

Chapter Sixteen

Almost a month after our arrival, without prior news, the crew of the SS Empire Defender came into the Fort, looking just as dejected as we had been on our arrival. They had also tried to get to the relief of Malta and had failed in the same way we had.

There was a difference; on the dockside as they left Glasgow, everyone seemed to know where the ship was bound and so they had difficulty raising a crew. Why did the authorities not tell our Captain about the Parracombe? It was a suicide mission and the least they could have done, was to tell us, even after we were at sea.

The Parracombe had sailed from Methil in Scotland whereas the Empire Defender had sailed from Glasgow. As they were only a month behind us meant that they had started loading only a week or more after we had left. So it was natural for the dockers in Glasgow to assume that, as there were similarities in both structural changes and the same cargoes, we were both bound for the same destination.

Heaven only knows how rumours were passed when we were supposed to have complete secrecy in war time, but word got around about the probable course of the Defender and when a crew was asked for, no one was available. I have heard that doctors' notes were prevalent that week!

In order to complete the crew, many of the sailors and firemen were volunteers from the well known gaol called Barlini. They were promised that their sentences would be revoked on their return home. Little could the judge realise what a hornet's nest this would create in our camp.

Not only was it hard to crew the ship, but it was difficult to get engineers as well, and we were told about the 2nd Engineer who signed on, on the day before sailing day. He had a write up in the press and was feted because of his age. He said he was 74 and that was the reason for everyone congratulating him on his desire to do his deed for the country. Within a day of his arrival at El Kef he was able to produce his birth certificate which showed he was 84. Not long afterwards we wished him "Bon Voyage" on his way back home.

On New Year's Eve we were surprised to see the Padre arrive in the Fort with a lorry and two of his helpers from the church. They asked for assistance to unload, and when we saw the contents there were no end of volunteers. He had cases and cases of grog, mainly spirits of French origin, enough to give each man nearly two bottles each. Unfortunately we were not familiar with either the name, or the type of "lethal" mixtures we had in our hands.

There was a bottle called "Eau de vie de Marke", at least I think that was its name. It would have made a great substitute in a methylated stove. In our room we had two or three bottles along with a variety of about another twenty.

Somehow judgement and common sense went out of the window on New Year's Eve and the alcohol, together with empty stomachs caused real trouble that night. By midnight, we were on to Auld Lang Syne and the noise we were making was too much for the Officer in Charge. He apparently had been around the other rooms asking them to keep quiet and turn in, and this they had done. When he came to our room, I do not think we acted like officers and told him where to go, in no uncertain terms.

We were called at daybreak as usual and straight afterwards were told to "Fall In" in the square for the raising of the flags. This was new to us; flags had been raised before without our presence. The Camp Commandant addressed us, with the help of an interpreter. "From now on you will stand at attention and salute the French and Italian flags as they are being raised."

I waited for some sign from the three Captains to give us a lead, I was sure that at least one of them would take a stand and say, "No way will we stand and salute the flags of our captor". When I knew that this was not about to happen, I went to the front of the three crews who were assembled and said: "I do not know how you all feel about this, but I have no intention of saluting any other flag but a

Union Jack". At that, our Chief Engineer stepped forward and said: "I will do the same, and you fellows ought to as well".

There was a rousing cheer from the crowd, and in one movement they turned their backs to the flag poles. The ceremony carried on and the flags were raised. We were dismissed and all departed to our own rooms. Within half an hour an officer arrived at our door with six guards.

The Chief Engineer and I were told to pick up what we wanted, and to follow the Officer to gaol. We didn't have much to collect in the way of clothing, but, in the short time allowed, I picked up a shoe box with a loaf of bread and fourteen dates, part of a ration. I grabbed my uniform bridge coat as well; this later turned out to be a Godsend to me.

It must have looked ridiculous to see the two of us being marched off with six guards, and the young officer in the lead. We had no idea where we were to be taken. We knew the Fort was large, and also that there were many more soldiers in the camp than we had seen during our walks around the square. We always had the same detail of about six or eight men who made sure we did not stray from our quarters. But now we were going somewhere we had not been before.

As we were being escorted away, everyone stood and jeered, and made rude remarks; but of course it went over the heads of the guards, who were Arabs, and only doing their jobs. There were shouts of encouragement: "Don't worry, you won't be in there long". "Is there anything we can send to you?", "Don't let the bastards get you down!" All very touching at the time, but I think I wanted more than that.

The Chief Engineer could speak a little French and asked, "What are we being accused of?". The officer replied, "You were inciting the men to mutiny, and the Commandant thinks a spell of solitary confinement will be a suitable punishment. Also, because of everyone's behaviour last night the Commandant has decided to introduce some discipline and the first thing is to salute our flags each morning". (We later learned that the saluting had been dropped).

We were taken to an area of the Fort which seemed isolated. There was a block of six cells which were empty so we took the two in the centre, next to each other. When the door was closed there was complete darkness, and I had a feeling of utter despair. This was a situation which was foreign to me, and was made worse when I heard an outside door clanged shut. It was as if we had been shut off from the rest of the world.

Then came the smell!!! Some minutes elapsed before I could make out my surroundings, mainly by feel at first then I realised that there was some light coming from a small window, with a steel grill, nearly 20 feet high on the end wall.

There was the most nauseating smell coming from near the door. I found an old milk can overflowing with human excreta. It was obvious that it had not been emptied for a long time. My immediate reaction was to shout and ask them to come and move it, and as the Chief had found his cell to be like mine, we both shouted until we were hoarse. We did not know that the guards had been ordered to keep away from the cells for three days.

Gradually I was able to see that my cell was about six feet long, two steps from wall to door; and about four feet wide. The door was made of wood about five feet high and two inches thick, with an iron grill. There was a cement bed with a cement pillow about three feet from the ground, and no blankets. There was a space at the bottom of the bed, near the door, large enough to take the milk can.

The Chief and I found that by shouting through the grill we could talk to each other. Neither of us could face using the milk can, nature had provided us with constipation.

On the third day the cell doors were opened and the cans were emptied. We were given our first meal, (more couscous), and were able to fill our water bottles.

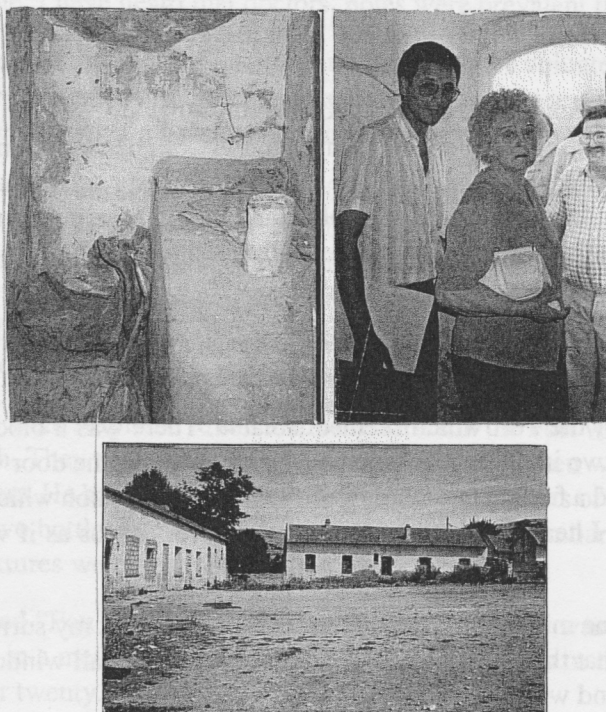
We soon found that the only way we could use the can was to drop our trousers and stand on the end of the bed. Incidentally the cans were not emptied for us again.

It was when our doors were opened, as well as the outside doors, that I was able to see score marks on the inside of my door that had been made by some poor blighter, who had spent 295 days in that hell hole. The marks were cut by a nail or knife. He had used the method of four down strokes and one across. It made me wonder just how long our stay would be.

On our first night in the cell, when we realised that all our shouting was a waste of energy, the Chief and I kept up a conversation until we were dead tired and then said "Goodnight". This was when I found my bridge coat to be a blessing. It was a very long coat, so I was able to practically cover myself.

I had my shoe box with the loaf of bread and the fourteen dates but nowhere to stow the box except at my head on the cement pillow. I was so tired that even the uncomfortable stone bed did not keep me awake, but a gnawing in the shoe box was sufficient to wake me. I hit the box and a rat jumped out squealing. I went to sleep again, and then I was awakened by feeling the rat crawling over my stomach.

Photographs taken September 1992, during visit to Tunisia.



TOP LEFT: Solitary confinement cell. Note the cement pillow. In 1992, workmen were busy rebuilding the Fort expecting a flood of tourists.

TOP RIGHT: My wife, Coralie, standing in doorway with officials who gave permission for our tour of the Fort. Note my wife's display of horror on looking into the cell.

LOWER: The quadrangle where we all stood for assembly in 1941.

Again I brushed him off with another squeal. Now sleep was out of the question, so I pulled my coat up over my face, held my hands on my face, and waited.

It wasn't long before he came again but this time I was waiting for him, and as soon as he stood on my face I threw my hands up and the rat was pitched down on to the wall at the bottom of the bed. This time he let out a very loud scream and it seemed to be the answer, because he did not come back again that night.

However before long I was referring to him as my friend the rat. For three nights we had this tussle. Each time I lay in wait with my hands under my bridge coat and each time he had a trip back against the wall, probably screaming with frustration because I would not let him have my loaf. By this time the loaf was as hard as a brick. I was only having one bite a day with two dates.

On the third day we were delighted to hear the outer doors opening. We were allowed to walk up and down for over an hour, for which we were very grateful. I managed to talk to one of the guards by sign language that I wanted a couple of twigs about a foot long. I then was able to find two places where I could stick the twigs in between the layers of large stones and make a resting place for my shoe box. Hurrah, we had fresh bread and couscous that morning. But I saw no more of my persistent companion, the rat. He never came again.

Outside in the world we knew nothing of, history was being made. Rommel was getting a beating by the British. Montgomery (Bless him!) was hammering at the walls of Tobruk and it was only days away when he would be at Tripoli. (The only news that the Vichy French ever gave us was that it would not be long before Hitler would be marching into London).

It was a complete surprise to hear, after 14 days in solitary, that the Commandant had been ordered to take his battalion to the front. We were not privy to how much notice he was given, but we did get a wonderful surprise.

Late in the afternoon of the fourteenth day the young officer who had put us in prison, came to get us out. The Commandant, he said, had departed that morning with his troops and apparently left orders that we had to stay in prison for another week. But that young officer had taken pity on us and said, "You have had enough of that place and I am sorry you had to spend so long in there".

I felt like crying for joy and both of us couldn't get back to the comfort of our room quick enough. The whole camp was out to cheer us when we arrived back, and we were bombarded with questions, mainly about the treatment.

Our fellow room mates had been told long before us about our release; in fact, the officer who had been left with only his six guards had said, "As soon as the Commandant is out of the Fort, I will be getting your friends out of the Hell Hole". They had been given about two hours warning, so between them they had arranged a tremendous "welcome home" party for us.

The camp had been issued with two Red Cross parcels prior to our stay in solitary and our pals had scrounged a tin of corned beef for each of us, as well as six eggs, and fresh bread. The eggs had been bought over the wire fence, at blackmarket prices.

The Chief and I were told to sit down, and were given a cup of hot tea. We waited for a minute or two, then we were served a plate with a pound of corned beef and six eggs, as well as fried bread. It was like having a banquet with only the two of us eating, and the rest looking on. Little did we know the trouble that was to follow.

Before the night was out both the Chief and I were doubled up with stomach pains. None of us had any idea of what to expect when filling our stomachs with food after almost starvation. The only relief came when we lost the lot by vomiting. But I had more problems to come!

Morning came after a very tormented night. I tried to sit up in bed. The pain in my back was worse than the pain I'd had from the huge meal. I was helped out of bed, but I found that I could only stand on my feet with my back bent at an angle of 90 degrees. Apparently my spell of lying on the concrete bed had given me severe lumbago. Why did the Chief come out of our experience much better than I did?

We called the new Officer in Charge and he arranged for me to go down to the village doctor with a guard and one of our juniors to help me. Unfortunately I had to walk down the stony road way, and after a considerable effort we arrived at the local doctor-cum-hospital, where I had to sit outside on a bench, and wait my turn.

Sitting there I noticed an Arab, who had been bitten by a scorpion; his hand was so huge it was impossible to tell if he had any fingers. It was just like a large balloon. When the nurse came for me, I beckoned her to take the Arab first because the poor man was in agony with pain. She just shook her head and said "No".

The doctor was a man about six feet six inches tall, a Prussian, who had probably lived his life in North Africa with the French Foreign Legion; compassion was not on his agenda.

I was placed on the surgery table in my bent position. The doctor gave the nurse her instructions and left. She wiped my back with olive oil, then appeared with about eighteen small glass jars. She lit a waxed taper and waved the insides with the flame, heating the jars, then banged them all over my back. I was left there for over half an hour, during which time the officer who had come with me, came to see what was going on. He said, "You ought to see what is happening, your skin has gone up into the glass and I can see beads of fluid coming out".

The nurse came back and without warning tore the glasses off. The torturous pain was over in moments. She wiped my back again with oil and said, "Fini, you can go now". Amazingly I stood up without any pain. I walked back to the Fort and fortunately did not require further treatment. But it was after my day in hospital that the camp decided, unless it was really urgent, they would rather be treated by me and my very small medicine box. At least compassion was among my skills.

Unfortunately, it was not long after this that a member of our room had an accident. It happened to Roy Campbell.

Roy was the 3rd Engineer from the Empire Defender. He was a very quiet fellow, never swore, was always kind and considerate, and was well liked throughout the camp. He would do anything for anyone. I remember him telling us about his wife being in hospital having their first baby. It had been winter time with snow on the ground, only in Glasgow the snow turns to dirty slush. He had been in to see his wife and just before leaving he said, "Darling is there anything I could get for you?". "Oh Roy", was her reply, "I would love some grapes". To get grapes in winter would be like looking for a needle in a hay stack especially in the UK, never mind Scotland. Anyway Roy set out and walked the length of Sauchiehall Street asking for grapes. After numerous set-backs he eventually found a shop that specialised in exotic fruits and flowers.

He asked for grapes and was delighted to be told, "Yes you are lucky, we have only one small basket left". The basket turned out to be a small gilded basket with no more than a half pound of black grapes all nicely draped with ribbon and the price one pound. In those days the basic wage was about three pounds per week, but nothing was too good for Roy to buy for his wife.

Back to the hospital, through the slush, trudged Roy, triumphantly carrying his gift and then up the stairs to his wife's room. "Just look at what I've got for you", said Roy, as he walked in. His wife took one look at the basket of grapes and then let out a howl, with a flood of tears: "You have bought me black grapes and I wanted green grapes". Roy laughed as he recalled this to us.

Our engine room staff, apart from Roy and the other officers, were Arabs from Cardiff. It was lucky for us, because the guards were also Arabs and they had so much in common. They spoke the same language and had the same religion. Our firemen soon made friends with the guards and we were able, through them, to buy across the wire fence. In other words the guards turned a blind eye when

some of the village peddlers came to the wire to sell us methylated spirits, charcoal and fruit in season, mainly dates. A special treat was being able to buy eggs. Unfortunately our 100 francs did not go far, that was our allowance paid by the Vichy French from the Red Cross.

As the Fort was so high above the plains, we had a tremendous difference in temperature from winter to summer. There was no means of getting warm when the temperature was as low as freezing. There was no wood to scrounge or even buy, that is why we bought charcoal for heating our room, and meths to use in our homemade stoves. The meths stoves were handy to heat water to make tea or coffee when these were available from our parcels. Depending on the village demand, we often could not buy charcoal. For a price, we could buy a small bottle of olive oil. We used that very sparingly, no more than a teaspoonful to cook eggs.

One day Roy had bought, from his savings, six eggs and was taking advantage of the fire which was lit to heat the room. There was a tiny fireplace across one corner of the room and being triangular, it was most difficult to cook on. The frypan was a tin lid with a wire handle.

The first we knew that Roy's eggs had fallen into the fire was when we heard him make a queer, very loud exclamation and he kicked the wall with a mighty wallop. Most men would have sworn, but not Roy. He shouted, "Oh my eggs, I've lost them". He limped around for a while nursing his foot but no one really took much notice of his pain, we were more concerned about him losing the eggs.

Some four days went by before Roy came to me and said, "Would you have a look at my big toe?". I couldn't believe what I saw! I suppose it was because of his state of health that the kick had caused the swelling and colouration of his big toe. It was black and very swollen and should have been attended to by a doctor straight away.

The doctor down in the village had by now been given the name of the Prussian Butcher, because of my treatment and that of other men who had been to him for treatment also. When I suggested we arrange for him to go to this doctor, Roy said, "No way, you can fix it for me". When the Rev. Dunbar had found no one would go to the doctor with minor complaints, he had supplied me with a small medical kit and I had become the camp's quack.

I started treatment right away by having Roy soak his foot in really hot water with boracic crystals in the hope that it would help to take the swelling down. It appeared to give him some relief, for which Roy was very grateful. Unfortunately the infection was so great that by early the next morning, it was obvious that he was in agony.

When I took the bandages off, the sight and smell was ghastly. The swelling had increased and the black was now green. I turned to Roy and said, "Now you will have to go to the doctor and have that toe lanced and he'll probably remove the nail". Again Roy was definitely not going to the doctor, and repeated that I could fix it.

I said, "Roy the only way is to cut out the big toe nail. Do you realise we have no anaesthetic, not even a bottle of plonk for you to take before we start. The pain will be horrific and there's nothing we can do to help there. It's just going to be hell for you. The only consolation is that it will be as quick as possible, and it will be successful". "Oh, I am not afraid and I trust you to do the job, so let's do it", said Roy.

I again tried to prepare Roy for the ordeal by explaining how I would carry out the operation, and confirm what we already knew; I could only provide a new razor blade and a bottle of Dettol as antiseptic.

Once more Roy said, "I am ready, so the sooner you do the job the sooner this excruciating pain will be gone". I asked Frank, Alex, Jim and Ron to come and give me a hand. I explained what I intended to do, and that I would expect Roy to fight like a madman, and they would need a lot of strength to control him and keep him still.

Poor Roy was laid out on his bed with a clean towel under his foot and each of my helpers took hold of a leg or an arm. "OK, here goes." Dipping the razor blade into the Dettol, my first cut was across

the base of the nail. The pus oozed out, and the smell was nauseating. Roy screamed and struggled, yelled and fought. How he controlled his language I'll never know.

Now I had to carry on. I had started, so there was no turning back. Two more quick cuts, one into each side of the nail and the nail was off. With the first cut there had been only the release of pus, but when cutting into the flesh I had to contend with quite some bleeding. All I could do was to swab the wound with cotton wool and Dettol.

Now there was a queer turn of events. When the nail came away, Roy immediately began expressing his thanks, obviously relieved of the worst of the pain. I had nothing to put on the open, gaping mess, so I made an ointment of Lever's carbolic soap and Tate and Lyles sugar from our Red Cross parcels, and covered his toe.

Fortunately we had bandages, thanks to our Maltese friends. I ought to have tried to get ointment from them too, but this was a spur of the moment decision, and I considered there was no time to waste. When it was all over, I gave Roy a couple of aspirins and put him to bed. That night Roy had his first good night's sleep for five days. I would have relished a very large whisky when it was all over, but I had to be satisfied with some ersatz coffee.

Our good friend the Padre arrived three days later. He was horrified to learn that we had no appropriate ointment and managed to arrange a courier to bring me a tube of French antiseptic. Within three weeks I was able to take off the final dressing from Roy's toe. Roy, ever grateful, was able to get around in a special shoe we had made for him, minus the toe cap.

I was tremendously relieved and proud of myself. I had tended many sick men during my life at sea, but the operations were minor compared to this one. I knew I had probably saved Roy's whole foot.

The doctor, Roy said, "The way you can fix it for me." When the Rev. Dunbar had found no one would go to the doctor with minor complaints, he had supplied me with a small medical kit and I had become the camp's quack.

We had been in the Fort for about three months when we were told that we would be moving to a new camp down the hill towards the village. When we arrived there, we were greatly surprised and very pleased with the new quarters. We were housed in three Nissen type huts.

One hut was for the thirty six officers, including the three Captains, and the other two for the three crews. Until now we had had comparative peace, but we were yet to find out what type of men the Empire Defender had taken on in their quest to get a complement.

Almost every week we had fights, and to make matters worse, the Glasgow element of gang warfare became obvious. When we had been given our first gifts from the Maltese in Tunis, they were unable to give everyone a safety razor and the Rev. Dunbar had, in his wisdom given a cut throat or open razor to all those who had missed out.

It wasn't long before we had some fool pull a razor out and threaten to cut his opponent to ribbons. I was taught how to sew a razor blade into the brim of a cap and with one flick of the index finger in the back of the cap, take a person's nose off. I was also taught how to sharpen the open razor by one of the Glasgow fellows who saw me sharpening it, and said, "Here let me show you".

He really went to town on the leather strap and then with a special locking grip, which he also taught me, he put out his tongue and whacked the blade on to the middle of his tongue. I let out a yell, "Oooh that will hurt". "Oh no, you have to taste it to see if it is sharp", said he. Needless to say I never really tried to master that skill! He obviously was one of the majority of the Glasgow fellows who were good guys.



Lifeboat crew from SS Pelican in prison camp in Tunisia myself, centre front row



Ship's Officers SS Pelican in prison camp in Tunisia, Captain: centre front row with Chief Engineer on his right and myself, on his left

One of the leaders was a professional boxer. He gathered a few ghouls around him. I think it made him feel a big man and his followers saw a means of getting some of the glory by following him around. In our hut, we asked the Captains to try to curb some of this fear that was creeping into the camp by reporting those particular men to the Camp Commander. For some reason they were loath to interfere. There were some men who were scared to go to sleep, worrying about that open razor gang.

It came to a head on a very sad day for the camp. The leader came into our hut with his main gang, about four of them. They had been previously been told by a few of us that they were not welcome. So this was to be a show of strength. They were asked to leave, and the leader said, "What are you going to do about it?"

Somehow our 1st Radio officer, Jim Schubert, who was sitting at the table minding his own business, was the first to be accosted. Sparks was one of the quietest persons you could ever meet. He was a mystery in many ways, he kept very much to himself. He certainly did not lack guts and later surprised everyone when he escaped from the camp. Maybe it was this fight which made him so desperate.

It all happened so quickly; the next thing was Sparks and this boxer engaged in a free for all. In a matter of minutes the whole camp was trying to get into our hut. A ring was formed around the two and Sparks was giving as much as he took. I was disgusted with myself, having to stand there and let someone else do the dirty work. The Captains didn't even try to stop the fight, and as long as Sparks

was holding his own, I was prepared to let it go. Then there was a turn in the fight; this so called professional boxer was taking a beating and started to mix it with dirty tricks. Sparks was no mug at this game and managed to get a head lock on the lout. It looked as if it was all over when I saw the lout get a grip on Sparks's testicles.

I could not stand it any longer and went in and put a head lock on the lout. Of course he had to let Sparks go, he was at the mercy of his opponent. Then someone got a head lock on me. There must have been a dozen fights going on at the same time. I was pleased when I later found out that some of our sailors had come in to help.

When I managed to free myself I found that my opponent was a fireman from Barlini Gaol, Glasgow. I was so uptight that I had his head in my arms and waltzed him right out of the hut, out into the field. Then one of our young boys shouted at me, "Let him go Charlie, you'll murder him, he's turning blue". That was as near as I ever want to be to killing a man. When he fell to the ground I felt no remorse, because he and his kind had to be stopped somehow.

It was over very quickly when the guards came. This time the culprits were led away for a couple of days in the guardhouse. They were lucky, the guardhouse was no real punishment. They had the same food as we did, but they had a bed and blankets. The only hardship was the isolation. That was the end of the bullying, but one or two of us had to keep our wits about us to dodge further trouble.

But Sparks secretly began his plan to escape. He was quite an enigma, hard to understand and did not make friends easily. He had spent his early years in Alaska USA. When war broke out he had come to England, studied at a radio school and after graduating, joined the Merchant Navy. Even though we were in the same hut, I did not know that he was planning to escape until I noticed he was making a compass.

Jim was not the first man to attempt an escape. There had been two other attempts. The first was a sailor who only managed twenty four hours of freedom. On the second attempt two sailors were on the run for two days before being captured. Apart from a reward of 500 francs (the Arabs would have informed the authorities for much less), the land itself did not lend itself to living off its produce.

In every direction there were miles and miles of olive groves, very little water and a range of hills surrounding the plains with the Fort El Kef rising on a hill in the centre. Unless you were equipped with food and water for at least ten days there was very little chance of making it to a coastal town.

Jim had somehow managed to get a map which unfortunately did not have much detail; but he was better prepared than the previous attempts. His work on the compass was pure genius.

Firstly, he made a drill bit out of a needle. It had to be hardened, shaped, and sharpened. Then, by hand, he drilled a hole through the centre of another needle. The hole was to be the pivot for the directional needle. The needle then had to be polarized (making a magnet) which he did using a coil in one of the electrical switches. The compass when finished, was about two inches in diameter and it worked perfectly.

No one knew when he would make his escape or how. One morning Jim was missing and he could only have had about eight hours start on his captors. Each day that went by, we felt that he had been successful. But on the fifth day he was brought in, tired dejected and miserable, and taken to the guardroom.

His solitary confinement in the guardroom was mainly isolation. He had a bed, blanket and the same food as we had. On his release (after seven days) he told us he was almost glad to have been apprehended. He only confirmed what we already knew, Tunisia does not lend itself to people living off the land. Jim did not try again.

Life in the camp went on its very dismal way until we had another rousing incident. We had asked the three Captains to complain about our food. It was couscous or vegetable stew (without vegetables) day after day. This was hard to take and made worse when we saw into the French Officers' galley,

and could smell what they were having for their meals. Our meals were cooked in a field kitchen, like a Furphy water tank on wheels.

There was no improvement. So one day we all went to the galley, the whole camp, and started to demand a better deal. The Camp Commandant asked us to go back to our rooms quietly and peacefully. This we refused to do until we had a change of food. He had an ace up his sleeve. From behind the huts came a full guard of about twenty Arabs with fixed bayonets, at a run. I am sure that we all knew that those Arabs would have loved to have some target practice, so we ran, with the Arabs chasing after us. We never complained again.

It was soon after that day that we had a visit from the brother of Marshall Pétain who had been made the Minister of War Camps with the Vichy French. Probably our complaints had reached his office in Paris and he wanted to see first hand what we had to complain about. We had two cooks on the Furphy. They were Spanish soldiers of fortune and went anywhere for money and excitement. They were very helpful, giving us unbiased news. They hated the French, and were glad to tell us about the conversation they had with Pétain. He asked them what were they doing. They replied, "We are cooking for the Englishmen". Pétain said, "You don't have to stir too much for "Les cochons anglais"the English Pigs.

Our next bit of excitement came when we learned of our pending relocation to a place called Sfax. We wondered where this place was and how we were to travel there.

There was one special French Officer who had been kind to us from the first day that he had arrived in the camp, after being transferred from another base. He was a lieutenant who mainly did the night shift and was always generous with the time that he was supposed to put out the lights.

We never knew his name, he just answered to 'Lieut'. He could speak English well and was fair in his relating of the news. Other guards (not the Arabs, they were never in the officer class) whom we asked how the war was going, were quick to tell us the bad and never the good news. Even when the Allies were making good progress in Libya, they always had some bad news to tell us, especially when a naval vessel had been sunk.

The Lieut was different; he always stopped to chat, and loved to tell us about his experiences as a croupier in the Casino at Monte Carlo. He was a wizard with cards and used to try to teach us how to deal cards Monte Carlo style. We were sorry to learn that he was not going to Sfax, I am sure he did not side with the Vichy French. He told us that Sfax was about 290 miles away in a south easterly direction and the journey would take about ten hours. It was a coastal city with a mild climate, and had been a tourist resort before the war.

The day for our trip to Sfax was planned for an early start. We were marched down the hill to the railway station, and prior to boarding the train we were handed our food ration for that day. We each had one loaf of bread, but only a large bottle of water between eight of us. We were told we could get more water on the way.

The journey took all day because we had to go via Tunis, so it was late in the afternoon when we arrived at Sfax. The reception we received going through the town in lorries, was friendly; very different from passing through Tunis. The population seemed to be more cosmopolitan, and it was a good introduction to Sfax.

Our new camp was about two miles out of town, along a well formed bitumen road. I think we expected tremendous improvements, because our trip from the station was like tourist sight seeing. The Arabs and the French were smartly dressed and gave us a wave as we passed.

But we changed our minds as we drove, in Army lorries, out of the built up area into flat, almost desert waste land and saw the high wire fence.

At first we were quick to assume that the wire fence was a symbol of more strict internment. As we passed through the large gates we had second thoughts, the fence enclosed an amount of land sufficient for a football field and maybe a cricket pitch.

When we had time to look around there was plenty to please us and the news was good. The camp had been built to intern us, but unfortunately the work was a long way from being finished.

The sleeping quarters and the galley were completed sufficiently for our immediate needs, but the supply of water to the camp was woefully low. The only supply we had was from a half inch pipe to the galley. There were problems right from the start. We had no toilets, no drinking water tap, (we had to go to the galley for a drink) and no washing facilities. Emergency toilets were erected very quickly; the usual hole in the ground and plenty of lime. We did have apologies from the new Camp Commandant. We appreciated his concern.

In the meantime the bricklayers were working on the ablutions block and within a matter of days we could see improvements all round the camp.

The Commandant frequently called the ships' Captains to his office to brief them on how the work was progressing. He was always ready to apologise for any delays and was the first Frenchman to restore rank to our Captains, apart from the Navy at Bizerte. Prior to this camp, all prisoners were treated alike. This only fostered the feeling some of the rebels had towards discipline. Some of the crew, including one or two of our men, felt that the Captain should have no authority over them because we were no longer at sea.

The dormitories were similar to those we had in the camp at El Kef. I shared a Nissen type hut with 36 officers, only this time we had the Captains in with us. There were 18 beds down each side, with tables and forms to sit on down the centre of the hut. We were even supplied with sheets; rather hard linen, but very serviceable in that climate. We also were given an extra hour with the light on at night time; again, in that climate, it was welcome.

The Commandant was always "pushing" the men constructing the toilet block. He was well aware of the sickness and ill health that could be caused by the primitive methods of hygiene we had to contend with. Next to the toilet block we saw half a dozen men start digging a hole in the ground. At first it was all soft sand and then it became much harder for the diggers. They dug down about 25 feet, a very symmetrical hole with a base about 15 feet wide, but only about five feet at the top, shaped like a giant milk can.

What followed next was intriguing for us to watch. Truck loads of round stones were delivered to the site, similar to those found in a fast flowing river. Each stone was approximately three inches in diameter. Before the stone laying commenced, plumbers had made a sump in the bottom of the well. Then a fine mesh basket was placed there, with a two inch pipe leading from it, right up to a tank, through a pump, on to the roof of the toilet block.

The stones were then lowered into the hole, where two workmen were placing them in an orderly fashion on the bottom of the well. The stones were not poured into the cavity but were deliberately laid stone by stone, in layer after layer, until the stones were level with the top.

When we asked why the layers of the stones had not been tipped in, which would have been much quicker, they said with a shake of their heads, "This is the way it has been done for hundreds of years".

It was only a matter of days before all the plumbing had been connected to the well, including a waste pipe from all the taps and showers. The water then ran over all the stones to the bottom and was

pumped up to the tank on the roof. After a couple of days when the system was working well, the water from the town supply was cut off and we were self sufficient; we could have as many showers as we liked.

In the toilet block we had six shower cubicles, six wash basins and six toilets, which by now had been connected to a septic tank. Almost home from home. I often wondered later why we did not save water like the North Africans. Incidentally the toilet water came from a salt water bore.

With the help of the Rev. Dunbar who appealed to the Red Cross, we were supplied with a couple of footballs. Our Maltese friends somehow managed to get cricket balls for us, and we fashioned our own cricket bats. Unfortunately we did not see so much of the Padre in Sfax, he apparently had to get a special permit each time to come to see us. The Maltese were mainly centred around the city of Tunis so we could not expect the same favours because we were so far away.

The whole camp was more relaxed and the tension eased from that which we had at El Kef. We did not feel that the guards were standing over us. If anyone of us had cause to attend a doctor or a dentist we were allowed to walk in to the city with only one guard. The medical service was almost as casual as we would expect at home. The guard stood outside the building, whilst we sat in the waiting room to take our turn with the doctor's regular patients. Of course it was an honour system, but no one gave the authorities cause to impose further restrictions.

Our biggest worry when walking around the camp was looking for scorpions. At El Kef that problem did not exist in the Fort, we saw very few. But here things were different.

Now we did not dare to wander far in bare feet. Scorpions have a natural disguise and can blend in with the surroundings. Quite a number of men found this out to their detriment, then it was a rush to the city for treatment. I never forgot that poor chap who had waited for treatment at the El Kef hospital.

Our life at Sfax settled down to a comparatively slow and uneventful one; the only excitement came when we received the Red Cross parcels, which often arrived in huge wooden crates. The American parcels were by far the best in quality and variety. They contained essential nutritious foods such as tinned meat, powdered milk, and wholemeal biscuits, which could be ground up and used as flour. The British parcels were often very poor. For instance, once we were given tins of fish balls in brine. It was difficult to get rid of the salt, then we had the problem of heating them up. Another time we were sent a consignment of parcels containing lots of curry and ghee. (Maybe they had mistakenly been sent to the wrong camp.) Then there was the time that we found packets of jelly crystals in the parcel. A child may have been delighted, we were not.

It was in this camp that Frank taught us how to play cards Glasgow style. Frank was an engineer from the SS Empire Defender, who had a philosophy of his own making, "If you are daft enough to play cards with me then you deserve to lose".

Each night we played Pontoon, sometimes called Black Jack or 21. The stakes were centimes, one match to represent one centime. Frank always had the bank when it was time for the lights to go out. At 8.55pm the lights would go off and on which was the signal that we had five minutes to get to bed before "Lights Out". It was then that Frank took over the bank.

Now, appearing very generous, he would say, "OK, the lights will be going out soon. No limit on the bank". Then mugs like me would try to get back what they had lost on the night by placing a large bet on the last hand, which invariably was played in matchlight. Frank would somehow turn up a Pontoon and clear the table.

After a while, when I was three months in debt (three hundred francs) I pulled out of the game and made arrangements to pay Frank 50 centimes a month until the debt was paid. After two payments Frank said to me, "Forget it Charlie, the mugs have paid your debt a dozen times over". Nice guy! We found out he made his living as a motor mechanic five days a week and at the weekend, the race track. He really was a nice fellow but an utter rogue.