

## British POWs

During the Second World War, almost 168,000 British soldiers passed through the camps administered by the Wehrmacht. One in five were sent to Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf - a total of around 48,000 men. The camp was therefore the largest place of isolation for British prisoners-of-war in Europe, and the Brits were the most numerous POW group in it - hence it was often referred to as a *Britenlager*. Among those confined in it were soldiers from across the British Empire: English, Scots, Irish and Welsh, as well as Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, Indians and South African soldiers. The British army also included French, Czechs, Dutch, Jews and Poles fighting in the Royal Air Force. The first transport of about 2,700 soldiers from the *British Expeditionary Force* arrived at the stalag on 14 June 1940. These were the soldiers who had fought at Dunkirk. Later they were joined by prisoners taken in the Balkans and Crete in 1941, mainly Australians and New Zealanders. In the autumn of 1942 came Canadians captured after the failed Allied special forces raid on the port of Dieppe (these commandos were shackled in reprisal for over a year). Then soldiers captured in North Africa, paratroopers from Arnhem, soldiers taken prisoner in the Ardennes and RAF airmen. The latter were part of one of the most prominent groups at Lamsdorf.

The British were among one of the best treated POW groups. Camp infrastructure was of an adequate standard of living, as were sanitary conditions, amount of food and medical care. Humanitarian aid was provided to them and the work they were sent to was not particularly gruelling. Later, the above-mentioned conditions and treatment of the British POWs deteriorated markedly.

The British POWs were employed in agriculture, mining, forestry, road and motorway construction. They worked in about 800 working parties in Silesia. The British POWs tried to pass their free time by carrying out various cultural, educational and sporting activities. With the help of international humanitarian organisations, they formed a school, a theatre, choirs and musical groups or sports teams in the camp.

Most of the British prisoners-of-war left Stalag 344 Lamsdorf on 21 and 22 January 1945. The evacuation then included almost 14,000 British POWs from the camp and working parties. Only the sick and those unable to march remained - some of them were moved from the place by rail in early March and the last of them regained their freedom on 18 March 1945.

Around 300 British soldiers died at Lamsdorf from various causes. Their bodies were either exhumed after the war and buried in the military cemetery in Cracow (Rakowicki Cemetery) or transferred back to their homeland.