

HAROLD OSMOND LE DRUILLENEC, sworn, examined by Colonel BACKHOUSE on 20 September 1945.

I am a British subject, a schoolmaster by profession, and my address is 7 Trinity Road, St. Helier, Jersey. On 5th June, 1944, I and most of the members of my family were arrested by the Germans because we had helped a Russian prisoner to escape some 18 months before, and we were also in possession of wireless sets which were forbidden. I was taken to a prison near Rheims in Brittany, to Belfort, and finally to Neuengamme, where I arrived, as far as I can remember, on 1st September, 1944. From there I was sent on a Kommando [forced labour group] to Wilhelmshaven, where I was made an oxy-acetylene welder in the region of the arsenal. Eventually I went to Belsen, arriving there about 5th April, around 10 o'clock in the evening. I received no food on arrival, but some fortunate individuals who had a few cigarettes or a bit of bread from the journey had soup - swede, turnip or mangel - offered to them in exchange. I was taken to Block 13. I should think, on that night, there must have been somewhere around 400 to 500 people in that block.

Q: I would like you to describe to the Court in your own words, just what conditions were like in that block that night?

To begin with, a French Colonel, an old friend of mine from the previous camp, and myself turned into one of the few beds, three-tiered bunks they were, in the hut. About five minutes later some severe blows on the head made us realise that we were not supposed to be there. We gathered from this language of blows that these beds were reserved for the officers and orderlies amongst the prisoners themselves. The Colonel and I made a point of finding some other French people - there was safety in being in groups - and sat with legs wide apart and other people sitting in between in a group on the floor. Sleep was impossible; the whole hut I should describe as a Babel gone mad. Actually that proved to be my luckiest night in Belsen, because the next day or two the next Kommandos were sent in and had to sleep in this already overcrowded hut. The floor was wet and abominably foul and we had to lie in that, but we were allowed two very tattered blankets. The next morning, about half-past three, we were roused and sent out of the hut, again the language of blows being the only way of giving orders.

Q: Did anybody die in that hut that night?

After we had been out on the *Appell*, or roll-call, for some time the next morning the hut was cleared of the superficial debris, litter, etc., and then some seven or eight dead were taken out and put in a latrine trench, which ran the whole length of most of these huts.

Q: Were there any rafters in the hut?

Yes, boards were usually put across two rafters by some enterprising prisoners, and rather than sleep on the murderous floor below they slept across these narrow boards. Most of the people in the hut were suffering from dysentery, and, as many of those people on the boards were suffering from this, I think I can leave the rest to your imagination. It was possible for people below to move out of the way, but if they had they would probably never have found a place to get down again, so after a little experience they learned it was better not to.

Q: Were you allowed out of the hut at all during the night?

No. It was humanly impossible to get out since the whole floor was just one mass of humanity, it would have meant walking across people in order to get out; in any case the door was shut. People were lying against it, and I think that it was locked as well.

Q: What was the atmosphere inside that hut like?

Well, it is rather difficult to put into words. I do not think it is humanly possible to describe that - it was vile. I think I have told you sufficient to make you realise that the smell was abominable; in fact it was the worst feature of Belsen Camp. A night in those huts was something maybe a man like Dante might describe, but I simply cannot put into words.

Q: The next morning you say you left the hut. Please go on from there?

For the first three or four days I was in Belsen we had nothing in particular to do. The *Appell*, which used to last from about half-past three - I am judging times, as I had no watch, of course - till about eight or nine o'clock in the morning, was in itself a terrible strain. The *Appell* is the normal concentration camp roll-call, during which time you are supposed to stand in ranks of five, at attention, I presume to make the ranks easy to count, and you

are counted and then counted again ad infinitum for some hours - apparently no two men could make the total the same. If you moved you received the usual blow on the head, the weapon used being a stick some four or five feet long and 1 1/2 inches thick; it was usually a very hard blow.

Q: Were you given any food before the *Appell*?

No, nor drink.

Q: What food did you have during the day?

The first day I had precisely nothing.

Q: How were you employed during the day?

We did nothing that day. Most of us went out into the yard adjoining the block and slept, as was the custom at Belsen, in heaps. At the end of the morning a French friend of mine asked me if I had inspected the long grey brick-built hut, on the other side of our yard and invited me to go and look through the windows, or rather, holes in the walls. The first window showed only a wash-house room, a very, crude place with one or two dead bodies floating about, or rather reclining on the flooded floor. The second window gave me a terrible shock. This room was absolutely filled up, and I really mean filled up, with dead bodies. These dead were arranged with the crown of one's head touching the chin of the one just below him, and in that way I should think there were many hundreds per room. We strolled down the yard looking into each window in turn, and in every room of that very long hut the sight was precisely the same. I had had some experience with dead people before, both at Bremen and at Lüneburg, but this particular sight made me wonder all the more, after the first night at Belsen, what sort of hell I had entered. The rest of the day was just spent lying about on the ground outside hoping against hope some food would turn up.

Q: What was the next night like?

Rather worse. Some more Kommandos had arrived by then and the hut was more crowded than on the previous night. By, the second day we realised that although some rather primitive type of sanitation existed, it was not used by the vast majority.

Q: Did you receive any food or water on the second day?

I had that day about an inch and a half of soup in an ordinary army enamel mug which I had to go and pick up off a certain heap of discarded effects of the dead, and there being no water to wash it in, I just had to eat out of that like many hundreds of others. We used to have the food given us in the hut; actually everyone had to get into the hut first. Then we went out with our little portion, and we had to keep giving furtive looks behind and chasing from one corner to the other, so as not to drop even a spot of rather precious food.

Q: What was the attitude of the S.S. guards to the prisoners?

I did not see very much of the S. S. during my short stay in Belsen, but on one occasion later I did see an S.S. officer whipping the women in the women's compound near the burial pits because they had lit some fires to do some rather primitive cooking.

Q: What was the attitude of the Blockältesten?

Particularly vile. They used to have some soup apparently sent to the block at midday, and distributed to the other officers, and to anyone who had a few cigarettes to exchange. The usual rate of exchange being three cigarettes to one plate of soup, though the vast majority of ordinary prisoners in the hut never even saw that soup - if we did have a little it was at night. The S.S. made no attempt to control the block leaders. On the fifth day I began work, and worked roughly for the last five days.

Q: Prior to beginning to work were the other days much the same as the day you have described?

More or less. There were one or two rather startling events, of course. I remember seeing my first friend, not quite dead, brought out of the hut in the morning and lined up with the people actually dead, then later on, still alive, dragged off to the hut east of Block 13, which was being used as a mortuary. In the first four days at

Belsen I had, all told, about a pint of soup, about an inch and a half depth, in an army mug each day for about four days. On the fourth day the water was turned on for maybe half an hour in the hut used as a mortuary and after negotiating three or four corpses you could get to the taps, and there, despite the warning of one of my friends that I would catch typhoid if I drank, I did have one mugful of water.

Q: Will you now tell the Court about the first day you began work?

In the beginning the work was rather interesting because we were herded as a block, some six or seven hundred maybe into the mortuary yard by means of blows, the language we understood pretty well by then; we were made to understand that we had to drag these dead bodies a certain route to what we were to find to be large burial pits. The procedure was to take some strands of humid blanket from a heap where the effects and clothing of the dead had been put, tie these strips of blanket or clothing to the ankles and wrists of the corpses and then proceed to walk to the pits. We started work at sunrise and were up quite a long time before that. We got no food before we started and worked till about 8 o'clock in the evening. In those five days or so I spent on this burial work neither a spot of food nor a drop of water passed my lips.

Q: Will you describe one of these days?

After the usual terrible night we started the *Appell* first. After about two hours of that we would be herded in the usual manner to this yard. We tied the strips of blankets to the wrists and ankles of the dead bodies, which we picked out most carefully. Firstly, we found the shortest corpse possible; they were all emaciated and more thin than anything I had imagined before, so by getting the shortest we were bound to get the lightest. Secondly, we chose one that was not too black. Our first task in the morning was to bury the fresh dead that had been brought from the various huts in my portion of the camp to the mortuary yard, not those which were in the hut. Despite the fact that there must have been over 2000 all told occupied in this work, it used to take us nearly the whole morning to empty that yard prior to going into the rooms to start burying the old dead. We then left the northernmost gate of the yard with the body dragging behind, usually allowing maybe two metres between the foremost people dragging and the body in front. If you allowed more than that a hit on the head made you hurry, up to reduce the distance. We made our way along the central road towards the burial pits. Along this road, stationed at intervals, were orderlies to see that the flow of dead to the pits carried on smoothly; they were particularly numerous near the kitchen and the reservoir water. One of the most cruel things in this particular work was the fact that we passed this water regularly on every trip, and although we were dying of thirst we were not allowed to touch it or get anywhere near, nor were we allowed to get to the heap of swede peelings neat the kitchen. A few of those would have made us a very fine meal indeed in the state we were in. Nearing the pits I found out that the pits themselves were being dug by so-called free foreign workers. I cannot very well explain my feelings when I first saw one of those pits which already contained many dead, and had to throw my particular corpse on top of those others already there. [During the dragging process I noticed on many occasions a very strange wound at the back of the thigh of many of these dead. First of all I dismissed it as a gunshot wound at close quarters, but after seeing a few more I asked a friend and he told me that many prisoners were cutting chunks out of these bodies to eat. On my very next visit to the mortuary I actually saw a prisoner whip out a knife, cut a portion out of the leg of a dead body and put it quickly into his mouth, naturally frightened of being seen in the act of doing so. I leave it to your imagination to realise to what state the prisoners were reduced for men to chance eating these bits of flesh taken out of black corpses.](#)

Q: What was the attitude of the S.S. and of the orderlies you have mentioned while all this was going on?

To get on with the job as quickly as possible. My own idea is that it was to make a good impression on the advancing British Army. We knew it was coming. We could hear the guns; and I think the whole idea was to clear the camp of as many dead as possible before they arrived. I would like you to picture what this endless chain of dead going to the pits must have looked like for about five days from sunrise to sunset. How many were buried I have no idea. It must have been vast numbers - certainly five figures.

Q: What happened to a prisoner who fell out on this parade?

You didn't dare to fall out, but many collapsed on the way - just lay dead by the roadside, or died. They in turn were lifted by a team of four and taken to the pits. People died like flies on the way to these pits. They did not have the necessary energy to drag even those very light bodies. A man who faltered was usually hit on the head, but many people were cunning, and if no orderlies were round about they used to leave their corpses stranded by the roadside and go back to the mortuary for another, because they would pass the kitchen or reservoir, and they still had hopes that they would reach some food or water.

Q: Were you struck at all yourself during this period?

Oh, many times. You were bound to get hit in the normal course of the day. You were bound to get hit on the head in the morning getting out of the hut, whether you were out first or last. You were bound to be hit in getting to the mortuary, and all along the way to the pits. They were just odd blows here and there, given, I suppose, for the fun of the thing. One ceases to question in a concentration camp why things happen. One is taught from the very beginning just to accept things as they are.

Q: Were any of the guards armed with firearms?

Yes. All the S.S. and Hungarian guards in the look-outs and who walked about in the camp. The first few days I did hear some shots, but saw no results, and in the last few days the shooting was almost furious, barely a minute of the day or evening passed without hearing a shot somewhere. Usually it was a whole volley of shots. I saw plenty of shooting, usually for no reason at all. Sometimes there was a hidden reason which we learned of only after many dozens had been killed; for example, at the north entrance of the mortuary yard many people had been killed before we realised that the particular guard in charge of that gateway wanted to see people go through at the double dragging the dead body behind. He was a member of the Hungarian guard, but the shooting was not confined to Hungarians; it was simply terrible, hundreds were shot per day.

Q: Did you see the results of any beatings?

The beatings were usually confined to blows on the head. I did see one receive 25 strokes. They were not particularly terrible - nothing like as bad as my previous camp - but the slapdash blows on the head during the day were very frequent, and very, very nasty.

Q: I think almost immediately the camp was liberated, you were released?

Yes. As far as I know I was the first man out, and I have been in hospital up to last Saturday week.

Q: Can you recognise any particular guard who either shot or ill-treated people when you were there?

No, they all looked similar to me at the time; I don't think I could pick one out.

Q: Did you ever see any guard help or assist any of the prisoners?

Never. May I add that guards in the concentration camp - I am talking in general when I say this - are brutish, and the prisoners in time become brutish and such a thing as human kindness is quite unknown in such a place. I would like to try to make everyone realise what starvation, absolute starvation, no water at all for some six days, lack of sleep - for sleep near the burial pits was quite impossible - to be covered in lice and delousing oneself three or four times a day proving absolutely useless, is like. Then there is the fatalistic attitude between the prisoners towards what the end would certainly be - the crematorium or the pits. Add to this the foul stench and vileness of the place, the scenes which apparently horrified the whole of the world, which we saw by the whole of daylight day by day, the blows on the head, the hideous work, and in the last three days the Hungarian guards shooting at us just as if we were rabbits, from all directions. If you can picture all this, the sum total as it were, then maybe you will get a remote inkling of what life was like in Belsen in those last three days.

Cross-examined by Major WINWOOD.

Q: What was the condition of the other prisoners who arrived at Belsen with you?

I don't know exactly how many died, but I know that many did. About 150 of us all told reached Belsen, only a remnant, and I know that many thousands died in these ten days.

Q: What was their condition when they first got to Belsen?

Most of the Kommandos arrived by marching there, and were pretty fit. We came by transport because we had been bombed in Lüneburg by the R.A.F. I have no idea whether our transport was expected at Belsen or not.

Q: Were you always in Block 13?

The day the British tanks first appeared we were transferred to Block 26. Block 13 was swept and garnished early that morning, and we found ourselves transferred to this new block - again, I think, in order to make a good impression on the British Army. There had been some grass growing round this hut, and when the tanks passed through I was actually having my first meal for five days; I was eating grass.

Q: Is it true that when you were in Belsen the cookhouses were actually working?

I think they were working.

Q: Was the food brought to Block 13 every day?

Some was brought in the first few days, but on the last five days when we came back from our work in the burial pits at dusk there was no soup.

Q: In Block 13 how many of the inmates had blankets?

I cannot answer that. There was a pile of blankets on the left of the door as you went in. The first ones in took one or two blankets, and I presume the rest did not have any. When I arrived at 10 o'clock at night I had brought one myself and I picked up one of these humid ones on the left-hand side of the door. The hut was not so crowded then as it was a night or two later.

Q: I think you said that the *Appell* started at half-past three in the morning?

We were told it was half-past three. We had no watches. It was pitch dark.

Q: Is it true to say that during the time you were at Belsen some real attempt was being made to bury the corpses?

An attempt was made. In fact, it was more than an attempt, I think it was successful. We did bury many thousands in the last four or five days. I have no idea from whom the order to bury the bodies came.

Cross-examined by Major CRANFIELD.

Q: Were all the S.S. personnel and *Blockältesten* you came into contact with men?

Yes. I saw some S.S. women the first night, but only at the entrance to the camp watching the Kommandos coming into the camp from various directions.

Cross-examined by Captain ROBERTS.

Q: At the time of the arrival of the British was your health as good as any of the internees?

I thought it was, but it proved not to be the case.

Cross-examined by Captain FIELDEN.

Q: Were all the S.S. men in Belsen responsible for ill-treatment and shooting?

No, the shootings I saw on the last three days were by Hungarian guards. Most of the guards who were in charge of the huts were not S.S. at all, but, on the orders of the S.S., were *Blockältesten* [prisoners in charge of a barrack], *Kapos* [prisoners in charge of work details], *Vorarbeiter* [foremen] and the like. I did not see the S.S. men in the vicinity of my compound during my stay there. I did see one ill-treating a woman, as I have mentioned, and a few others just strolling around. In the three concentration camps I have seen, the S.S. in every case have lived in a very well protected compound outside the actual concentration camp area, and the discipline and administration of the concentration camp itself is deputed to prisoners. That is the viciousness of this concentration camp system, to have prisoners in charge of prisoners.

Cross-examined by Captain CORBALLY.

Q: When the time came for the prisoners to have a meal was food brought to your hut and had you all to go inside before it was distributed to you?

Yes. Quite a few methods were tried and failed absolutely. It meant that perhaps twenty or thirty prisoners got food, and the rest went without. In the first days the method was to go into the hut - the soup bin was near the door - and pass outside into the yard with your mug or plate of soup. The best way was the last time I had any food. We were behind some barriers and the people were called out one by one and got their soup near the doorway and walked out into the yard. The person who ladled out the soup in our case was the *Blockältesten* or an assistant.

Q: Did you ever see internees employed trying to rejoin the queue after they had had their ration?

Yes.

Q: Was there any system employed to prevent that happening?

Yes. People were stationed at all the windows and at the doors or breakages through the side of the hut to prevent people doing that.

Q: Have you ever seen an internee come up to where the soup was being ladled out just too late, to find that it had all disappeared?

Yes, that occurred on quite a few occasions. It was very rare at any one distribution to find there was enough to go around, even with the small amount that was put in.

Q: Did you ever see anyone caught coming up for a second bowl of soup?

I cannot swear that I did.

Q: Would you agree that one of the reasons why the soup did not go round all the internees in the hut was that some people succeeded in getting a second helping?

No, I would not agree with that.

Cross-examined by Captain MUNRO.

Q: You said that the *Blockältesten* and *Kapos* were under the control of the S.S. Would it be true to say that these internees were as frightened of the S.S. as you were?

I don't know. I did not come into contact sufficiently with the S.S. to make a genuine answer to that.

Q: Would you think that they would be punished by the S.S. if they did not do their job as the S.S. thought they should?

I have no idea. I have never been a *Kapo* or *Blockältester*.

By the JUDGE ADVOCATE.

Q: Did you or did you not get the impression that the *Blockältesten* and the *Kapos*, in addition to being under the control of the S.S., were wider their protection in the sense that if any attack had been made upon them they could have relied upon the S.S. men to support their authority?

Yes, I think so.

Q: Do you know how the internee officials came to get their posts?

I don't know.

Q: In the first four days you said that you got about an inch and a half depth of soup on each day in a mug. Was that the sort of quantity that everybody was getting, or was it just accidental you got that amount?

That was the regular quantity that was being given to the whole lot.

Q: There was some kind of attempt to organise that each prisoner should get a certain amount?

In those first days, yes.

Q: Do you think that conditions were deteriorating towards the end in the sense that many more internees were flooding into the camp and that such arrangements as there had been for distribution of soup-little in amount as it was-and water were getting worse?

I did not quite get that impression. Things were deteriorating, but not necessarily because of the numbers flowing into the camp. Conditions got worse and worse, and finally ended with the shooting in the last three days, for which I could find no excuse at all.

By a Member of the Court.

Q: Would you tell the Court how conditions in Belsen compared, in general terms, with the other camps you had been in?

In the two previous camps in which I had been there was an attempt made at cleanliness, though the atrocities probably or sadism in the other camps at Wilhelmshaven and Neuengamme were worse than Belsen. I think I can fairly describe Belsen as probably the foulest and vilest spot that ever soiled the surface of this earth.

By another Member of the Court.

Q: Did you actually see anyone except the Hungarians shoot all internee?

No.

By the PRESIDENT.

Q: Were these *Appels* all run by the prison leaders as distinct from the S.S. personnel in the camp?

Yes.

Q: Do you know, in those last four days when you said no food was issued, whether it was actually issued to other prisoners in your hut or to the prison leaders and you merely missed it because you were away, or was there no issue at all so far as you know?

I don't know, but I know I didn't see any soup at all in the last five days.

http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialProsecutionCase/Trial_010_Druillenec.html