



PAPERSPAST

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 **ESCAPE!**
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ESCAPE!
400 MILES THROUGH ITALY
MR L. DAHM'S EXPERIENCES

To be taken prisoner by the Germans, handed over and sent to an Italian prison camp, forwarded to a working camp, to escape, and be recaptured—only to escape again, this time to make his way for over 400 miles down the length of Italy posing as an Italian civilian, to evade both German and Italian civilian police and to ride through the German defence lines on a bicycle finally to link up with the British again after nearly three weeks of being constantly on the move, is the outline of an amazing story told a Beacon representative by Mr L. Dahm, who has recently returned to New Zealand and started in business in Whakatane. Added to all these exciting experiences was the knowledge that should he be caught in civilian clothing he would be shot.

The tale unfolded by Mr Dahm, or as he was then, Pte. L. Dahm of the 22nd New Zealand Battalion, has all the trimmings of a modern novel, and as such would make first class reading.

Capture

Briefly the story is as follows:—

Pte Dahm left New Zealand with the 11th Forestry Company, but overseas transferred to the 22nd Infantry Battalion. He was sent to

infantry Battalion. He was captured by German forces outside of El Alamein. The treatment meted out to him during the four and a half days he remained with his captors before being removed to a prison camp, he states, was particularly good. He received the same rations as the German soldiers and the conditions under which he was held could give no cause for complaint. At the end of the period he was removed to Benghazi and remained under an Italian garrison.

Along with some 30,000 British and South African prisoners he was then shipped to Port Brindisi and on to Bari. From here he was transferred to Campo 57, a camp in the North of Italy, 30 miles from the Swiss border. This camp was mainly for New Zealanders and Australians and contained some 4000 men in four separate compounds. His next move was to a working camp outside Venice and it was from this place that he finally succeeded in escaping.

His opinion of the working camp was a good one. The work was mainly agricultural and served to build up the health of the occupants till many of them were almost as fit as when they were captured. Dte. Dobson's knowledge of

ture. Pte Dahm's knowledge of Italian gained while in the various prison camps in Italy served him in good stead and he was more than once called upon to act as interpreter.

Suddenly there came one day the news that Fascism had lost its grip in Italy and the country had capitulated to the British. Many prisoners thought they would very shortly be on their way home, but news that the Germans intended taking over the country and deporting the prisoners to Germany was sufficient to dash their hopes.

At this juncture, Pte Dahm decided that his only course lay in that of escape. On the night selected he was assisted over the fence and from that moment began the journey which was to lead him right under the very noses of the Germans back to friendly territory.

His first move was to 'obtain' some money, which he did to the extent of 11,000 lira. He also procured a complete suit of civilian clothes in exchange for his uniform. Posing as an Italian he made his precarious way down through Italy, aided by friendly peasants and others, till he finally reached the German defence lines on the River Po. All the bridges were heavily guarded

and the river itself was watched continually for British prisoners attempting to escape. Unfortunately we are unable to print all the details of the way in which he crossed, sufficient it is to say that a friendly Spaniard, a youth of 16 or 17, who had been born and brought up in London and who had been caught in Italy at the outbreak of war, carried his gear across first, the Germans recognising him as a local resident and permitting him to cross. Pte Dahm then took a bicycle lent him and rode openly over the bridge. The guards, never dreaming that a prisoner would be escaping without even so much as a packet of food, did not even bother to stop him. Picking up his gear again on the other side, Pte Dahm set off again in the direction of the British, but more anxious moments were yet to come.

Recapture

Before he had travelled far he was suddenly approached and ar-

rested as an escaping prisoner by a policeman and taken to the local police station. He requested to see the Commissioner, and by recounting a stupendous tale concerning the strength of British divisions which had been landed in Italy, managed to bluff him into releasing him. He made sure of putting a safe distance between himself and the town before taking a spell, and after several more days of hard travel during which time he passed through towns actually under German control reached the British lines. One would think that to bring back oneself would be sufficient, but Pte Dahm went even further. On a piece of paper he carefully mapped the position and strength of the German forces in the various places he passed and as a result obtained information which proved to be of great assistance to the Allies.

The Red Cross

Mr Dahm states that throughout the whole period of his internment the one consoling factor was the Red Cross parcels which arrived regularly. Without these, he said, many of the boys would not be alive today.

The first parcels he received came each one being shared by seven men. When he was a prisoner at Bari, It was a great relief, he said to see them, and although each man had only one seventh of a parcel, it made a very welcome addition to the meagre rations. In fact he said Yugoslavians, who were also interned in the same camp, actually wept with joy at the sight of things like jam and butter which they had not seen for five years. When transferred to Campo 57, the parcels began arriving more regularly. For the first month they received one per week between two men, then one per fortnight between two men, and finally one per week per man. In describing the parcels, he mentioned the four types issued.

The Canadian type, which was at that time recognised as being the best, contained 1lb butter, 1lb jam, 1lb large water biscuits, two packets dried fruit, 2 tins fish, 4ozs cheese, 14ozs milk powder, 4ozs chocolate, 4ozs sugar, 4ozs coffee and a cake of soap

The English parcel contained a bigger variety of articles but in smaller quantities.

The New Zealand parcel, which was very popular with the Kiwis was very much the same as the Canadian, and lately has had some minor changes made to its contents placing it first on the list.

The Indian parcel was also very good except that everything had to be cooked.

At one time several Argentine parcels were also received which contained meat, sugar, tea and cheese in fairly large quantities.

All tinned goods, said Mr Dahm were punctured with bayonets by the Italians before they were given out in order to prevent the prisoners storing them up in preparation for an escape, but such foods as dried fruit were always held by those inside in readiness for a break.

Another big factor which contributed towards the health of the prisoners was the Red Cross medical supplies which were issued and used by the men among themselves in all cases except where medical advice was necessary. The issue of 200 cigarettes per man each month by the Red Cross was also very welcome.

A Magnificent Organisation

Mr Dahm states that the Red Cross is doing a Herculean task in Europe. Mere words cannot describe the high regard our own boys for it. An illustration of this is apparent in the story told of two boat loads of Australians who were returning home from the Middle East last year. When outside of Aléxandria, a voluntary collection organised entirely by the men was taken among themselves and £2000 was presented to the Red Cross with the heartfelt gratitude of soldiers who knew the worth and value of the organisation by direct contact with it on the battlefield.

In conclusion, Mr Dahm stated that he earnestly hoped the Red Cross would continue in its full strength after the war and thereby help to relieve the suffering through famine and disease which has already reared its ugly head in occupied countries and which after the war will be a grim factor, much larger than at present against which countries impoverished by the Nazi hordes will have to fight.

Kua tangohia aunoatia tēnei tuhinga mai i te Bay of Plenty Beacon, ka whakatōpūtia ki te tīwae kotahi, kātahi ka whakatika papaitia kia āta kitea ki te mata o tō rorohiko. Nā reira kāore pea e ōrite te āhua ki tō te whārangi tūturu. Ka kitea te tuhinga ki tōna āhua tūturu ki te [tirohangā wā](#).



Mō tēnei pae | Mahere pae | Āheitanga | Whakapā mai | Ngā ritenga whakamahi | Puka Aratohu mō te Manatārua newzealand.govt.nz