

## PREFACE

A number of years ago we came into possession of a small, fragile looking booklet consisting of twenty-three pages of fine print- in Dutch. There was no title to indicate what it might be about, or name to indicate who the author might be. In fact, there was not a name of any person mentioned anywhere in the book to give a clue as to its origin. However, during all the years that it floated around our house, whenever someone came across it, it was always referred to as "Opa's war". We knew that it was an account of something that had happened to Opa Moerman during the war, but none of us had ever taken the time or effort to read it.

One Sunday afternoon about two years ago, armed with a tiny Dutch | English word book, I plunged into those fragile pages seeking to learn a little more of this quiet man who is my father-in-law. In them I found a young man of twenty-five, carried along by the events of his day into circumstances over which he had no control. I found him to be a sensitive, caring and humorous man, with a heart full of love for his family, his comrades, his country and his God.

It is in honour of him on his seventy-fifth birthday that I offer this translation for the benefit and enjoyment of his children and grand-children. May they be as blessed in the reading, as I have been in the translating of this account which came to be known in my computer file as "Andy's War".

Ralph Postma August, 1989

## INTRODUCTION

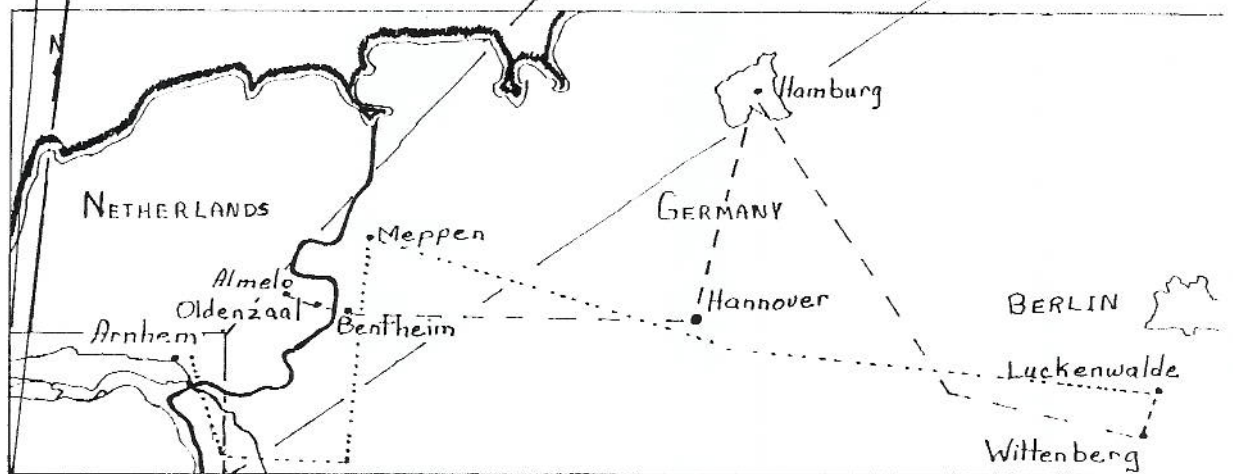
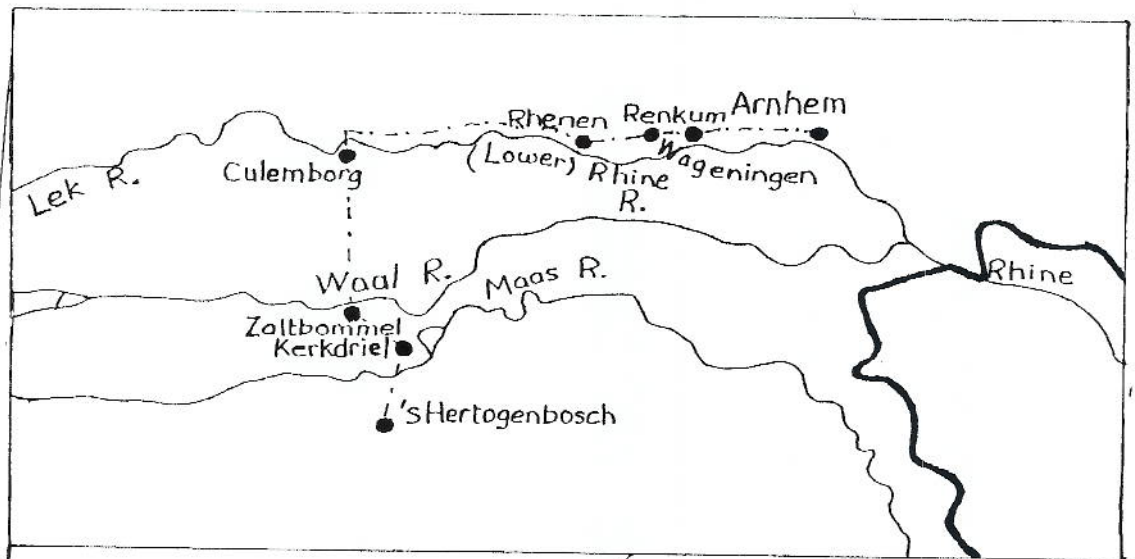
In the fall of 1939 the German armies of Adolph Hitler invaded and overran the neighbouring country of Poland. For several years Europe had been watching with apprehension as Hitler had rallied his nation around him and assembled a war machine of such power and speed, as until then was unheard of. The previous year, Abyssinia, Albania, Austria and Czechoslovakia had felt the might of this ruthless machine and were quickly brought into subjection, and still there had been no official declaration of war in Europe. But now Poland had fallen, and Britain, which until then had been a spectator of Hitler's advance, declared war.

Soon squadrons of German bombers were flying over Holland on their way to Britain, and Dutch anti-aircraft guns throughout the country began to protest feverishly. Yet, there were many in the country who felt that, as in the first world war, Holland would be spared in the German advance through Europe. Those who were in charge of the armed forces were not so convinced, and throughout the winter of 1939 and 1940 they proceeded to mobilize the Dutch troops in full strength along the Eastern frontier.

It was in this setting that Andrew Moerman, who had completed his term of service in the army several years before, now found himself called again into active service in order to defend his country against the German threat. The following story is his personal account of what happened to him and the company of which he was a part, beginning a few days before that fateful 10th of May and ending with his eventual return home.

R.P.

THE FIVE DAY MARCH.....



THE TRAIN RIDE TO LUCKENWALDE .....

THE TRAIN RIDE HOME - - - -



## FOREBODINGS OF WAR

Tuesday May 7, 1940

Tuesday, before the war, all furloughs were again cancelled. It had happened on other occasions, but never so soon after each other. Everyone was required to report immediately. Could it be that something was really about to happen?

In our company, I was one of twenty-five men chosen for watch duty at the new Telegraph and Telephone building in s'Hertogenbosch. Our watch lasted from Wednesday morning until Thursday evening, at which time we were allowed to sleep in the great tennis hall of the city, which had been prepared for our use for the first time that night.

### THE FIVE DAYS

The reality of that Friday morning aroused us early from our sleep. At 4 AM. we were awakened by the sound of anti-aircraft fire from within the city. We rushed outside to hear swarms of planes passing overhead at very high altitude, and realizing that something was very wrong, we hurried back inside to awaken those who were still asleep.

All motorized divisions in the area were racing past our quarters. There was a great stir of urgency on this beautiful spring morning.

Our suitcases were quickly packed and our combat gear properly organized and made ready, for it was becoming obvious that we would soon be leaving this place. Just before 7 a.m. the Captain gave us our orders: "Get everything ready for immediate departure".

We marched through the city and at about 10 a.m. left "Den Bosch" and marched toward Hedel which lies on the other side of the Maas River. Having crossed the river over a beautiful new bridge, we turned right and near the village of Veldriel we began our trek along the Maas.

It was a hard, tiring march with full combat gear and warm weather to boot, so we were very glad when we had roughly 20 kilometers behind us. Many planes continued to fly over at high altitude and we were constantly mindful of them, hoping they wouldn't notice us. Every soldier who got a chance would stop along the river to wash his sweaty feet, which served to refresh us considerably.

Toward evening word came down that at dusk we were to meet at a designated area fully prepared to continue our march. Canteens were filled with milk etc. at various farms in the area, knowing that their contents would be much appreciated



during the long night march, then off we went to an unknown destination.

The weather was beautiful during the night from Friday into Saturday, but because of the heavy gear we were carrying, the march became very difficult. In addition to his combat gear, each man now had to carry his own personal belongings as well, which had not been the case before.

"We must be across the **Waal River** at **Zaltbommel** before dawn," the Captain informed us matter of factly, "because at that time the bridge will be blown up." We estimated it to be another 20 kilometre walk. At least the weather was perfect again this night, and from what we could see of it, the **Betuwe** District, through which we were passing, was very beautiful this time of year.

"But what's all this racket up ahead? It sounds like a team of horses galloping through a tunnel!" The troops dove right and left off the roadway! It was so dark that we were unable to see where we were going to wind up. On one side of the road was a ditch, and there was so much splashing in the water, it sounded like a whole flock of geese fluttering through it. Machine gun wagons, bicycles and soldiers in full combat gear were sprawling in the water. For a moment there was real panic, but everything was quickly recovered and on we went. The march seemed endless and we thought we'd never get to the bridge. When we were allowed ten minutes to rest, many troops dropped like bags of sand and immediately fell sound asleep. Finally we reached the bridge, and what a beautiful and great structure it was! It was hard to imagine that shortly it would lie in ruin.

Over the bridge we turned left and in the approaching dawn we finally reached our goal. On the side of the dyke everyone again dropped from fatigue. Our clothes were all wet from sweat and we shivered from the morning cold and exhaustion. Some of us asked our officers if we might be allowed to rest in some nearby farm buildings, but were told: "Dig yourselves into the side of the dyke immediately".

More and more enemy planes were passing overhead. This morning they were flying considerably lower than the previous day so that the heavy machine guns in our battalion were doing their best to shoot them down. This of course drew the enemy's attention and those of us who could, sought shelter under the trees, while others simply lay flat on the ground. But in spite of our best efforts to remain undetected, one of the planes did notice us, and making a wide turn, headed straight for us, passing right overhead with machine guns blazing. With two other men I dove under a hawthorn bush as far as possible, not even noticing the sharp thorns. The bullets screamed through the branches just over our heads. After the attack, we were amazed

to learn that only one man, a sergeant, had sustained any serious injury.

Again, more planes passed low overhead and one of them, shot by our machine gunners, caught fire. Immediately, about fourteen men parachuted from the plane and were greeted by a hail of bullets from our rifles.

Towards noon the time had come for that beautiful, big bridge to give itself to the cause. There were two heavy muffled explosions and there lay that beautiful structure which perhaps had taken years to build. The footbridge as well as the rail bridge, over which we had crossed just hours before, now lay broken in pieces in the Waal.

Toward evening, our machine gunners directed heavy fire at an enemy boat attempting to cross the Waal. During the night we had to patrol the banks of the river two by two in case any of the enemy had escaped from the boat. As a result, not many of us got more than a few hours sleep that night.

The following day we again worked on our defensive positions, but this time more on the banks of the Waal. The rest of the day passed rather peacefully and around 6 p.m. the mail was distributed, while at the same time we were given permission to write a few lines home. Quickly some paper was sought and soon my friends and I were sitting in our freshly dug foxholes in the side of the dyke, writing to our loved ones.

During the night we did a little watch duty and even got some sleep. The next morning we dug a new installation, this time right on the bank of the Waal. Who could imagine that today was the second day of Pentecost? How muddled our human reckoning had become with the events of these last days!

Toward 7 p.m. we were called to assemble at a nearby farm. The captain informed us that another long march lay ahead of us. It would be best to wait till dark, but in light of the distance to be covered, we could not wait any longer. During the night we must travel from the **Waal to the Lek river**, a distance of about 25 kilometres, in order to pull back beyond the water line. From the farmer we received a cigar and a canteen of milk, and then we were on our way again, well packed and weighed down. Care was taken not to leave anything behind, sensing that nothing could be missed. Though we were greatly fatigued, and in spite of everything, we seemed oblivious to the enormous weight of our packs because of the many thoughts which flooded our minds.

We marched through several quaint, peaceful villages, but it soon got dark and we were no longer able to see much of our surroundings. One thing was obvious: we were coming into a flooded area. Houses in town and country alike, stood empty and abandoned, inundated by water. Here and there a few isolated cows walked along the road.



Finally we were allowed a short rest, and most dropped along the side of the road, where many, overcome by exhaustion, fell right off to sleep. The few who remained on their feet were, in the end, better off. When it was time to resume the march, they were not nearly as aware of their painful feet as those who had taken their weight off for awhile.

Then on we went. Marching in line and in step was no longer in fashion. Nor did there seem to be any rank distinction in our section any longer. On and on we marched, sergeant and soldier and lieutenant, all walking side by side, with the one hope that once we were behind the water line, we might be informed as to what was happening.

We had now come to the **Linge River**. From what we could make of it in the dark, the bridge across it seemed to be a small, old one. It was rumoured that we were now half way between the Waal and the Lek.

Shortly, from a side road we heard an awful commotion and soon became aware of a large number of horses pulling heavy artillery pieces and guns, and also horses pulling civilian wagons of every size and description. They were coming from the Tiel district and it was becoming apparent that all must be in back of the water line before dawn. Thus, according to our calculations at least, the enemy had penetrated a considerable distance into our country.

Again we rested briefly. Countless numbers of horses and wagons continued to pass by, along with many people on foot from the Tiel district. After we had resumed our march, and before we had gone too far, we noticed that one of our comrades was missing - one with a machine gun yet. I had remembered seeing him asleep against a gate, and so I hurried back to find him, as I had last seen him, peacefully snoring beside his machine gun.

We entered the town of Culemborg and as far as we could see, all the homes had been evacuated. Our goal was the other side of the Lek and so we marched through the town searching for the means to cross the river. Finally, on the outskirts of the city we found a rail bridge and wasted no time in crossing over. In the meantime it had become light, but so far our movements had continued to be obscured by a dense, lingering fog. The weather again promised to be beautiful this day.

Having crossed the bridge we turned left and soon came to a farm which was right on the dyke along the Lek (River). The inhabitants had all fled and our canteens were quickly refilled with milk from cans which were still standing there, full. Then, in a small loft we flopped down, exhausted and sleepy, not to mention the sore feet which had just completed a 25 kilometre hike. Each of us hoped that today (Tuesday) we might learn what had been happening, now that we were behind the water line and



we'd reached our destination.

But alas, our rest was of brief duration. Before each of us had found a place to lay down on the wooden floor, the captain came in and ordered us to our defensive positions. The more we complained that we couldn't, the more he insisted that we must. There we went again, the one more crippled and lame than the other. We managed to get to our new installations but...to our dismay we found that much of the work was yet to be completed. There were various heavy concrete group shelters, some of which were ready for occupation but others which were not ready at all. From the back of each shelter ran a corridor around to the front into a trench. Our shelter was on the edge of the dyke and, except for the machine gun nest, was completely ready. However, much work still needed to be done, but few had much heart for it, because no one seemed to realize the seriousness of our situation. If we had known how near the enemy really was, perhaps we might have been spurred on to exert ourselves a little more.

As it was, we went looking for the food wagon to see if there was anything to be had to eat, at least those who had feet that were still willing to carry them about. But for most, getting a little rest was more important than anything else. There were also those who roamed around the farm to see if they could find anything to their liking. All sorts of foodstuffs were requisitioned, including canning jars of applesauce. Others took this opportunity to freshen up a bit and to rinse their sweaty socks which were hung in the apple trees to dry. In the meantime the weather had become quite beautiful.

Suddenly, the peacefulness of the day was violently shattered. Around 1 p.m. artillery fire was directed at us and a heavy shell exploded not far from our position. Everywhere men were dashing for trenches and shelters, as more shells followed one after another. No one had suspected that the enemy would be this close. This was quite different from the rest that we had anticipated. The long exhausting marches, the sore feet and the lack of sleep all seemed unimportant, now that we understood the peril that we were in.

The enemy continued to pound us with artillery fire until 2 p.m., when there was a pause. Our external watches were spread out over eight different positions along the perimeter of our position because our view of the area was obstructed by an orchard and a nearby farm. A sergeant major approached from the front lines and asked for our commanding officer. He had been captured by the enemy and they had released him to deliver a message. We were being asked to surrender. If we refused, artillery fire would resume at 3 p.m. While all this was going on, a group of volunteers, along with ten cavalrymen crossed the

front lines in order, if possible, to destroy the rail bridge which we had crossed the previous night. A little later a lieutenant from the military police also came to speak a few words of encouragement to us. He told us that the enemy contingent we faced was a small one, and asked if he could count on us when the time came.

As had been forewarned, the shelling resumed at 3 p.m. and continued unabated. But we were quickly becoming accustomed to it, for we were soon able to tell whether a shell would land nearby or not. Each time one did come close, we crawled into the bottom corners of our trenches. Still, we must also continue to direct our attention to the front lines, with machine gun and rifle ready, because it was during the artillery fire that the enemy was most likely to advance.

The group of volunteers, which had crossed the front lines a short while ago, now returned, at least those who were able, for several had been wounded. These, now almost completely covered in blood, were being carried back by their comrades. The horror of war had not fully driven home to us until now, as we saw how our wounded friends were being dragged back. One of the cavalymen, downed by an artillery shell a short distance from our trench, was badly mutilated and crying for help. But the artillery fire was so intense that it was almost impossible to come to his assistance. Yet, because of his terrible pleadings, there were a couple of men, who, with total disregard for their own lives, dashed out and brought him back. There being no doctor or medical attendant in our area, one of the men in our section did what he could to bind the injuries, while the wounded man screamed in pain. Now, finally, we began to understand what war was. Exhaustion and sore feet no longer mattered.

The shelling continued until 5 p.m. and then we saw something that we shall never forget. The regiment first lieutenant and the company second lieutenant began to walk over the dyke with white flag raised. The tears welled up in our eyes when we saw what was happening. It was dreadful! The first thought that came to my mind was: "Our little free Netherlands is lost!" On the other hand I was also relieved, because there was now the possibility that alive and well, I might again see those who were near and dear to me. Still, a Jewish soldier and I approached the two lieutenants to ask whether our battalion had surrendered on its own accord or whether our nation had laid down her arms. They showed us a telegram from the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and so it was indeed true, our country had surrendered - and so they turned to meet the enemy with white flag raised!

The shelling stopped immediately. A lieutenant and I tried



to draw a little milk from some cows, which were bellowing unbearably because they had not been milked for some time. But within half an hour the two lieutenants returned with the enemy, who moments before had been the targets of our rifles and machine guns. The so called enemy now walked back as friends with the two Dutch officers, with the necessary manpower following close behind.

We were ordered to lay down our weapons and gear immediately and raise our hands. We were lined up and counted several times and then without being allowed to eat or take anything with us, we were forced to come along. Our field kitchen had been damaged by the artillery fire and so there wasn't much to be had there anyway. Where the enemy was leading us nobody knew. From the top of the dyke we could clearly see the destruction that had been inflicted by the shelling. Those shells that had landed on the hard surface of the dyke, had blown a hole at least one square meter in size. The whole area was full of such craters. A nearby farm was burning and several cows and a horse had been hit. Also, several of our comrades had lost their lives there.

#### PRISONERS OF WAR

Now we were led away captive and everything seemed so strange. On the one hand, there were no more artillery shells shrieking around our ears and we no longer had to carry our heavy packs, which was a considerable relief. On the other hand, all of our worldly possessions had been left behind. The only thing I had managed to take was my overcoat, which would serve me well in time to come.

We marched along the Lek in two hour stretches with brief rest periods in between until about midnight, when we arrived in Wyk by Duurstede. Several local citizens of this historic old town were still out and informed us that a bed of straw had been prepared for us. Oh, if that were only true, how wonderful that would be! And it was true! In the Netherlands Reformed Church there was a large quantity of straw where we could sleep.

But before we could do that, it was necessary to find something to drink, for we had developed quite a thirst during the twenty kilometre march which we had just completed in such short order. And then the sleep served us well, for in the preceding five days there had been precious little of that.

Wednesday morning arrived very quickly. The big question on everyone's mind was: "What will they do with us? Where are they planning to take us?" Many thought that we would be sent home from here and were already busy exchanging addresses with new friends so that they might be able to correspond once they arrived home. At 9 a.m. we depart from Wyk by Duurstede and



continue our march along the Lek. It seemed an endlessly long procession of about 2,000 men, walking four abreast. Soldiers, officers, infantrymen, cavalrymen, motor pool personnel all moving on foot.

It was another beautiful warm day, so that our gnawing hunger soon gave way to extreme thirst. We were now on the road to Amerongen and everyone looked anxiously for any available water to drink. Now and then someone would bring a pail of water from a farmhouse as we passed by, which was usually emptied before it could be set down. Men scrambled over one another for just a small drink. But when we reached Amerongen it all worked out to our great relief. There, in front of virtually every house along the street, people had set outside their doors, pails and wash basins of water for us to drink. Besides that, many people came out with cups and pitchers so that there was a great deal of drinking and thirst quenching going on.

Again we continued, but now in the direction of Rhenen. We had already heard that there had been some fierce fighting in that area, which soon became obvious as the evidence of war became more apparent. The road we were on ended abruptly at a bridge which had been destroyed, so that it was necessary to cross on a temporary bridge which the enemy had already put in place. Once across, we noticed the bodies of several enemy soldiers, while a little further off the road death continued to grimace at us. Scores of bodies, both friend and foe, lay on both sides of the road, their faces covered with an article of clothing. The town itself was a smoking pile of rubble. Only the church tower stood virtually unscathed in the midst of the smouldering ruins.

Outside the town it became very clear that terrible things had happened here. Everything was totally destroyed! Pieces of battle gear, clothes, shoes, helmets, and all sorts of other things were strewn along the road. There, in an orchard were several bodies and here in this trench along the road was another. And as I saw those who had fallen I thought, "Why him and not me? Am I better than he?" How terrible it must be for those they left behind, when in due time they received the news about those whom they would never see again! No one spoke a word as we passed through this place of terrible calamity, but our minds were reeling with the things we were seeing and experiencing.

We continued on. Scores of livestock which had been destroyed in the pastures, lay bloating as we passed. The stores and homes of the local citizens, at least those which were still standing, had all the windows smashed and had been plundered of virtually all their contents.

The weather continued to be warm so that we were soon

feeling quite parched again. Many had painful, blistered feet, especially those who were unaccustomed to walking. Somehow we all managed to make it to Wageningen where we were herded into a pasture along the Lek. There we lay not knowing what they had in mind for us, or where they were planning to take us. We had been heading in the direction of the German border, and many of us were beginning to express the hope that we might not be brought there, but there was scarcely a Dutch officer among us who could give us a word of encouragement.

Large quantities of drinking water were brought, but if this was also intended to satisfy our hunger, then it didn't bode very well for us. We hadn't eaten in a day and a half and a little food would taste just fine about now. No point in running to the local bakery, since the needs of 2,000 men could hardly be met there. Besides, there most likely were no bakers in town anyway since the local citizens had virtually all left.

Soon, however, we were led from the pasture to a large wooded area near Wageningen where we were locked behind a high fence. A number of German guards were placed on the outside and there we sat, without food or anything. But one Dutch officer had been doing his utmost on our behalf. He stood on a small hill in the woods and told us that we must spend the night here, but that he had made an appeal to the Dutch people over the radio for food and drink for the 2,000 soldiers that were being held at Wageningen. "Be patient," he said, "I have every confidence that enough food for all of us is on the way."

About an hour later the first luxury cars drove through the gate. "Everyone remain seated," the captain had ordered, "then everything can be evenly divided." But there was no restraint left. The cars were virtually attacked as they entered the enclosure. The Dutch soldiers seemed to have lost all sense of manners or shame as hunger and thirst overpowered their sense of propriety. There followed all sorts of vehicles with more foodstuffs. Later in the evening there was even a bus which came from Twente, and the list of things they carried from it was almost too great to mention. There were sandwiches and buns, large pieces of cheese and all sorts of sausages, even a large piece of ham. In addition there were chocolates, cigarettes and matches etc. It had become dark and still more things were being brought -everything to meet our immediate needs. Beyond that, everyone made provision for the next day so that there would be something to eat then. I thought to wrap up a good chunk of rye bread and a tin of liverpaste. Approximately 2,000 stomachs had been filled and much food was left over, so one can envision how much food had been brought there.

Now the captain spoke to us again. It was no easy task to address that many men in the woods. We were asked to arrange



ourselves in companies in designated areas. He would meet us at 3 o'clock the following morning at which time we would be required to set out. Then he said: "Let us pray", and what happened then was something one never saw a soldier do in peacetime or in mobilization. Many soldiers knelt down. Each was in trouble and dependant on God to lead him out. Already we were greatly indebted to Him because He had spared our lives.

There were also about 20 ladies from the Red Cross who did their best to bandage up the blistered feet. They had their hands full tending to all the needs.

Then we needed to find a spot in the woods where we could get some rest. It is hard to imagine how cold it was under those bushes in the woods that night, and was it any wonder? The clothes we slept in were still damp from the sweating we had done during the day. Those in our company, crept as close together as possible to help ward off the cold.

At 1 a.m. we were all awakened, which wasn't all bad since it shortened the cold night considerably. Everything was brought into a state of readiness for the coming march. What would our destination be today (Thursday)? I made a quick check of the area to see if there was any more food to be found that we could take along. There had been so much left over from the previous night (and one never knew when he'd be fed again). I found a box full of sandwiches - way too many to take along. There was also a paper bag with about 20 pieces of chocolate and several pieces of cheese. Then there was a small pile of bread loaves, and so I decided it would be no problem to take one of these.

Finally, at daybreak, we began to leave the woods, (we still couldn't get over all the things that our countrymen had brought here for us) and headed toward the east to an unknown destination. Everywhere people greeted us along the road even though it was barely daybreak. It was still early when we arrived in the village of Renkum, where it was obvious that the townsfolk had anticipated our coming. All along the street they had set out bottles and jars and various containers of buttermilk and other things for us to drink. I had a bottle of water and it seemed each minute one of my comrades walking alongside of me would take a little draught from it, and of course, I no less than they. It was beginning to warm up again so that the bottle needed to be filled regularly.

On my back, fastened by a couple of backpack straps, was my rolled up overcoat which contained the rye bread, the liverpaste and a few remaining bars of chocolate, since most had already been dealt out. As we passed through the Oosterbeek district the local people provided us with sandwiches as well as bandages for the many bleeding feet. And so we went on, with little or no rest in the awful heat of the day. Yet, in spite of our



difficulties, many insisted on singing patriotic songs to help us forget, at least for the moment, the various hardships we were enduring.

As we walked on, there was one recurring question from those who lined the roads: "Is so and so from such and such a regiment with you?" It seemed that there were people from all over the country who had travelled here to see if there were friends or family members in our group. Many people offered to write to our families on our behalf if we would leave them our name and address. Some handed out postcards, on which we could scribble a brief message and our address, and then took them back so they could be mailed. This exercise was quite difficult since we were very tired, not very steady, and had no real opportunity to stop walking in order to write. So we placed the card against the back of the one in front of us, ask him to stop for just a second, quick wrote something, and then hurried on again.

Pails of water had again been set out for us, but now cups were being filled and pressed into our hands so that we would not lose our places in line, which would require extra pain and exertion to regain. On we went, through the assembled throngs of people, farther and farther toward the German border. There was the constant question as to whether we would be taken to Germany, but no one seemed to know.

Now we were heading toward Arnhem. The area through which we were passing was beautiful this time of year, as was the weather -typically Spring. No destruction had taken place here and there was no evidence of war to be seen. Everything seemed to be going at a normal pace. All along the road scores of people were still asking us if there was anything they could do to help. Around noon we arrived in the city of Arnhem, where things were no different. The streets were lined with thousands of people. In response to our queries, we were informed that we would be taken to the new barracks in the city. Everything we needed would be provided for us there - things such as food, soap, washcloths, socks, etc.

It was a huge barrack and we were assigned a place to sleep in the loft. But first we searched out the washing facilities, in order to wash off the sweat and dust from the last few days, which served to restore us considerably. We were asked to line up outside and each one received a post card, while our captain told us what we were allowed to write on them: "I am healthy and well. I am a prisoner of war." This statement struck all of us since none in our company had anticipated that we would be held. The cards were quickly written and returned to the designated place. "Fall in line to march out! Would our fears now be realized? Were we really going to Germany? The mood got more

sombre by the minute. It seemed that most now feared the worst. We were lined up five abreast on the parade grounds in front of the barracks. Each had his belongings, what little they were, with him. What had been handed out on the parade ground was also being taken, for many local citizens had brought much needed items such as socks, which were already coming in handy since most of our own socks were dirty and sweaty and worn. Without good socks one could wreck his feet in very short order. Besides this, there was also much food that was still being brought out to us. The local people seemed to have some idea as to what was in store for us. With a hefty chunk of liver sausage and a loaf of rye bread rolled up in my coat, we stood ready to march out. "Oh my, I almost forgot!" I quickly rushed back into the building to fill my bottle with the water which would be so indispensable in the time to come. Nearly everyone had cleared out of the barracks, so that I could see right through the empty rooms and noticed much bread still lying around. A day ago we were begging for food and now, so quickly, we seemed to have forgotten what a sharp sword hunger could be. But none of us knew what lay ahead. "Fourth section together!" someone hollered, and so we were drawn up into long, wide lines. The gate to the parade ground opened up and off we went again.

Rows of citizens lined the streets outside the gate. Because the barracks were on one of the highest elevations in the city, we were afforded an excellent view of the road before us. How many hundreds of citizens lined the streets was hard to estimate but the troops could barely pass between them. Again and again the question resounded. "Is so and so with you?" "Which regiment?" was our response. Again, it became apparent that people had come here from every corner of the nation in order to inquire about a friend or loved one. Invariably our reply was that we didn't know, for our group consisted of soldiers from seven different regiments. At the end of the street we again turned toward the east. It became quite apparent that we would be crossing the border in spite of our reluctance to accept that fact. We could also read it in the eyes and faces of those who watched us pass. One looked more sombre than the next, and some, unable to restrain themselves burst into tears. There was one soldier who met his wife and little daughter. What a stirring moment that was to see them running along side of him amongst the troops. But on we went.

Outside the city we crossed the Rhine over a temporary bridge, because the rail and foot bridge had been blasted into the water. The temporary bridge had been built using seven barges which were fastened together with heavy timbers so that even the heaviest vehicles were able to cross over it.

Finally we arrived at a small train station in Westerveld,



where a long line of boxcars awaited us. In my pocket I still found a couple of sharp cartridges and wondered what to do with them. We should have handed them in long ago, and were no longer to be in possession of such things. While no one was looking, I bent down and pressed them into the ground.

Fifty men were assigned to each boxcar. Through the partly open doors many citizens continued to give us packages of cigarettes and the like, but soon the doors were closed tight and latched. Still cigarettes were being passed through small vents near the top of the car walls, which one could also look out through if he were not too short. Finally the locomotive, with a great deal of effort set things in motion. Backward and forward, with a bump and a jerk we slowly began to move down the track. But where to? All kinds of thoughts filled our minds. All questions and no answers.

As many as possible sat along the walls so that they might have some support for their backs. For those in the middle, sitting soon became unbearable so that they found it necessary to try standing for a time.

We made some calculations by the sun and figured that we were heading in a southerly direction. Around 7 p.m. the train turned more toward the east which to our thinking was better, since to the south was an area totally unfamiliar to most of us. At dusk we changed direction yet again, this time to the north. One after another voiced his concern: "Where will we wind up?" "How far are we from our country?" Finally, when night fell, it became pitch dark in the car. Wherever you were, you had to remain, because every time you moved you stepped on a comrade's head or arm or leg. We tried as much and with as little fuss as possible to lie down on the plank floor. Those who were so rich, rested their heads on a rolled up coat, while others simply lay them on the limbs or body of a comrade. And so, lying over and against and partly on top of one another, we tried to get a little sleep. In the pitch dark stillness our minds drifted to thoughts of home and family father, mother, brothers, sisters, loved ones. How had they fared during the invasion? Had they all survived? When would we see them again? Again, all questions and no answers. Through all of this we had one consolation: we could still pray to Him who directs all these things, knowing that nothing happens apart from His will. But enough of these thoughts. It was high time we got some sleep after the long tiring days that lay behind us. But even that was almost impossible. First one and then the other found it necessary to turn over, for, having rested in one position for even a brief period caused all the limbs and joints to ache. Yet, in spite of everything, we did manage to get a little sleep.

Finally, at around 1 a.m. the train began to slow down. After



a jolt and a jerk and jostling us about thoroughly, we shuddered to a stop, presumably at our destination. But the doors remained latched and it was getting quite close in the car. Someone asked if there was anything to eat, 'cause he sure wouldn't mind having something. Now that he mentioned it, he wasn't the only one. I was reminded of the fact that we hadn't eaten for a whole day. After much searching and groping I finally found my coat in which I had rolled up the rye bread and liver sausage. Because of the dark, it wasn't possible to cut off some neat slices to make a sandwich, besides which, I couldn't find my knife anyway. But that didn't matter. The bread had apparently been slept on, it was so flat and broken, and was hardly suitable for slicing any more. Between the three of us we each took a couple of bites of bread, then a piece of sausage and so without knife or plate, table or chairs, we ate our meal. What it looked like no one could see, but it sure tasted good for in no time it was all gone.

Finally, as it started to get light, the doors were opened for the most pressing of errands and a few gulps of fresh air. But our relief was short lived as we were soon bolted behind the doors again.

Around 6 p.m. we were allowed to leave the boxcars and for the first time we noticed how dirty we had become from the dust on the boxcar floor. And so we began the march to what was to be our first prison camp. Everyone was burning with curiosity as to where we might be. To all appearances it seemed like an ugly, dead, God forsaken little town through which we were passing. However, on the outskirts of town, many new homes were being constructed, but the roads were still so rough and uneven, that they were almost impossible to walk on, especially with our sore feet. As we were leaving the town we noticed the placename of Meppem on the other side of the road. None of us had ever heard of it. Where could it be? No one seemed to know. The area was not much different from our own country - some nice farms; some poor rundown operations too. At a fork in the road we stared in amazement at the road sign that confronted us. One direction indicated Meppel and the other Leeuwarden! How was that possible? We had spent so much time in the train, and some of that time we had spent travelling in the opposite direction from where we now were - so close to the Dutch border.

After a half hour of walking, we approached what seemed like an endless moor. Far in the distance we could see a few buildings, which, from the direction we were taking, seemed to be our destination. My dear water bottle, which I had filled at the station, because of popular demand was soon empty again, so that I myself almost ran short. All this walking in the hot sun soon caused us to become quite parched.

Finally we arrived at our first camp. It was completely surrounded by two barbed wire fences about five or six meters high. At each corner of the camp was a high watchtower, each equipped with a machine gun. Down below, along the barbed wire fences, several German guards were also in evidence, so that any possibility of escaping and sneaking across the border seemed unlikely. We were all ordered to form up in a large open area, where we were required to hand over all of our personal belongings: cigarettes that we had received in abundance from our countrymen the previous day, matches, knives, etc. After that we were assigned to our sleeping accommodations two hundred men to a wooden barrack. Our bedding consisted of a little fine straw, but that didn't matter. We had not been spoiled in recent times, especially the previous night on that hard plank floor in the boxcar.

Friday, the first day at our first camp, was devoted almost completely to sleeping because of the long exhausting days that were behind us. That was also the first day that we received a couple of slices of german 'kuch', for which none of us had much appetite yet, in spite of the fact that we were quite hungry. "In a few days you'll eat it gladly", we were informed by a fellow prisoner who had already spent a few days there, and he was probably right.

At noon we received our first hot meal in over a week. It was potato soup with some other things in it that we couldn't identify, and though it didn't look appetizing, it tasted just fine. In the evening we strolled around the camp to see if there was anyone else that we knew, but we realized it would take more than one evening in a crowd of 2500 men. We soon tired of shuffling through the loose sand and before it was dark, each had retired to his spring cushioned bed. One had to be on the ball in order to gather a little straw together to form a bit of a pillow. For the rest, one pulled his coat up over himself to serve as a blanket, if he still had one.

We slept like logs and before we knew it, it was Saturday morning. Again, we found ourselves wondering what the day had in store for us. Amongst ourselves there was much speculation about our future, and some even asked a German guard what he thought they would do with us. According to his thoughts we would soon be going home. "You can count on it," he said, "You are being treated like friends. Soon the French will be arriving and you will be leaving." Indeed, that same day we were informed that there were 10,000 French prisoners of war. So, we speculated, we would soon be leaving this place in order to make room for them. That evening we again went to sleep early, as if to bring on Sunday morning a little sooner.

The following morning we arose quite early, having



apparently caught up on our sleep. It was beautiful weather that Sunday. "If only we could spend it at home", was the thought of each of us. "If only we knew a little of what was happening there, it would be so much more bearable here." The Sundays were particularly difficult. What benefit there would be in such times to be able to attend a church service! How we missed it! And after church, a delicious cup of coffee would taste so fine!

The days here seemed endlessly long, for there was no work or similar distraction to occupy our time. Several times we were counted. That was our Sunday service. That evening we were told that we would be moved to another camp, a so called registration camp. That was also O.K. with us since it would break up the long, tedious day somewhat. That Sunday I met an acquaintance which I had previously met at a church group gathering in Vlaardingen, and so we spent some time talking about our respective groups.

Early Monday morning we departed for the next camp, which was about a half hour walk further on this endless moor. This was a huge camp with many wooden barracks, some of which were already occupied by some other Dutch comrades. Polish P.O.W.s were busy cutting peat under the watchful eyes of German guards. It was very dusty. It was also quite windy so that big black clouds of peat dust blew between the barracks.

In one of these barracks we were required to register: name, address, occupation, and also whether we knew any other language. Each man was assigned a number and between the three of us we were quite concerned about the possibility of being split up, so we made every effort to get three numbers close together. We were also required to empty our pockets, and the contents of our wallets were thoroughly checked. To our amazement we were allowed to keep our money, which, according to reports, had not been the case with those who had been registered the previous day. But then it did make sense in light of the rumour that we would soon be returned to Holland.

That same morning we returned to our first camp where a fine hot meal awaited us, but towards evening we were again brought back to the "peat dust camp", as we had named it. There we were divided, 200 men to a barrack, according to the numbers that had been assigned to us. "What does this mean?" was the question on everyone's mind. Some kuch was handed out - one loaf for every two men, a small piece of butter and some tea, as they called it. "This is for the next day in the train." we were told. The bit of butter was carefully stashed in an empty liver paste tin and the pieces of kuch were wrapped together in a towel. My friends and I had made a habit of pooling our food together because when we travelled, we usually received the day's allotment of food in advance. This way we had only one

package to carry amongst the three of us.

Tuesday morning arrived early. At 3:30 we had to get up, but that was not as bad as it might seem because the night was very cold and sleep had been difficult. At 5 o'clock we were ready to march, but where to? If only we were going home as the German guard had said. But not many of us were too convinced that we would be going home now. Where then? On other days we had received one kuchen for every four men, and now each a half. It was certainly an indication that a long journey awaited us and that we would not be fed for a while. Yesterday we had been asked about our occupation. Were we now being sent off to work in Germany? The one speculated this and the other that, but no one knew where we were going. Finally, around 7 a.m. the long procession began to move through the sandy heath. The dust didn't make too much difference because our clothes were already about as dirty as they could get. Closer to the town we again had to traverse the roadbed of large boulders which looked like they had been laid by a tailor, they were so uneven and almost impossible to walk on. Around 8:30 we reached the train station in Meppen, where we had arrived the previous week. The train stood ready for us so that we could step right inside (pick a nice comfortable spot amongst the pillows) and in no time at all we sat latched behind the doors again. A little before 9 o'clock the train departed the station, after thoroughly jostling us about again, to an unknown destination.

The weather was beautiful again so that the cold which we had suffered during the night was soon forgotten. Toward noon it was getting quite warm and stuffy in the boxcar. It also didn't take us long to realize that we were not headed toward the Dutch border, for according to the sun we were travelling east. It was a lovely region through which we were travelling; I made rather frequent use of the small air vent in the side of the car to take a look outside. The terrain was quite hilly and somewhat mountainous with fields of beautiful young grain growing up the sides. Here and there, amongst these beautiful green fields were small villages with red roofs, which were a pretty sight indeed. It was too bad that we should not be able to see this under better circumstances, for then we would certainly have enjoyed it much more. .

Around noon the train stopped to let us out for the necessary errands and to allow us to fill our bottles with water. The warmer it got, the more valuable my bottle became. We also took this brief opportunity to make a quick sandwich before we were herded back into the cars and on our way again. As we pass through a town, I notice a road sign that said: Hanover - 30 km. So we were able to calculate roughly in what area we



were. Every once in a while I saw something that was certainly not an every day occurrence, at least where I came from: a pair of oxen pulling a plough. There was much land under cultivation in this area and I noticed that there were many women working in the fields - more women than men in fact. Here and there we also noticed Polish P.O.W.s at work in the fields, which only caused us to think about our own futures and the possibility of winding up working far from our own land. As evening approached we were still heading further east. Again we tried our best to get a little sleep, mostly to help us forget, if only briefly, our bleak circumstances, for some were becoming quite despondent, and for good reason, considering the dismal conditions of this trip.

Soon it got dark in the car and very quiet. Was everyone asleep? No, that couldn't be because every part of the body ached either from lying on the planks, or being stretched out across someone's legs or boots. But without doubt many were thinking about home and family and wondering how they were, and when they would hear from them, and when they would see them again. Then someone disturbed the silence, pulled back on a leg, and in so doing hit someone else in a sensitive spot, who in turn uttered a couple of loud curses. I then heard something I had never heard a soldier say to anyone before: "Stop your cursing! Isn't it bad enough that we're in this terrible place? How can you still curse?" Yes, when we are in need we learn to pray, and when we can see no way out we must pray that God will deliver us. In those days there were many who learned to pray, who, by their own admission, had never prayed before.

After stopping several times through the course of the night, at around 2 a.m. it seemed the train had finally reached its destination. Thus, except for a few brief breaks, we had spent almost seventeen hours locked up behind those doors. Where could we be? At 5:30 the doors were unbolted and we were glad to be let out, for it had become quite cold in the car. The first thing we determined to do was to find out where we were. A railway official informed us that we were close to Berlin. Again it was a matter of waiting to see what they would do with us. In the city there was nothing of particular interest to see. There were no nice shops here like we were accustomed to seeing in Holland, and there didn't seem to be a lot happening. It was quite a large city and we were certainly not passing through for our pleasure, for we would not soon forget the train ride that had brought us there. One of our comrades commented that he felt as if he had just completed a long march he was so sore all over from the ride. We could all relate to what he was saying. To our relief, our third camp was only a half hour out of the city.

The first thing we noticed was another large group of

brothers in arms, although we were kept a considerable distance from them. Would there be someone that we knew? There was no way of knowing for we were directed to another part of the camp which was divided into three areas. In the areas to the left and right stood large tents, while the area in the middle contained ten brick barracks. It was on the far right side that the other Dutch P.O.W.s were being held, while the brick barracks housed a number of Polish prisoners. After passing through several barbed wire gates we entered the area on the left intended for us, where eight tents stood on about one hectare of land. Four hundred of us were assigned to each tent, which was quite large but definitely not designed to hold that many men. The way a guard explained it, they were designed for 200 to 230 men each. The 400 men in each tent were split into groups of 40 and a captain appointed for each group. Anyone with a little knowledge of the German language got top consideration for the job, because from now on we would be receiving all of our instructions in German, from a German commander assigned to each tent. Our tent was divided into ten sections with forty men in each. There was a little straw on the wooden floor of the tent and it was now left up to us to find a place to lay down. After much fitting and measuring, each of us finally had a place to lay, if not on his back, then at least on his side.

It didn't take us long to realize that with 400 men searching for a place to sleep, it soon became too hot and dusty for comfort inside the tent, so that about ten of us sat outside in the sand, speculating about the future. One thought this and the other said that, but we were all just guessing as to what would become of us. My close comrade was really downhearted; we could find no words with which to encourage him - he had such a gloomy outlook. He thought much of home, and no wonder, since his wife was expecting their first child any day now. One could readily understand how much he was longing to be home. But for the time being it seemed a remote possibility indeed that this might happen soon. If we could only receive a letter from home just now, how that would help to restore our flagging spirits.

While we were thus talking, it was announced that our meal would be served soon at 2 p.m. It had been about two days since we had received our half kuch. It didn't matter what they served, it would taste just fine. Distribution began at tent number one, and since we were tent eight, we were last to be served. For the greater part of the men a small ceramic dish was available, but those who ate last found it necessary to borrow from the first. Thus, a little rinse under the tap - it cleaned up much quicker here than in a Dutch kitchen where one could never clean a dish without hot water and the dish was as clean as you could want it. There was obviously not much fat that



would require hot water to wash it off. Along with our hot meal we received our daily allotment of kuchen - one loaf for five men; no problem adding that little piece to the meal. Now, we felt a little more like ourselves again. However, when we were finished, our captain informed us that there would be no more to eat till the same time tomorrow afternoon. Too late! We had eaten it all! There was nothing we could do! It was all gone!

At 6 p.m. we had roll call in the middle of the camp. This one was quite different from any we'd had before. We were required to gather from all the tents and neatly arranged in such a way that there was an open square in the middle. A little later a few officers appeared in the square. What were they going to tell us? Would we hear what was waiting for us? Would it be good news? It didn't seem like it could get much worse. If only we could understand the German language. Actually, it didn't go too badly. Most of it we could understand and where we couldn't, we at least got the gist of what was being said. And this was what he told us: "The commander-in-chief of the Dutch forces and Adolph Hitler have resolved to have the Dutch P.O.W.s sent home." A resounding cheer went up from the crowd that lasted for several minutes. He also stated that we would not be returned immediately, but that it would likely be arranged in a few days as railcars became available. That didn't seem like a big drawback to us. It was now Wednesday and by Sunday we'd be back in Holland, according to optimistic calculations.

What a change all at once one moment everything seemed dark as night and now just the opposite. Everyone was busy speculating as to when we would leave. One figured to be home on Sunday, while another would be quite happy to leave here on that day. Still another would be content just to know it was really true, for why would they bring us 600 k.m. across the border, and not have left us in the first camp? It didn't make much sense, but it was not the kind of thing one cared to dwell on for too long. The Polish prisoners obviously shared our joy for soon they came out with a self organized music corps blowing a merry tune. What a delight to have some cheery music on such an occasion, but we had not yet experienced the height of the evening - the best was yet to come. We responded with the singing of "Where the white tops of the dunes", and before long, we had sung not a few verses. The Poles countered with a patriotic song of their own and soon we were singing back and forth to each other, one song after another. It was a most incredible experience. There was also a barrack of Polish boys and girls who also insisted on being heard several times. So it became an unforgettable evening which was over before we realized it. It was high time to find our tent and get our beauty rest, because if one didn't get to his carefully measured

little spot before dark, there was a good possibility that he wouldn't be able to find it at all. To step over all those arms and heads and legs etc. in the dark was just not conceivable.

Everyone was up early again on Thursday morning, most, because of the cold. Those who had no coat had received a thin, dirty little blanket which the Poles had been sleeping under all winter, while those of us who did, received nothing. Also many could no longer stand the unbearable air in the tent, and was it any wonder, with four hundred men laying in such confinement. So, many found it much better outside than in. The early risers also had good opportunity to freshen up a bit, there being only eight taps where everything needed to be done: washing, rinsing of eating utensils, and shaving - which we wanted to do especially now that we might soon be going home - if we were able to gather together the necessary items. From one we borrowed a brush, from another an apparatus, while with the next one we pleaded for a blade. I had a piece of ordinary soap, but we still needed a mirror. Someone had seen a sliver of broken mirror the other day and through much asking and searching, we finally found it. It wasn't for nothing that we started early, for it took nearly all day just to get a shave.

Roll call was at 7:30 a.m. and at 5 p.m. and for the rest we just needed to make sure that we were present when food was being distributed. Mealtime started around 11 a.m. which today consisted of potatoes, as they called them - they were boiled in their skins, with white cheese. This stuff that was supposed to pass as white cheese, didn't look like cheese at all but more like buttermilk, very thick and sour tasting with finely sliced onions thrown in. Though we did not consider ourselves picky eaters by any stretch of the imagination, most of it wound up in the barrel. A German guard told us it was something we had to learn to eat and once we had acquired a taste for it we would find it quite delicious. We decided to wait for our little piece of kuch which we knew would taste much better, and we were not disappointed, for, in addition to our ration of kuch, we also received a small pat of butter and even a thin slice of sausage.

Most of the day was spent in conversation about our pending departure. What else was there to talk about? We had no other distraction with which to occupy our time, and the day seemed so endlessly long. The evening was again concluded with music from the Polish section.

Friday was the same as the day that preceded it more predictions as to when we would be leaving for Holland, but for the rest, there was no real news. It was a very hot day so that one soon felt quite wretched and weary of sitting and rising and walking and a day that seemed to last forever.

Saturday was not much different. The whole day there was



more talk about the departure, but no one knew anything for sure. So the week drew to an end and another Sunday came into view the Sunday, which one had hoped to spend at home, which was so little observed here, that it passed almost unnoticed. Where one was accustomed to going to church each Sunday, it was especially missed here, particularly in days such as these when one tended to spend so much time thinking about those things that in normal times were taken for granted.

In the morning we were vaccinated for small pox and typhus, "Another indication that we're not about to be released from here" many were heard to say. Having received our shots, we made a washday of the rest of the Sunday, which happened almost imperceptibly, because to put on those dirty under clothes over those fresh wounds seemed a little risky to us. They were not only terribly dirty but also carried a bit of an odour. I had worn mine for four weeks including the time of the invasion and all the marching and sweating we did after that, and then one dusty, dirty camp after another. It was no wonder our clothes looked the way they did. We washed and scrubbed and rinsed them at length under the tap and then hung them out to dry on the barbed wire fence, which was by this time covered with various laundry items. They were by no means sparkling clean, but at least the heavy dirt and the sweaty odour were gone. The day was sunny and warm and it wasn't long before everything was dry.

At this time there was also a considerable improvement brought about in our camp in that we were granted more freedom. Behind our camp was a wooded area which the polish prisoners had enclosed with barbed wire the previous day. To our great relief we were allowed to spend some time in this area, out of the sun and away from the clouds of dust which constantly enveloped the camp. In the evening we received a "sleeping pill", as we called it. It usually consisted of someone coming in with the good news that he knew when we would be leaving, because he himself had overheard a German guard - which was again the case tonight. The story tonight was that a large group of French prisoners was to arrive tomorrow which would make it necessary for us to leave. We would be leaving on the same train on which they were arriving. Now, that was nicely thought out. "It could very well be true," was the thought of many who went right off to sleep with good cheer and good hope for tomorrow.

Monday morning was rainy and dark, and the news was gloomier still. The encouraging predictions of the previous night fell flat in the puddles. Early in the morning a group of Poles entered our compound with a couple of wagons which carried enough materials to build five more large tents. These they set up so that we now had thirteen tents in all. Our brothers-in-arms from the far side of the camp were now brought over to

occupy these newly erected tents, so that their area would be available for the French P.O.W.s who were soon to arrive. We were now confined with 5200 men in thirteen tents, so that each tent had 400 men. The wooded area which had been opened for us the previous day certainly came in useful now. And so the days passed by Tuesday, then Wednesday, and the story remained the same: tomorrow we will leave for sure.

Thursday: Any hour now! The train is ready! For many these announcements were a bright spot. If it were really true, then by Sunday we could be in Holland.

It was not surprising that by this time many men had become sick, and about forty had been placed in an infirmary. We slept so close together that we were constantly breathing in each other's faces, and it certainly didn't help to be sleeping without suitable blankets during these cold nights. If one woke during the night it was to the constant din of people coughing and hacking.

Friday morning broke windy and cold. In our tent we were asked for twelve volunteers to go out to work, but there was little interest because few figured that our small ration of food warranted going out to work for it. Finally, twelve men were assigned and promised an extra portion of food. I considered it to be of double benefit for it would also break the day up nicely. We marched a short distance from the camp to where there was a large garden plot. We were told that carrots grew there and that it was our job to pull the weeds. If you looked really hard and long, you could find the odd carrot plant. The wind blew cold and hard and it was definitely not a pleasant task, but, if we managed to hold out till one o'clock, we would earn an extra portion of food, and that was certainly worthwhile. However, our German commandant was not pleased with our work, for one pulled too many carrots while another left too many weeds, so that when we were dismissed at 1 p.m. none of us received the extra portion for which we had worked so hard.

Several did receive a cigarette, which we craved almost as much as food. That we had done without now for several weeks was for many a tough row to hoe. Often one would see a group of four or five men sitting in a circle, passing a single cigarette. Some would roll small cigarettes from butts that the German soldiers had thrown away. There was a canteen annexed to the camp where one could purchase cigarettes, tobacco, beer, razor blades, etc., but these were not available to the Dutch prisoners because they would be leaving shortly anyway. It was the same with writing home. Often someone would ask his commandant for permission to write a letter, but the reply was always the same: "You'll be home before your letter arrives." But on this occasion we each received a special P.O.W. postcard



on which we could scribble a few lines home. It was also an indication that our departure was not so near. There was further confirmation of that fact when the canteen was also opened up to us. However, everything was limited and extremely expensive, so that not too many availed themselves of this new privilege. For instance, each day sixteen cigarettes were made available for every twenty men, and sold for three and a half cents a piece. Beer was thirty-five cents a bottle and razor blades were eight cents each, so that at least we could shave again. There were several who were beginning to grow quite a beard, while others declared their intention not to shave until they were going home. So there were also some in our group who no longer washed or shaved, who had become so despondent that they seldom came outside, but spent the whole day in the dusty tent, for all the straw had by now been ground into the floor. One could well imagine how grimy they would look after a while.

The following day (Saturday) we took some of these comrades and gave them a good going over. First, with a small pair of scissors we cut off their beards and then gave them a shave. After that they were provided with a bar of soap and a hand towel, so that when all was said and done, they looked and felt much better. And so the endless days dragged by, each day longer than the one before. It was Sunday again - the day we had longed for, and had hoped to be home. It was, however, a day that promised something new. There was in our camp a teacher who had asked permission from the camp commandant to have a Protestant assembly, for which he was given one half hour. It turned out to be an exceptionally beautiful half hour, never to be forgotten. Those who were not there can never fully appreciate how beautifully those verses rang, being sung with full enthusiasm as every verse and every line, yes, every word could be applied directly to our own lives and situation. Never were the words so plain and clear as for instance the words to Psalm 42:

As a deer pants for the water,  
so I long for you O Lord.  
All my heart and being falter,  
thirsting for your living word.  
When shall I behold your face?  
When shall I receive your grace?  
When shall I, your praises voicing,  
come before you with rejoicing?

And so it was with us. We had acquired a thirst for God's Word. When we mortals are beset by various trials and difficulties then we direct our hearts to God for deliverance.

After that, the teacher read to us from Matthew 6:19-34 -- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal; but lay up for

yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal etc. With what attentiveness these words were received, especially since they so much applied to us, in that we had not come together like this in several weeks. After having sung together one more time, this unforgettable meeting was closed with prayer. He further shared with us that each evening from now on we would be having vespers in a far corner of the woods. These meetings would be led in turn by two speakers who were evangelists in civilian life. At the conclusion of this gathering we were again inoculated for typhus.

Monday morning we were visited by a health official who had come to see our living quarters. On completion of his tour, he wasted no time in condemning the place, stating that no one could be expected to remain healthy under these conditions, for which he refused to accept responsibility, and further disclosed to us that by tomorrow, at the latest Wednesday, we would be leaving here, which boosted our spirits in no small measure. Later in the day another large group of French P.O.W.s arrived, amongst which were also a number of black Morrocans, so that they now totalled about 10,000 in this camp.

Tuesday morning my comrades and I had a mind to peel potatoes. We rose extra early in order to be in the front of the line, for there was no lack of interested parties, because, as a rule, there was an extra portion of food from the leftovers. The names were taken down, and after the hot meals had been served, the potato peelers would receive an extra portion of warm food. Thus one can understand the interest, even though about one hundred were needed for the task, because the potatoes needed to be cut into very small pieces. Now, we hit it lucky that day - potato soup with hake (stockfish). That would taste really fine, with an extra portion for peeling yet. But we were not the only ones who were aware that the soup was good that day. Many came to the kitchen with their bowls to see if there were seconds to be had and didn't mind pushing and shoving to get to the front of the line. When the crush became too great, the kitchen commandant grabbed a couple of pails of water and poured them on those in the front of the line, which did cause them to retreat somewhat. The kitchen was completely surrounded with barbed wire and everything was closed up for a while. Then, the gate was opened and the names of the peelers were read off, who were then allowed to enter. One character tried to sneak in, but the German commandant noticed him, and, grabbing his bowl, smashed it on his head. Then, with his left hand he was ordered to hold the broken bowl on his head while with his right hand he had to hold his right leg high in the air -for about twenty minutes. In the evening we received another sleeping pill from the cooks,



who now knew for sure that we were leaving because tomorrow they were expecting a large quantity of kuch and sausage for our return trip home.

On Wednesday morning all signs indicated that the time had finally come. Those who had received a hand towel were required to hand them in, along with their so-called blankets. After our hot meal was finished the dishes were also returned. Everything was thrown into commotion. "This is great! By Sunday we'll be in Holland maybe even home! some ventured to say. But in the hearts of most there was a fearful apprehension: "As long as its really true that we're going home." A large truck arrived, full of kuch, intended for us on the train, which we were to board early in the morning. That would be Thursday morning one more night.

There was an expectant bustle in the kitchen where a large area was being stacked up with kuch. As the commandant turned briefly away from the truck, one of those helping with the unloading took a loaf and threw it to one of his comrades, who quickly concealed it under his coat and disappeared into the woods, where it was promptly divided and consumed by a number of hungry mouths. Toward evening the rumour began to circulate that we would not be leaving on Thursday but on Friday. In one instant the joy and cheer that was evident on each of the faces was gone. What were we to believe? If only we had some diversion; work, or something else; anything to provide some distraction. Day in day out continually talking and thinking about the same things: about home and how things were there. How long it took for a day to pass in that place, could not be imagined by anyone who did not come through that experience.

Everyone was up very early on Thursday morning, for in the tent, in our nice (soft) beds, it had become unbearable because of the cold. The weather was damp and cold that night, especially for those who were doing without their little blanket, so that around three o'clock in the morning, the camp was astir with those who just wanted to warm up a little bit. The hot meal was served quite early today, it least our tent's turn came early, for there was generally quite a difference in time between the first tent and the last. Serving began around 10:30 a.m. and continued till around 3 p.m. That really hit the spot, especially in the cold. The kuch was distributed around 5 p.m., one day a quarter per man and the next day a fifth. Most ate theirs as soon as they received it, ignoring the fact that they would be without food till noon the following day. Butter was distributed very sparingly - sometimes a small pat two days in a row and then three days without.

And so that day dragged by ever so slowly. In the evening we went again to that familiar little corner of the woods, which was already occupied by a good number of Dutch soldiers. How we

had changed, for in normal times and even in mobilization, one never saw anything like this, but then again, in these days we were being so sorely tried. As it turned out, this would not only be a day closing meeting, but a camp closing as well, as it would be the last time we were to meet in the woods like this. All three of the speakers had an opportunity to address us on this night and it became another memorable evening. Many beautiful verses were sung there that night, such as: Ga niet alleen door't leven (Go not through life alone); U alleen, U loven Wij (In Thee alone, in Thee we trust); Geloofd zij God met diepst onzag (Trust in the Lord with reverence deep); and many more. How beautifully those verses rang. One of the speakers pointed out with great emphasis that we should never forget this spot in the woods and to be thankful for all that we had learned here for the rest of our lives. Another spoke a few words on the theme: "It has been good to have been oppressed", which was also very fitting for us. I sensed that there were a goodly number present that night who learned something from that message. Now that we were oppressed, the Lord God had to manifest Himself by delivering us out of all our trouble. Now we were nothing, and stood in need of His strength to help us to stand. We were also reminded that soon, when all of this was over, we would be so inclined to forget what He had done for us. Having sung another hymn, the service was closed with a prayer of thanksgiving. . After this the speakers had one request: that when we had returned to our home towns, we would send them a postcard of our church or church tower, as a memento. For the rest of that evening there was a cheerful atmosphere amongst one another. Several wagons arrived with kuch, and everything was brought into readiness for our departure the following day. And still, there were those who were overheard to say: "I'll believe it when I'm on the train, and it's going in the right direction."

On Friday morning everyone was up really early, most because of the cold, and the rest from an anxious expectation to see whether we would actually leave. One came around and told us that departure had been postponed for another day. "Ah, let him chatter. Don't listen to him. He's just trying to stir things up." Then another said he could confirm it; he knew it for sure, for he had heard it himself from a German guard. The response of most was: "I don't believe it. You're just trying to scare us." And still - one thought to himself: "I hope It isn't true. But what do I see there? Oh no! My eyes aren't deceiving me." And sure enough, the bowls which we had handed in the previous day, were again distributed to us. So it was true indeed! What were we to believe now? "Tomorrow," they told us again, but we were not putting much stock in that any more. And so this day also passed, although it seemed more like a week. Vespers were held



in the woods again that night and an innumerable crowd again had their hopes fixed on the following day, although with fear and apprehension in their hearts. Again we sought out our fine feather beds, shoes off, pulled up my overcoat over myself what a valuable item that had been in providing protection from the cold, fixed my pillow by stuffing a soiled shirt with a little bit of dirty, fine straw, placed it on my shoes, and then stretched out for a lovely night's sleep.

And so Saturday morning arrived quickly, with everyone up early in expectation of what might happen. Those who originally had to hand in their money, were now instructed to meet at a given point in the camp. "They'll be leaving first," someone commented. Everything seemed to indicate an imminent departure. Kuch was distributed, and the first group left the camp around 7:30 a.m. This business of leaving was very relieving. The second group followed at 10 a.m. The remaining two groups still received a hot meal and then the last group, of which I was a part, finally departed. The French P.O.W.s sat quietly watching the proceedings, asking only if there was anything that we could spare, such as knives, razor blades or whatever. The Dutchmen reached into their pockets, and anything still to be found there was thrown over the barbed wire barriers. Soon after that the kuch was handed out for the train trip - two thirds for each man, a sausage to be divided amongst ten of us, and in addition, some Swiss cheese. So this last time at least, we were being extra well looked after. All those who still had a bottle, had opportunity to fill them, for a little water would be much appreciated on such a warm day. Also many empty beer bottles were filled with water and taken along as a souvenir from Luckenwalde. Outside the camp we were required to wait for an hour which we used as an opportunity to apportion the sausage and the cheese. Many ate theirs right away, but not everyone cared for the cheese, because it didn't really look like cheese, although one did get used to it and when it was almost gone, well, it actually tasted pretty good.

Finally we resumed, and we noticed that our departure was even being filmed. The area was lovely with rolling hills and evergreen woods alternating with fields of new green grain. But again, we found the city to be a rather bleak place, with no nice shops such as we had in Holland. There was a bread bakery which had two pastries in the window, but whether or not they were edible, was not indicated. A butcher shop sported a couple of sausages, a ceramic pig, and a pot of flowers.

And so we arrived unnoticed at the station, where about forty cars stood waiting for us. In a few of them, some benches had been placed. Were they intended for us, or for the German guards who accompanied us? But no, that was not likely, for we

noticed a regular passenger car near the front of the train. One man was willing to part with ten, and another fifteen guilders, to be allowed to sit in one of those cars. Our group of forty-five men wound up being one of the fortunate ones assigned to a car with benches. "Now we're travelling first class," some quipped, "we couldn't possibly want it any better." Some had pretty well used up their supply of water, and began to crowd around a small tap nearby. After a little pushing and shoving I did manage to get my bottle filled. How good that would taste, as the Swiss cheese had been a little salty and the weather was warm. And then, one knew when he was boarding the train, but not when he would get off, so that it was also wise to conserve some water for the trip. For the rest, what else could a man want.

At 5 o'clock on Saturday afternoon, the heavy locomotive set into motion the forty or so boxcars, each carrying forty-five Dutchmen. First a jolt backward, then a jerk forward, and then, having been thoroughly shaken together, we started our journey back to Holland. Unprecedented joy was on every face. "Now, so long as everything is well at home," was the constant concern in every heart. For five full weeks we had not seen or heard from home, and there had also been five days of war in our land. We had heard that Rotterdam had been bombed, and that paratroopers had landed in the area around Delft, but more than that we didn't know.

The train gained speed rapidly, and before we knew it, Luckenwalde was out of sight. But it was not out of mind, for we had learned much there, especially to be thankful, which was a big lesson indeed. It was not likely that we would ever appreciate home as much as we did now. How often had we not thought of those who were there, those who were dear to us from whom we had not heard for so long. There had been nothing else to do in that camp. And then your own, soft, warm, bed, and a good serving of fried potatoes with lettuce how often had we not made each other hungry just talking about it. And when presently we would be eating out of a Dutch kitchen again, and someone were to serve us brown beans with a big chunk of bacon as had often been the case during mobilization, and many had pulled up their noses or thrown it in the garbage barrel we certainly wouldn't complain any more. "Nor will I complain," said another, "when I get home and I'm served something I don't particularly care for, or something that's not exceptionally well prepared." And so, much time was spent in this kind of conversation, and everyone burned with longing to see Holland again.

The train travelled on through endless plains with rye and potatoes and corn - which looked rather sparse, and there was practically no livestock to be seen at all. At the beginning of the journey I had seen one cow, and it was pulling a plough



which was being used to turn up potatoes. We passed through a large number of towns and cities which were being carefully noted by almost everyone. We also passed through Wittenburg, which was familiar to us from our church history. Towards evening we approached what looked like a very large city, at least from a distance, which turned out to be Hamburg, a large city indeed. The train stopped in the station where our locomotive was exchanged for another. Thus, we were ready to go another stretch, and with fresh power to meet the night. We tried to sleep somewhat, for once we arrived in Holland there would probably be very little opportunity for a while. Would we arrive Sunday before noon? No, not very likely; most probably in the early evening. And so our thoughts persisted and sleep evaded us.

In the first half of the night, the train sped on in one long stretch, but this changed considerably in the second half. Several times it stopped, and with a little tugging and jerking, would start up again, so that we were thoroughly shaken up again. In the early dawn, around 3 a.m., we arrived in Hanover, and so, according to our calculations at least, we had come a long way. During the last part of the trip, we noticed a gradual change in the area through which we were passing - more densely populated, more pasture land with livestock - certainly, all indications that we were headed in the right direction - toward Holland. The weather was beautiful early that Sunday morning; mowers were already busy cutting hay.

The train was picking up speed again. This was great! We'd be over the border before noon. But where would we cross, and where would we wind up? Would we be allowed to go home soon? There were dozens of questions which were soon to be answered. Finally we arrived at the small border town of Bentheim. "Oh," said someone who lived in the area, "then we'll be crossing the border at Oldenzaal." The doors, which had remained partly open throughout the trip, were now closed, so we were again forced to rely on the vent holes in the upper sides of the car, in order to see something. One can well imagine the interest there would be in occupying such a spot, especially now that we were getting so close to the end. As it happened, I had been standing under a vent all along, and so ignored the demands of some, that I should step aside. "Are we over the border yet?" was the constant query from the other comrades. "Yes, we have crossed." I could finally announce, for I could tell by the road barriers at the railroad crossings. In Germany, all the roads, even the smallest sideroads were protected by automatic barriers. As soon as we had crossed over the border, I noticed that the houses along the track were emptying as we passed by. From little children, to the very old, all stood and waved with all their

might. Far ahead, I could see people pouring out of their homes and running as fast as they could toward the approaching train. It was apparent that they were aware of our coming. Everyone was sharing in our joy, and I could not keep my hand from waving back to our dear countrymen, through that little air hole.

Finally we arrived at the station in Oldenzaal, where a number of military police stood on the platform. Why were they still here? I asked them where we would be going, and how things were here in Holland, and immediately, many other questions were being posed. Soon the tracks were lined with townsfolk who continued to wave to us. Someone asked for a cigarette, and the response was immediate. Anyone who had cigarettes in their pockets, threw them toward us, so that in no time, dozens of packs of cigarettes and matches, and shortly after that chocolate bars, were being handed up to us by the German guards, who still accompanied us. The military police informed us that we would be going to Almelo, where we would be billeted for a few days before we went home. That sounded almost too good to be true. Once more the train pulled out, to the boisterous waving and cheering of the crowd along the track, toward Almelo.

It was 10:30 on Sunday morning when Almelo came into view. The weather was beautiful, and along the tracks were countless happy faces. The train passed by the station, but stopped a little bit beyond at the freight sheds. And then came our big moment! The bolts were removed from the doors, and we finally stepped down on Dutch soil again. Outside the boxcars we were drawn up and counted, after which our names and ranks were documented. We were then handed over to Dutch officers, while at the same time a stream of scouts (padvindere) were let loose on us, boys as well as girls, with postcards and pencils, so that we might immediately write home. I quickly filled out three of them, and as soon as they were completed, the scouts rushed them to a nearby mailbox. They were busy running all sorts of errands nothing was too much for them.

When four hundred names had been documented, that group was led to a nearby freight shed. Here things were run with assembly line efficiency - everything had been looked after, to the smallest detail. As we entered the building, each of us received a couple of chocolate bars, then, cigarettes and matches, and a little further, a nice cold glass of delicious lemonade, which was refilled as soon as it was empty. Boy, did that taste fine, as one can imagine, not having had anything but water to drink for at least five weeks, especially after such a long trip with only a small bottle of water. After that, we were called to order, and a voice over a loudspeaker made a several announcements. The first was that for the time being, we would be billeted with local citizens, which caused a thunderous cheer



that, the table was being prepared, and all the things that had been set out were almost too numerous to mention. There was chicken soup, a big piece of meat, potatoes, cauliflower, and apples with something tasty. At the conclusion of this splendid meal, there were special treats of pastries and wine. And so this unforgettable Sunday came to an end. My host didn't think it likely that the telephone connection would go through that night, so they directed me to a wonderfully soft bed a real bed with blankets. However, I was no sooner upstairs, when someone called from downstairs that a connection had been made with Schipluiden. I rushed down to the telephone, but found I was barely able to speak, not knowing what to ask or say. I finally managed to ask how things were at home, and the reply was that all was well. Thus, one can understand the awesome gratitude with which I went to bed that night. And what a change that was for me, to sleep in such a soft, warm bed. In the meantime, the hours had quickly slipped by it was 12:30.

Still, I found myself awake quite early in the morning, in spite of the fact that I had slept very little the previous two nights. I was anxious to know about my friend, who was being billeted next door, whether he had heard any news from home. Well, it was no small thing. At 10:30 I had to come over for coffee, for he was treating with a big cake, as he had been the father of a son for about three weeks now. For several men from Rotterdam it was not quite the same, as they were unable to establish contact with those at home. For the rest, my stay with the confectioner meant delicious meals, with often a rich pastry set before me; it was fare quite different from potato soup.

And so came Tuesday morning, the day on which I set out on the last leg of that long journey home. Under the circumstances, the trip went quite smoothly, and when I arrived home in the evening, everyone had already retired for the night. In no time they were all awake, which was no wonder in that we hadn't seen each other for six long, eventful weeks.

And what a great privilege we enjoy, over so many of our comrades who will never return home; when we think of them, whom I saw lying near Rhenen, then I can never thank God enough!