

Escape

My story is an account of two years of “living and partly living.” Memory is growing dim of unpleasant times, and looking back, now, I can recollect little but days when you almost forgot that a barbed wire fence surrounded your hut, events that were comical, times when you laughed. Memory has been kind to me and perhaps it is as well.

They took us prisoner in June, 1942, and marched us a long way over the desert in the first two days. We were hungry and thirsty in the sun. They flew us to Italy, where we moved from camp to camp, eventually finishing up near Parma and some six miles from the river Po. As camps go it was a good camp. We spent five months there, until in September, 1943, came the famous day of the Italian armistice. When the guards heard the news they threw down their arms, danced round the square and melted away overnight to their homes. We evacuated the camp in haste, and the German column that came for us arrived an hour too late.

The next nine months — for it was nine months, including a hard winter, before we reached our own troops — seemed like a dream, in which a third-rate thriller plot seemed to have seized hold of our lives. We managed to exchange our uniforms for disreputable peasants' clothes and started to walk, first of all over

the hills, to avoid the teeming Lombardy plain, then southwards along the ridge of the Appenines. We had no map, no money and no food and we were among people who, though friendly, were often too scared to help us. The need of begging food and shelter and of asking the way rapidly taught us to speak Italian, and somehow we got along.

It was a long walk, down the spine of that mountain chain. It is rugged country, full of steep hills and rocky river beds, which were dry at first, and then foaming with the winter rains. Farms are few and far between. We never ventured on a road, nor did we go near villages, for Germans passed along the roads, and they were often billeted in villages. Except when we were hungry, or wanted to shelter in a barn overnight, we avoided every human being, for there were still fascists to betray us. We walked for thirty days, dawn to dusk. Razor-back ridge succeeded razor-back ridge; we made great detours to avoid towns and roads: following only goat-tracks in a wild and deserted countryside, we often lost our way; our boots began to give out. Then the first winter snows fell and we were delayed.

Near Casino we gave up the attempt to get through the lines, the low ground being uncomfortably full of Germans, and the high impassable through snow. We waited. Nearly two months later, when the landing was made at Anzio, we walked there by forced marches across the mountains, but were too late to get through

before the lines were consolidated. So we waited hopefully for the spring offensive. For more than three months we were within six miles of our own troops at Anzio, living on the generosity of Italian farmers in a straw cabin halfway up a mountain side. We ate queer things — dandelions and artichokes, chestnuts, maize and soya beans. The Germans knew we were there through fascists, and conducted beats for us, but we were lucky and escaped their cordons. Their field police surprised us in our cabin early one morning, searched us for arms and let us go, thinking we were Italians. We watched them at their daily duty of pillage and plunder, until there was no living beast or fowl and hardly a handful of grain for miles round. We saw them ransack other cabins for peasants' pathetic treasures, wantonly destroying what they could not carry away. The Italians were as hungry and eager for revenge as we were.

The offensive started in May, 1944; we saw the flashes of the guns far away to the south. Anxious days went past, and still there was no sign of an attack from the Anzio bridgehead. But one morning we woke to a drumfire of guns, and we watched the whole battle unfold beneath us. For one whole day we watched a troop of German gunners load and fire almost without pause. That night we heard a series of great explosions, and an excited Italian boy woke us with the news that the Germans had blown the bridges and were fleeing. We hastened out, and it was true. . . . We lost self-control, and took risks that jeopardised all our

months of waiting, but our luck held. The local wine merchant broached his buried cask of wine, and we drank and drank again to the day of liberation. . . . and still those scattered groups of Germans straggled past us, panting up the mountain with all their kit and equipment on their backs. I held an auction between Germans wanting to sell their kit to lighten their loads, and Italians who were in rags and barefoot. We booed and jeered . . . danced with our Italian friends . . . ate and drank copiously. Towards evening we said good-bye to them all and walked down the hill towards the plain. Within half a mile we met an American patrol, which, like magic, conjured up hot coffee and fresh dough-nuts. The rest of the day passed in a dream — regimental H.Q. — Generals asking eager questions — food and more food — American cigarettes — even a bed in Anzio.

The adventure was over and little remained of our excitement the next morning, when we were put in gaol as suspected spies. They let us out the next day, and so to Naples and England and — flying bombs ! Much more dangerous and unpleasant.

Anonymous AOB
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