to the surface. If not we had to go on working without food until the task was done and if finished at 6 o'clock we could then ascend the shaft to the surface. If not then finished we had to complete our task and wait until 10 o'clock without food. The cage was only used for conveying prisoners up to the surface at stated times.

Owing to bleeding from my nose and ears which took place every day I was allowed to ascend to the surface with those prisoners who had completed their tasks but this was entirely owing to the bleeding I suffered from

There were 25 other English prisoners at work in the mine, the majority of whom had been there for periods ranging from two to three years. Six of the 25 prisoners were RAMC men captured this year.

There was no violence used to the prisoners that I saw but they were kept in the mine until they had finished their tasks and most of them looked thin and ill from over work and exertion.

When I had ascended the mine I was taken to the bathroom and made to have a hot bath, the object being to clear the skin from the salt which gets into the system and causes boils and abscesses to form all over the body. I am only just recovering from an abscess on my hand which I contracted in the salt mine.

After the bath I went to the barracks and at 4 o'clock had a meal of soup made of carrots, potatoes and beans. At 7

o'clock I had maize soup. At 9 o'clock lights were put out and I slept in a wooden bed or bunk there being two tiers of bunks one above the other at the side of the dormitory. Twelve men slept in the dormitory I was in. The main dormitory held about 100 men. The barracks were infested with bugs.

Repatriation

Owing to my weak condition I was examined by a civilian doctor and sent back to Hameln Camp after which I was sent before a board at Aachen on the 12th October and from there to Rotterdam.

References

WO161/100 page 4024 report 2820

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Berkshire Chronicle