

CHAPTER 13

Operation Exodus – ‘An achievement of great magnitude’

‘PARIS, 6 February 1945 (D-plus-245). SHAEF has asked for a plan for small forces of airborne troops to protect certain prisoner-of-war camps after either formal surrender or a German collapse. It is feared that the S.S., the Gestapo, or the fanatical type of Nazi may commit atrocities against our prisoners in the final debacle.’

General Lewis H. Brereton¹

By January 1945 Allied chiefs were of the opinion that the war in the west demanded a more tactical use of their heavy bombers. The British Chiefs of Staff on 27 January 1945 accordingly instructed Air Marshal Sir Norman Bottomley to inform Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris that ‘as soon as moon and weather conditions allow’ RAF Bomber Command was to undertake a series of attacks on cities in eastern Germany (Operation Thunderclap). Harris was further informed that the Chief of the Air Staff considered that ‘subject to the overriding claims of oil and the other approved target systems within the current directive, we should use available effort in one big attack on Berlin and related attacks on Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz or any other cities where a severe blitz will not only cause confusion in the evacuation [of German forces] from the East but will also hamper the movement of [German] troops from the West.’²

The Chief of the Air Staff doubted, however, that it would be right to attack Berlin if such an attack would not be decisive. The purpose of Thunderclap was to exploit ‘the confused conditions which are likely to exist in the above mentioned cities during the successful Russian advance’.³

Though RAF Bomber Command’s heavy bombers did not go to Berlin they visited Dresden and Chemnitz on the nights of 13/14 and 14/15 February 1945 respectively. Thunderclap having served its purpose, the Chiefs of Staff concluded that there was little future in ‘town bashing’, and on 6 April advised Harris that no ‘great or additional advantage can be expected from attacks on remaining industrial centres, since the full effects would not be likely to mature before hostilities ceased.’⁴ Air Ministry Cypher Signal MSW.480 of the same date said simply: ‘Area bombing designed solely to destroy industrial areas to be discontinued except when disintegration of enemy’s ground resistance can best be served by this means.’

The Americans, however, bombed the Tempelhof marshalling yards in Berlin on 3 February 1945 (losing 23 of the 937 effective B-17s), and visited Chemnitz on 14 February and Dresden twice – on 14 and 15 February. They ended strategic bombing with an order issued by HQ USStAF on 16 April 1945.⁵ On that same day Air Ministry Signal A.34 instructed that ‘Henceforward main tasks of Strategic Air Force will be to afford direct support to Allied Armies in land battle and to continue

offensive against enemy sea power.’

With the cessation of hostilities on 5 May, it was time for the PoWs to be gathered up and sent home, a task for which the Allies had long been preparing. On 11 June 1944 the US Military Mission to Moscow first notified the Soviet authorities that the advance westward by their ground forces would probably overrun PoW camps holding British and American prisoners, and the request was made for the Soviets to promptly notify the US forces when such a situation occurred, so that ‘contact teams’ could be sent to the liberated camps to arrange for the quick evacuation and repatriation of the PoWs.

Little was heard from the Soviets for several weeks despite further appeals from the Americans, but nevertheless, on 4 September 1944, General Deane, head of the US Military Mission to Moscow, ordered an evacuation and repatriation plan to be drawn up. Four days later he invited the Russians to participate in the planning, but they showed no interest until 30 November when V.M. Molotov, Soviet Foreign Minister,⁶ informed the US mission in Moscow that they agreed in principle to the American proposals. Then nothing was heard for over seven weeks.

The long discussions held between US, British and Soviet officials concerning the terms for the reciprocal treatment of liberated PoWs at last bore fruit when, on 21 January 1945, following the liberation of the first PoW camp by the Red Army, General Deane met with Lieutenant General K.D. Golubev, deputy chief of the Soviet Repatriation Commission, to negotiate a PoW agreement. Their discussions on the reciprocal treatment of liberated PoWs were to form the basis for the final agreement reached and signed by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin on 11 February 1945 at the Yalta Conference. The principal provisions were:

- Representatives of the governments of the liberated PoWs would have immediate access to the camps or points of concentration where they were held pending repatriation.
- Liberating forces would maintain freed PoWs in camps or at concentration points until turned over to their own governmental authorities.
- Liberating forces would immediately notify the home governments that the PoWs had been freed.
- The liberating country would be responsible for outside protection of the camps, whilst the internal administration would be under control of officials from the country of those liberated.
- The liberating country would provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention, until the PoWs returned to the authorities of their own country.
- Each country could use its own means of transport to repatriate its PoWs held by the liberating Power.

In the West, meanwhile, at its Paris HQ SHAEF received information on 11 December 1944 ‘that the condition of Allied prisoners in German hands is definitely not good. It is feared that with the coming of winter there will be insufficient clothing and bedding. There is said to be no fuel for heat in German prison camps. Many of the Red Cross food packages, on which Allied prisoners depend so much, have not reached the camps. Since July the German attitude toward Allied prisoners has undergone a marked change for the worse. This is generally attributed to Himmler.’⁷

The information was entirely accurate, but in mid to late January 1945 the threat of the Red Army’s advance forced the Germans to evacuate the more easterly PoW camps. In freezing conditions many thousands of Allied PoWs of all services and nationalities were forced on to the open road. Hundreds more were left behind, some too ill to be moved. Others were ‘forgotten’ in some remote *Arbeitskommand*), a few

more deliberately hid in the hope that they would be able to escape back to the Allied lines, and others, having formed amorous attachments with local ladies, had no plans to go anywhere.

On 6 February 1945 Sir James Grigg, Secretary of State for War, informed a worried House of Commons that ‘assurances on the highest level had been given by the Soviet Government that provision would be made for the protection and welfare of all British (including Commonwealth) prisoners liberated by the advancing Soviet Armies’.⁸ A week later Sir James Grigg was able to further inform the House that ‘twelve camps have either been overrun by the Soviet Forces or are in their direct path’, and that in these camps there were some 60,000 British Commonwealth prisoners, a considerable number of whom had been transferred to camps in Central Germany.⁹

Still the Soviets prevaricated – even the direct intervention of the ailing US President Roosevelt by letter to Premier Stalin had no immediate effect – and consequently the implementation of the Yalta agreement broke down in nearly all respects due to Soviet failures to live up to any of its terms.

On 2 March 1945 the British Minister in Berne was informed by the Head of the Swiss Political Department that unconfirmed reports from Berlin suggested ‘that the Germans intended to liquidate, i.e. massacre, such prisoners of war as were held in camps in danger of being overrun by the advancing Allied forces rather than try to remove the prisoners or allow them to fall into Allied hands. In addition, we have, in recent months, received various indications that the Nazis might in the last resort either murder Allied prisoners in their hands or hold them as hostages.’

There was considerable concern, too, that the Germans would withdraw to the mountains in the south and fight to the last. An article in *The Sunday Times* on 11 March 1945 reported:

‘that recent news from reliable sources appears to confirm the surmise that the Nazi leaders have decided to make their last stand in Austria, which they consider the most impregnable part of the zones they still occupy.

‘The news is of vast supplies, essential factories and, most reliable, foreign workers being concentrated there in preparation for a long, drawn out struggle.

‘Most of the country, together with Bavaria and part of Czechoslovakia, it is reported, is being constituted into a national fortress which the Nazis call a national redoubt.’¹⁰

Though the Nazis were never able to form their last great stronghold in the Bavarian and Austrian Alps, the supposed *Alpenstellung* (mountain fortress), for Churchill and Roosevelt the vexed question of what would happen to the PoWs who were evacuated from their camps continued to tax their minds. Stalin, on the other hand, was not in the least bit bothered. On 22 March 1945 Churchill sent a note to the US President:

‘I have seen your recent exchange of messages with Marshal Stalin on prisoners of war matters. As regards the general question of Allied prisoners in German hands, I entirely agree with you that we ought to arrange matters now so that we are in a position to do something quickly at the right time.

‘We have long foreseen danger to these prisoners arising either in consequence of chaotic conditions resulting from a German collapse or alternatively out of a deliberate threat by Hitler and his associates to murder some or all of the prisoners ...’¹¹

Meanwhile, on 22 February 1945, the War Office had notified the British Military

Mission in Moscow that word had been received that the Russians were sending 70 former officer PoWs and 2,591 other ranks by rail to the Black Sea port of Odessa, where a transit camp capable of holding 5,000 men was to be established.¹² At last the Soviets agreed that personnel from Britain and the US could enter Soviet territory to assist with the repatriation of prisoners from Odessa, and steps were immediately taken to ship supplies and appropriate staff from Britain to set up the transit camp at that port.

In anticipation of their being granted the necessary permission the British Red Cross had already, by late autumn 1944, begun sending large quantities of stores and comforts for overrun prisoners to two collection centres ('staging camps') in Poland – at Volkovysk (Wolkowysk) in the north and Lemberg (Lwów) in the south. The stores were shipped to the northern Russian port of Archangel, where it was left to the British Military Mission in Moscow to have them distributed to the two collection centres as and when appropriate.

As seen (Chapter 11), several airmen who had managed to escape during the evacuation of Stalag Luft VII fell into Soviet hands on 4 February 1945. Having been sent from Brieg-on-Oder to Oppeln (Opole) in Silesia, they then walked 60 or 70 kilometres to Gleiwitz on the Polish border and reached Odessa at the end of February, probably among the first to do so. They sailed from Odessa on 6 March,¹³ and were in Port Said four days later. Two of them – Warrant Officers W.S. McPhail and A.D. Naysmith – got a lift to Cairo and were flown back to England, where they arrived on 19 March 1945.

For many other PoWs now under Soviet control there was little prospect of an immediate return home. Overbearing rules and regulations and the unbending adherence to superior orders made it nigh on impossible for any decision as to the release of the PoWs to be made at local level. There may have been a more sinister motive, as Churchill mentioned to Roosevelt in a telegram sent on 16 March 1945:

‘...At present all entry into Poland is barred to our representatives. An impenetrable veil has been drawn across the scene. This extends even to the liaison officers, British and American, who were to help in bringing out our rescued prisoners of war. According to our information the American officers as well as the British who had already reached Lublin have been requested to clear out.

‘There is no doubt in my mind that the Soviets fear very much our seeing what is going on in Poland. It may be that apart from the Poles they are being very rough with the Germans ...’

After telegrams had been exchanged by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, the British and Americans were in no doubt that Stalin wanted all Soviet prisoners in the west to be returned without question to Russia, there to be disposed of as he saw fit. To this end the Soviet premier was quite prepared to use British and American PoWs as pawns in his game.

It was several weeks before the Soviets finally agreed that the several hundred British PoWs left behind at Stalag XXA (Thorn) could go to Odessa, the only agreed transfer point for returning British and US PoWs. Rifleman Sam Kydd made his way there via Lublin (150 kilometres south-east of Warsaw) with many other Britons and Americans. After various adventures, it had taken them five or six days aboard goods wagons to reach the Black Sea port:

‘200 of us rolled around in dilatory fashion till we were rounded up by two good humoured Russky

guards and marched through the Odessa streets to what had originally been a school before it had been bombed ...

‘Odessa had been bombed mercilessly and there were few buildings left undamaged ...

‘Where we slept, obviously one of the classrooms, there was a huge stove in the middle of the floor which glowed red hot all through the night – it was stoked up with coal – but even with that it was still freezing in the mornings!’¹⁴

After a few days Kydd and the rest were taken to the docks, where they boarded the *Highland Monarch* ‘which had arrived that morning with Russian prisoners liberated in France, who, now clad in battle dress, lined up on the Odessa quayside’. Carrying Commonwealth troops the ship made its way via Crete to Port Said (Egypt):

‘The arrival at Port Said was a very emotional one. As the ship nosed its way slowly into the harbour, the Scottish Pipers Band could be seen swinging along proudly in their kilts and regalia and there was a stunned silence aboard as the pipes and drums could be heard reverberating across the water playing “The Cock of the North”. A great cheer filled the quayside and many a face was tear-stained. We were given four days leave ...’¹⁵

They sailed via Naples (Italy), where the Americans disembarked, to Liverpool.

Also arriving at Odessa with a large group of PoWs from Thorn was Padre David Wild:

‘We arrived eventually, to find sparse accommodation in some rather tatty barracks. We were not allowed out into the city, and an armed guard was mounted on the gate to keep us in, “for our protection” we were told, but protection against what or whom was not explained.

‘Conditions were primitive, though there was adequate space in the large barrack rooms. Food was as sparse as ever. There were no facilities for exercise, and the only sanitary arrangements were lines of open trench latrines dug in rows across a courtyard ...’¹⁶

They were slightly more fortunate than the group of Odessa-bound ex-PoWs whose train came to grief on 10 March 1945 at Rudawa, near Krakow (Cracow). Flight Lieutenant Don Elliott RCAF:

‘For some unknown reason the train was stopped on part of the railway that was on an embankment. An engine was then put on the back – and the back half separated from the front half – which was then run at the front-half and the collision occurred ... Polish men were brought, long ropes put around the disabled coaches and they were pulled off the road bed and down the embankment.’¹⁷

Eight men were killed and thirty injured as five coaches had telescoped. The injured ‘were taken to the Russian military hospital at Krakow, where they received excellent treatment and whence all except one who died of injuries were flown to Odessa’.¹⁸

Don Elliott was fortunate to have been on the train in the first place. On Christmas Day 1944 he was ill in bed in the East Compound hospital at Stalag Luft III with a streptococcal infection of the throat:

‘Whereupon they decided to fumigate the place. Thus I was moved to North Compound hospital on Jan. 5th and five days later, Jan. 10, they sent me to Stalag 8C hospital, about ½ mile up the road, to have a specimen taken from the abscess in my throat. Before they got around to doing it, however, I was completely cured and planning to go back to the boys on Monday Jan. 29th.’¹⁹

On 28 January 1945, however, all he could do was watch from his hospital window as Stalag Luft III was evacuated. With the help of two British doctors he kept out of the way, and the Germans forgot about him. Five hundred PoWs, too ill to leave on foot

with the main party, were evacuated by train on or about 5 February. Don was now stuck in Stalag VIII C (Kunau) at Sagan:

[It was] a French camp with about 6000 Frenchmen as well as 1000 Russians and 4000 British, mostly South Africans and paratroopers from Arnhem attached to it. Those who could march were evacuated on Saturday Feb. 10th and the 1000 fellows who couldn't walk, of which I was one, ahem, ahem, were left to await transport.²⁰

On 12 February, as the Russians drew ever closer to Sagan and Kunau, the German doctor in charge of the hospital and all the guards disappeared. They left behind a German 88 mm. gun battery dug-in behind the hospital which began firing at the Russians. Luckily for the prisoners the Russians did not return fire, but the one-sided duel continued until 15 February when all the Germans, except for a rearguard, began to pull out. On 16 February advanced patrols of the Red Army made contact with the rearguard and a brief fight ensued. Don Elliott:

'The only casualty we had was when a light mortar shell burst in the kitchen of one of the barracks. There were 3 chaps in it, not one was hit, but one fellow swallowed his lighted cigarette.'

For a few minutes there was light machine-gun fire, then Russians on bicycles were in the camp. Everyone who could walk was immediately ordered to evacuate the hospital. Twenty patients or so were left behind as the remaining 150 former sick PoWs, including Elliott, set off on foot. Their 200 kilometre journey over the next ten days took them to Sprottau, over the Oder at Steinau and on to Öls, 50 kilometres north-east of Breslau. Under Russian control, they stayed for ten days in the castle of the former Crown Prince Wilhelm, its 300 rooms packed with 1,500 men of many nationalities – Czechs, French, Roumanians, Yugoslavs, Poles, Americans and British.

Some of the party from Kunau carried on to Czestochowa by rail, but on the evening of 5 March another group, including Don Elliott, left Öls in open trucks on what proved to be the worst part of their journey. It was around midnight when they reached Kreuzburg:

'It was windy and terribly chilly and when we did arrive there was only one little house for 150 of us. The next day we went on to Katowice and there joined up with the other group from [Czestochowa].

'We were there 2 days and the 2nd day we were rushed on to boxcars at 2 o'clock in the morning. Two days later the train moved out of the yards and we were on our way. In our boxcar were 25 officers and 2 civilians including an Englishwoman. For warmth we had 2 cast iron stoves with lots of coal. The sleeping accommodation was easy, 2 layers of boards across each end on which 5 could sleep comfortably side by side. Being officers we had the luxury of straw mattresses, a table and some chairs. Miss Short, the Englishwoman, slept on the floor.'²¹

The rest of the journey to Odessa, via Berdichev, took another fifteen days, two of which were spent sorting out the train wreck.

Then one day word reached the former PoWs at Odessa 'that two British liners had berthed in the harbour, bringing loads of Russians who had been liberated on the West Front. With them had come a US and British repatriation mission.'²² Padre Wild and his party were 'marched off to the harbour to be confronted on the quayside by two lovely Canadian Pacific liners', the *Duchess of Richmond* and the *Duchess of Bedford*. Padre Wild boarded the *Duchess of Richmond* (Captain E.A. Shergold) which sailed via Istanbul, Naples and Gibraltar to Greenock, where it docked on 13 April. It was at

Istanbul, on 29 March 1945, that Don Elliott wrote to his family in Canada:

‘It seems like a fairy tale and yet here I am, sitting in the officer’s lounge of one of the C.P.R. liners, and as I write we are anchored in the harbour of old Constantinople. Coming through the Bosphorus was really marvellous, just like a travelogue and now darkness has fallen and all the cities’ lights twinkling about us make a magnificent sight.’

Though these sailings proved, if nothing else, that ex-PoWs were being repatriated from Odessa, British and American authorities still found it almost impossible to get any sensible intelligence from their Soviet counterparts as to the whereabouts of the hundreds of others still in Russian hands. No one could, or would, say how many ex-PoWs there were at any given point in time at any of the several so-called collection centres scattered throughout the country.²³

Sir James Grigg had told the House of Commons on 6 March 1945 that 14 officers and 464 other ranks had so far reached Odessa. That more should have been there by then was apparent to the British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, who complained on 21 March to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov that he had ‘had no information since February 17th when your authorities told us that 2,611 of our men had been collected and were being sent to Odessa. Only 1,817 of these have arrived in time to be embarked on the ship sent to collect them.’²⁴

Two days later Churchill received a telegram from Stalin which stated, *inter alia*, that ‘there are no longer any English prisoners in our camps – they are en route for Odessa and the voyage home.’ Molotov replied to Eden on the same day assuring him ‘that British prisoners of war are in good conditions. We will continue to take good care of British prisoners of war in future.’²⁵

Whatever the position, ex-PoWs continued to trickle into Odessa, where conditions grew steadily worse due to overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and a lack of food and proper clothing. The Red Cross did what they could, as ever, until their facilities were closed on 22 June 1945. By this date over 4,000 British and Commonwealth ex-PoWs had been repatriated through Odessa:²⁶

‘According to US government documents, the Soviets stopped repatriating US personnel through Odessa on 28 May 1945 ... The last British ship seems to have sailed on 31 May 1945, though there still appears to have been some non-Soviet shipping sailing from Odessa in the first week in June. By 31 May, 4,377 British and Commonwealth personnel had been repatriated through Odessa. No more came later.’²⁷

However many British ex-PoWs sailed from Odessa they were only a small fraction of the official total of 142,319 Army, Navy and Air Force PoWs in Germany and Italy.²⁸ One of the problems facing the British government with the war as good as over was how best to return the majority to England. In anticipation of this particular problem the War Office had held discussions in London as early as July 1942. There was consensus on two matters, firstly that the delay in repatriating liberated prisoners should be as short as possible and, secondly, that adequate facilities should be in place on their return to provide for their welfare, food and clothing.

By the end of 1943 the War Office and the staff of the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe²⁹ had agreed that the most practicable method for repatriation of ex-PoWs in Western Europe would be to channel them as quickly as possible down already established lines of communication to the rear. Consideration was to be given to the

psychological welfare of ex-PoWs, those who had been in captivity for over eighteen months being deemed to be particularly likely to need rehabilitation.

By October 1944 a plan was tentatively agreed by SHAEF to set up at Supreme Allied HQ a central organisation called PWX. The plan envisaged three phases: (1) staging camps; (2) transit camps; (3) actual repatriation by sea to the UK (hospital cases to be flown home).

It was not until March 1945 that it was thought that an airlift would replace the third stage, though Air Vice-Marshal Donald Bennett had written to the AOC-in-C Bomber Command as far back as 9 November 1944 ‘suggesting that the Lancasters would serve well as transports to bring home the prisoners of war, as soon as the advancing Allied armies secured their release.’³⁰

In April 1945, it was decided to replace staging and transit camps with assembly camps in Belgium at Brussels and Goch (21 Army Group); Namur (12 Army Group); and in France at Epinal and Sedan (Communication Zone). These locations might, however, be subject to alteration. With the conflict over, liaison officers were to be stationed at every major headquarters of all three services. It would be their responsibility to go into former German-held territory and co-ordinate the orderly despatch of the former prisoners to the nearest transit centre.³¹

Though the airlift began on 3 April (with the US IX Troop Carrier Command flying 172 ex-PoWs in C-47 transports (Dakotas) into RAF Oakley – see below), such was the rapidly changing situation on the ground during the second half of April 1945 that plans had to be rushed forward on an *ad hoc* basis to cope with the great number of liberated PoWs. The Red Cross Deputy Commissioner in Brussels reported that by noon on 17 April a trickle of prisoners ‘had grown into a stream; by evening, the stream had swollen into a torrent’.³²

The authorities had not taken into account the possibility that liberated PoWs would decide to make their own way home using whatever transport they could beg, borrow or steal, and that they would want to have a bloody good time before becoming fouled-up in ‘red tape’ again. Warrant Officer J.D. Garland RAAF and a couple of his compatriots relieved an *Oberst* and his entourage of their Opel car and headed for the River Elbe:

‘The bridge across the river had been blown by the retreating Germans and the sappers had erected a pontoon bridge as a temporary means of getting across. As the Luftwaffe were still a little active vehicles were being sent across the river at about 100 yard intervals. Our turn came and Barney put his foot on the throttle and we raced onto the bridge. Half way across the car came to an abrupt halt. We had forgotten to check the petrol level and we were stranded. In nothing flat a large English MP ... was alongside us and screaming in dulcet tones: “Get that f*****g car off the bridge!” As we complied and started to push the car to the far side the dulcet tones again smote our eardrums: “Not that way! Over the f*****g side!”

‘Watching our dreams of idle motoring gurgled its way to the bottom of the murky Elbe, we ran to the western bank and were able to hitch a ride in a British Army truck to the town of Lüneburg.’³³

‘Judy’ Garland and his companions scrounged a lift back to England on a DC3 flying out of an airfield near Soltau, thus avoiding the danger of entanglement in ‘red tape’ at Brussels, but such was the volume of self-propelled former prisoners-of-war entering that city, however, that on 25 April 1945 SHAEF requested RAF Bomber Command to:

‘1.... provide 50 aircraft sorties per day until further notice to assist in evacuation of ex P.O.W’s from [airfield] B.58 on Continent to U.K. Airfield destination in U. K. will normally be Westcott or Wing, but exact destination will be furnished each evening for subsequent day by CATOR Rear.

‘2. Aircraft should start landing at B.58 at 0900 hours on 26th April and continue at the rate of 12 per hour. Pilots report to P.O.W. control tent by runway on airfield at B.58.’³⁴

A measure of the increasing pace of Operation Exodus, as the airlift was known, may be gained from the distress call sent from Belgium on 26 April 1945:

‘Owing to serious congestion of ex POW’s at Brussels request you increase bombers allocated to evacuation tomorrow (27th April) to 90 to arrive at rate of 16 per hour as from 0900 hours. 2 Group ask that all aircraft be landed by 1500 hours.’

Despite the independence and initiative shown by many ex-PoWs, thousands had been collected in the assembly camps well to the rear of the front line. General Eisenhower himself paid a visit to the American collection centre, camp Lucky Strike, at Fécamp near Le Havre (France):

‘On each return trip from the front our transports and converted bombers brought back planeloads of recaptured Allied prisoners. These men were concentrated at convenient camps for rehabilitation and early transfer to the homelands. Near Le Havre, in one camp alone, called Lucky Strike, we had at one time 47,000 recovered American prisoners. The British had similar camps at various places in north-west France and Belgium. The recovery of so many prisoners in such a short space of time presented delicate problems to the Medical Corps, to the Transport Service, and indeed to all of us. In many instances the physical condition of the prisoners was so poor that great care had to be exercised in their feeding.’³⁵

American airman Lieutenant Bernal ‘Rusty’ Lewis, arrived at Lucky Strike from Stalag Luft I (Barth):

‘We were detained at “Lucky Strike” for almost thirty days. We were restarted on our PoW diet after eating properly for two weeks and almost starved to death. General Eisenhower came through and walked up to one of the fellers and asked how they were treating him. He said, “Goddam it, Ike, they’re starving us to death.” Ike took him over to the mess tent and told the cooks to fill his mess tin with chicken!’³⁶

Having ferried millions of gallons of fuel in their DC3s over to their armies in Germany, the Americans used the empty aircraft to repatriate the liberated PoWs to England. One beautiful April morning Ordinary Seaman Roger Coward RN was waiting his turn to be flown home from one of the American-controlled airfields on the continent:

‘Dakota after Dakota came in, refuelled, loaded up with men and flew off again to various destinations – a constant stream of them.

‘We were all impressed with the American organisation – it was superb. Everything went like clockwork – or almost ...

‘The party next to us needed no encouragement to board the waiting aircraft, which revved up its engines and roared off down the runway. I don’t know what went wrong just after it became airborne, but there was a blinding flash and explosion and every man on board that plane was killed.’³⁷

RAF Bomber Command, too, as Don Bennett had hoped, was making full use of its Lancasters. To ensure the safety of all concerned strict rules on the loading of Lancasters were detailed in Bomber Command Operation Instruction No. 81:

‘1. The number of P.O.W. that can be carried is limited by the C.G. position. The total load (P.O.W. and

petrol) carried on a specific operation is to be such that consumption of fuel brings the landing weight down to 35,000 lbs.

2. Because of C.G. limitations, only 23 P.O.W. can be carried with full petrol load. 24 P.O.W. can be carried when the fuel load is 2,040 galls. or less and these conditions will invariably apply ...³⁸

The evacuation was not without its perils, however. Lancaster PD339 (50 Squadron) had delivered its load of twenty-four ex-PoWs to RAF Wing and was flying low to the south of Northampton when it crashed, killing five of the crew. There was another tragedy on 9 May when, soon after take-off from Juvincourt airfield (Belgium), a Lancaster crashed near Roye Ami (France) and twenty-four Army ex-PoWs and the six crew were killed.³⁹ There were two minor accidents on 9 May, three more on 10 May, and a sixth on 11 May. Two days later, on 13 May, another Lancaster crashed on take-off from Juvincourt.⁴⁰

From 3 April 1945 (when the airlift began) up to midnight on 19 May 1945 the RAF and USAAF had flown some 300,000 ex-PoWs back from the continent, the greatest total in one day being 36,204 on 11 May:

Command⁴¹	PoWs				Total
	British	American	French	Others	
IX T.C. Command, USAAF	83,421	55,507	81,474	952	221,354
Eighth Air Force USAAF	2,806	8,072	20,776	144	31,798
302nd Wing USAAF	402	2,669	2,107	18	5,196
46 Group RAF	31,436	414	1,358	1,452	34,660
Bomber Command RAF	5,473	700	0	0	6,173
38 Group RAF	278	0	0	0	278
French Air Force	0	2	56	0	58
Totals:	123,816	67,364	105,771	2,566	299,517

By midnight on 31 May 1945 the total airlifted had risen to over 354,000:

Command	PoWs				Total
	British	American	French	Others	
USAAF	102,888	65,068	126,168	4,391	298,515
RAF	38,909	1,119	8,985	7,088	55,901
French Air Force	0	2	70	0	72
Totals:	141,797	66,189⁴²	135,023	11,479⁴³	354,488

General Eisenhower wrote to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris on 15 June 1945 expressing the gratitude of SHAEF for Bomber Command's prodigious effort:

'The record of your Command, in flying repatriates out of Germany and from Continental bases to England, is one that I wish to commend most highly.

'Your lift of some 75,000 allied repatriates during April and May, using aircrew trained, and aircraft designed, for night bombing, is an achievement of great magnitude, comparable to the remarkable results of the offensive war waged by Bomber Command.

'The assistance rendered by your Command not only greatly accelerated the return of many British repatriates to their home, but it also relieved the over-worked transport aircrews and aircraft.

'For this great achievement in a strange role, please convey to all your air and ground crews who took part, and particularly to those who worked so hard at airfields at Rheims and Brussels, my sincere compliments and thanks. It was a contribution to human happiness of which the Air Force can remain forever proud'⁴⁴

Whilst Eisenhower's figure of 75,000 may not agree with earlier quoted totals, it is the sentiment behind the words that is significant.

The following UK airfields were those predominantly used for the RAF side of Operation Exodus:

RAF Dunsfold (Surrey). Some 6 miles south-east of Godalming this was one of the busiest airfields. Arrivals began modestly on 21 April 1945, two Stirlings landing 70 ex-PoWs who were filtered through No. 2 Hangar, which had been converted into 'the Air Arrival Centre and had been decked out with flowers and decorations'. By the end of April 3,584 former prisoners and 142 aircraft (Stirlings, Halifaxes, Lancasters, Dakotas) had been and gone. By the end of May the totals were 44,474 ex-PoWs from 1,556 aircraft, the busiest day being 9 May when 160 aircraft delivered 3,953 personnel.

On 6 May Dunsfold's medical staff were pressed into action when an American Curtiss C-46 Commando making for the USAAF airfield at Membury, Berkshire, with a load of ex-PoWs crashed into the radio mast atop Gibbet Hill (894 feet/275 metres) near Hindhead in Surrey. The medical staff's dash to help was to no avail, for all thirty-one personnel aboard were found to be dead, together with one Canadian officer from the radio station.⁴⁵

With effect from 8 June 1945 Dunsfold became one of the two RAF stations (the other was RAF Ford – see below) designated to receive ex-PoWs from the Middle East. By the time that Dunsfold closed as an Air Arrival Centre, on 25 June 1945, 47,529 ex-PoWs had passed through it on their way home.

RAF Odiham (Hampshire), Dunsfold's one-time parent station, was also used extensively for taking in former PoWs, predominantly flown over in Dakotas.

RAF Ford (Sussex). On 11 May 1945 20 Lancasters of 576 Squadron deposited 480 repatriates on this airfield on the Sussex coast. A rare occurrence, it is presumed that the airfield was used on this occasion to deposit Commonwealth airmen as close as possible to their own Personnel Reception Centres located along the south coast.

Flight Lieutenant Bruce Lumsden RAAF arrived from Brussels:

'After about half-an-hour's flying, we landed at a quiet little place called Ford on the Sussex coast ... I was surprised at the reception we were given. It was clear that plans had been made to give returning POWs an unmistakably warm welcome. Smiling faces greeted us as we stepped on to the tarmac. Instead of clipped words of command and peremptory orders, we were courteously directed first to a delousing point where something like a vacuum cleaner hose was used to blow a few puffs of a chemical powder down the inside of our shirts. Then we were invited to proceed across a stretch of grass to a marquee and here, before our delighted eyes, beautiful young women hovered in WAAF uniforms. Inside the marquee small tables were arranged for afternoon tea. We were invited to sit wherever we pleased. At each table an aircrew officer was ready to act as our host and a WAAF to wait on us ...

'From Ford we were conveyed in open R.A.F. tenders, through the Sussex Downs to our Holding Centre in Brighton ...'⁴⁶

RAF Ford, as with RAF Dunsfold, was then used for the return of ex-PoWs from the Middle East.

RAF Hixon (Staffordshire). Three miles north of Stafford, this airfield was little used,

only 210 liberated PoWs being landed here.

RAF Seighford (Staffordshire). A satellite of RAF Hixon this station, together with RAF Wheaton Aston (home to No. 21 [Pilot] Advanced Flying Unit), was originally earmarked as one of the two to receive repatriated PoWs for Cosford. In the end, only 1,299 were brought here, 917 of them arriving on 10 May 1945 in 41 Lancasters.

RAF Oakley (Buckinghamshire). 8 miles north-east of Oxford, this 'reserve' airfield, a satellite of RAF Westcott (see below), was informed on 2 April 1945 'that 300 repatriated prisoners of war were arriving by air at 1100 hours. All arrangements were made for their reception, and the provision of refreshments in the Social Club. The arrival was postponed until later in the day.'⁴⁷ Seven Dakotas landed with repatriated PoWs on the following day and more throughout the month until, by the end of April, 72 Dakotas had brought 1,787 ex-PoWs.

May 1945 was even busier with 443 Lancasters, 103 Dakotas, 51 Halifaxes, 31 Liberators, 3 Stirlings, 3 Hudsons, and 2 Fortresses bringing 15,088 personnel.

RAF Westcott (Buckinghamshire). 10 miles south-east of Bicester, and the home of No. 11 Operational Training Unit. On 7 April 1945 information was 'received from Headquarters 92 Group that landings of repatriated prisoners of war will take place at Westcott. Arrangements immediately started to prepare B. 1 Hangar to receive the prisoners, and provide refreshment.' Two days later, on 9 April, the first aircraft landed with repatriated PoWs. On 19 April a number of USAAF C-47s landed with liberated PoWs from Oflag IVC (Colditz).

On the ground at Westcott the reception committee was ready and waiting:

'For the first few intakes all repatriated prisoners were briefly inspected to exclude lice. As the intakes became larger, however, this became impracticable and only those who were too ill to travel to their reception camps and had accordingly to be admitted direct to hospital were examined before leaving the station. By April 15th arrangements had been completed for disinfecting all repatriated prisoners of war. This is done immediately on arrival at the airfield by dusting with anti-lice powder (AL63 Mark III). Power operated guns are used and the maximum speed of operation with six guns in use has been found to be 500 per hour ...

'In addition, 249 United States personnel were admitted to hospital but all these were in a comparatively fit state of health. One of the patients admitted to hospital died soon afterwards from Diarrhoea and Exhaustion. Information has also been received to the effect that one repatriated prisoner of war who passed through Westcott on 21.4.45 and was sent from his Reception Camp to hospital was later diagnosed as suffering from Typhus fever. All prisoners of war are seen by a Medical Officer during the dusting process and all minor dressing of cuts and boils are adjusted or replaced and other first aid medical treatment is given in the M.T. Room, in the reception hangars ...'⁴⁸

The total landings for April were: 302 Dakotas, 104 Stirlings, 61 Curtiss C-46 Commandos, 42 Lancasters and 7 Ansons, with 13,778 ex-PoWs. The numbers increased in May with '710 Lancasters, 70 Dakotas, 27 Liberators, 26 Halifaxes, 22 Stirlings, 7 Commandos, 9 Fortresses, 2 Mosquitoes, 1 Anson, and 1 Hudson bringing 20,809 personnel.'

Fifteen Liberators on 2 June 1945 and a further six on 3 June brought 368 ex-PoWs from Italy in Operation Dodge, the last to arrive at Westcott.

RAF Wing (Buckinghamshire). Four miles west of Leighton Buzzard, this station was

chosen to receive the bulk of returning prisoners because of its central location. The first 819 men arrived on 9 April 1945 in 33 Dakotas:

‘A complete hangar was assigned to the medical section and was used for delousing, inspection and ward facilities while the patients were awaiting transfer to hospital. The hangar was sectioned off on one side by 6 ft. hessian-covered screens and the floor was covered with coconut matting. Heating was by Valor oil stoves and delousing was done by means of four powder guns, charged with A. L. 63 Mark III and powered by a low-pressure blower, installed outside the hangar to reduce noise.

‘The inspection and treatment room was large and the area near the entrance was kept clear to facilitate the rapid passage of the prisoners-of-war.

‘The staff consisted of three R.A.F. medical officers, R.A.F. and W.A.A.F. nursing orderlies, nurses from the Red Cross and St. John Organisation and general duties officers, who assisted the medical staff by writing down the answers to three questions which were asked of each prisoner-of-war:

- (a) Did they require medical treatment?
- (b) Had they any sickness or diarrhoea?
- (c) Had they any wounds or sores requiring dressing?

‘Those personnel not requiring treatment proceeded into the hangar by a side entrance. After delousing and medical examination various forms were completed ... Transfer from Wing by road to Cosford, a distance of 120 miles, was found to be difficult so that local E. M. S. hospitals were used for immediate treatment, the patients being transferred later by air to Cosford.’⁴⁹

By the end of April 14,794 ex-PoWs had passed through the station. On 15 May 1945 there were 1,332 Lancaster landings. Of the total of 32,864 ex-PoWs who were delivered to RAF Wing, only 534 were admitted to hospital.

RAF Cosford (Staffordshire). The plans for Operation Exodus had envisaged that No. 106 Personnel Reception Centre (PRC) at RAF Cosford ‘should undertake the complete repatriation arrangements for RAF and Allied Air Forces personnel’, but so rapid was the evacuation by air that initial reception centres had had to be set up at a number of airfields across the country (e.g. Westcott and Wing).⁵⁰

Once through the initial reception centre at whichever airfield he had landed an ex-PoW was transferred to RAF Cosford ‘which was chosen because there was adequate accommodation there for the high proportion of officers included among the personnel to be repatriated ... The medical section at Cosford was to be responsible for two main functions, firstly the initial reception of the prisoners-of-war and examination to determine their fitness to proceed on leave and secondly their medical boarding and disposal on return from leave.’⁵¹

No. 106 PRC was opened at RAF Cosford on 7 March 1945 as a unit in No. 24 (Technical Training) Command on the understanding that the ex-PoWs would be flown to the two nearby Staffordshire airfields of RAF Seighford and RAF Wheaton Aston. With the unexpected speed and size of the airlift came the change in plan, not only the setting-up of initial reception centres but also the movement of former PoWs from RAF Wing by rail to Cosford Halt, a railway station literally on the edge of Cosford’s airfield.

To avoid the medical staff at No. 106 PRC having to spend fruitless hours on duty awaiting the arrival of their first patients, it was agreed that the rail despatching officer at Cosford Halt would notify the PRC when a trainload of ex-PoWs could be expected. On the night of 9/10 April 1945, however, one of the PRC staff, idly chatting to a porter at Cosford Halt, discovered to his considerable alarm that at that very moment a trainload of healthy ex-PoWs was on its way from RAF Wing. At 3.40 a.m. on the

morning of 10 April – after barely three hours notice – they arrived:

‘As the train pulled into Cosford Halt, it was obvious that the RAF Wing dispatcher’s description of the condition of the men could not have been farther from the truth. They were all in poor health and several had to be helped from their seats. Seventy five per cent of them were suffering from diarrhoea, some severely and they had been forced to endure a two and [a] half hour journey in a train without toilets or corridors. Many were unable to proceed any further without first going to the toilet. Horrified, angry and extremely sympathetic to the PoWs plight, the medical staff worked rapidly and professionally. Within twenty minutes all had been processed and were seated in a mess hall ...’⁵²

There were ninety-eight men on this first train. Apart from the severe diarrhoea ‘all showed a degree of emaciation which rendered Phase 2 of the procedure redundant for the time being. Two nutritional experts, who were sent to Cosford immediately, reported that the clinical evidence of malnutrition was confirmed by emaciation, paræsthesia, nutritional oedema and skin changes. The chief complaints were loss of libido, diarrhoea, general weakness and sore tongue. It was recommended that each man should have four pints of fresh milk and three eggs per day, a liberal supply of oranges and compound vitamin tablets at the rate of two per day.’⁵³

Medically speaking, this was the worst group of ex-PoWs to be received. Twenty-one of them were admitted to hospital, three with suspected pulmonary lesions and one with diphtheria. The remainder were severely under nourished, but their ‘improvement in hospital was rapid and in some cases as much as 14 lb in weight was gained in three days.’⁵⁴

Seven more ex-PoWs arrived on 11 April, fourteen more on 13 April and a further 1,531 by the end of that month. Officers were:

‘accommodated and fed in the Fulton Block, together with the officer permanent staff. Other ranks are accommodated in ‘B’ ‘D’ ‘C’ and ‘P’ lines and fed in 106 P.R.C. Sergeants’ Mess (late 1 Wing Dining Hall and have Ante-Room facilities in the late 1 Wing N.A.A.F.I. converted into a Sergeants’ Mess) ...

‘Administrative accommodation has been provided in No.4 Workshop set out for the reception of ex-prisoners of war and officers provided in the Fulton Block and late 1 Wing Headquarters and Squadron offices. The Medical Section of 106 P.R.C. has been given accommodation in No.4 Workshop and in the Fulton Block.’⁵⁵

To assist No. 106 PRC (with long-stay patients in particular) No. 108 PRC was established on 16 April 1945, but outgrew its original designation so quickly that it became No. 4 Medical Rehabilitation Unit (No. 4 MRU):

‘The function of No. 4 M. R. U. was the care of those patients who, although not sufficiently ill to warrant admission to hospital, were nevertheless still in need of medical supervision. The unit was housed in hutted units with their own kitchens and every possible amenity calculated to make the prisoners-of-war feel at home. A complete hangar was fitted up as a gymnasium, where the patients did carefully graded exercises. These exercises, performed under careful supervision, combined with the pleasant atmosphere of the unit and generous well-cooked meals, had a dramatic effect upon the health and morale of the patients.’⁵⁶

Both units – No. 106 PRC and No. 4 MRU – worked closely with Princess Mary’s RAF Hospital Cosford which, having begun the war as Cosford’s station sick quarters, had been raised to the status of station hospital in the latter part of 1939.

When the last RAF ex-PoW had been examined it was found that the medical staff had processed 11,003 men, 9,185 alone in the eight weeks from 10 April to 4 June

1945.⁵⁷ 8,269 were seen by No. 106 PRC; 1,379 by No. 4 MRU; and 555 by RAF Hospital Cosford, to which a further 800 cases could be added 'from No. 4 M.R.U. previously "temporarily unfit all duties"'.

Of those sent to RAF Hospital, Cosford, 228 cases were classed as medical ('malnutrition syndrome, characterised by weight loss, diarrhoea with flatulence, dry sallow skin and in some cases oedema of legs. '); 215 surgical; 23 neurological; 65 ear nose and throat ('active otitis media with perforation. Old otitis media with scarring. Nerve deafness. '); 12 ophthalmic ('hypermetropia and myopia which had progressed in captivity to a standard below that required for aircrew. ') and 12 skin cases. Of the 135 men referred for neuro-psychiatric opinion, only two were found to be paranoid and only four schizophrenic. In ten of the cases no abnormality could be found. There were, however, 61 cases of 'psychological disorder, including anxiety depression and obsessional and hysterical states. The clinical picture was fairly uniform, showing lack of self-confidence, desire for solitude, fear of the future and reluctance to face it.'⁵⁸

After the initial examination former prisoners were sent on leave. They were required to return to RAF Cosford for Phase 2 of the operation – the medical boarding and disposal – and began to do so during June 1945. Though it was hoped that 250 men per day could be boarded in groups of fifty, this figure was never actually achieved, the best rate being 474 over two days. 10,136 men were boarded up to 11 August 1945, the fit being passed on to the authorities for posting as appropriate. Unfit personnel were either sent to hospital or to No. 4 MRU. Of the 11,000 airmen boarded six are known to have died in 1945 from causes attributable to their imprisonment.

For the British home was not far, but for Commonwealth airmen it was half the world away. Before Australian former PoWs could go home they were directed to No. 11 Personnel Distribution and Reception Centre (PDRC) at Gowrie House, Eastbourne, for interrogation and a medical inspection. For some, their last days in England were tinged with regret:

'No man can spend years of his life in such a country as Britain without making friends, and the long-awaited posting to No. 11 PD.R.C. meant last moments with many whom they might never meet again. For some, too, it meant temporary separation from wives married during their period of service in Britain. There were more than 2,000 such marriages through the years since that day in 1939 when the first R.A.A.F. men, the Sunderland crews, stepped ashore in Britain.'⁵⁹

RNZAF men were sent to Brighton and to No. 12 PDRC, a large seafront hotel, where they arrived in May.

Commonwealth airmen were also able to enjoy the facilities of the Southern Cross Club before, by the end of July 1945, mostly being repatriated from Liverpool by ship, three of which were the *Stirling Castle* (which sailed on 18 June),⁶⁰ *Stratheden* and *Orion*. The *Orion* sailed through the Panama Canal (as did the others) to Wellington (New Zealand), where the 'Kiwis' disembarked, before making her way to Sydney. The Aussies then attended a rehabilitation course before they too were 'demobbed'.

For one Canadian airman (not an ex-PoW) at No. 3 PDRC Bournemouth there was to be no going home. On 15 July 1945 22-year-old Flying Officer G.M. McCracken RCAF DFC (awarded on 1 October 1944 for numerous operations on 428 Squadron, where he 'invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage, and devotion to duty') was fatally injured diving off Bournemouth pier.

Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Pensions, together with representatives of the three services, had held a conference in June 1944 at which the problems of 'rehabilitation and resettlement' were discussed. Their preliminary conclusions were that only for those unable to take their place immediately in civilian life would special arrangements be made. Cases requiring 'toning up' would be given the required period in which to achieve this, and voluntary organisations such as the Red Cross and the British Legion would be asked to follow up cases as necessary. Responsibility for 'resettlement follow-up' would be delegated to the Ministry of Labour, which had already set up a special Resettlement Advice and Information Bureau. Finally, RAF personnel would be medically examined by their own medical authorities.

In January 1945 the RAF issued a memorandum entitled 'Resettlement Training', a title chosen to avoid use of the word 'rehabilitation'. It was reckoned that ten per cent of the PoWs would require hospital treatment and would have to be invalided out of the service. It was also reckoned that half of the total would want to leave the RAF. The RAF therefore geared itself up to provide resettlement training courses lasting four weeks, which would also be made available to anyone leaving the RAF, provided that they had spent at least sixty days in captivity:

'The aim of the training, which was not to be compulsory for those being released to civilian life, was to efface the mental and physical handicaps induced by long confinement in prison camps. The known numbers of R.A.F. prisoners at that time were 2,166 officers and 6,336 airmen, 90 per cent. of these personnel being aircrew.'⁶¹

In May 1945 the Air Ministry set up four Refresher Centres whose principal object was 'to bring the prisoners-of-war up to date with events which had occurred at home and abroad during their absence and to provide them with some general educational and practical training of a useful nature.' Two of the four centres were at Wittering, one at West Malling and one at Church Fenton. Their official designations were respectively Nos. 109-112 Personnel Centre (Refresher):

'Although it had originally been proposed that each centre should accommodate 120 prisoners-of-war in three flights of forty men, the size of each centre was ultimately increased to 250 men, with six flights per centre.

'The Flight Commanders interviewed each man shortly after arrival and discussed the programme of work ... The needs of the men naturally varied considerably and the programme was therefore flexible. It included lectures on R.A.F. and civilian development, R.A.F. technical lectures and visits to neighbouring R.A.F. stations, factories and municipal organisations.'⁶²

Not a few ex-PoWs, with little or no idea of the purpose of these centres, resented their 'special treatment':

'Many arrived with a feeling that they were wasting their time, but before the end of their stay, the majority agreed that the centres were of value, particularly in respect of the work of assessment to determine future allocation. In general, those who continued to criticise were those who remained unsettled with no clear ideas as to their future.'⁶³

Once the necessary paperwork had been completed and they had been 'demobbed' the former PoWs were free to resume their lives as best they could, though it was believed that not every RAF PoW had managed to get back to England. Despite every effort

being made to trace them, a handful known to have been alive at the end of the war simply disappeared, some possibly of their own volition. Warrant Officer R.H. Barratt slipped away from his PoW camp (possibly Stalag 344) sometime towards the end of 1944 and made his way to Budapest (Hungary). Arrested by the Russians at Szarvas on 24 December 1944, he was known to have been in their hands on 8 June 1945. Allegedly seen from time to time thereafter he never returned to England and to his wife. He was just one of the 690 members of the Allied forces who, as at 11 August 1945, had 'not been recovered or accounted for'.⁶⁴

One former PoW who opted to stay on in the RAF was Ivan Ure. Now a warrant officer, he was posted to Transport Command HQ at Bushey Park, Kingston-on-Thames, where, in a complete reversal of fortune, he was put in charge of 150 German PoWs detailed for work duties:

'A tattered array of human beings appeared, mostly crews of U-boats with a few Wehrmacht personnel and a Messerschmitt 109 pilot from the Luftwaffe ...

'I could not allow myself to feel sorry for any of these men, for I had seen too much in Germany. I did, however, understand their feelings being locked up hundreds of miles from family and friends, and tried to make their lives as easy as possible.'⁶⁵

He tried to make his own life easy, too, using a large and noisy Rudge 'Ulster' motorbike for his personal transport to and from work. Despite a warning that motorbikes were not to be ridden along the roads close to the office of Transport Command's CO, Air Marshal Sir Ralph Cochrane no less, Ivan did so. As a result, his presence was immediately requested. Ushered into the great man's office, Cochrane's eyes fell upon the medal ribbons on Ure's breast and he elicited the fact that the wretched man before him had been a PoW:

'I was then told to sit and we discussed whether my POW could dismantle the air raid shelter at his official residence on Coombe Hill, Kingston. I thought I was let off the hook until he dismissed me and said "and don't ride that bloody motorbike round my Office".'

After fifteen years in the RAF Ivan Ure's services therein, latterly in the RAFVR, were no longer required. He left having experienced 'rarely a dull moment but many poignant ones. I cannot say that I would wish to relive some of them again but shall for ever be glad I did not miss them.'

And Ken Dobbs, too, despite all the attendant horrors, hunger and brutality of fourteen months of 'krigiedom', could still say, over half a century after his liberation: 'When I look back, now that I'm 76 years old, I would not like to experience these happenings again, but somehow I would not like to have missed such traumatic episodes of my life.'⁶⁶