

The prisoners' progress: an illustrated diary of the march into captivity of the last of the British Army in France, June 1940, by Leslie C. Hunt, East Surrey Regiment

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THE PRISONERS' PROGRESS



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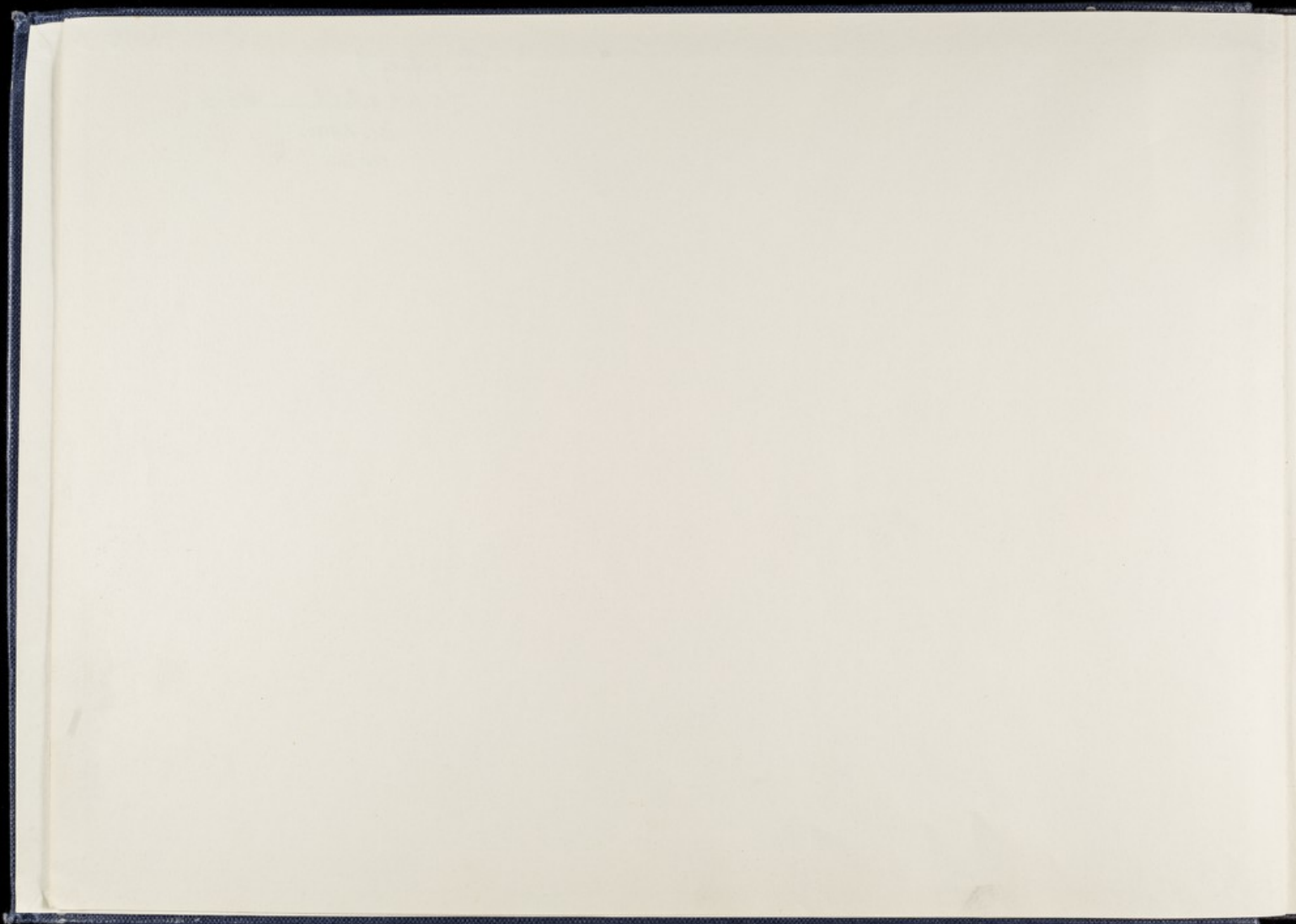
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THE PRISONERS' PROGRAM

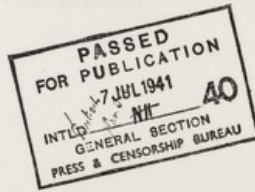


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THE PRISONERS' PROGRESS

AN ILLUSTRATED STORY OF THE MARCH
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THE PRISONERS' PROGRESS



THE PROGRESS

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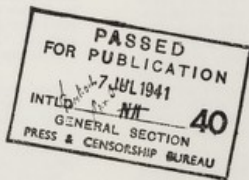
THE PRISONERS' PROGRESS

AN ILLUSTRATED DIARY OF THE MARCH
INTO CAPTIVITY OF THE LAST OF THE
BRITISH ARMY IN FRANCE - JUNE 1940

By

LESLIE C. HUNT

2nd LIEUTENANT, THE EAST SURREY REGIMENT
No. 1351, of OFLAG VIIIC, GERMANY



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THE PRISONERS' PROGRESS

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE MARCH
INTO CAPTIVITY OF THE LAST OF THE
BRITISH ARMY IN FRANCE, APRIL 1940
BY
LESLIE C. HUNT
THE LATTERDAY, THE EAST INDIAN COMPANY
AT THE ... OF ...



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INTRODUCTION

This illustrated record of events in the month of June, 1940, is not a War Diary. It is concerned only with the route of march and some of the experiences of British officers and men who were taken prisoner after the collapse in France.

After Dunkerque the British troops left in France were the 51st (Highland) Division, the 1st Armoured Division, and also remnants of the 12th and 23rd Divisions, who, together with some Lines of Communication troops, had been hastily formed into the "Beaman" Division. After the German thrust across the Somme our troops, supporting the French who were still in command, were forced to retire westwards. Although part of the 51st Division and most of the Armoured and "Beaman" Divisions managed to embark from western channel ports, the remainder of the force, which was in close contact with the enemy and which thus covered these evacuations, was eventually overwhelmed by strong German armoured formations. By June 12th all fighting had ceased, and these rear units which were on the general line from St. Valery en Caux to a point some twenty-five miles up the River Seine from Rouen had been captured. The actions commemorated in these pages by regimental badges are representative of many such that were fought between the Belgian frontier and the Seine, but which must remain unchronicled until regimental histories are again brought up to date.

So the last scattered remnants of the British army fighting in France were captured, and these pages of maps record their march into captivity. Some individuals and small parties had thrilling adventures in trying either to reach the sea or to join up with larger forces. Most of them eventually travelled on some part of the route to Germany here described, the exception being a few who travelled by way of Amiens, Cambrai or Luxembourg. The majority of British officers had reached "Oflag VII C" by July 7th, while Other Ranks had been distributed among various "Stalags." But from generalisation let us pass on to the personal reminiscences of a Prisoner of War.

In small parties we gradually merged into the main route—Domart, St. Pol, Bethune, Seclin (France); Tournai, Renaix, Ninove, St. Nicholas (Belgium); Hulst, Walsorden (Holland); Wesel, Hemer, "Oflag VII C" (Germany). Deprived of our arms, but carrying all we possessed of clothing and equipment on our backs, always tired and often hungry and dispirited, we began the awful trek, which, with little respite, was to go on day after day for a month.

At first there was little or no food: this was not the fault of the German escort, who were as badly off themselves, but simply the inevitable result of the speed of their advance through France. How we contrived to exist, and even later to be well fed is indescribable here. Those with the instinct of self-preservation most strongly

developed quickly collected a little store of necessities, the first and foremost being a tin or mug to serve for both eating and drinking. By degrees everyone was "equipped," often in a most bizarre fashion, and even the dullest had learnt to guard his possessions jealously.

The daily march of sixteen to twenty miles seemed longer than ever when our tired feet struck miles of cobbled road, while the exhausting German practice of marching for three hours without a halt, added its quota to our troubles. Our tramp-like existence had become almost a matter of course. We slept in our clothes, but on the whole in progressively better circumstances. We slept variously, in open fields, barns, churches, schools, factories and barracks, in the grandstands of racecourses and running tracks, and in the cells of a civil prison. Nights spent huddled together in fields, in the pouring rain without any cover, after a twenty-mile march and with another to come, are not easily forgotten. Sometimes the nightly camps held 200 to 300 officers and 4,000 to 5,000 men, British and French. At an early stage, tin hats, knives, and what remained of any warlike articles had been taken away. After Doullens, officers and men were mostly in separate camps; occasionally the men were caught sight of on the march, on the Rhine barges, and on German trains, and a brief exchange of smiles and hand wavings was possible. This separation from his men, and his inability to do anything for them, was perhaps the first thing which brought home to every officer the invidious nature of captivity.

Food and nightly camps improved as we got further away from the zone of recent fighting. The early morning scramble for a little water in which to wash, and if possible to shave, gave place to the luxury of an open-air "tub" on the racecourse at St. Pol and the cold shower-baths of Tournai prison. The morning cup of black, unsweetened acorn coffee, with British ration biscuits (a godsend), and the evening meal of watery soup was supplemented by meals provided by townspeople, for example, at Bethune; by purchases from civilians and sometimes by generous gifts of eggs, butter, chocolate, sugar, ham, and fruit, as at Doullens, Tournai, Ninove, and St. Nicholas. Those who had the opportunity to make purchases divided the spoils among their friends. Although the amount for each was small, it was enough to make all the difference.

Marching through the Somme country, the absence of destruction was most impressive, especially to those who had known it in the Great War. Here and there were a few dead, a few deserted guns, a village machine-gunned, a house destroyed by bombs, the burnt-out remains of an aeroplane, a bridge demolished, but it was impossible to believe that a few days before war had swept over those smiling fields and untouched villages: they were, however, empty of civilians, and cattle and horses roamed wild, wretched cows crying out to be relieved of their milk. Nor was there any sign of wanton destruction.

Note: The maps are not drawn to scale, and some minor geographical details may not be strictly accurate, as these had to be drawn from memory. The route of the march is coloured red throughout. Each camp is marked by a "barbed-wire enclosure" and given a few words of description.

Even though our march may have avoided the scenes of the worst damage—and some towns and villages were heavily shelled and bombed—it had been a merciful campaign compared with 1914-18, when over miles and miles of this very country not a tree stood, scarcely a blade of grass survived, nor was one brick left upon another.

In the still populated districts many civilians showed us great kindness. A shout of *les Anglais* would spread through the town, and old women and girls came running beside us, often in tears, thrusting a bit of bread and butter, a few lumps of sugar, a cup of coffee, or wine and water, into our hands. Guards kept our columns always on the move, but our gratitude cannot have been lost to those kindly souls who, having themselves just lost all, did not forget us. And there were the farmers' daughters at Domart, ministering angels indeed, and the poor women of Tournai, and of other large towns, who collected our money and shopping lists at the prison gates and unwearingly brought back our purchases and change. The people in the mining districts showed a fine spirit; forgetful of their own needs, they stood for hours by the roadside, handing out pathetic little packets of food; that first stick of rhubarb eaten raw with a few lumps of sugar was nectar. For many of us one particular day is memorable. Having marched rather further than usual in the broiling sun, our column halted in a field where the inhabitants of a French mining town had collected pails of hot coffee, food, and oddments of every description. These were eagerly pressed upon us with kind words of encouragement, a scene which was repeated as successive columns passed through this place.

From the mining villages of France we marched into Belgium. At first the people ignored our existence, looking mostly sullen and hostile, but in the districts north of Brussels they were more sympathetic. In Holland we entered a very friendly atmosphere. Gifts of food, soup, and chocolate were distributed, payment always being refused except for bread. (The newly-baked Dutch loaves we bought were a great treat.) After a terrible journey of two-and-a-half days up the Rhine, packed like sardines in a former pleasure steamer, we disembarked at Wesel.

We were in Germany. People lined the streets or gazed from their windows regarding us in silence, but there were no hostile demonstrations during our journey through the Rhineland and Westphalia into Bavaria. Throughout the march, and until within a few hours of our destination, we had the French always with us, and of course in numbers far greater than our own. Our separation from them only really became definite after we entered Germany, and we actually saw the last of one another at Hemer.

Some day the story of "the march" may be written—perhaps it never will be—in any case it will not be forgotten by those of us who were there.

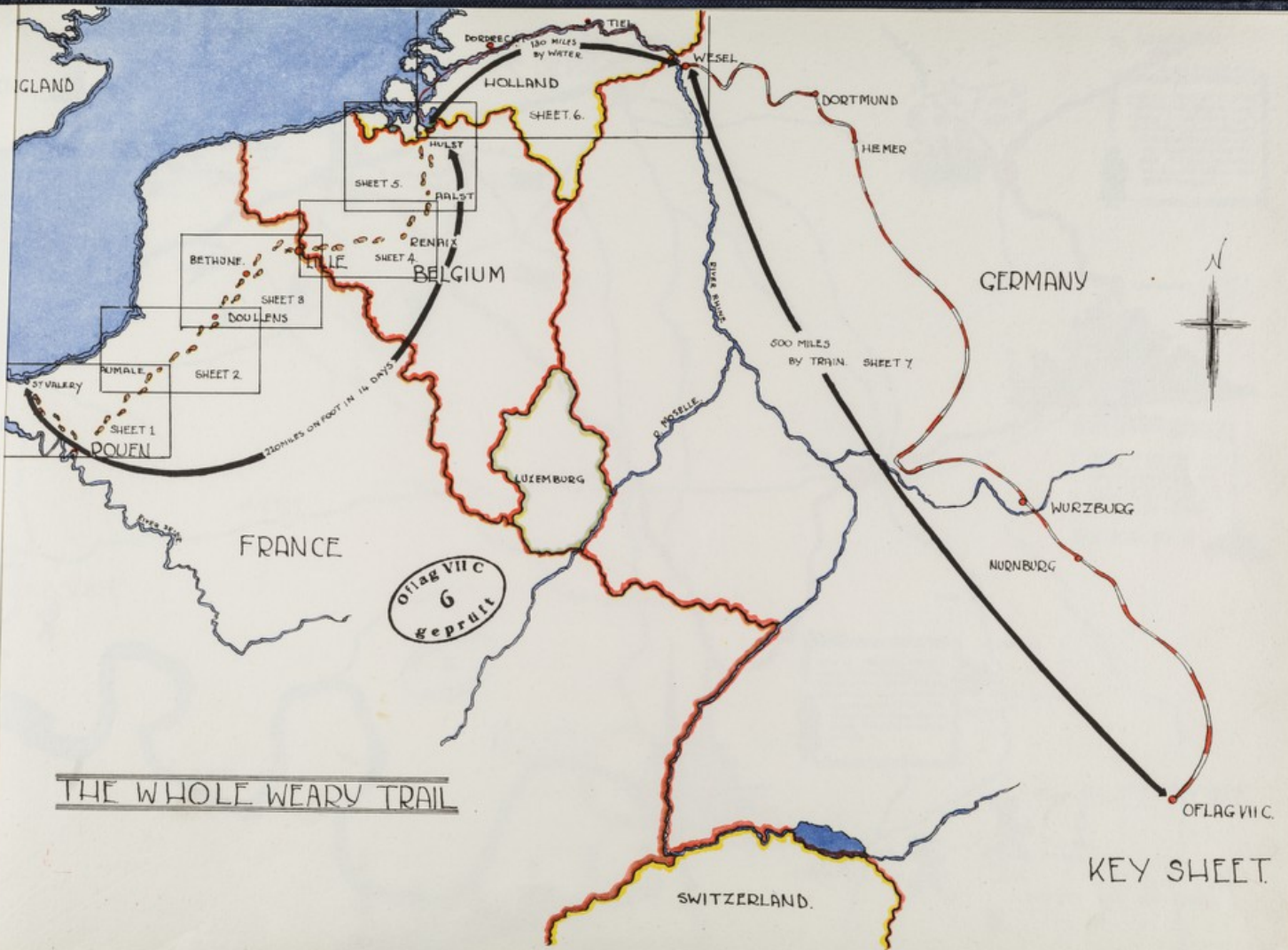
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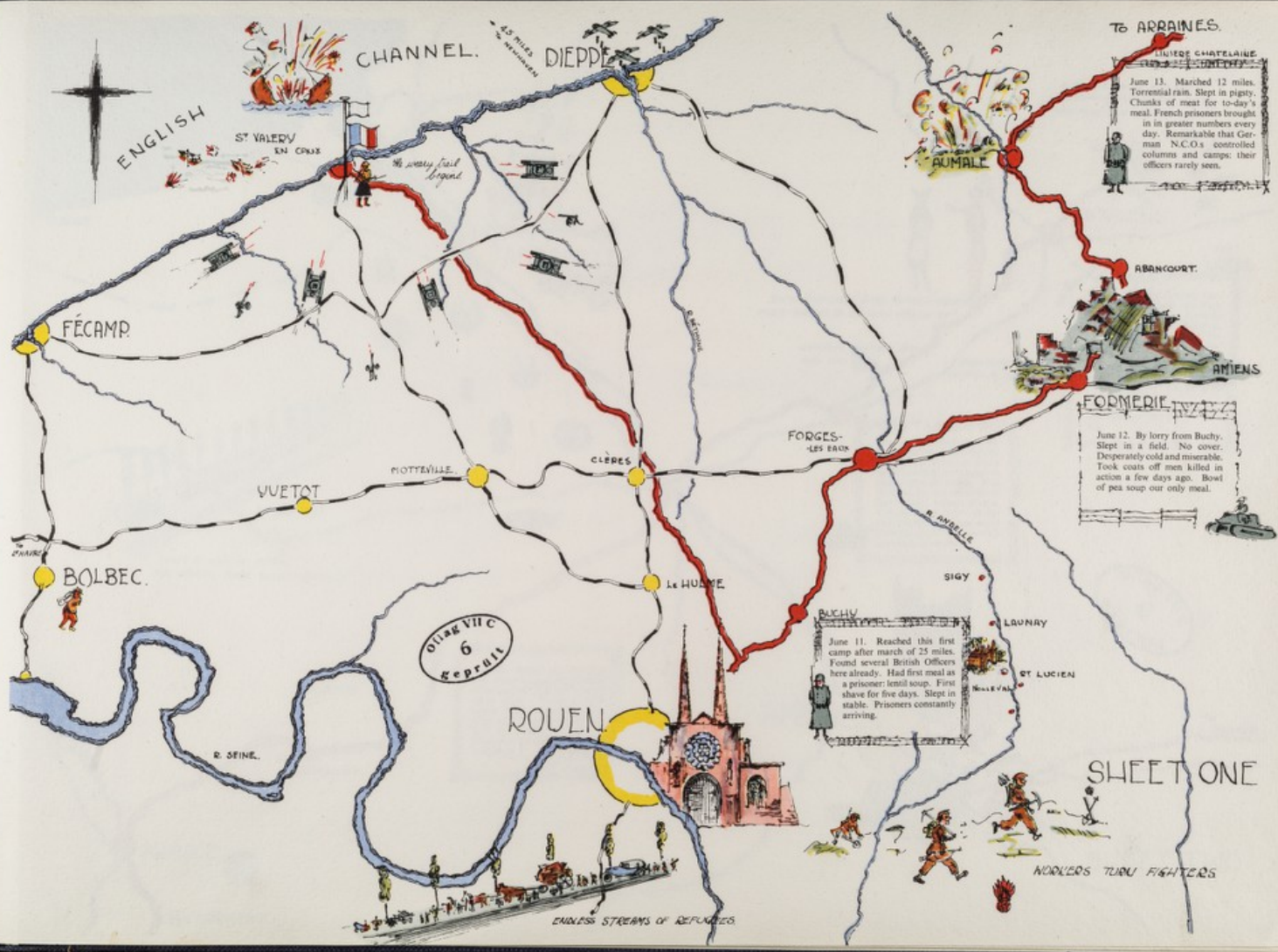


INTRODUCTION

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and have not been included.







ENGLISH

CHANNEL

45 MILES
to Arraines

DIEPPE

ST VALERY
EN CAUX

the way just beyond

AUMALE

TO ARRAINES

TO ARRAINES
June 13. Marched 12 miles. Torrential rain. Slept in pigsty. Chunks of meat for to-day's meal. French prisoners brought in in greater numbers every day. Remarkable that German N.C.O.s controlled columns and camps; their officers rarely seen.

FÉCAMP

ABANCOURT

AMIENS

FORMERIE

June 12. By lorry from Buchy. Slept in a field. No cover. Deplorably cold and miserable. Took coats off men killed in action a few days ago. Bowl of pea soup our only meal.

VUETOT

MOTTEVILLE

CLÈRES

FORGES-
LES BAINS

R. ANSELLE

BOLBEC

Le Houlme

SIGY

OLIG VHC
6
KEPRILL

BUCHY

June 11. Reached this first camp after march of 25 miles. Found several British Officers here already. Had first meal as a prisoner: lentil soup. First shave for five days. Slept in stable. Prisoners constantly arriving.

LAUNAY

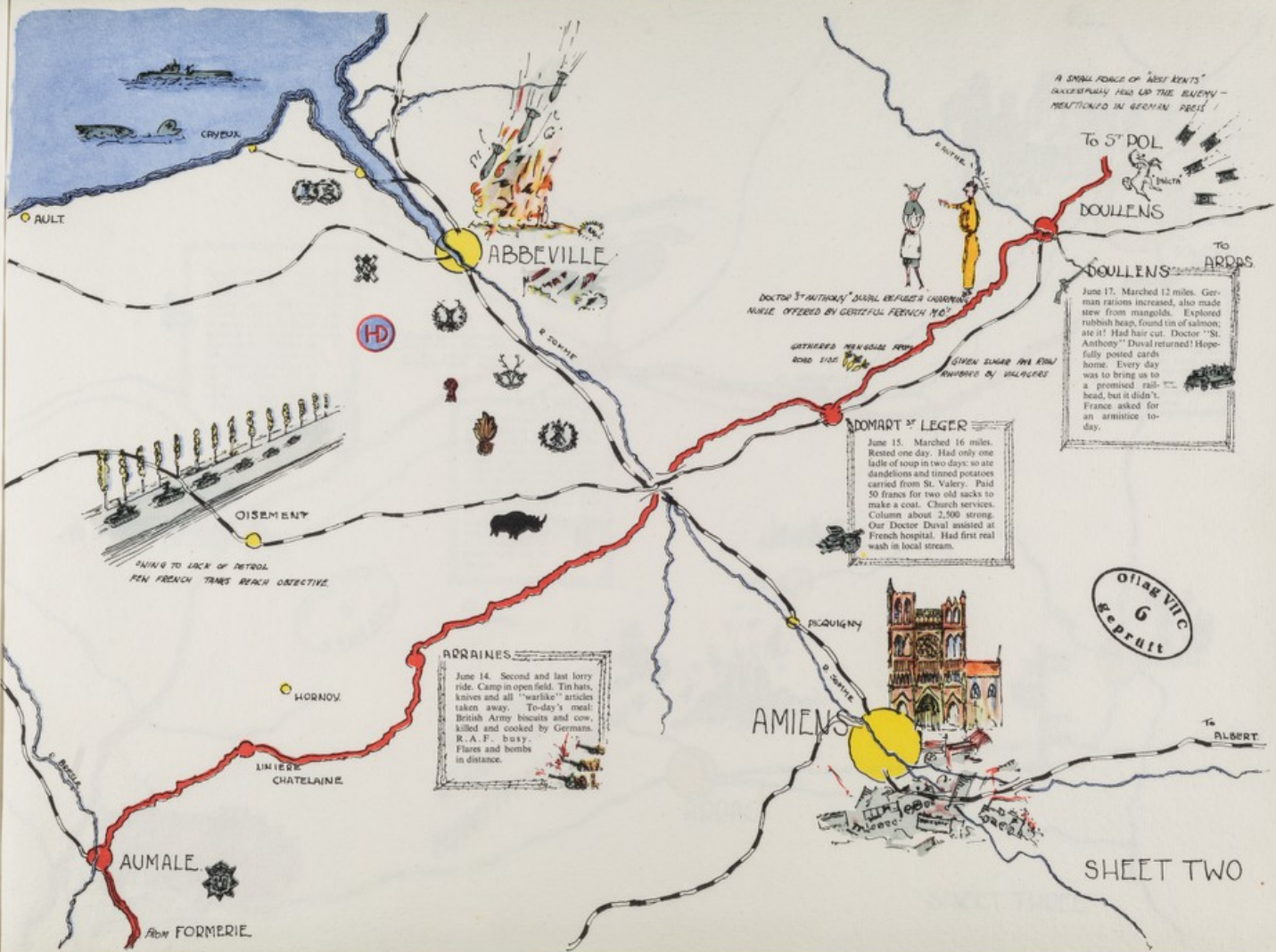
ST LUCIEN

ROUEN

SHEET ONE

NOODLES TURN FIGHTERS

ENDLESS STREAMS OF REFUGEES



A SMALL FORCE OF BEST BENTS
UNEXPECTEDLY TOOK UP THE BLUESY -
MENTIONED IN GERMAN PRESS

TO ST POL
DOULLENS

TO ARDAS
DOULLENS
June 17. Marched 12 miles. German rations increased, also made stew from mangolds. Explored rubbish heap, found tin of salmon, ate it! Had hair cut. Doctor "St. Anthony" Duval returned! Hopefully posted cards home. Every day was to bring us to a promised rail-head, but it didn't. France asked for an armistice today.

DOCTOR ST ANTHONY'S "SARIL REFUGIA" CHAIRMAN
NURSE OFFERED BY COURTEOUS FRENCH MO'

GATHERED MEN GOING AWAY
BOYS 1:05
GIVEN SUGAR AND RUM
RUMORED BY VILLAGERS

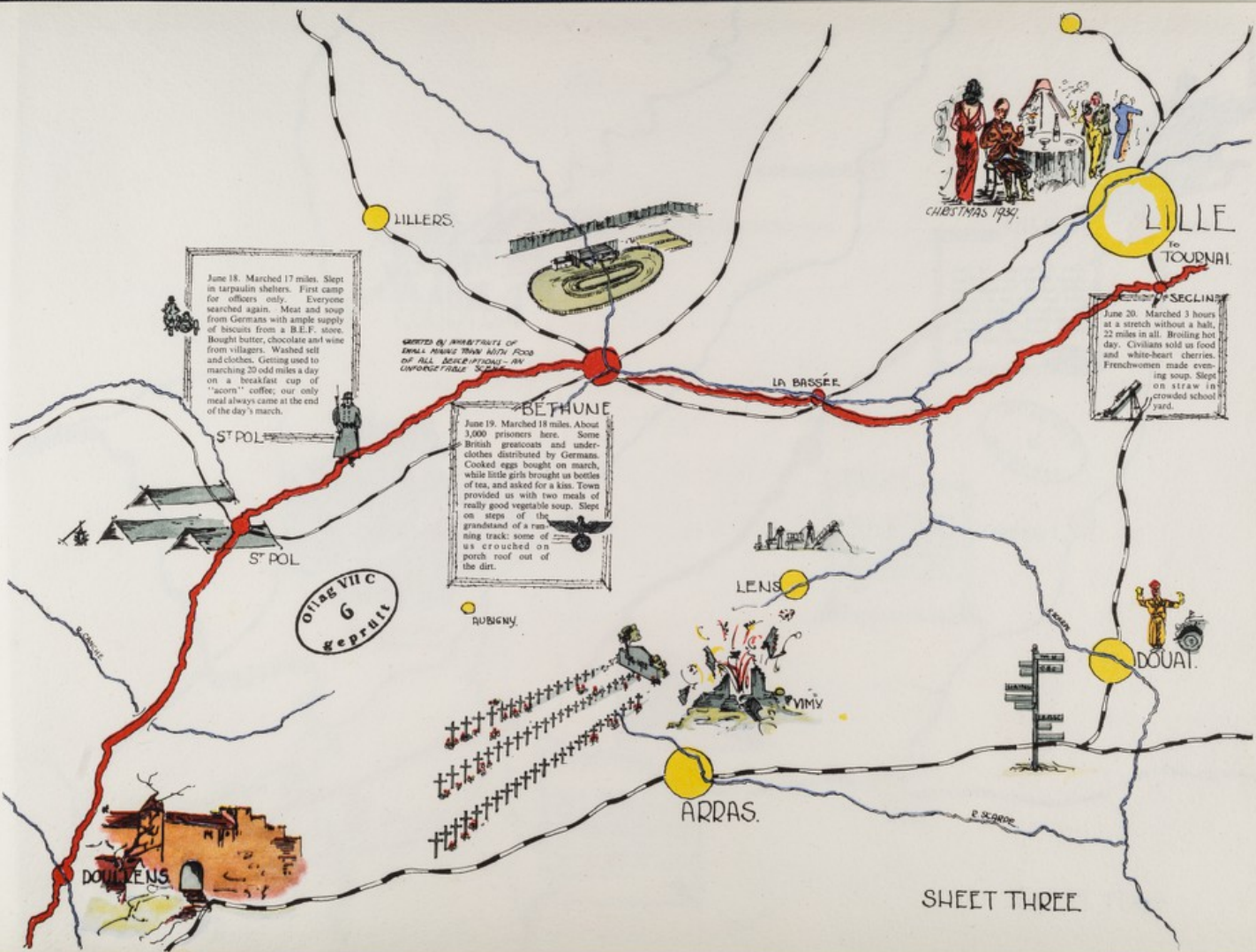
DOMART LEZ LEGER
June 15. Marched 16 miles. Rested one day. Had only one ladle of soup in two days: so ate dandelions and tinned potatoes carried from St. Valery. Paid 50 francs for two old sacks to make a coat. Church services. Column about 2,500 strong. Our Doctor Duval assisted at French hospital. Had first real wash in local stream.

ARRAINES
June 14. Second and last lorry ride. Camp in open field. Tin hats, knives and all "warlike" articles taken away. To-day's meal: British Army biscuits and cow, killed and cooked by Germans. R. A. F. busy. Flares and bombs in distance.

OISEMENT
DUE TO LACK OF PETROL
FRENCH TANKS REACH OBJECTIVE

OTIAG VIC
6
de fruit

SHEET TWO



June 18. Marched 17 miles. Slept in tarpaulin shelters. First camp for officers only. Everyone searched again. Meat and soup from Germans with ample supply of biscuits from a B.E.F. store. Bought butter, chocolate and wine from villagers. Washed self and clothes. Getting used to marching 20 odd miles a day on a breakfast cup of "scoorn" coffee; our only meal always came at the end of the day's march.

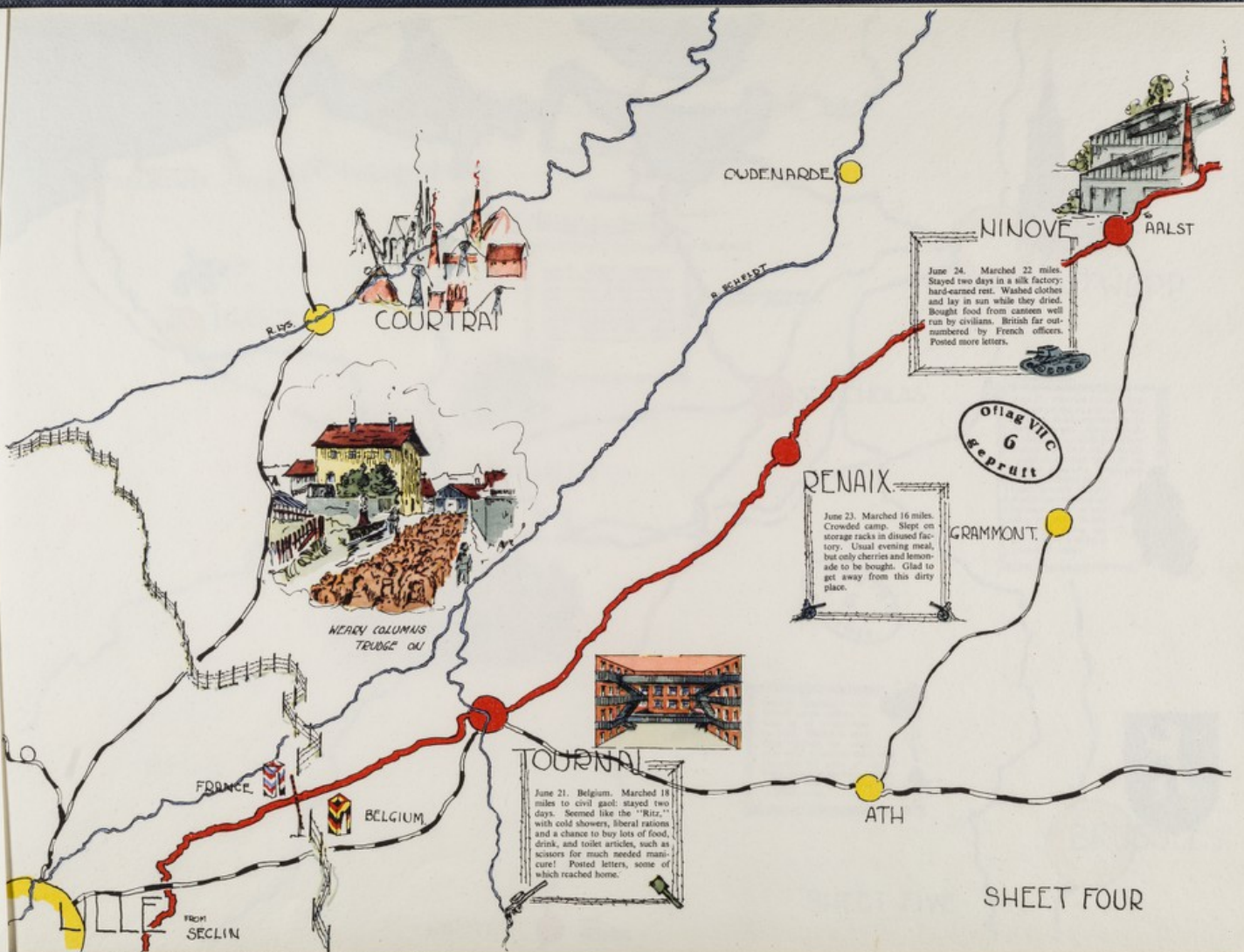
WRITTEN BY ABANDONED OF SMALL MARCH TOWARD FOOD OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS - BY UNFORGETTABLE SCENES

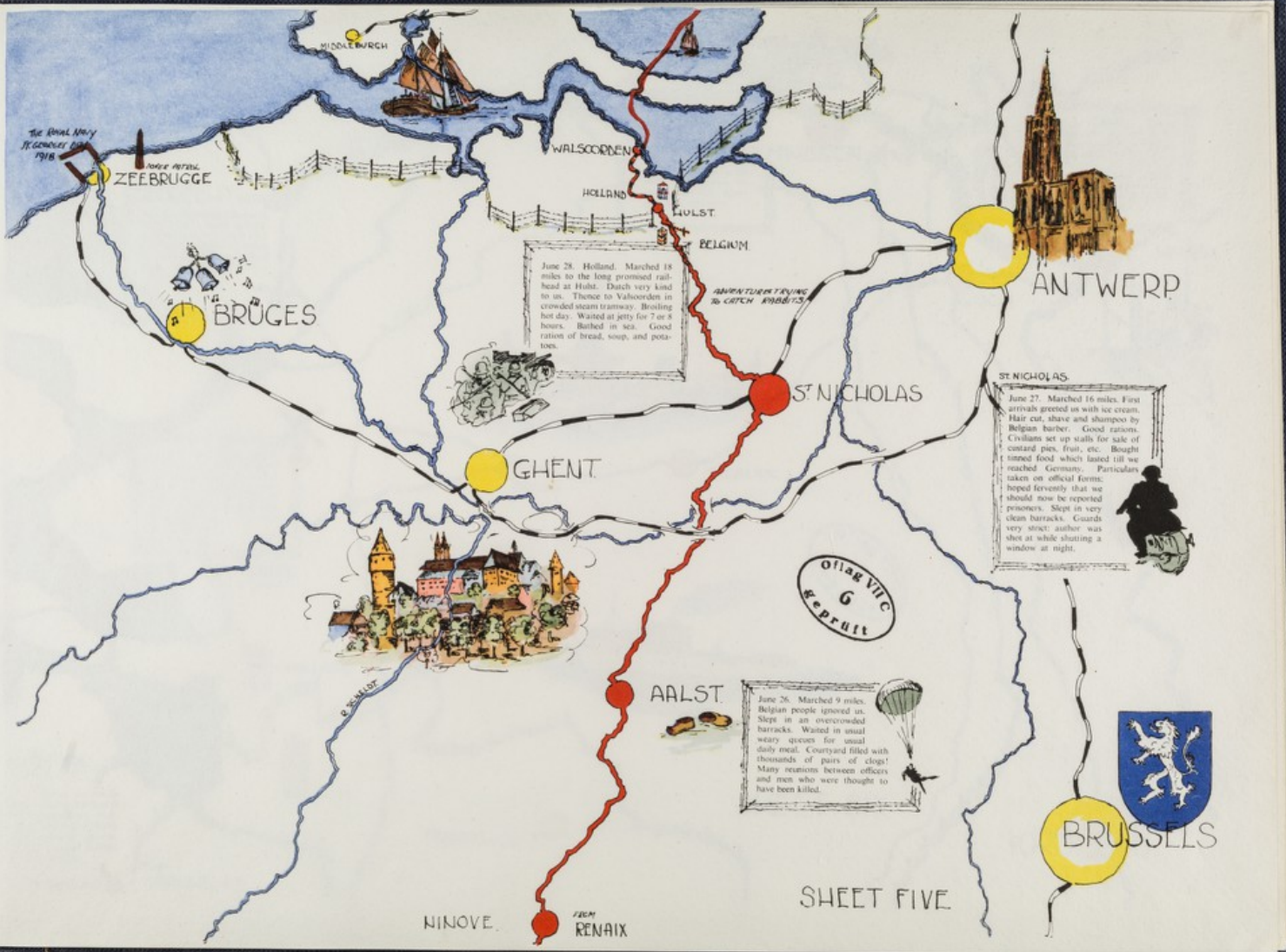
June 19. Marched 18 miles. About 3,000 prisoners here. Some British greatcoats and underclothes distributed by Germans. Cooked eggs bought on march, while little girls brought us bottles of tea, and asked for a kiss. Town provided us with two meals of really good vegetable soup. Slept on steps of the grandstand of a racing track; some of us crunched on porch roof out of the dirt.

June 20. Marched 3 hours at a stretch without a halt, 22 miles in all. Broiling hot day. Civilians sold us food and white-heart cherries. Frenchwomen made evening soup. Slept on straw in crowded school yard.



OTAG VII C
6
Reprint





June 28. Holland. Marched 18 miles to the long promised rail head at Hulst. Dutch very kind to us. Thence to Valsoorden in crowded ocean tramway. Broiling hot day. Waited at jetty for 7 or 8 hours. Bathed in sea. Good ration of bread, soup, and potatoes.

June 27. Marched 16 miles. First arrivals greeted us with ice cream. Hair cut, shave and shampoo by Belgian barber. Good ration. Civilians set up stalls for sale of mustard pies, fruit, etc. Bought tinned food which lasted till we reached Germany. Particulars taken on official forms; hoped fervently that we should now be reported prisoners. Slept in very clean barracks. Guards very strict; author was shot at while shutting a window at night.

June 26. Marched 9 miles. Belgian people ignored us. Slept in an overcrowded barracks. Waited in usual weary queues for usual daily meal. Courtyard filled with thousands of pairs of clogs! Many reunions between officers and men who were thought to have been killed.

Ollag VIC
6
Kedruit

SHEET FIVE

NINOVE. FROM RENAIX

BRUSSELS

ST. NICHOLAS

ANTWERP

BRUGES

GHENT

AALST

WALSCOORDEN

HOLLAND

HULST

BEELM

ADVENTURE TYPING TO CATCH RABBITS

THE ROYAL NAVY
17. GENESEEY 1918

ZEEBRUGGE

MIDDLEBURGH

SCHALDT



