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Life as a POW

LCpl Millbank

Who is he?

In a report by 21431 Pte Donald Macdonald of the 6th Cameron Highlanders there is a reference to a Lance Corporal Millbank of the Berkshires being deliberately crushed between two iron-stone trucks at Petersbach Ironstone mine in Rhineland.

However there is no record of a man name4d Millbank either in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Debt of Honour register who died as a Prisoner of War neither is there any medal record of a Millbank in the Royal Berkshire Regiment. in the National Archives medal rolls. The only candidate is 17305 Pte P E Millbank who transferred to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment as 14197 9/8/1915. and equally there is no Millbank of the Warwicks in the medal rolls.

Macdonald's Report

Nevertheless Macdonald's report contains details of line in an ironstone mine which is worth considering. He was first at Dulmen camp and was moved to Petersbach on the 30th August 1916

It is to be found in WO161/100 page 3335 report 2761

Extracts read as follows:-

I was taken to Petersbach in Rhineland attached to Wahn Lager. The mine was a kilometre down. There were Russians and Frenchmen working there when we got there, in all 100 men who were housed in a barrack surrounded by barbed wire. The guard consisted of 13 or 14 sentries and a sergeant major Gunther. The food was very bad. Coffee in the morning; swedes boiled in water for dinner, soup at night.

We were allowed to write two letters a month and a postcard a week. I received by first letter at the end of October. I had my first parcel on the 21st October. Parcels were opened in front of us and the tins confiscated. Bread arrived in good condition.

I started work on September 1st. A few of the men would not go down the mine and the sentries clubbed them with rifles. Feldwebel Gunther was in charge of this commando and was particularly cruel. Six sentries stood over the mine while we went down. The punishment for refusal to work was to stand with face against the wall for a long period without food.

Every prisoner was numbered and had to work with civilians. I was working with two civilians, one old man and a middle aged man. They made me work very hard. They did not speak English. We were eight hours down the mine at a time and the civilians used to beat us. If we hit back three or four of them would lay wait for us until

we got down into the mine and then set about us. They never hit us with their fists, always with sticks. I was hit by a civilian; William Schaffer.

Oberstahl Graft told the civilians that the English must be made to work hard and that there was to be no rest for them.

Lance Corporal Millbank of the Berkshires was deliberately crushed between two wagons by a civilian. Millbank was pushing a wagon and the civilian crashed into him.

There was no Sunday work, our punishment being worked out on that day. We had three church services in 18 months. Williams an English preacher held these services at Wissen and Ham [*Wissen was a smelting works and Ham was a coalmine*] Here we met prisoners from the other mines.

We were paid 9d a day in stamps and could buy cigarettes and cigars at the canteen, but no food.

An officer came from Wahn Lager to see if there were any complaints. We complained about working in the mine and he said that German prisoners were being made to do it in England.

Sergeant Major Gunther was a brute. If as sometimes happened a man hurt his hand and the place festered, Gunther would cut it with a penknife instead of sending us to a doctor. It was most painful.

He used to have us up for stafe parade and on one occasion Private Mooner of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, was standing to attention with the rest of us when the sergeant major came up and hit him under the chin saying he was laughing.

On another occasion Private Bell of the Warwickshires was very ill. He went to Gunther and asked to be excused work. A fresh lot of parcels had just arrived and Gunther said he had been eating too much out of the parcels. He was excused work one day, but the next he had to stay down 16 hours to make up.

The doctor was quite good, but we had to walk about eight miles to see him and get Gunther's permission which he often refused. Many men were too ill to work and so did not see him. He spoke English.

I went sick with heart trouble and could hardly get my breath. I was sent to the doctor and had to stay in bed for a fortnight.

A man named McFarlane of the Scottish Rifles was I am fairly certain, suffering from consumption. The civilians with whom he worked used to stand over him and thrash him so that when he came up he could hardly walk. He was exchanged to Switzerland.

We were asked at the mine if any wanted to change nationality. They promised us a farm, cows and horses.

Ten Italians came to the mine. They were half starved. One was wounded in the stomach; he went sick three weeks after he arrived but was not allowed to see the

doctor. He was kicked out of the sergeant majors office and told he was not sick. They carried him out and he died on the stretcher.

Just before Christmas, Gabriele Portermere, a Frenchman was chased right around the mine because he had a row with the civilians with whom he worked. They pushed him down a small shaft and he fell from the sixth to the seventh gallery breaking two legs and his jaw.

A man named Davis who was sitting at the shaft pulled him out and they sent him to hospital.. Dr Sabblesburg (of Limburg) treated him. There was an enquiry but no punishment for the men concerned were tried by civilians. The Germans working in the sixth gallery were brutes.

Postscript

Macdonald went to Limburg camp in February 1918.