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How Russians stormed barn to end POW's two-year ordeal

By Mark Taylor



MENU



PRIVATE George Pollard threw his arms in the air and shouted "British! British!" as Russian troops stormed the barn he was locked inside.

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His two-year misery as a German prisoner of war was over.

Mr Pollard, along with tens of thousands of others, had been forced to march through the extreme winter conditions from a POW camp at Lamsdorf on the Polish border, through Dresden into Czechoslovakia.

A wound to his leg caused by enemy gunfire had throbbed with every step on a journey ordered by Hitler to keep the Allied prisoners out of Russian clutches as the Soviet forces surged westward.

The ordeal lasted about four months between January and April 1945.

Mr Pollard – one of a number of men who have come forward following an Oxford Mail appeal for prisoner of war stories to be shared with the Soldiers of **Oxfordshire Museum** in Woodstock – said he would never forget that first taste of freedom. He had thought it would never arrive.

The 89-year-old Littlemore resident said: "I can still remember the day. Oh, it was lovely. We never thought we'd get out. None of us did.

"Every day it was the same, marching here and there.

"The Russians were getting nearer so the Germans marched us over the border into Czechoslovakia.

"We walked past some of the concentration camps over the Czech border and some in there looked like walking skeletons.

"I have to say we had it luckier than them. It was horrible to see them like that."

Mr Pollard was born in Thame in 1924 and joined the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in 1942 aged 18.

He served in North Africa and Italy. It was at Anzio where the 19-year-old was shot in the leg and captured in 1943 after a fierce battle on the ground.

He said: "German paratroopers surrounded us. There were only six of us left at that point.

"We gave it a go with the guns but they told us to give up."

He spent more than two years in Stalag 8B in Lamsdorf, and had learned to cope with capture even if he didn't expect freedom.

He said: "I was full of confidence. You don't let war affect you as much when you're 18, but the effects can hit you later.

OK. I forgave them afterwards. "It's not something I could hold on to, the hatred."

It was in July 1944 Hitler first ordered the evacuation of camps to move POWs west.

It prolonged the agony for men like Private Pollard, and many did not survive what later became known as The March.

Many thought they were being walked to their death.

Mr Pollard said: "We had been living off Red Cross parcels, but by the end it was just a few scraps of bread each day.

"We were marched overnight into Dresden. I was there when they bombed it – terrifying.

"We were marching one night, and there had been rumours the Russians were advancing, so we were locked inside a barn.

"We heard gunshots outside, then they burst in.

"We said 'British!'" "They said: 'English? You are free!' What a feeling."

After the war he returned to Oxford and lived with his partner Doreen Durbridge, who died 20 years ago. The couple never married or had children.

On his return Mr Pollard did odd jobs and went to work as a handyman at Magdalen College in Oxford.

He said: "My mother was so pleased to see me back. I gave her all my medals. I never saw them again.

"I got over (the war), but still have bad nerves. I was shell-shocked at the end, and the problems came later. I never had bad nightmares but I was a bit bruised."

[The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum is collating tales for a new display as part of a £3m refurbishment. For more see <http://sofo.org.uk>

MARCH HORROR

- More than 80,000 POWs were forced to march westward from German military prison camps across Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany in sub zero temperatures.
- The POW camps were evacuated as Russian forces approached.
- On one march about 1,500 captives died.
- Many were reduced to scavenging, and some reportedly ate dogs and cats – whatever they could find.
- Others died from exhaustion, pneumonia, diphtheria, and other diseases.
- Typhus was rife, spread by body lice.