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Tripolitana.

Dedicated to the men held P.O.W.

*Barren wastes of scrub and sand
Dry unfertile dessert land
Spiked wire on every hand
Prisoners of war.*

*A helpless host of hungry men
Crowded like rats in cage and pen
Shut off it seems from human ken
Prisoners of war.*

*Ill clad, unkempt and underfed
Trading their watches, rings for bread
And chilly concrete floors for beds
Prisoners of war.*

*Queuing for hours in blistering heat
Receiving a morsel of meat
Glad of even the scrapes they eat
Prisoners of war.*

*Bullied and driven like flocks of sheep
Treated as dirt from dawn to sleep
Hearts being filled with hatred deep
Prisoners of war.*

*Cut from news of the outside world
Sifting for truth in the taunts that are hurled
Silently keeping the flag unfurled
Prisoners of war.*

*Striving to keep alive our hope
Feeling at times its beyond our scope
Drugging ourselves with rumours of hope
Prisoners of war.*

*Setting new values on trivial things
The smell of a flower, the skylark that sings
The beauty and grace of a butterfly's wings
Prisoners of war.*

*Seeing that life without freedom is vain
Tis better to die than live ever in chains
Thank God for sure hope he brings
Thus did they treat the King of Kings
Prisoners of war.*

*Seeing at last if you've eyes that see
The glorious truth, fixed by God's decree
As long as your soul is unchanged, your free
Prisoners of war.*

Author unknown.

THE DIARY OF AN ESCAPEE.

PART ONE.

Freedom! After 650 days as a prisoner of war then Freedom. After 650 long, dreary, monotonous days of impatient waiting, then Freedom. A life, nay an existence, summed up by Winston Churchill as:

"It is a melancholy state. You are in the power of your enemy. You owe your life to his humanity; your daily bread to his compassion. You must obey his orders, await his pleasure, and possess your soul of patience. These days are very long; the hours crawl like paralytic centipedes.

More ever, the whole atmosphere of prison, even of the most easy and best regulated of prisons, is odious. Companions quarrel about trifles and get the least possible pleasure from each other's society. You feel a constant humiliation being fenced in by railings and wire, watched by armed guards, webbed about by a tangle of regulations and restrictions."

.... And then Freedom.

It was difficult to realize just what had happened. Our day had arrived – the day we had so long awaited – the day when the gates should open and we, no longer confined so miserably behind wire, be free men. Yes, the gates had opened, although not quite as we had visualised and hoped – opened not onto the roadway home and to complete liberty, but rather opened to a new life – fugitives, parasites, escapees (harsh words, but all in a sense true) – fugitives and escapees from the German Military Command – parasites upon the starving Italian people. Yes, the gates had opened and led to a new life. Those, who so wished, might remain in camp, those who wished might go. Who could tell what was the better course? Would we be transported to Germany or be handed over to our own troops? Lack of news and ignorance of our position caused uneasiness and indecision. It was every man for himself and with myself and my friends, I know, it was the chance of fleeing from prison life, of avoiding possible further imprisonment that we took and not the possible chance of finding our way to safety. We knew naught about the situation of our own or the German forces – we would learn that later. But this we did know, that only as the very last resort would we return to camp once we were out. Perhaps it was bravado; perhaps folly that sent us out of the camp for surely it was a shot in the dark. Nevertheless, we left – without plan or idea – knowing that those would come and be altered with circumstance and chance as they turned up. We did not know that the Italian people would be with us – would help us, would feed us and probably shelter us. As far as I know, approximately half of the camp left that first night – how many more went or returned I know not.

It was on Wednesday the 8th of September, 1943, around 8.30 p.m. that we first heard rumours of the armistice between Italy and the Allies. Although we had had so many months as prisoners of war, with rumours so prominently (and so often misleadingly) a

part of our lives, nevertheless the possibility of there being truth in this story, stirred up those previously repressed emotions that were reserved for this occasion. No satisfaction could be attained from any source and three or four hours were spent wandering and discussing with controlled excitement, and everyone retired that evening with "hearts aflutter." Thursday dawned as usual and with it at 5.45 a.m. the inevitable "work" bugle, crushing not a few hopes. But at work we soon knew the truth. The civilians we passed on the way to the job, had greeted us and waved with almost a reverent air – and then a glance at a newspaper decided us on no work. The Capo (headman) and the chief engineer readily acquiesced and stood around excited and restless, urging the workmen to fetch thither vino (wine) in order that we might rightly celebrate the auspicious occasion. However, the trailers arrived about 9.30 to carry us home again and farewells were made to our Italian workmen. Tears gathered in their eyes as they shook us sincerely by the hand and bade us "Bon Voyage" and bestowed upon us some parting gift, cigarette case, pencils etc.

The trip back to camp was the scene of impatient tearing off of the despised Red Patches (the sign of a Prisoner of War) and the carefree waving to the thronging civilians, as we whole-heartedly sang patriotic songs. Thursday and Friday passed "uneventfully" – 2,000 Red Cross Parcels (now so inconsequent) arrived early Thursday afternoon. Friday night saw panic commence. Rumours were rife and the realization of the nearness of the Germans and the possible threat of being taken over by them, gave us to believe that, though Italy had signed an Armistice, we were not yet by any means on our way home. The first intimation of the (possibly) new life ahead of us was given us by whispers that many of the guards were leaving their posts that night and also that many of our fellow prisoners were going over the wire. So rife and persistent were rumours of approaching Jerry, and so anxious and perturbed the general atmosphere of the camp, that the Camp Leader asked to see the Camp Commandant and to demand information and advice. He (the Camp Commandant) assured us, in tones that spoke of treachery, that everything was in order and that there was no need to worry. And then the mere fact of the Camp Leader calling an assembly of the men and speaking to them, caused obvious uneasiness and (in a minor sense) panic, asking them not to act foolishly, but unconsciously stressing the impending danger of the Germans overtaking the camp and transporting us to Germany. "We are not afraid" he said, "of the Germans, but rather of more months in a prison camp." A sense of uneasiness pervaded the atmosphere of the camp – an atmosphere taut with anxiety, indecision and repressed action. One spark would have set the bombshell off that night. Till well past midnight, groups of men, fully dressed and with small packs of personal gear handy, clustered to discuss the situation or walked restlessly, seeking information. Several of the guards had assured the men that they could break if they so wished and consequently the wire in several places was tampered with and staples were removed from our prison walls. However, for the want of a spark, the bomb did not burst and eventually everyone retired to bed.

With the light of Saturday morn, comparative calm ruled in the stead of the tension of the dark hours. The distribution of the Red Cross parcels created a diversion and the day was spent (as on Friday) of washing, discarding unnecessary clothing and other gear, autograph hunting and general cleaning up. Dame Rumour persistently broadcast that if the guards, then on duty around the camp, were not relieved by 4 p.m., they were refusing to do further duty and were deserting. They had not been relieved for hours and their

numbers were further decreasing. Watchful and anxious eyes scanned the road for the relief, and eventually, to the sorrow of one and all, they did arrive (decidedly reduced) at about 4.45 p.m.

The evening saw the long-awaited 3rd Baseball Test Match between New Zealand and South Africa. Camp Sergeants had been interviewed by the Camp Commandant and though no definite information was given it was quite obvious that an excellent policy was to be prepared to go. Consequently, the spectators of the game were in the main fully dressed and things were assuming great tension. Interruption of the game was called for by the Camp Leader after the seventh innings. The Camp Commandant had been asked to open the camp gate and let us to do as we wished. His answer would be announced at 8 p.m. However, most minds were made up by now and it was every man for himself. Already civilians of all ages and kinds were clambering two or three deep outside the wire, desperately striving to beat his neighbour for the clothing that was being thrown to them. The last two innings of the game were played in spite of all, resulting in the glorious victory for the Kiwis – (compare Drake and his bowls – he at least had some idea where his Armada was!). The remainder of the Red Cross parcels were issued in the failing light and it was during this that the Carabinieri (Italian Military Police) did everything to create the panic that they were trying to quell, by their exclamations to make haste and predicting the early arrival of the Tedeschi (Germans). Parcel issue was completed by 8.45 p.m. and it was at 9.05, as darkness eclipsed all, and after hasty and probably in many cases final farewells were made, that our sextette filed out of the gap cut in the rear wall of our cage, under the indifferent eyes of the guards. We were heavily laden, yes, but why discard our good clothing when we would probably want it to exchange for civilian clothing. So, with one food parcel stowed away, another in hand, with small packs up, with kit-bags hoist a shoulder and great-coats slung, and with jaunty and unrestrained feeling, we bade farewell to Campo Centosette and strode the road of freedom.

So, at 9.05 p.m. on that Saturday 11th of September, we left our concentration camp, laden as mules and headed north west for the village of San Georgio di Nogaro. For brevity we followed a track among the familiar cane, meeting the main road a few miles east of San Georgio. Here we met, passed and were passed by many in similar plight, and were greeted by many civilians, all friendly, all anxious to offer us advice and information, which so varied and contradicted itself that it became quite amusing, and we soon realized that we could rely on none. One thing we did ascertain – that Venice was not, as Dame Rumour had had it, in our hands – which naturally considerably altered our position. We had been led to believe that a successful landing had been made there – which made our position and object obvious and easy. And now? Who knew? Half the population of the township clustered the streets as we passed through (we escaped prisoners in our groups of 2, 4, 6, or even more) but with most the exchange of "Buena Sera" was the limit of the conversation. We accepted the hospitality of one, Farino Sylvio, and toasted the Allies with his wine. We filed out of the village about 11.15 p.m. and decided that safety would be surer away from the main road. Consequently, a left turn was made a couple of kilometres from the township and as the hour was past midnight, we decided to call a halt and sleep in the nearest suitable spot. Then at 12.30

a.m. after crossing the railway line, we left the roadway and headed for a cluster of trees on a canal bank where we laid our weary selves down to sleep – fully clad – tired but free.

Sunday morning, awake with the dawn and the birds. After breakfasting and repacking our gear, we set out for the house near to which we had slept. We had decided that now that we were free and on the loose in Italy, our first necessity was the camouflage of civilian clothing. So, in quest of these and in desire of a wash, we casually and openly trooped up to the house "en masse," and found our way to the back door. This step, little though we realized it at the time, was of great consequence to our future – it was the first step of our new lives, and here, for the first time we met the generosity and sincerity of the Italian working class, which we later found to be prevalent everywhere and which was of great consequence to us. We were welcomed sincerely by the whole household (the boss and his family, and the worker and his family), who stared open-mouthed at us as they listened attentively, trying to comprehend our account of who we were and what we wanted, told as best our then scant knowledge of Italian would allow. "Inglesi! Inglesi!" they exclaimed, emotionally and almost reverently, presuming that we were airborne invasion troops and the answer to their desperate prayers to free them from the yoke of Germany and Fascism. Before we had a chance to correctly inform them, we were embraced many times. "No," we said humbly, "we aren't the invasion – we were prisoners of war." We enjoyed a wash under the usual artesian fountain and a cup of hot fresh milk was welcomingly received all round (after so many years!!). Civilian clothes, very old and ragged, were provided for four of us and the suggestion was made that we make use of the hayloft as a hideout. We gave thought to our situation. Our forces were at Salerno – Germans were apparently to be run into anywhere – we were safe where we were – therefore we would accept at least temporarily the hospitality of the Venco family and sleep in their hayloft. They declared themselves keen to provide us with food – an attitude we later found to be general among the Italian workers. Our own food could I suppose, be relied on for 10 days' sustenance. So, for the first week of Freedom, we slept in the hayloft. Abundant food was provided us in pumpkin, potatoes, farina (maize flour), fresh milk and bread. We were given the use of an outside building for a kitchen and in the main we did all our own cooking. We had expressed ourselves willing (but not keen) to work and on Tuesday we repaired to the nearby State land to fell three or four trees (a crime in itself). These were duly carted to the house in the evening per medium of that ancient wonder, the bullock wagon, and Wednesday we spent sawing the wood into lengths. We immediately set about to find further civilian clothing, and so on Monday night three of us set off for another nearby house to ask for same. These were available the following night. On Tuesday we heard of Mussolini's liberation and with his annulling of the Armistice, we then realized that our hosts were, on paper, our enemies again. The Venco family were obviously well-to-do. "Pop" appeared to be a "gentleman" farmer, who being antifascist, had suffered under the hand of Mussolini and his allies. His home in Venice had been confiscated in the early part of the war, and then later his new home in San Georgio was confiscated for a headquarters by the Germans. He was tall, well built and well dressed, and held himself rather aloof and for the first few days didn't condescend to take any interest in us. "Mumma," his wife, was a second mother to us – big, fat, pleasant looking and jovial, ever wanting to add to our comfort and tend to our health. The two children at home were the attractive Gina, aged 20, who had been a

school teacher, and her 17-year-old brother, Gino. Gina particularly was to become a great friend of ours. Perhaps it was because of her educational training that she was able more easily to understand us and it was not long before all communications with the Venco family was carried out through her.

Friday saw our first panic. We were greeted with the news that the German Radio had announced that all escaped prisoners were to return to camp immediately or else they would be shot on sight and any Italian found harbouring them would be shot and his home burned to the ground. To return to camp was for us the last resort and we decided to remain hiding out, though in fairness to our hosts, to leave the house and build a tent with Pop's permission and with the ground sheets that he provided, in a patch of millet 100 yards from the house. Saturday morning saw our new home built, which however lasted but one day, for on Sunday morning (after panic number 2 – the Carabinieri and the Germans were searching for us), we shifted further afield and camped 400 yards from the house – over a minor canal and in a small copse on State Land. This copse, with one change of tent-site, sheltered us until October 4th.

Our tent consisted of four Italian groundsheets. Walls were lacking but with the mild weather, they were really quite unnecessary. So, with eight short poles we raised our tent, table-like, three feet from the ground. The bushy nature of the copse completely concealed our home and as different ways of approach were always used; no tell-tale tracks led the inquisitive to find us. Plentiful straw (frequently added to) was our comfortable bed. Nine blankets and our greatcoats formed more than sufficient covering. A small canal a few yards away was available for washing, while further south was the larger canal suitable for swimming and bathing.

Our position soon became quite apparent. Our lives were now our own – we were comparatively safe, providing we exercised reasonable caution. For the first week, we kept very much to ourselves – wary of venturing out lest we be recognized, but as days passed so curiosity drew us further afield and boredom sent us exploring. As we gained more confidence, we boldly assumed our new roles – that of demobilised Italian soldiers. Civilians, we soon learnt, were all our way, only too keen to help us in any way whatsoever, and to such an extent, that it became embarrassing and even a nuisance. Never a day passed that we were not warned by some good-intending soul that Carabinieri and Germans were to search our area that day and advised us to hide out for the day. As we understood more the panicky nature of these people, we ignored rather than heeded their advice. They would have us change tent site at least once a day. I remember one woman, who had walked about 4 miles to reach us, arriving at our tent before light (about 5.45 a.m.) to warn us of an approaching German search. She brought food enough for days and advised us to leave the area immediately. We stayed. And this is an example – not an exception. We were ever a bit dubious as to whether any newly acquainted Italian would keep our presence secret, or take advantage of the reward (equivalent of about £40) for any prisoner handed over dead or alive. We struck camp a couple of times however – firstly when German officials were purchasing (or rather commandeering) cattle and horses in the area. We were hiding the last of our belongings in a nearby maize patch in preparation of spending the day out, when Germans drove up the roads on either side of us. Thus, completely hemmed in, we spent a miserable and monotonous day,

never daring to speak, squatting among the maize. A second time on reliable information that our canal was to be cleaned by a gang of workmen under a Fascist foreman, we spent the day in the attic of the Venco home shelling maize that we had plucked a few days before. And so we wandered abroad, meeting workers in the fields and yarning to them as best our scant knowledge of the language would allow, while occasionally helping them weed their crops, pluck their maize or stack their hay – meeting the housewives, all ever ready to give us food or at least some wine and bunches of grapes.

One personal experience temporarily rendered me a little less self-confident for a while. I was walking casually into a nearby village one day, when on rounding a corner, I was suddenly face to face with a fully armed German soldier. He halted me (as if there was any need!) and asked me who I was. I realized in an instance that his knowledge of Italian was less than mine, so to his faltering question, I boldly answered that I was an Italian soldier, who had been demobilised and was on my way home. Where was my home? Naples. He offered me a cigarette and we carried on further conversation with difficulty for several minutes before going our separate ways. Needless to say, I went home. Another day, a couple of our boys were casually strolling down a country byway, when with much loud tooting and angry guttural sounds that could perhaps be interpreted as, "Get off the bloody road," a German motorcyclist and pillion-rider swept passed. We were confident now that we were not as conspicuous as we felt, and we spent many days sitting on the side of the main road, watching convoys of German trucks and artillery guns roar passed. The young, pleasant looking German lads cheerfully responded to our waving. Our worst fear then was not the Germans to whom we could pass as Italians, but rather the Fascists and the Carabinieri.

The first civilian friend that we made, apart from the Venco family, was a friend indeed. Amedeo we met on the morning of Saturday 18th September, and again that afternoon, when he returned with bread, boiled eggs and wine for us. Poor Amedeo – shy and diffident – was perhaps our sincerest friend. Very dark and small, he took obvious delight in our friendship, though he said little – he regarded it an honour, I am sure to know us, ever respecting us in his quiet revering manner, always showing concern for our safety and ever rather sceptical as to the wisdom of our jaunting. Later he would often visit us at our tent and fearful of being followed, always carried a hayfork slung over his shoulder in pretence of going haymaking. On the first occasion of our meeting with him, he greeted us with the extremely welcome news that, that evening, we could proceed to the house of a friend of his to hear the B.B.C. news at 10 o'clock. Accordingly, that same evening as soon as dark was falling, we followed his vague directions and stealthily crept forward. Certain excitement was created, on this, our first excursion abroad, by the fact we boldly knocked at the wrong door, were met by a gruff-voiced workman to whom we apologized and attempted to explain the position. He appeared to comprehend and led us out onto the main road and down to the local "pub." To us, raw escapees, this was rather a heart-beat and we doubled back smartly, cut through a patch of maize and by pure luck, ran into Amedeo waiting for us at his back-garden gate. And so, we were introduced to Umberto Taverna and family. Again, we were regarded as though we were works of art by our new acquaintances. We were fed like kings and duly heard the B.B.C. news – the first time for well over two years. From thenceforth, three of us heard the radio every evening thereby providing a link between our isolated lives and the civilization that we knew. As dark was

falling every evening, we would come out like night owls and like the real hunted, thread our way through the maize and scrub up to our friends' home – every evening to receive a hearty meal of fish, poultry or soup, and bread and wine – chat heartily till 10 o'clock, hear the news and depart, laden always with further food for breakfast (bread, grape-bread, fruit, sugar, eggs, synthetic coffee, milk etc.). Umberto could best be described as belonging to that set type, the Italian musician. Slender and lithe he was, with bald forehead and that typical dark mass of unruly, finely-curved hair, jutting up and back from the centre of the head, and his eager eyes were dark and beady. He was always keen to fully understand us and in his own apologetic manner, was ever ready to blame his own stupidity, rather than our interpretations, for any failure to understand. "Now Maestro" (as he liked to call me), he would say, "Again – slowly." And laboriously I would repeat for the umpteenth time, some trifling remark that he had failed to comprehend. He was a mechanic by trade and was a true Italian in his love of music. An accomplished violinist, he had quite recently lost two fingers of his left hand, but not to be beaten, he had learnt to play left-handed. His plain petite wife was the perfect hostess. He had three children – a ten-year-old son who ably accompanied his playing on the piano, a curly headed lad of eight and a small girl of five.

From Umberto and Amedeo (brother-in-law), we met numerous relations and friends. Every evening at least three or four would visit Taverna's house to stare at us and satisfy their curiosity as to what we were like. They would all express their keenness to provide us with food or any other wants, and would either give us their provisions at night at Taverna's, or demand to bring meals down to us at midday. They would never take "No" for an answer. One evening we were greeted by the news that the next day's meal was to be provided by Umberto's brother-in-law's wife's father, who having a son a prisoner-of-war in England, who was apparently being treated well, desired to treat us well. And he did.

Another friend especially worth mentioning was the wife of a wealthy Fascist San Georgio Merchant, who hardly being in the position to help us openly, gave food etc. to the Taverna's for us. She was obviously of the higher society, for the Taverna family worshipped her, and when she finally wished to see us, she condescended to visit us at our home. Accompanied by Senora Taverna, she approached by a round about method, carrying a wire basket, in pretence of mushroom hunting. Well dressed and rather aloof, she met us in a very formal manner, with liberal gold flashing in her teeth. She was certainly "well off," for she also brought us 50 of those rare things, cigarettes. And she promised more.

So vastly different was Egidio. Big, rough, ignorant Egidio, we met on our first visit to the slum village of Carlino. He insisted that we dine with him at his home, where, to our constant amusement, he persisted in patting the most prominent part of his pregnant wife. His ancient father woke us at some unearthly hour next morning to invite us to dinner on the following Sunday, which invitation we accepted and duly fulfilled. We dined, that Sunday, on soup and poultry in the filthiest of hovels, with an earthen floor generously bespattered by numerous fowls. However, the unpleasant atmosphere was soon obliterated by the soothing effect of the wine generously supplied. We were slightly inebriated as we wended our way home that night.

As regards the weather during this month in Italy, we were particularly lucky – apart from a short cloudburst one afternoon and a night of heavy rain a few days later, we enjoyed the pleasant sunny weather which Italy boasts. Our roof survived it all, although its flatness caught much water, the weight of which billowed it almost to the ground. Much of our gear and bedding became somewhat wet, which situation was easily righted by the collapse of the tent the following day and by the drying of Old Sol.

Regarding meals – I blush as I recall it. The Venco's provided us with hot milk and bread in the morning, a meal at midday and another at night. Taverna's gave a meal for three of us every evening and gave us bread etc. for breakfast, and almost every day one of the families we befriended there, brought down a hot meal at midday. We thus fed regularly from these two houses – on double meals – a fact we kept secret from both. Finally, however, with too much food being provided, and with the scare of the unavoidable meeting of the two parties and after petty arguments between ourselves, we, with embarrassing confessions told all and got things reduced satisfactorily. All went well for a time with afternoon tea (with tea provided by us from the Red Cross) brought down each afternoon by Gina and her schoolteacher friend, Claudia. These two provided ample entertainment and were even possessed of sufficient patience to instruct us in the intricate art of playing some complicated Italian card game. However, things were to become worse. As the civilians of our neighbourhood and of San Giorgio heard of our existence, they poured in with meals at an alarming rate. Quite often as many as ten strangers (and one day no less than twenty), found their way to our home with bread, macaroni stew, grapes, wine etc., and were never satisfied until they had left their contributions. We appreciated the thought behind this kind and generous gesture and, while thanking them sincerely, strove to stress the point that we were already overfed by two nearby families and that extra food was quite unnecessary. But never would they take "No" for an answer and never would they take the food away again. We tried all manner of way to show them that we didn't require further food. I remember one day, we placed all our uneaten food on exhibition in front of the tent, before the "grub attack" commenced. There was a circular pile of bread, (loaves the shape and size of large buns) about three feet across and one foot high. We were ready to repulse any attack. The first attack came a little later – an elderly lady arrived with a sack containing about 20 loaves for us. We tried counter-attack. "Thank you very much, but we don't really need it – we have this huge pile here yet to eat." "Non importe, non importe (doesn't matter)," she replied casually, "It will keep till tomorrow," and with that emptied her contribution onto the pile and departed. We were left speechless and stared in exasperation at each other. And so, we had no option but to bury food. The amount of bread and stews that we buried was disgraceful, and it could I am afraid, be classed as one of the most serious of crimes in a country so desperately short of food. At this particular time, however, the population were eating as they had not eaten for many a long year. With the collapse of Mussolini and Fascism, everything they had was their own. No longer did they have to give the larger portion of their grains and crops over to Fascist Officials – no longer had they to answer for each fowl or beast they fed. Previously, these were hardly their own – they were really only a liability, in that they could never kill a fowl or beast of their own will, but they had to retain them all and feed them until such times as the Germans or Fascists had need of them. But now with whatsoever they had, they could do as they pleased – and fearing plundering raids by the Germans, they were killing off fowls, geese, turkeys and beasts

daily and were feeding right royally. It was fortunate for us that we joined them at this time for food was to be had in plenty and they always said that if we didn't have it, the Germans would take it, so in we went with clear consciences. How long these newly-available stores would last, none knew, but these scheming people made certain provisions for the future, by secretly burying supplies of potatoes, grain, etc. in inconspicuous places. And the Venco's, being as I have mentioned comparatively wealthy, also buried considerable amounts of household linen, blankets, mattresses, carpets, materials, etc., for fear of them being confiscated by the Germans. We helped them bury these in damp proof containers and then erected a fowl run over the top of them!!

And so, a month passed – a month during which, thanks to better and more plentiful food, we became considerably fitter to undertake the trek we made, and hardier to stand up to the hardships and exposures we experienced. We had always hoped that the Allied advance up Italy would have been sufficiently rapid to enable us just to wait in our hiding for the arrival of our own forces and thereby our relief from bondage. However, it soon became apparent, from the news we heard on the radio, that the fight for Italy was to be long and hard, and we therefore had no option, if we desired complete freedom, but to use our own initiative and hike for it. To head for Switzerland, we out-ruled, realizing that once there we would become internees and perhaps little better off than prisoners of war. We were debating as to the route to follow down the mainland of Italy, when we heard of the departure for Yugoslavia of some of our fellow escapees. It was rumoured about the neighbourhood that many of the escaped Allied prisoners were repairing for the foothills in the East of Italy, that were then occupied by the Yugoslavian Partisans, with the idea of forming a British Battalion. It was, then, generally agreed that we should head east and while never intending to stay and join any unit in that country, we would at least see just what was being done and probably gain information as to the possibility of proceeding south through Yugoslavia. A certain village had been arranged as a meeting place and this village became the first objective in our hike home.

It was Thursday 8th October that we first met Mareo. Mareo, a Partisan disguised as an Italian soldier, had voluntarily undertaken the task of locating and guiding the likes of us to the arranged rendezvous. A party was scheduled to leave that night from the village of Castello, he told us, so with but a few hours' warning, we hastily struck camp and prepared ourselves for departure. Extra clothing, we now realized would be a considerable handicap, so we set to, to sort our remaining kit, discarding everything above what we actually wore. We hastily bade farewell to the Venco family, giving them portion of our discarded goods, and left at 6 p.m. what had been our home for the past month bound for the eight-mile-distant Castello. We called at Taverna's, giving them the remainder of our unwanted clothing and after numerous gifts of food had been bestowed upon us, we took leave of our Italian friends and headed east. We travelled as rapidly as possible, using short cuts and byways. Hastening along the main road near our destination, we were suddenly halted by a Carabinieri, who covering us with his pistol, huddled us together at a safe distance. He demanded of us who we were and we truthfully replied. It was rather unfortunate for us however, that our spokesman had replied in almost perfect Italian. The Carabinieri then concluded that he was an Italian civilian who was aiding and guiding us. On his denying this accusation, we were instructed to

converse in English to convince our detainer that we understood each other. Apparently satisfied as to our nationality, the Carabinieri sent us on our way with the usual prayer for the Allies' rapid advance up the country. He rode ahead of us, and fearing possible treachery by his possibly getting help to arrest us, we finished our journey over fields and through vineyards. We arrived at Castello at 9 p.m. and there being no sign of immediate departure, we bedded down under a cluster of willow trees. We were joined by a further fifteen escapees (similarly bent) about 10 p.m. Until Friday, we awaited departure. We were held up by the non-arrival of a second partisan who was to bring arms and was to guide us a certain distance of the way. More than ample food was provided by nearby houses. On Friday, our sextette decided to return to our original encampment and to await there further news of the departure for Yugoslavia. And so, for another week, we were the guests of the Venco's and the Taverna's. Borrowing all the clothing we had given them and again accepting the use of groundsheets, we were soon as comfortably established as formerly. It was just a week later that we finally left the district. Pointing out the certain dangers of our proposed expedition, our Italian friends begged us not to go but stay with them, expressing themselves willing and keen to keep us hidden and supplied with food until the arrival of our armies. But realizing that this would mean a long and indefinite stay, we were determined to go and rashly promised to revisit them when the war was over. (As far as they were told, we were leaving to join the British Battalion that was apparently being formed, and would be in Yugoslavia for the duration). So, with promises of an early reunion to be celebrated with abundant wine, food, singing, dancing, etc. we took our leave.

It was just as we neared Castello that evening that rather an amusing incident happened. We were hastening down a stretch of German-used main road, down which we had no option but to pass, when we heard the sound of a truck approaching from behind. Fearing to be overtaken by Germans, we dashed madly forward to reach the side road that we were to take. At this corner was situated the local wine house and as we raced up to it, the rather dazed and bewildered customers, hearing our mad approach on the metalled road with rattling and banging of our gear and sundry tins etc., sheepishly poured out of the pub, with hands in the air, yelling "Camarde, camarde." Obviously, they thought they were being attacked and choose simply to surrender to the attackers, but the attackers, still fearing attack from the rear, ignored them and rounded the corner to be off the main road. I don't know who got the biggest fright!

It was 8.30 that night that we set off for Yugoslavia – a party consisting of ten New Zealanders, one South African and about twenty Slavs (who had been imprisoned in Italy) with two Partisan guides. To reach the arranged rendezvous, it was necessary to pass through the German line of outposts that challenged any advance westwards of the Partisan Forces. Consequently, the strictest silence was observed, we ever plodding on the grass rather than on the roads themselves. Main roads were, whenever possible, forsaken for the less-frequented byways. Our way was naturally much longer than the beeline, as we frequently encircled villages known, or thought to be German-occupied, and thrice we crossed the rocky bed of a river that ran in practically a straight line. Once we doubled back on our path for almost a mile when we suddenly found the road barbed-wired and guarded ahead of us. Our entrance into one largish village was heralded by a

tell-tale barking of a dog, whose loud and betraying yelp was soon taken up and echoed around by all and sundry dogs of the neighbourhood, and never has the canine species been so heartily cursed as then, as we hurried on our way. About two hours before daylight, after having followed a canal for many miles, we neared a certain village which housed numerous Germans, but through which we had no option but to pass. Then, in stockinged feet, with all our gear so packed as to ensure no rattling or other noise, we stealthily crept ahead on either side of the road under the shadows of the walls of the buildings. About halfway down the main street, at the corner where stood the village church and steeple, we turned down a side track and as we were passing beneath the lofty walls of this church, the deadly silence was suddenly shattered by the clock booming out the hour. The effect was nerve-wracking. Many of the boys visibly "jumped with fright" and several took to their heels and fled wildly ahead. A few more miles brought us to temporary safety. At the top of a long and steep hill which proved rather a difficult finish to our twenty-five-mile march, stood a Partisan-held village. We were straight way taken to Brigade Headquarters, which occupied a huge castle-like building. Built of large grey stones, in the main ivy covered, with massive doors and large, iron-barred, glassless windows, this building would have seemed quite in place in Old England. Situated majestically on this steep hilltop, with an extensive saucer-like valley below and around it, the castle kept guard over the numerous white villages set below in the peculiar crazy pattern formed by the green grass plots, the brown squares of newly ploughed land, alternating with the striped patches of maize, the rows of each piece being set on a different angle. The whole was generously dotted with trees of every hue of green, and was irregularly divided by the ribbon-like roads. We were fed and slept thankfully on plenteous straw. (16th). At 12 noon we were awoken, fed again and by 1.30 were on our way again to our four-day-distant rendezvous. Strolling along the hilltops, with frequent resting to enjoy the plenteous and luscious grapes, we passed through many tiny villages, where we were always objects of great curiosity. We halted at 4.30 p.m., at another command post when our guide handed us over with the explanatory note he bore from the previous command. A deserted school housed us that night and 7.45 next morning (17th) saw us on the move again. Higher and higher, with ever more extensive and glorious views over the plains of north-eastern Italy, we trudged, parallel to and just within the western extremities of the mountains. At 9.30 we were presented to another commander, who in time presented us with further escorts (Partisan women), who guided us on that day till 5 p.m. Even along the mountain tops we marched, with valleys well below us, and frequently our guides pointed out German occupied villages and the roads under his control – often almost immediately but far below us. Apples and blackberries thoughtfully grew in plenty along the way. At this Headquarters the usual procedure took place – note presented, tea and bed (in another hayloft) provided, and we were off again at 8.25 next morn. (18th). For an hour and a half, we descended, there to rest, spending our time roasting chestnuts and potatoes at an open fire till dinner of dumplings and parsley sauce was ready for us at a private house. At 12 noon we climbed again. Up, up, ever upwards we went on a comparatively good road, though in many places blasted away, and although very rocky, the difficult going was a little easier. Up and still up we went, circling up around this huge valley until all earthly things were well below, and until many miles away, through a gap in the mountains, we could distinguish part of the Aegean Sea. Suddenly, as though we had rounded a corner to reach the edge of the earth,

we had arrived at the top and then immediately we descended - down, steeply down we went, seeing our road ahead twisting and winding far below us but gradually nearing us. Our legs were stiffening and tiring from the jarring of the downward journey, for, as I should imagine all experienced mountaineers know, descent is far more difficult and tiring than ascent. Almost at the bottom of this new valley we had entered, was situated the village which was to have been our halting-place for the night. As we approached, openly and quite casually, we were surprised, and later somewhat amused, to see that half the village were advancing on us – those with rifles held them in readiness, pointed at us and forming the front line, while those in the rear were armed with sticks and batons of varying sizes. However, at word from our escort, this intended attack was changed to a comparatively jubilant welcome. We carried on down the road to a further village which promised food and shelter. Here however we were pushed on to yet another village one mile distant, that nestled picturesquely in a tiny branching valley. Then having difficulty to fully comprehend what we were told and finding ourselves not understood, we telephoned through to an English-speaking woman who commanded the forces in a nearby village. She told us to push on to her village, so reluctantly we set off again. On, still on, dog-tired and weary we pushed, eventually to interview this woman, who proved very disinterested and unsympathetic, and while offering us a meal, said that we could under no circumstances sleep there, but must continue on our way over the remaining nine miles to the village where "our English friends were." It was then 8 p.m. We thoroughly enjoyed that hot meal, in spite of the fact that it was given in such a bad grace, and we set off again a little later. Dragging one foot after another and with drizzling rain to add to our discomfort, we covered those remaining miles on a solid asphalt road. And then at midnight that night, we lost no time in bedding our weary selves down in the haylofts of the village of Stupizza, which had been chosen as the meeting place of those prisoners of war who had been fortunate enough to escape from their camps after the collapse of Italy.

The country, through which we had passed, had proved very interesting. The valleys were sights really worth seeing. Perched up as high as we had ever been, the views had covered many miles and branch mountains could be seen interlocking themselves throughout the valley's length. Dozens and dozens of villages were visible at one time. More clusters of crude, rocky houses with red tiled roofs, they were seen anywhere – at the bottom of the valleys by the side of the main road or river, half way up or even at the very top of the hills. The hills appeared as patchwork – the brown patches of cultivated plots, the greens of various crops, the patterns of maize rows and grape vines set on different angles, the black, blues and green of trees all on a background of the green of grassland. Trees and woods were generously scattered through the open land, which appeared never to be grazed. The whole was dotted with the typical haystacks of the country and wooden racks of the drying crops. The haystacks were small conical affairs, built around a central wooden pole. On all roads and bypaths, shrines of varying sizes had been built, some depicting the Madonna and some the Lord, some the crucifixion and some the Lord as The Shepherd. Some were paintings, others sculpture and others again were carvings. Some were large enough to give rest to the weary and others were small frameworks resembling dog kennels. The villages themselves were poor examples of sanitation. Appearing to be built mainly of crude broken rocks with red tiled roofs, the

houses were homes not only for their human owners, but also for all the livestock possessed. Consequently, each house individually stunk abominably, and each village was able to be smelt from some considerable distance away. The site of the villages necessitated that each house be built on a different level and a queer effect was thus produced especially in view of the fact that the houses were crammed so closely together.

Our first impression of the "Partigiani" (Italian resistance movement) as a fighting force was hardly complimentary. No doubt, where the material was available and things organized, they did undoubted good, but up here to our eyes, they appeared more playboy soldiers. "Toy-town soldiers," a "ragtime army" would describe them. The men, boys and girls strolled around, in Italian military uniform if available, otherwise in civilian clothing or anything else that was available, with any type or make of rifle, with as many hand grenades as they could secure to their belts, with revolvers and swords etc. etc. slung in available spaces, and with any other war like equipment hanging on where possible. In fact, it appeared all show and seemed to us merely an excuse to evade work. The youthfulness of the forces was alone enough to make us sneer, to say nothing of the showiness and individuality of the army. Hats alone bore identification marks – three horizontal ribbons of blue, red and white beneath a red star. Red stars, red scarves, red ties etc. figured prominently, presumably as an emblem of the communistic views. In fact, the hammer and sickle were displayed prominently by many of the forces. Yes, they were truly communistic in belief, if not practise. Doubtlessly, as I said before, they do well when organized, but up there each battalion appeared a separate unit and did exactly as it liked. Consequently, Germans and Partisans were mixed up everywhere, seeming to alternate in the possession of the succeeding villages. Of course, with only rifles and machine guns available, all they could do was to annoy Jerry and then run when he came with his armoured stuff. They certainly seemed a thorn in his side. With their plundering habits they were hated as much as the Germans by the civilians. These Partisans when they felt the need of food, took over a town, demanded the cattle, farina, wheat etc. They would take this by force but I believe they did pay for it (with valueless lire). Between their very infrequent attacks on the Germans they would laze around at their depots, mount guards but generally enjoy themselves by strutting around with all their war like paraphernalia.

What good these boys were doing was their rendering of roads and railways useless to the Germans by blowing up the railway's bridges, causing roadblocks by blowing cliff faces onto the roads and lines. This would be done to all or any road, and we cursed them many times when we realized that they were responsible for a lengthened way.

PART TWO.

And so, we reached Stupizza, the small Italian village situated on a main asphalt road, squeezed in between a range of hills and a largish river that had become the accepted rendezvous of British escapees. The arrival of our sextette swelled the numbers of ex-prisoners to 60, including six officers – an English Major who because of his height was nicknamed "Stump," a New Zealand captain, "Debra Den" a South African captain, "Dingdong," and three South African Air force officers. The remainder of us comprised New Zealanders, South Africans and Tommie's. We were greeted by our fellows with rather a pitiful and sympathetic look obviously meaning, "Why the devil did you come here?" This unenthusiastic welcome worried us and we sought the cause of their depression. It appeared that the earliest of the party that had arrived at Stupizza were hailed eagerly as allies of the Partisans who wasted no time in putting the boys in the front line against the German attack. The arrival of the English Major changed things. He demanded the withdrawal of the English front line and after three days' argument, they were reluctantly released. They were a sadder but wiser mob – guests of the Partisans and virtually prisoners again being unable now to leave Stupizza. And this was the mob that we joined. We were held by the Partisans and could move neither one way nor the other. They fed us, meagre meals of bean stews and dumplings. For the next few days Stump spent his time arguing with the Partisans and endeavouring to get permission from them to allow us to go where we willed. He informed the Partisans that we were not fighting for them as a body – individuals could if they wished, but he stressed to us the value of keeping together and locating if possible, an English Liaison Officer who was stationed somewhere in Yugoslavia. On Friday the majority of us visited Linden, a small town about two kilometres away that had just been bombed as a practise target for the German Airforce. On Saturday evening word came through that we were allowed to leave. Great was the relief therewith.

And so, 8.30 a.m. Sunday 17th October saw us on our way. It was drizzling with rain and as we marched all that morning via San Pietro to San Leonardo. We had been given sufficient food to last possibly two days, together with money and a small map, and we were provided with a guide. After dinner at San Leonardo, we marched on up hill for about two hours and then descended down into a valley and straightway ascended the other side to arrive at another Partisan centre. It rained cats and dogs all afternoon and a more miserable mob it would be hard to visualize. Over half of us had no greatcoats and no gear other than that which we stood in. Those with packs and extra clothing cursed them more strongly than ever now, for they were sodden and consequently twice their original weight. It was dark when we bedded down that evening in the various haylofts, most of us in our wet clothing, having nothing to change into. The next day was showery and between showers we dried our clothes at fires that we built in the open. We were awaiting orders from the Partisans - we were to move as they said and designed and not of our own choice. Orders to move eventually came through about 8 o'clock that evening and half an hour later we were on the move again. We had expected to move in the darkness as during that night we were to pass over the Asona River, the railway and the main road at Salona. We scrambled on in the darkness, through the bushes and trees, over

rocks and stones, and after 2 hours of slipping and sliding and all but breaking our necks, we halted on a downward slope till about 12.30 a.m. We then advanced single file, slowly, carefully and silently as we neared the roadway. This main road and railways were naturally under German control and therefore every precaution was necessary. Quickly but quietly we crossed the railway and then the road and finally the bridge, making the crossing in small groups at irregular intervals. Then straight up the road for a few chain, up a hill and disappeared into the darkness of the bushes. In spite of occasional showers, we trudged on all night and as the dawn was breaking, we disappeared as though by magic into various barns and lofts and slept soundly until midday. After dinner we got on the way again just before 3 p.m. Easy going till nightfall when we bedded down at Battaglia, after much argument as to whether we were to go on or not. We had tea that evening with civilians and by 7 o'clock next morning we were on the way again and continued until 10 o'clock when we stopped for a drink of milk and a change of guides.

A change in the country was now noticeable. Still the mountains and valleys but now less steepness was to be seen and the countryside more open. Not so much bush was present and with small use of the imagination, the country could be mistaken for New Zealand sheep land. As we climbed rocks grew more numerous and out-juttings frequently scarred the hillsides. The very mountain tops were crowned with rough ridges of jagged light grey rock. A vast improvement was noticeable in the villages as far as cleanliness was concerned. The fact that each individual house was kept so much cleaner, greatly improved the appearance and smell of the villages.

After dinner consisting solely of bare potatoes, we continued our upward climb and found ourselves overlooking yet another valley. Down into that valley we went and after about 4 hours varied walking, partly cross country and partly on a good asphalt road, we arrived at our sleeping quarters, a house perched practically at the top of a very steep hill on the right hand side of the road, where after a good wash, we had tea of potatoes and veal (so very tasty). After a good night's rest, we arose at 6, enjoyed a drink of milk and were on our way by 7 a.m. The going was easy along a good road and by 11 o'clock it brought us into Zelin (9.5 kilometres N.N.W. of Idria). A clear stream there permitted an excellent wash and we then waited for dinner.

The two days' rest at Zelin gave us time to appreciate the beauty of the place. It was autumn and the valleys, now more open, presented real picture book scenes. The houses were of the style generally associated with Tyrolean scenes – especially the thatched roofs. White walls and square windows predominated and the thatched roofs were a completely new feature. Covering at least two storeys these roofs were extremely steep and often reached almost to the ground. This was undoubtedly due to the snow falls. Green moss generally mottled the gables and often the whole of the roof was covered with this green carpet. The villages were clean and appeared to be real Austrian or Swiss type – charming and quaint. Autumnal tints cast beauty everywhere and whole hillsides were being transformed. The trees were feathery in appearance with here and there a scattered pine. No artist could reproduce what we saw and even if the reproduction was anywhere near exact, it would not appear real. Every imaginable hue from palest lemon, through yellow and gold to the darkest of brown was present and any possible monotony

was broken by the persisting green of the pines or the occasional brilliant red of wild berries. Yes, the whole was the picture book land and to finish it all off, the valley was bedded with the clearest of streams, at times great in its deepness and stillness, and other times flecked with white foam as it babbled and dashed through rocky passages. Zelin itself was apparently some kind of border fortification. All the hills to the north of the township were tunnelled to make what appeared to be under-ground defences. Heavy iron or concrete doors with all types of elaborate locks pockmarked the hillside and the few that were open revealed concrete walls and steps leading in. Gun posts were numerous and at the bottom of the hill was what had once been a small outpost, all the buildings of which were protected by stone walls.

After dinner, Stump left for Circhina, 4½ kilometres away, to see an English Major and Doctor who had been dropped by parachute, and they informed him that they had just received a letter telling them to send all Britishers on to Major Jones, the English Liaison Officer in Yugoslavia. An order was received from the Partisans that the party must be divided up into 2 as 86 was too large a number for safety – so the two parties were formed – the first to leave the following morning and the second later. The second party included all those who were desirous of obtaining gear (mainly boots) and the weary. There was just the chance that gear might be procurable. So about 10 a.m. Friday October 22nd, the first party departed, taking with it two of our original sextette (the two Johns'), the remainder of us staying behind in the hope of having our worn boots replaced. We spent that day lazing around eating – eating apples, apples and then more apples. Dinner at 3!!!- Tea as usual. Breakfast again next morning of hot milk and bread and we were on the road again by 9 o'clock, with no new gear. We marched well till 10.30 when we had to wait for new guides. But after wasting an hour and a half, we set off again with the same guides and the promise that dinner was only 2 hours away. And so "flat out" we went up the longest and steepest grade that seemed to be a place in the clouds and the tops of many mountains appeared in front of us through the blue haze, and formed pictures of rare beauty, with a foreground of autumn leaves. While we waited for dinner, we had a look around the village, which was famous for its beautiful Catholic church. The priest willingly showed us through the church, the elaborate beauty of which certainly was outstanding, and the through the grounds that had become the cemetery of the deceased villagers. Here for the first time, we noticed the habit of these people to insert a covered photograph of the dead person in his tombstone and this cemetery somewhat resembled a picture gallery with so many photographs, ancient and modern scattered throughout it.

Still the Partisans lived up to their reputation. Ever since we had been guided by them, we met the same yarn. "Only 2 hours to go," which I bet would be nearer to 4. "Only 2 kilos to go," would turn out to be at least 6. This was always the same, so much so that it had become quite a joke now and the time or distance was at least doubled. Of course, in that mountainous country, journeys were never reckoned in kilometres or miles – it was always in hours. A journey of 8 kilometres might take 2 hours, but then again, the same distance with hard going might take twice as long.

Late that afternoon, a dilapidated monoplane flew over and dropped several "eggs" on the village just over the hill. The bombs were easily seen affixed to the wings and their flight to earth was easy to follow. Dinner (or tea?) came up at 5 – macaroni served with butter and a drink of beautiful cider. At 6 o'clock we left (as apparently the previous party had done the night before) and after an hour and a half ended up, after a very steep and jerking descent, at a large but dirty farm house. (Joy of joys, we managed to buy about 13 cigarettes per man on the way). We had only just arrived and our welcome rest was shattered by the arrival of a car and the alarm of "Tedeschi" went up. We scattered and in a very few minutes every one was out of sight – in ditches, behind hedges or buildings, but fortunately it was only a false alarm. At this house we were told that we could stay if we so wished and to do the odd kilo to Command next morning. Some turned in about 9 after a meal of hot polenta. That good bed, buried down in the hay was really appreciated, Sunday morning (24th), we were up and on our way to Command by 6 o'clock and an hour later were there, where we were given a double meal of "porridge" made of macaroni flour, and which was at least hot!!! We were on the way again with a civilian guide at 10.15. Very slow going was experienced through wooded hills with no made path most of the way. Germans apparently were likely to be anywhere and our over cautious guide called at every house seeking information. By 1 o'clock we had reached a civilian house that was willing to feed us. They gave us first a piece of rye bread (almost black) two pieces of raw bacon, several apples each and then a couple of drinks of beautiful cider. And then they told us that if we would peel the potatoes, they would get a meal ready for us. We were not accustomed to such ideas of feeding and we were absolutely astounded. The country was just the same – nothing to see but hills and then more hills – largely covered with autumn coloured birches and dotted with the white, red-gabled houses with their typical square windows. Quite obviously the peasants of these parts were now quite rich. All their food was now their own – no longer were they robbed to supply the rest of Italy with food. The country was productive, green and fertile. After that unexpected dinner of mashed potatoes with fried onions and pork fat added, we got going again at 3.30 with our civilian guide leading us again everywhere where there was no path. Thank goodness he went slowly. At 4.20 we came to a small village which was divided by the boundary line between Yugoslavia and Italy. Large concrete pillars marked the spot on the road and on the east face of this pillar was J.1920 and on its west face I.1920 as being the boundary between the two countries as affixed by the Treaties after the last war. With a certain amount of individual mock ceremony, we crossed the frontier into Yugoslavia. By dark we were still unable to locate Command, which apparently was very mobile up here, and so we bowled up to a house, whose owners gave us the use of a barn. Although they were rather wealthy people, they gave us only a meagre tea of potatoes. They owned above all, a wireless, which unfortunately, owing to a failure of their private electric power plant we were unable to hear. While we were having that meagre tea, our guide went on and located Command and brought back with him four guides (partisans) for the morrow's march. Next morning, we were off by 7.15 and at 8 stopped at a home for bread and hot milk. The chief guide had sent two of his boys off earlier to the various houses telling them to bring milk and bread to that house at which we had stopped. From 9.15 till 10, we marched on to a little village where we spent the rest of the day. We had just settled down in the various houses, when we were asked to please hide ourselves out in the bush about two hundred yards away. The people

were apparently very scared of the Germans finding us there, and so we spent the rest of the day out under the trees. It was very pleasant there, with all the leaves of the trees, yellow, bronze and all shades of brown. A fair breeze was blowing and the leaves fell by the hundreds as we waited, deepening the bronze carpet on which we lay.

We could never say for sure how far the enemy was away from us or how safe we actually were, but all precautions were always taken – hiding from aircraft, etc. Occasionally we were told that the Jerries were only 5 or 6 kilometres away. How true it was we didn't know, but quite often we would hear machine guns and rifles being fired and occasionally the dull plod of a mortar. Germans had been in the district through which we had just passed a few days before us and we were shown the marks of machine guns fired for no apparent reason at peaceful homes.

Dinner and tea consisted of beans plus a little potato. At 6.30 we lined up and got on our way. Easy going for a couple of hours and then across a main road just after a German truck had passed down it. Then proceeded one night of hell! The night was overcast and pitch black, and we proceeded through heavy natural pine forest in single file. Things were so dark that it was impossible almost to see the man in front and the night was spent in slipping and sliding over rocks. The tail of the long procession was always becoming lost and consequently we floundered everywhere striking sharp rocks falling down onto other rocks. White paper tied onto every man in front of you was useless. You could only see it after you had banged into him. It was certainly a night of hell – worse than any possible nightmare. Many faces were cut and scratched, nearly every foot and hand was cut or injured. The steady rain made things worse. So often was the tail lost that we adopted the following method of procedure – the queue, with the aid of the guide's torch would go ahead for 100 yards, then stop and the guide would go back locate the tail and bring them up. This was kept up for hours and was very trying alone, to say nothing of the inconvenience of the darkness and the rugged nature of the country. When 400 yards from the railway line, we took off our boots and proceeded at a snail's crawl up and over. The going was then not quite as bad but it was just as dark. At 4 a.m. we halted, lay down on the wet ground and slept. It was not actually raining then but drops of water as big as houses fell on us from the trees overhead. At 6 we arose, sore and tired and stiff, and proceeded to a little opening where we were to meet new guides. They failed to appear so at 8 we pushed on with a civilian who had joined us as our guide. His home was near our immediate destination and though he hardly knew the way I suppose he was better than nothing. For 2 hours the road was good but for the next one and a half hours it was rough. We halted outside a little village while our guide went on to see if it was safe for us to pass through for, we had learnt that Germans had been here two days previously. Suddenly we saw soldiers 400 yards away on the flat. No-one knew who they were so we decided that the safest policy was to make for the bush and remain there until we found out whether they were friend or foe. So, we went as fast as our weary legs would take us. Everyone went their own way and had just made the bush when the soldiers opened up on us. I was on my own at this stage and mortar bombs and rifle and machine gun bullets whizzed up the valley to my left. I was up and off – likewise everyone else – up hill and down dale – stumbling, falling almost fainting with exhaustion. It was hell. My general direction was east and as I stumbled blindly and madly on, I met up with some of the

other boys and ended up as one of a party of eleven, (5 Tommie's, 4 South African and 2 Kiwis). In our mad and intoxicated rush, we almost ran into a German encampment down in a valley. We had heard voices and it was not until we were half way down into the valley, that we suddenly saw those Huns ahead of us. We stopped dead and then very cautiously retraced our steps out of the valley. How they missed seeing us I don't know. We pushed on, keeping in the forest and keeping as high as possible. Although we had been marching for long, it was remarkable what new energy we found with the Germans behind us, and this new life kept us going on and it was at 4 o'clock that bombing by the Germans a little further to the east showed us the way to safety. Where the Germans bombed there must be Partisans. So still further we stumbled and eventually as we descended into the valley, we met a friendly civilian who took us into the bombed village (Rakitnar). The people proved hospitable but believing that the bombing was a fore runner of a German attack or invasion forced us to go on our way (with a basket of potatoes). In twenty minutes, we arrived at a lonely house, and after ten minutes of incessant banging, woke the inhabitants. So fearful were they that they would not open the door for quite some time, but eventually they took us in and cooked our potatoes. Much against their desires, we forced ourselves into their barn and went to sleep, thoroughly exhausted. It was then 9.30 and after almost 27 hours of tramping, stumbling, and pure hell, we again were able to lay down our weary bodies. As far as we could make out, the Partigiani had evacuated the previous day and so in the morning we set out to catch up with them, leaving at 7 a.m. At 8 we were at Osrednek. The people were still scared, gave us little food and we pushed on at 9, arriving at San Vid at 10 o'clock. Here we located the padre who, after half an hour talking, arranged food for us at two of the houses. He told us to push on to Stopnjaike where there may possibly be Partisans, so we awaited the food then pushed on.

What an ending to P.O.W. life – Hell it was cruel. And that we should strike trouble after such a night – over 24 hours of "pushing on" and without food. We were all dog-tired, foot-weary; always hungry and our pace necessarily pretty slow. Still we pushed on!!! We had arrived at San Vid at 10 o'clock (Wednesday 27th) and were waiting that hour for dinner. The hour was almost up when the door was opened and two Partigiani walked in. The boys arose as one and stared in wonder and with delight and thanks at our Saviours. Kitchener's arrival in Khartoum was nothing to this. Although we had cursed and mocked these people, our joy at seeing them then was indescribable. We at least knew that we were safe but knowing the Partigiani as we did and never daring to have too much faith in them, we knew that our position might be anything yet. Nevertheless, so far so good. So, to dinner. Later we helped them to fill sacks with potatoes from the cellar that had apparently belonged to a member of the White Guard (an anti-partisan band of Yugoslavia). At 1p.m. we set off with these Partigiani to Battalion Headquarters which we reached at 3 that afternoon.

As we walked that day, every village that we saw, and many we did see, was completely wrecked. They had been burnt down and only blackened, charred brick walls remained of what had been houses. This was the result of the Italian occupation I believe. We saw such the whole day and on later days also. At Battalion Headquarters, we heard vague stories of further English in the vicinity and when they realized that our aim was to join

the Liaison Officer, they decided to push on. At 5 we walked into a tiny village and we were about to leave the place when we were hailed by another eleven of our original group. The Partisans had failed to inform us of their presence in that village and if it had not been for the yell that we heard as we were leaving the village we would have gone on and left them behind. They were being held prisoners under armed guards and our arrival convinced the commander that the boys were English and that their story was true. "The Partigiani want you to fight for them – take up a rifle and you will get looked after but otherwise you must push on. No one wants you. No one is keen to help or guide you – in fact you are a damned nuisance." As a last resort we decided to join them, but not if we could possibly help it.

This other eleven joined us in our mystery hike. We tramped on with ever existing 3 kilos ahead, and at 7 entered a village through which we were scattered for a tea of potatoes. We slept that night in yet another barn and were up and off by 7 the next morning. After an hour, we entered the forest again and soon came across Partigiani encampments. We passed through with much questioning and eventually lo and behold, we ran into our first party of 45 headed by Major Gibbons. God, were we thankful to see them – not only to know of their safety but to get together again and become part of the official party again? Excitedly our stories were exchanged. Their trip apparently had been little better than our own. Certainly, they had not been fired on, but nights and days of tramping and starvation had hardly been enjoyed. Like us, they had also lost their guides and civilians had apparently led them blindly till they ran into a couple of Partigiani, who took them to Battalion and hence to Brigade. It so happened that the Brigade was conducting a little war at the time and sent the boys back. They settled down and at 11 were told to shift with Brigade as the Jerries had cut the road. They eventually got away at 4 in the morning and had walked till 1 p.m. to the spot where we met them in the forest. This Brigade that the boys had joined and that we now joined was apparently just newly conscripted and its morale was as low as possible. Its members were youth, their faces as long and surly as possible and as unhealthy and pimply as possible, and their clothes and appearance as dirty as could be.

Our little encampment was a great sight. Shelters had been built of the branches and leaves of the pine trees – all shapes and sizes resembling a real Indian effort with wigwams – every little tent with its smouldering fire. It will be humorous one day I remember thinking, but by God, it was miserable then. There apparently the sun never shone. The heavy mists seemed perpetual and consequently things were very damp and miserable. As from that day two meals were given us daily by the Partigiani who were also encamped with us. As to our geographical position, I had no idea. As regards our general position, things appeared somewhat as follows (only vague information was given) – Jerry had started a minor offensive in the little valley that we were heading for, to chase the Partigiani back abit and probably to get food. Consequently, all communications etc. were broken and nobody knew where anyone else was or what was happening. Consequently, until things clarified, we had to wait. It seemed as if this happened quite often for short periods, and when things had settled and became known, we would be taken on.

We spent that day in resting in our open encampment and in trying to keep warm around our open fires. Night was hellish – cold and misty like the day – hard bed and repetition of the old "Benghazi hip." Next morning, we were wakened with the cry of "Breakfast up" (and we knew that there must be some catch somewhere). "Be ready to leave at 8." At this time, we lined the road ready to march off. The whole Brigade, fully 1,000 men filed past us – such a motley crew with no set uniform – with every make of rifle and machine gun and with such long and unhealthy faces, that we simply couldn't help laughing. Each Company had its half dozen mules for transport. It reminded us of a circus. So, we eventually got away, at the end of this comical file. We tramped off in a northerly direction and immediately we all realized that something was wrong and everyone felt a bit uneasy. They would not tell us where we were going and not until the halt for dinner did they tell us that they had orders to cross the railway line (that we had crossed a few nights before) and to take a couple of strongholds on the way. This was against our principles at the time – to say nothing of the fact that we were going in the wrong direction. We wanted to go south and there we were, being dragged off north to help them carry out their orders. We naturally kicked against this and we realized that they would do nothing to help us. A panic followed. We had three options – to try on our own as a body to get through (naturally pretty hopeless) – to keep with the Brigade and trust to luck – or to break into little groups of two or three and go our own way either back to Italy or to head for the English Liaison Officer, wherever he might be, or to strike out for the Dalmatian coast. Our little clan were still arguing over whether it was to be the Dalmatian coast or Italy, when we heard that they were taking our arms off us (the first party had once again been obliged to take up arms when they met us with the Brigade) and were giving us a guide to take us on to another Brigade. We almost cheered aloud. Just another example of their bluff I guess, to try their utmost to get us to stay with them.

So, we left them at 4 that afternoon and marched generally in a north-westerly direction and before long came to a beautiful little valley surrounded by gentle undulating hills. The first village was our objective and the people, and particularly the Partisans, welcomed us heartily, giving us five cigarettes each, a good tea, and a bed. In the morning after soup, we left at 9 for Brigade Headquarters which took us just over two hours. We marched straight across the fertile, intensely cultivated little valley to the village of Skofljica on the other side, thence through about half a dozen little villages (Nansce, Smarje etc.) and finally to the township of Sap. All of these villages were extremely clean and beautiful – the people hailing us joyfully and the clean bright houses were further beautified by the brilliant displays of chrysanthemums and dahlias, and numerous window pot-plants. One couldn't help noticing the presence of flowers again. Walls of houses, buildings and posts were literally covered with red stars, hammers and sickles, etc. and such slogans as "ZIVEL STALIN, ZIVEL TITO," and the names of allies S.S.S.R., ANGLIJE, U.S.A., etc. Numerous shrines and other evidences of their belief, lined the road way for miles. Things in general were very beautiful. But then another hitch arose. Perhaps the old bluff again – they were certainly keen to get us to join them. This time the story was that we couldn't get through to the Liaison Officer, "so stay here take up arms and join us till you can get through." What would arise we would see later. They were at least a decent mob.

Dinner of rice soup followed by spuds and meat was most acceptable. A low flying "reccie" plane just after dinner caused us to be shunted off to a little village about 400 yards down the road. We had only just settled in when a runner came to say that Jerry was advancing along the road. The Partigiani were already clearing out. Panic once again and it looked like another run for it. We scrambled into our gear once again and almost ran back through Sap and across the little valley to the tiny village of Bicje, one hour away. The Partigiani left us in the dust; they certainly didn't waste any time when the Germans were behind them. At Bicje we stayed, procuring meals from the different houses – seven to a house. The meals were vile, filthy buckwheat, sour cabbage, potatoes etc., and nearly all Sunday (October 31st) was spent in scrounging round for bread which most managed to acquire in one way or another from the dozen nearby villages, which were only a few hundred yards apart. Sunday afternoon a trio of us (Stu, John & self), thinking of the good Sunday meals that we always had at home, hit a fowl on the head and roasted it over an open fire and ate it with hot with potatoes.

The story that arrived from Brigade was that two guides would arrive between 3 and 4 to take us on. If Jerry came in the meantime, we decided that we would follow the Partigiani – they always get away well in time and they would have more idea than us where it was safe to go. There was much mortar and machine gunning uncomfortably near to the north – tanks we thought. Still we thought that we were safe – at least we sincerely hoped so – what with last Tuesday's effort and then yesterday's scare!!! As usual the guides did not arrive between 3 and 4 and on Monday, we were still in Bicje, hanging around, everybody as impatient as could be. About 3 that afternoon, a beautiful little formation of eleven planes came over, split into two and did a spot of bombing a little to the west of us. We could see them easily as they circled again and again to come over their target. Our own rations we received from the Brigade were cooked up at the various houses. Tuesday saw another scare. All the time we could hear sounds of battle – spandows, machine guns mortars etc. and about 11 o'clock Tuesday, Jerry was again on his way towards us. The Partigiani had already cleared out and the Germans had actually been seen about two villages away (500 yards). We packed up and waited on the forest's edge but a little later we set out over the hill to a little village, about one hour's walk away in a south westerly direction. We were then about 20-30 kilos due south of Ljubjana. We were just having tea at the various houses in this new village way up in the hills when another scare arose. Jerry had entered the village we had left 20 minutes after we had marched out. However, things calmed down when it was realized that the Germans could not take the same track as we had taken in his tanks. We decided that we would take the risk and go to sleep – however at 8 o'clock a runner came from Brigade to tell us that the Brigade was shifting and he was to take us on – so for an hour we tramped up to Gradisce – eventually bedding down in a cold draughty barn with very little straw and where I spent the coldest and most uncomfortable night yet. We had breakfast at the houses and were on the way to Brigade next morning at 8. We passed through last Monday's bombed village and through several others as well and eventually reached Brigade about 10. Things seemed to be clarifying a bit – with the Allied invasion of Italy, the Partisans had started a comparatively extensive and successful offensive against the Germans. Owing to the slowness of the Allied advance however, the Partisans, to a certain extent losing heart, were now encountering Jerry's counter offensive, directed with only a couple of

tanks or armoured cars and a few men, to recapture the positions that he needed – consequently the mess-up with us. The Partigiani claimed that it was not safe for us to go south and that Brigade was quite sincere in its statements and were not attempting to hold us. Finally, upon a written statement that we went entirely at our own risk, they let us go after furnishing us with guides.

Winter was definitely here. November 1st saw the first frost and every day after that heavy dense fog lay around the whole day, which as a consequence was raw and bleak, so the cold was going to beat us if we didn't hurry. Many chaps had very little gear, no coats or blankets and the stories that snow was always about six feet deep in those parts in the winter did not exactly cheer us. Perhaps cold would be the one thing that would make us give ourselves up!!!

The guides arrived late in the day and it was decided that we make a start immediately after tea. At 7 o'clock, we were on our way to Rob – 7 kilos distant. Rather unfortunately the guide for us got lost and for two hours we went around in circles. Eventually at 11.30 we reached Rob and learnt that the Germans were only a few kilos away, so we back pedalled and slept a little in an old Mill-house away from the village. At 4 we were hauled out of bed by the fear-stricken owner who directed us to another little village an hour away. There we continued our sleep until mid-day, then off again, further up the hill to Macki about an hour away. There we dined on spuds and slept during the afternoon in preparation of another night's walk. It was bitterly cold as we took our turns watching the road for the advance of the Germans, and all clothes, gloves and scarves were to the fore. After an early tea, we were on the way by 4.15. We were promised a hard night – not the length of the way, but the chasing around after guides, the banging round in the dark, the extreme cold etc. The first two hours were uneventful enough, except for the fact that the first village that we entered was one that the 22 of us had slept in the night before we had met up with the main party on the previous Thursday (a week ago!!). So, we certainly had been going around in circles, thanks to these damned Partigiani. It was a bit of heart breaking – a whole week had been wasted. However, we proceeded on with minor halts, over sticky going – through mud, water and forests. We had two main roads to cross and they were both patrolled by the Germans. Both were crossed without incident, and we entered a little village about 400 yards over the second road about 9 p.m. It wasn't as far as we wished to go that night (yet another 7 kilo) but it was decided to bed down and get up at 3 next morning and get on the way again. A beautiful warm bed, deep down in straw. A proper gale had been howling all night, freezingly cold as it roared through the trees and round the buildings. On Friday morning the guides refused to move at 3 o'clock at the last minute, and so we had but one option – to get up and back pedal again, back over the main road to a little village in the mountains. Jerry patrolled the main road and it was too dangerous to stay so near to it in the village where we had slept. Had we got going at 3, we would have been well away by daylight. Again, curse the Partigiani. Still the cold continued and about 9, when sheltered (and hiding) in the civilian houses of Novi Pot, snow commenced to fall. This would make things hard. As it was, everyone was wearing all their clothing, more than half were wrapped in blankets in lieu of great coats, and sacks and bags were liberally utilized whenever they could be commandeered.

Many might just have been barefooted for all the use their boots were. Please God – a few more weeks of decent weather.

It snowed lightly all day. Dinner and tea consisted solely of spuds. Spuds, spuds, spuds, I was sick of them but still thankful to receive them. A glorious night buried deep in hay. Very early rising on Saturday morning and we were on our way by 3 a.m. as we first had to cross again the second road and on further to another road had to be crossed (we hoped) at first light. This third road had been visited and the country reconnoitred during the day by Stump. All went well and we crossed that third road, which showed signs of bearing recent heavy traffic, just as things were becoming really light. We had been warned that the going would be stiff, in the two senses, firstly, hard stiff going and secondly, possible encounters with Jerry. The journey between the two roads certainly was hard – down steep hills and the up almost perpendicular cliffs which were as slippery as they possibly be with mud. A party of 17 Partigiani (the useless bastards!!!) had joined us as from Novi Pot – they had been trying for weeks to go where we were bound and were too windy to try it alone – so they tacked on uselessly behind (as always) us. We had just crossed the road and the end of our file was just leaving the open, 400 yards on the south side of the road for a sheltered little vale, when a German patrol car ripped down the road. Luck was with us – he kept on his way – apparently not seeing us as we dashed for individual shelters, or seeing our trail across the snow.

We were now on our own – to do as we wished – with just an English-speaking Slav, Florian as interpreter, and with of course our useless following that we simply ignored as best as possible. Our Major's plan was to strike south – so due south we went – ignoring tracks and roads, surmounting any obstacle up mountains down into gullies – through country in the main densely forest clad (pine) – and the whole covered with perhaps 2 inches of snow. Marvellous sights were to be seen – the sombre dark green of the pines was changed to greenly silver and the boughs bowed to the ground. The deciduous trees were now snow clad and intricate patterns like fine old white lace were formed. The going was hard but we tramped on wearily but resolutely. South, always due south. At mid-day we spied a little village ahead, the Officers reconnoitred, to be met with a very cold welcome. "Tedeschi, Tedeschi, Get out Get out!!!" and the little conversation to find out where we were was only carried on through closed windows. Stump was extremely pleased with our position – we had made better time than expected. No meal was forthcoming in that village so on we pushed. Now we had to cross the valley and climb the mountain in full sight of this German patrolled village. We were just crossing an open space on the mountain slope when a German convoy chose to pass through the village. We dropped as dead on the cold snow and dared not move for twenty minutes or so. We tramped on – on – up the steepest of mountains and down into their equally steep valleys – through the maze of tree trunks – stumbling, stumbling over slippery snow-clad rocks – weary, hungry, scarcely able to raise one foot after another. We were well in the mountains and as weary as we were, no amount of tramping would have got us out. So, at 4 in the afternoon we decided to follow a rather well made but rocky road. At 5 (after fourteen hours' tramping onwards), we decided we must call a halt and bed down in the open – so rapidly, fires were built after difficulty with wet wood (but fortunately many logs were available) and our only meal for that day was cooked from the little rice that

we carried. It was very meagre but at least something. Realizing that we had to spend the night out in the open on that snow-covered rocky road, we cast caution to the wind and piled huge logs on our fires and kept them going all night, trusting to luck that they would not be seen by the enemy. After very little sleep we were up and on our way by 7 a.m. continuing on this road for an hour and a half we then followed a bypath straight down into the deep steep valley. After a few hundred yards of this almost perpendicular path, we spotted a little village. The Major went forward again on reconnoitre – found out that the road and the village were patrolled by the Germans, but that our position was excellent. We had progressed far better than expected and a Partigiani village was only an hour away. The people sold us some potatoes and we hung round impatiently in the snow. Then those ignorant Partigiani almost undid all our work. A couple of the most impatient Partisans followers ignored orders and entered the village and lo and behold, a German Staff car entered, saw them and fired. We don't know whether they were hit or not, but we know what we hoped. At any rate they didn't return. That almost created panic, but we stayed on, cooked our spuds and buckwheat biscuits on our little fires, while Stump went forward on another "reccie." So, we spent the day – pretty miserably – and when Stump returned, we learnt that we were to cross the valley and advance to the Partigiani village. It was a tricky job – German cars could be heard going through every half hour, but thanks to their regularity we were able to time our cross in safety. We crept down the hill, through the village across the road and valley and up to the village and then advanced another few kilos to a little deserted place. The two still persisting dwellers of this town gave us an excellent stew and we had the rest of the deserted houses at our disposal, and so we slept in a lovely room with a hot fire going all night, and at which we cooked our potatoes, apples and bread made of "acquired" flour. In the morning we were on our way by 7.15. About 9 we again met up with that first party of Partigiani that we had got rid of after yesterday's trouble. They tried to come with us but as Florian told us they seemed to be deserters from the Partisans and we had to get rid of them, which required a certain amount of brute manual force. We chased them back but realized that they were following at a safe distance. Across another Jerry road we tramped on through six inches of snow for hours and hours. About 1 o'clock we entered one of the nicest little villages that we had seen for ages – with quite modern houses and looking extremely pretty with all the roofs rounded off with snow. A quaint little post office contrasted with the houses. The going had been fairly easy – over rolling hills, and it was reminiscent of Arctic exploring pictures, watching the black file steadily advance with no sign of a track ahead but leaving a plainly visible track sunk deep into the snow behind. This track was visible meandering over several past hills. In this little village we saw another Jerry road a few hundred yard away and watched, ourselves carefully concealed, Germans trucks going up. We had to get on so we filed carefully down to this road concealed between the banks of the steep track. The couple of hundred yards we did on the road we did at a trot – carelessly dashing forward – ignoring mud and stones – with dixies and packs flapping. It was hard but necessary seeing that the Jerry trucks were quite frequent. We plodded on, guided from village to village by the civilians – up and down – round and about – through semi-deserted and destroyed villages till about 3.30. We were all done – tired and sore of foot and shoulder and welcomed the news that we were staying in this village. Tea was provided by the "civvies" and a deserted house given us to sleep in. The next day was spent in resting and cleaning up, with light snow

still falling. The Partigiani fed us that day. Our position was excellent, we were now getting somewhere – we were only 4 hours from the area that we were heading for and we would find out where this Liaison Officer (Jones) was and what he could do for us. The food problem was a bit acute – we got enough but it sadly lacked variety and salt. Potatoes – I was absolutely sick of the sight of them and a man can't become really satisfied on them alone. We were filthy – no chance to wash either clothes or body. Oh, for a Turkish bath!!! Ten chaps have dropped out for various reasons since we have been going our own way – lack of boots and gear, tired and weary with no apparent object ahead. Our party was now I think 58. The Major summed up the position for us while we were stopped there at Muha Vas, as follows – since we had left Stupizza, we had gone approximately 300 kilos (approximately 200 miles). Since we had been going on our own), we had gone 120 kilo – 85 as the crow flies (75 miles) in the last five days. We were heading for an area known as the "Bella Krajina" – an apparently comparatively safe area where Jones together with other English Officers were – seemingly in hiding with the German offensive that was then going on. Naturally they couldn't disclose the exact position to us, but apparently, we were only about two day's easy march away.

Wednesday 10th November, we were on the way again by 10 o'clock and it was comparatively easy going through that unpleasant mixture of half melted snow and mud. We had been situated very high (therefore the snow) and we were now slowly descending, ending up after dodging a Jerryified town and crossing a Jerry held road, at the quaint little village of Zavarovano. The people here seemed totally different. More hospitable and friendly, they treated us extremely well – ten of us per house – giving us cider by the gallon, cigarettes, and plenty of really enjoyable food. We descended down into a beautiful little valley (with only light snow) which was intensively cultivated, with that entirely new feature, well formed terraces. Totally different in appearance, it seemed almost like civilization again. As usual many little villages were in view. We were on our way by 10 next morning and climbed a high range to the east and so we went back into the snow. Everything was again pure white and presented really marvellous pictures. Antelopes and woodpeckers, we made acquaintance with, and although we did not actually meet any, we saw the trail of many bears – and they were pretty hefty too. Once over the top and having descended far enough for the trees to be no longer thick enough to obscure the view, we beheld what appeared as heaven in contrast to the hell we had just left. Stretching for miles ahead and below us lay a long gently undulating plain, edged in the remote distance with another range of mountains. The plain was for the most part cultivated, with the brown of bare ground forming patchwork with the green of growing crops, these sections all being on different angles and running in different directions. Through this in the foreground, ran a meandering stream and odd patches were bush clad, these now appearing yellow with the tinted leaves of beeches. Not far distant could be seen the town of Crnomelj Trinomily – apparently the largest in the Bella Krajina area – and at present, much to our amazement, in Partigiani hands. We descended to within a few hundred feet of the edge of the plain and halted at a little hill-side village. We were then out of the snow area and that night we had a good hard frost. With almost drastic results we discovered that we were once again in the wine area. This was quite evident by the vineyards and their numerous accompanying store houses. During the rather prolonged stop, the officers quite obviously partook freely and consequently

arrangements were hardly made for our sleeping quarters. Therefore, each man made his own arrangements for sleeping but we soon realized that nothing could be done in that village for the providing of food. So off we went – already a bit under the effect – and heedless of orders, down to the next village to scrounge tea. The majority of the chaps were pretty well under the weather when another German scare arose. They were only one kilo away – but what with the effect of the vine and knowing the Partigiani and their scares we completely ignored this scare and everybody went to bed quite unconcernedly. And thank God – it was only another hoax; otherwise all our walking and labouring would have been undone.

Next morning (November 12th) the real scare arose again. We were awaiting guides when suddenly German mortars burst near behind us – later to be accompanied by machine gunning. The Partigiani were gone before you could say "Jack Robinson" and we were left stranded without guides, directions or anything. We eventually took to the hills and rather luckily met our guides half way up looking for us. We eventually got away about 10 o'clock and five hours marching away from this fertile valley brought us to that day's destination. We had plodded back into the snow and then down into another little valley. We bowled up smartly to the Partigiani that were in that village and then received rather a shock. Their Staff Headquarters they apparently kept a great secret, and here we were walking there so easily. We really had taken the wind out of their sails, had rather embarrassed them and consequently we were not exactly welcome. They said they didn't want "refugees" which rather tickled us. They would tell us nothing but eventually they shoved us back a little to the last village through which we had passed and fed us twice daily from their village.

This little village of ours had been quite large in its day, but now it sported only eight families. Deserted houses were numerous and a more dismal, dreary place I have yet to see. Such was the village of Strednja Vas. Saturday we all spent washing. We were all browned off as could possibly be, what with poor food, lack of news and inactivity – (it was no wonder that another fowl went west!!!). So, for eleven days we made use of those deserted houses and lived in Strednja Vas until Wednesday 24th November. For the first few days the Partigiani fed us from their village but after their departure we got our own rations and fed ourselves three times daily and generously. On the first Sunday that we were there (Sunday was ever becoming a day of events, good news or action!!!) Major Jones presented himself to us thereby fulfilling our first objective. He spoke to us, offering all possible help and advice etc., and left to endeavour to contact Cairo on our behalf. He spoke of the Partigiani and their work – obviously very much of a Partigiani himself. "Don't laugh at them – they're not cowards, by God they're not. I've seen them fight," and so on. It was really amazing to us after what we had seen, and judging from our own experiences with them – perhaps we had underestimated them. Sunday night also brought a fall of snow, a heavy fall that lay around on the ground for over a week. The gear that Jones promised us clothing (but no boots) arrived during the week. The second Sunday Jones paid us another visit, giving us little news but offering the officers the route that we sought. We wondered just what he had arranged – naturally he couldn't disclose. Twice more we had fowl for tea!!!!

Those eleven days at Strednja Vas passed slowly. We divided ourselves up into small groups and took possession of the deserted houses. Almost every day we boiled up water and it was certainly good to get the old body and our clothes clean again. In spite of official orders to the contrary, we gradually wandered further afield and it wasn't long before a couple of friends and myself had crossed over the hill to Semic about 5 miles away. I remember our first visit there. It was a Sunday and we reached Semic, a really picturesque place situated on a hillside overlooking the beautiful Bella Krajina plain, and were standing outside the church when the morning service ended. The young priest proudly showed us through the building and then with difficulty, asked us if we would like to dine at the Convent. So, a few minutes later we found ourselves seated in the spotless kitchen and were being waited on by the Nuns. We were rather embarrassed, I remember, feeling humble and heathenish, with our ragged clothes, unshaven faces and unkempt hair, in that surrounding of cleanliness and piety. We certainly found ourselves in odd positions at times. We spent the afternoon in the company of English-speaking Slavs. It was remarkable the number of old people that spoke English – every other person, it seemed, had gone to America in their youth and had in later life returned to their native land and were now cursing the fact that they had ever come back. Naturally they spoke with a very American twang. Food was there in plenty and we returned laden with bread, nuts, apples etc. Wine and grapa (local whiskey) also flowed freely and we found ourselves frequently in the store houses "sampling" this keg and then that. Almost every house had its own little still to make the grapa and it was certainly potent stuff – but just what we needed in that cold wet place. So attractive was Semic, that later in the week we went out to visit it a second time. On the way we called to "scrounge" food at a rather dismal little hovel, where our incessant knocking brought a very elderly and doddering old man to the door. Repeatedly we asked him, in Yugoslavian (as best we could) for food. But no, he wouldn't understand. So, we tried Italian – still the shrug of the shoulders. We repeated the words "bread" and "milk" to him then in French, in German, Greek and Egyptian, but still he couldn't (or wouldn't) understand. So, in disgust we turned away. I remarked, "I wonder how in the hell the old bastard lives." We almost dropped dead when in a very low, slow voice he said, "I live like a hungry dog." It was too much for us, we let him be. We reached Semic and spent the morning walking on to several smaller places, all of which had plenty of food. In the afternoon, we visited a youngish chap who had returned from America just prior to the war. He was most entertaining – telling us how he had been engaged in the whiskey business and how he had been very unfaithful to his wife, after little "outies" he had known. He couldn't be bothered with her and was only waiting to go back to America as soon as he could. And in the meanwhile, he certainly gave her a dog's life.

On Tuesday, Jones paid us another visit. He had secured a pass for us giving us permission to pass through Croatia. And that was all that he would tell us.

And so, after a long and deserved rest, we again took up our packs and walked. Commencing at 8 o'clock we retraced for the first 4 hours, those steps we had plodded 12 days previously – back to the hillside village that we had hastily evacuated. For the most part of the journey, thick snow lay all around, but as ever, as we descended into the valley, we left the snow behind. An hour was wasted calling on Partigiani Headquarters

and then we struck out over 5 kilos of the previously described fertile and prosperous valley to the city of Crnomelj, arriving there at 2 o'clock. After one hour's waiting, we again got under way – through the city and along the main road bound for Vinica. (18 kilo). The city was typically a city as we know it although it appeared so strange to us at that time. Shops and houses like our own were strange to us – the houses and buildings in general were extremely modern in design – no doubt a modern and prosperous city. We reached Dragatus at 5 o'clock after 2 hours real solid going. We had covered 10 kilo and so we decided to call a halt. Here we were spread out five per house to the civilians, who gave us tea and breakfast (sausages for tea!!!). The village was quaint with its mixture of modern brick and wooden houses side by side with thatched-roofed hovels.

We were on the road next morning by 8 to continue our way to Vinica, which journey of 10 kilo we completed in just over 2 hours. Here we had to stop and make inquiries. Vinica was situated on the north bank of the Kolpa River, which was the boundary between Slavonia and Croatia. The Kolpa was a tributary of the Sava, which in turn was a tributary of the Donava. No immediate news of what the situation was over the river in Croatia was available, so while we waited in Vinica, Stump crossed over and still got no news, so he then set out to another Brigade 15 kilo to the north-east. He returned mid-day next day (Friday 26th), and we then awaited guides. We spent the day waiting while he was away very enjoyably – the people were most pleasant and hospitable and gave freely, vino, grapa, food, milk.

(We were now bound for a place called Otocac, which was almost due south of where we were and distant about 75-80 kilo. Here we were to contact another English Liaison Officer, who, according to Major Jones, the last one we had seen, could make all final arrangements for us.)

We were on the way again at 4 o'clock Friday afternoon with our objective a night march of 40 kilo with three rivers, two roads and one railway, all Jerrified, to cross. After an hour's marching along the river bank, we crossed over – 10 at a time in a rowing boat – being swept well downstream each time by the swift current, a procedure which occupied over an hour. And so, we entered Croatia. Our guide then informed us that he was only taking us three villages ahead (about 10 kilos altogether) which took us to 9.30 so many were our stops! We ended up by running into another Brigade which proved very sympathetic and helpful, and they sent us back half an hour to sleep in a previous little village. About 11 o'clock we eventually lay down, divided as always now among the existing civilian houses. Our breakfast was robbed from us by a mob of Partigiani, who grabbed it before we were up; however, another meal of spuds was prepared for us.

At 9.30, we were again padding the hoof and for 6 hours we plodded on. We made good time on the main road all the way but owing to several hold-ups we only covered about 15 kilos. We crossed over a river about mid-day on a bridge that the Partigiani were pulling to pieces. Then owing to the bridge on the tributary of that river being blown away previously, we proceeded to go right round the source of the tributary. It was an underground river and its source came roaring forth from the rocky face of a hill. We halted out of Duprava at a small village as the people were abit jumpy as Jerry had visited the town that day. At that little village we cooked up our own rations and after dark

completed the half hour's journey to Duprava. Here we were put up at houses to rest till midnight. At 1 o'clock in the morning we were under way again – wending our way carefully over easy hills to cross yet another railway. Civilian guides led us over the snow-covered rocky ground. About 3 we picked up new guides (two women) and learnt that we were only a kilo away from a permanent German Camp and we certainly heard odd shots being fired by jumpy sentries. Half an hour later we crossed the line with no trouble or fuss in spite of the nearness of the enemy. Over the line we again crossed a German road and soon after changed guides then climbed into forest country, heading for the last obstacle for the time – an un-bridged (for us) river. About 5, our guide (a youth) lost the footpath and miserably cold we stamped around for an hour and a half awaiting light and visibility. As dawn was lighting the sky, we found the lost trail and proceeded down to the swift flowing river. No-one was there and taking the chance we fired a shot across the river in an endeavour to attract attention. In the meantime, we discovered a large canoe moored below an old water mill with a wire rope extended across the river. Half a dozen of our party piled in and pulled themselves across. Two brought the boat back and laden as much as possible the boat commenced its bank to bank journey conveying us across. We certainly travelled by funny means but this looked so humorous that in spite of the cold, weariness and hunger, we all laughed heartily. As the tail of the party was crossing, two Partigiani descended the steep hill ahead and greeted us. We then climbed the hill and proceeded to a post an hour away over open but extremely poor ground. The people were living in the most disgusting hovels – often in what had actually been pigsties – (their own homes had been destroyed). We halted at a cluster of five houses where we again divided ourselves out and cooked our rations. These houses were certainly appalling with their lack of sanitation – the people were filthy and lousy and their earth floored hovels consisted of but one dirty room. At mid-day we again got under way and 3 hours later (10 kilo) brought us to Veljun, a command post. The country was rocky and poor yet open, and while most dwellings were mere hovels, we passed through one quite picturesque village with the national costume quite in evidence – bright home knitted socks, full gathered skirts (of any bright hue for the younger set and generally black for the older women), covered with bright contrasting aprons, coloured embroidered blouses, coloured kerchiefs over their heads and with woollen designed ruck-sacks with numerous tassels dangling, slung over their shoulders. Just before we reached Veljun, we crossed another river by means of pontoon barges. Here we learnt that transport was available and that possibly we would continue in trucks that day. Transport – it was hard to believe after so much walking and sounded too good to be true. We fed that night most unsatisfactorily – many missing out all together and many might just as well have missed. Then we hung around, waiting, waiting, and waiting. The place which consisted of only four houses was full of lousy Partigiani and consequently shelter was hard to find. Finally, we realized that the trucks would not be arriving that night so we decided that rest (if possible) was the best thing. Some lay down in the louse-filled Partigiani room and did their best to sleep. We spent the early part of the evening in a crowded room of a civilian home. We had invited ourselves for tea and after a very frugal meal we attempted conversation with our hosts. The filth and stink was something terrible, and any New Zealander couldn't believe it without first seeing it. The habit of the place seemed to be to spit everywhere and those filthy wretches spent the night spitting at all angles across the room. In spite of it all we couldn't help feeling amused

and soon we were spitting with the best of them. And it was then, and only then, that they made us feel welcome, just as though the mere fact that we could spit elevated us to the ranks of manhood. Then it came the time for retiring for the night, and though perhaps you wouldn't believe it, we lay down with the rest of them on that spit-covered, louse covered earth floor and slept. It was simply disgusting and I for one nearly spewed. Everyone caught lice again and the whole company was fed up and very out of humour. Monday morning, we learnt that the trucks were coming that afternoon.

The news soon spread round that Monday was market day for that area. Peasants obviously from far and near, had commenced pouring along the roads in their hundreds since very early hours in the morning and were bound for the market place, leading towing or driving swine, sheep or cattle, one or many – or carrying bags, baskets or rucksacks or various small goods eatable or otherwise. So off we went, following them up, and strode the three kilos to the small cup-shaped dip where the market was held. No more than a dozen of us attended and we proceeded from the time that we arrived to have the time of our lives. On one side of this small dip the live-stock market was taking place where farmers in the main exchanged animals with any balance being made up in cash (Kuna being the currency). This section held little interest for us and we headed for the small goods and "eats" market. The area covered was considerably large and the attendance was excellent. A couple of stalls were provided but the majority of sellers merely sat out in the open with their goods displayed. Grapa and vino were plentiful, cooked mutton, beef, pork and fowl (all in lovely big hunks), bread, fat, honey, a little fruit, and a few eggs composed the main eats, while knitted socks, wooden buckets, implements and crude household goods were also there for sale. We were hailed heartily by the filthy, ill-clad peasants who nine times out of ten endeavoured and sometimes succeeded in kissing or at least embracing us. We were ever hailed as heroes, and crowds with eyes and mouths open with amazement and curiosity always encircled us. Many proved generous and we were "shouted" for many times but we realized that we must get hold of some money. There was only one way to get that, so smartly some of our clothing was flogged – shirts, woollen singlets brought about 1000 kuna after some argument, blankets went for 1,600 etc., and we then proceeded to feed right royally. Bread in one-pound hunks cost 50 kuna, beautiful big slices of meat 100 kuna and so on. Right royally we certainly fed and merrily drank and soon we were elbowing our way quite unconcernedly backwards and forwards through that filthy stinking crowd, and ploughing through the inches of mud that lay upon the ground. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves although we realized that it was the novelty and the odd experience that amused us – in any other circumstances we would have been disgusted. We left about 1, just as the crowd were becoming a little under the effect and as the noise, singing and shouting were reaching their climax. We arrived back at Veljun to find the trucks waiting for us. We climbed on board and in half an hour were on the way again. Oh, the glory of it – such easy speed after walking I suppose over 700 kilo – t'was like heaven itself to us plodding and weary walkers, and we sang heartily, the first time for so long, as we left that filthy and most loathed place. With a capable speedy driver, we sped over the countryside, through rocky yet comparatively open land and covered the odd 110 kilos to Otocac in approximately 6 hours, with only a few minor stops. Seventy of us were packed onto the lorry – there was no sitting room but nevertheless the trip didn't seem very long in spite

of the cold and the light snow that fell while in the heights. Otocac, with the exception of Crnomelj, was the largest place that we had been in and after our arrival and the issue of a piece of bread, we were straight way shown to our sleeping quarters – 3 rooms (later straw covered) upstairs in the long main (and only) street. Tuesday we were met by the English Officials, Capt Reid (in charge in the temporary absence of the Major Hunter) and five N.C.O.'s all of whom proved very hospitable and glad to see us. Their main task, it seemed was the coding and decoding of messages and the sending and receiving of same. Otocac proved quite a township, boasting 6 working restaurants, where we were able to buy meals (consisting of almost entirely meat). Partigiani meals were provided but proved very insufficient – soup, with perhaps two potatoes sometimes a piece of meat and always a piece of bread – issued twice daily, and consequently meals were brought up to seven or eight times a day. For money, more gear was sold to dealers and on Wednesday we were given 500 lire per man (3000 kuna). Meals cost about 80 kuna a time, wine 150 kuna per litre. Wednesday was local market day, which though thoroughly enjoyed, came no where near the standard of the Veljun market, but a little bread or cooked meat was offered for sale, and there was plenty of tasteless butter and cheese. The fortunate were able to buy eggs and had them cooked at the restaurants with the meals that they ordered. Three of us were particularly lucky the first day in that we were able to purchase two dozen. Also harboured in the town were many Jews, who some time previously had been liberated from concentration camps, and they now entertained the same hopes as us. Captain Reid had spoken to us – patience was now the big thing he said – our boats would come bringing gear and would take us back to Italy. Naturally (if he knew) he did not disclose when this was likely to be. "Hard though it will be," he said, "be patient." It was pretty hard too – apart from buying meals, there was absolutely nothing to do and things were more than monotonous. Showers (poor but welcome) were given us at the local hospital on Thursday and Friday. Day after day passed and we waited and waited. Another pay day came up and another 500 lire we had to spend. Yet another came and another 500 lire, and with each Wednesday came another market day and consequently the buying of eggs, nuts etc., to provide a welcome change in the diet. Rather fortunately 3 of us after a bit of searching around managed to buy 2 litres of milk each day and were consequently envied by many. Two Partigiani dances were held during our stay and they were the scene of much fun and laughter. National folk dances and a type of modern dancing were held in adjacent rooms and proceeded in spite of each other. Many of us joined in the vigorous stamping and running of the national dances to the utter amazement of the locals, and the show was enjoyed by all. Two concerts were witnessed by those interested. Several times for the want of something better to do, we drank the town dry of wine!!! The weather was continually unpleasant. Not once did we see the sun, low clouds hung around daily, and only a couple of heavy frosts and a light fall of snow broke the monotony of those bleak days. Lice, those pearls of poverty, gave us hell – we were now properly lousy and spent half an hour each day delousing. They are absolutely disgusting things and yet those primitive people seemed quite at home with the things crawling all over them. But not us, I am afraid.

Time slowly drifted on and we got to wondering whether Christmas would see us out or not. Finally, the day came. On Wednesday, 15th December, we learnt that we were to be off the next day, and we were invited that evening to a dinner given in our honour by the

Partigiani Leader. The English Mission spoke that this was indeed an honour for us – it was the first time it had been done. An international banquet and we, the English representatives. We were rather curious as to what the dinner would be like after the meals we had been provided with. We duly seated ourselves at 8 p.m. in the concert hall and realized that we were being entertained by the General in charge of the Croatian Partigiani Army and the Vice-President of Croatia, and with a brass band ably taking the place of the orchestra and we dined as never before for years. It was hard to believe and many of us gaped with amazement. The hall was suitably decorated and on the front wall hung huge coloured portraits of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, and the stage was decorated with the flags of the United Nations. Amidst this finery, we in our old and ragged clothes felt rather out of place and felt that we should have been dressed in dinner suits. However, most of us had at least shaved for the occasion!!! The dinner, for a country so short of food, was amazing. First course, ham and salmon with garnishing, followed by roast mutton, mashed potatoes and rice (with pork fat), salad and beans (with oil), and with bread and wine aplenty. Honestly a most tasty and excellent meal – capably served by numerous waitresses. Coffee and cakes were served with cigarettes later – cakes with powdered sugar on top of them!! Yes, it was true, after perhaps three long years without. Speeches were made and translated on both sides. We were heartily congratulated and were charged to take home news of what we had seen in the country, and to broadcast the need for gear and equipment in that country. The party eventually broke up at about midnight after we had answered requests for English songs and after we had been enjoyably entertained by choruses, soloists and the band.

And so, on Friday, 17th December, we said farewell to Otocac – city of poverty misery, lice, impatience and innumerable other disagreeable associations. We pulled out at 11.30 on a lorry and in an ambulance. Two and a half hours travelling through rather remarkable country brought us to the port of Senj. Climbing steadily for the first hour and a half, we entered the snow area and reached considerable height, when suddenly the sea appeared before us, though far below. A steep descent down a remarkably well-made road brought us to the port. Soup and bread were issued and we were taken straight to the wharves where our ship was waiting for us – our "ship" being a small Partigiani "fishing" launch. Without waste of time we boarded her and pulled out at 3.5 p.m. She was a fishing vessel our boat, as evidenced by the pile of netting on the stern, but I wonder how many months had passed before she had seen a single fish. There was certainly not the sign or even the remote smell of fish on her or in the hold, which proved rather insufficient in size for our comfort. We were very cramped – sadly reminiscent of early P.O.W. days, when we were "passengers" at the expense of the Italians. Besides ourselves, there were on board a party of Yugoslavian Naval Trainees and a Polish Countess. We pulled out of the little harbour and headed south. We made our way south following the coastline of the mainland with innumerable little islands on our right. More barren desolate country could not be imagined. The coast was composed of pure solid rock towering to considerable heights and the whole sea was dotted with those tiny islands, which were also of pure rock without a leaf of vegetation. Odd little fishing villages were passed – perhaps six stone dwellings clustered in a small bay. A most remarkable and outstanding feature was the stone walls that chequered the hillsides everywhere – enclosing a few stunted wind-bent trees apparently for sheep or goat

fodder. There was no other vegetation. About 8, a sister launch picked us up and guided us a certain distance. For part of the night we travelled outside all the islands and the open sea certainly tossed our small craft about. Comparatively few were sick – full advantage was made of the deck (now that it was dark, we were allowed up) and many slept there voluntarily besides those that slept there necessarily, and all suffered wet hides in the open sea. Tired, squeamish and weary we pulled into our immediate destination, the island of Incoronata at 8.30 next morning to hide up for the day from Jerry Air patrols. We landed at Incoronata, an island of pure rock with a cluster of ruined rock homes at the head of a rocky sheltered bay. We ate heartily during the day of the rations that the Mission had given us and rested and waited night and further advance. At 4 o'clock we were on board again and at a quarter past were on our way again. We straight way hit the open sea and were tossed about pretty vigorously for 10 hours when we pulled into the little city of Vis on the island of Lissa. After a couple of hours waiting, and hanging around, we disembarked and were shown 3 rooms where we lay down to sleep the couple of remaining hours of night. We were now about half way to Bari and there we were to await our own navy for our final stage on the road to freedom. Sunday dawned a beautiful day and Vis awaited inspection. With a long waterfront road, the town lay right around the harbour, perhaps six houses deep with steep rocky hills rising immediately behind. Palms and trees beautified the front and the blue of the harbour completed the beautiful picture. It was surely an extraordinary little spot that no doubt was extremely popular in peace time. We were fed three times daily on our own rations, an extremely pleasant and appreciated change. Vis was of naval importance. The Allies sent food, clothing, ammunition etc. there, from Bari, and from there they were taken on by the Partigiani for their own use. By day the port appeared quiet and harmless but as darkness gathered, the night life of Vis began. Cargo ships would slip in and unload and were away again, torpedo boats could call in and slide away again before light. Any ships not loaded or awaiting unloading would lie up for the day in either hidden bays and creeks, so that when Jerry's "reccie" planes come over early every morning there was nothing to see.

At last our time came. Our craft, an I.L.C. No 122, eventually pulled in as night was falling on the eve of the 22nd December and by 9.30, she was unloaded and we were aboard. We were comparatively comfortably off in the 4 decked canvas beds and at 11.15 p.m. the final stage of our flight to freedom commenced. Sixteen monotonous hours while our flat-bottomed tub tossed vigorously about, smacking her flat bottom on the troubled waters we spent aboard, but finally we sailed into the safety and freedom of Bari. We were rushed immediately through the city, to what had once been a prisoner of war camp and to what now went under the name of Ex P.O.W. Transit Camp. Hot showers, new clothes, tea and bed, all speak for themselves. We spent one week there excellently looked after and entertained by Lady Freyberg and members of the N.Z. Club, receiving patriotic parcels, an excellent Christmas dinner, and daily leave in Bari (which sported little or no amusement). On the 30th we departed per train for Toranto (6 hours) and there were housed in a couple of Mussolini's new state houses. Daily leave in Toranto was not exactly appealing. On Tuesday the 4th January we boarded the *Kosciusko* bound (indirectly) for Egypt. We didn't pull out for over 24 hours and it was Thursday before we finally departed. It was a rough trip, with about 75% of us sick, and being part

of a large convoy of over 20 ships it was necessarily very slow, but eventually we got back to Egypt and after a few days back in Maadi Camp, we boarded the *Denbyshire* and set sail for good old New Zealand.

The members of the sextette were:

D.W.W. Chambers – (24th Battalion.)

J.S. Lugton – (27th Battalion.)

J.A. Illston – (22nd Battalion.)

J.A. Abel – (25th Battalion.)

E.W.R. Hart – (22nd Battalion.)

R.M. Reeve – (22nd Battalion.)

The Major referred to as 'Stump,' was Major E.H. Gibbon.

The New Zealand Captain was Captain D.J. Riddiford who commanded the New Zealand section of 26 men.



The location of Campo P.G. 107 is shown on the above map between Venice & Trieste.



Back In Uniform.

Some of the group of 26 New Zealanders who escaped to freedom from Northern Italy through Yugoslavia and back to Bari in Southern Italy.

John Abel has informed me that this photograph was taken at either the Bari Railway Station before they boarded the train on December 30th 1943, or on arrival at the Toranto Railway Station.

Stuart Lugton pictured squatting in lower row second from left, and Don Chambers in the same row, fourth along from the left.

From the collection of John Abel – Napier.



Gina Venco – 1943.

Courtesy of Mrs B.P. Lugton, Matamata.

From the New Zealand Military Forces History-Sheet for Pte. D.W.W. Chambers, it is recorded that Don was:

Missing believed P.O.W. on the 13/12/41. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 3/1/42.

Geneva confirms P.O.W. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 16/2/42.

Rome comm. P.O.W. at Campo P.G.52. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 8/6/42.

Posta Militare 3100 (Chiavari) Transferred, P.O.W. at Campo P.G.57. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 24/2/43.

Vat Radio reports P.O.W. at Campo P.G.107. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 27/4/43.

Vat Radio states P.O.W. at C.C.P.G.106 P.M. 3100 Italy. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 14/8/43. ¹

PH Sub Commission Reports Safe with Allied Forces. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 3/1/44.

Now Safe in Base Camp. Notification cabled to N. of K. on the 18/1/44.

The history-sheet also records Don's date of arrival back in Wellington, New Zealand, as being the 5th March 1944.²

Medals awarded:

1939-45 STAR.

AFRICA STAR.

DEFENCE MEDAL.

WAR MEDAL, 1939-45.

N.Z. WAR SERVICE MEDAL.

¹ It would seem there has been a mistake made here in the official records, as we now know Don was at Campo P.G.107 from early April 1943 until his escape from that camp on Saturday 11th September.

² Don's two brothers, Hugh Ward (Wid) Chambers and Hansford Ward (Paddy) Chambers, both having also served overseas, arrived back in New Zealand in 1944 – Wid in February, and Paddy towards the end of the year. Paddy was awarded the D.F.C., in 1943.

Letter written by Don on 27th December, 1943.

Write the address in large BLOCK letters in the panel below.
The address must NOT be typewritten.

14341

TO:- MRS. CHAMBERS -
C/ MRS. L. CRISTALL -
R.D. WHAKATANE -
BAY OF PLENTY -
NEW ZEALAND.

25
1943

PASSED BY CENSOR
NO.
7067

Write the message very plainly below this line.

Sender's Address: A.E. CHAMBERS - 28234 - 2nd. N.Z.E.F.

27th Dec. 43.

My Dear Mum & Family -

It's almost four months since I last wrote to you!!! and what months!! And what a difference since I did last write - now a FREE MAN! Heavens can you realize what it means, I wonder! To be free again after so much and so long - I took up this status 2 days before Xmas and am as yet in the same country as have been in during the last two years - but not for many days longer. Am having a great time - living like a king and am gradually working up and finding that I am not dreaming - and believe you me, I take a bit of convincing that all this is actually true. There is much I have to tell you but not just now. I hope I will be able to tell you it all and not write about it.

Have been trying to locate Widi & Bob - so far unsuccessfully - they must still be over where I left Widi. Am dying for news of you all - the last I heard, was dated about here I think - and what's happened in the meantime? Am perfectly fit and well - very rapidly putting on weight!!!! and starting to feel like my old self again. Tons of love to all the family and remember me to any of my old pals you see. Tons tons of love Mum dear & here's hoping it won't be long -

Your loving son - Don.

This space should not be used.

MAKE SURE THAT THE ADDRESS IS WRITTEN IN LARGE BLOCK LETTERS IN THE PANEL ABOVE

Don's father, Alan Ward Chambers, had died on the 27th January, 1943, and his mother let the family home in Douglas Street, Whakatane, and moved out to Otakiri to live near her two eldest daughters, Barbara Ward Cristall, and Juliet Ward Chambers. Her youngest daughter, Nancy Ward Chambers, had that year moved up to Auckland to attend Teachers' Training College. On arrival back in New Zealand early in 1944, Don stayed with the family at Otakiri until he recommenced his teaching career.

To: - Mrs Chambers –
C/- Mrs Cristall –
R.D. Whakatane –
Bay of Plenty –
New Zealand.

Senders Address: Pte. D.W. Chambers – 28234 – 2nd N.Z.E.F.

My Dear Mum & Family –

It's almost four months since I last wrote to you!!! And what months!! And what a difference since I did last write – now a Free Man – Heavens can you realize what it means, I wonder? To be free again after so much and so long – I took up this status 2 days before Xmas and am as yet in the same country as have been in during the last two years – but not for many days longer. Am having a great time – living like a King and am gradually waking up and finding that I am not dreaming – and believe you me, I take a bit of convincing that all this is actually true. There is much I have to tell you but not just now. I hope I will be able to tell you it all and not write about it.

Have been trying to locate Wid, & Pad – so far unsuccessfully – they must still be over where I left Wid. Am dying for news of you all – the last I heard was dated about June I think – and what's happened in the meantime? Am perfectly fit and well – very rapidly putting on weight (!!!!!) and starting to feel like my old self again. Tons of love to all the family and remember me to any of my old pals you see. Tons & Tons of love Mum dear – and here's hoping it won't be long –

Your loving son – Don

Nº 12707

[Form N.Z.—748A.



NEW ZEALAND MILITARY FORCES

Certificate of Discharge

No. 28234 Rank: Private
 Name (in full): Chambers, Donald Walter Ward

Pursuant to Regulation 40 (1a) of the National Service Emergency Regulations 1940, the above-named, having served outside New Zealand during the present war and having been found to be medically unfit for active service whether in New Zealand or elsewhere, and is unlikely to become fit for active service, is discharged from the Armed Forces.

The above-named, by reason of being discharged as aforesaid, is deemed to be transferred to the ~~Third Division of the General Reserve~~ constituted by the National Service Emergency Regulations 1940, and is therefore not liable, and should not apply, for enrolment in any class of such Reserve.

ARMY SERVICE.

In New Zealand: _____ years _____ 324 days.
 Overseas: (Three) 3 years _____ 76 days.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ABOVE-NAMED ON ENLISTMENT

Age: 21 years 176 days. Height: 5'10"
 Complexion: Olive Eyes: Brown
 Hair: Dark Brown Trade or occupation: School Teacher

Signature: [Signature]
 Adjutant-General
 New Zealand Military Forces.

WELLINGTON, 17th January, 1945

N.B.—(1) This certificate is to be issued without any alteration in the manuscript.
 (2) WARNING. The person to whom this certificate is issued should on no account part with it or forward it by post when applying for a situation, but should use a copy attested by a responsible person for the purpose. If this certificate is lost it will be replaced only when its loss can be proved to have been due to very exceptional circumstances. Applications for the replacement of a lost certificate should be made to Base Records, Wellington.
 (3) ANY PERSON FINDING THIS CERTIFICATE is requested to forward it in an unstamped envelope to—
 Base Records, Army Department, Wellington C. 1, N.Z.

Don never forgot the generosity of the Italian people, especially those who at great risk to their own lives gave assistance, shelter and food during that first month after he & the other members of the sextette made their escape from POW Camp. After the war he made contact with the Venco family – correspondence being exchanged with Gina Venco, who understood and spoke some English.

During a trip to Europe in 1959, Don returned to Italy and visited the Venco's. The relevant extracts from his diary read:

13/11/59. Crossed into Italy – to Fiest - & on to San Georgio di Nogaro – visited Sguazzin's family (Genoueffa) – then down to Venco's old home.

14/11/59. Out to Sguazzin's - & Venco's again, then to Campo di Prigionieri du Guerra (now villaggio Roma), then to Pordenone – eventually found Venco's – went with Mrs Venco out to Gajarine to see Gina & Anna. Spent night at Pordenone – tea at Venco's. Don then writes: see back page of diary for summary of P.O.W. friends.

The summary reads as follows:

November 13th – San Georgio di Nogaro.

Eventually arrived at house next door to what was Umberto Taverna's (sold home and now living at Vimodome, Milano – 2 years ago). House now occupied by the Sguazzin's family – Mrs Sguazzin a sister of Mrs Taverna – and both sisters of Amedeo. Amedeo, who first "found" us and took us to Taverna's, killed by a motor car in December 1953. Sguazzin family consists of Genoueffa, glasses, who guided us to Castello when we left. Sisters, Bianca (lives in vicinity), Pia and Eda – all married – a brother working in Fiest - & a brother at home.

Venco's chased out of house by Germans in 1944 – lost everything – lucky to be alive – till 1957 the family lived at San Georgio – Gina married 10 years ago and living at Gajarine ever since. Venco & Mum live at Pordenone – nice new house. Gino married. (married school teacher from San Georgio) – two sons – lives at Aviona and is poultry farming. Gina, married name Maschio – obviously very well off – nice house – big distillery – Maschio grappa etc. Gina has 3 children – son & 2 daughters. Anna lives nearby and husband works for Maschio at distillery – also quite a nice home – 3 kids. Gina 36, Gino 34, Anna 29.

Eventually arrived at Venco's at Pordenone – met by Gino's wife – and Mrs Venco – who accompanied us to Gina's – went on to Anna's. Returned to Pordenone – had dinner with the Venco's, also Gino and wife. Very pleasant evening. Gino a very good host – made a big fuss of me. Mrs Venco charming. Mr Venco whom we picked up out of the Pub, quite jovial but I couldn't converse with him. Apparently retired. Multi veno, multi grappa.

As a result of the experiences they shared during the war, Don and Stuart Lugton remained friends for the rest of their lives. Don was best man at the wedding of Stuart and Paddy when they married in 1945, and interestingly a year later there came a connection by marriage when Don's brother Wid (Hugh Ward Chambers) married Lois Ethel Luxton, a cousin of Paddy's.

Amongst the letters found after Don's death, were two he had kept from Gina Maschio (nee Venco), via Vizza, 11018 Gajarine, Treviso, Italy.

The first written on the 15th December 1971, informs Don that her father had died on the 17th February 1970.

The second letter written on the 15th December 1976, indicates that Don, and Stuart and Paddy Lugton (of Matamata), had invited Gina to come out to New Zealand for a holiday in January 1977. In this letter of reply to Don, Gina explains that she had already written to Stu and Paddy, thanks everyone for the invitation but says she was unable to make the trip at that particular time, and asked if it would be suitable to postpone the trip until late spring 1978. Perhaps due to her own family commitments, Gina never did make the trip out to New Zealand.

Don rarely spoke to any of the family about his experiences during the war and we the next generation are fortunate indeed that the handwritten notes he wrote have survived.

It is felt important therefore that in memory of Don, his *The Diary Of An Escapee* should be transcribed and printed as a permanent record for us and future generations, and that it be a lasting reminder to us all of the role he and the other members of the sextette played in their particular theatre of the war.

Don made a further trip to Italy in 1979. The following photographs of his Italian friends were taken during this trip.



Erica – Don Chambers – Gina.



Adriano – Saul – Anna – Gina – Alda – Moré.



Saul – Anna – Don – Gina – Alda & Moré.



Wilma (wife of Gino Venco) – Don Chambers – Mrs Venco.

40 YEARS LATER.

Yugoslav medals for Kiwi partisans

THE SOCIALIST Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is anxious to trace the whereabouts of 26 New Zealanders who, during the unpredictable situation following the Italian armistice in September, 1943, escaped from Italian prisoner-of-war camps and joined Captain Dan Riddiford to fight as a group with Marshal Tito's partisans, or were connected directly with the Yugoslav National Liberation Army.

After 40 long years, the Yugoslavs wish to show their gratitude to those 26 men who fought and suffered alongside their partisans for the liberation of their country, by awarding them a medal for bravery.

Captain D. J. (Dan) Riddiford, 6th Field Regiment, commanded the New Zealand section of 26 men of a party of 62, and also acted as interpreter in all the negotiations with the Yugoslavs. For his work with the section and for his escapes he was awarded the Military Cross.

*RSA Review
9 June 1984*

The names of the 26 men are:
 Captain D. J. Riddiford, Pte J. A. Abel, 25th Bn.
 Dvr W. F. Andrews, 4th R.M.C. (MiD), Pte P. A. Burke, 26th Bn.
 Pte H. Carson, 28th Bn, Pte D. W. W. Chambers, 24th Bn
 Pte N. A. Gosling, 20th Bn, Pte E. W. R. Hart, 22nd Bn.
 Pte J. A. Illston, 22nd Bn, Pte J. Hutton, 20th Bn.
 L.Cpl R. D. Johnstone, 20th Bn (MiD), Pte H. J. Joseph, 23rd Bn.
 Cpl C. H. Kerse, 18th Bn, Pte F. J. Laird, 20th Bn.
 Pte J. E. Lockhead, 19th Bn, Pte J. S. Lugton, 27th Bn.
 Pte P. S. Mackay, 23rd Bn, Pte J. W. Mount, 20th Bn.
 Pte N. Nicol, 7th A.Tk Regt, Pte R. M. Reeve, 22nd Bn.
 Pte E. M. Robinson, 25th Bn, Pte B. M. Robson, 23rd Bn.
 Spr B. H. Smith, 8th Fld Coy, Pte N. Smith, 20th Bn.
 Pte A. J. Svenson, 20th Bn, L.Cpl J. H. Wildman, 22nd Bn.

Would those listed or their next of kin, please write to RSA REVIEW, Manager, P.O. Box 27248, Wellington, stating full name and address and, if possible, list the places they went through in Yugoslavia and details of people they knew or met while serving with the partisans.

From the RSA Review – June 9th, 1984.

Medals recall Kiwis' help for partisans

By JAMES GARDINER

TITO'S Kiwis, they called themselves: "New Zealanders taken prisoner in World War II, they escaped from Italian camps, crossed the border into Yugoslavia and joined partisan resistance units fighting the German occupying force.

Many must have wondered whether they would have been better off in prison. The units they joined lived a harsh life. They were so outnumbered and underequipped for most of the war they could do little more than hit and run, moving only at night, hiding by day.

Yesterday the Yugoslav Government paid tribute to the New Zealand soldiers who shared in the struggle for liberation, awarding commemorative medals at a ceremony at its embassy in Wellington.

It has taken nearly five years for embassy staff to track down 24 of the 26 New Zealand soldiers known to have spent time with the partisans. And the years since the war have taken a toll — seven had died, and their families were presented with memorial charters. Two of the 14 who were awarded medals had died since the list was drawn up, but the embassy decided to award the medals to next of kin, anyway.

One of the problems of preparing a list was that few records were kept. Yugoslavia's government today has its roots in the Communist Party-led resistance movement, rather than the "official" royalty-based government the allies recognised for most of the war.

But one New Zealander in particular was well remembered for his contribution. He was Jack Denvir, a corporal with 20 Battalion serving in Greece till he was captured by the Germans in 1941. He escaped eight months later and

joined the partisans, where he rose in rank to lead a brigade.

Mr Denvir was later decorated for bravery by both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. He returned to New Zealand in 1944, living in Christchurch and later Blenheim, where he died in March 1973 aged 59.

The rest of the New Zealanders were among a party of 62 who escaped from prisons after the Italian surrender in September 1943. They were commanded by Captain Dan Riddiford of the 6th Field Regiment, who acted as an interpreter during negotiations with the Yugoslavs.

Captain Riddiford was later awarded the Military Cross.

In 1984 the Returned Services Association Review published the names of the 26, asking that the survivors come forward to receive their commemorative medals. Several wrote recounting what they could remember of their experiences. Some sent maps showing the route they followed or souvenirs, like Yugoslav currency, they had kept.

John Mount of Green Island, Dunedin, recalled heading for the hills when he and his mate Jim Munro left 107 Campo.

"Got caught up with a group of (Marshal Josip Broz) Tito people near Vipulzano. Their headquarters was at Castel Dobra," Private Mount wrote.

Yugoslav embassy charge d'affaires Vojislav Savin completed work started by his predecessor, presenting medals bearing the inscription in Serbo-Croatian which means "Death to fascism — freedom to the people", the slogan of the partisan resistance still used in Yugoslavia today.



EMBASSY OF THE S.F.R.
OF YUGOSLAVIA

24 Hatton Street,
Wellington 5, N.Z.
Telephone 764-200

20 March 1989

Mr Donald W W Chambers
3 Laughton Street
TAUPO

Dear Mr Chambers,

It is with great pleasure that I invite you, with a family member or companion, to attend a function at the Embassy in Wellington at 3.00 pm on Wednesday the 26th of April 1989, to officially present to you, in the presence of members of the New Zealand RSA and other distinguished guests, a Memorial Medal and its accompanying Charter, in commemoration of your participation with Yugoslav Partisans Units during the Second World War, following your escape from POW camps.

This Memorial Medal is conferred on you by the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, on the recommendation of the Embassy of the SFR of Yugoslavia in Wellington, and the initiative of the NZRSA.

Would you please inform the Embassy by 15 April whether you, or a member of your family, can come to Wellington for this function, and if not able to come, please indicate whether you wish to receive the Medal through your local RSA, or have it mailed to you by the Embassy.

Yours sincerely,

Vojislav Savin

Vojislav Savin
CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I.



Donald Walter Ward Chambers being presented with his Memorial Medal by Vojislav Savin, Charge D'Affaires A.I., at the Embassy of the S.F.R. of Yugoslavia, 24 Hatton Street, Wellington, on Wednesday, April 26th, 1989.

FACE OF MEDAL



Text: YUGOSLAVIA

REVERSE OF MEDAL



Text: 1941-1945 DEATH TO FASCISM - FREEDOM
TO THE PEOPLE



PREDSEDNIŠTVO
SOCIJALISTIČKE FEDERATIVNE REPUBLIKE
JUGOSLAVIJE

 ZA UČEŠĆE U OSLOBODILAČKOJ BORBI
NARODA I NARODNOSTI JUGOSLAVIJE
ZA DOPRINOS ZAJEDNIČKOJ POBEDI NAD
FAŠIZMOM I ZA ZBLIŽAVANJE I PRIJATELJSTVO
MEDJU NARODIMA

DODELJUJE RATNOM DRUGU

Donald Walter Ward Chambers

SPOMEN MEDALJU

U ZNAK PRIZNANJA I ZAHVALNOSTI

U BEOGRADU,
DANA 19. 9. 1988.

PREDSEDNIK

Raif Djukanović

translation

THE PRESIDENCY
OF THE SOCIALIST FEDERAL REPUBLIC
OF YUGOSLAVIA

FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE LIBERATION WAR OF
THE NATIONS AND NATIONALITIES OF YUGOSLAVIA,
FOR HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE MUTUAL VICTORY OVER
FASCISM AND FOR STRENGTHENING TIES AND FRIENDSHIP
AMONG NATIONS

BESTOWS UPON THE COMRADE-IN-ARMS

D O N A L D W A L T E R W A R D C H A M B E R S

THE MEMORIAL MEDAL

IN RECOGNITION AND GRATITUDE

IN BELGRADE

26.9.1988

PRESIDENT

Raif Dizdarevic
(signed)

War action honoured



Yugoslav Charge d' Affaires Vojislav Savin (right) and Eric Hart of Otaki, who served as a private in the 22nd New Zealand Battalion before being made a prisoner-of-war and then fighting with Yugoslav partisan units.

Eric Hart* & Vojislav Savin.

Text from the newspaper report reads:

Eighteen New Zealanders who fought in the Second World War were honoured by the Yugoslav Government.

Yugoslav Charge d' Affaires Vojislav Savin presented the men and their next of kin with memorial medals and charters for their participation alongside the Yugoslav partisan units.

Eric Hart of Otaki said it was "a thrill, really," to be honoured and recalled how, after spending 15 months as an Italian prisoner-of-war he managed to meet up with the Yugoslav partisan units.

After Italy surrendered in 1943, the New Zealand soldiers joined a party of other prisoners-of-war from Britain, Australia and South Africa and spent nearly three months walking through northern Italy, finally entering Yugoslavia.

Another soldier who made the trek to Yugoslavia was Donald Chambers of Taupo: "I've got a soft spot for the Yugoslavs. They gave food to us guys when they barely had enough for themselves."

The men spent about two months in Yugoslavia before arriving home in New Zealand in March 1944.

Others to be honoured yesterday were John Abel of Ohope Beach, Harry Joseph of Christchurch, Charles Kerse of Gore, Frank Laird of Blenheim, Stewart Lugton of Matamata, Arthur Montgomery of Blenheim, John Mount of Dunedin, Norman Smith of Christchurch and Bruce Robson of Alexandra.

The families of the following deceased soldiers were also presented with awards: Robert Gosling, John Illston, P.S. MacKay, Daniel Riddiford, Bertram Smith, John Wildman and Richard Johnstone.

* Eric Hart was a member of the sextette. It is understood that for many years Eric was Postmaster at Otaki, and that he did keep in contact with fellow members of the sextette after the war.

Waimana man to receive medal

Mr John Abel of Waimana is on the Yugoslavian Government's 'wanted list' — for a medal for bravery.

Mr Abel is one of 26 New Zealanders whom Yugoslavia wants to honour.



Mr John Abel

Mr Abel, 66 is unsure why Yugoslavia wants to give him a medal, but feels it could have something to do with his involvement with Marshal Tito's forces in Yugoslavia near the end of World War Two.

He will be writing to Wellington in the next few days to have his name listed along with other survivors among the 26 men.

During 1943 Private Abel fought, with the other New Zealanders, alongside Marshall Tito's communist

partisans against the Germans in Slovenia and Croatia, in the west of Yugoslavia.

From the 25th Battalion, he was among many allied prisoners of war who escaped from Germany occupying forces in Italy about the time of the armistice in September 1943.

Mr Abel, and five other men who stayed together until they returned to New Zealand in March 1944, had been imprisoned in north Italy at Palmanova.

They managed to travel north into Yugoslavia and gradually, over three months, travelled down the Dalmation coast to Senj, where they were eventually removed, by fishing boat to the Adriatic island of Vis.

Mr Abel told the News-Gazette that the six men, along with 62 who eventually made it out, joined Marshall Tito's forces to help fight the Germans.

The New Zealanders, according to Mr Abel, arrived in Croatia to find themselves heroes. "They put on a huge reception that went on for two days in recogni-

tion of the British recognising them."

Mr Abel was the youngest of the six men. Of the five, four are still around. One, Mr Don Chambers, lived in Whakatane until the early 1950s.

COPY.

MEMORIAL MEDAL FOR STUART

Travelling by stealth under cover of darkness and hiding from the enemy by day was once a way of life for Matamata identity Stuart Lugton.

A way of life that saw him, an escaped prisoner of war, walk 600 miles across Yugoslavia, fighting alongside Tito's Partisans.

Late last month Stuart's contribution to Yugoslavia's fight against fascism was recognised by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia when he was presented with a memorial medal at Wellington's Yugoslav Embassy.

The story began in 1942 with Stuart, a machine gunner in the New Zealand Army, fighting in Egypt.

"I was taken prisoner," he says, "and was sent to a POW camp in North Italy."

The following year, during the Bagdolia Armistice, Stuart and several of his fellow prisoners took advantage of the confusion and escaped – some going through the wire, others simply walking out.

RISKED LIVES

The escapees were sheltered by sympathetic Italians for five weeks.

"They were wonderful people," says Stuart. "They put their lives at risk to help us."

Then, realising that allied troops were not going to reach them in time, Stuart and his comrades made their decision – they would go to Yugoslavia and fight alongside Tito's Partisans.

This the group did, travelling by night and hiding – mostly in hay barns – by day.

During their hiding periods, the group would catch up on some sleep, and it was during one of these rest periods that Stuart was very nearly left behind by his comrades.

Always a sound sleeper, Stuart awoke with a start to catch a glimpse of his companions silhouetted against the night sky as they crested a hill, unknowingly leaving him behind.

After that episode, the group took precautions to ensure that none of the members became separated or left behind.

PARTISANS

On reaching Yugoslavia, the 26-strong Kiwi group, led by Captain Dan Riddiford, began to fight alongside Tito's Partisans.

"But we wanted to keep moving," says Stuart, "and were passed from battalion to battalion right across Yugoslavia."

In the end the group walked, and fought, 600 miles through Slovenia, Croatia and Dalmatia before being picked up by British invasion craft and taken to Southern Italy.

The invasion troops knew where to find the New Zealanders because of information passed on by a liaison officer who had been parachuted into Yugoslavia on intelligence work for British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

And, because of information that the New Zealanders were able to pass on, Churchill changed his stance completely to support Tito.

The Yugoslavs gave the Kiwis a wonderful banquet before they left and the memory of this remains a highlight for Stuart.

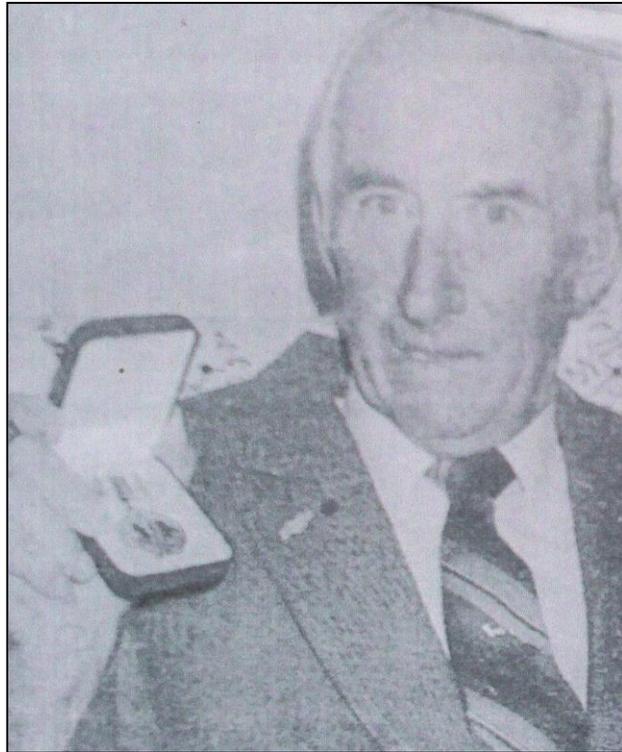
Liberated just two days before Christmas Day, 1943, Stuart was repatriated shortly afterwards.

In 1984, Stuart and wife Paddy read in the RSA Review that the Yugoslav Government wanted to trace and honour the 26 Kiwis who had fought and suffered alongside the partisans.

The following five years saw the Yugoslavs track down information regarding 24 of the 26 men.

In all, nine of the 24 had died, but their families joined the group at the Yugoslav Embassy to receive the medals on behalf of their dead husbands or fathers.

The pewter medals, which bear the inscription Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People, are a tangible reminder of Yugoslavia's gratitude to its Kiwi comrades-in-arms.



MATAMATA'S STUART LUGTON with the memorial medal presented to him by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Several of the photographs used in this document are copies from the collection of Mrs B.P. Lugton (widow of the late J.S. Lugton of Matamata,) who I visited on Wednesday 23rd January, 2008. She also showed me a typed transcription her son in law Mike Smith had made of the 4 war diaries of John Stuart Lugton, which covered his period of training in Fiji in 1940 through to fighting in Egypt and Syria and capture and escape from POW camp in Italy – ending in December 1943. Don's name appears in several of the entries of 1943.

The first mention of Don appears on Wednesday 14th April, 1943, when Stuart writes about: *one of the most recent fellows to arrive here – Don Chambers.*

On Sunday 6th June, 1943, comes the entry: *A beautiful day, the morning of which I spent in bed sleeping. I'm not looking forward to work tomorrow – resting after last night's spree. How we would like to have a reunion of the same fellows - "drops of Guerra." The fellows were Curly Blake, Johnny Wildman, Don Chambers, Alwyn Burke, Johnny Abel, Johnny Illston, Bob Reeve, Eric Hart, & myself.*

Then on Saturday 26th June, 1943, Stuart writes: *Made a promise to return to Fiji after the war with Don Chambers.*

An entry on Monday 5th July, 1943, records the following: *Don Chambers received sad news of his father's death which so far as we can make out must have taken place in January. It has knocked him fairly hard – Poor kid.*

It has also been interesting to find that in the book, *Inside Stories – New Zealand Prisoners of War Remember* – Edited by Megan Hutching, and published by Harper Collins in 2002, that the story of another member of the sextette (John Abel) has been recorded. When one compares that with what Don has written, along with the diaries Stewart Lugton kept, it all makes most informative reading.

I made contact with John Abel (now the only surviving member of the sextette) on the 28th February, 2008. Until quite recently John had been living in retirement at Ohope Beach, but is now living with his daughter Sally Abel at 52 Vigor Brown Street, Napier. John was able to confirm that the six members of the sextette were all housed in the same hut at Campo 107 before their escape and that they all returned to New Zealand together. He also told me that when the *Denbyshire* arrived at Sydney the watersiders there were on strike, so the sextette waited in Sydney until they were able to get passage on the *Waihine* for the final leg of their journey to Wellington, arriving there on March 7th 1944.

John, his late wife, and their daughter Sally, made trips over to Italy, and on each occasion, they met up with Gina Maschio (nee Venco) and other members of her family.

Through my contact with John Abel, I was then able to phone and speak with Gary Illston (son of John Illston) at R.D. 1, Leedstown Road, Marton. Gary informed me that his parents travelled to Italy in 1970, and confirmed that they did visit Gina and others.

The only sextette member unaccounted for in these pages is R.M. Reeve. It is understood he returned to the South Island after the war and there appears to have been very little contact kept with him over the years.



Villa Roma – in the compound of Campo 107.

The hut where the members of the sextette were housed at Campo 107. It was from this POW camp that the members of the sextette made their escape on the evening of Saturday 11th September, 1943.

This photo was taken when Mr and Mrs Lugton toured Italy and Yugoslavia in 1969 and by car retraced the journey made by the sextette.

Courtesy of Mrs B.P. Lugton.



The Venco Family – 1969.

Gina standing beside her mother to right of photo. Mr Venco is standing behind Gina, & it is thought the two men to the left are Moré (Gina's husband), & Gino Venco. The young lass also pictured, is probably Gino or Gina's daughter.

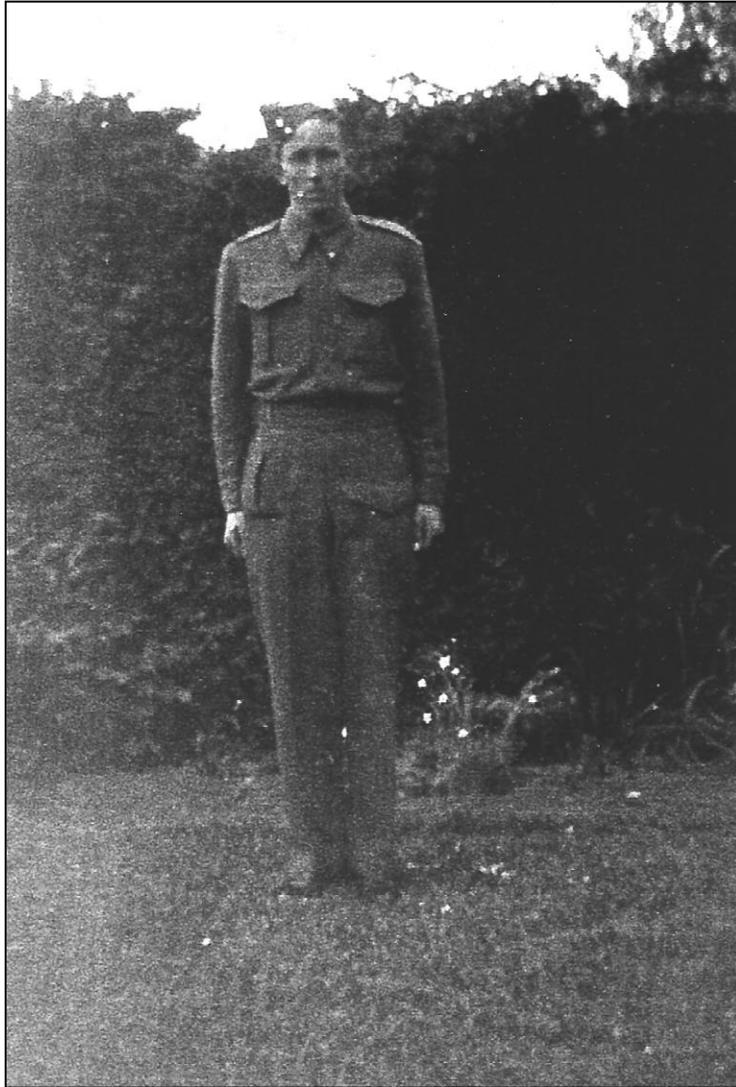
Courtesy of Mrs B.P. Lugton.



Members of the Taverna/Sguazzins Family – 1969.
(Genoueffa & Bianca are somewhere in this group)

It was at the Taverna's home where Don, Stuart, and other members of the sextette,
listened to the BBC News in 1943.

Courtesy of Mrs B.P. Lugton.

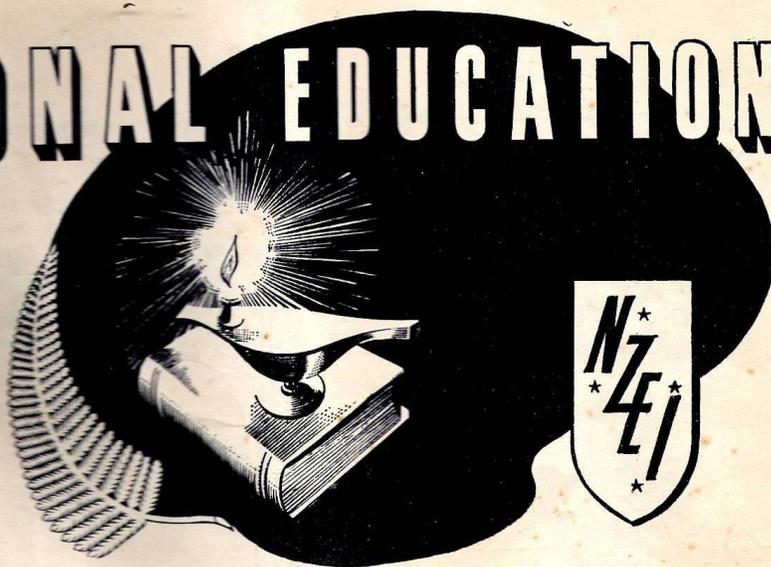


Stuart Lugton.

Courtesy of Mrs B.P. Lugton.

NATIONAL EDUCATION

•
THE JOURNAL
OF THE
NEW ZEALAND
EDUCATIONAL
INSTITUTE
•



In this issue

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VOL XXVI No. 280

JULY 1, 1944

ESCAPE FROM ITALY

By D. W. CHAMBERS

[The author of this article returned recently to New Zealand after making his escape from a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy.]

IT was on Wednesday, September 8, 1943, around 8.30 p.m., that we first heard rumours of the armistice between Italy and the United Nations. Although we had had so many months as prisoners, with rumours so prominently (and so often misleading) a part of our lives nevertheless, the possibility of the truth of this story stirred up those previously repressed emotions reserved for this keenly anticipated event. No satisfaction could be obtained from any source and eventually, after lengthy discussion with controlled excitement, all retired to bed that evening with hearts aflutter.

Thursday dawned as usual and with it the inevitable 'work-bugle' at 5.45 a.m., crushing not a few hopes. At work, we soon knew the truth. The civilians had greeted us cheerfully and waved with almost a reverend air, and a glance at a newspaper on the job decided us on 'no work.' Back to camp we went, and there it was, the scene of rejoicing and the impatient tearing off of red patches (the sign of a P.O.W.), and the care-free waving to the thronging civilians who readily responded.

Yes, it was armistice—after 650 days a prisoner—freedom!!! But Saturday brought the sobering realization that complete freedom was not yet ours. Rumours were rife and the realization of the nearness and the possibility of our being taken over by the German troops gave us to believe that we were not yet by any means on our way home. On hearing whispers that many of the guards, impatient to be away home, were leaving their posts that evening, we spoke to some of them and were assured that we could escape if we so wished, and consequently staples were removed and the wire in several places was tampered with.

That evening, under cover of darkness, we left the camp that had been our home, if I dare call it so, and became again free men. I was one of a party of six who that evening ended up a few miles east of the village of San Giorgio di Nagaro. Casually and openly next morning, the six of us trooped up to nearest house, which step, little though we realized it at the time, had a great effect on our future—it was the first step of our new lives, and here, for the first time, we met the generosity and sincerity of the simple Italian working classes, a sincerity which we later found to be prevalent almost everywhere. The month we lived with these people is a story on its own—how they gave us information as to searches, hid us from Germans and Fascists, how we heard the B.B.C. news every evening, how we were, one day, arrested by a German who, speaking less Italian than we, was easily convinced that we were demobilized Italian soldiers (we were, of course, by now in civilian clothing), etc., etc. After this month, we decided that if we wished to enjoy complete freedom, we had no option but to hike it. To head east and then down through Yugoslavia, was unanimously decided upon by our sextette.

It is rather unfortunate that, for security reasons, much of the adventures of that trek cannot be disclosed, but the following points may be of interest. A certain meeting place, the name of which was spread through the area by bush telegraph, had been arranged, and it was to this village that we set off. We managed to engage a Partisan guide and after a very trying 86 hours' trek arrived at the rendezvous. To do this, we had to pass through the German line of outposts facing the Partisan-held territory to the west. Our first real obstacle was a certain German-occupied village, through which we had no option but to pass, and so, in stocking feet at approximately 2.30 a.m., we stealthily crept along the main street under the shadows of the house walls. Imagine the almost panic created by the sudden loud striking of the town clock!

And so one day in early October, approximately 80 of us (South Africans, Tommies and New Zealanders, under the leadership of an English major), after a few days spent in fighting the enemy, side by side with the Partisan forces, left on that trek which, blest by fortune and good luck, rather than due to any skilful planning on our part, eventually brought us the freedom we sought. Until December 23, we were continually on the move—covering to our reckoning 600 miles on foot and the crossing of the Adriatic Sea to Bari.

In the early stages of our journey, we were severely handicapped by the Partisan forces. At this stage, Marshal Tito and his men were not officially recognized as an ally of the United Nations, and consequently treated us with a considerable degree of suspicion. In my opinion what help they did give us was only for the reason that we were allies of Russia—these Partisans being of communistic belief and rather idolizing that country. We would become attached to a certain brigade of them, and it was only after hours, and in two cases ten days, of persuasion and argument that we were guided on to the neighbouring brigade in the general direction we wished. On one occasion we were actually held under armed guard for a certain time until we convinced them we fought a common enemy, etc. (We became pretty good propagandists!) This method of advance proved too slow to us impatient, freedom-seeking chaps, and at last we were reluctantly given permission to go off on our own—not, however, before many days of almost unpleasant argument and very tedious and trying begging. They provided us with an interpreter, an action which naturally greatly facilitated matters.

I hope I have not conveyed the opinion that I am against these guerrilla fighters. Far from it. But we could hardly blame them. They were not recognized as our allies at this time by our Government and they continually put forward the argument that, if we fought a common enemy, why didn't we stay and fight with them? It was rather embarrassing, and I think they realized that our selfish aim was to get away from the had made and they, from their meagre supplies, fed us war for a while. We owed to them what advance we as one of themselves—two meals a day of thin stew, made from anything available.

And so we set off our own. We had one very small scaled map which showed main villages, and our method of advance now was to procure a guide (generally a woman or child) from this village to take us to the next, and so on. And thus it was that we traversed the country to a port on the Adriatic coast, from where

we were taken to a small island, whence a few days later our own navy brought us back to Bari.

The country, as far as we were concerned, was very mountainous—this area being less exposed to the dangers of contact with the enemy—the enemy being not only the Germans but also those several anti-Partisan parties of the native population. Small villages nestled almost anywhere—generally only a couple of miles apart, on our route. Most of these were partly, and many totally, destroyed—the work of the Italian Fascists during the Italian occupation of the country. Being mainly built of rough broken stone, with either red-tiled, slated or atatched roofs, these houses were homes not only for their human owners, but also for any livestock that they possessed.

For sleeping accommodation we would commandeer any barns or lofts available and snuggle down feet deep in the hay. But as the weather became colder, our general plan was to divide our party evenly among all the occupied houses of the village (seldom more than nine) and make the most of what we could get. And this is also how we generally fed. I almost blush as I recall some of the methods employed to obtain sufficient food—but beg, borrow or steal, they say, and necessity will always find a way. Many maintained that fowls, not laying at the time, were a handicap to the starving population, so benevolently we would help rid them of these burdens—after dark. An occasional cow was milked—perhaps a potato patch ratted, or maize plot plucked. On arrival in a prosperous-looking village, the gang would disappear as if by magic to all and sundry homes, with a long and pitiful look upon their faces, with hands extended and murmuring the mournful plea 'Krusha prosim' (Bread, please). This would continue till sufficient bread was obtained to ensure a certain amount of breakfast next morning. Only too often we were rebuffed, and then even shadier methods had to be resorted to. It was unfortunately a case of robbing the poor, but we had to do it to live. Our main diet, however, was plain unadulterated potatoes and maize cobs, which, when roasted upon an open fire, proved extremely drastic for denture-wearers—many of whom managed to hang on to no more than two or three masticators.

Whenever possible we walked by daylight, although for various reasons much of our trip was done by night. We went forward more or less blindly, relying on the information gathered from the civilians. For the crossing of two main rivers, we needed to commandeer rowing boats and row ourselves across. The railway lines, all patrolled by German troops, and the numerous main roads, likewise frequently patrolled, were generally crossed in the early hours of the morning. With extreme caution and silence we would creep near under cover, wait, listen, and then cross at irregular intervals.

We trudged a great deal in snow up to three feet deep. This meant slow laborious progress, but only once, after 14 hours' plodding, when we had lost our way, did we suffer the discomforts of it—we then cast caution to the wind and lit huge log fires. Quite often we viewed German convoys on the roads below us, and once had the rather alarming experience of seeing a German convoy pass through the village in which we were resting. A couple of times we left a village as late as 15 minutes before the Germans entered. But luck was always our except for the one rather unfortunate contact we had with them. We had been marching for 20 hours when

a German patrol appeared ahead. They spotted us as we first saw them and immediately charged us—opening up with rifles, and later machine-guns and mortars. We fled, as pre-arranged, individually, and headed as fast as weary legs could take us for the bush—up hill and down dale, stumbling, falling almost fainting with exhaustion. I had become one of a party of eleven by now. We headed mainly east, keeping in the forest up as high as possible. It was remarkable what renewed life we found and about 4 o'clock that afternoon, the German bombing of a village a little to the east of us gave us a direction to safety. There we met friendly, many homeless, civilians, who took us in and eventually, after 26½ hours of tramping, stumbling and pure hell, we laid down our weary bodies to sleep. We continued our journey a few days later with 18 less to our party.

It was only natural, in a country so primitive in sanitation and one wherein we had so little opportunity to wash, that we should become troubled by lice. I won't attempt to explain the unpleasantness of these vile, disgusting 'pearls of poverty,' because words couldn't do it. Ask any once-lousy Digger.

We arrived back at Bari two days before Christmas—and that Christmas celebration will stand out in my memory for years—with the excellent food and beer, and, in general, the good time given to us by all.

Transcribed and printed for the family of Don Chambers

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21st November, 2008.

All Don's original hand written notes relating to *The Diary Of An Escapee*, his photographs, and medals etc, have all been presented to the National Army Museum at Waiouru since his death.