

Stalag XXA, Toruń, Poland

This year is the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War.

My father-in-law, Jock McDonald, was in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment, of the 51st Highland Division. The 51st was called up for service in 1939 and sailed for France, landing in Dieppe in January 1940, whence they marched to St Valery-en-Caux.

“The people of St Valery continue to remember the men in the Highland Division. A street in the town bears the name Avenue de la 51st Highland Division. In 1950 a fine granite monument was erected on high ground to the east. Its Gaelic inscription, ‘Là a’ bhlàir is math na càirdean’, translates as: ‘On the day of battle it is good to have friends.’” [Bill Innes, Ed., *St Valery: The Impossible Odds*, p.32].

In June 1940 was the famous evacuation of Dunkirk...

“[T]he men of the 51st were still fighting in France ten days after the evacuation of the main British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk had been completed” [St Valery, p.1].

The Division was captured: German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel marching them through France, Germany, and into the prisoner of war camp, Stalag XXA, at Toruń, Poland. There, the men of the 51st spent the rest of the war.

Like many POW camps, the prisoners in Stalag XXA formed music bands, aided by the Red Cross. My father-in-law was a professional musician, and he played the saxophone in one of these bands.

We have a photograph on our sitting room wall of him and three other prisoners, instruments in hand, at the beginning of their incarceration – and they look fairly healthy.



As his imprisonment continued, he made new holes in his belt... My husband was born just after the war. When he was a boy of eight the final notch made in his father’s belt, shortly before the ‘Long March to Freedom’ in winter 1945, fitted him.

Jock McDonald survived the war – just. But countless other men did not. Most suffered horrendous physical injuries, psychological traumas, and severe deprivations in POW camps; many even paying the ultimate price, so that future generations might know freedom from foreign tyranny. May we never be guilty of treating their heroic sacrifices for our sakes lightly...

Bill Innes, Editor, St Valery: The Impossible Odds, (Edinburgh, 2004) “These vivid accounts bring alive the chaos and horror of war and the grim deprivation of the camps and forced marches which so many endured. Yet these personal stories resound with the spirit, humour and sense of comradeship which enabled men to fight on in desperate situations and refuse to be cowed by their captors”

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13)

We will remember them...
Elizabeth McDonald
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