

**Statement by John A.S. MacDonald to the Judge Advocate General Office on 7th May 1950.**

**General**

On or about the 29th of January of this year (1945), the camp at Teschen, known as Stalag VIIIb, was broken up. This had been obvious for some time before this, as the Russian advance from Kattowitz had been driving the German civilians out of the district and town for many days. The actual day of the break-up was, I believe, a Saturday. Previous to this, the Germans, through their chief medical officer in the camp, Oberstabsarzt Dr. Mentzel, had decided who were the men who, through some physical disability, were to be allowed to remain behind. This examination did not seem to me to be one which could be called thorough. Men who had been lying in the camp hospital for considerable periods were forced to get their kit together, and attempt the march along with the fit. No transport for their kit was provided, and men who had arm or leg trouble were compelled either to overtax their strength to save their belongings, or to jettison what they could after marching off. I know of one man who was forced to start the march with an inflamed condition of the skin between the legs which had necessitated his lying in hospital for over a month. Another man marched off with his broken arm in plaster, others having to carry the necessities of kit for him. The German officer who had final say at this period, and, indeed for the whole of the time during which I was at Teschen, was a Major Birkhoff. Mentzel, however, had charge of the medical side.

The conditions which prevailed during this march, and in those in other parts of Germany at this time, are well-known. The initial part of this trek from Teschen had to be made through Silesia, East Sudetenland, and part of Moravia. The weather was extremely cold, and during the first few days blizzards were common. Our first day's march ended round about midnight, and our guards herded us into a concrete-floored barn. My feet had given me trouble that day, and on the commencement of the second day, I complained to one of the German "Unterroffiziere" that I could barely walk. The reply was that I must march off with the rest. That second day was particularly trying, the weather being violent, the roads slippery, and the guards in nasty humour. After marching a distance of some 35 kilometers, we stopped at a brick factory in a place called Neutitschein. Here I felt so weak that I could not carry my kit into the billet without aid. On the following day (morning) I went along to see the British M.O. who was marching with us, a Major Eagle of the South African Army, and he told me to stand aside when the column moved off. In the company of other British prisoners, together with a sprinkling of other nationalities, we remained at the brick factory that day, moving off the following morning. We travelled some 60 Kilometres by train to Sternberg, where we arrived late at night. No billet had been arranged for us, and we ended up in the discipline cells of a school for German NCOs. Several of the party were by this time in bad condition, some suffering from frost bite. One, a Polish medical major, had to be removed some days later to the local hospital, his feet being completely frost-bitten. We remained in the cells in this building for a week, at the end of which period the Germans asked those who wished to walk to segregate themselves from those who considered themselves unfit for any further marching. Some eight or nine

British, incapable of continuing on foot, among whom I was, fell out. We were later in the day joined by a small party of Russians, all in bad physical condition, and proceeded by open lorry to Ober-Langendorf, picking up on the way Dr. Mentzel and the Russian who later transpired to be the "doctor" on whom we had to rely on for medical treatment. The latter carried with him a large cardboard box containing paper bandages.

### **Ober-Langendorf**

When we arrived at this building, which was to serve as hospital for prisoners-of-war incapable of continuing on foot, the place was shut up. Mentzel sent someone to the Burgermeister, and eventually he, in the company of a nun, appeared and opened the house. Our party, the first of many to arrive here, numbered roughly 14 or 15 men. Only one medical orderly was with us, an Australian, and he had no equipment apart from a pair of scissors, two or three bandages, and some ointment. To the best of my knowledge, none of this party was suffering from any dangerous illness. Debility, frostbite, and general bad conditions accounted for, I believe, all of us. The building into which we were put was the largest in the village of Ober-Langendorf. Later, I found out that it had originally been the home of the Cardinal, later being converted to the use of Prison-camp for French Officer prisoners-of-war. After this, it had been turned into a "Reserv-Lazarett" for wounded German soldiers, and my informant thought that VD cases had been dealt with there. The building had three main floors. The ground floor consisted of empty rooms, which had obviously been used at one time for the purposes of administration required in the German hospital. Half of the ground floor was taken up by a stone-flagged corridor running almost the full length of the building. The first floor was divided off into wards, and the beds, which had been used by the German wounded, were still there. This floor alone, I feel sure, could have comfortably bedded a few hundred sick. The top floor, also, I understood, contained beds, but this part of the house was placed out of bounds for us, and was later in the week given over to refugees. What I wish to convey is that there was ample room in the house as a whole for the accommodation of several hundred sick, and that the first floor, equipped as it was with beds, palliasses, and a certain amount of crude hospital furniture, was left deliberately unoccupied. On our arrival, one room – of fair size – was allotted us by the NCO placed in charge of the so-called hospital by the Oberstabsarzt. This man was of a rank known as "Sonderführer", a rank usually associated with the administration of a camp. The only apparent qualification which this "Sonderführer" had was that he could speak Russian. He had no medical knowledge. After herding us into this room, the Germans arranged for bundles of straw to be brought, and we spread this on the floor for our beds. The Russians lay down on one side of the room, and we British on the other. The senior British soldier there, a CSM Leader, of, I believe, the Yorks. and Lancs., asked me to perform the duties of interpreter. It was in that capacity that I came to know much of what was going on in Ober-Langendorf, and it was this that was ultimately responsible for my being sent back to march.

During the night, more men began to arrive, and before the morning the room in which we were was greatly over-crowded. In the course of the morning, parties of Russians and British arrived at frequent intervals, and were pushed into the existing available accommodation by the German guards. when the congestion became extreme, the

Sonderführer opened other rooms. He did not pursue the logical course, and send the new arrivals into the newly-opened rooms; he worked on some obscure system of his own, and kept shifting British sick from one room to another, allowing them hardly two hours peace in the one place. By this time - perhaps afternoon of the day following our own arrival - several cases of dangerous illness were in the building. One, in particular, was plainly in agony. This young man was called Kenneth Knight, and was a member of a working party composed entirely of prisoners taken in Normandie. He could hardly breathe, and was unable to speak. Several other serious cases came in at the time. My memory is not sufficiently retentive to enable me to say to the day, on which day a particular case arrived, but, as I was there for only a week, the margin of error is not great.

I should like, at this point, to insert a brief description of the Russian "doctor". A doctor is usually a man of culture, and, however callous his surroundings, one can usually tell, no matter what the nationality of the individual concerned, whether he behaves in the manner expected of a medical man. We all agreed that this man was not to be trusted with any really sick person. His appearance was that of a ruffian, he had the hands of a navvy, and he was far too well thought-of by the Germans to be trusted. My initial impression of him was confirmed when I saw him perform his first operation. A young Englishman came in, suffering from a swollen condition of the right leg. He was plainly in a dangerous state, and, the British medical orderly not being prepared to risk doing anything for which he was not qualified, we were obliged to allow the Russian to examine him. He had the man laid out on a table in an adjoining room, and, with the assistance of a Russian orderly, who himself died a couple of days later, he operated on the soldier's leg. He had no anaesthetic, and his instruments consisted of a razor and a pair of scissors. After obtaining a certain amount of puss from the leg, he had the patient laid out again on the straw. He - the Russian - then examined Kenneth Knight. After a cursory examination, he pronounced his verdict..."Lungenentzündung", or pneumonia. No treatment, beyond a small cup of wine, offered by one of the nuns who hung about the village, was given this man. On the orders of the Sonderfuhrer, however, Knight and other seriously ill men were shifted up stairs and down, not once, but several times. By this time one or two other British medical orderlies had arrived, and they joined the first<sup>3</sup> one in tending to the sick. They, through me, made repeated protests to the Sonderfuhrer about the way the ill men were being shifted about, and especially in the case of Knight, who was plainly in extremis. The German, however, maintained that he had his orders from the Oberstabsarzt, and that he could do nothing of his own accord. I was prepared to believe this, for, his rank being but equivalent to that of a British corporal, he had little or no authority apart from that which he derived from the German officer concerned. All of our protests in the case of Kenneth Knight were in vain. Nothing was done for this man to ease his suffering, and as far as I know, he was given no drugs. He died on the day following his admission to the building, his decease hastened, in my opinion, by the incessant shifting upstairs and down. CSM Leader and I went along to the Sonderführer's office, and told him of the death. He expressed regret, and added that the Russian thought the man would have died no matter what attention he had received, as his heart was in poor condition. Knight was given a funeral of the type accorded British prisoners; no complaint could be made about their treatment of the man after his decease. CSM Leader made arrangements for the

transmission to his parents of the few personal belongings which he had on him at the time of his death, although it was realised that some considerable period would elapse before the Red Cross could be informed of the occurrence.

Towards the end of the week during which I was at the "hospital" serious cases of all kinds were crushed into the ground-floor rooms. As I have already mentioned, the first floor had spacious accommodation and beds for a large number of men, but, after the first day or so, we were not allowed to set foot there. All of the sick, Russians and British, were obliged to find space for themselves on the floors of the rooms at the bottom of the building. In the room in which I was sleeping, the cases included one of pleurisy, an extremely bad case of snow-blindness, and we had also a young Canadian suffering from brain trouble which caused him to get up from bed on the floor, and, sometimes in the middle of the night, wander around the room in a state of delirium. At one time, this man had a temperature of the kind usually called "extremely dangerous". Annexed to my room, and through which we had to walk in order to obtain exit, was a small room less than half the size of mine. Into this room were crushed the worst of the ill. The youngster who had his leg slit open by the Russian lay there on the straw, his wound exposed. More than one case of pneumonia lay there, one of whom I remember distinctly because of the manner in which he was continually moaning. Others there were so weak that they had to be helped by the orderlies to stagger the two or three yards to the bucket placed in the room. Later, the number of seriously ill increased so much that the Sonderführer was obliged to allow the room next to this small one to be used exclusively for sick who required constant attention. Here, again, the decisions made by the Germans fluctuated so much that men with serious conditions were shifted from one room to another.

The conditions under which the British prisoners had to live in Ober-Langendorf were bad: they could not even approximate in vileness, however, to those in which the Russians were forced to lie. No Russian was allowed into a room. They were numerically stronger than us, and consequently had more cases of serious sickness. The long stone corridor which I have already mentioned was the only accommodation accorded the Russian prisoners. Straw was thinly scattered over the flagstones, and they were crushed into this in a manner hardly imaginable. More and more of these men were arriving daily, and no additional accommodation was made available for their reception. They lay on both sides of the corridor, crushed together in such a manner that they could not move without disturbing the whole row, and they could find no bed space except the foot-wide passageway which they were forced to leave down the centre, having to pull their legs up to do this. No Russian was allowed into the building at all unless he was obviously in bad condition. The various types of illness were in no way segregated from one another; there were men suffering from black and swollen legs and feet, frostbitten because they had been marching for weeks through snow and ice with no covering for their feet apart from pieces of sacking, and perhaps straw placed in their clogs. Many had frostbitten hands, and could do nothing for themselves. Even to the eye of one untrained in medical matters, many of these Russians were plainly dying. A few sat and moaned all day; some had to proceed to the filthy latrine on their hands and knees. The worst case that I saw was that of a very young man, perhaps of seventeen or eighteen, who was sitting on a chair placed in the foot-wide

passage. He was being held from behind by a Russian orderly, and was being attended to at the front by another. This man was screaming at the top of his voice, and struggled as the Russian in front of him worked with some rough sort of instrument on his stomach. Later I learned that he had had several pistol bullets fired into him by a guard on the road. Common to all the Russian prisoners was their lousy condition, and the smell that assailed one on emerging from the British quarters was sickening.

As explained, I had been acting as interpreter during my week at Ober-Langendorf, the CSM and I going many times in the course of the day to the Sonderführer, making complaints and attempting to get things improved. It was inevitable that, in the course of these activities, I should run foul of the Russian so-called doctor, for, whenever a medical query was put to the German, he referred to the Russian "Artz, who had, he said, the full authority of the Oberstabsartz to act in any way he thought fit. Conversation with the Russian was almost impossible, for he spoke neither German nor English. His callous behaviour incensed me, and I had many rows with him. I conveyed to him the conviction I had that he was not a doctor, but a medical orderly, and this led ultimately to my being sent away from the place. The circumstances were these. One of the British orderlies came to me, and asked me to go along and speak to the Sonderführer. One of the British patients was in violent pain, and the Russian "doctor" had pronounced as his diagnosis appendicitis. The orderly was anxious that an effort be made to obtain proper medical attention for the man. The Sonderführer was adamant; if the man had appendicitis then the Russian "Artz" would operate. On hearing this, I went in search of the Russian, who conveyed to me that he had not said that the man was suffering from appendicitis. I abused him as best I could, and left him. That afternoon, a clearance of British and Russians was made, to provide space for incoming batches, and the Russian pronounced me fit to walk. In this manner, I left Ober-Langendorf.

Mentzel, apart from the time he opened the hospital up, appeared thereafter on only one occasion. Then, he made a tour of the patients, giving them a cursory look. It must have been plain to him that many were in serious condition, some obviously in pain. His visit resulted in no change of conditions. During my stay there, and, I believe owing to the agitation of the CSM and myself, another German Stabsartz had paid us two short visits. He seemed to be a man of culture and, when he was there, dealt with the worst of the British sick. He cleaned up the leg on which the Russian had operated, and said that he would see what he could do about shifting some of the worst of the British sick. Nothing transpired. Mentzel's second visit followed upon those of this doctor.

## Appendix

It may be argued that conditions were, during this time, far from easy for the Germans themselves. This is not entirely true. Ober-Langendorf was far removed from the advancing Russian line, and lay in one of the last areas of Eastern Europe to fall into Russian hands. Life in the village itself, apart from a moderate influx of refugees, was going on more or less as usual. Several towns of fair size lay in the neighbourhood; Sternberg and Neustadt are two. These towns could have supplied some medical attention for the sick, and I feel sure that, for the very worst, hospital accommodation could have been arranged, had the will to do so been there. Inside the building itself, accommodation was left deliberately congested. The whole of the first floor, with its beds, was left unoccupied. There came, ultimately, a small number of refugees to the house, but they were housed on the top floor. The horrible congestion of the ground floor could have been immensely relieved by allowing the badly ill to sleep on the beds of the first floor, leaving these who could look after themselves down below.

The Sonderführer, although he was never helpful, had, I believe, little or no authority to make dramatic changes. His job was to register the incoming and outgoing men, to attend to the food (soup, made with potatoes in their skins, and a small quantity of meat) and apart from these duties, he appeared to be powerless. On complaints being made to him, he invariably said, "What can I do? The Oberstabsarzt has made these arrangements, not me." The attitude of Mentzel towards the Russians was nothing unusual; it was typical of the way the Germans in general looked upon them. Even during the march of June, 1940, however, I saw nothing to compare with the filthy and squalid conditions under which the British sick were compelled to live at this "hospital". The gross congestion could have been alleviated, had Mentzel given the order. We once asked the Sonderführer to try to obtain the services of a British MO, as we knew that several marching columns were in the vicinity, and almost every one of them had a British doctor with it. Mentzel refused to send for one of these doctors. None of the British patients had at this time lice. The Russians, on the other hand, were moving with them. It looked at times, as if the Germans were deliberately blind to the chances of typhus.

It is not my intention to convey the impression that, at a mere word, Dr. Mentzel could have changed Ober-Langendorf into a model hospital. Although his powers were not unlimited, he was plainly the last authority as far as the treatment of the sick prisoners was concerned. He could have arranged for the worst of the sick, at least, to be removed from the building, and given the German NCO in charge authority to open the first-floor rooms for the reception of others. Beside this, he paid the place only two visits during the week I was there, one of which was made when there were only fourteen or fifteen men there. I do not believe that he devoted his time to the men who were still marching. The medical attention accorded those who fell sick on the way was either given by ourselves, or was encouragement from the rifle butts of the guards.

Stalag VIIIb at Teschen, was the camp which supplied most of the prisoners for the Silesian coal-mines. 40,000 Russians were, I believe, administered from there, as well as some 15,000 British and other nationalities. The great majority of these men were employed in the coal-mines of the Beuthen-Gleiwitz-Kattowitz area. Mentzel was the chief medical officer of the Stalag, and through his hands passed every man before going to the mines.