CHAPTER V

LIFE on the "Wolf" was very different to life on the "Hitachi." To begin with, all the single men of military age from the "Hitachi" were accommodated on the 'tween decks, and slept in hammocks which they had to sling themselves. The elder men among them slept in bunks taken from the "Hitachi," but the quarters of all in the 'tween decks were very restricted; there was no privacy, no convenience, and only a screen divided the European and Japanese quarters. The condition of our fellow-countrymen from the "Hitachi" was now the reverse of enviable, though it was a great deal better than that of the crews of the captured ships, who were "accommodated" under the poop—where the captains and officers captured had quarters to themselves—and exercised on the poop and well deck, the port side of
which was reserved for the Japanese.

There were now more than four hundred prisoners on board, mostly British, some of whom had been captured in the February previous, as the “Wolf” had left Germany in November, 1916, the “Hitachi” being the tenth prize taken. The condition in which these prisoners lived cannot be too strongly condemned. The heat in the tropics was insufferable, the overcrowding abominable, and on the poop there was hardly room to move. While anchored near Sunday Island, in the Pacific some months earlier, two of the British prisoners taken from the first prize captured managed to escape. Their absence was not noticed by the Germans till a fortnight later, as up to then there had been no daily rollcall, an omission which was at once rectified directly these two men were noted missing. As a punishment, the prisoners aft were no longer allowed to exercise on the poop, but were kept below. The heat and stifling atmosphere were inconceivable and cruel. The iron deck below presented the appearance of having been
hosed—in reality it was merely the perspiration streaming off these poor persecuted captives that drenched the deck. The attention of the ship’s doctor was one day called to this and he at once forbade this inhuman confinement in future. From then onwards, batches of the prisoners were allowed on the poop at a time, so that every man could obtain at least a little fresh air a day—surely the smallest concession that could possibly be made to men living under wretched conditions.

But notwithstanding these hardships the men seemed to be merry and bright and showed smiling faces to their captors. They had all evidently made up their minds to keep their end up to the last, and were not to be downed by any bad news or bad treatment the Germans might give them.

The “Wolf” of course picked up wireless news every day, printed it, and circulated it throughout the ship in German and English. We did not, however, hear all the news that was picked up, but felt that what we did hear kept us at least a little in touch with
the outside world, and we have since been able to verify that, and also to discover that we missed a great deal, too.

The accommodation provided for the married couples on the "Wolf" was situated on the upper deck on the port side. Some "cabins" had been improvised when the first women and civilian prisoners had been captured, some had been vacated by the officers, and others had been carved out as the number of these prisoners increased. The cabins of course—small—there was very little room to spare on the "Wolf"—and, at the best, makeshift contrivances, but it must be admitted that our German captors did all they could to make us as comfortable as possible under the conditions prevailing. The married couples, the Australian military officers and a few elderly civilians messed together in the officers' ward-room, quite a tiny saloon, which was placed at our disposal after the officers had finished their meals.

The food on the "Wolf" was better cooked than it had been on the "Hitachi," but there was of course no fresh food of any kind.
Even the potatoes we had were dried and had to be soaked many hours before they were cooked, and even then they did not much resemble the original article; the same remark applies to the other vegetables we had. Occasionally our meals satisfied us as far as quantity went, but in the main we left the table feeling we could with ease dispose of a great deal more. This was especially the case after breakfast, which consisted of bread and jam only. Each cabin had a German orderly to look after and wait on its occupants, two German stewards waited on us at meals, and a Japanese steward had two or three cabins to look after and clean.

The deck—we were only allowed the port side—was only about six feet wide, and part of this was occupied by spare spars. Sailors and officers, and prisoners to fetch their food were passing along this deck incessantly all day, so it can be easily imagined there was not much room for sitting about in deck chairs. On this deck, too, was the prisoners' cell, usually called the "calaboose," very rarely without an occupant
with an armed sentry on guard outside. It was not, a cheerful abode, being very small and dark; and the prisoner, if his sentence were a long one, served it in installments of a few days at a time.

We were allowed to go down to the well deck to see our friends and sit on the hatch with them during the daytime. They had their meals in the 'tween decks at different times from us, but the food provided was usually just the same. The evenings were the deadliest times of all on the "Wolf." At dusk the order "Schiff Abblenden" resounded all through the ship sailors came round to put tin plates over all the portholes, and from thence onward throughout the night complete darkness prevailed on deck, not a glint of light showing anywhere on the ship.

When the "Wolf" considered herself in dangerous waters, and when she was laying mines, even smoking was forbidden on deck. All the cabins had a device by which directly the door was open the light went out, only to be relit directly the door closed. So it was impossible for anyone to leave his cabin
with the door open and the light on. There was nothing to do in the evenings after the last meal, which was over before eight o’clock. There was nowhere to sit except on the dark deck or in the dark cabins; it was so hot that the cabin doors had to be kept open, and the evenings spent on the “Wolf” were certainly very dreary. Most of us felt we would rather be in gaol on shore, for then we should be in no risk of being killed at any moment by our own people, our cells would have been larger than our cabins, our food possibly not much worse, and our gaol would at least have been stationary and not rolling about, though it must be confessed that the “Wolf” was a good sea boat.

She had been one of the Hansa line before the war, and was about six thousand tons, with a speed of about ten knots at the outside. She had been thoroughly adapted for her work as a raider, had four torpedo tubes and six guns (said to be 4.7) with concrete emplacements, not to mention machine and smaller guns, none of which could be seen by a passing ship, to which the “Wolf”
looked, as she was intended to look, exactly like an innocent tramp. When in action her bulwarks dropped, giving free play to her guns and torpedoes. There was telephone communication between her bridge and every gun and every part of the ship; she carried a huge searchlight; her masts and funnel were telescopic, and she could rig an extra funnel. She carried large supplies of bombs, hand grenades, rifles and small arms, had hospitals with two doctors on board; among her crew of more than three hundred were representatives of every trade, she was thoroughly well equipped in every way, the officers had the best and most powerful binoculars, and absolutely nothing seemed to have been forgotten. There were, it was said, only three of the officers who were Imperial Navy men, the Commander, the Artillery Officer, and the Lieutenant in charge of the prisoners. All the other officers and a great many of the crew were from the German mercantile marine, who had travelled with, mixed with and lived with Englishmen in many parts of the world. To this
we undoubtedly owed the kindly treatment we received on board, treatment which was infinitely better than we expected to receive. The majority of the officers and men were certainly kindly disposed towards us. There is no doubt, however, that the fear we might be taken by a British cruiser also had something to do with this treatment, for if we had been treated badly the Germans knew they would have had cause to regret it had they been captured.

In a conversation with the Lieutenant in charge of the prisoners—who, by the way, had a Scottish mother—I remarked that it was very hard on our relatives and friends not knowing what had become of us. He agreed that it was, but added it was no worse for my relations than it was for his! They did not know where he was either! “No,” I replied, “but you are out doing your duty and serving your country, and when you left home your people knew they would have no news of you for many months. It is quite different with us. We were not out to be taken prisoner, we were simply travel-
ling on business, being compelled to do so. We are not serving our country by being caught and kept in this way, and our relatives did not expect us to disappear and send them no news of ourselves for a long time.” However, he affected not to see the difference between our case and his; just as the sailors often told the prisoner’s aft that in case of the “Wolf” going into action, it would be no worse for the prisoners than it was for the fighting crew.

We were forbidden to talk to the crew, but under cover of the darkness some of them, a great number of whom spoke English, were only too glad to speak to us. We learnt from them that the “Wolf” had been out a year, and that they were all very “fed up” with it all, tired of the life, tired of the sea, tired of the food, longing to get home, and longing for the war to end. They had, too, no doubts as to how it would end, and were certain that the “Wolf” would get back to Germany whenever she wished to do so.

They were certain three things would bring them victory; their submarines, the
defection of Russia who would soon be made to conclude peace with Germany, and the fact that in their opinion America had entered the war too late.

The interests of the "Wolf" were now, to a certain extent, identical with our own—that we should not meet an Allied cruiser. A notice was posted in some of our cabins saying that in that event the women with their husbands, and some other prisoners would be put into boats with a white flag, "if weather and other conditions permitted." The other prisoners, however, viz:—those under the poop and on the 'tween decks, would have had no chance of being saved. They would all have been battened down under hatches (this indeed was done whenever the "Wolf" sighted or captured a ship, when mines were being sown, and when and other drill was carried on) and armed guards with hand grenades sent among them. Their fate, if the "Wolf" had gone into action, would have been too terrible to contemplate, and it is certain very few of them could have been saved.
The "Wolf" with a company of over seven hundred on board sailed away on a southwesterly course for the next two days, and the usual routine of the ship went on, but no further drills took place. Soon after daybreak on November tenth a sailor came along and locked us all in our cabins, armed guards patrolled the deck, and a short time after an officer came to each cabin and informed us there was a steamer on the starboard side which the "Wolf" intended to capture. He told us the "Wolf" would fire on her to make her stop, and provided all of us with cotton wool to insert in our ears while the guns were being fired! We waited for the sound of the guns, but nothing happened, and in about half an hour the same officer came along and said to us, "Don't be fearful, the other ship has stopped and there will be no firing!" Our cabin doors were unlocked, the men on the upper deck were allowed out, the ladies were requested not to show themselves on deck, and another officer ran along the deck saying "We've caught her, we've caught her, a neutral this time!"
The “caught” vessel had stopped and was lying very near the “Wolf.” The name on her stern proclaimed her to be the “Igotz Mendi” of Bilbao, and she was flying the Spanish flag. In a short time a prize crew left the “Wolf” in her motor-launch, and proceeded to the other ship. After they had been aboard her a few minutes, a message came back that the Spanish ship was from Delagoa Bay to Colombo with a cargo of fifty-eight hundred tons of coal for the British Admiralty authorities in Ceylon. The chargin of the Germans may be imagined when they realized that they had captured this ship just three days too late to save the “Hitachi.” Here was a ship with ample coal, which, had it been captured a few days before, would have enabled the Germans to save the “Hitachi” and take her as a prize to Germany as they had always desired to do. The “Igotz Mendi” had left Lourenco, Marquez, on November fifth and was due at Colombo on the twenty-second. Before nine a.m. on the morning of the capture, both ships had turned about, the prize now being
in command of the Germans, and were going back on the course the "Wolf" had followed since the destruction of the "Hitachi." Discussion was rife among the prisoners as to what would be done with the new capture, and whether the Commander of the "Wolf" would redeem his promise to transfer the married couples to the "next ship caught."