



Robert Dey's War Memoirs

ROBERT L DEY
WARTIME MEMORIES
March 1940 - May 1945

September 3rd 1939 was a memorable date in my life having just returned to Glasgow, after spending a few happy days with my fiancée in Northern Ireland after becoming engaged on the 31st August.

On the morning of 3rd September 1940 the people of Great Britain were informed that they were now at war with Germany. It was not entirely unexpected, as events in Europe had left no doubt in anyone's mind that it could hardly be avoided.

Young men in their thousands were being conscripted to serve in the armed forces. Those in the immediate call to arms being army reservists and members of the Territorial Army.

With the British Expeditionary Force established in France the need of further manpower for training was becoming apparent on the home: front and so it was that I volunteered for service on 15th February 1940, and was duly posted to 6th Training Battalion of Royal Engineers in Elgin, Morayshire on 15th March 1940.

The training was rigorous, starting off with a three mile run at 6am each morning, then breakfast at 7am, followed by roll call and square bashing until around 11am whence we adjourned to the NAAFI for a mug of tea and a biscuit, I think it cost two pence then.

My memories of Elgin were pleasant, the people were: friendly, and on a Sunday after church parade some families would invite two or three of us into their homes for afternoon tea.

With our training completed most of us Sappers were posted to other units, and by the middle of May I was posted to 505 Field Coy. RE., which had just returned: from Dunkerque. I thus found myself in Dorset alongside men who had already experienced the hazards of the battlefield and the withdrawal from Dunkerque.

During the months ahead we embarked on further training, always on the alert to help repel the invasion of the south coast which never took place.

My fiancée and I had decided we would get married on July 9th 1940, and I was given three days leave to accomplish this as I had to travel to N. Ireland for the ceremony. It took me thirty-three hours of travel to get there as the train was held up repeatedly due to the continuous air raids between Southampton and London.

When I arrived at Stranraer harbour the steamer for Lame had already cast off and was about three feet from the quay. I threw my kit bag onto the deck and took a running leap and was helped to land aboard by two of the merchant seamen who caught me as I landed. Needless to say I ignored the shouts of the military police on the dockside. I certainly made sure that I would be at the church on time. I spent my three days special leave in N. Ireland.

Later that year at the end of December I was given a weeks leave which I spent in Glasgow at my parents' house, my wife having travelled across from N. Ireland to spend the time with me and also meet my family for the first time.

During the week I was desirous of letting my wife see as much of Glasgow and surrounding district as possible. We made a journey to Balloch and Loch Lomond and were able to see much of the havoc caused by the heavy bombing on Clydebank. The days passed all too quickly and soon it was time for me to rejoin my unit. The final memory I took with me was of my wife and my father on the platform as the train pulled out of the station. Little did I realise that it would be four and a half years before we met again.

During the next few months I witnessed many air raids and travelled around a number of villages in Somerset and Devon, finally settling in Wimble, Dorset. It was there I contracted mumps and tonsillitis resulting in two weeks stay in hospital at Tiverton. A few weeks after being discharged my unit was issued with tropical clothing and speculation was rife wondering to which part of the theatre of war we would be sent.

Everyone was hoping to get embarkation leave but there was no such luck as we were told to be on 24 hours notice to move. Eventually we were on the move and packed into trains, destination unknown. After travelling overnight it was with mixed feelings we realised that we had crossed the border into Scotland and were proceeding towards Gourock, at The Tail of the Bank.

We could see a large convoy of ships waiting to transport us, the flagship being the S.S. Georgie, a Union Castle liner. We sailed the following day, the 22nd May 1941.

Little did I know that my wife and my mother had travelled down from Glasgow and watched our convoy departing.

THE VOYAGE BEGINS

The vessel which I found myself aboard was named the S.S. Orduna, an old CP liner of around 16,000 tons. It was my misfortune to find myself berthed in a hammock immediately above the propeller shaft and slightly below the water line. It was no wonder that a few of us decided to look for a sheltered area on deck and spend our nights there. Incidentally, our convoy was escorted by an aircraft carrier, two destroyers and one cruiser, H.M.S. Exeter. We sailed north into the Atlantic then travelled south uneventfully until about the fifth night out. I was sleeping on deck when there was a terrific crash and I awakened to find a ship's officer going around speaking words of assurance to the ship's company to the effect that we had not been torpedoed as was feared, but that due to a fault in the ship's steering gear we had collided with another vessel causing damage to the deck railings and one of the lifeboats, as became visible when it was daylight.

It soon became apparent that the damage to the steering gear on our ship was slowing the convoy down and a decision was made for the rest of the convoy to sail on without us hoping we could effect repairs and catch up with them. You can imagine that the crew and troops aboard the SS Orduna felt alone and very vulnerable without an escort, and to make way to the best of her ability.

It was three days later to the surprise of everyone that we saw the aircraft carrier and the cruiser sailing north towards us. The Aldis lamps were flickering as they signalled a message to us, it read, on our way as part of a force to engage the German battleship "Bismarck", it was apparently about thirty hours sailing time north of our position. It gave us all a queer feeling to think how unprotected we had been for the past few days. Four days later we sailed into Freetown harbour and met up with the rest of the convoy.

Temporary repairs to our steering were effected, more permanent ones to be carried out when we reached Durban. Prior to leaving Freetown we had a flying visit from enemy aircraft operating from Dakar. I was between decks at the time and could hear the machine gun bullets hitting the metal plating on the ship's side.

Continuing south on our way to Durban we experienced a fire in a forward hold where the motor transport was stored, but it was quickly got under control and so averted another crisis.

As the weather improved we were fascinated by the shoals of dolphins following the ship, and the antics of the flying fish in their lovely colours as they jumped clear out of the sea for several feet.

At last we reached the safe haven of Durban where we spent five memorable days. As we docked a gang of Negro prisoners were working on the dockside. They were chained together by the ankles, and if they even looked up to the ship and spoke to us they got a lash from a bull whip across their backs. Those were the days of apartheid. Even on the buses black people sat on the opposite side to the white people.

The citizens of Durban, mostly ex patriots from the U.K., were extremely hospitable to all of the British troops. A lot of them were queuing up at the docks in their cars to show us the sights and treat us to a good meal. One middle aged couple took a friend and myself a tour of the sugar cane plantations and then on to a good restaurant for a meal.

Our time in Durban ended we set sail again and noted that HMS Exeter had rejoined the convoy on escort duty. As we sailed into the Indian Ocean, still unaware of our destination, we used to line the ship's rails and watch the seaplane which was on board the Exeter being winched on and off as it set off and returned after making a check for any enemy U-boats. On one of these return trips as the plane was coming down to land we were horrified to see it blowing up in mid-air. An immediate search was made for the bodies of the crew. We never did find out what actually happened. Some days later the officer commanding the troops on board the SS Orduna died suddenly and his body was put ashore when we reached Aden.

A further day was spent in Aden in taking aboard fresh water etc. after which we proceeded up the Red Sea and knew then that our destination was not the Far East. On arrival at Port Tufich our convoy was under attack from the air and the liner Georgie was severely damaged.

My unit of Royal Engineers had still not been told to change into tropical kit and so we disembarked wearing battledress, and carrying greatcoat, kit bag, back pack, side pack, gas mask, steel helmet plus rifle and ammunition weighing about 14 lbs. In a temperature of 110° it took only a few minutes for the perspiration to fall from us like raindrops.

It was now mid-July and we spent two weeks at Ismalia in Egypt, then set sail from Alexandria, by K class destroyer to Cyprus where we were stationed until November. During my stay there I contracted sand-fly fever twice. We left Cyprus in early November 1941 then spent a month in Haifa before setting out for Kirkuk in N. Iraq where we remained until mid February 1942. The winter was very severe here. It was so cold that eggs were frozen solid, and even though our cooking utensils were washed in hot water icicles had formed on them before a drying cloth could be used. On the return journey when sleeping out on the desert I was attacked by a coyote. I was awakened by it tugging at the blankets I slept in. I called out to the guard and it was soon silenced with a fixed bayonet. Next stop was Syria for three weeks then on through Cairo and into Libya. Each day as we progressed further into the desert we had grim reminders that the war zone was not too far distant.

A number of graves, friend and enemy alike marked the route, plus burnt out tanks, and various forms of abandoned transport.

Every night there was a brightly lit sky as Tobruck was heavily attacked, our lines of defence were about three miles distant but the continual roar of explosions would send shock waves through the air, and the ground would tremble at times.

After a large tank battle between Rommel's forces and our own the British army were forced to retreat and during a rear guard action a large number of us were surrounded and taken prisoner.

Most of my unit of RE's were dug in and positioned in two or three waddi's, better described as small ravines, and these positions were taken by a strong patrol of German armoured vehicles heavily armed and late at night. Our C.O. and his second in command contacted some of us to inform us that we were completely surrounded, and to try and make our way through the enemy lines and break out in small groups of two or three under cover of darkness and hope to meet up with some of our own forces. I and a companion tried this and got to within two hundred yards of a line of vehicles blocking our way when suddenly a stream of tracer bullets came towards us from a machine gun. We quickly backtracked and met up with our commanding officer and a fellow officer to whom we explained what had happened. We were

then advised to find a place in which to conceal ourselves and hope that things would take a turn for the better in the near future, and hopefully be re-united with our own forces.

My friend and I found a small recess about six feet long and three feet high and four feet deep half way up the side of the waddi. There was a small bush growing in front of it, which afforded us some protection from the sun during the day and also from the eyes of the enemy, who we discovered were all around us in tanks and other vehicles. At one time a plane landed bearing we supposed some high ranking officers, and we could see them being driven off in a staff car - this would be at a distance of roughly 600 yards from us. We were forced to occupy our place of concealment for four days and nights, with only two small bars of chocolate, and about a pint of water between us. At the end of this period we were feeling quite weak and our tongues were beginning to swell. On the fifth morning we decided to risk coming out of our hollow to try and get our circulation going as we were getting quite cramped with being in a restricted position for so long.

The next thing I remember hearing was the clanking of some kind of track vehicle, then a burst of machine gun fire up the waddi followed by several voices, in German, and we found ourselves staring at six or seven of the Afrika Korps with machine guns pointing at us. One of them said to us in perfect English "For you the war is over".

These Germans were all fairly young men, and the one who spoke in English asked us for our name, and rank. He seemed to know that we were from the 50th Division because he said, most of your comrades have already been taken prisoner.

We were then helped into the back of a covered truck as we were both weak from lack of food and water. We were then driven to an area where there was a fairly large concentration of German forces and hundreds of POWs. I soon recognised a number of men from my own company of Royal Engineers and learned that my friend and I were about the last to be captured.

Within a few hours a meagre ration of water was distributed to each POW, some of us, including myself, were in a bad way as our tongues were so swollen. Shortly after receiving the water the German positions were bombed by British aircraft, and a barrage of 25 lb shells from our own artillery were bursting around us. One German soldier shouted to me, "Kom Kamerad", and gestured for me to get under one of the large trucks beside him. When the barrage had ceased I learned that a sergeant in my unit had his leg blown off.

Later that evening it was decided to move all the prisoners as the supply of water was getting very low. All of the paws were packed in open trucks, and the convoy set off at dusk through a gap in the minefields en route for Dema which was some considerable distance along the coast.

We arrived there early the next morning and were handed over to the care of the Italian military authorities as Libya was a colony of Italy and from now on it would be life under Italian guards.

Our first night in Dema the Royal Navy made it their business to fire a few shells into the town, we could hear them screaming overhead as they passed on their way to a chosen target. We cheered on the efforts of the navy and excused them for not knowing that British paws were in the area.

Two days later we were on the move again, this time we were packed into huge lorries, pulling just as large trailers, roughly about forty of us in each and it was standing room only as we

followed the coast road. We had been travelling for just over two hours when a stop was made at a small village and everyone thought we would be allowed to leave the trucks for a few minutes to stretch our legs and relieve ourselves but the Italian officer in charge of our truck gave no such order. In fact when a native woman approached the vehicle carrying a container of water and some cups to hand up to us this officer withdrew his pistol and waving it at the woman told her to go away. Eventually we reached Benghazi and as the convoy of trucks laden With British prisoners passed through the narrow street it was comical to watch the facial expressions of the passing crowds. At first they seemed to think that we were victorious troops advancing through the town, but when the true situation was realised, the scene changed with people leaning from their windows jeering and making crude gestures. Most of them seemed to be real Fascists.

Arriving at our temporary quarters, which was a number of large tents in an area surrounded by high barbed wire, beyond which was a screen of tropical trees and dense foliage, beyond which we could see nothing. The washing facilities left much to be desired while the latrines would even have had a herd of pigs turning away in disgust.

Thankfully our stay here was of short duration and we set off for Tripoli arriving there about the end of the first week in June. This time we bypassed the town and found ourselves encamped in a sandy area. Some of us were housed in large tents, and my friend and I, along with others were allocated small tents about six feet long and 2 feet 6 inches high, each to contain two persons.

The heat inside them during the day was intense, and the discomfort considerable as one had to lie on the sand, and be subjected to the bites of various insects. My particular phobia at this time was in constant dread of being bitten by a scorpion, having encountered a few before being captured.

It wasn't long before I contracted dysentery and had a very sore time of it for several days.

I was not long recovered when I was told to report to the cookhouse to help the Italian cook there.

He was quite a friendly person and showed me pictures of his young wife. Like myself he was not long married before he found that his country had need of his services. My worst moments helping him were in carrying 100 kilo sacks of rice and macaroni from a storage point, a distance of about fifty yards. I was bent double under the weight of them. My consolation and reward was an extra plateful of whatever was the food of the day.

With the end of June not far away we were taken from our camp and transported to the docks in Tripoli and put aboard an Italian cargo steamer and installed in the holds below decks and the hatches secured above us. The only illumination being from a few small electric lamps as the portholes were covered over. We left Tripoli under cover of darkness and the following day the hold covers were opened up and the prisoners were allowed up on deck for a breath of fresh air and to receive a portion of food which consisted of a piece of dark bread and some cheese washed down by some coffee. We noted to our surprise that there were some German soldiers also aboard and a number of them were posted as guards over us while others were scattered about the decks, manning various guns such as anti-aircraft, etc.

With our crossing of the Mediterranean Sea having been accomplished without mishap we docked at Taranto, which we noticed was a naval base on the heel of Italy. There were

numerous submarines tied up at their berths and a couple of destroyers. However, before we could observe too much we were hustled ashore into large sheds, where we were all formed into ranks of two abreast and counted to make sure that no one was missing. We were then given a close haircut, and a red patch on our sleeve to denote that we were POW, and marched off to another building where we had a shower followed by a medical inspection. Thereafter we stood in line to receive our ration of food for the day. This consisted of a small tin of cooked horseflesh, plus a biscuit about the size of a saucer and half an inch thick, it was so hard that it had to be soaked in water for about an hour before it was soft enough to eat. After a sleepless night on the stone floor of a large shed, we were put on to trucks and set off in convoy for a transit camp situated in Capua, where a large number of POWs, including South African and Indian troops, were all awaiting transportation to permanent camps.

Here we had at least one warm meal a day consisting of a ladle of stew made with macaroni or pasta, we called it skilly. Our other daily meal was usually a piece of bread (brown) with a piece of cheese or meat. After two weeks here it was now mid July, about two hundred of us were taken to railway sidings outside the town, and around 7pm we were all put into goods wagons, the doors closed and barred from the outside, and after about thirty minutes the train moved off, travelling all night with the exception of one stop which was made to allow for toilet relief. The truck doors when opened revealed a line of guards standing along the track side all heavily armed to make sure no person escaped during this brief stop, which was around lam. We were all too cold and tired to think of escape, the sight of so many heavily armed guards did not encourage us.

Once aboard the rolling stock again we all tried to snatch some sleep, there was insufficient space to stretch out, the lucky ones were those who managed to find a floor space and had their back supported against the side of the wagon. After what seemed an interminable journey we were finally at our journey's end, and learned that we had arrived at the town of Modena. We were quickly assembled, and as we started marching through the suburbs, a number of civilians lined the streets to watch us go by. It was I think their first sight of POWs and many of the women were quite sympathetic and were shedding tears and saying "poor men, que poveri soldati", it was a comforting thought to know that they were quite distressed to see us in our present state. We marched for about two miles and eventually arrived at our prison camp which was named P.G.73, its full name being Prizzonieri de Guerra Campo Numero 73.

On entering the camp enclosure we were issued with a mattress cover and directed to bales of straw from which we proceeded to fill our mattress covers. These we were told to carry to where a large number of tents had been erected, and we were then told that each tent would hold ten men, this was to be our temporary accommodation until our permanent camp would be ready in about a week's time. Our mattresses were placed on the ground and it was quite difficult to sleep at times as small lizards and field mice used to run over our heads and faces at times.

It was a welcome relief to be eventually moved into a permanent camp, and billeted in huts with bunk beds, which had been getting prepared for us. We were not exactly new entrants to the camp, as it was already occupied with prisoners from the South African Army and also other British Forces. The camp consisted of two large compounds with several huts in each, each compound was surrounded by twelve feet high barbed wire fences, and strategically placed observation towers, usually manned by two guards with a machine gun.

We had hardly settled into our huts, when we were all ordered out on to the parade ground and stood to attention. The camp Commandant, who was a colonel and his staff of Italian officers then came out to take a roll call to make sure that there were no absentees.

The camp interpreter, who was an Italian then told us the name of Commandant, who said he hoped we would be comfortable in this our new home for the duration of the war. Until such time as Red Cross parcels would arrive for the POWs the camp Commandant said he would supplement our food with fruit from his neighbouring farm. We learned that the Commandant was anti-Nazi, and that although he expected the rules to be obeyed he would also listen to any complaints the camp committee would bring to him.

Our food was very frugal for a couple of months, breakfast consisted of a cup of coffee unsweetened, lunch was a bowl of soup, and the evening meal consisted of a small portion of dark brown bread, plus either a piece of cheese or meat about two inches square.

The camp was visited by a delegation from the Swiss Red Cross in late August 1942, and the following month each prisoner received a food parcel about the size of a shoe box. The contents of the parcels varied as some were packed in New Zealand, some Canada, and others in Great Britain. They usually contained 1 Packet Biscuits, 1 Tin Milk, 1 Tin Bacon (2 oz), 1 Tin Egg Powder (1 oz), 1 tin Butter (8 oz), Tea (2 oz). These continued on a regular basis for which we were all thankful, as most of us were all losing weight on the normal camp rations.

I have omitted to mention that the facility at the camp for washing oneself or clothing was extremely poor. There were about two wash houses in each compound, inside these were two long benches about twenty feet long on which were a number of galvanised water channels into which a trickle of cold water would drop from taps spaced at intervals above them. The small squares of soap as provided would hardly lather, and it was difficult to wash ones body properly, and it was only a matter of weeks before everyone became infected with lice. The prisoners were taken to a special unit in the camp, their clothes removed, and placed into a machine with high pressure steam, which was supposed to kill off these vermin. Eventually most of our clothing had to be destroyed, and everyone was more or less left with only boots, and a pair of shorts. With the cold weather now upon us, I had to wrap my two blankets round myself as I walked round the compound trying to keep warm, and then wrap them round myself in my bunk at night to keep warm.

It was November of 1942 before a fresh issue of clothes came through from the Red Cross, and the parcels coming in to us also contained a bar of toilet soap which we thought was sheer luxury.

Mail of any kind was always in short supply, and when a delivery was announced there was always a rush of prisoners to the receiving point hoping to hear their name called out, some were disappointed, but what a joy it was to receive a letter from a loved one at home, it would be read over and over again.

Recreation of any kind was non existent, the inmates of the huts would often have a spelling bee to keep their minds active. Some of the prisoners who were mechanically minded or were clever with their hands, would save up the empty tins and make tin chests to hold their belongings, others managed to make water tight drinking mugs with handles attached.

In the early part of 1943 the occupants of each hut were taken out on a rotation basis to visit a water melon farm about a mile from the camp. Here the melons could be picked as they grew

and paid for, I think they cost ten lire each, which was about half of what we received for pay at the camp each week. This was only a one off outing but it was good to get outside of the barbed wire for one day, even though we had an armed escort. This was one gesture by the camp commandant that was well appreciated.

News regarding the progress of the war did not reach the camp very often, unless it was to the advantage of the enemy. By the beginning of May 1943 it was becoming apparent that the allied forces were meeting with some success.

Through the camp interpreter it was made known to us that the war in North Africa was over, and that the Allies had since made landings in Sicily and on the mainland of Italy. It brought new hope to all the paws to know that our forces were making progress. The attitude of the camp guards were becoming more friendly to us. During the early part of June two of the prisoners from the other compound escaped but were recaptured within a matter of days.

The subsequent action taken by the camp authorities after this was to have roll calls twice daily and also the tinned food in our Red Cross parcels were punctured, so that they had to be consumed quickly. The idea being to prevent any intended escapee being able to hoard and build up a stock that would provide sustenance for a few days to anyone that might attempt to escape.

In the beginning of July it was announced that volunteers were required to go to a camp in the north of Italy where prisoners would be put to work and provided with extra food for so doing.

The extra rations proved to be a great incentive, and around fifty of us were taken to Bologna railway station and we occupied a normal coach in a passenger train, and were soon on our way.

Any main line stations we stopped at were busy and the blinds were drawn on our coach windows so that those on the platform would not be able to see too much of us. As we travelled north towards the Brenner Pass the scenery was really beautiful, and the Italian officer who was in charge of us would say "you fellows are really lucky, you are getting this trip for nothing, in peace time the tourists would pay a lot of money for this same trip". By mid afternoon our train was well into a mountainous region, and we finally stopped at a place called Predazzo, and after alighting we then had a short bus journey to a single line railway station where we boarded a two coach electric train and travelled through very lengthy tunnels sometimes which went right through the mountains. When we came out of these tunnels the view was wonderful as looking down into the valleys we could see the roads winding their ways with many hairpin bends right up the mountainsides. It really was a trip to remember, so full of grandeur.

At last we reached our destination, and noted that the small station was named Bellamonte, meaning beautiful mountain. It was certainly appropriately named. From here it was about ten minutes march to our new camp which was named PG113.

This camp was only about fifty yards from the main road, and was very compact, consisting of one large hut which accommodated the paws and two smaller huts, which held the three or four Italian officers, while the other one housed the guards and stores.

Being at such a high altitude I found it took quite a few days to get used to the change of air. One had to take short breaths until the lungs got used to it. No doubt this is why mountaineers required supplies of oxygen, but eventually everyone got acclimatised to the change.

As it was a Thursday when we arrived here no working parties were formed until Monday the following week. We had no idea what was expected of us, or what type of work we had to do. The normal routine was that we would have breakfast at 7am, and for this meal we had a small loaf of bread and a mug of black coffee substitute, and by 8am we were marched out of camp and followed the road for about a half mile until we came to a bridge which crossed a river which ran parallel to the road in both directions. On the far side of the river was an old mine

and beyond that open country for about a quarter mile leading to the base of a mountain some 3000 metres high which was known as Il Cardinal, one of the highest peaks in the Dolomites.

On arrival at the site we were expected to work at, each one of us was given either a pick or shovel, and spaced out at intervals and told to start digging holes in the river banks. Needless to say none of the POWs were very keen to exert themselves on behalf of the enemy war effort, and besides which we were all very weak and undernourished and the ground was very rocky and hard and we did not make much impression on it. At the end of the working day, each pair was lucky if they managed to excavate a trough of roughly four feet long and six inches deep. The Italian sergeant in charge of the working party shouted at us, but eventually had to accept that he was not going to get any more work done, other than what we were determined to do.

As we marched to our working site each morning we always marched with pride and keeping in step with heads high and arms swinging. Our guards almost had to trot to keep alongside us. On one such occasion a convoy of German trucks was approaching us, and in the lead was a staff car containing some high ranking officers. As the car drew level with us our sergeant in charge shouted from the front of our column, "Eyes Right". This was acknowledged by the senior German officer standing up in his car, turning to face us marching past, and gave us the traditional military salute in reply. Despite the fact that we only made a show of working we still received the extra food as promised. A mug of the local wine was also issued each day. I used to give my ration of wine away, as I was a teetotaler. It was later I realised that the wine was of nutritional benefit, and I should have kept it.

By this time it was mid September 1943, and rumours were rife. Some stated that the British Forces were only eighty miles away just south of Venice. How wrong they were, as we discovered a few weeks later. Other rumours were that the Germans were sending large reinforcements into Italy and were digging in somewhere in the Dolomites. As it so happened during the last week in September, the Italian staff and guards in the camp got word that Italy had capitulated and were now out of the war, it was rumoured that German forces were taking over all POW camps and that a strong force was on its way to our camp. During the panic and indecision that followed our interpreter officer told a few of us that he was making for his own home in the province of Trento, to do that he would have to climb Il Cardinal first to get into the province of Belluno, and then find his way from there. Half a dozen of us asked if he would take us over the mountain with him, and to this he agreed, and within ten minutes we had slipped out of camp and made our way across the river to the workings of the old mine.

We traversed to the other end of the old mine tunnel and came out into a wooded area that screened us from the road. Here we rested and contemplated on the step we had just taken. Most of us in leaving the camp had taken with us what food had remained from our last issue

of parcels a few days previously and also our two blankets. None of us had ever climbed a mountain of some nine thousand feet before and pondered on the best way to tackle it.

Our interpreter was quite familiar with this type of terrain and he explained that we would have to do it in stages. As we had left our camp about 10.30am in the morning it was agreed that we should try and make for the base of the summit before nightfall. Undaunted we made progress in a sort of zig zag fashion as our guide explained this was the easiest way instead of a direct climb. Approximately every hour we halted for a ten-minute rest and by late afternoon we were about halfway up, and looking back down marvelled at just how much ground we had covered. All of us were extremely tired and warm with the exertion, and decided on a half-hour rest before continuing on our climb.

It was our objective before darkness fell to reach the bottom of a wide gully we could see led to the summit, the slopes became steeper and were interspersed with a lot of loose shale and large boulders. Progress was much slower as our breathing became laboured and rest stops became more frequent.

Eventually as it was approaching dusk we reached our goal and looked around for a sheltered place to spend the night, and finally settled in a small hollow, each of us having a meal from our small stock that we had brought with us. Those of us who had cigarettes shared them, after which we unwrapped our blankets and snuggled into them for the night.

It was one of the longest nights I experienced, it was difficult to sleep as the cold was intense despite us wearing our new issue of battledress plus the blankets. In the grey light of dawn we all got up and walked about swinging arms to restore circulation to our limbs.

With the sun rising we were able to take stock of our surroundings much better, and realised that we had quite a formidable task ahead of us.

The gully up which we had to climb was about thirty feet wide at the base and tapering upwards for about 150 yards at varying degrees of slope. The gully itself was one mass of boulders in all directions, the smallest about 2 feet in diameter with the larger ones being 4 - 6 feet in diameter not to mention various slabs of irregular sized rock.

We realised that any excess baggage would have to be abandoned, thus it was that blankets and tins of food were left behind, a few biscuits stuffed into our pockets for emergency, and trusting to Providence for the next meals.

The climb ahead of us required both of our arms to haul ourselves up over one large boulder after another, and finally after three hours of an endurance test we reached the summit.

There was open ground here for at least twenty yards and rough tracks going in several directions. What was more interesting was the amount of old heavy wire-cable lying around and several hundred empty tins and rusty bayonets and other relics of military occupation. We learned at a later date that this site was part of the Italian- Austrian defence position of the 1914-1918 great war.

The view from this height was magnificent; one could see a distance of fifty miles on a clear day. The interpreter told us that Venice was eighty miles to the south, that we should go that way and try to link up with British Forces. He said he was going west towards Trento and two of my comrades went with him, one of them was named Smudger Smith and the chap we knew

as Edward. After shaking hands and wishing each other good luck we parted company. My companions were Taffy (Hugh Jones), Bill and George Gordon. We set a course downhill following a small burn which eventually formed a stream about ten feet wide and three feet deep about one mile further on. We decided at this point it would do us all the world of good if we could all have a bath. Thus we stripped off and sharing a bar of soap jumped in at the deep end so to speak. The water was extremely cold and minutes later we were out again drying ourselves off with our shirts.

As we proceeded the sun was shining brightly and the downward slope was soon down to a gentle incline, the time about midday, and soon we saw a small group of people coming uphill towards us. These turned out to be two elderly women and two younger men. We carried on

calling out to them as we passed "Buon Giorno" to which they replied in like manner with a smile. A short time later into view came the roofs of houses and around a bend in the trail was a small village, and as we passed the third cottage a young woman came down the path with a bucket which she proceeded to fill with water from a hand pump. We stopped and I said to her "Posso revere aqua". She smiled and said "Momento" ran back into the house and came back with an elderly man who after looking at us said "you boys are English". We said we were prisoners escaped and making our way south to join up with our own forces.

He looked up and down to make sure nobody was about and then told us to follow him into the house. His command of the English language was quite good, he told us he had worked in the coalmines in the U.S.A. before the war and had come back to Italy in 1936. The young woman we had met outside was his niece who was called Daria, her husband was serving on the Russian Front.

He arranged for her to make us some food, a stew of some kind with macaroni and beans, it was very palatable, and was our first decent meal in two days. The village he lived in was called Canal San Bovo. He informed us that there were German soldiers stationed at two of the larger villages within two or three miles and that they had been alerted to look out for escaped POWs.

Apparently his village had been searched the week previously so it was unlikely the Germans would be back in the near future. He said we could stay the night, but we would have to get rid of our army clothes and boots. He would arrange for more suitable attire for us that would help us to blend in with the mode of the locals. This he did and after providing us with a piece of bread and salami sausage each, we said cheerio the following morning early before the villagers were up and about. His niece Daria took us across some fields and pointed out the main road, which she said we had to cross, go down a steep embankment to the banks of a large river, it was called Piave, and follow it downstream until we saw a metal bridge crossing it. We had to climb up to the road again about two yards before the bridge, make sure there was no vehicles approaching, then cross the road and climb up the steep embankment on the other side until we found a track about a hundred yards above, turn right and follow it to the village of Zorzoi.

Proceeding on course along a narrow track which kept rising upwards we eventually topped a small incline and found ourselves looking down on what we presumed to be the village of Zorzoi, some four hundred yards below us.

This downward trail was narrow and winding and halfway down we were accosted by a man who immediately said to us "Tu sei inglese", to which we responded "Si". Our knowledge of

the Italian language was limited to a few words only such as fame (hungry), fredo (cold, mangiare (to eat) and fumare (to smoke). It was much later with a basic knowledge of French that I had that I was able to understand and converse quite well.

To continue this man said "Andiamo" and gestured for us to follow him down into the village. The time would be about 6pm in the evening. Having ascertained that there was nobody in the village road he conducted us to what seemed to be a small hotel with a bar downstairs. Once inside he sat us at a corner table, saying "momento" he then left the saloon and returned a few minutes later with a middle-aged man who was the padroni or innkeeper.

We were agreeably surprised when this person spoke to us in halting English, with an American accent. He knew immediately that we were escaped POWs and asked where we had come from. He was very impressed when we told him and of how we had climbed the mountain etc. to get to our present location. He thought it was quite an achievement.

He went behind the bar and returned with a glass of wine for each of us. He said that the Germans sometimes came into the village to their base across the river in a small town called Serbo. He said he would have a word with the local priest about finding us a place to sleep, he thought it would be safer if we moved on to the neighbouring village of Croce D'Aune, a mile further on at the end of the valley. An hour later we were led out and on to a trail beyond the village square and passed into the care of the priest who led us to a house some 400 yards on higher up from the village and well away from the road, and the rear of which gave access to hills which were well covered with trees. An ideal location if we had to make ourselves scarce in a hurry.

The owner of the house was a pleasant gentleman of around seventy years of age, who then introduced us to his wife and his daughter, a woman of about forty I thought, her name was Medagina, and after much passing of time I had much cause to be thankful to her and her family who were of considerable assistance to me personally.

Her parents were quite comfortable financially as far as village standards went, they owned three milk cows, her younger brother Don Gelindo was a priest in the village of L'Arena two or three miles away while her sister was a nun in the town of Feltre, all these places being in the province or region of Belluno.

For the next two nights we slept in a loft above the cowshed and the heat from the cattle underneath us kept us warm during the night. Our mattress, by the way being a thick carpet of dried leaves, which was held in the loft as cattle bedding. We parted from this family with regret as they had been so kind, but apparently there was the odd fascist in the area who would easily have denounced us to the Germans. A nephew of the family escorted us part of the way to Croce D' Aune and told us where to make for which was the home of a gent by the name Benedetto fu Francisco, it sounded very aristocratic, he was in fact a farmer come dealer in timber and had a good sized area of hillside behind his property with a good cover of trees.

He made us welcome and had been informed to expect us. Apparently his son was due to arrive shortly from Feltre. When he did so he was driving a four wheeled cart pulled by two large bullocks with wooden yokes over their necks to which was attached the harness. Benedetto Junior was a likeable young man about in his late twenties. We then had a meal of salami and polenta (this was made from maize meal and looked like a large yellow dumpling when tipped out on to a large square board). It was then sliced into pieces by slipping a strong thread under it and pulling upwards.

We were to eat a lot of polenta before we went hungry. It was part of a regular diet with the villagers. After we had eaten our meal he gave us a piece of tobacco leaf which we managed to shred with a sharp knife and roll a cigarette wrapped in a piece of old newspaper. We then tried to hold a dialogue with father and son, naming ourselves as Roberto, Hugo, Ernesto and Georgio, explaining which part of Great Britain each of us came from.

In the later afternoon we were taken outside and shown the general lay of the land. Along the road which led from the house were a few villas about six or seven hundred yards distant.

These apparently belonged to wealthy Italians who used them occasionally during the summer to perhaps spend a long weekend in. One of them had been occupied recently by a naval officer who had been on leave. The others had not been occupied for well over a year. Beyond them about a further half mile was a large hotel which apparently was the peacetime venue for skiers and was known as Croce D' Aune; the main road from there leading down through the hills to the town of Feltre.

On the other side of Benedetto's house was a large hut where straw and leaves were stored for use by the animals for bedding and it was in this hut that our new sleeping quarters were to be.

It had two windows, one commanding a view of the road going towards the hotel which was out of sight around a bend in the road, the other window looking down a valley in which lay the village Aune, about 600 yards distant. The ground in front of the hut sloping gently downwards while to the rear wooded slopes rose to several hundred feet and likewise on the right hand side of the valley leading beyond Aune and on to Zorzoi.

The first few weeks of our stay here was quite uneventful, we had a visit from the local priest Don Piero, who was slightly built, and of a very nervous disposition, he was constantly impressing upon us the danger to the people of the village should the Germans (Tedeschi) become aware that they were harbouring us. We spent our time during the day assisting Benedetto senior to fell trees and, with the use of saw and machete, remove the foliage and branches from the trunks, then saw the trunks into suitable lengths that would load on the cart for transporting down to the town of Feltre.

About the middle of October, Benedetto had a visit from one of his friends from Feltre, he was introduced as Dario Di Paoli who was a sort of civil servant and he was employed in council buildings under the control of the Germans. He brought us some cigarettes and apples and peaches, which we were glad to receive. He had heard about us from other sources, who he assured us were absolutely trustworthy. Dario himself told us that he was quite friendly with the German colonel who was in charge of administration in Feltre, and that he was in a position to hear if any detrimental moves against us were likely to be made. The Germans had their informers also.

At the end of October Benedetto was closing up his holdings here and moving down to Feltre for the winter months, which meant that my three companions and I had to look for other accommodation, but Dario talked Benedetto into letting us have the use of the shed that we slept in, and we could go down to the village of Aune during the day, and we could be sure to get a meal of some sort at the various houses. This worked out all right until about the end of November, when word was sent to us by Dario from Feltre, that a raid was being made on our hut sometime during the night. We lost no time in leaving the village with a couple of hours of daylight to spare and returned to our hut belonging to Benedetto and quickly packed up our belongings, and removed all traces of occupancy from the hut, even to the extent of removing

candles, and raking up the straw and piles of leaves, so as not to give the impression of being slept in, then closed the door behind us. It had a simple latch and bar, as was the case in most of these mountain huts or chalets. We then went down to the village again, where two of the local men had collected supplies of beans, pasta, macaroni, and some lard, bread and cheese for us. They then led us through an area of timber through to a valley at the end of which stood a fair sized cottage with a stone floor, large open fireplace and an assortment of cooking pots and a neat stack of cut timber plus dried foliage and twigs for lighting a fire. There were also a few candles and a few boxes of matches in a table drawer. Seating comprised a few small stools. The upper floor held a good supply of dried leaves, which would provide bedding for us. In the

event of an impending raid by the Germans at any time we were shown an escape route up the hillside behind us where we could climb to a height of several hundred feet and remain in concealment quite safely.

We passed an uneventful night after the two villagers left us but we were informed two days later that a search had been made of our previous hideout and that Benedetto had been taken in for questioning but had later been released without harm as nothing could be proven against him.

As Christmas approached the villagers of Aune felt that it would be too cold for us in our present habitat and in a joint effort organised by the local baker is Feruccio Gorza and an old lady named Catrina Corrente we were installed in a house in the centre of the village. It comprised a ground floor kitchen with a wooden floor, had a kitchen table and four chairs and a short flight of stairs led to a bedroom upstairs. Catrina would stay with her sister-in-law and would only move back to her house, so as not to arouse suspicion, if we, the four paws had to vacate it in a hurry. Regarding the flight of stairs, these had cleverly been altered so that the first four steps could be removed in one piece and replaced quickly. Under the stairs was a space large enough to conceal us.

We appreciated the use of the village house as the months of January and February 1944 were very cold with snow to a depth of seven or eight inches. The villagers kept us supplied with food, each family making a contribution of some sort towards our subsistence.

During the month of March we heard lots of gunfire and when we questioned the villagers about it they said it was coming from high up in the mountains in the vicinity of Feltre.

Apparently the partisans had quite a strong group, a lot of them being local men. Sometimes they would come down from the hills and attack German supply trucks in the region of Croce D' Aune. This caused a lot of alarm for our safety and they suggested we move back to the village of Zorzoi again. I think also that it may have been the fear of reprisals against the village should they be found to be harbouring not only partisans but escaped prisoners, so we thanked them for taking care of us and went back to Zorzoi and hoped we could settle in there again.

We had known for some considerable time that the Allied forces were still several hundred miles to the south of us and not just eighty as pre-supposed when we first escaped from our concentration camp. In addition the Germans were pouring extra troops into the north of Italy to form a line of defence in case of retreat and we were beginning to feel less secure every day.

On arriving back in Zorzoi again we cautiously approached the dwelling of our good friend Medagina and explained our position to her. She bade us to wait in the loft above the cowshed

and returned some twenty minutes later with her brother-in-law Tony Baldo who had agreed to put us up at his place, which was a small farm on the outskirts of the village and at a slightly higher piece of land, it was approached by a path some quarter of a mile long. His farmhouse was a long building with living quarters upstairs and store shed underneath, and cowshed at other end. His family consisted of his wife and three young children, a boy about eleven and two girls aged nine and seven years. In the front was a large cherry tree about thirty feet from the house, it had a massive trunk and branches and on many an occasion we would climb up and eat the ripe cherries. Beyond there was a large field and when the hay had ripened we

would learn to use the scythe and cut the hay, and load it onto a cart and stack it onto two haystacks near the house.

These haystacks would rise to a height of nine or sometimes twelve feet high with a large pole at each corner and a sloping canopy or roof placed on top leaving a space of about two feet between the underside of it and the top of the hay. There were peg holes in the poles so that as the hay was used and the level dropped the pegs could support the canopy.

During the months of April and May we would explore the various trails between the two villages and also the paths going up the wooded slopes of the mountain immediately above the villages of Zorzoi and Aune until we knew them as well as the locals. In June we were sorry to learn that the partisans had a shoot out with some German troops near Aune and some were taken prisoner and hung in the village by means of a meat hook on the end of a rope being stuck into their throat before being hauled up.

Some of the cattle were killed and a number of houses set on fire. This news caused great alarm to our friends and the people in the village. It was therefore agreed that we would move to a chalet two or three hundred feet up the mountain slope and we would be kept informed of events and food would be brought to us every other day. We had several reports of the Germans knowing that we were in the area and that rewards were being offered for information leading to our whereabouts. On occasions we were given definite news that a big search was to be made to look for us, and once or twice we left our chalet and came down and climbed up the poles on the haystacks, lying on the hay on top under the canopy and spent the night there.

During July we discovered a small cave lying in the side of a concealed hollow in the centre of a forest. The opening was just about 2 foot 6 inches high concealed by bushes in front while inside it was about four feet high and about eight feet long. It became our home for three days. Before occupying it we informed Tony Baldo where we were, we showed it to him so that he could let us know when things quietened down again. From now on we were always on the move from one location to another.

During the months of July and August those villagers who owned a few cows would drive them almost to the summit of the high hills above the village where the summer grazing was.

There at a height of 1200 feet was fairly level ground in all directions. A person could walk for miles on these concealed plateaux.

While the cattle were grazing, butter and cheese was being made, also a product called ricotta, not unlike cheese, but much softer. These were produced in a fairly strong building built from the rocks and stones lying in the area. Butter churns and cheese making equipment having been carried up on the backs of mules to start the process many years earlier. My companions and I

used to make the journey up the mountainside every second or third day and bring down some milk for our own use. It took us one and half-hours to make the upward trip and forty five minutes on the descent. We each had a strong wooden staff to help us on our trip.

By mid August we were living in a hut some five hundred feet above the village. It was situated on the fringe of a heavily wooded area and had a good view in all directions. We were sitting outside on the grass one afternoon when we saw a well dressed gentleman, suitably attired for climbing approaching us from the lower slopes. On reaching us he spoke in perfect English saying "your friend Dario di Paoli told me where to find you". He was a Swiss

importer and exporter with business interest in Italy and Sicily. His name was Hans Vogt and he could speak four languages fluently, English, French, Italian and German. He had a full rucksack on his back which contained various kinds of tinned foods, cigarettes, and two bars of soap which we were glad to see as the villager's home-made soap left a lot to be desired. Hans brought us up to date on the course of the war and it was gratifying to know that the allies war effort was gathering momentum and that Germany was now being heavily bombarded by the R.A.F.

Hans asked us how we were off for clothes. We said we only had what was on us. Our boots had worn out long ago and our leather uppers had been nailed onto thick one piece wooden soles which made it very awkward for walking and climbing.

Unfortunately he could not help us in that respect as leather was virtually non existent in Italy, even food supplies were getting short, such items as butter, jam, lard, sugar and eggs, even meat, had disappeared :from most of the villages one and only shop, which was supplied once a month.

Hans talked to us for an hour, he said that if clothing could be procured he would bring something back in a few days time. He kept his word and we each got a jacket of some kind, a pair of socks and a pair of towels and some razor blades for our use. He was returning to Switzerland and took our names and addresses and promised to do what he could about letting the British Consul know that we were alive and well, and to get this passed on to our families.

After Hans left we kept busy by helping the villagers to cut their supply of winter timber and taking it back down to the village packed on to large hand drawn sleighs. One had to stand in between the shafts and proceed down narrow rocky paths, lean back and with our legs forward dig our heels in to act as a brake to prevent the load from travelling too fast. As the leaves fell off the trees on the mountain slopes the villagers would sweep the leaves up and pile them into huge sacks, load half a dozen sacks then on to the sleighs and take them down to the village for bedding for the cattle. The rest of the mountain slopes were well swept and the leaves stored in the various huts and chalets scattered around.

Towards the middle of September, while working amongst the timber, word came up from below that two truckloads of German soldiers had arrived in the village. We then had to return to our hut, pick up our belongings and we made our way through the timber to the end of a small valley, and then climbed up a slope for about fifty yards to a concealed path and followed this upwards for about a quarter mile and some four hundred feet higher up.

During the course of our wandering up this part of the mountainside we had to squeeze through a small natural tunnel in the rock about four feet long and roughly three feet wide and slightly less in height. On emerging from this and turning round a bend in the path we were startled and

not a little scared by the sight of an eagle with wings fully spread hovering just six feet above us and to our left away from the cliff face. It was obviously in an aggressive mood and the reason being a nest with two young eagles in it situated in a rocky hollow on the right of the path. It was a sight we were not likely to forget. I can still see that cruel beak.

We know what these eagles were capable of as from a vantage point on several occasions we had watched them swooping down and lift up a young lamb or chicken and carry them up aloft to their eyrie.

After our encounter with the eagle without injury to ourselves we soon found a secluded spot offering security and shelter for the night. The following morning after a night without sleep we found the valley below was shrouded in a white mist which covered the tall pine trees. It was like being above the clouds, nothing could be seen so we dare not try to descend to a lower level.

By midday the sun was high in the sky but the mist was still hugging the valley below and we decided to follow the path and see where it would lead us. The path eventually rose over the brow of the hill and continued along quite a wide stretch until we eventually saw this building which turned out to be the place where we had collected our supply of milk from and where the butter and cheese was made. It was nice to be among mends again and they did not know we had spent the night up on the side of the distant valley.

A good meal of hot stew was served up to us followed by bread and cheese and a glass of milk. It was suggested we spend the night in the loft above the cowshed as someone from the village was due up the following day and would surely bring news of what was happening down below.

After a good nights sleep we came down from the loft and managed to wash and shave in warm water and breakfast on a piece of bread broken up into a bowl of hot milk. By midday two of the villagers had come up to collect some of the dairy produce to take it away to barter for other commodities which were in short supply. This was the way of life as money had little or no value. We prepared to go back down to the village, as the news was that it was safe to do so. As was our custom we visited a few of our friends to see what if anything they had managed to collect from the people in the village for our sustenance. Anything that was edible and storable was welcome such as beans, maize meal, macaroni, pasta, lard or small onions, along with any apples or peaches or pears. Sometimes when we had to keep clear of the village we used to survive by helping ourselves to a bunch of grapes off some of the vineyards as we passed by.

Time was passing quickly, the cattle were all down bottom their summer grazing and back in their stallas or byres as we knew them by. As the weather got colder people would sit in beside the cattle and spin wool from the sheep or goats. This way they would save on the wood burning and also keep warm. It was now into October and a woman had given us the use of a hut on the outskirts of the village much nearer to the point at which the Germans would normally approach from.

At first we thought it was too risky but after viewing it and noting that it was just one hundred yards from the base of a thickly wooded slope and nearby clumps of bushes we decided to accept her offer. It was well stocked with leaves, almost three feet deep so we should be warm enough lying on them. Things went smoothly for the first week so as I was the best speaker of Italian it was arranged I should go into the village at night and try and see what news I could pick up and also see what were the possibilities of acquiring some tobacco or cigarettes.

I was halfway to the village square and had just passed a number of houses when I was accosted by a tall stranger wearing a trench coat and soft hat. He said, "Come si chiamo?" (what is your name), I responded quickly by giving him in reply "Umberto Artonello" which was the name of the local schoolteacher. He further said "Dove andare" (where are you going), I replied in rapid Italian "Andiamo ala paese por beve le vino, non ho tempo par parlare, Ciao" (I am going to the village to drink the wine, I have no time to speak with you, cheerio). I think my rapid speech took him by surprise, anyway I was allowed to continue on my way. I am sure he was a German but not too sure of Italian.

A few days later at 5 am we were roused by someone battering the door and shouting "Inglese scampa I Tedeschi la fatto un grande restrelament por tutto in tomo la paese". It was the woman who owned the hut telling us that the Germans were in the village and also high up in the woods above us and were working their way down.

We left her to tidy up after removing all our personal effects and going round the rear of the hut and away from the village concealed ourselves in a large clump of thick shrubs. After about ten minutes we could hear a lot of voices shouting to each other in German some distance above us and soon we heard them quite close and were almost afraid to breathe. Soon we heard a commotion coming from the hut we had just recently vacated and realised the Germans were questioning the woman.

When we were satisfied that the area was completely clear of all German troops we retreated further from the scene to a vantage point on the hill overlooking the bridge crossing the river Piave. We remained here well concealed for two days without either food or water then hunger forced us to take to the high trails through the timber covered slopes and eventually made our way down to Tony Baldo's farm at night to learn that the woman whose hut we had slept in had been released after questioning.

Tony's wife gave us all a bowl of warm soup and some cold polenta and cheese and also a supply of pasta and beans to keep us going for a few days then told us to use their hut high up on the hill among the trees.

Before leaving we were told that the school teacher wanted to see me, we all went to see him together. Apparently he wanted me to deliver a rucksack full of goods for an officer recently in an Alpine Regiment but I had to deliver it to a group of partisans who would collect it from me just above the village of Aune. I was also handed a Beretta automatic pistol for the use of the Alpine officer. I was to deliver it exactly at 11pm and come on my own. I had first of all to call at the house of the baker in Aune where a guide would take me to the hand-over point.

My companions and I left the school teacher's house and made our way to Tony Baldo's hut on the hillside. We brewed up some coffee and I left them at 10pm and set off on my own through one of the lower tracks which would take me to Aune. It was extremely dark at night travelling through the forests and difficult to see more than a few yards ahead and one had to be careful not to stumble over roots of trees and protruding rocks.

I found my guide sitting at a table in the baker's house with three or four pistols lying on the table in front of him and he was twirling a small point 22 round his forefinger. He made me nervous just watching him. After a few minutes we left the baker and arrived at our rendezvous with the partisans. I had to ask for Albino whom I had met the previous year. Albino then took me aside and called "Capitano". The Alpine captain shook my hand and thanked me for

bringing the rucksack and also the Beretta pistol. He also told me that the Germans were retreating and that he felt that perhaps it would be safer for me and my companions if we joined them in their camp high up in the mountains. He said they had two other British POWs from another area who had joined them recently.

The captain then told me he was going to Venice as he had business affairs to look after and that I should think over what he had told me. We shook hands and I said cheerio and I took my leave and made my way back to my other three companions, arriving back with them about lam.

During the next few weeks the weather was getting colder and as the allied forces advanced so the partisans harassed the Germans who in turn became more active around the villages as they tried to take over the already dwindling supplies of food.

Some nights rather than sleep in a hut we would resort to sleeping out on the hillside and on one occasion we found our blankets lightly covered with snow and our bodies numb with cold.

Towards the end of November we had a visit one evening from one of the partisans whose family lived in Aune. He informed us that they, the partisans, had received word to the effect that the Germans intended to make a big search for escaped POWs during the next few days. We were strongly advised to leave our place of refuge in Zorzoi and to come up to the partisan camp high up in the mountains. We agreed to do so the following night and would say farewell to our mends in the village and tell them what was happening.

The next night at 10pm we met our partisan guide and set out on what was to be a journey of several hours. There was a full moon and we took the route up to the top of the gully where the villagers made their cheese and butter, then our guide turned to the right and after half an hour walking we came upon a long valley about a quarter mile wide. (From the village looking upwards a person would only see the peak of the mountains and never suspect that such valleys existed out of sight). We must have walked for miles around the various valleys concealed beneath the mountain peaks. A stop was made around 1.30am for a fifteen-minute rest and a smoke before resuming our journey. We eventually reached the partisan camp at nearly 4am having been challenged twice by guards on the approaches and were allowed to pass after acknowledging a password from our guide.

We were taken into a long hut and shown a space where we could lie down and sleep off the effects of our very strenuous walk during the past six hours. It was the best night's rest we had for a few months, wakening at about 11am, were washed and ready to meet Bruno who had been elected as leader. There were about thirty members of the partisan group plus the two English lads called Ernie and George. Everyone seemed to be well armed, most having a rifle and a light machine pistol.

Everyone queued up for a meal around noon, it consisted of thick soup with a good portion of meat thrown in. Apparently a live bullock had been acquired recently and had been slaughtered two days previously thus assuring a supply of fresh meat for a few days.

The next day being 1st December 1944 my group of six paws were each given a rifle and a light machine gun, also extra ammunition and sent in pairs to various positions around the camp to act as guards and observers. I should explain here that this group of partisans were known as the Brigade Garibaldi and the camp itself was in an area roughly the size of a football pitch surrounded by sloping ground on all sides except one, the high ground rising to 400 feet on one

side 'A', 200 feet on the opposite side 'B', at the head of the camp the huts, three of them, were backed onto an almost vertical hill of about 250 feet high 'C', and at the opposite end 'D', dropping sharply into a valley some 500 feet deep, access to and from made possible by use of what might be termed a narrow winding path about two feet wide which eventually led to some village two or three miles distant.

At this end of the camp also was a small hut which was to become the sleeping quarters for us POWs. Fifty yards to the left of our hut was a track rising to the summit of our partisan camp and on to an emergency escape route along what was known as The Devil's Pass which I saw for the first time some weeks later.

The first day was spent in doing guard duty 200 feet up on side 'B'. There was a small hut up there that could sleep four while two were on guard. The idea was to keep under surveillance a track that wound its way down to a valley some 3000 feet below. There was open countryside for miles straight ahead and beyond were a range of mountains, which separated Italy from Austria and Switzerland.

On a clear day the view was one of sheer grandeur on other days the clouds were below us and we could see nothing. The weather was good for the time of the year. Some days the sky was very clear and when off duty we could watch the Allied bombers, including a number of Flying Fortresses, making their way towards Germany.

Small groups of partisans were always making excursions down below and we heard they had cut the hair from the heads of some Italian women who had apparently been fraternising with the Germans. On one occasion they brought one up to the camp and after interrogating her for information they had made her kneel and shot her in the back of the head.

The week before Christmas a young German soldier was brought up to the camp. He was made to do a lot of odd jobs about the place and when in contact with him he told us in English that he was a pay clerk, he was 26 years of age, had a wife and one child and that he had been due to return to Germany for Christmas.

A few days later he was made to dig a deep trench in the ground, calmly shot and pushed into it. We did not see this happen but were told about it. This sort of atrocity sickened us but we deemed it safer to keep our mouths shut as anything could happen up here and the outside world would not know about it.

Christmas passed, just another day, but my thoughts were back home with my wife and family, wondering if the Swiss gentleman had managed to be the means of letting her know that I was alive and still keeping one step ahead of the Germans.

With the beginning of January 1945 came the snow, all eight inches of it, and the glare was dazzling. By the end of the second week there was some excitement one night as a plane circled around the camp and five parachutes were seen dropping down towards us.

When morning came we learned that two British officers and two Italian officers had been dropped into the camp along with supplies.

Later that day the British officers came along to see us. I was told they were Major Ross and Captain Simpson. Whether that was their correct names I would not know as apparently their

work was to liaise with partisans and underground groups and try and co-ordinate their activities. At least we were told that the war was progressing in our favour and to stick it out until this area was liberated.

A few days later around the 20th January we, the paws, were guarding position D looking down the valley when we suddenly heard the clatter of heavy machine guns to our rear and to our right at position A and could see that the Germans were attacking the camp from three sides. We could see large numbers of them silhouetted on the hills at the skyline. The long approach to the camp entrance was being defended by the partisan machine guns while across to the right of my position and the paws the Germans were seen appearing with two or three pack mules which they quickly unloaded and within a short time my position was being targeted with mortar fire, our own rifle fire doing little or no damage. We took shelter where possible in hollows or behind rocks until after about half an hour the order came to evacuate the positions as our machine gun posts had been destroyed.

The British and Italian officers came down to us and shouted make for the escape route above, as quick as you can. We looked up the hill and saw partisans from all directions making for the Devil's Pass. It was a steep climb and my companions and I were gasping for breath as we reached a small gap that led to the pass.

Behind us bullets were pinging off the rocks and at times I wondered if I would be lucky enough to make it as it was obvious from the noise and cries behind that several of the partisans had been wounded or taken prisoner.

When we reached the Devil's Pass I could see it was aptly named, it was no more than eighteen inches wide from the hillside to the edge beyond which was a drop of several hundred feet. The pass ran for about 100 yards of hard packed snow, it was nerve racking. In front of me were several partisans and the four officers and I thought if they can do it so can I. It was a case of keep an eye on the person in front and don't look down. After what seemed an eternity I could see those in front of me were turning a corner in the path and I was glad to see that the ground to the left of me had risen to a height of about fifteen feet. The hazardous part of the path was behind me and to my relief so were my other five POW companions. About twenty yards further along this path the four officers were having a discussion with two of the partisans, the others were still going forward. We halted by the Major and were advised that one of the partisans would take the two British officers and four of the POWs to a ledge out of sight of the main path where we could remain concealed until we felt that the Germans had left the area. The two Italian officers and the other two POWs would go with the main band of partisans and hopefully get away from this area safely.

The partisan who remained with our group to guide us then led us along the path for a further ten yards and turned into an opening to the left of us about five feet wide and some fifteen feet in height covered mostly with large rocks and boulders from which a lot of the snow had disappeared. When we reached the top of this the descent on the other side was steeper and longer ending in an almost flat area going forward for about twenty feet and beyond that a drop of over one thousand feet. The partisan guided us on to a concealed ledge to the left side, this ledge was about twelve feet long and no more than four feet wide and covered in snow. With our hands and rifle butts we pushed all the snow to the edge of the ledge and made a ridge the length of the ledge about one foot high and six inches in depth. When this compacted and froze it would be a footrest for us all to prevent us from sliding over the edge to the depths below.

We spent four full days and nights on this ledge huddled together with only two blankets and the two officers' army coats to keep us warm. None of us had any food and we survived by eating snow for the next four days. Sleep was virtually impossible, and to keep our circulation going we were continually swinging our arms and wiggling our feet.

During our four days on the ledge we had no idea as to how the rest of the partisans had fared. There was a lot of sporadic gunfire during the first three days echoing about the mountains, and also occasional shouting from it seemed somewhere above us. The fourth day and night not a sound was heard, then on the fifth day, the 25th January 1945, the partisan decided to climb back up the way we had come down to have a look around to see if the way was clear for us to leave, and make a descent to the lower regions.

After about thirty minutes he came back and told us he thought it was safe to make a move, it was doubtful if any of us would have survived another two days in our present state without food and heat.

It was decided therefore to move out just before 3pm and one by one we carefully moved off the ledge to the bottom of the rocky incline we had to ascend and descend to get back on to the trail leading away from the Devil's Pass.

When we had stamped our feet and swung our arms a bit to restore circulation we started the ascent. I was last in line and had climbed up about ten feet when someone above me dislodged a few stones and some of them landed on my hands as I was climbing.

I immediately lost my grip and began to slide backwards striking my forehead on a hard substance as I fell, continuing to slide on the snow covered stretch of gravel, and I remember shouting out in alarm "Help, help, please God help me". I was conscious of coming to a halt, lying full-length face down and feeling cold and numb. I could feel moisture trickling down past my chin and thought my face must be cut. Feeling very much alone I again shouted "Help" wondering if my companions had perhaps gone on unaware of what had happened to me. I thought don't panic and shouted again for help, and after about ten minutes I heard a voice telling me to lie still. Raising my head a few inches I saw the major crawling towards me. He then wriggled out of his army greatcoat and holding it by the collar he threw it towards my arms which were stretched out on top of the snow in front of me. He then said, "Get a grip of my coat Bob, and I will try and pull you back a bit". My reply was to the effect that my hands were numb, and he replied, "You must if you want to save your life, you are only about four or five feet from the edge of the drop". I then asked him to get the coat a bit closer to me so that I could get my hands one inside of each pocket. Eventually this was achieved and I was pulled up to safety, and brought on the main path of descent. The freezing temperature had helped to congeal and stop my wound from bleeding and the captain quickly put a field dressing and bandage on my head.

After a long and dangerous journey down the mountainside during which time I can remember walking along a narrow ledge about the width of my feet for about three yards and with my back to the wall of a cliff behind me and further on crossing a natural rock bridge of uneven surface and about two feet wide. This bridge spanned a gorge some two hundred feet deep and only one person at a time could cross it. I can still see some of my companions waiting on the other side saying "Come on Bob, you can do it". There is no doubt that in adversity or emergency it is truly amazing what the human body is capable of.

Once over the other side of the gorge it was downhill all the way following the usual pattern of narrow slippery trails. Progress was slower than usual, as I was feeling a bit light-headed on account of my head wound and I was only beginning to feel the pain now. Two hours further travel and we could see a large red glow about several hundred yards away and a number of persons revealed near to it. The partisan who was leading us called a halt and said to wait and

he would go ahead and investigate. He returned about twenty minutes later to say that the red glow was the hot embers of what had been a large bonfire and the people round about it were partisans who like us had been hiding out in various places.

It was now about 3am, date 26th January 1945 and we stayed around the heat of the fire for an hour before moving on to reach the nearest habitation so that we could perhaps get some food and also the Major was anxious that they could look at my injury in daylight to see how serious it might be. Two of the partisans that we had joined up with were familiar with this territory and by 7am had brought us to a farmhouse about a mile from the nearest village.

The farmer and his wife were quickly told of our needs and agreed to help providing we did not stay too long and thus endanger them. We were all given a mug of hot coffee laced with their own special brand of pure alcohol as distilled from their own grapes. It was like nectar and within minutes I could feel my body warming up from the very soles of my feet. This was followed by a bowl of warm milk and bread to break into it, and it was most welcome, a second helping was giving us a contented feeling.

The dressing on my head was removed, it had to be eased off gently because of dried blood. It was bathed with clean cloths in warm water and re-dressed with a bandage provided by the Major this time, who also stated that I needed the service of a doctor as soon as possible.

Apparently the doctor served a wide area and it was not known precisely where he would be at any given time. The farmer agreed to provide a horse drawn sleigh which the partisans could return to him when they had finished with it. The Major then thanked the farmer and paid him for his services and also gave the two partisans a sum of money and told them to get me to a doctor as soon as they could. I was then put on the sleigh and after saying goodbye to the Major and Captain, who knew where they were going, our party which included myself, Hugh, Ernie and Bill plus the two partisans set off around 1pm and we travelled for miles around three villages, always waiting on the outskirts of each village while one of the two partisans made the enquiries for the doctor. Eventually at 7pm that same evening I was taken into the back room of a village equivalent of a bar and a few minutes later the doctor came in and sat me in a chair and removed the bandages from my head. His first words were "E molto male", meaning my wound was quite serious. He said that I really required hospital treatment as there was a gaping wound in my forehead and broken bones. The best he could do was stitch my wound. He had no painkiller, I could feel every stitch going in, about twenty of them, as the fracture ran from above my eye to the crown of my head above the hairline. When he finished I thanked him and he wished me luck, the partisans then paid him and enquired about a place for us to stay.

The doctor mentioned a family and gave directions and eventually we ended up bedding down in beside some cattle that night, the partisans said they would bed down not too far away.

It seemed as though we had hardly put our heads down before we were being wakened at 6am and told we would have to move quickly as apparently the Germans had been informed that there were partisans in the area also a wounded POW and three others. The two partisans

returned with the horse and sleigh and once more I was on the move. Some miles outside the village the partisans stopped and helped me up from the sleigh then told me and my companions to make our way up the hillside facing us and over the brow of the hill we would see a hut on the verge of a forest. We were told to stay there and keep out of sight and someone would bring us something to eat later in the day. It was late afternoon before we saw someone

coming towards us. He brought some bread, a piece of cheese, and a portion of salami sausage for each of us. He said we would have to move on in the morning and he would be back then and point us in the direction of Aune some twenty miles farther north. It was difficult to sleep that night even though we were almost submerged under the layer of leaves in the hut and I was beginning to get a headache.

True to his word the partisan came back the following day at about 10am. We were travelling light just the clothes we stood up in. He led us through the trees for about half an hour then we angled downhill and before long we were at the side of a river which had swollen considerably with the recent snow, and it was running quite swiftly. This is where I leave you said our guide, "You will need to cross over, then turn left which is facing north and keep going". We said farewell and thought now we are on our own again until we get back into territory where we are known. Eventually we got to the other side of the river but not before our trousers were soaked to above the knees and our boots were squelching with every step forward. After roughly travelling for what we thought was about eight miles we saw a few houses ahead of us and we decided to make for the more distant one and ask for help.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman who called her husband and we explained we were Inglese POWs and we wanted to be able to dry our wet clothes and a place to rest for the night. After much deliberation they said we could stay in the loft of the shed at the back of the house. The man said if we removed our wet clothes he would have them dried for the morning and he would bring us some old sacking to put over us until then, also he would get his wife to make some pasta and bring it to us when ready. We thanked him and told him we would be on our way the next morning.

On the move again, and a bit warmer in our dry clothes, and with only twelve miles to go before we reached Zorzoi, sometime in the afternoon.

We were finally able to look down on Croce D' Aune, Aune and further on at the end of the valley the village of Zorzoi, it was a good feeling to know that help would be available in the way of food and shelter again. Everything looked peaceful, smoke curling up from the houses and no sign of any German vehicles on the roads anywhere.

We passed through Aune, pausing briefly to acknowledge greetings from old friends who had heard about my head injury and could see I was heavily bandaged. Within half an hour we were in Zorzoi, calling first at Tony Baldo's place. My three companions remained at Tony's house and Tony himself took me down to the house of Medagina whose brother was a priest in Larina. This family had heard about my being injured, all of the village was concerned as they could not help but hear about the attack on the partisan camp.

While a meal was being prepared, and I brought Medagine and her parents up to date on all that had transpired during the past two months since I had left. After I had eaten Tony came back into the house and told the family the barn was now ready for me to sleep in. Tony had made a concealed room in the barn with a bunk in it for me to sleep on. This had been done by putting in a wood partition at one end of the barn and stacking bales of straw against it.

Entrance and exit could be made by moving two of the bales. From my bed I could watch out through gaps in wooden sides and see who was moving up and down the village street. My food was brought to me and the doctor who lived a quarter of a mile away was brought to the barn to see me. He said he would come back and remove the stitches in a week's time. This he did, and applied something to my wound and put a fresh bandage on it which he said could be removed again in about two weeks.

The bandage was removed about mid February and it was only then that my three friends and I were re-united as they had gone back to a hut on the hillside. They told me when they first saw the wound in my head that it was thought that I would not survive as they could see the broken bone was pushing inwards and my head was split open for about four inches. It was amazing that I had managed to keep going; even the Major had told them he thought my chances of survival were slim.

By the end of March the snow had all cleared away and the grass was quite long in the fields, so much so that when walking across them it was with trepidation as the odd snake used to slide across our feet. I was suffering a lot of headaches by this time and could not take much strenuous exertion. Food was becoming scarce for the villagers and a lot of them were starting to live on a diet of beans. Pasta and macaroni and spaghetti were almost non-existent as the Germans were commandeering all the supplies of flour.

The Germans were all appearing more frequently in the district. Don Gelindo said it would be better if we paws split up, one here and one there. He said I could go to his village of Larina, but to get there we had to pass through the town of Serbo, where there was a number of German soldiers stationed, once we reached the town I would have to follow behind him just keeping him in sight, until we came to his own village where he would wait for me and conduct me to his house which had a main door just on the village square. The building consisted of basement, ground floor, first and second floors. At night I slept in a small room on the top floor, by day I stayed in a room in the basement and my meals were brought down to me by an elderly housekeeper whose name was Maria.

Across the passage from my day room in the basement was another door which was locked, this apparently led into a schoolroom where young children were taught each day. I could hear them doing their lessons and chattering away at times although I never did see any of them.

What Don Gelindo did not tell me was that a company of German soldiers were billeted in a hall next door to him and that two German officers usually dropped in to see him two evenings a week to play cards with him and have a glass of wine. It was not unusual for one or two of the soldiers to call in and see Don Gelindo at anytime if they required to see a priest. In fact on one occasion I was coming downstairs in the morning to go to my basement room for the day when just as I was about to approach the street level the front door opened and in walked two German soldiers.

With a smile on my face I said "Good morning, Don Gelindo will see you upstairs". Their acceptance of me as a local was acknowledged by a nod of the head, and they walked past me up the stairs. When in my own room I could hear their heavy boots as they walked up and down on guard duty.

There was a further fall of snow in mid April when it turned very cold. My room being at the top of the house was like a cold storage at times and I lay shivering in bed at night.

I told Don Gelindo and he instructed his housekeeper to put a fire in my room to warm it up. This she did but with the window closed the fumes from the burning wood was too much and I wakened up vomiting over the bedclothes and falling out of bed. The thump I made brought both Don Gelindo and Maria up and they found me semi conscious on the floor.

The next thing I remember was someone rubbing my hands and face and something being given me to drink. It was the doctor trying to revive me. After a further day in bed with extra blankets I soon recovered.

After this our meals were very frugal. They consisted of beans and dandelion leaves twice a day with a glass of wine after each meal. It was now the end of April and the Allies were less than eighty miles away. One evening there was a lot of noise coming from the village square. Apparently most of the Germans had withdrawn from the village leaving only a dozen rearguard troops.

The commotion was caused by partisans entering the village and entering the Germans' billets had forced them to take off their boots and uniforms at gunpoint and then taken this clothing away with them and left the soldiers in their underwear. Don Gelindo was so afraid he took me out of the house at dusk and told me to stay hidden down in a small valley until it was safe for me to return again.

I remained concealed in a small recess between some large boulders with just enough room to sit with knees up and leaning with my back against a rock. When darkness had fallen the next evening I made my way back cautiously and peering over the wall which surround the village square was relieved to see that it was devoid of people and quickly ran across to Don Gelindo's door and knocked on it gently. The priest opened the door himself and let me in, asking my pardon for not coming to see me earlier.

The Germans had since left in a truck, which had apparently been sent for their withdrawal as it now appeared that they were retreating quickly.

At the end of the first week in May the priest took me out on a small balcony on the top floor and passing me a pair of binoculars told me to focus on a road which climbed up the valley leading to the bridge crossing the River Piave some two miles distant, just below the village of Zorzoi.

To my delight and amazement I could see a long column of vehicles headed by tanks all bearing the insignia of the U.S.A. I was so excited I shouted to Don Gelini "C'e L' Americani", "por noi la guerra e fmito" (It is the Americans, the war is over for us").

Don Gelindo then said "Come Robert we will ring the church bells" and so it was I found myself on the end of a rope pulling on the bells for peace. The village square soon filled up and everyone was amazed to learn that I had been living in the priest's house for the past two months unknown to anyone.

The following morning I said farewell to Don Gelindo, as he advised me to get back *to* Zorzoi and join up with my friends, and then contact whatever Allied forces we could and get arrangements made to be repatriated back to the United Kingdom again.

When I got the length of the bridge over the river Piave I came across an American tank and a truck, and they were having a heated argument with some partisans who had taken about half a dozen German soldiers' prisoners.

The partisans on recognising me said the Americans wanted to take over the prisoners, while the partisans wanted them to be taken to the prison in the nearest town which was Feltre. I translated for the benefit of the Americans, and their sergeant in reply said to me, "Gee bud, you speak good English for an Itie". When I told them who I was they all shook my hand, and then I had to explain to the partisans that the Germans would have to be handed over to the Americans as prisoners of war. It was agreed and it ended amicably. I then learned that one of my friends had been shot in the arm when helping to attack a German column in flight across the bridge, he had since had treatment and was ok, and I was told all my comrades were in the village of Zorzoi, waiting for me to return.

We slept in our usual lofts in the village that night and the next day I procured paper and pencil to write a letter thanking the villagers for their kindness to us in providing food and shelter for the six of us during the past twenty months, and me and the other paws all signed our names, rank and numbers and told the local priest to make sure someone in authority received it, so that the community could be rewarded in some way.

We then reported to the senior American officer in charge of the occupying forces and asked for assistance in getting back to our own army or whoever it was in caring for missing paws.

The following morning we were put aboard a truck en route for the south of Italy. The whole village turned out to wave us goodbye, and after travelling all day we landed in Florence that evening, placed in accommodation, confined to billets and told to be ready to move off to Rome in the morning.

On the way down we saw the amount of devastation caused by the bombing and shelling by both sides. The bridge of the mighty river Po was down and we had to cross over on pontoons, an uncomfortable experience.

It was evening before we arrived in Rome, and here we were able to receive a new issue of clothing from the skin out, also towel, soap, and razor and new boots, which was a great relief from the wooden soles. After this we all paid a visit to the showers and felt on top of the world, and felt so clean again.

Next we had a good army meal of steak, beans, potatoes, followed by custard and apples, and a jug of good strong tea with sugar and milk, a real treat. Afterwards we lay on our beds and listened to the broadcast on the radio and so to bed. The next morning we were all interrogated and gave an account of our experiences, since we escaped from camp. We gave our names, rank and army number and the last unit or regiment we served in, and given an aerogramme on which to write home to our next of kin. After lunch we sat in a wired off compound and watched the various aircraft flying over, including some of the new USAF B29 bombers that had been just recently put into service.

Later that day after our evening meal we were taken into the city of Rome and dropped off the truck at 6pm and told we would be picked up again at the same spot at 10pm and to be there waiting. My friends and I, six of us were strolling up one of the main boulevards admiring the nights, it was a lovely clear evening as we paused outside a big cinema to look at what was being shown on screen. It was a good film with all the old film stars we knew, and as we

looked in the vestibule, the notice board said 'For Officers Only', while behind us an American voice said to us, "Do you guys want to go in and see the movies". We said it would be great, but it is for Officers only, and by this time who we presumed to be the manager appeared in a

dinner suit and said to us ""on permesso, e per ufficiale"", meaning you are not allowed in, the cinema is for officers only. The American GI for that was who had spoken then pulled out his service pistol and told the manager to step aside that these POWs were going to see the film whether he liked it or not. The OI then took us upstairs and to our embarrassment sat us all down in the same row as was occupied by some high ranking officers, saying to us, enjoy the show guys, and we were left in our seats undisturbed throughout the showing of the films. Maybe the red POW patches on our tunics had some effect but we never heard any more about it.

The next day I think it was about 5th May 1945 we were on our way to Naples and were billeted in high flats, with small balconies on which we used to stand and look out. We were all vaccinated the following morning and in the evening joined by other POWs. A bus load of us were taken to the Royal Opera Theatre and watched a really nice show.

Two days later we had an excursion to Pompeii but instead of seeing the old ruins some of us took to the beach and had a swim, going out to a small island, more of a sandbank and relaxed there for an hour before going back to the beach where some of the lads were watching our clothes.

During the next few days a lot of POWs were flown home, but on the 12th May we joined a few hundred other British troops at the docks and were put aboard a steamer for dear old Blighty. We were able to receive £3 each on board from the paymaster, and could buy a few personal effects from the ship's store. The food aboard the ship was very good, but the accommodation was a bit cramped and I had to sleep on top of a table in the dining hall for the journey home, via the Mediterranean, the Bay of Biscay, with a stop in Gibraltar harbour en route to take on fresh water etc.

We had visions of docking at some of the large ports in England, but as we progressed further North I knew we were heading for the Clyde, and we did, docking at King George V dock in Glasgow at 6pm on 22nd May 1945. Everyone was allowed to send a telegram off to their folks, or rather the forms were made out and collected by someone on board ship to be sent off. The next morning we were put aboard a train and despatched to Haywards Heath in Sussex, where we all got a new pair of black shoes. That was a change from the usual army regulation footwear.

We were then given a medical examination which lasted about ten minutes, when the M.O. said to me "you can go now" I immediately said to him, "what about the injury to my head sir". He looked up and asked me how I came by that and what treatment I had received for it. I replied, "none at all". The next morning I was given a travel warrant for London and was told to report to the Atkinson Morley Hospital in St Johns Wood, where I was x-rayed, examined by a brain specialist, a Dr McKissock who I later learned was one of the top five brain surgeons in the world. He heard an account of how I had come by my head injury, and told me I was a remarkable young man, that it was miraculous how I had survived and no disease had set in.

He asked me where I was going to stay for the time being, and I said either in Glasgow or Northern Ireland. I was advised to enjoy my demobilisation leave and build up my strength and he would send for me in due course.

I was back in Glasgow in two days time where my wife, father and my two sisters met me coming out of St Enoch station. Before I even got the chance to embrace my wife, whom I had not seen for four years and five months, I was surrounded by four or five women who danced around me to give me a welcome back to Scotland.

It was wonderful to be home again and to hear of all the changes that had taken place since I left to go overseas. More than anything I wanted to be with my dear wife to hear how she had been able to cope with the shock of hearing that I had been posted missing, presumed to be taken prisoner. I learned that my wife had tried every avenue to try and get news about me, even to the extent of writing to the Vatican to see if I was listed as a prisoner in Italy. Her faith was remarkable, she was so certain I would come home again. Once she knew I was alive and well all her time was spent in house hunting, never letting up she called regularly on property factors, until at last her efforts were rewarded and we had a place of our own to set up house in.

My concern also was to get in touch with my previous employers, to arrange to take up my old job again after I had an operation on my head.

In due course I received word to report back to the Atkinson Morley Hospital in London where I had an operation to insert a metal plate about the size of a large duck egg in the front of my head. The injury had been described as a depressed frontal fracture of the skull and Dr McKissock had fully explained to me what he had intended doing, and even showed me a piece of the tantallan metal that he was going to make the plate from. He inspired every confidence in his skill. Two weeks after my operation I was taken to Euston station in London in an army staff car, met at Euston by an officer in the British Red Cross who had a wheel chair waiting for me, and we were allotted a first class compartment to ourselves on the night train for Scotland.

The Red Cross officer was well supplied with flasks of tea, coffee, and a variety of sandwiches for the journey. Our destination was Ballochmyle Hospital in Ayrshire where I was to undergo skin grafting at the hands of Sir A McIndoe the famous plastic surgeon. After two weeks there I was sent home without having to undergo any skin grafting operation as my head was healing up very well externally although I suffered very severe headaches for a long time afterwards, and still do but to a lesser extent.

I remained officially a member of H.M. Forces until February 1946 when my period of army reservist ended.

It is worthy of mention here that Hans Vogt and his wife visited my wife and family in 1958 and had a happy reunion.



Early 1944

This photograph was taken
in the area above Cine
by a Swiss gentleman,
Hans Vogt, who was
anxious to meet us.



Picture of an Italian
soldier, taken in Tripoli
during our stay in transit
camp, before we made the
journey to Italy to begin
our stay in POW camps.

This recent photograph of Mr Robert L Dey with Mr Hugh Docherty both ex- servicemen was taken at a Remembrance Service in Trinity Possil and Henry Drummond Church in Glasgow where they both worship.
Mr Dey is now 97 years old and attends church every Sunday!



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Robert L Dey

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