

If Only.....

I can remember it like it was yesterday. We were told not to advance any further into Germany because there was such a problem ahead. I was shocked to be told that we were even having a ceasefire with the Germans. We knew that the war was nearly over, but it still seemed strange to us to be having a ceasefire, while all around us the war was still raging. But we had to follow orders and deal with the German soldiers in a reasonable manner. What we were about to witness made this even harder to do.

The camp was a short distance from where we were stationed and at first we were not able to advance into it. Our officers did a deal with the Germans and many of them were told to go back to the families; the war would soon be over and it was decided that many of them could just go home. Some of them, however, were taken off for further interrogation; their role in the war had been a whole lot darker.



Eventually the time came when we could go forward and it was then that we got into the camp. There had been times when we had wondered exactly what we were fighting the war for....at least now we knew what we were fighting against. Those left alive in the camp, staggered around, like skeletons with a thin sheet of skin draped loosely over them, while the bodies of many of those who had not survived were just piled up in a big heap, as if they were left over stones from a quarry, which nobody wanted. There were still times when I thought that they were the lucky ones.

The smell of death and disease lay over the place like a foul blanket and although the spring sun was smiling down on us, in our hearts we were crying. A bulldozer was summoned from somewhere and with a scarf tied firmly over my face I was given the grim task of bulldozing the rotting bodies into a mass grave, which as much dignity as I could muster.

We tended to those who were still alive as best we could. Some were given medical treatment, whilst others were fed, although tragically this very life-saving food was what killed a number of them, so unused to food were they.

Eventually the order came for us to move on and we left the camp to carry the fight further into the heart of darkness, until with great relief we were all gathered together and told that the war was finally over. We heard that back home, people were dancing in the streets, but we didn't feel like doing that. We just wanted to get home and try to get on with life. But we couldn't forget what we had seen.

.....

My job back at the factory was waiting for me when I got home and I settled back into the work and family routines. It was hard to say anything about what I had seen. Who could believe it, who would listen? Mostly, though I just didn't want to upset the rest of my family. And not saying anything meant that I could start to forget about it all; well try to anyway.

My two sons often asked me about the war. They were starting to grow up and would sometimes spend their pocket money on boy's comics, full of adventure stories, many of which were about war. War seemed the greatest of all adventures, full of glorious victories and heroic actions. I knew the truth. I tried to explain to them some of things I had seen. But not the camp.

I'm not sure exactly where I read about it...it was probably my newspaper. Anyway, somewhere I read about this girl from Amsterdam, who had hidden in an attic and ended up in a death camp. Sadly she had died there, but when her father went home to the attic in a factory in Amsterdam, where the family had hidden along with others, he found a diary of hers, on the floor. He picked it up and dusted it down. When he read it he was amazed at how well his teenage daughter had been able to write about her life and the lives of all of them stuck hiding away from the Nazis in that tiny, cramped attic. He was so impressed by what he saw that he decided to get it published and it was now fast becoming a best-seller. The story was interesting to me in itself. But it was near the

bottom that I really got a shock. The teenage girl had died of typhus, the same disease which we had come across when we liberated the camp.

I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if we had just got there a couple of months earlier. February instead of April. Goodness know we tried hard enough, to drive the Nazis back into their own land and finish the war off without any more innocent deaths. We had seen enough of those already. But what if we had go there earlier?

Perhaps this teenage girl would have gone home and seen her diary. What would she have done with it? Would she have seen it as mere adolescent musings, not worthy of reading anymore? Would she have thrown it away as a reminder of the bad old days, when she was stuck in the cramped attic, with adults who didn't understand her, ever fearful of being betrayed and captured? Would she have gone on to be the great writer the diary suggests she could have been? We will never know.



Still, I'm proud that it was a regiment from my own North-east of England which liberated Belsen. We have always hated bullies up here and the Nazis were the worst bullies of all. We did our best and saved some lives at the camp. I just wish we had got there earlier.

Sorry Anne.

A Living Tradition