
Alan Forster - British POW in Klimontow

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The life of Alan Forster (1917-93), captured at Dunkirk in 1940 and a prisoner of war in Poland at Poznan and Klimontow. His Diary which begins at Klimontow in October 1944 and ends in May 1945 with his liberation by the Americans at Regensburg has been published on the BBC "Peoples War" web site.

Alan was born at Newcastle-on-Tyne in the North East of England in 1917. He was the youngest of a family of five. His eldest brother, my father (rear left), was commissioned as an Observer Gunner in the RAF on anti-submarine patrol in the closing months of World War I and by the time this family photograph was taken in 1923 was a 3rd Engineer on a large oil tanker whilst Alan, holding his father’s arm, was still only six years old.

Alan was a bright lad who had a good education but left school at 14 and choose not to follow his two older brothers to sea as a marine engineer. He worked for the Co-operative Wholesale Society and by his early twenties had met his future wife, "Bunty" Hancock, and could fall back on the memory of their holidays together during his five long years of captivity in Germany.GOING TO WAR

Alan Forster (4459370 Pte. A. Forster) was enlisted in the 1st Battalion Tyneside Scottish, the Black Watch. His Battalion was photographed shortly before they went to France to defend the evacuation of the defeated British Expeditionary Force from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940.

They embarked at Dover with so little notice that one soldier was in the cinema with his girl friend when the film was interrupted with an announcement that his battalion was to go immediately to the docks and embark for France. He had to change out of civvies and into his uniform whilst crossing the channel.

On disembarking at Dunkirk Alan’s unit was marched off to delay the advancing German forces. Alan was holding the end of an anti-tank gun when they rounded a corner and came face to face with a German Panzer Division. Alan dived into the ditch but the soldier on the other end of the anti-tank gun was too slow and was killed. Within a few minutes they were all on their feet, hands in the air, prisoners of war. Only 140 members of the battalion survived death or capture to make their way across the Channel.PRISONER IN POLAND

They were marched east and transported by train in cattle trucks to Leslau, an outlying camp of Stalag XXIB (the main camp was at Schubin) in Poland.

In April 1941 he was moved to Posen, the German name for the Polish city of Poznan, 100 miles to the south west where he was to spend nearly four years at Fort Rauch, a nineteenth century fortress on the outskirts of the city. Two of the 29 forts surrounding Posen, Fort Rauch and Fort Acht (eight), were used as camps for British POW (Prisoners of War), and identified as Stalag XXID.

They were allowed to send photographs home with their letters, mostly posed, but some show them working under guard and are of the annual pantomime, a popular form of theatre at Christmas in England. They include Alan Forster (Prisoner 3921) and his friends, Charlie Glasgow and Phil Goold. Alan was the stage manager for the theatre productions, the costumes being hired from the Posen Opera House and his friend, Phil Goold, painted the stage scenery as well as being the "star" in Cinderella.

In the Autumn of 1944 they were transported in cattle trucks to Silesia where he worked as a labourer in the Bismarck II coalmine at Klimontow as part of the E702 Arbeitskommando administered by Stalag VIIIB Teschen.

Conditions were much tougher and he looked back with longing to his time at Posen:

"This is going to be a tough billet for winter but I don’t think ther’ll be much better anywhere else around here so rotten is this Stalag V111B. To think we ever grumbled about Rauch!" Monday 13 November 1944.

"Last year at this time we were all looking forward to what we firmly believed would be our last

POW Xmas. I at least was sure. We said of Cinderella this will be our last Panto., let's make it a super-show. It was our last, true but only because in this bloody hole nothing in the entertainment line can be done. Good God, are we brownd off! I never imagined we would come down as far as this. Looking back to Posen it would seem to have been a dream …” Saturday 18 November.

LIFE AT KLIMONTOW

Alan's Diary begins at a camp near a coal mine on the 24 October 1944. Neither the place or even the region is identified in the diary but his letters home to Bunty gave the address as Stalag VIIIIB E702 and this provided the clue which led to its identification as Klimontow, a small village on the outskirts of the city of Sosnowitz (Sosnowiec) in Silesia.

He was pretty miserable; the weather was bitterly cold, the roof of their timber barracks leaked, the rations they received were inadequate for the lard labour at the coal mine and for several weeks they received no morale boosting letters from home.

Two typical entries in his diary at Klimontow:

Friday Dec 15

Shifted the small loco half around the pit – 17 of us amid the snow. Returned or rather were dragged back at the Feldwebels [NCO] order at 16.00 – dawn to dark, that's us now! There has been a heavy fall of the usual brand of fine dry powdery Polish snow which is quite alright if the temperature keeps below 5 degrees but is hellish to work in once it melts. Small cheese issued tonight – two pats per man. The Poles had their usual schnapps and sardine issue from the mine today but unluckily I didn't manage to be on the spot due to the bloody engine.

Sunday Dec 31

This is the last time I shall write in this for 1944 – solemn thought. I have a free day tomorrow at the expense of the miners. Goodbye to 1944. 1945 will, I hope and pray, bring us freedom. Taking it by and large this year has been the worst in Gefangenschaft [imprisonment]. MARCHING WEST

On the 18 January 1945 they were awoken at midnight and told to be ready to move off at 2.30 am. This was the start of a 900 plus kilometre march which only ended near Regensburg in Bavaria, at the heart of the ever shrinking German Reich.

They were force marched with prisoners from other Arbeitskommando of Stalag VIIIIB Teschen through the Czech Protectorate to Bavaria, sleeping in barns and subject to bombing by allied planes and occasional atrocities committed by the German guards in their efforts to keep them on the move away from the advancing Soviet troops.

Finally on the 30 April he writes:

“This is the Day!!

I shall remember this anniversary all the rest of my life for this morning the Americans arrived to free us. The time was 8.30 … it is now 7.15 pm & I can't yet quite realise just what's happened to me. We have eaten as we liked, bacon, eggs, milk – all those things which we've starved for in 5 long years. It's more than strange to be able to walk around the fields a free man, to do what one likes without a guard's interference – oh to do everything one wishes, only stopped by one's sense of right & justice. Peculiar that one still has a sense of conscience regarding them.” THE WAR WAS OVER

The Diary finishes at a reception camp for released POW in Slough but there is a moving Postscript written in 1985 after the death of his wife, ‘Bunty’, which describes the journey North to Newcastle on Tyne by train and the tumultuous welcome they received on arrival at Newcastle Central Station:

“Then the train! It was astounding, amazing & altogether fabulous: a great long passenger train pointed north. We piled in regardless – old friends reunited in many cases – after a while the engines hooted – it was double headed – & we were heading home.

Then the fun began! Realise, as I do know, that we were the first P.O.W.s to come back to England in bulk & were treated accordingly by the brass. Various officers NCOs & officials toured the train dispensing

advice & sorting out who wanted to go where. The train would pull up in the middle of nowhere & a couple of chaps would swing down & hare over the fields & then off we’d chuff again.

Consequently we travelled in fits & starts & night became early morning as landmarks appeared anticipation grew & when the magic carpet stopped for ages on the high level bridge over the Tyne – dirty as ever – the language honed over years of captivity nearly set the carriages on fire.

Then we moved & pulled in at 5.00 am to a welcome I would not have believed! The whole of the Central Station was packed with a shouting cheering mass of people – it was fantastic inspiring & altogether a tear giving experience.

I walked with the throng down the slope from the bridge & scanning the crowd & there she was, little bright face under a little brown beret! What a time that was …”

Bunty, “the bright little face under a little brown beret”, was wearing the same clothes she had on when they last saw each other, six long years before. They married and had two children, both boys.

Alan became a sales representative, working first of all for Hoover and later for shoe companies, driving all over the North East of England and selling their shoes to shops. He was a friendly easy going person whose customers trusted and liked him.

He left Newcastle and moved to the beautiful old city of York. Charlie Glasgow, a fellow prisoner at Posen and Klimontow, had studied librarianship whilst a POW and became the Deputy County Librarian for the county of Suffolk. He cycled on a tandem bicycle with his wife Peggy to visit Alan and Bunty and their young family.

In later years Bunty suffered from ill health, loosing her memory and becoming completely dependent on Alan who had to carry her in his arms from room to room. Alan wrote his own epitaph at the end of the diary he started at Klimontow, after the death of his wife after 40 years happy years in 1985:

“As I write this 40 years later after my Bun’s death & look back at all that has happened in that strange exciting, happy period of time with two fine sons & two grandchildren I’m glad it all happened just the way it did. I did my best to make a life, I could have probably done better, I don’t know, but I could most certainly have done worse. And that’s not a bad epitaph.”

He sold his house and lived with his son Graeme, wife and grandchildren. His wartime diary is full of references to smoking and the lack of cigarettes and he remained all his life a heavy smoker and as a result and his health suffered. He died in 1993.<< www.klimontow-sosnowiec.prv.pl