

## CAPTURE AT ST VALERY-EN-CAUX

Following the Battle of Abbeville and during their retreat to the coast in an attempt to evacuate to England, the 4th Seaforth Highlanders fought determinedly at Arques-la-Bataille and a few days later at St Valéry-en-Caux. But they were completely surrounded, out of ammunition and supplies,



and were overwhelmed by the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division under the command of General Erwin Rommel and ordered to surrender on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1940.

The surrender was the start of five years of captivity. The men were required to march at least 16 miles a day and it took 16 days to reach the railhead at Hulst in Holland. Food was in short supply and the prisoners relied on hand-outs from French and Belgian villagers. The men slept in fields with no cover. From Hulst, the troops were transported in open railway wagons to Valsoorden, where they embarked onto barges for a journey up the Rhine into Germany. They disembarked at Wesel and were sent by train to the prison camps.

Despite the harsh circumstances in which the men were living, the regimental spirit of the 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforths helped maintain morale. Music played a strong part in this. The well-known Scottish country dance, 'The reel of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division' was created by Highland officers held as Prisoners of War.



Approximate route of march from St Valéry en Caux to the Rhine, June 1940

The majority of men serving with the 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders were imprisoned in **Stalag XX-B at Marienburg**.

**Extract from an article in 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division website by Henry Owens –  
Gunner Artificer, Royal Artillery**

*“Stalag XX-B was a bleak, forbidding camp on the outskirts of Marienburg, with the usual double wire fencing, lookout towers, and floodlighting. It housed many prisoners of all nationalities, in different compounds, and had a look of despair about it. We were allocated to a long hut with three tiers of bunks and an earth floor. We soon realised it was overrun with rats.”* 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1945 – Evacuation began on this date.

### **Other camps which accommodated 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders from Lochbroom**

**Stalag XX-A at Torun**

**Stalag XX1-D at Posen (Poznan)**

**Stalag VIII-B (later called 344) at Lamsdorf (Labinowice)**

**Stalag VIII-B was located at Teschen from 1943 to 1945.**

**Stalag 383 at Hohenfels**

**Stalag IX-C at Mulhausen**

**Oflag VII-B at Erchstatt – for officers**

**Stalag XX-A** contained as many as 20,000 men at its peak. The main camp was located in a complex of fifteen forts that surrounded the city of Torun. The camp was liberated on 1 February 1945 by the Soviet Army.

**Stalag XX1-D** : In Posen, three forts were used - Rauch, IIIA and VIII.

The Prisoners of War were moved out before the advancing Russian Army eventually took the town, which took place between 24<sup>th</sup> January and 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1945.

**Stalag VIIB at Lamsdorf** (later called Stalag 344)

**Extract from *The Prisoner of War, September 1942*** – published from 1942 until 1945 for families in Britain.

*“This camp, in Silesia, is the largest prisoner of war camp in Germany. About 270 work detachments are administered from it. There are some 20,000 British prisoners of war in the whole camp area, of whom 5,700 are in the base camp. The base camp is composed of rows of one-storeyed barracks, each with a wash room and running water. The barracks are of stone, built directly on the ground, which makes them rather cold in winter. There are large playing fields and room for vegetable and gardens. The men sleep on 3-tiered wooden bunks, with wool stuffed palliasses and have two blankets each. Lighting has improved since the last visit, and bathing facilities are quite in order. Except for the Medical Officers there are no officers in the camp. Eleven British doctors and 39 medical orderlies work in the infirmary.”* 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1945 Stalag 344 was evacuated.

### **Stalag 383 at Hohenfels –**

#### **Extract from the "Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War"**

*"The Germans had never ceased their pressure on NCOs to go out on working parties, but by September 1942 they were finally resigned to allowing those who claimed exemption to go to a special camp at **Hohenfels - Stalag 383**.*

*Between September and the end of 1942 over 3000 NCOs were collected there from camps all over Germany, and by April 1943 their numbers had increased to over 4000. The camp, formerly for officers, was built on a gentle slope in the middle of a piece of heavily wooded country, some miles from the nearest town. Instead of being crammed by the hundreds into un-partitioned barracks, the NCOs found themselves allocated small dormitory huts holding fourteen or less, described by one of them as "snug billets". The camp had plenty of room for sports fields and walking space besides, and some larger barracks for theatrical shows and indoor recreation. When Red Cross food arrived in October to supplement the ordinary German prisoner-of-war ration, there was little to complain of at Hohenfels"*

After various delaying tactics, **Stalag 383** was finally evacuated on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1945. The PoWs were forced to leave the camp and march south via Regensburg to Frontenhausen where they were liberated by advancing American troops.

### **Stalag IX-C at Mulhausen**

On 29<sup>th</sup> March 1945 this camp was evacuated

### **Oflag VIIB at Erchstatt – for officers**

On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1945, as the US Army approached, the officers were marched out of the camp. Unfortunately, only a short distance from the camp the column was attacked by American aircraft, who mistook it for a formation of German troops. Fourteen British officers were killed and 46 were wounded. The camp was liberated by the U.S. Army on 16 April 1945.

## **THE LONG MARCH**

In January 1945, as the Soviet armies resumed their offensive and advanced into Germany, the Nazis made the decision to evacuate the PoW camps to prevent the liberation of the prisoners by the Russians. About 30,000 prisoners were force-marched westward across Poland and Germany in appalling winter conditions, lasting about four months. The first two months of 1945 were among the coldest winter months of the twentieth century, with blizzards and temperatures as low as -25 °C.

Most of the PoWs were ill-prepared for the evacuation, having suffered years of poor rations and wearing clothing ill-suited to the appalling winter conditions. Each Stalag was responsible for co-ordinating the movement of PoWs at the outlying Arbeitkommandos (work camps) as well as those at the main camp. They marched in small columns following side roads to villages where they could find accommodation at the end of each day.

In most camps, the PoWs were actually broken up in groups of 250 to 300 men and because of the inadequate roads and the flow of battle, not all the prisoners followed the same route. The groups would march 20 to 40 kilometres a day - resting in factories, churches, barns and even in the open. Soon long columns of PoWs were wandering over the northern part of Germany with little or nothing in the way of food, clothing, shelter or medical care. With so little food they were reduced to scavenging to survive. Some were reduced to eating dogs and cats - and even rats and grass - anything they could lay their hands on. Already underweight from years of prison rations, some were at half their pre-war body weight by the end.

Because of the unsanitary conditions and a near starvation diet, hundreds of PoWs died along the way from exhaustion as well as pneumonia, diphtheria, and other diseases. Typhus was spread by body lice. Sleeping outside on frozen ground resulted in frostbite that in many cases required the amputation of extremities. In addition to these conditions were the dangers from air attack by Allied forces mistaking the PoWs for retreating columns of German troops.

As winter drew to a close, suffering from the cold abated and some of the German guards became less harsh in their treatment of PoWs. As the columns reached the western side of Germany they ran into the advancing British and American armies. For some, this brought liberation. Others were not so lucky. They were marched towards the Baltic Sea where Nazis were said to be using PoWs as human shields and hostages. It was later estimated that a large number of men had marched over five hundred miles by the time they were liberated, and some had walked nearly a thousand miles.