

Harry Oakes (IWM SR 4302) and Bill Lawrie (IWM SR 7481)

About that time the chaps attached to 11th Armoured Division had seen a staff car come up to Headquarters one day with a German officer, or two German officers I believe, blindfolded and when they made enquiries they were told that they were from a Political Prison Camp at Belsen. The Germans, anticipating us capturing the camp or over-running it, wanted the British to send in an advanced party to prevent these prisoners who were supposed to be infected with typhus from escaping. But the force we wanted to send in was too much. The Germans felt it wouldn't have been fair so they agreed on a compromise that they would leave 1,000 Wehrmacht behind if we returned them within ten days. So we were standing by at Lüneburg, Lawrie and myself, to go into Belsen... We had this business of the staff car with the white flags telling us that there was a typhus hospital on the way ahead of us, and would we be willing to call a halt to any actual battle until this area was taken over in case of escapees into Europe and the ravage that would take place. And as far as I know, the Brigadier believed this story, and we set sail that evening to have a look at this typhus hospital under a white flag. And there was no typhus hospital. There was barbed wire, sentry boxes, a huge garrison building for SS troopers, and Belsen concentration camp. And, as I say, we drove up in two, three jeeps, four jeeps maybe, in the evening, and we saw this concentration camp that we believed was a typhus hospital. But we knew immediately that it wasn't a typhus hospital.

Dick Williams (IWM SR 15437)

But we went further on into the camp, and seen these corpses lying everywhere. You didn't know whether they were living or dead. Most of them were dead. Some were trying to walk, some were stumbling, some on hands and knees, but in the lagers, the barbed wire around the huts, you could see that the doors were open. The stench coming out of them was fearsome. They were lying in the doorways – tried to get down the stairs and fallen and just died on the spot. And it was just everywhere. Going into, more deeper, into the camp the stench got worse and the numbers of dead – they were just impossible to know how many there were... Inside the camp itself, it was just unbelievable. You just couldn't believe the numbers involved... This was one of the things which struck me when I first went in, that the whole camp was so quiet and yet there were so many people there. You couldn't hear anything, there was just no sound at all and yet there was some movement – those people who could walk or move – but just so quiet. You just couldn't understand that all those people could be there and yet everything was so quiet... It was just this oppressive haze over the camp, the smell, the starkness of the barbed wire fences, the dullness of the bare earth, the scattered bodies and these very dull, too, striped grey uniforms – those who had it – it was just so dull. The sun, yes the sun was shining, but they were just didn't seem to make any life at all in that camp. Everything seemed to be dead. The slowness of the movement of the people who could walk. Everything was just ghost-like and it was just unbelievable that there were literally people living still there. There's so much death apparent that the living, certainly, were in the minority.

Gilbert King (IWM SR 31503)

I can remember going down this road with these Hungarian guards, soldiers, all got their bullets and grenades on their chest. We went in then to a very large military hospital and parked our vehicles for the time being and we was told that we would be going up to relieve the camp in the morning. And our Troop, which was C Troop, were the first up there to enter the gates. A medical team had gone through the gates, but we were the first military, and we had to round up the German military. One thing that I remember vividly was after entering the camp, you'd see the inmates which weren't too bad – they got

worse as they went down the camp – and as I stood there this, I don't know if it was a man or a woman you couldn't tell really, came up to me and kissed my boots. And it nearly brought tears to me eyes. It was very emotional.

William Arthur Wood (IWM SR 15427)

And then on the left hand side there were the huts and of course outside the huts were piles and piles of dead bodies, and living ones, we didn't know which were which. In the huts themselves, equally, you didn't know who was dead and who was alive unless they made, there was some movement you could see, because the dead and the living were all together – they hadn't the energy to take the dead out and there were so many piled outside as I say that it was hard to see, to pick out the dead from the living...

Dick Williams (IWM SR 15437)

The food that we'd got, breaking open these compo rations was just not right for these people – their stomachs just couldn't take anything. The best we could do was the tea and then we decided the best thing we could do would be to open all the tins and make a big mess of it, put as much boiling water in amongst it and make it a thin stew, as we could do. This started to be quite – it seemed to us with what we got, that was the best we could do, so we did that – and those that could come to the cookhouses, we fed them from the cookhouses and eventually we started trying to take that service back out to those who couldn't even get that far. Some of the people were still in the huts where there were more dead than living and we would take a dixie of this broth and leave it at the door...But from our side, I say that we tried to do the best we could with the substance of the compo rations and that it became such that that's all we could do, literally. I'm afraid sausages and beef and everything – corn beef – all got mixed up together, but at least it was some sort of liquidy food. Some people who tried to eat the real stuff straight away, I'm afraid it was too much and they, it probably killed them. But it was kindness to give them something, although it is the wrong kind of kindness.

Roger Dixey (IWM SR 8996)

What happened was we were all allocated to a hut. We divided into pairs, as I said, and each pair was given a hut to cope with. And into the hut you went and it was designed, I think, to take about 60 soldiers. It was a typical army Nissen hut-type – only it wasn't a Nissen hut because it wasn't the same shape – and inside it were upwards of six or seven hundred people lying on the ground. They were all totally emaciated. They were all in filthy rags – rags is literally what I mean, rags. They were all, or most of them, lying in pools of vomit and faeces and urine. A considerable number of the ones in the hut were dead and the first job to do each day was to go in, and with the help of two Hungarian soldiers – strangely enough we had a company of Hungarian soldiers to help as labourers – you'd go into the hut and pick out the dead bodies. You'd just go around and see who's dead and who wasn't. It was sometimes very difficult to be certain who was dead and who wasn't. Remove the dead, take them outside, leave them in a heap and the Hungarians then moved them by truck to the mass graves where they were put in the mass graves. And having got rid of the dead you then made a sort of so say ward round to try and do what you could for the remainder, all of whom had diarrhoea, or the vast majority had diarrhoea. They all had the most appalling coughs, they all had the most dreadful skin diseases, they were all filthy dirty and they were all absolutely skeletally thin... And we were dealing with the killer, the main killer, which was typhus. And typhus was killing a very large number of people every day.

William Arthur Wood (IWM SR 15427)

We'd been trained for war wounded, we were used to terrible wounds, especially in my case as I say with the facial wounds that always seemed worse than a lot of the others, and that we'd been trained for – how to behave and how to work. But I'm afraid when we got to Belsen we hadn't been trained for this, and it was so, so different to, well to anything. I can't explain it, it was so terrible and so different from

anything we'd seen in our move up from D-Day onward. We'd seen distressed people about, people walking from town to town, but nothing like this.

Harry Oakes (IWM SR 4302)

Of course then the SS guards were put to work burying the dead. They were made to, they got a lorry and they had to start this lorry without using the self-starter in the morning and physically pick up the dead. They were everywhere in piles around the camp, in the huts. Soon they had to dig more graves, huge graves.

Laurence Wand (IWM SR 9082)

You see, there was a war still being fought...There was a CCS, there was 32 CCS, there was an anti-aircraft regiment and there was a control unit, there were a few British Army units which had been allowed to be in reserve at Belsen, but their primary function was not to look after Belsen, their primary function was to back up the 21st Army Group in trying to get that war over and there was very little that could be spared. Most of what we had was captured German equipment...There was very, very little in the way of medication or equipment. But then, even if there had been, the problem was one couldn't have used it because the problem was too overwhelming. One medical student and two Hungarian soldiers are not really a very effective medical team for four hundred people when the definition of a 'well person' is a person who can stand. If a person could stand he was 'well', if he couldn't stand he was 'ill'. And this was the arbitrary classification we had to use, whether the individual could literally stand unaided.

Laurence Wand (IWM SR 9082)

The policy was, right from the beginning, was to get people out of that awful place into proper surroundings and you couldn't take them out until they'd been cleaned and the army had set up a 'human laundry' – or was in the process of setting up a 'human laundry' – which consisted of trestle tables, water supply, trestle tables, a clothing dump, a stretcher dump, old clothing to be discarded, fresh clothing to be provided after the inmates would be brought out of the huts, hosed down, washed down, deloused, and then put into fresh clothes and then evacuated from the camp...The primary task of course was to save life and to get people fed, to get them out of the camp into proper conditions where they could be nursed and looked after and saved from dying.

Norma Alexander (IWM SR 15441)

When the patients started getting a little better, the sister in charge would say 'oh they can get ready and go down to Harrods' and afterwards...I thought 'well this is a bit...' and I couldn't quite follow it and then it dawned on me that 'Harrods' was a huge hall full of clothes that were taken from the German shops – whoever was in charge went and took all the things from the nearest German town and brought them into the camp. So, of course, when they were strong enough to walk, they would be sent to 'Harrods' and come back and the joy on their faces – and the men would have nice smart suits and the ladies dresses and shoes – and so whenever I think of, I hear the word 'Harrods' it always reminds me of these poor people, but the joy they got out of, it really boosted their spirits.

Mike Lewis (IWM SR 4833)

Something had changed for me after I'd seen that camp. Although I'd seen the terrible things in war, to have treated ordinary people like this. And there were so many theories and reasons as to who was responsible and everybody seemed to point a finger around until the finger came round in a circle and I had to think hard about it. Why the Germans? They had their own culture, their own civilisation of a kind. They produced Beethoven, great scientists, how could it be? The terrible discovery came to me, this sort of revelation like a flash of lightning, because it penetrated these terrible scenes to make me think – all the stories I'd heard about the persecution of people from my mother and father, here they

were true. But this was on a scale of – it had to be organised, it had to be done it could only be done with modern administrative service. It could only be done by moving masses of people by rail. It had to be planned and worked for. It was a sort of death by administration.

Laurence Wand (IWM SR 9082)

These people had been degraded by the Germans. It was a systematic depersonalisation, degradingness. They'd been for as long as they'd – the Germans had degraded these people from the time they'd occupied their countries. They degraded them by putting them into ghettos, they degraded them by making them into second and third class citizens, they degraded them by herding them like cattle, by transporting them in conditions which were worse than animals would be transported, by totally dehumanising them.

Leslie Hardman (IWM SR 17636)

Well first of all, they kept on saying to me 'tell the world, tell the world. They must know what happened. Did you know it? Did you know what was happening to us? You won't be able to save us all, but those who can talk and will survive they must present all our suffering to the world'. And I believe it – it's unimaginable how it could occur, come about, I don't know but we got to talk about it. I know it's 50-odd years now but nonetheless as long as you have it in writing, in books, in tapes and so on, so the generation of another 50 years' time will see what's happened.