



*TED'S WAR*

*THE MEMOIRS*

*OF*

*GEORGE EDWARD PEARSON*



THE CAPTURE

On 1st April 1941, Rommel realising that the British had only a small force involved (due to units being withdrawn from the Western Desert and sent to Greece), decided to test out the British strength. The British retreated rapidly and I was caught up in this retreat and successfully made my way back from Msus to Um-er-Rezum where I found my water tank company, lagered up for the night.

At the time of the German attack I was quite near the front line at Adgedabia and spent a night hearing the sounds of gunfire and seeing the flashes of explosions and tracer bullets. Very early the next morning (daybreak), I started off on the return journey with about eight trucks and found an organised retreat taking place. Military Police stopped me (I had no officer with me at this time). They enquired my destination and I could only say that I had to find my unit somewhere near Derna. They just told me to get a move on which was not easy as this stretch of desert was stony and sandy and progress was difficult.

We eventually arrived at Msus where a supply dump had been established - food, petrol and ammunition. More Military Police on duty who told me to head for Derna and to help ourselves to anything we could take from the dump. Whilst we were doing just this, a Lysander reconnaissance plane landed nearby and out came General Wavell and we saw him in discussion with a group of officers. We then set off for Derna making good time now and found our unit at dusk at Um er Rezum with my twenty trucks and found that my two friends Sgts Devonshire and Gorse missing, presumed to be at Micheli.

Rommel continued his pursuit which developed into a full Italian-German offensive. One spearhead of Rommel's led by Colonel Gustav Ponath, by-passed Mechile where a British garrison had been formed as a delaying tactic, and headed North towards Derna. Reaching a wadi 3 miles South of Derna at 6.00 pm on 6th April, 1941 I was with him and his men in that wadi!

On arrival at Um-er-Rezum, my Commanding Officer told me that I had to take six full water tank vehicles to Mechile the following day as the 'Garrison' there intended to hold out. I told the Commanding Officer I would be pleased to go as my friends Sgt. Devonshire and Sgt. Gorse were missing and I believed they would be at Mechili, they having left Msus in retreat sometime before I had started back.

I set off early next day with six vehicles, a Lieutenant in charge who delegated the leading of the convoy to me as I was well acquainted with the route to Mechile. At about midday, the driver saw some figures on the horizon. I knew we were about two miles or so from Micheli and assumed, at first, they were our troops. No information had been given to me that they could be Germans. We were at this time travelling at a fast speed across a flat salt pan, probably doing about 60 kph and were rapidly approaching the men on the rising ground ahead.

I glanced back and saw that the convoy had become very extended - the last vehicle with the Lieutenant being rather more than half a mile behind. I turned my attention to the men in front and when we were about 400 yards off, realised they were Germans.

I snatched on the hand brake which was on my left (the driver was on the left), and yelled "jump out" which we both did, just as the Germans opened fire. As I scrambled back behind the wide sand tyres of the truck, the 18 gallon petrol tank on my right hand side burst into flames which probably saved my life as it provided a screen from the German gunners. I crouched behind the wide sand tyres, the driver doing the same on his side of the truck. I could feel the heat of the flames from the burning petrol tank and could see the sand spurting up a few inches from my body as the bullets from the spandau machine gun hit the ground alongside. Because of the flames, the gunner could not see me and he was, fortunately for me, firing blind, but coming near enough to scare the hell out of me. They also had a 2 pounder gun which I presumed pierced the petrol tank. The driver (a Cypriot) was not so fortunate, he was badly shot up and died soon after.

My only injuries were small pieces of shrapnel in my right arm, lots of blood but no damage. The firing seemed to go on and on, but eventually stopped.

The next thing I hear a voice in perfect English say "You can get up now, are you wounded?" I got up and the Germans surrounded me and I then realised that our Lieutenant had very wisely put his white handkerchief up on a stick and surrendered. I say wisely simply because we had no means of serious defence with us. My truck had one rifle, and I am certain that none of the others had anything different. In any case, the drivers were Cypriots and certainly none of us had combat training. The English speaking Feldwebel, after instructing one of his men to put a plaster on my arm, invited me to travel with him and his men in their half track vehicle. I remarked on his excellent English and he told me he had worked in Croydon for ten years. I climbed in and sat alongside the German gunners, (the spandau machine gun was mounted on a tripod so that the gunner could shoot in any direction over the heads of his comrades. The Unit also had two anti tank 2 pounder guns on trailers, so off we set for Derna. On the way we ran into another British convoy of about 30 vehicles on their way to Mechili. As they were Royal Army Ordnance Corps, I cannot imagine why they were going to Mechili. Our intelligence must have been very poor. This convoy was captured simply by the Germans firing some long bursts up in the air.

The men in the convoy dived out of their trucks thinking it was an air raid, and were rounded up. Colonel Ponath made a short speech to everybody, basically to tell us that anybody attempting to escape would be shot. He spoke in German through an interpreter and, although at that time I had no German, I understood his short sharp sentences ending with the word *Geshossen!* We then cautiously set off North again towards the coastal road along which the British were still retreating eventually arriving in the wadi

just South of Derna airfield where we settled down for the night. All the German activity since I was captured had been seen by me in the rather privileged position sitting between two German soldiers in the half track. They were all very kind and affable.

Immediately on arriving in the wadi, the Germans set up machine gun and anti-tank posts covering the entrances to the wadi and the prisoners were assembled on the ground. By this time several hundred.

Just before dusk, a number of vehicles came into the wadi and, to our surprise, General Phillip Neame and General Richard O'Conner and their drivers, all taken prisoner by Colonel Ponath's men. My friendly Feldwebel put me with them and told me to look after them if necessary. One of the captured trucks in the convoy had stacks of Naffi stores. Chocolates, cigarettes etc. The next morning I was given permission to go and get some 'comforts' for the Generals and myself. (This was after the Germans had taken what they fancied), and I got some Cadbury's chocolate blocks and cigarettes, being told by a German soldier not to take the Cadbury's fruit and nut as he had put that aside for General Rommel; he was particularly fond of this sweetmeat!

Darkness fell on a very subdued group of POW's. On the adjacent airfield quite a battle was going on and we could hear gunfire and see flashes of tracers continuously. More German troops kept arriving.

A Medic group with Doctors came in and quickly erected a tent to serve as first field dressing station. As wounded arrived they were lined up outside the tent waiting for treatment. The doctors were dealing with quite serious wounds, including amputations. The battle on the airfield intensified and many wounded, both German and British were brought in and lined up outside the tent waiting for treatment. I noted that they took them into the operating tent according to the seriousness of their wounds. They treated the British in the same way.

About 3 or 4am the grinding noise of gears and vehicles were heard approaching from the South. It was possible to hear the silence in the wadi! The vehicles stopped and an Australian voice shouted, "who are you?" An English voice shouted "Get down Diggers, it's Germans". The Germans opened fire and the Australians bravely fired back but, not knowing the situation, were soon silenced.

It was a sad burial party the next morning when they were laid in shallow graves in the wadi. Sometime the next day, 7th or 8th April, the fighting on the airfield was over and the main German attack had moved on towards Tobruk.

A convoy of German trucks appeared and we were loaded in and set off towards Tripoli. During my stay in the wadi, I had seen Rommel who had obviously come to see the British Generals and they were later taken off, I assume for interrogation (together with General Gambia Parry who had been captured at Mechili). They all ended up in a villa near Sulmona in Italy.

The journey to Tripoli and then on to Sabratha, a village to the West of Tripoli, is now vague in my memory. One incident however remains. We had been given a can of Italian meat (pretty awful) and some hard tack biscuits when we halted on the journey for a meal break. I was most impressed with the German field kitchen in one of the trucks. The cook had obviously been cooking a meal for the drivers and guards. As we drove along, we looked on enviously as they enjoyed a hot meal. A German soldier approached me with his dixie and spoke to me, making a gesture which I understood to mean "would you like this"? I nodded and said "Thank you" and he promptly gave me his dixie which contained rice pudding and stewed apricots. He then spoke in school boy French which mine just about equalled and discovered that he worked with his father in a grocery store in Hamberg. Of course I was able to tell him about my similar situation in my father's grocery store - all very matey.

We eventually arrived at Sabratha, just a compound of barbed wire in the desert, no huts or tents. We just slept and lived on the sandy ground. The conditions were fairly awful and a lot of the men became ill with disentry, including myself.

In about three days another column of British prisoners was seen approaching the compound. We all moved to the wire to see if we knew any of them as they went past to the gates. Sure enough there was Percy Devonshire and Frank Gorse. As soon as Percy saw me he started laughing and pointed at me. I said "What the hell are you laughing about", but it seemed so funny at the time, I had to laugh too.

Again my memory fails me but eventually we were moved to Tripoli to board a cargo ship for Italy. After leaving North Africa I have now learned that Colonel Ponath was killed at Tubruck on 13th April.

### THE VOYAGE TO NAPLES

At this time of the year, April, the weather was good and, as we arrived at Tripoli docks to catch a view of the Mediterranean and the busy activity in the harbour. It was quite a surprise to see so little damage, although there were some ships which had been sunk with masts and funnels above the water line, but the docks and harbour were still quite capable of handling large cargo ships and unloading was going on as we boarded the cargo ship to take us to Italy. We were all put down in the holds and the covers put on. It wasn't a pleasant situation sitting in the semi darkness and about to cross the Mediterranean which we believed was heavily patrolled by British submarines and ships. However, no sooner had we left harbour than the covers were removed and we discovered the Captain was a German. He was also obviously not anti-British and, looking down on us crowded below, he said "I expect you could do with some tea"! What a surprise. He explained that he had a small chest of tea on board which he had kept since a voyage from India just before the war. He apologised for not having milk, but when the tea came along it tasted like nectar! It was amusing to see that the Italian guards had taken off their shoes and were wearing their lifejackets which they didn't remove until we were safely in Naples harbour. The Captain allowed groups of 20 or so at a time up on deck for an hour and the sunshine and blue seas were a tonic to us all. In spite of our fears for the Royal Navy, most of us slept well that night, and we arrived in Naples harbour without incident. We were still feeling rough and, in fact some chaps were quite ill with dysentery. We had had little food and what there was certainly didn't help.

However once on the dockside, the view of Naples, the harbour and Vesuvius with its wreath of smoke, raised my spirits and the bright Italian sunshine helped. We then mounted into trucks and were on our way to Chiote to what we found to be a tented holding or transit camp, before documentation and transfer to a permanent POW camp.

The tented camp at ~~Chiote~~  
<sup>LAPUR</sup> was a disorganised mess and had obviously been erected hurriedly by the Italians to receive the unexpected influx of British POW's. There had been some heavy rain and the areas between the tents were rivers of mud. We hung around in these conditions for about ten days. The only incident worth perhaps mentioning was the reaction of the POW's to an Italian peasant passing the camp with his horse and cart. The cart was heavily laden and the horse looked ready for the knackers yard. The cart track was in the same condition with mud as our camp site, and the old horse and cart got bogged down and came to a standstill. By this time hundreds of POW's were lining the wire fence watching this scene. The peasant got out a whip and started beating hell out of the poor old nag. The immediate reaction of the British was typical. They yelled and shouted and created a tremendous noise. The camp Commandant got over excited and thought there was a riot and turned out the guard!

However, give him his due, when he discovered the reason for the outcry and, obviously knowing something of the British attitude to animals, he sent about ten Italian soldiers (much to their disgust), to assist the peasant and his horse and cart and off they went, to the cheers of the Brits

We were then moved to Sulmona, a town in the Appenines, and settled in an ex army camp of reasonable buildings surrounded by a high wall (15ft or more) and outside the wall a double perimeter fence of barbed wire and the usual guard towers at each corner and the halfway mark. It was not very aptly named 'Fonte d'amore'. Life in the camp is another story but all I can say at this time is that the Summers were bearable and the Winters very trying. It may seem strange, but while I was in the camp, one of my activities was learning German! We were fortunate in having Joe Drew, born of English parents in Berlin, and for the first 14 years of his life, German was his first language. We managed to obtain some German grammar books and a group of about 15 had daily German lessons, sitting in the sunshine. I didn't realise it at the time but this was to stand me in good stead later on our way to Switzerland and in Switzerland. I also had daily contact with Italian soldiers one way and another and picked up quite a bit of Italian, but never studied the grammar. Nevertheless this also came in very useful and the Italians I met up with on my way to Switzerland didn't seem to worry about my mistakes and I was mostly able to make myself understood. Life in Sulmona was just about bearable in the Summer months but the Winters, fortunately short, were quite hard going, especially the lack of nourishing food. Without the occasional Red Cross parcel, I doubt if some of us would have survived. I think only one or perhaps two, were shot during those years, and a few died, but I believe the vast majority of the POW's survived. I had one illness which put me in the camp infirmary. Very high temperature and, as the Italians had few medicines, I was given quinine injections in the buttocks and, sure enough, my temperature came down and, after a few days adrift in delirium, I gradually recovered. This was helped by the kindness of the Italian Doctor who was able to obtain fresh milk to assist my recovery.

As an NCO (Sergeant), I was put in charge of Hut 90 with 80 odd men with a corporal who slept in the hut. We were expected to parade the men twice daily for Appell.

Guards came into the compound, enough for two per hut and stood at each end of the parade whilst an Italian officer counted the men to ensure that none were missing.

So far 2½ years learning German, playing bridge and other camp activities, days rolled slowly by. Of course the Italian presence was felt all the time. "Appell" was twice daily and more often if escape activity had been discovered. Walks in the country were very rare and, in actual fact, these were route marches in columns heavily guarded sometimes more guards than prisoners. It was on these marches that I picked up a lot of my Italian. The guards walked closely alongside, and we would get them into conversation by asking "Come si Chiamari questo que in Italiano", pointing to an object (what do you call this in Italian). At first they were happy to answer, delighted with our interest but, of course, eventually the Brits drove them mad with their questioning and they eventually realised that we were really taking the micky! Of course the guards changed on our next march, and we started all over again.

The Italian camp Commandant kept a few hens outside the camp compound and, one afternoon a Rhode Island cockerel flew over the wall. One of the sailors from our hut was sitting outside in the sunshine and the cockerel landed almost in his lap. With great presence of mind, he wrung its neck, dashed into the cookhouse, starting to pluck the feathers as he went and, before the guards could get round to the gates and into the compound, the poor old cockerel was plucked, gutted and jointed and hiding in a dixie of boiling water with cabbage on top to form a screen. Not a feather to be seen anywhere, but a strong smell of singed feathers from the fire. Round came the guards "Dove e Gallo" (where is the cockerel), but they departed empty handed and none the wiser. As for us, the thin soup that night became chicken broth. I was never able to get it confirmed but I believe that the Colonel's black Labrador went the same way one dark night. The secret was well kept for discovery could have had fearful consequences.

After nearly two years in Sulmona camp, requests were made for Sergeants to go to Chieti, an officers camp, to take charge of the officers batmen and camp workers. Looking for a change of scene, I volunteered and very soon found myself in a much more reasonable environment.

This camp was an ex army barracks surrounded by a high wall and offering much better accommodation than Sulmona.

Chieti is situated on the Adriatic side of Italy near the coastal town of Ancona. There was a splendid view of the mountain "Grand Sasso" (Great Stone) where later we saw a lot of activity which we discovered was the 'rescue' of Mussolini by the German paras. Having settled down in my new camp where conditions were so much better, I carried out my duties I hope, to everyone's satisfaction. The senior British officer was a Colonel Marshall. On Wednesday 8th September 1943 at 0800 hours, I was playing poker in our NCO's room with an American Sgt pilot, a Canadian flight Sgt and a couple more lads. Some of the boys had gone out to hear the radio news from Rome over the loudspeakers. Well the news came on and a terrific cheer went up and everyone started running around. We had been expecting something to happen soon and we threw the cards down and just looked at each other. I half guessed what it was, and later when the boys told me, I went as white as a sheet. You can imagine a chaps feelings, after two years and nine months in prison camps to find the war with Italy was over. Everybody felt fine anyhow and we got down to discussing what would happen next. We all expected to wait a few days and then find our own troops arriving! I slept well that night and next day a thanks giving service was laid on for Sunday (later postponed). We had a victory dinner which was the best feed I'd had since I had been captured. Colonel Marshall, the senior British officer, ordered all escape enterprises to cease forthwith and no man was to leave the camp, under penalty of court martial!

Thursday afternoon, a Jerry convoy went past the camp and everyone got the jitters, especially when a Jerry officer came in and went into the Italian HQ offices. However, he went off and Colonel Marshall told us that he only wanted the assurance that the camp was under control. So we sat tight.

The next few days, lot of Jerries went past and an officer called each day. The local German Commandant called and said that as we were under control, he had no interest in British POW's. However, by Sunday, officers and men were getting worried and a few Italians deserted and went home. There was an Italian Alpine Division in the camp area and Colonel Marshall assured us it was for our protection! When they started going too, chaps became uneasy! We were again assured by the SBO that if Jerry came we would have plenty of time to get out of the camp because the Italian Commandant would give us at least half an hours warning.

Anyway, I can't remember all the things that happened, but it may have been Sunday afternoon or Monday, when a strongly armed German convoy stopped outside the camp, and a bunch of guards came in with a Jerry officer. This had an immediate effect on the Italian soldiers on guard or in the barrack rooms. They must have had everything ready because immediately, with rucksacks packed, ladders were shoved up against the wall, and about 100 Italian guards went over. I immediately grabbed my small kit which I had ready and stood by with some more chaps, ready for the worst. The Jerries stayed about half an hour and then went. We relaxed again. There were not now enough guards to keep the camp in, so the SBO mounted guards of British officers inside the camp to stop anyone attempting to escape. That night the remaining Italians went and that just left the Italian officers and the Carabinieri, a nucleus of about 25. Next day three Carabinieri were on guard in conspicuous positions, to kid the Jerry that we were still under control, or so said the SBO. All we had to do was to keep calm, cool and collected. Well, of the three we were certainly collected. About 1500 officers and men kept in by the threat of terrible court martials and, of course three carabinieri. You will realise that opinion was very much against the Colonel, and a couple of officers who tried to escape were put in close arrest! Tuesday morning, I think. Three other ranks were observed getting over the wall.

A British Major shouted to them to come back or they would be charged. I could not repeat what they said to him. Anyway like sensible men they went. We stayed. That night three more officers went, and good luck to them. Our front line was not 100 miles away and the civilians wanted us to come out of the camp, they kept beckoning to us. Still, all except about six stayed in, much to their own and my disgust!

It had been warm lately and the bed bugs had been troublesome so a bunch of us were sleeping out on the verandahs. It may have been Wednesday or Thursday night when 'Merchant' the Flight Sgt who slept by me, woke me up at 11.30.

Merch by the way was chummy with me and he had only been a POW for about ten weeks. He's a little dark chap, Canadian, speaks French but no Italian or German and he's got bags of guts and determination. Well, Merch woke me up, "Listen Ted", "Well, what's up"? "Jerry's here". I listened. I could hear Marshall's voice and a Jerry answering him, together with a stamping of feet of a patrol marching. "What shall we do"? "Lets sleep on it eh". "OK". "Goodnight". "Goodnight".

Next morning, Jerry was in full control. Machine guns, tommy guns and all the usual toys. It was a paratroop division and the SBO now gave permission to escape. Joke over! Whatever can be said about Jerry, I've always found him fair enough. He gave us more grub than the Italians and assured us that we would be treated fairly.

Within the next few days he had moved all the camp in lorries and I was waiting to go with the last batch. We had several tunnels ready and just before we moved out, I helped to seal down a group of ten officers in a tunnel who were going to get out that night. All the other tunnels were filled so, including a few chaps who escaped during the day in the rubbish waggon, about 70 chaps escaped after the camp had been under Jerry guards. I left with the convoy and arrived that afternoon in Sulmona, my old camp, just in time to see the first 750 on their way to the station and presumably Deutschland.

On the journey we were carried in open trucks with a German sitting with his rifle on the edge of the drivers cabin, keeping an eye on us. The truck was moving slowly up a very steep gradient on the mountain side when one of the men decided to chance his luck and leapt over the side and ran down the valley. The German soldier raised his rifle and took aim! We all shouted, "Let him go", which he did! They're not all bad.

I was pleased to meet my old pals again and we spun out our stories together and it was a real reunion. However, groups kept leaving daily for the trains. Many escapes were made at night and many hidey holes were dug and one group of men (about eight), actually built a false wall in an alcove of one of the barrack rooms and walled themselves in. Others hid in the roof spaces all with the idea that when the Germans had moved out all the prisoners, they would then leave the area and the hidden men could come out and make their escape. I found later that the men 'walled in' had stayed hidden long enough and eventually reached our own lines. A few chaps were shot trying to escape in various other ways. We were here for over a week and, as we had plenty of grub, we did OK. Of course the main topic was getting away. Merch wanted to hide in the camp but, after Jerry had thrown a few grenades in a tunnel, and tommy gunned a few ceilings, we decided to wait and see. Our turn came eventually. I was on the last party to leave. Off we went for the station, complete with kit, Red Cross parcels and Jerry guards (mostly 17-18 year old boys). At Sulmona there was a lot of discussion about escaping and I felt quite determined to have a go. I did not fancy going to Germany and felt that an opportunity to escape would present itself whilst on the move.

THE ESCAPE

When we got down to the station, we filed past a table where a Jerry, complete with typewriter, took our names and number in groups of 30, and into the goods trucks we went. The type of truck was steel lined, four heavily wired windows about head level, four ventilators at foot level with iron grill and heavy gauge wire covering. The metal door over the grill was a sliding type. We had three days ration of biscuits and canned meat given to us. The doors were shut and locked. I had grabbed a bar of iron I'd found in Sulmona and put it with my kit. Merch and I sat down and looked around us. We realised that it was our last chance now. As soon as the train started we intended to get going. We asked if anyone had tools and received no response. We intended first of all to try the top windows. When the train started at about 6.00pm, I went with my iron bar on the top grill. Merch meanwhile inspected the lower vent which had an iron sliding door outside. I couldn't make any headway with the wire grill up top so we decided to concentrate on the lower ventilator. As soon as we started again, Merch got the pincers, and after a bit of difficulty, we got busy on the wire mesh over the lower ventilator. With three of us taking turns (Fiddle Feldwick helped), we eventually got the wire off after about 1½ hours work. We were all filthy working on the floor and sweating, because we hoped to escape long before the train reached Rome, in order to try and reach our own lines.

The train was not making very good time. It was about 9.00pm when we finished getting the wire off and we calculated that the train would be in Rome about 4.00am next morning. We still had a lot of work to do because of the iron bars across the ventilator. I got going with my makeshift crowbar, which bent badly, but managed to prize off the top bar. This quick success spurred us on and we worked like demons. By midnight we had moved every other bar and the upright bar still remained. This is where our difficulties really started. It had been fairly easy by leverage to clear every other bar, but now nothing was left to lever against and we sweated and swore for about two hours without any progress. One good thing however, we could move the steel shutters up and down from inside, so that when daylight came we could cover up our nights work. We asked if anyone had a file but, of course no one had, (or so we thought). We had another go for about an hour and then decided to wait 'till morning to ask in some other truck if anyone had any tools.

When morning came we were a few miles past Rome in a place called Orte. Merch and I looked as if we had been down a coal mine so, with a drop of water in a dixie, we had a wash and shave. We didn't want Jerry to notice things.

The train stopped after being on the go for only an hour and they let us out a truck at a time to stretch and relieve ourselves.

When we got out, we glanced at our vent and everything was OK. Then a chap gave us the wink that there was a file in the truck.

As soon as we got back, I asked the chap and he said he didn't have a file only a cobbler's rasp!! Well, I don't suppose that is a file, but we got going again and in about 1½ hours we had everything ready. The steel shutter was down so, as long as Jerry didn't lift the shutter, we were OK. This was about midday. We had to wait until darkness and hoped we didn't get too far North. We packed what we needed into a couple of small rucksacks and included some food. One tin of bully, 1 tin of biscuits, 1 tin of meat roll, some cheese and tea and coffee from our Red Cross parcels, for barter. We need not have had fears about going too far North because the train was making very poor time. We arrived in Florence about 4.00pm and the train waited and shunted and so on. By six o'clock we were still near the town. At about eight O'clock we were moving again in earnest. Merch and I had everything ready and were going to jump out next stop. Our plan was to wait until the train started moving and then jump. Well the train stopped and we were able to see that we were just outside a station (the rear of the train was actually in the station, which was occupied by Germans). I found out later it was San Benedetto.

Just in front of the engine we could see a tunnel through the mountain and the track on a downward course. We were a bit concerned at the speed that the train would accelerate, probably quite fast, an electric engine on a downward slope! The engine was made by John Brown of Glasgow!

We were kneeling on the floor ready to jump out, but we were still there an hour later and we were both dozing. I must have gone right off to sleep when Merch shook me and I woke to find the train just moving. We rammed the shutter up and away went Merch and I followed close behind him. I landed on the gravel by the track. I somersaulted down a steep bank, grabbing the weeds and the grass to slow my progress. There was a fitful moon appearing in and out of thin clouds, but quite good visibility. After regaining my breath I carefully made my way back to the railway track and saw a figure standing at the top. I froze, thinking it was a German, but I knew he had seen me! After what seemed ages, I decided to take a chance and whispered "Hello". It was of course Merch. We took off our boots and crept under some trucks across the track and made our way up the hillside where we eventually found a road. After walking about half a mile we left the road and crossed some fields towards a farm. We found a haystack near a footpath and we both climbed in and settled down for the rest of the night.

I woke at about 5.00am and had a look around. Merch was still asleep. There was an Italian civilian walking along the footpath and, as soon as he was near enough, I got up and spoke to him (in Italian of course!) The poor man nearly swooned with fright. I asked him if there were any Germans about and he indicated that they were mainly in the station area and our best course was to go further up the hillside. He asked what we were - Merch had joined me by this time and I said Yugoslavian! This seemed to satisfy him.

We immediately got on our way arriving at a farm and asking for food. We were not made very welcome but they did give us some bread and cheese and a glass of wine. Of course we were in battle dress and the Italians didn't know what to make of us. We left the farm and continued to go up the hillside eventually arriving at a village which we later found was San Benedetto Val di Sambro. It seemed that most of the population of the village looked out to see who had arrived in this strange uniform. It made me feel very insecure. We were asked a lot of questions and I admitted we were British and had escaped from the Germans. A man on crutches with one leg seemed to have some authority and said "Come with me" and sent the others away. He explained that he had lost his leg on the Russian front and had no time for the Germans and would take us to a safe place. We arrived at a cottage and he knocked on the door. A handsome woman looked out of the window upstairs and he explained our situation. "Pauvereni" she cried (poor things). I'll come down. We were welcomed into her home like long lost sons and immediately given food. She also prepared a bedroom for us. It was Mrs. Di Giovanni and she explained that her husband was away on business but expected back that night. He would be able to advise us what to do and perhaps assist us in some way. We went to the bedroom where we both slept for some hours. Mrs. Di Giovanni was preparing a meal for her husband's arrival expected at about 6.00pm. During the afternoon we saw American planes bombing somewhere a few miles away and were told it was Bologna.

Six o'clock came and the meal was ready. By 6.30 Mrs. Di Giovanni was getting worried by the non arrival of her husband as she knew he was coming home via Bologna. However, at 6.45 she told us to sit at the table with her servant girl and she would serve the meal. We were to have two courses, Pollenta followed by spaghetti bolognaise!

We had just started on the pollenta when the door burst open and a handsome bearded man appeared. Obviously distressed he leaned against the wall to recover his breath and, glaring at Merch and I he said "Who are these men"? His wife started to explain and he said "These bastards bombed me in Bologna today and I was nearly killed". His wife remonstrated with him and he cooled down, took off his hat and overcoat and sat at the table.

His wife fussed round him in her effort to calm him and to accept us. Merch, who of course couldn't understand what was said but was able to realise the situation was tense and asked me what was going on. I said, "If this fellow doesn't calm down, get ready for a quick exit". Guido, for that was his name, sat at the table and started his meal. He first said to the servant girl, "Go into the cellar and bring a bottle of No.1 wine". He drank with gusto all the time watching us with flashing brown eyes and obviously weighing us up. After a few glasses of wine, he asked if we would take a glass, which we did. He then started to question me and I told him the full story of my capture in the desert and the prison camps in Italy. I also explained that Merch was in the air force.

After a lot of discussion over the meal table, he sent the servant girl to the cellar again asking her to bring up a bottle of number 4. This was an excellent wine so I concluded that the higher the number, the better the wine. Guido then said he was very tired and suggested we all retired to our beds and have, as he put it, a conference in the morning. After a good nights sleep, we had a simple breakfast and moved into his study. This was a very pleasant room with a fine desk with a leather tooled top in green and gold. Before starting our 'conference', Guido explained the situation of the house. It was built on a steep hillside so that the ground floor was cut into the hill, which meant that the exit door was at the back on the upper floor. This exit led to a chestnut grove which we explored for a good hiding place. Guido said we should stay upstairs and if any Germans came, to bolt out of the back door into the woods. We then went back to the study and started to discuss the situation.

Guido by this time disclosed that he was very pro English (he was a Doctor of Engineering, specialising in oil exploration). He had obviously taken a liking to us and looked forward to fooling the Germans. I think he was now enjoying the danger. Have no doubt had the Germans found us in his home he would have been taken out and shot. We were still in uniform and reasonably safe from execution if recaptured, but you never knew. Returning to Guido's study, the discussion started by Guido saying that he might be able to get us to Switzerland.

Having been a prisoner for nearly three years, I was to pleased to go anywhere except Germany. Merch however was against going to Switzerland because he had been briefed that if we got there we would be interned, not sent home, which was quite correct. On this, Guido said that our troops, according to the latest news, were just South of Foggia and only advancing against stiff German resistance, very slowly. However, he had a friend in Foggia itself and, to our amazement, he picked up the telephone and got through almost immediately. His conversation was very guarded, talking business but querying the situation. His friend told him that the whole area was occupied by the Germans and advised him not to come to Foggia in no uncertain terms. Guido on hearing this said we couldn't stay at his home, it was too dangerous. There were known Fascists in the village who would have no hesitation in reporting him. He was not prepared to go South with us but would help us to get to the Swiss border. Merch had to concede. Plans were made. Guido had a flat in Milan and a friend with a villa on Lake Como. He would set off the next morning on reconnaissance which would take him two or three days. In the meantime, Mrs. Di Giovanni would try to find some suitable jackets and shirts in the village and dye our battle dress trousers brown (this was done with ersat coffee!) We were not to go out of the house and, as soon as he returned, if all went well on his reconnaissance, we would set off the next day or as soon as he felt it was reasonable.

He then said it would be safe to go in the woods at the back and we could go with him to pick edible fungus for our evening meal. When Merch saw some of the horrible things Guido was putting in his basket he was not very happy with thoughts of eating them. Back in his study, Guido got out his reference book of fungi all illustrated in full colour. He would pick one out of the basket, examine it carefully, compare it with the illustration, and if satisfied place it on his right hand side in a smaller basket saying "Bueno". If he was not satisfied then on the left hand, saying "Non bueno". All this alarmed Merch even more and I realised that Guido was enjoying making Merch ill at ease. Although we spoke in English, Guido was able to grasp Merch's trepidation. Mrs. Di Giovanni made a wonderful pasta meal that evening. When she served it, Merch looked at his plate with apprehension.

Guido said to me (by this time he was calling me Eduardo), "Is he afraid that I intend to poison you" (joking of course). I said "Yes" so he demonstrated the safety of the fungi by showing Merch how he would eat his without any qualms. It was a great evening and Guido and I became quite close as friends.

However, there was always the feeling that the tramp of jack boots might be heard at any moment. The next morning, Guido set off for the station after repeating his strict instructions to be careful. We got busy with the clothing and the next two days passed without incident. I spent my time in the kitchen watching Mrs. Di Giovanni making pasta and generally trying to make a poor food supply go a long way. She chatted away to me, most of which to my amazement I could at that time understand. For an Italian she was very fair and when I commented on this, she explained that she came from Turin where a lot of people were fair. Perhaps from Austrian or even Yugoslavian descent.

True to his promise, on the third evening Guido returned and, as soon as he entered the house I could tell by his demeanour that his journey had been successful. He insisted however that we would have our meal first and a glass of wine. He then explained that he had spent the night in his Milan flat. The city had been heavily bombed and the Germans had imposed an 8.00pm curfew. This meant we had to get into the flat before 8.00pm. At Como he visited his friend at the villa and she had gladly agreed to help. Her gardener would be waiting near the ferry pier and would guide us to the nearest point of the Swiss border. He would wait for the evening ferry for three nights. It was intended that we were to set off the following morning. Guido had made allowances for any delay. That evening a few locals were invited in for a drink. About six or seven came in, all men. We were introduced and accepted as friends.

Guido opened his drink cabinet (it was our first visit to his sitting room). Lo and behold Scotch whisky, Gordon's gin and other familiar beverages. Merch and I settled for a scotch. Apparently, I now discovered, the locals came in this same evening every week to listen to a Colonel Beasley(?) on the BBC giving the war time news in Italian. When the Beethoven "Der Dum, Der Dum" came on there was a deathly silence while we all listened avidly to the news in Italian. The Italians were quite confident that the BBC news was a statement of true events. The locals left at about 10.00 pm and we retired to our beds with the next few days very much in mind.

The plan was that Guido would precede us to the station. We would follow, not too closely so that if we were spotted, Guido would be in the clear. He had provided me with some money and rehearsed me in the correct Italian to ask for a single ticket to Bologna.

*It was a Tuesday morning, bright and clear. We set off to San Benedetto station. Guido was well in front with quite a few locals going down the footpath which gave us more confidence. However, when we arrived at the station it was alive with German troops and German Military Police. This certainly took the wind out of our sails and we went to the booking office absolutely petrified. We know now that as we were in civilian clothes, if we were discovered by the Germans, execution would be certain.*

*I bought the tickets successfully and we tried to become invisible amongst the crowd of commuters. The German troop train departed and things quietened down. The Military Police were still around but did not seem to be very interested in the commuters. When our train arrived, Guido gave us the nod, and we boarded the carriage at the opposite end to Guido but saw him again giving a very discreet nod. The train journey was uneventful until we arrived at the outskirts of Modena. The train stopped at a small station and we were told that the line to the town was damaged in the bombing the previous night so we would have to take a tram into town. This certainly complicated things and Guido then spoke to me and advised me to take the tram into town and he would meet us at the main station later. He would not now travel on the tram with us but would take a later one. We waited at the tram stop feeling very lonely now that Guido had gone on. As we waited I read an Italian newspaper, or rather pretended to do so. Two German soldiers came and stood with us. To add to our fears a German convoy went past with the usual staff car leading with the Officers. The two soldiers sprang to attention and saluted the Officers. The Officers responded, looking closely at the two soldiers and, we hope, two civilians! I felt sure at the time that the Officer thought we were under arrest. The tram arrived and we stood back to allow the master race to go aboard, when one of them said "Nach Ihnen" (After you). We quickly responded. I said "Grazia" and we skuttled to the front of the tram.*

*We were relieved to see that the Germans stayed on the rear platform and got off before we arrived at the station. We were not asked for tickets so I assumed that this was a shuttle service because of the bombing.*

*When we arrived at the station we were relieved to see Guido waiting. There was a tremendous crowd on and around the station which made things easier for us and gave Guido the opportunity to have a word. He had discovered that trains to Milan were delayed and none were expected until at least 3.00pm. He had bought the tickets and handed them to me. He was going to the Turkish baths to fill in time. He thought we should stay among the crowd on the station where we would be unobtrusive. I fully agreed with this so Merch and I found somewhere to squat down and just sat and watched the crowd and the antics of them. From some of the things I heard, many of the travellers were refugees from the war zone, making their way up North for safety. Time passed very slowly and every now and again a German soldier or Military policeman had a walk round.*

This especially disturbed Merch, particularly when an Italian woman asked him if he could change a 5,000 lira note! Merch looked at me and I indicated to him to shrug his shoulders Italian style. Fortunately a man sitting by me grasped the situation and told the woman he could probably change the note. I felt sure at the time that he knew that we were not what we appeared to be. We never spoke but I thanked him with a big smile and a shrug and he made no further move. Unfortunately Merch became very unsettled and got up and indicated to me that he was going out of the station.

I had no choice but to follow. Just outside the station was a large notice board in German and Italian. We stood looking at this whilst we got our bearings. There were few people in the square but Germans very much in evidence.

Guido told us later that they had taken over the town and confiscated any cattle and other foods for their own purposes and made an 8.00pm curfew. Merch asked me what was on the notice board and when I told him a 10,000 lira reward for anyone finding an English soldier or airman, he really got the jitters. He insisted that we walked down one of the side streets and, as they were so quiet, we became very conspicuous. We walked some way from the station and were proceeding down a street of terrace houses when a German vehicle (half track with mounted machine gun), turned in at the far end of the street. Merch was ready to make a run for it but I held on to him telling him that if he ran they would fire for sure. I tried the front door of the house nearest to us which was fortunately open. We went in through the front parlour to the back room where the Italian family were sitting round the table having a meal. They were scared to death at our appearance but I put my finger to my lips and, pointing to the door said "Tedesco! Acqua in bocca" (Germans! don't speak). At the same time moving towards the back door and out we went. There was no further reaction from the Italian family. We then went down the back alley and, as we approached the end, a German guard goose-stepped past. It was obvious that if they had a formal guard then we must be near a German office of some sort.

We retraced our steps, found a way round and I had by then persuaded Merch that we were safer at the station. I was very relieved to get back amongst the crowd.

Guido turned up just before three when a train could be expected. Sure enough a passenger train arrived. A number of goods trains had gone through the station and we had seen refugees or whatever in the trucks - not prisoners as the doors were open. We got on the train closely behind Guido. The seating arrangements were in fours or sixes, three each side facing each other. We found a seat and Guido sat opposite. A woman came and sat beside him and, of course, tried to get into conversation with Merch. Guido took over and Merch feigned sleep and in fact eventually did sleep for some time. In the same compartment only a few seats away from us sat two quite senior German officers who fortunately ignored the other passengers.

The train moved off eventually and just after dusk stopped for some time at a station which was obviously in German hands as the announcements on the public address system were in German. The town was probably Parma or Piacenza. When the train started off it gave a sudden jerk, which awoke Merch who spoke to me in English! Good luck was again on our side. Although many Germans spoke good English they had not noticed his outburst. Neither had the woman sitting by Guido. We eventually arrived in Milan about half an hour before the curfew. We had to walk some way to the apartment through streets of bombed houses. The damage was to our eyes enormous.

We arrived outside the flat. Guido said as we entered "Senza Rumore" (without noise) as there were fascists in the flat above, which did not improve our confidence.

However, we got into Guido's flat and settled down for the night. We had strict instructions not to walk on the floor with boots on and to make as little noise as possible. The next morning Guido went off to check the situation at the station for our journey to Como. He discovered that there was a tremendous exit from the town at 6.00pm. Workers going out to the country for the night to avoid the bombing. We then settled down for the day and at 5.00pm set off for the station. We got the 6.00pm train with Guido and arrived safely at Como. We made our way to the ferry boat with a large crowd of Italians. There were German personnel and soldiers at the pier side but the Italians pushed forward and swept us aboard with them, Guido still in attendance. There were a number of stops on the way to our destination. We disembarked at the second stop and went ashore. The boat trip was really relaxing. It was a beautiful night with a full moon shining over the lake and we felt we were coming to the end of our journey. Sure enough the gardener, our guide, was waiting in a secluded position and we said our farewells and thanks to Guido. It was quite emotional. Before setting off he took me aside and gave me a blank piece of paper and a pencil. As soon as we were over the frontier safely, I was to write one word on the paper "Securro" and give it to the guide to return to Guido. He would then be rewarded. No paper! no money!

#### INTO SWITZERLAND

He was not a very reassuring character, their gardener turned guide, but we set off up the mountain track at a steady pace. After climbing up the track, which must have been regularly used as there were steps fitted in the steeper sections, we passed a cottage and heard sounds of revelry.

Our guide wanted to go in and join the fun, if that is what it was. I objected strongly feeling that the frontier was quite near. Merch was very weary so in we went to find the place full of Italian deserters and others. Fortunately they welcomed us like long lost brothers. Some of the deserters had been guards on POW camps in the area and had looted Red Cross parcels. They had English cigarettes and food available. We had a packet of army biscuits and a tin of corned beef which we had saved from our own parcels in Sulmona but we accepted some Player's cigarettes.

We stayed for about an hour and had a glass of wine. They were able to inform us that there were German patrols on the frontier wire. The guardhouse was some distance from where we would reach the frontier which we arrived at within the next half hour. The frontier fence was about 12ft high with chain link wire. It was easily lifted from the ground and we scraped under. We rested by the wire for some time, the last part of our climb had been quite steep. We then handed over the paper to the guide and set off down the mountain.

Now we were in Switzerland we felt so free we were talking openly for the first time since leaving Guido.

We soon came to a mountain track leading downwards and, after passing a charcoal burner tending his fire, who made no comment and we didn't speak either. Merch and I were not really in tune with each other and we started arguing quite loudly about something or other when a soldier stepped out from behind a tree and challenged us in Italian. This is of course the language of The Tessin, that Canton of Switzerland.

The Swiss helmet is very like the German one but with wider flanges at the back and side, so I realised he was Swiss. Merch, however got the idea we were caught again. I answered the challenge in Italian "Due Inglese Prigionieri di Guerre". "Avanti" said the soldier, who then examined us carefully. After satisfying himself that we seemed to be genuine, he took us down to the guardhouse. The soldiers were very kind and gave us a basin of hot milky cocoa and a hunk of bread and Emmental cheese. I have enjoyed Emmental ever since.

We slept the rest of the night in the guardhouse and next morning we were escorted to Chiasso, a border town which already had a military camp nearby. On our way to the camp, we passed over the frontier road quite near the gates, the far side patrolled by German guards. The Swiss soldier said "Do you want to have a word with them"? I didn't feel too sure but the guard encouraged me. I shouted to the German soldier on the other side "Wie Gehts". He responded "Gut danke", who are you? I told him we were British Kriegsgefangene and he replied "Good luck".

We then went up through the town and along a street of Italian style houses. The local residents came out of their houses, quite delighted to see us. They gave us chocolate and fruit, we were quite overwhelmed. On arrival at the army camp, we had our body and head hair shaved off and a hot shower. Our clothes were deloused, although we were not actually lousy at this time. We were told we would be put on a train to the North in a few days time.

We left Chiasso a few days later on an ordinary passenger train which went though Lausanne where a representative of the British Embassy came aboard and took our personal details. He was full of reassurance about our treatment in Switzerland but warned us that under no circumstances were we to attempt to leave Switzerland without Embassy permission which would not be given anyway. He gave us a small amount of Swiss francs and explained that our destination was to villages in the Appenzell, a German speaking area. We had a pleasant journey to Winterthur where we had to change trains.

There was a buffet on the station so with the Swiss francs burning holes in our pockets, we thought a glass of beer (the first for three years), would be very welcome. We went into the bar and a Swiss lady welcomed us in the usual Swiss manner "Wilkommen".

"Zwei glas bier bitte" I ordered.

"Dunkel oder Helles" she enquired. "Do you want light or dark ale Merch? "Light ale please". "Helles bitte".

This was the first time Merch had heard me speak German and he was suitably impressed. The German lessons in the prison camp served me well for the next six months. I became very friendly with the Swiss liaison officer and, as the British officer's accent was very upper class, the Swiss officer could not understand his English. He did not admit to his knowledge of our language and insisted that I attended all the interviews with the British officer as interpreter.

My sojourn in Switzerland is another story.

I spent six months in the North East which was German speaking (Appenzell) and we then were moved to the Caux Palace Hotel in Montreaux which is French speaking. This was not operating as an hotel having been empty apparently for some time but we turned it into a rather high class barracks! We had Swiss liaison officers and both here and in the North I had to continue to act as senior NCO and worked with two British officers in Caux. A sort of Military set up! They were even able to get me promoted to temporary Sergeant Major and found a suitable badge to wear on my sleeve. Of course I had to return to Sergeant as soon as I left Switzerland.

There were about 600 British soldiers billeted in Caux, a magnificent situation with extensive views over Lake Geneva.

I had arrived in Switzerland on 1st November and when the allies landed in Southern France, they quickly reached the Swiss border at Geneva.

### HOME

We were on our way to Marseille the very next day, almost a year to the day since my arrival over the border. Then from Marseille to Naples and a fortnight in Salerno, waiting for a troopship home. We eventually sailed on the troopship "Staffordshire", to sail at last up the River Mersey to see the familiar sight of the Liver Buildings and the river frontage of Liverpool.