

Dunkirk to a German POW - Charles Coak



Four Penzance Coak brothers John, Bill, Leonard & Charles and one sister Ann donned armed service uniforms to do their bit in ugly World War II.

Dunkirk Disaster Invasion

In early May 9/10 1940, German forces attacked the Low Countries. French troops and British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) were unable to halt the suffocating German advance. Six days later, German forces reached the coast effectively cutting off the B.E.F. leaving a large number of 330,000 men Allied troops and equipment trapping the British and French armies on the beaches small pocket around Dunkirk harbour. The German High Command strangely failed to order a full-scale panzer tank attack on the sitting duck troops in Dunkirk with their backs to the wall. The delay bought some time to arrange an evacuation of many allied forces from the Dunkirk pocket.

Dunkirk Destiny Evacuation

Admiral Ramsey, based in Dover, formulated Operation Dynamo to get off as many men as possible from the beaches. From May 26th 1940, small ships transferred soldiers to larger ones which then brought them back to ports in southern England. On 27 May, the British fought back to the Dunkirk perimeter line. The Le Paradis massacre took place that day, when the fanatical 14th Co. SS Division(Death's Head) Totenkopf machine-gunned unarmed 97 British 2nd Royal Norfolk division prisoners near the La Bassée Canal who had surrendered and outnumbered covering the retreat to Dunkirk. The Germans lined them along a barn wall and shot them. Only two survived.



In the nine days from 27 May–4 June, 338,226 men escaped, including 139,997 French, Polish, and Belgian troops, together with a small number of Dutch soldiers, aboard 861 vessels (of which 243 were sunk during the operation including a hospital ship). It was reported British Fighter Command lost 106 aircraft dogfighting over Dunkirk, and the Luftwaffe lost about 135 – some of which were shot down by the French Navy and the Royal Navy; the British claimed lost 177 aircraft and the Germans lost 240. Around 338,000 soldiers were evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk to southern England. Well done Ramsey et al! But what about those who did not make it? Churchill: 'No war was won by evacuation'.

On the Beach without a Paddle

Young Charles Coak was in the RAMC B.E.F. at Dunkirk France invasion in 1940 and was one of the 40,000 who were unlucky to be marched off to captivity by the German forces to POW camps enforced labour leaving families anxious at home.

Charles was interned at a German POW at **Stalag XX1A** Schildberg (now Ostrzeszów 44 miles ENE Breslau SW Poland).



Poland POW Camps

June 1942 - Oflag XXI-A in Schokken was renumbered Oflag XXI-C, the first Norwegian officers arrive.

March 1943 - The camp and all Norwegian officers were transferred to Ostrzeszów.

1944 - The Norwegian officers were located as follows: 630 in Seminary; 290 in high-school; 100 in primary school; 80 in Richter house; 30 in hospital.

January 1945 - The officers were marched out westward. Finally arriving at Offlag 111-A Luckenwalde, south of Berlin.

21 April 1945 - Soviet tanks under Gen. Tomoshenko liberated the camp.

5 May 1945 - The Norwegian officers were transported east to a camp near Lignica in Silesia.

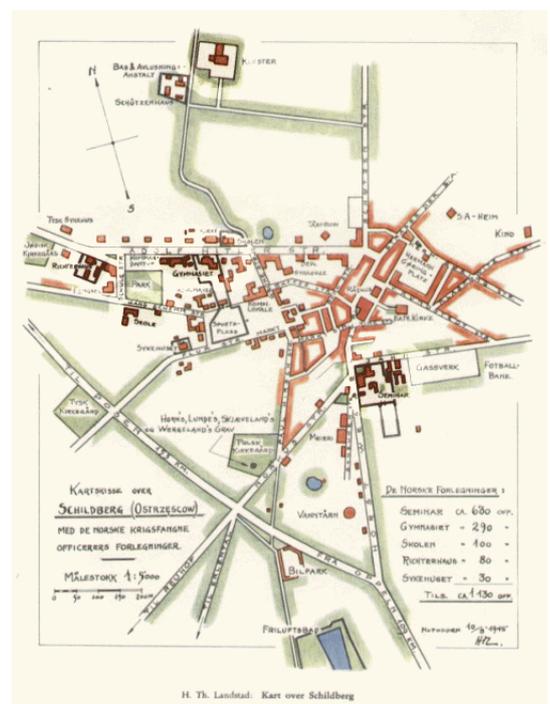
28 May 1945 - They arrived in Oslo after several day's journey by train via Hamburg and Aarhus in Denmark.

Oflag XXI-C was a German Army World War II prisoner-of-war camp for officers located in Warthegau, a western province of Poland that had been incorporated into the German Reich in 1939.

Stalag XX I A Schildberg Camp today Ostrzeszów

The camp was originally established near Schokken, present day Skoki, 30km (18 miles) north of Poznań Then it was moved to Schildberg, present day Ostrzeszów, 29km south of Ostrów Wielkopolski,. This camp was rather unique among POW camps as several buildings in the centre of the small town from which the remaining Polish inhabitants had been removed. These buildings were not adjacent to each other and were surrounded by barbed-wire fences. This was a P.O.W hospital camp, where more seriously captured wounded troops were able to receive medical care.

Gym & Primary School POW Camp Buildings 1940-44



Meanwhile Back in Cornwall

The writer's father Leonard Coak sent this photo below to his younger brother Charles interned in Stalag XX1A Schildberg Poland. It shows Leonard, his dog Pat and baby son Brian in the pram at Sancreed Cornwall 1938. (See reverse of the photo the Stalag stamp and writer's father's handwriting)



The Schildberg POW camp was built in 1937 and closed in 1943 and prisoners moved to other camps. The camp was liberated by the Russians in 1945.



Pre War II photo Penzance Coak family Leonard & Clarice Ivy Coak wedding. His youngest brother Charles Coak far left standing by his father and mother and other family members.

When the WW II choppy tide turned by 1945 in the favour of the allies German Wehrmacht forces was given a chance to spend a spell in Allied



POW camps. 3.5 % British POWs in German camps died. 0.03% POW Germans held in British camps died. 24.8% British POWs in Japanese camps died.

After Wasted Years



After his release from the Poland POW camp in 1944 Charles returned to his home in Penzance Cornwall. I recall the first time I met him in the street 1945 when he gave me a hug and gave me a simple two piece wooden fort for a few soldiers which delighted me for many hours.

Charles Coak became a well known ambulance driver for St. Johns Ambulance Service Penzance Cornwall for many years and Freemason. See left Charles Coak and Mrs. Dora Coak wife of Brian Coak Penzance 1965.



1938 Photo right 'boy in the pram' budding soldier. **1958** Same boy 1 QONR West African Frontier Force (National Service)

