

“While the kettle boils”

Part 2 – Between the armistice and leaving Dänholm

11 November 1918

“A deputation from the Soldier’s and Sailors Council arrived in the camp in the morning and promptly deposed all the Hun Officers, deputing Muller, Canteen Sergeant to take charge! The soccer trial in the afternoon resulted in a drawn game”. This was Captain Wilkinson’s entry in his diary, while Witherington notes were a little more detailed. Sgt. Muller had not only been in charge of the canteen but also the chickens.



Roll-call was taken at 4.30pm by the Senior Feldwebel otherwise known as “Harry Tate” who had charge of the bookstall and bread shop. *“He requested that all officers should turn up on parade as previously and that no demonstration be made. We should be released earliest possible”*. Walking round the camp Witherington had seen the former Commandant and other senior officers *“in civis, looking very miserable and frightened. They had been dismounted of sword, arms, badges etc”*. The inmates, now former prisoners of war, then spent the rest of the afternoon getting all their remaining tins out of the store. Lieutenant Colonel Moss-Blundell¹ took over from Colonel Hill as Senior British Officer. He called all the hut commanders together at 9 that evening and informed them *“Commandant and adj. remained in camp nominally in charge but with no power. Other officers have gone”*. He continued *“a wire has already been sent to Copenhagen to send a boat for us and they will get us away earliest possible. Letters and parcels will be delivered uncensored”*. Lights were put out by the guards at 10.30.

“we expected to leave at any time”

It appears that there were some concerns initially about giving offence to the local population once the terms for the armistice were known, and Witherington wrote on 12 November that *“games and concerts stopped”*. Next to this entry was however noted *“later cancelled”* and the idea of a self-imposed restriction of activities can have lasted only a few hours as the planned rugby match “Island trial” took place at 3 in the afternoon. Witherington appears to have been in the new SBO’s “inner circle” and this snippet is perhaps an example of how they discussed all possibilities for getting things off to a good start in the new circumstances. They even argued about the advisability of putting on concerts. Previously they were only

¹ On photo Captain Arthur Simpson Witherington is standing behind Lieutenant Colonel Moss-Blundell

allowed to have 25 spectators at those sporting activities which took place on the football field outside the barbed wire, now everyone who wanted could watch. Although they were asked not to cheer! Entrance was given to the Red Cross. And the concerts continued too. However when the planned series of lectures came to an end with a history lecture on *"The growth of representative government in England and the influence of the Crown"* no more were arranged. A memorial /thanksgiving service was held on the morning of Friday 15 November. According to de Renzy Martin it was well attended for a week day with *"300-400 men out of a total of 800"*. It was special too in that *"Williams², the English chaplain of Berlin also arrived unexpectedly, so we had Holy Communion after the service & quite 200 partook."*

Rumour ran rife; they were to be *"leaving, first, last, direct by sea, via France, via Denmark, Holland etc."* There were lots of letters too; Witherington received 11 on the 12th, 3 on 13th and 16 on 14th! So many letters were handed out that de Renzy Martin³, normally very self-controlled, let loose in his diary about the Germans *"Not only their upper classes seem overbearing but also the ordinary lower middle and lower classes. The veneer of civility & civilization with them is all very thin. Our interpreters here are an example: for 2 days now letters have been given out uncensored – one man says there's nine thousand there in their office – another says they are all given out. Food bribes are necessary to get one's letters! For months the German officers have tried to assure us that letters are given out without delay, but from the thousands now being issued, it is evident that they lied. It seems to me that all Germans prefer to lie!"* Parcels got through. Wilkinson wryly remarked at it being late in the day for his parcel of shorthand and bookkeeping books while there is no doubt that Witherington could immediately put to use the two parcels he received from Copenhagen with 36 eggs, 50 cigarettes, 2 pots butter, cheese, jam and sugar lumps.

The church service on Sunday 17th was conducted by 2Lt Glover, East Yorkshire Regiment and was according to Witherington a *"better service than ever while padres here"*. Glover had been a POW since November 1916 and was in the group of officers sent to Aachen for repatriation but subsequently sent back into Germany, to Dänholm, in August 1918. There was a football game in the afternoon Officers v. Orderlies. Wilkinson played for the officers and, somewhat peeked, noted in his diary that he was told *"to play the game"* by an orderly. He thought it a poor match but the officers did win by 2-1. The first week of peace came to end.



Major Basil Barton

The men were now allowed to walk outside the barbed wire, except in a few specified areas, during daylight, between 9 am and 4.30 pm. Talking more openly with the Germans it became clear to them, the *"terrible conditions of starvation in Germany"* and when asked by an interpreter for spare bread tickets after he had seen British officers lighting cigarettes with them they gave him several. Witherington exchanged one of his tins for a Stralsund postcard from an interpreter, sent his dirty laundry out to be washed and in his hut they collected food for their guard Feldwebel Heidelberg who was leaving. On Monday 18th Major Barton took surplus food from the camp to the hospital in Stralsund and brought back with him a bottle of brandy and a dog!

² Chaplain Henry Morrison Williams

³ Winifred de Renzy Martin's handwriting was so flowing that when a word ended –ing it looked like a dash. A later family anecdote was that *"This was thought to be some sort of code and none of her letters were delivered"*.

Another off on a mission of mercy was 21 year old Lt Chance, RAF, who many years later remembered⁴ *"We were told that there were some Russian officer prisoners locked up in an Asylum near Stralsund and I was asked by our Senior Officer to accompany him on a visit arranged by our captors as I could speak Russian, by this time quite fluently. Our Senior Officer was taken into one of the wards and was told by the German Superintendent that the Russians - who were in beds between two genuine mental cases, were suffering from various kinds of mental illnesses. Following behind, I was able to converse with several of the Russians - one of whom told me he had been sent to the Asylum as a punishment for having made several attempts to escape. Poor fellows - we could do little to help them and one hesitates to imagine what were their ultimate fates, either in German hands or in the hands of the Bolshevicks if they got back to Russia."*

It appears that 20 November was a general holiday in Germany, according to Witherington "Martin Luther day". No parcels or wood were handed out in the camp. It was also the day the pow library closed.⁵ It had been a great success with a membership of 1174, 250 of whom were orderlies. Members paid a joining fee and subscription, and out of the final financial balance the library presented 1576 marks to the Y.M.C.A. in appreciation for the many books they had given. The library's books; 1893 English, 311 French and 372 German were distributed among the members of the library.

De Renzy Martin turned once again to his diary to let off steam *"Moss-Blundell a Terr[itorial] gunner took over S.B.O. from Hill on the armistice being signed. He & Pollitt are always raising scares & both show very unbalanced minds for military matters. Their first scare was over a plan to defend ourselves from our guards if they turned on us! Then agitated to get away from here in a body by private arrangements instead of through the Kriegsministerium's offices. Now Pollitt is trying to go on his own! They both, as did several younger so called officers frequently forgot that we are p. of w & were not only exorbitant but rude in their demands to the Germans for privileges etc! There are many cases here daily which show that officers cannot be made in a few years!"* Frustrations were growing and *"Waiting for the boat to come for us a slow job!"*



⁴ Sir William Hugh Stobart Chance wrote his memoirs of being a pow in September 1970.
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/whs_chance_5

⁵ "A Prisoner-of-War Library" by Luxmoore Newcombe and John H.E. Winston 1919

⁶ Postcard courtesy of Cpt. Christie's family.

“Tophole being out of wire again”.

Two days later they woke to the first hard frost, but this didn't stop Witherington walking around the island and watching the train on the ferry going over to Rügen; *“Tophole being out of wire again”*. Bread was issued and letters and parcels were still arriving for lucky individuals. Witherington received 5 letters and 2 parcels, one with clothing including woollen gloves for which the timing was perfect. 3 cases of wine arrived for Wilkinson's roommate Southern and naturally this was shared with his friends. Major Norman Southern MC, RFA, a 34 year old bachelor, had been taken prisoner 27 May 1918. By profession a solicitor he took, according to Wilkinson, a prominent part in the *“great arguments”* they had at night in their room. Southern apparently a *“dreamer”* was a willing participant in their frequent *“high-browed”* discussions, one assumes about a world at peace.⁷ He gave, like so many others, food from his parcels to guards he had befriended to give to their children. Southern and his roommates weren't the only ones enjoying themselves over a bottle or two, in the next door room they too *“drank wine and were very rowdy”*. They had reason to celebrate, although they could hardly believe it. The news had spread that the first group was to leave Dänholm on 27th travelling from Sassnitz by boat. This batch was to be composed of 600 officers; those captured before 27th May 1918 and the number made up of others in alphabetical order, and 150 orderlies. Roll-call was cancelled henceforth.

The weather continued frosty but sunny. The list of names was put up and, given their names, neither Witherington nor Wilkinson were on it. It was understood that one should keep busy. Wilkinson did a sketch of Rügen while Witherington exercised at an outdoor P.T. class, with Lt. Brown as instructor. Wilkinson gave the concert a miss while Witherington thought it was a good show. Obviously in good spirits he put *“Oxo, bully and biscuits”* on their room's window sill for their guard. The next day all spare food in the camp was collected by a committee as journey rations in preparation for the 27th, while all spare biscuits

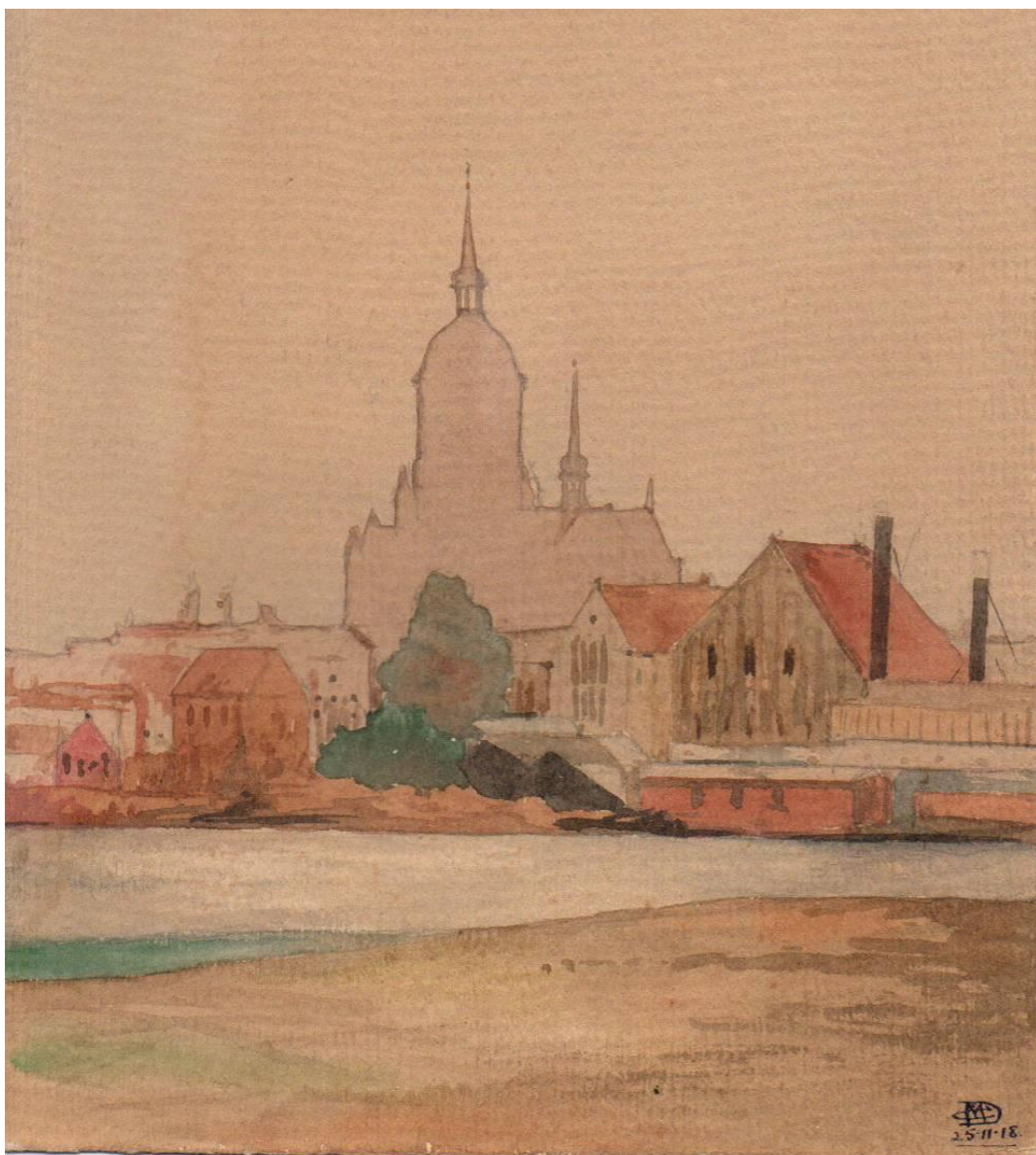


went for distribution to the most deserving in Stralsund. With departure close, the formalities of camp life became even more relaxed, no guards were seen about at night, officers walked outside at all hours and they were themselves responsible for turning out their own lights at 11 pm.

Captain James Christie⁸, Gordon Highlanders shot in both right arm and leg was taken prisoner on 11 April 1918. Years later he told his son *“they weren't taking prisoners and started shooting their captives”* then *“he was about to be shot but, at the last moment, rifle pointing at his head, a German officer pushed it aside.”* Christie's subsequent medical treatment went well and they managed to save his leg, although he was awarded a disability pension and his wound pained him the rest of his life. Christie's family still have a number of items which he took home with him incl. a photo of a group of German “Red Cross orderlies”.

⁷ According to his grandson; after the war a solicitor in Newcastle Norman Southern “gave his time free one day a week and was one of the few solicitors in Newcastle that represented conscientious objectors”.

⁸ Photo courtesy Captain Christie's family



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Hope of departing Dänholm on 27th lasted two days, and then the Sassnitz orders were cancelled. However the 3 wagon loads of bread and biscuits were still sent to the needy of Stralsund. Only 60 boxes reached their intended destination as a hungry mob helped themselves to the rest whilst the wagons were en-route. At the camp everyone received an emergency parcel in the afternoon. The weather was beastly cold but walking around the islands had become a popular pastime and it appears that more than one inmate sketched the views. Christie took a charming souvenir of this day home with him, a watercolour of Stralsund which had been painted on cardboard, perhaps from a parcel. He wasn't the artist. Two of DMC¹⁰'s sketches had been used in "The Outlook". Witherington got his cleaned laundry back, at the cost of 3.25 marks.

⁹ Painting curtesy of Cpt. Christie's family

¹⁰ Not identified yet

In fact a group of former pows were picked up from Sassnitz on 27 November and taken to Copenhagen. These were the last 563 civilian internees from Ruhleben and several 100 soldiers from camps in the Brandenburg area. At Copenhagen they were placed straight onboard "J.C. La Cour" and "A.P. Bernsdorff" and sailed to Leith arriving on 30th.

While some had expected the first departure to be cancelled, accepting that the repatriation of pows was a large logistic operation that would take some time to be organized, others felt a growing frustration over the delay. De Renzy Martin monitoring their situation wrote *"Pollitt is now urging young officers to 'take control' over the boche & run the camp & I think it is he who is urging that officers should go off on their own on Dec 4th if arrangements have not been made for us to go before!"*. Colonel Pollitt, Lancashire Fusiliers, a 40 year old who had previously attempted to escape on the 13th October when he was *"shot at and caught"*. It appears that de Renzy Martin thought of him as a trouble maker.

Lt. Sharp, RE, on the other hand made himself useful by mending the pump for the hot water, a job well done. It was much appreciated that the baths were now *"working splendidly"* and *"hot bath –best in Stralsund as worded by British orderlies. No limit to water and hot!"* What made the day even better for Witherington was another parcel with *"Steak and kidney pie, quaker oats, Horlicks, plum pudding, small café au lait, tin choc, milk, tea, sugar, milk tablet, Rowntrees plain choc"*. For a privileged few a surprising amount of effort was put in behind the scenes. Director Hovlund had presumably "adopted" Major Hill and sent him parcels. His business premises lay near those of the Danish Red Cross in Copenhagen. He had transferred 500 kr to a bank in Berlin payable to the DRC office in Berlin. One can imagine that Director Hovlund has walked over to the DRC office in Copenhagen for in a letter they sent to their office in Berlin they required them help by sending this money to Major F.R. Hill room 6 in barrack F, Dänholm. Director Hovlund was apparently insistent that the Major received the amount as soon as possible. Why the 46 year old Major Hill, Middlesex Regiment needed so much money is a mystery, perhaps he had been unlucky in a card game and the time had come to pay up!

Wilkinson mentions *"skating had started in the town"*, perhaps he had been over and joined in the fun. Permission was given by written permits for the men to visit Stralsund, at first accompanied with a member of the German camp personnel and later on *"without such attendance"*. But it appears that, even though they were warned both verbally and in writing on 17th, 27th and 29th November, this privilege was *"greatly abused"*. The officers were particularly disorderly in the town of Stralsund, and this caused frequent complaints to the police authorities and the Council of Soldiers, sent on to be addressed by the camp authorities. *"The officers got drunk, molested women, visited forbidden establishments, especially such as employed female attendants, and gave offence to the public by consorting with loose women."*¹¹

De Renzy Martin was disgusted by this behaviour *"Several officers are bringing the name of the British officer into disgrace now. Permits have been given for a few to go daily into the town with an interpreter. Some have broken away from him & got drunk & other worse crimes."* The officers were letting their hair down in camp too. Lt. Mallabar, mentioned already, was still getting drunk and Wilkinson described on the 28th *"The crowning incident of the day was the 'Entente' dinner, when all seven of us dined together – to Turnbull went the honour of being cook, and he did us well with 5 courses. After much wine, we were rather*

¹¹ "Conheeny" report

rowdy, and all sang a song from the table! To bed very late and very happy". They weren't the only ones singing much to poor de Renzy Martin's annoyance "The noise in our room or round it is terrible; orderlies singing on one side & the kitchen opposite. Work at times is almost impossible".

Owing to the officers' misconduct there was a brief stop put to visits to Stralsund and walking outside the camp limit. However the next day permission was again given when it was made clear that they had to be back in camp before dark, at the latest by 4.30. A new rumour gave the date for the first departure to be either the 5th or 8th December, and that a *"Brit hospital ship is coming with equip for us all – regulars go to Russia to fight Bol. Temp commissions to France. Territorial officers home"*. De Renzy Martin, Lt. Col. Hill and Col. Sarson got leave to visit the cemetery at Stralsund on 29th to make sure that a gravestone had been put on Pte. Howell's grave. These three knew how to behave themselves and went on into the town sightseeing. *"People were quite quiet & looked slightly better fed than when I last saw them on 10th"* and they visited St. Mary's church where de Renzy Martin, critical as usual found it ugly. However they went up the tower, all 330 steps, and enjoyed the *"fine view"*.



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30th November - the first group leave Dänholm

There was great excitement when it finally happened: 61 officers from the 2nd name list were detailed to go, within hours, on 30 November! Unfortunately I haven't got this list. Information from other sources provides the names of some of these lucky few, the first to be repatriated after the armistice from Dänholm: officers Longland, Ritchie, Christie, Heelis and possibly Marshall. Their repatriation journey is described in Appendix A. De Renzy Martin commented *"These German officers cannot be trusted an inch. They have now broken their promise & have detailed 60 offrs to go off today and of course chosen all those who should not have gone first. At the last minute they tried to send them off without their a/c books. They prefer to lie rather than to tell the truth. All these young English officers & men will require v. careful treatment in England. The offrs lose their heads at one on rumours of going off etc. & of course have v. little discipline. The men also are inclined to be troublesome having seen all this breaking up of discipline in the German Army. The German adjt told Hill today that their soldier's Council has now stopped all their Officers'*

¹² Postcard courtesy Robert Spiers Robertson archive.

pay!" And it must have felt very unfair that it was officers who had only been pows a few months, such as 2Lt. Cyril Victor Longland, taken prisoner on 8 August 1918, that were the first to go! Perhaps the logic in not taking 61 from the 1st name list is that this would have caused difficulties choosing which of them was the most "entitled" to leave first.

It was a rainy day and for those not leaving for home the good news was that a large number of parcels had turned up at the post office in Stralsund. 12 officers were detailed to go into town to deal with what turned out to be parcels consisting of 8000 loaves of bread. This of course was a disappointment for those waiting for parcels from home and Witherington not lacking in foodstuffs noted *"we could very well have done without"* them. The day's frustrations led to unrest made worst by the lack of leadership by the SBO which de Renzy Martin had already foreseen. His diary entry on 1st December *"The Germans sent off 60 officers to Stettin. A disappointed one kicked "?Habout" one of the S&S council – M.Blundell says he will not try any more to uphold discipline! How skin deep only it ever was in the Terr & new Army."* In a later report the incident was described *"The disorders in the camp increased when the transfer of 600 officers, which had been announced and arranged for, had suddenly to be postponed for a few days and 60 other officers sent off instead. Repeated threats were uttered against the Camp Commandant Major von Buse, the Cashier, Feldwebelleutnant Reichow, and Beamtenstellvertruter Hube, to the effect that they would be thrown into the water after dark and that their names should be entered on the Black list. As a matter of fact Mr. Hube did actually suffer repeated verbal abuse and personal injury at the hands of a British officer on 30th November 1918".*¹³ And *"30th November Brit officers attacked and badly mishandled non-commissioned off named Hube. Other Germans in fear of their lives."* And it wasn't just German officers that felt threatened, early in December Landsturmann Kraeft had *"an encounter with several orderlies from Hut 4 who desired to get to the town in spite of repeated prohibition".*¹⁴

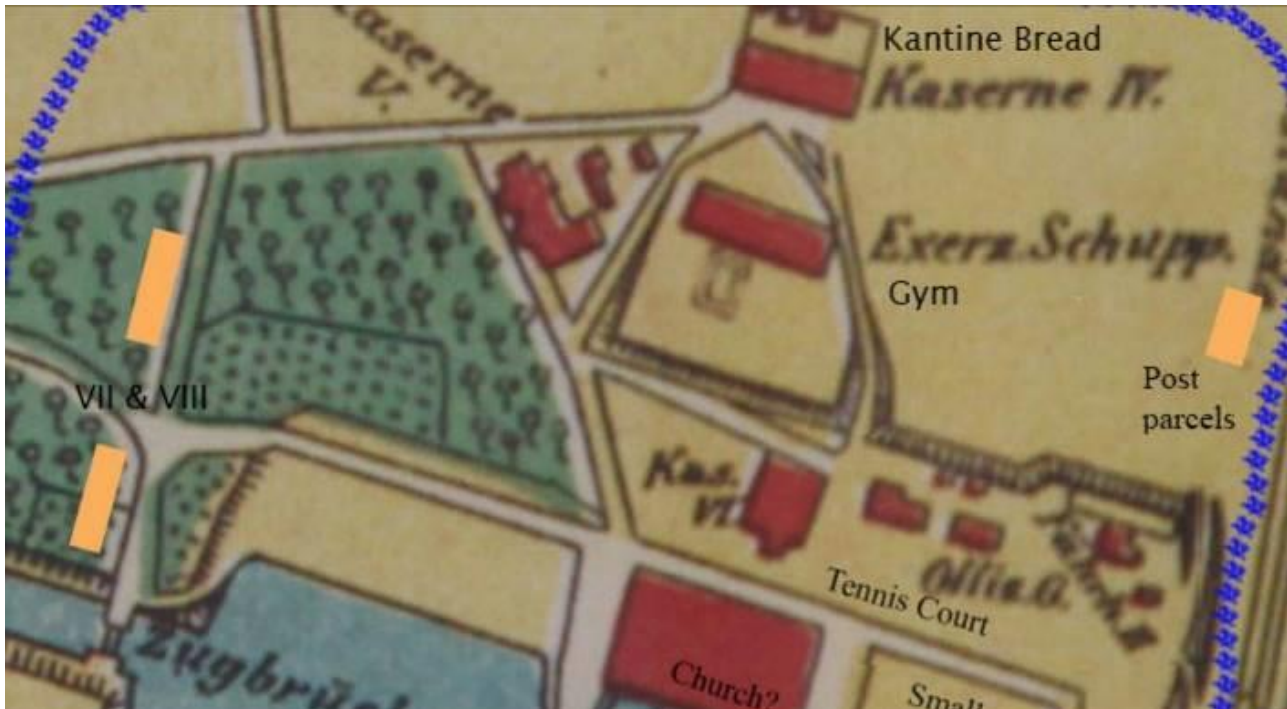
On 2nd December it was announced *"Party 601 off[icers] and 150 going 4th 5th or 6th. Reported 4th most likely date. Landing place Hull then Ripon"*. Witherington continued *"Concert got up by Roberts, best of season including 2 sketches etc. National Anthem sung which Feldwebbel Harry Tate heartily joined in. News received first party goes on Wednesday. All heavy luggage to be ready by tomorrow. Interpreters and people in pay office "struck" so volunteers working all night to have pay books ready tomorrow. Light out midnight."* De Renzi Martin enjoyed the same concert, as best he could! *"Very good concert – there are 5-6 people here with plenty of talent in singing, recitation etc. but most of them spoil it by vulgarity. There was an officer in the hall drunk, before all the orderlies etc. M. Blundell & several others did not seem to think much of it!"* The next day *"Had our lager money changed – I have 91.53 marks still to be paid – presumably in England- I was given the whole of the Church money 337marks which I must send to Y.M.C.A. The question of rate of exchange which we have been in Germany needs going into. I only got 25 marks for a £1 cheque the other day. I fear the paymaster here, ROLCHOW by name, has been making his fortune out of us."* Another "tophole" concert was put on in the evening, this time with Major Norman Southern (the dreamer) performing in a small sketch.



Major Southern

¹³ "Conheeny" report

¹⁴ "Conheeny" report



1912 map of Dänholm

4th December - "Another beastly day, livened only by a fire in the gym"

The departure date for those on the 1st name list was now set for Saturday 7th, and so the waiting game was once again on but with an end in sight. The 4th December was uneventful for most of the inhabitants of the camp and Witherington and Wilkinson's diary entries were brief, they had nothing to do with the trouble. De Renzy Martin was more explicit of the evening's events *"A party of offrs committed more hooliganisms, throwing all the sentry boxes in to the canal, tried to set fire to the gym & broke the head off the old emperor (Frederick?) off the memorial to those who fell in the 1866 & 71 putting the head opposite the comdt's office, also battering the tablet of names on the memorial & putting a pot in the place of the head."* The "hooligans" responsible were some of the young officers from the "Aachen" group. 22 year old 2Lt. Roberts, RFC, well-known for his acting and entertaining in the camp theatre, took part. In his memoirs he describes their actions, with artistic license or perhaps not wanting to recognize the correct chronology of the events, he put the shooting episode first with their actions being a consequence of it.

"But at night, in exasperation, we had a bit of a rough-house, toppling the German sentry-boxes into the sea and setting fire to one of the storehouses. The Germans telephoned for the town Fire Brigade. It was ferried across, but took a long time, so that when it arrived the fire had a nice grip. With a clanging of bells an old-fashioned horse-drawn vehicle galloped into the camp. At once the willing prisoners lent them a hand. Before the firemen had time to jump down, the horses were unharnessed and led away, not to be seen again. Dozens of willing helpers rapidly lifted the equipment off the fire-engine; hoses were unrolled, to non-existent hydrants, and the firemen's axes disappeared in the night. The excited Huns were running all over the place trying to reestablish order. When finally they got the hoses linked up, someone had found the hydrants and turned them off at the main. In the meantime some sportsmen had discovered a bucket of red paint and poured it over the statue of von Kluck, which stood outside the Kommandantur. Unfortunately, this was discovered almost immediately, and for some reason enraged the Hun much more than anything

else we had done. They started gunning about the place and driving us into our barracks. It had become extremely dangerous to put our heads out, so we called it a day. Order was restored and we carried on the next day as though nothing had happened.”¹⁵

Pte. Joseph Garvey remember what happened too in his memoirs *“One day they deliberately set fire to part of the gymnasium, rang the fire alarm and when the fire brigade arrived, gave three ironic cheers and stood by not raising a hand to put out the fire, which they had started, and while the Germans were working to put it out they impudently unloosed the horses and put them in the shafts back to front, a crowning humiliation which the Germans felt deeply”*. One report stated *“On 4th December, it came to a regular case of arson at the camp. The exercise shed where wood for sale and large quantities of paper and cardboard boxes were stored was burnt. The fire-brigade, which was summoned from the town, was received with ironical laughter, and left amid wild yells emanating from the quarters of the orderlies. While the fire was being got under (control) Landsturmann Dranger and Officierstellvertreter Grosse plainly saw how two British officers in passing a heap of paper attempted to start another fire by throwing a fuse on to it.”*

You could say this was part of a chain of events which the following day resulted in the death of a British officer and the wounding of another, in Pte. Garvey’s words *“All the fault of a few stupid men carrying officer rank”*.



Pte. Joe Garvey

The gym today



¹⁵ 2Lt. C.L. Roberts archive in Leeds

5th December – two separate attacks on officers, 12 officers escaped and “a cold-blooded murder”

As a result of the disturbances the day before the Commandant had ordered extra sentries, but they had “not been given any special orders whatsoever”. Once again it is from de Renzy Martin’s detailed diary entry we can follow his version of what happened on 5th December. *“About 1.30pm Hill went to Moss Blundell to urge him to keep discipline. Hill told me when he came back that M-B had at first considered all these acts were a fair protest but had finally agreed to issue strict orders to stop all disorderly acts- the result was a very weak letter to [?] huts. The first two paras practically condone with previous acts of indiscipline as a protest but the last para only forbids further indiscipline – I am keeping this effusion! I got it about 6pm and Sarson, Hill & I agreed – also Utterson – that we must persuade M-B to take up a stronger line of action. I assembled room comdrs & gave strict orders that orders were to be obeyed & offrs must behave as gentlemen, & not as Bolsheviks. At 8.30pm heard that 2LT Conheeny RFC had been shot dead & another officer wounded at the ferry by a German sentry at about 8pm. They had no right to be outside the wire after dark – this disobedience of orders combined with the gradual growing ill-discipline of the camp culminating in the affair of last night, which naturally irritated the German soldiers, is the cause of this sad event. Hill, Sarson & I decided that we must see M Blundell at once on Friday.”*

Witherington wrote in his diary of the evening’s tragedy “8-8.30 pm 2 shots we heard fired. Sentry at ferry shot at officers at crossroads who were walking round the island –one (an American, said to be influential) killed instantaneously and another wounded through the leg. 4 officers swear no challenge, but sentry declares he challenged, that officers threw stones – most inoffensive men – the wounded officer was kneeling tending killed off. when shot. Tremendous indignation. Sentry under arrest. A cold blooded murder.” The dead officer was 2Lt. Conheeny¹⁶, and Lt. J.C. Culver was wounded in the leg.

As if this wasn’t enough for one day “Maj Hillman RE & 11 other officers in spite of orders of British representatives through Mr. Abrahamson at Berlin, went off to Copenhagen or Sweden in a sailing boat. I believe they actually started about 8pm.” The group of 12 was made up of 4 officers from the Aachen group, while of the other 8, one was South African, another was Australian and 2 had been involved in the camp magazine “The Outlook”. Their repatriation journey can be seen in Appendix A. On this day of tragedy, whilst Witherington and his roommates were tucked up in bed ready to fall asleep at 11.30, others for some reason or other were apparently outside. Bad feelings and tempers were running high. “In addition to above about 11.30 Lt. Nathan had been assaulted by sentry who had put rifle against Nathan’s chest and was only prevented from doing harm by another sentry who came upon the scene.” Lt. Nathan, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, a 22 year old Londoner had been taken prisoner in May 1917. George Samuel Montgomery Nathan, who later worked under cover for British Intelligence in Ireland and was killed in the Spanish Civil War, is thought to have been homosexual. In another incident the same evening Captain Gasson, Northumberland Fusiliers “in a place where they were not forbidden to be and without warning”, also reported being similarly attacked.

What had happened?

Immediately after the shooting incident enquiries were made by both the British and Germans into what had happened, and to determine if charges could be made against the German guard who had killed 2Lt. Conheeny. 27 year old Gerald Conheeny, whose father was a coal miner, had emigrated with his family from Wigan to Newport, USA when he was 8. It is noted on his medal card that he joined the 6th Dragoon

¹⁶ Conheeny is spelt Coheeny, Colheeny, Conheeny in diverse documents.

Guards and served in France from 15 September 1916. Later he was commissioned as a 2Lt. in the 1/5bn King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment. He was taken prisoner on 8 April 1918 and arrived at Dänholm from Rastatt on 29th July. 2. Lt. Culver 10th Essex Regiment had been taken prisoner 21 March 1918 and arrived at Dänholm a week later on the 4 August from Karlsruhe. 26 year old Joseph Culver came from Plaistow and had been a printer before the war. The two were presumably roommates.

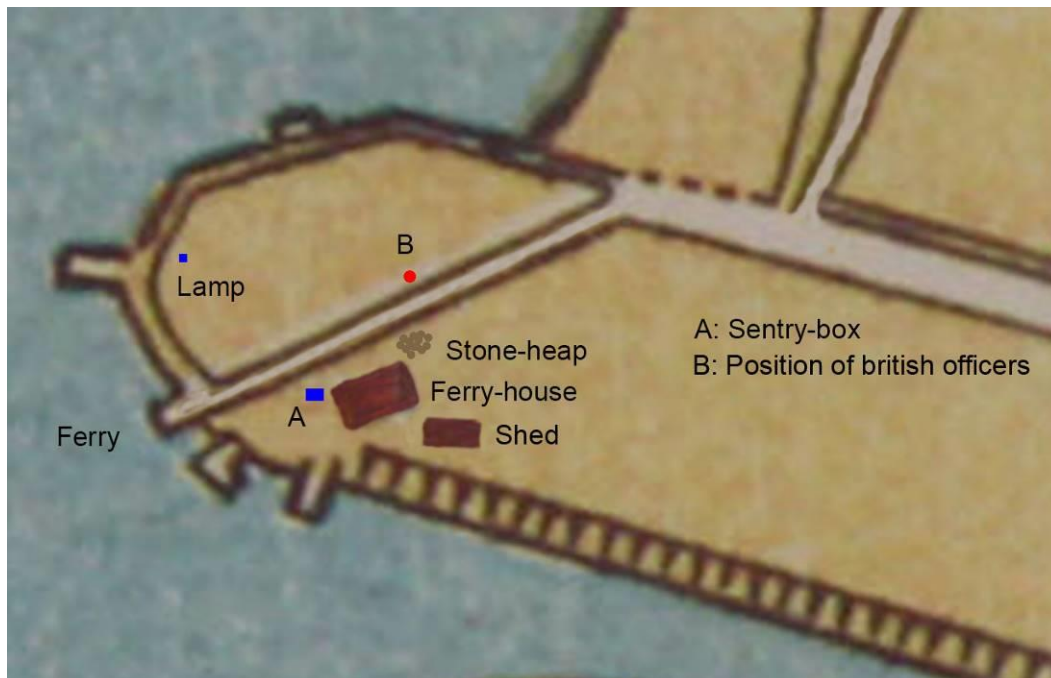
The Germans took action immediately after the shooting taking statements from the sentry and the German witnesses. Further interviews by the German authorities took place early next morning. The site of the shooting was examined and orders were given for an inquest to be held on Conheeny and for proceedings for murder to be instituted against the sentry. At the same time Lt. Col. Moss- Blundell ordered a Court of Enquiry to collect evidence made up of president Lt. Col. P.R.O.A. Simner, D.S.O., 10th West Yorkshire Regiment, and members Lt. Col G.C.H. Twiss, D.S.O., 15th West Yorkshire Regiment, Captain W.T. Cave 20th London Regiment and Capt. & Adj. Charles Gasson. They took statements from the wounded Culver and 8 British witnesses; Captain Andrew Scobie Findlay, RAMC, 2Lt. Frederick William Handley Lambert, South Staffordshire Regiment, Lt. Edward Arthur Lister, 5th Yorkshire Regiment, Lt. John Handley, RAF, 2Lt. John Victor Bowring, RAF, 2Lt. Thomas Richard Vivian Hill, RFC, Lt. Alfred Halkyard, 8th Leicester Regiment, and 2Lt. Harold Ray Whiteman, RFA. They all told more or less the same story, with only minor inconsistencies.



After the restrictions had been removed it had been common practice for the officers to take a walk around the island between 8 and 9 in the evening. The sentries had always been well disposed and often said "Guten Abend". The weather had been calm that evening and after eating their meal 4 officers from hut VI had gone for a walk, Conheeny and Culver walking together, with Lister and Lambert walking 30 yards behind them. The road out of the camp ended at the ferry and was out of bounds for them, but they could branch off to the right on the road that circled back to the camp. The crime scene details, as shown on a sketch made at the inquiry, drawn onto the Dänholm map clarifies where the involved were when the shooting took place.

2. Lt. Culver stated *"We left the camp by the big gate at the east end of Barrack VIII. This gate was wide open and there was no sentry on it. We proceeded on to the road leading down to the ferry. 2nd. Lt. Conheeny and I were in front. There were several officers walking up and down this road. We were both in uniform. It was our intention to turn to the right into the road that leads round the island. On other*

occasions we have met a sentry somewhere near this road. On this occasion we met no sentry and missed the turning in the dark. We must have gone a few yards beyond the road junction because I could see the light by the ferry. Almost immediately after I saw this light I heard a rifle shot. It came from the direction of the ferry. There was no challenge whatever. I am absolutely certain of that. It was a fairly still night. I said "Hello someone is firing we had better go back". We at once turned to go back. Conheeney said "I will do up my bootlace" and stopped. I went slowly on towards the camp. I then stopped and two more shots rang out. The first one hit Conheeney and he shouted "I am hit Joe". I turned round and said "All right I am coming". The other shot hit me in the leg before I could move towards him. I saw the flash from the rifle. It came apparently from the direction of the little house by the ferry. I fell down and crawled away shouting out to the others "Conheeney is hit and so am I".



Captain Findlay R.A.M.C. explained in his statement that he had been summoned by Lt. Cook "I met a party carrying an officer wearing a British uniform and directed them to take him into a room in Barrack VIII. I examined him there and found he was dead. On information received I then went and examined another British officer in the same barrack. This was Lt. Culver. He was wearing British uniform. I found that he was suffering from a gunshot wound in the right thigh. The bullet had entered the inner part of the thigh, passed right through just behind the femur and had come out on the outer side of the middle of the thigh. I dressed the wound and returned to examine the dead officer. I recognized him a Lieut. Conheeney. I discovered a gunshot wound in the upper part of the body. The bullet had entered behind the right shoulder and passing through the upper part of the chest had made its exit behind the left shoulder. Death was certainly due to this gunshot wound."

Lt. J.C. Culver was taken to lazaret Schlossgarten in Stralsund.

Further inquiries were made and evidence collected over the next couple of days. Representatives of the Netherland Legation headed by Ridder von Rappard arrived from Berlin on 9th and a report was made with accounts of the incident given by both the German sentry and the British. On 10th December the indictment

against the sentry had been formulated and the date for his public trial fixed to take place at Stralsund on 20th December.

The accused was Landsturmmann Alfred Kraeft. He had been a guard at Dänholm for over two years and as he explained he had countless times been on duty where the incident took place, was thoroughly acquainted with his duties and on a former occasion had not fired on two officers attempting to escape. He had a couple of days previously, had *“an encounter with several orderlies”* and, this time he had ended up acting in self-defence. The path to the ferry was used by German officers and camp personnel, so he hadn't in any way shot blindly into the darkness. He stated that he had called out when recognizing them as British officers and after the first large stone flew past his head had shot, then fired into the air to alarm the watch and then fired a third time when he saw another of the officers bending down. He feared that other officers would come round behind him and attack. Kraeft was apparently short-sighted and according to his superiors a very bad shot who never hit a target. He had never previously been punished.

The ferryman Gottschalk living in the house by the stone heap had been at home having his supper with his family when the shooting incident occurred. They had not heard the guard call *“Halt”* but as he explained there was often shouting going on near the ferry and they would have taken no notice. On hearing the shots he went outside and spoke to Kraeft. Kraeft said to Gottschalk *“I was not going to let myself be stoned to death”*. Two ferrymen were transporting two Feldwebel over to Stralsund when they heard shots fired. They returned immediately to see what was going on. None of the four had heard the sentry calling *“Halt”*, but wouldn't have done because of the noise of the *“rowing and splashing of the water”* and because there was a high wind blowing.

Culver had admitted to having been in a spot that was out of bounds even in daylight, but by mistake. All were agreed that it had been very dark and only a few lights were lit, but whether it had been windy or not, whether the sentry had called and they hadn't heard his warning to stop or not, and whether Conheeny had bent down to tie his bootlace or bent down picked up a stone and thrown it, were the points of question.

It appears that the identity of the sentry was withheld from the British officers in Dänholm during the first days after the shooting. The reason being that it had obviously caused a great deal of unrest in the camp, which had led to the assembly of crowds with a very threatening attitude. SBO Lt. Col. Moss-Blundell had

described the sentry as a murderer.



The camp authorities were concerned for the safety of Kraeft's life. Kraeft was in particular danger as he was the owner of a shop bearing his name in one of the most frequented streets of Stralsund, and the British officers could easily have found his business.

Postcard courtesy R. Spiers Robertson archive



Lt. Col. de Renzy Martin¹⁷

6th December

This was all obviously a nightmare for SBO Moss-Blundell, who as we have seen from de Renzy Martin's diary was already having great difficulty maintaining discipline especially amongst the Aachen officers. It is as if he had given up, hoping that the wilder they were the quicker they would be repatriated. After ordering the Court of Inquiry Moss-Blundell opened his door to a group of 8 officers, including de Renzy Martin who wanted him to assert more control. *"Hill, Sarson, Fisher, Christian, Utterson, Ballie-Hamilton, Gell & I went to M Blundell at 10.30am. On the way we talked to Pollitt who has been urging officers to ask for more liberties & not to obey the Germans. He is a v dangerous man, selfish & [?] to lead young fellows astray as well as excitable & disloyal. He cannot see that any bad discipline has been shown here! Hill spoke v tactfully pointing out that we wanted more discipline enforced – M B's whole attitude for some time has been that he condones with & agrees in the system of lawlessness to German orders as a protest to their not granting our requests. He told the German comdt some days ago that he would no longer be responsible for discipline. His whole argument was weak, as was his letter last night to the hut cmdts & he cannot see the stigma thrown on the name of British offrs or the disgrace to them as gentlemen by drunken & disorderly behaviour. I told him I could not read the first two paras of his letter to my offrs as the views are so weak. He said it was easy to be wise after the event so I had to say we had decided to see him on the receipt of the letter before the death of the offr. Hill asked him to speak to all the offrs which he did at 5pm."* Whilst this was going on a new standby order had been circulated at 9am. The 1st group of named officers were to be ready to *"entrain and proceed to Stettin"* at 1pm, and they all packed up ready to go. This was cancelled at 3.30pm.

Lt. Col. Moss-Blundell assembled everyone in the gym at 5pm and according to Wilkinson gave *"a lecture on discipline - very necessary at this time"*. It didn't live up to what de Renzy Martin had hoped for *"Again, though he touched on the necessary points his speech was weak as it was all an "appeal" & not an "order" to obey him & there was no censure for the disgraceful behaviour except as regards defacing the memorial. Afterwards he asked Sarson & me if he had said enough. S. weakly said yes but I could not agree. However, it may be enough to keep people quiet till we leave."* Moss-Blundell rounded his lecture off with the latest update from Berlin which was that *"1st draft expected to go in 2 days' time, remainders by train to*

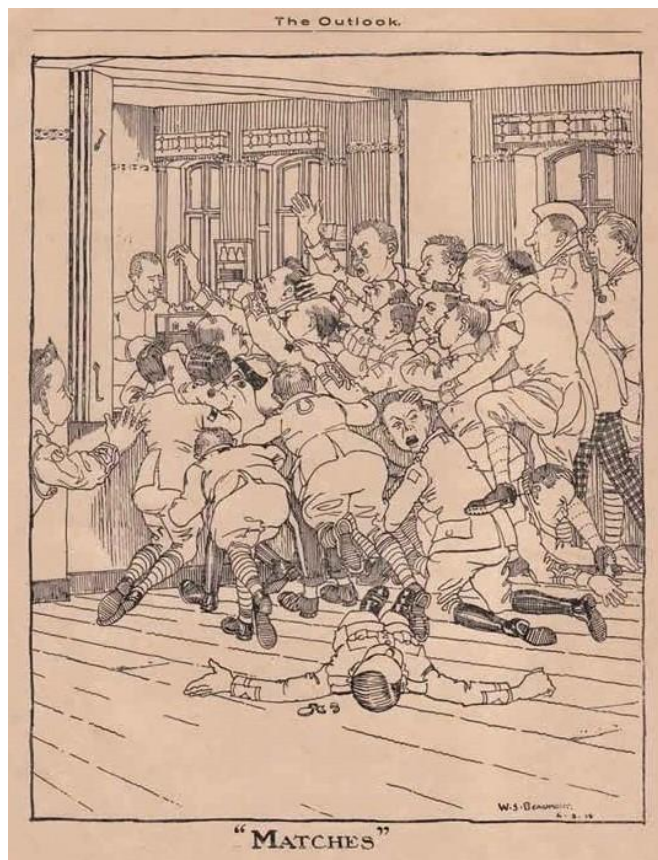
¹⁷ Photo courtesy De Renzy-Martin family

Copenhagen.” With everything else going on Moss-Blundell apparently didn’t do much to follow up on the 12 officers who had left the camp about the time of the shooting. Hill met with him about these officers going off on their own and they agreed they couldn’t call it escaping but Moss-Blundell promised him he would publish a direct order forbidding people without proper authority from leaving the camp.

200 to leave on 9th

Late the next morning a football match was stopped 15 minutes in to the game when the ball burst, and that was that. More cheerful, if they at all dared believe it, was the news that 200 were to leave via Warnemunde for Copenhagen on the 9th. With the focus back on repatriation and with Moss-Blundell giving his undertaking of good conduct to the commandant the extra guards were withdrawn. Witherington enjoyed a hot bath, clean sheets and clean towels. The move was confirmed on the 8th, but now it was to be 200 officers and 71 orderlies. Wisely the Aachen “troublemakers” were among the chosen with the number being made up by those taken pow up to March 23rd in alphabetical order. A list with the officers’ names can be seen under “lists”. Unfortunately we haven’t found a list containing the names of the orderlies involved in this group, however the names of a few are known i.e. Pte. Joe Garvey and Cpl. Wiltshire. Their repatriation journey can be seen in Appendix B.

This party under Lt. Col. Peck, 19th King’s Liverpool Regiment, left Dänholm at about 1am on 9th December. It was rumoured that about another 30 officers had joined them, unofficially that is! Moss-Blundell had after all not published his order forbidding “escapes” until 8th. For those left behind in the camp the big news of the day was that there were matches for sale in the canteen.



“our hopes of Christmas at home were again raised”.

An official telegram was received on the 10 December informing that 450 officers were to depart on 14th and 50 every subsequent day. Conheeny's funeral was held, but none of the diaries give any detail other than Witherington commenting that each gave money to cover *“funeral expenses for the murdered officer”*. In his memoirs¹⁸ written in the 1930's which were based on his diaries he explained *“The unfortunate victim of the outrage was quietly buried on Tuesday 10th. Every precaution was taken to avoid a demonstration and in consequence we were not allowed to be present. All we could do was to ensure proper arrangements and a supply of beautiful flowers”*. Roll-call was taken by Moss-Blundell and it was found that 35 officers could not be accounted for.

The next day reasonably confident that their days at Dänholm were numbered, Wilkinson and his friends went to see Stralsund. *“We made breakfast early and Johnson, Turnbull and I left for the town at 9am. We made sundry purchases of 250 cigarettes and 100 cigars, an iron cross and ribbon, etc. and visited the old Catholic Cathedral – a very cold and hard Gothic, with an organ dated 1659. It was raining a little. There were no hostile demonstrations, and the people took no great interest in us – they all looked very anaemic and “gemuseish” [vegetable]. In the shops we saw nothing but black bread and vegetables – no meat, and only a little fruit. At 12 noon we returned, to learn that those “up to R” captured on May 27th, go with the 450 on the 14th. Dinner at night was good, and it was now snowing again.”*

Another small group of officers was planning to leave Dänholm that same afternoon, and they were not going to return. They were the 3 Colonels Griffin, Pollitt and Temperley, all of whom had previously tried to escape. De Renzy Martin getting rather worked up about this wrote *“Griffin came to Hill in front of Sarson & me & said he was leaving this afternoon, having got leave from M-B!! Hill told him in his opinion he was doing very wrong, & Sarson & I joined in – we had all read an order from Marshal Foch yesterday which expressly forbade leaving camps on one's own plans. We reminded him of this & he finally changed his mind. Temperley had been going too. I was horrified that Griffin, a regular, could be so foolish - & also that M-B could be so weak as to permit him to go.”*

Volunteers to stay

Volunteers had been called for to stay on in Germany to assist with repatriation duties and the Young brothers Mark and Norman had gone to Berlin to do so on 2nd December. 32 year old Lt. Frank, RFA, and Witherington's roommate - one of the “eight”, accepted the post of accountant for the Red Cross in Berlin and left Dänholm on 13th. Accountant Charles Octavius Frank had been living in Brazil when war broke out and he appears to have been on the first boat “home” arriving at Liverpool on 19th September 1914. Lt. Frank had married Brazil born Clotilde Lisboa Wright on 25th March 1918 and was really still a newlywed when he was taken prisoner on 27th May.

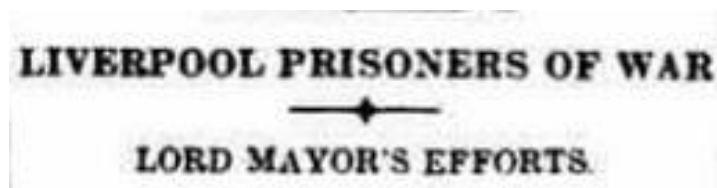
Several others, one of them being de Renzy Martin, volunteered, but they went straight to the camp at Altdamm. Once again and for the last time he had had a difference of opinion with the SBO *“volunteers have been called for to go to men's camps to clear them and superintend the embarkation; I feel I should go, so have offered myself, though Moss Blundell tried hard to put me off”*. Perhaps Moss-Blundell had been

¹⁸ Ripon Return

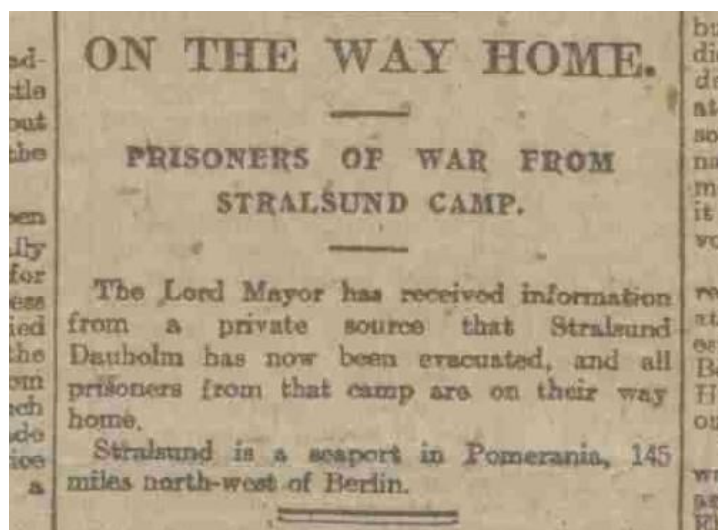
thinking of de Renzy Martin's wife and two daughters aged 5 and 2 waiting for him at home, that it should rather be the younger bachelors that stayed behind instead. Lt. Col. de Renzy Martin, Lt. Calder and Lt. Simpson left Dänholm late in morning on the 14th. More about their experiences can be found in Appendix E.

"we smashed up all our crockery"

On 13th December the names of the lucky 500, 450 officers and 50 orderlies, to leave early on 14th was made known. Delighted Wilkinson wrote *"News came that 500 will go so that I just came in! Also that we were to parade at 1am. Our heavy luggage left at 6pm and Burrell and I went to the Canteen to get "warm" on much wine at 12 marks per bottle. They rumoured that our boat would go straight to England, but that was too much to believe! After a late meal at 11pm we smashed up all our crockery etc. in a barbarous fashion, took our light luggage over to the gym, and "fell in" outside the hut at 12.30am. – thus began our journey home."* Their repatriation journey is described in Appendix C.



In the UK the families of former pows still in Germany were getting anxious about their fate. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool Lt. Col. John Ritchie was obviously using every channel open to him to seek information about Dänholm and his son Major Norman Ritchie. A piece printed in the Liverpool Daily Post on 14th December described his efforts. *"The Lord Mayor, in reply to an inquiry has received an official telegram from the Prime Minister saying that he is making all inquiries into the matter, and the Lord Mayor hopes very shortly to be in a position to give the public some definite news."* Major Ritchie, RFA, had by this time already left Dänholm with the group that left on 30th. Two days later on 16th it was noted in the same paper that *"The Lord Mayor has received information from a private source that Stralsund Danholm has now been evacuated, and all prisoners from that camp are on their way home"*. This was certainly true for his son who was in fact almost home, his repatriation date being 17th December.



"One of the best moments in my life"

Their numbers had suddenly dwindled and it must have felt strange for those left behind at Dänholm in their almost empty huts. Witherington noted on the 14th how he had watched the party leave at 1-2 am and then on the invite of the Col. had gone to have a drink with him first getting to bed at 3 am. The good news after he woke up at 11 o' clock and had a cup of tea was that almost all the remaining officers and orderlies were to leave the next day. Only three officers, the Colonel¹⁹, Lt. Digby and Lt. Urry and 15 orderlies were to be left behind.²⁰ The Germans aware that the camp would soon be emptied of former British pows *"took away a cart load this morning under false pretences"*. The officers locked up what remaining food they had and spent the afternoon *"packing and smashing up every conceivable thing"*. Witherington with the rest of the group, about 40 officers and about 40 ORs, left at 4 am on the 15th December. Their repatriation journey can be seen in appendix D.

"Murder of U.S. airman by Hun Soldiers' Council"



The British officers who had given statements regarding the shooting incident on 5th December *"were from the first particularly desirous that if possible they should not be detained in Germany longer than necessary in respect of this matter"*. They left on the 14 or 15th. That is except for Lt. Bowring whose name appears handwritten on the typed name list made at Hald of the officers who left Dänholm on 9th. He appears to have been one of the chaps who had, unauthorized, left with this group. He didn't stay at Hald, by the 10th the British Legation had made arrangements for him to travel over to Copenhagen, accompanied by an interpreter or guide if necessary, to give evidence. Bowring was also interviewed at the American Legation on 13th about the fatal shooting of Lt. Conheeny, who although in the British Army was an American citizen. Bowring's statement was telegraphed to the American Embassy in London who immediately contacted the Committee on Treatment of British Prisoners of War and asked what steps, if any, were taken or were proposed to be taken by His Majesty's Government with reference to the killing of Lt. Colheeny.

The group who left Dänholm on the 14th arrived at Copenhagen and the news of the shooting incident at Dänholm hit the Danish newspapers and immediately after the British. Papers from The Times to The Daily Mail ran the story on 19th December *"Murder of U.S. airman by Hun Soldiers' Council – Brutal shooting of a war captive at a Stralsund camp – British officer hurt – The Danish paper Koebenhavn publishes the following on the authority of an*

¹⁹ Sarson?

²⁰ Digby's repatriation date indicates he stayed on to help with repatriation duties while the others repatriation journey is unknown presumably they left Dänholm the next day.

English officer staying here, and states that the story is confirmed by three eye-witnesses:- "On December 5, at seven o'clock in the evening, a young American flying officer, named Coheeny, twenty-seven years of age, who had been interned for some time as a prisoner of war in a camp near Stralsund went outside the barbed wire entanglements for a moment. The Soldiers' Council immediately issued an order to shoot Coheeny for this "crime" although the armistice had long been signed, and Coheeny was no longer a prisoner of war in the real sense of the word. He was taken out and shot three bullets striking him, and a young British officer was wounded by one of the bullets. Coheeny's shocked comrades sought to carry away his body, which lay in a pool of blood, but this was forbidden them by the Germans. "

Further statements were given by British officers to the authorities e.g. on 20th December Lt. Bloore who made it clear that he was not an eye-witness *"On December 4th 1918, a fire broke out in the gymnasium, which was ascribed to us. On the same night the sentry boxes were thrown into the water. Also a monument to Frederick the Great was mutilated. These acts were all ascribed to us, but no proof was available. On account of this the guards were strengthened. On the following night at 8.10 pm as Lt. Conheeny and Lt. Culver were walking along the road they passed a sentry, two or three more couples were close behind them, and one couple in front. After passing the sentry about 30 yards he fired at these two, one shot passing through the chest of Lt. Conheeny, and one shot passing through the fleshy part of the thigh of Lt. Culver. As Lt. Lambert, went to the assistance of the two officers the sentry fired at him, but missed. Lt. Conheeny died a few minutes later."*

The trial against Landsturnmann Kraeft and the inquiry

At his trial on 20th December in Stralsund Landsturnmann Kraeft was acquitted. The court gave credence to his evidence and an inspection of the locality, and the sworn evidence of the witnesses Perlitz and Gottschalck, as well as to the findings of Stabsarzt Dr. Albrect, Faldhilfsrurst Grotjohann and Major von Busse. The court regarded the evidence given by the British officers as having been refuted. The use made of his rifle by Kraeft was found to have been justified in view of the proven facts.

Tragedy that it was, the way the story was reported and distorted in the newspaper articles increased the concern felt for the plight of the former prisoners of war who, more than a month after the armistice, were still in camps in Germany. The accusations were taken seriously, regarding both the shooting incident itself and whether justice had been sought and the trial of Kraeft had been objective. "The Commission of Inquiry into cases of alleged treatment of prisoners of war in Germany in a manner contrary to International Law" held a public session on 31st January 1919 concerning the incident that took place at Stralsund on 5th December 1918. An 18 page report²¹ with the findings and conclusion of the inquiry goes into detail about the situation of the pows at Dänholm before the shooting, what happened on the day and how both the British and the Germans immediately following made their own inquiries taking witness statements and examining the location. Landsturnmann Kraeft was questioned under oath again and all the other witness accounts and evidence was taken under account.

"The sentry found himself confronted in the darkness by four British prisoners who contrary to regulations were outside the camp, and who attacked him by throwing stones. Repeated acts of violence committed since the conclusion of the armistice demanded the employment of stringent measures to combat an attack

²¹ The National Archives, Kew

of this nature. In the alternative the sentry might fear lest he should be overpowered and put out of action by his assailants. Kraeft, who was given a high character by his superiors, produced upon the commission the impression of being a very quiet and intelligent man who could not be credited with making light use of his rifle."

The Commission further agreed with the view taken by the Court finding "According to general instructions guards and sentries at the prisoners of war camp Dänholm were authorized in cases of assault on their person to make use of their rifles, in case of dire necessity, after briefly announcing their intention to fire. The conduct of the inquiry into the matter in question was consequently in all respects in conformity with German military penal procedure and it was carried out with the greatest possible promptitude and thoroughness. The statements made in the complaint are therefore devoid of all foundation."

"Articles in English in contemporary newspapers about the shooting were based on information given by the three officers from Dänholm who had originally given the "story" to a Danish newspaper." This had given according to the Commission an "entirely distorted picture of the actual occurrences".

"He died for Freedom All for Honour".

"Lt. Col. Moss Blundell, as also other senior British officers stated that the disorderly conduct was by way a demonstration against the delay in repatriation and they could not answer for their countrymen should their transfer not be soon undertaken." The officers who had started it all on the 4th got what they wanted out of it, they were quickly repatriated. And that if it suited their storytelling back home, they could tell of a tough time as prisoners of war at Dänholm and how Lt. Conheeny was cold-bloodedly murdered; he had after all been killed and people had read about it in the newspapers. This unfortunate tragedy is mentioned in both academic²² and popular²³ books as an example of violence used against pows in Germany after the armistice.



The personal inscription on Gerald Conheeny's headstone, chosen by his mother is "He died for Freedom All for Honour". All three who died while they were at Dänholm camp Pte. Howell, East Kents, Lt. W.R. Hill²⁴, DLI and Lt. G. Conheeny, Royal Lancaster Reg. were later moved to Berlin South-Western Cemetery Stahnsdorf.

Dorothy 07.08.2017 revised 30.11.17

edited by M.A. Jones

²² Heather Jones: Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War, Britain, France and Germany 1914-1920

²³ Alvin Ferguson diary cited in Desmond Morton "Silent Battle" then used in John Lewis-Stempel "The war behind the wire".

²⁴ www.rutlandremembers.org

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