

"SOME WEREN'T SO BAD"

A Soldier's View Of Prison Guards

"WHY worry any more? The war's over and we've had it" is the reply of many New Zealand ex-prisoners of war if you ask them about their experiences. Apart from official accounts, it is not easy to get a clear picture of their lives during the last four years. Most of them will say little more than that their German guards were of a mixed type—some were good, some were not so bad, and some were very bad.

This elastic view is taken by Pte. Hubert Gilling, of Kaikoura, but he also tells a story of a German officer who underwent seven days' gaol for surreptitiously giving prisoners food and comforts, and of German guards who took prisoners on sightseeing trips and bought them meals and drinks. He adds the qualification that the sightseeing was well towards the end of the war.

Pte. Gilling, of the 2nd N.Z.E.F., had his first taste of prison life at Kalamata, Greece, in 1941, he told *The Listener* in an interview. And what amazed him was the extreme youth of the German parachutists who did the capturing. The oldest was not more than 22. One claimed personal friendship with Dr. J. E. Lovelock, the New Zealand athlete, whom he had met, he said, before the war in England.

Loss of Weight

It is said that a man's steady weight is a guide to his good health. Pte. Gilling left New Zealand weighing 15 stone. In Germany he went down to 10 stone, and on the way home in England regained three stone. Now, he says, he is rapidly getting back to normal. Rations, said to be 13 per cent. below starvation point, were the first cause of the deterioration.

When they arrived in Yugoslavia their rations were a loaf of bread and a tin of German preserved meat for five men. Soon they reached Marburg, their first prison camp under full German command. They changed here into German clothes and were put to work on farms and market gardens, marching six miles to the job every day. Forestry work followed the farming, for timber was wanted to build an aeroplane factory.

"Things were a bit grim here," said Pte. Gilling. "If a chap lagged through weakness he was bayoneted in the back—not killed but given a nasty wound."

A little later things improved a lot. Two German welfare officers were put in charge of the camp. One spoke English very well. He had worked in a Canadian packing factory before the war. He was the man to whom all complaints were taken and he did his best to put things right. He bought the prisoners tobacco and various odds and ends for the sake of comfort, and went to gaol for seven days when some other German "pimped" on him.

A Little Poaching

They were moved about a good deal, going next to a State farm in Austria. The guards were hostile, rations were bad, and so the prisoners played up

To break up their association they were sent to different farms round about the district. Red Cross parcels now began to arrive and what with these and an occasional hen snatched off a roost in the dead of night, and a few eggs pocketed when the chance presented itself, the food situation improved.

But what all prisoners were most anxious about was the BBC news. There was little opportunity of hearing anything, for the penalty for listening was death. Some of the farmers were sympathetic, however. It was quite usual for a prisoner working at a farm to listen while members of the family kept watch outside. Then he kept guard while they listened.

There was a constant watch for a chance to escape and it came last Easter



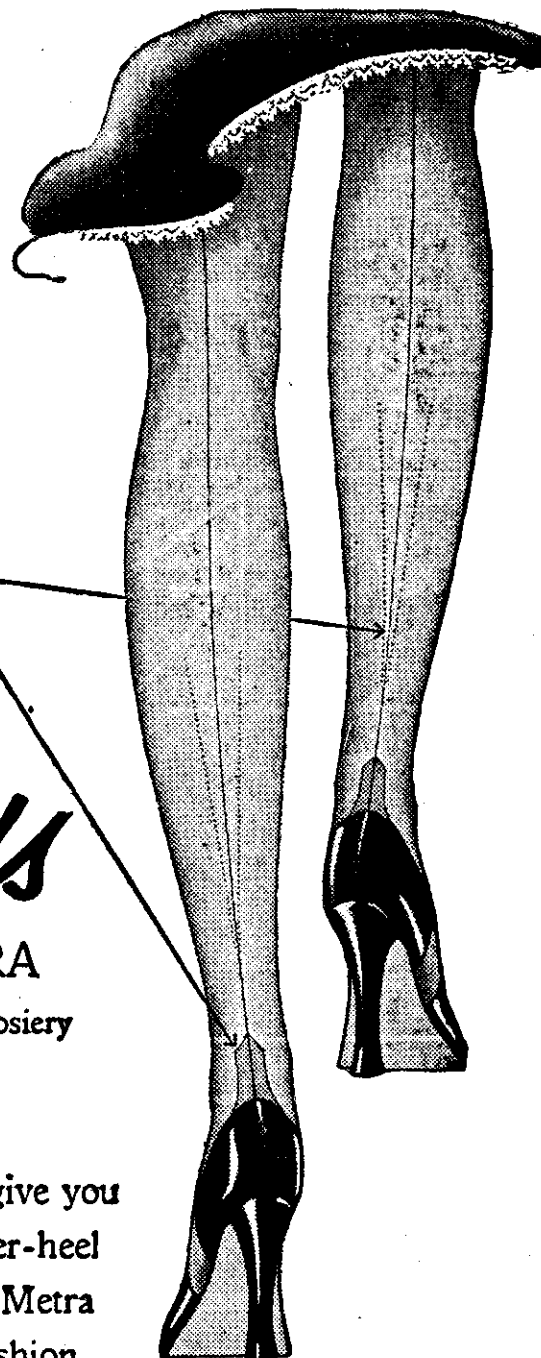
PTE. HUBERT GILLING

for Pte. Gilling. He and 13 others made a break in the confusion when villagers were given two hours to get out because the Russians were advancing on the district. They went over the Hungarian border and reached the hills. Two, through weakness and hunger, gave themselves up. The others got separated and nine were picked up by S.S. troops and sent back to camp.

Then came a march of 350 miles, followed by a stay for three or four days at Gratz. Some of the German officers here could speak English, and one saw the astonishing spectacle of these men taking prisoners on sightseeing tours and buying them food, beer and smokes. Four days later the war finished.

Prisoners made the most of their comparative freedom after so long under German military rule. At Berchtesgaden they saw Hitler's hideout and were treated by American troops to food, drinks and cigars. Here the troops had discovered 10 tons of Canadian Red Cross parcels hidden in the cellars of the hideout.

"And that's about all there is to it," said Pte. Gilling. "Our route was through Salzburg, Munich, Ulm, and Augsburg. American planes took us to Brussels, and British planes flew us to England. What a time we had there! And now, it's back to work in Kaikoura again."



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