

DNODD's ARMY
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Naples



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Dodd's Army

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John R Smith

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Words of praise for Dodd's Army

Quite interesting

Don Harvey

When it did work, it worked quite well I thought.

Robert Benson

Many grammatical errors

Ian Jackson

To Jo and Katy

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The Story So Far

In July 1943, a British transport aircraft is shot down in the Mediterranean. The aircrew are lost, but the passengers, a middle aged intelligence officer, a regular army sergeant, a corporal, and four privates, all English but for the Australian corporal, manage to get ashore in southern Italy.

They find the remains of a stone hut, and, what with fishing, stealing from the surrounding fields, and from a local man's rabbit traps, they make themselves comfortable, and, having seen the locals do it, stock up on food stolen from an Italian army transport camp.

Soon, though, boredom brings bad tempers, and Lieutenant Dodd dons his civilian suit to visit the nearby small town, in the hope of finding the British soldiers most vital provisions, tea and tobacco. He makes contact with the village priest.

Their comfortable lifestyle is bought to an end when Private Stan Tullett, the self appointed fishing expert (with the interesting nickname "Kinnell" because he ends most sentences with "Kin' 'ell!") is blown up on a land mine, and disappears. This changes the mood completely, and the men decide to go on the offensive by blowing up the transport camp using land mines, salvaged from the minefield that had accounted for Kinnell. The attack causes a fire in the camp, but the fuel dump remains intact, until Allied bombers, passing overhead, assume the fire is a bombing indicator, and bomb the camp.

Lieutenant Dodd is in the town, continuing his quest for provisions, when the Germans arrive and start checking papers. Dodd is whisked away by the villagers and hidden in a cellar, where he finds Private Tullett, who had been rescued and treated by the villagers. Dodd discovers that the villagers knew about the soldiers all along, but left them alone in case the authorities find out about their smuggling operation.

The townspeople approach the soldiers for help: they are afraid that since their town sits astride a main north-south road, the Germans will defend it as they retreat northwards, or destroy it to block the road, and they seek advice as to how to avoid this calamity. Angelo, the local swashbuckler, with his mates and the soldiers plan to combine forces to demolish the road bridge over the river south of the town, but when they approach it, it is already firmly in the hands of the Germans who are using it to retreat over.

Thwarted, the group moves off towards Angelo's mountain hideout, but on the way, they have to pass a railway bridge over the river, which the Germans are preparing to blow up. After Dodd dresses in a German officer's uniform the Italians had stolen, they capture the bridge by a trick, allowing Allied troops to cross the river and outflank the German retreat, forcing them to abandon the town.

Dodd's miniature army collects a truckload of supplies from the advancing British army and we rejoin them as they disappear into the mountains to continue their adventures

Chapter 1

Angelo Santangelo spoke lovingly to his ramshackle old Lancia truck as he coaxed it westwards, along the alleged track away from the farmlands of south east Italy towards the ramparts of the mountains. Angelo and the vehicle had been an inseparable feature of the landscape around Casagrigo, his little country town, for years. Until a few years ago, Angelo had described himself as an agricultural trader, which was true to the extent that he traded with the farmers, though his stock often included more exotic goods than were grown locally. But as the Italian government became ever more greedy for agricultural produce to feed the ever growing army, and to pay for the weaponry provided by the Germans, agricultural goods for trade became ever more scarce, and Angelo had added a range of rare and precious items to his menu - things like razor blades, soap, tobacco and silk stockings. But now, mostly, such things were unobtainable at any price, and in any case, nobody had money to pay for them. Nobody, that is, except the fascists, and Angelo refused to deal with them.

But now, with his mate Dino alongside him, Angelo had a new treasure trove in the back of the truck. British army uniform clothing was piled alongside cases of food, which in turn jostled with box after box of ammunition for the Bren and Beretta sub-machine guns, as well as for the old faithful army issue Lee Enfield rifles. And in pride of place, a whole new supply of explosives, detonators and the other gear needed to make things go bang. Not that any of this was for trading – it was, in modern parlance, for personal use.

British regular army Sergeant Brownlow had taken the wheel of the British three tonner, and followed along, though his driving style was, it's fair to say, more assertive than Angelo's. Where Angelo wheedled and cajoled his vehicle, Brownlow demanded and swore at his.

Beside the sergeant in the cab, sat middle aged Lieutenant Dodd, whose slender frame and pale complexion had been compared with Noel Coward after a long illness, mulling over their recent adventures. He found it hard to accept what his memory told him was true: the crash, the stealing from the army camp, then the burning of it, the thwarted demolition of the road bridge and the capture of the rail bridge – could that, and all the other escapades, all have happened? Truly? It just didn't seem possible, let alone plausible, and yet, here he was, alongside the sergeant, tailing the Italian truck. How else could he have got here, if not as his memory told him? And in his adventures, he reflected, he'd been a major, which had felt quite good, even though it was in a German uniform, but he'd much preferred his time as a British colonel, even if it was a pretence – he'd just felt more comfortable somehow, as a senior officer, more at home, which he admitted to himself was a little strange, since it wasn't that long ago he'd been at Gullies College, Oxford, lecturing in Mediaeval and Renaissance Italian History. Could that possibly only have been, what, two years ago? Dodd scrubbed his face with his hands and smiled. Astounding! But excellent! Who would have guessed his fluency in Italian would have brought him here?

Dodd had been one of three scheduled passengers on the aircraft that crashed into the sea, on his way to Sicily to join a forward intelligence unit as an interrogator, though he was uncomfortable with that word, with its connotation of, well, unpleasantness. It conjured a completely incorrect image – Dodd had found that if he gave most of the Italian soldiers prisoners half a chance, it was harder to stop them than to force information out of them. Though he was an accomplished German speaker too, Dodd hadn't come across any German prisoners yet, except

the handful of yokels and misfits back at the bridge, but he imagined the proper German soldiers might be a little more reticent.

Dodd had long since realised how lucky he, and the others, had been that Brownlow had been cadging an unauthorised ride back to his unit when the plane was shot down. Dodd had wondered, once or twice, what might have happened to them if the sergeant hadn't been there – behind the wire, probably, by now. Or worse. But then again, he mused, the lanky Australian corporal, Kelly, might have stepped up: he was quietly competent, too, and gave the impression that whatever was needed, he'd be happy to at least have a crack at it. He'd also been grabbing a free lift on the aircraft: he and Brownlow just seemed to be that type that would manage to do whatever it took.

Behind Dodd, in the back of the truck, the other soldiers shared the discomfort with Angelo's mates Giovanni and Bimbo. All the Italians were, in a sense, in uniform, since they all wore the standard Italian working man's outfit of aged but cleanish black suit with waistcoat, collarless shirt and boots, black and worn but well tended. The only variation was that some men, who fancied themselves dandies, wore a bright neckerchief, red being the favoured hue, while others went for the more macho look, with a hint of grey woollen undergarment fighting with a robust thatch of chest hair at the open neckline. To complete the ensemble, the well accoutred Italian rural male almost invariably wore a moustache your average RAF squadron leader with be proud of, and a minimum three days growth of stubble, black against sun-weathered skin. The overall impression of Angelo's group was of a gang of vicious bandits, but this was dispelled by their shy good manners and boyish grins. At any distance, it would have been difficult for an outsider to tell them apart, except for the giant Bimbo, who stood head and shoulders above his mates.

The men had all been in high spirits as the journey commenced, laughing and joking, even between English and Italian, who, of course, had no idea what the others were saying, but the mood was enough to make understanding of the actual words unnecessary.

The exchange of cigarettes helped to maintain the confidential atmosphere - the smokers carefully ignored the fact that all the cigarettes were identical British Players, which Dodd had ordered from the British army, which was a curious twist, because the first time there'd been a fag swap - incredibly, after all that had happened, just a few days ago - it was all Italian tobacco being exchanged, and then, of course, after they'd captured the bridge, there'd been some German cigarettes in circulation as well.

As the drive continued, the men settled down, finally relapsing into a restless and exhausted silence, squirming and twisting, trying to find a comfortable position in the truck, but the best they could hope for was the odd few minutes doze before being shaken awake as the vehicles lurched and staggered ever more slowly along the track, which, rough and unkempt as it was when the journey started, became steadily worse as they laboured inland. The men in the back of the British truck didn't even notice the difference when the vehicles parted company with the well worn track, which followed the river bank, while they slowly started climbing as they approached the mountains that form a central spine virtually right down the length of Italy.

Privates Johnny Burgess and Stan Tullett had been the other stowaways on the aeroplane, hopping an illicit flight rather than suffer the days of heat and flies needed to catch up with their company by truck along the awful road from Cairo to Tunis. The pair had been mates from childhood, and had somehow managed to stay in company since joining up. Burgess always

seemed to give the impression he was, not fat, exactly, but carrying some excess baggage, but that was mainly because he was usually stood next to Tullett, who was one of those wiry, lean faced, hooded eyed people, so common in London's East End. In addition, Burgess, by his juvenile and enthusiastic manner, which reminded Corporal Kelly of a kelpie puppy he'd once owned, appeared to be about thirteen years old, whilst Tullett behaved like someone much older, more worldly, more suspicious of life. This had led to his habit of finishing every other sentence with a mournful 'Kin' 'ell,' from which his nickname, Kinnell, had derived.

They'd lost the sun behind the mountains now, which the drivers were pleased about – they'd been squinting into the glare for a while. Burgess was suddenly awake and shivering, fingered the scar on his face and grumbled to nobody in particular 'Gettin' fuckin' cold, innit?' He might have addressed his comment to Tullett, but he wasn't there: he'd stood on a mine while crossing the beach to go fishing, and had been whisked away by the locals and tended to by a doctor who was accustomed to dealing with such injuries among his flock, who supplemented their meagre incomes with a little smuggling.

Privates Gilbert Green and Bill Watson had been members of the Ceremonial and Presentation Unit - a group of soldiers chosen especially for their good build and good teeth, who were used for filming newsreels in place of the newsworthy destroyer captains, tank commanders and fighter pilots, who were mostly too scruffy, or too drunk, to be presentable. Like Lieutenant Dodd, they had been authorised passengers on the plane, on their way to be ready for a newsreel assignment in Palermo, as soon as it was taken, before getting caught up in this adventure. Green, whose blond hair and pale blue eyes gave him an oddly menacing appearance when he was fully kitted out in his ceremonial gear, had been dozing at the rear of the vehicle, stirred and gazed out behind them. He sat speechless for a moment before calling 'Here, Bill, come and have a look at this! Have a look, lads!'

Alerted, the soldiers all stared, agog, at the vista. Unaware of it, they'd been slowly climbing for some time, and now, spread out below them, under a perfect, cloudless sky, lay the rough country of the foothills, then in the hazy distance, they could make out the gleaming line of the river and faintly, the greyish smudge of the town amid the untidy rectangles of the fields, identified, from this distance, only by their different colours, yellow grey where the wheat had not yet been harvested, brownish where it had, and greenish where the fields had been left fallow, but even that only dimly seen in the haze.

Burgess thought it was wonderful. 'Shit, boys, we're on a mounting! I never been up this 'igh before! Good, innit!'

Watson, who was dark haired and brown eyed, but otherwise interchangeable with Green, looked at Burgess before realising he was serious, and asked in a friendly tone, his accent betraying an expensive education, 'Er, John, what about in the aeroplane? Wouldn't we have been higher then?'

Burgess thought carefully about that, then responded 'Yeah, I s'pose you're right, Bill, but that don't count, I reckon.' He regained his enthusiasm. 'This is the 'ighest I been on land, though, easy. Looks all right, don't it?'

He got agreement on that, at least, and the men continued to gaze out of the back of the truck, until their path took them into a stand of scrawny and wind tortured trees, which blocked their view. They returned to their slumped but restless dozing then, but in a few minutes, Angelo stopped his truck and switched off the engine, and Brownlow pulled up behind him.

The silence came as a surprise as well as a relief to the soldiers after what seemed to them like many hours of clattering, pitching discomfort. Realising that this part of the journey was over, the men all sat quietly, relishing the sudden calm, the only sound the small tinkling noises from the vehicles as they began to cool, when the tranquillity was broken by a shout from outside.

‘‘Bout fuckin’ time youse blokes got ‘ere, ‘kin’ ell it is! I bin on me own ‘ere for fuckin’ ages! Beginnin’ to think you’d fucked off without me!’

In a second, Burgess, his face a mask, was out of the truck and on his way to his friend Private Stan Tullett, the soldier who had blown himself up on a mine. Tullett was dressed in his soldiers desert kit, supplemented by a plum coloured velvet jacket, which might have been very smart at the turn of the century, but it’s long journey from the gentleman’s outfitters to the rag bag was almost over, and had apparently been quite adventurous, since it had, somewhere along the way, lost its left sleeve. Tullett stood, leaning on a walking stick, and grinning broadly. Burgess ran towards him, fists ready, and would have knocked him down if Brownlow had not been quick enough to get in the way.

‘Now, now, son, settle down’ Brownlow said kindly, as he held Burgess away from Tullett, ‘you wouldn’t hit a cripple, would you?’

But he would have done, if the sergeant had given him a chance. ‘You pratt, Kinnell!’ He screamed at Tullett, fighting to pull away from Brownlow. ‘You dozy fuckin’ pratt! What’s the fuckin’ matter with you, for Chrissake? D’you ‘ave to keep doin’ this stuff, you dozy fuckin’ bastard? Jesus!’

And with that, all the anger, fear and worry about his old mate went out of him, his body slumped, his chin fell on his chest and his head shook. After a moment, he stood up straighter, glanced at Brownlow and mumbled ‘It’s OK, Sarge, I’m OK.’

The other men were on the ground now, relaxing as the tension oozed away, and beginning to take in their new surroundings. They were in a small flattish open area, maybe twenty yards across, almost surrounded by rocky walls, set into the mountain like a cave without a roof, a scatter of crooked trees and skeletal bushes clinging half heartedly onto life among fissures in the walls. It looked as though there should have been a waterfall cascading from the cliff at the far end of the arena, and they were standing on the gravelled bed of where a pool should be. The only entry was through the gap the trucks had driven through, and at the other end, built out from, or to be honest, leaning against the vertical rock face, there stood a dilapidated shed. To be kind, it could be described as having a mixed pedigree, the leftovers from a badly managed building site being predominant, giving it the look of a partly constructed bonfire. It seemed to have been assembled mainly from similar materials to Angelo’s truck, and perhaps by the same hand, many years ago. There were sheets of rusting metal, mouldering canvas, a few rotten planks and bits of packing cases, held together more, it seemed, by the power of prayer than any visible fixings.

The soldiers studied it warily, before their attention was drawn back to Burgess and Tullett, who were now facing each other, a pace apart, with Brownlow half between them, watching Burgess carefully. Slowly, a small smile creased Burgess’s face, and he held out his hand to Tullett, saying ‘Fuck me gently, mate, you are a right fuckin’ worry, though, ain’t you?’

Indignant for a moment, Tullett replied ‘I dunno what’s the matter with you, chum. It’s not like I done it deliberate, did I?’

But he grabbed Burgess's hand anyway, then lunged forward and hugged his old friend, muttering 'Jesus, it's *well* fuckin' good to see you, though.'

He stood back then, and remembering the others, called 'Fuckin' good to see youse chaps too! Seems like a long time since we met up, Sir, eh?'

And then, the spell broken, the soldiers, Dodd included, crowded round him, gleefully shaking hands, calling him an idiot for getting blown up, and finally, almost as an afterthought, asking about his injuries.

'Am I lucky, or am I *fuckin'* lucky? That doctor cove you met, Mr. Dodd, you remember, the big ol' geezer with the hair? Turns out, he's sorted quite a few locals what've stood on them mines, an' got fuckin' good at fixin' 'em up. What with chaps fishin' an' smugglin', that beach gets a fair bit o' traffic, and most of 'em are worse than me, bits hangin' off an' all sorts. Me boots – I take back all the fuckin' swearin' I ever done at 'em - they gave me a bit o' protection, an' all, more than what the locals shoes do, anyway. Upshot is, I'm short a couple o' toes but ...'

Burgess broke in, thrilled. 'What? Honest? Give us a look, mate!'

Everybody looked at Tullett's feet. He was wearing his boot on his left foot, and the remains of an old canvas boot with a wooden sole on his right. Private Watson agreed with Burgess. 'Ooh, yes, Stan, let's see!'

But the tall, lean, Aussie Corporal Edward Kelly was against it. 'Jeez, boys, you're a gruesome pack o' bastards, fair dinkum. Leave the poor bugger alone for five minutes, eh? Come on lads, we've got things to do before dark, and I'm hungry too. Let's start getting ourselves sorted out.'

Burgess gave Tullett a wink and a knowing nod, which said 'I'll have a look later, then.'

They talked about the sleeping arrangements then, which were rudimentary. There was one bed, or rather, an approximately bed-like arrangement of bits of wood and straw, which Tullett had been sleeping on, and, in honour of his injury, would continue to use. All the others, Dodd included, would make the best of things in the back of the trucks, or under them.

Dodd was content to let somebody else get things organised. He was able to relax now, for the first time since the journey started. He was just happy the British three tonner hadn't broken down. He knew that if it had, he'd never hear the last of it from Angelo, quite apart from the question of how they'd transport all their newly won kit, as well as themselves. Even Angelo's miracle truck would struggle with that. Dodd realised, far better than his men, how difficult travelling in the mountains was going to be, but had decided to worry about that later. For the moment, he was happy to be where he was, and to let the moment wash over him. He turned away from the scene of action, put his hands in his pockets, and strolled away, back along the track through the miniature gorge.

Brownlow and Kelly watched him go, and looked at each other. 'Yeah,' said Kelly, reading Brownlow's mind, 'let him go. He can't come to much harm, and he deserves a bit o' time off, d'you reckon?'

Brownlow nodded. 'All right, Corp, let's get these kids organised, eh?' Brownlow mostly called the Australian by his given name, except when he was handing out jobs, when he usually reverted to formality. Kelly called out to the men 'Come on lads, look slippy now.'

It was getting more than a bit chilly now, as night fell, and a wispy mist draped itself on the little arena. The Italians squabbled and fretted round an old wood burning stove about the food they

were preparing: Angelo had promised a feast in celebration of their exploits, and it seemed that the four Italians each had their own, and independent, idea of how the cooking should be done.

The soldiers lazed round a large fire in the middle of the hollow and idly watched. They had nothing to add to the ever more heated discussion – they were just happy to be getting the delicious aromas from the stove. Dodd had been concerned about the flames attracting unwelcome attention from the Germans, but Angelo said there was no need to worry – the mountain above them was impassable, even for locals, and in any case, no Germans had ever been up here.

Tullett, who had been rescued and hidden until now by the Italians after his encounter with the mine, was anxious to know about his companion's adventures, but Dodd had asked that the story be put aside until the Italians were ready to join them, so it fell to Tullett to recount what had happened to him over the last weeks.

He told the group that he had no recollection of stepping on the mine: one minute, he was strolling across the moonlit sand along what he swore was the exact same route he'd taken numerous times already, on the way to his favoured fishing spot, and the next thing he knew, he was on an improvised stretcher, being raced into hiding before the Germans arrived on the scene. Dodd broke in here to relate that he'd learnt afterwards that Tullett had become an unwitting pawn in the regular nocturnal game played out between the authorities and the townspeople, where the locals engaged in their traditional pursuits of fishing and smuggling, and the authorities, firstly represented by the *carabinieri*, the armed Italian police, and now by the German military, tried to stop them. Tullett had been lucky – further down the beach, a gang of townspeople had just accepted delivery of a small but valuable cargo of items that would have been of considerable interest to the authorities, and they immediately knew that anybody stepping on a mine on the beach in the middle of the night was, by definition, one of them. Dodd reminded the group that Tullett had seen people moving about on the beach before, and that the locals had known for a while that the soldiers were there, but since they weren't doing any harm, had left them alone, so, until recently, each knew of the other but considered it best not to interfere with them.

Tullett took the opportunity to savour the aroma of dinner during Dodd's intervention, then continued his story. Somehow, he didn't know how, he'd been brought to the town and hidden in the cellar below the doctor's house, where he'd spent his time getting treatment and passing the time by teaching Angelo a few words of English, most of them utterly inappropriate, while steadfastly maintaining the Englishman's well known right to refuse to learn any foreign words whatsoever. He told of his amazement and delight when Dodd joined him in hiding from the Germans in the cellar, and how, after his last meeting with Dodd, he'd been smuggled out and brought up to the hideout to rest and recuperate. He'd been astonished at the care he'd been given – once, Angelo had even brought the ancient doctor all the way up here to examine his wound. The language barrier was a bit of a problem: Tullett's Italian remained stolidly non-existent, and the doctor's only English was 'bollocks,' as taught to him by the priest, who had learnt it from Angelo, who, under instruction from Tullett, had the impression it meant 'welcome.' The priest had not yet had the opportunity to try his new-found language skill on the bishop, a well known anglophile – but when he did, he would find the interview would not go as well as he'd hoped. At any rate, the doctor had apparently been satisfied with progress, because he'd smiled at Tullett and awarded him one of his horrible cigars. The doctor had managed to convey that it was now a

simple matter of resting, a prescription that, since there was nothing else to do up here, Tullett was able to follow to the letter, except that most days, as night fell, he'd limped down to the edge of the trees, where, on a clear evening, he'd been able to look down towards the distant coast and follow the course of the battle by the pinprick flash of the artillery, and once, a wind borne distant sound of shells.

As he was finishing his story, the Italians began serving the meal, bringing the dishes to the soldiers. There were three different pastas, with three different sauces. But before they could get started, Angelo appeared from within the shed with a large glass flagon of deep red wine, and made a little show of making sure everyone had a well filled mug. He'd saved a special mark of esteem for Dodd, who'd been holding out his china cup. Bimbo took the cup, and, with a flourish, replaced it with an actual wine glass, and Dodd nodded thanks, acknowledging the feeling behind the gesture.

When Angelo was sure they all had a full charge of wine, he began a small speech, which Dodd translated for his men, in which he addressed them as *compagni d'armi*, brothers in arms, and, just as it looked as though he was getting under way on a serious oration, emotion got the better of him, and, with that expressive Italian shrug, which all his audience understood to mean he could not find the words to express the depth of his feelings, he raised his mug.

Everyone stood then, even Tullett, understanding the gravity of the moment, and Angelo, aware of the attention, held a pose worthy of Mussolini himself for a long moment, his weight on his right foot, the left at right angles to it, chin raised and jutting out, right hand on hip, the other holding his mug aloft, then drank his wine in a single mighty guzzle. Watson was suddenly reminded of his old boss in the Ceremonial and Presentation Unit, Captain Murray, who had made no secret of his pre-war career as a Shakespearean actor, and who had a habit of taking a dramatic pose and quoting the Bard at every opportunity. He looked at Green, his colleague in the CPU, who had obviously been struck by the same memory: they grinned at each other and stuck their chins in the air.

Tullett watched interestedly as the whole company followed Angelo in swigging their wine, while he, Tullett, took a more measured gulp.

The Italians grinned and licked their lips appreciatively, but the soldiers had a less complimentary reaction: after a second or two of silence there was an explosion of coughing, spluttering, and wincing, and Tullett even thought he saw a tear in Dodd's eye. Well satisfied with the reaction, Tullett beamed and said 'It's a fuckin' shocker, eh, boys?'

Forgetting Dodd's presence, Kelly complained 'Jesus Christ, Stan! You could of warned us!' But then, he started grinning too, and held out his mug for a refill, quickly followed by the others.

They fell upon their food then, and Angelo, as the perfect host should, made sure they had plenty to eat and not *too* much to drink, until at last, the meal done, cigarettes were once again exchanged, and the soldiers were again able to offer English brands from their newly replenished supplies.

It had long been full dark now, and the only light was from the blazing fire, which the Italians kept as well fed as they were, against the increasing chill. At the edge of the firelight, shadows danced on the rocky walls and drew fleeting pictures of monsters among the greenery. Burgess

remembered that time, in the trees and the darkness when he was a boy, and shivered. He leant towards Tullett and whispered ‘Ere Stan, there ain’t no wild animals on this mounting, is there?’

Tullett began to laugh, then saw the expression on his friend’s face, and realised he was serious. ‘No mate, there’s ‘ardly anythin’ lives up ‘ere. An’ what there is’ll keep well out o’ your ‘kin’ way. Just birds, the odd lost sheep an’ that. I ain’t even seen a ‘kin’ rabbit.’

When all who wanted it had had yet another refill of the wine, gleaming black now in the firelight, the storytelling began, seasoned with lies, to the tellers taste.

The talk went round and round the group, first a soldier telling his part, then an Italian bursting in with his version. Dodd was kept busy as interpreter for both sides, and there were times when confusion reigned, one lot talking about one thing, and somebody else shouting good naturedly over them on a completely different subject. On these occasions, Dodd had to act as referee, as ring-master, almost, as well as over-worked interpreter. Somehow, though, both sides got their versions of events told without too much disruption, until Dodd related the details of his ‘promotions,’ first to major, to satisfy the German Captain Bock, who wanted to surrender to a senior officer, then Brownlow had promoted him to colonel for his dealings with the uppity British armoured car commander back at the bridge.

Angelo didn’t grasp what Dodd was saying at first, and had to call for silence while Dodd repeated it, but when he understood, he laughed uncontrollably, rolling and slapping his thighs – he reminded Burgess of one of those mechanical sailors at the fairground, where you put a penny in and he starts laughing.

Finally, Angelo recovered enough to blurt ‘*Colonello!* That’s wonderful! I didn’t know you could get promoted by a sergeant in the British army!’

That set him off again for a couple of minutes, until he managed to stand, ponderous from the wine, and, with a salute so flamboyant he almost fell over, said ‘In honour of this occasion, from now on, we Italians will call you *Colonello!*’

At this, the other Italians, Dino, Bimbo and Giovanni, all stood, as solemnly as their intake of wine would allow, and toasted Dodd ‘*Il Colonello!*’

Chapter 2

Next morning, the men woke to find their environment completely changed, the gentle late mist of last night having grown into a heavy, grey-white and dank smelling miasma which blanketed everything. It didn't seem to bother the Italians, but it matched the way the soldiers felt, thick headed and clumsy after the wine of the night before, and they stumbled grudgingly and shivering from the trucks. Burgess shuddered and muttered 'Fuckin' fog! Middle o' fuckin' Italy an' we got fuckin' fog!'

Tullett sniggered. 'Fog! You call this fog? I'll show yer fuckin' fog. Come on Johnny, it ain't far.' and groped his way through the gap between the rocks and down the mountain, leading a short crocodile of grudgingly interested squaddies through the pall. Shortly, the murk began to thin, then suddenly, they'd walked out below it.

Tullett pointed down towards the base of the mountain: the country down there, and as far as they could see, was blanketed in a layer of fog which glowed white in the early sunshine, just the tops of the odd taller trees protruding.

'Now,' Tullett pronounced, '*that's* fog.'

The others stood, mesmerised, until Burgess came to his senses. 'All right, Stan, that's fog. I never seen it from up 'igh before, but I reckon you're right. But that,' he turned and waved at the gently churning grey white billows just above them, 'that's fog an' all, is it?'

Tullett played his trump card. 'No, mate, it's not. Its clouds.' He said that with just a hint of pride, having worked it out for himself after having seen a belt of cloud move in above him while tottering out for exercise a week ago.

Burgess wasn't convinced. 'Oh, bollocks! Fuckin' clouds! Clouds is up in the sky, they don't touch the ground, do they?' But as he stood and watched the languid movement of the vapour, he began to realise the truth. Burgess looked to Watson, who had had a public school education and therefore, as far as Burgess was concerned, knew everything. Watson looked up at the cloud again, and acknowledged that Tullett was right. 'Well, fuck me' was all Burgess could manage.

It occurred to Tullett that he'd embarrassed his mate, and spoke to break the spell. 'Don't worry, lads, this'll fuck off shortly, soon as the sun gets warm. Any rate, it's better than that greasy yellow fuckin' fog we used to get in London, eh, Johnny? 'Kin' 'ell, eh, that was a real bastard, weren't it? You could bloody near eat that shite, eh? Mind you, takes you back, just thinkin' about it. Creepin' down Leytonstone 'igh Road, couldn't see a fuckin' thing, 'til you got to the eel and pie shop, eh, Johnny, eh? I could just do with a pie an' mash just now, wi' lashin's o' green liquor, eh? 'Kin' 'ell, yes.' He smacked his lips extravagantly.

This was quite a speech from Tullett, and it sent the soldiers away on mental trips back home, while they waited for the water to boil for their morning brew up. They'd grown accustomed to having coffee, but, as one of the luxuries Dodd had procured on the trucks, they looked forward eagerly to a mug of tea, which, what with the fog and the hangovers, made their thoughts of home more real.

Kelly was unmoved by their reveries, and clambered into the British truck, to emerge a few minutes later wearing a brand new uniform of battledress blouse and trousers. 'Getting a bit cool for that desert kit' he mentioned, and the other soldiers, still in their shirts and shorts,

shivered agreement in the cool and clammy air. Soon, they were all parading and poncing about in new gear. Tullett had even abandoned his velvet jacket. All, that is, except the sergeant, who was thinking he'd have to pick the stripes off his desert shirt and sew them on a battledress blouse before he could change. Dodd, though, was quite happy with a squaddies uniform, to which he'd a little sheepishly transferred his lieutenant's shoulder badges.

The Italians were offered uniform clothing, but they declined gracefully, explaining that their own 'uniforms' of black three piece suit and collarless shirt would allow them to merge into the countryside if required. But Giovanni held up a foot and waggled it, sending the sole flapping and soon, after a small ceremony, each of the Italians was mincing self-consciously around in new British army boots. It didn't seem to occur to them that their footwear might be a little hard to explain if the Germans questioned them.

They'd finished breakfast, and the smokers were luxuriating with their cigarettes, when the fog began to thin, and within minutes, a clear blue sky was visible above them.

Tullett spoke to Burgess. 'There you are, mate. Told you it'd go, didn't I? Now, Johnny, you was pleased with the view down to see the fog, eh? Well, I got another treat for yer today, chum'. Come on. Ain't far.'

Tullett lurched to his feet and waited for Burgess to do the same. The others watched interestedly as the young two men moved off through the entrance to their arena.

Tullett led his friend, climbing among tumbled piles of boulders. Burgess was amazed at his agility and called 'Blimey, mate, you do all right for a bloke with a scrambled foot.'

Tullett stopped for a moment, and replied 'Bugger me, you're right! I 'adn't really noticed. That's good, innit!'

After a few minutes he stopped again and turned. 'OK, mate, nearly there. Now, jus' close your eyes an' I'll guide you the last bit – it's only ten yards.'

Burgess looked sceptical.

'Trust me, Johnny, it'll be worth it. 'Ave I ever let yer down?'

Burgess didn't know where to start, so just sighed and closed his eyes.

Tullett took his arm and guided him round a last rocky outcrop, then turned him to face the west. 'All right, John, you can look now' and Burgess opened his eyes. His mouth followed suit. He was looking up towards the great mass of the Apennines, the peaks gleaming grey green in the early sun, marching off into the haze over the far horizon to north and south. He stood, transfixed, for a full minute, then realised he'd stopped breathing, and gasped for air.

Finally, he managed to speak. 'Well, fuck me dead, Stan, that's the biggest surprise I've ever 'ad! When we looked down yesterday, I thought we was on the top of the mounting, near enough. But look at that. Fuck me gently!' And he continued to gaze upwards.

Tullett knew how he felt. He just gazed up at the mountain in front of them and whispered, 'Yeah. Fuckin' big bastard, ain't it?' and left Burgess to it.

Burgess eventually tore himself away and returned excitedly to the others, demanding that they come and see, which all the soldiers did, Tullett and Dodd excepted. Tullett's foot was hurting, and he'd had enough, and Dodd excused himself, but made Burgess promise to take him later: he was anxious to discuss the next move with Angelo.

Angelo had anticipated Dodd's wish, and had made fresh coffee. They sat on a couple of boxes, silently toasted each other, and basked in the warming sun for a few moments before Dodd opened the conversation.

'Well, my friend, what now?'

Angelo smiled. 'You're the *Colonello* – I await your orders.'

Dodd was a bit taken aback by this, and sat silently contemplating his coffee for some time, before he looked up, faced Angelo squarely and asked 'Do you intend to hide out, or fight?'

Angelo was affronted, and leapt to his feet, splashing himself with his coffee, without noticing. 'Fight, of course! These Germans, they've led us astray, and now they've taken over our country. Our leaders have shamed us with their stupidity and cowardice. We may only be farmers and shopkeepers, but we have our pride. We have to do *something!*'

He grinned suddenly, realising his emotions had run away with him. 'But in the end, *Colonello*, all we really want is for the war to go away, and if we have fight to achieve that, then so be it.'

'Excellent!' Dodd exclaimed. 'My boys are keen to get up to some more monkey business, too, though I'm not completely convinced about their motives - I can't help thinking most of 'em would be just as happy blowing up Buckingham Palace, if I told them to. So, what do you think?'

Without hesitation, Angelo replied 'Did we not already agree we should go to Naples?'

Dodd vaguely recalled Angelo mentioning it once before, after the episode at the bridge, but he hadn't really thought about it at the time, and said, 'Well, maybe we should. But let me think it out.'

He began ticking off points on his fingers.

'Now, obviously, there's no point in staying here. If we're going to do any good, we have to stay behind the German lines, though I suppose I should say, get back behind the German lines, because the Allies might have gone past us by now, for all we know. So, we have to go north.'

'Of course.'

'I can't see there's going to be much fighting in the mountains, can you?'

'No - it's hard enough to move about up here now, and with winter coming on, even these slopes will be impossible.'

'All right. Now, we've seen the Allies are pushing forward nicely this side of the mountains, but according to your information, the landing at Salerno, over on the other coast, is being fiercely resisted. In fact, they're not making much progress at all. Is that right?'

Angelo nodded glumly and added 'And when they do break out, *if* they do, the only decent road is along the coast.'

It was Dodd's turn to nod agreement. 'We saw how the Germans on this side of the mountains are retreating as slowly as possible, but making sure they get their troops out. Yes?'

'Yes.'

'Well, my guess is they're putting a strong defensive line together somewhere to the north, so they'll cause as much delay as they can, while they're building their defences. I can't imagine they'll let Rome go without a fight.'

'I agree, my *Colonello*. If they can keep delaying the Allies until the winter comes, the weather will be their friend, and the Allies won't be able to move again until the spring, and by

then' He let the sentence tail off. There was no need to mention that if the Germans had the entire winter to do it, they could build a defensive line strong enough to defy all but the strongest opposition. Dodd acknowledged the unspoken point with a nod. 'Yes, I agree. So, I'm thinking the best thing we can do is see if we can help to force the Germans on the west coast to retreat before they're ready. That means getting over the mountains. Can we do that? Can we get the trucks over?'

'I've taken my truck over a couple of times, but it's not easy. The track is a lot worse than that one.' He jerked his head towards the entrance. 'But your truck got up here, so' He shrugged, and waggled his head from side to side. Dodd understood he was saying, 'Maybe it'll get over, maybe it won't.'

Angelo went to drink his coffee, and suddenly realised it was gone. He looked at Dodd as though a silly trick had been played on him, but continued 'If we're going over the top, we mustn't leave it too long, Colonello. When the weather turns, it would be impossible.'

Dodd acknowledged that with a nod, and went on 'Do you think we have enough petrol? My truck came with a 50 gallon drum, and we haven't broken into that yet.'

'Hmm. How much is that in litres?'

The lieutenant thought, then said 'Not sure. I think there's about four litres in a gallon. Maybe a bit more. So, a bit over 200 litres?'

Angelo rubbed the stubble on his chin. 'We wouldn't have anything like that much. I've got 20 litres put away in the hut, so we'll fill my tank before we leave here, but that's all I've got. How far were you thinking of going, *Colonello*?'

'We'll need to get well north of Salerno, to give ourselves a chance.'

Angelo sucked air in through his teeth. 'It'll be tight - we'll be using a lot of fuel, going mostly in low gear, but yes, maybe we could manage that.'

'You see, I don't see the Germans making a serious stand along the west coast road if it follows the coast - their position would be too vulnerable to shelling from the sea, so I'd say when the breakout comes, they'll fall back to the next defensible point, which will be a river or a decent sized town astride the road. Where would that be?'

Angelo smiled. 'Naples.'

Dodd was impressed that Angelo had pre-empted his strategic review. 'Well, all right then. I'm glad we agree on strategy. Naples it is. I must say, Angelo, I'm very impressed that you've already thought it out.'

Angelo looked bashful. 'Well, yes, that's true. But I used to know a girl there'

Dodd chuckled. 'Oh, well, whatever the reason, we agree we'll aim to go to Naples, if we've enough fuel. How far is it?'

Angelo scratched his head. 'I really don't know, Colonello, but I'd guess at least 300 kilometres, probably more, and it's rough going a lot of the way. And we'll have to go back down the mountain anyway: there's no way up the country up this high, but at least we'll be on reasonable roads for some of the time. So, maybe we have enough fuel,' He shrugged again.

Dodd understood. They had to accept the situation they were in, and if there was not enough petrol to get both vehicles to Naples, well, they'd deal with that at the time. He moved on.

'All right, then, let's suppose we can get as far as Naples. What then?'

Angelo looked blank, and it was Dodd's turn to do his rubbing his head thing for a moment before continuing.

‘It’s just like the situation at Casagrigio, isn’t it? The Germans are bound to either defend Naples, or make it impassable, so I think we should see if we can do something to stop them.’

Angelo was delighted. ‘Oh, superb! What is your expression? Excellent! Yes, *Eccellente*.’

Dodd was pleased too. ‘Well, I’m glad our thoughts are similar’, and turned as he heard the soldiers returning. He called to the men ‘Over here, chaps. Come and hear what we’re going to do.’

Having heard the train of thought and the decision, Brownlow, ever practical, wanted to know what they would do when they got there, but Dodd, having learned from Angelo, shrugged.

‘Let’s take one step at a time. Today, we’ll look over the vehicles and kit, and get packed up, as much as we can, so we’re ready for an early start tomorrow.’

He switched to Italian and asked Angelo how long it would take to get there. In turn, Angelo went into a huddle with his countrymen, and the customary argument followed, accompanied by the inevitable pointing, waving, and shouting. Dodd remembered his previous experience of Italy, and remarked to his men that if you want to start a squabble in Italy, you ask two or more Italians for their opinion on, well, anything.

Eventually, it seemed they’d come to some kind of agreement, and Angelo said the plan should be to head approximately north-east, hugging the foothills, where there were roads of a sort and the going would be easier, then, when they were far enough up, north of Vesuvius, they’d turn west, and get over the mountains on a track Angelo had used before. If all went well, they might be far enough north by last light the day after tomorrow, or maybe a day later, but this estimate was accompanied by a shrug, which meant, obviously, they probably wouldn’t. In any event, whenever they got there, they’d then be deep in enemy territory, so they couldn’t use their lights to travel at night, and would camp in the foothills overnight. They would tackle the tortuous climb up through Angelo’s secret passes the next day, and the day after that, the Italians would go on into Naples to have a look around, and find out what the situation was.

Dodd was worried by this last part, and wanted to go too, but Angelo pointed out that they were Italians, with the appropriate papers, and there’d be little danger for them as long as they didn’t draw attention to themselves, so that was settled.

Brownlow had everybody checking the equipment for the remainder of the morning, and the soldiers looked forward to an afternoon lazing about, but the sergeant had other plans. As soon as the midday meal was over, he announced that there would now be live firing drill. This was greeted by the automatic groan of the squaddie denied the chance to do nothing, until Green realised what Brownlow meant.

‘Er, Sarge, d’you mean, actually firing the guns?’

Brownlow sighed a mournful sigh, knowing full well that if there was one thing the young soldiers liked more than laying about doing nothing, it was laying about making lots of noise and destroying whatever they could see. ‘That’s right, Gilbert, if it’s all the same to you?’

As Corporal Kelly remarked, it was like an ants nest had been kicked – suddenly, there was jumping up, running and shouting, all to the consternation of the Italians, until Dodd filled them in, and they enthusiastically joined in.

The weapons and ammunition were hastily brought from Angelo’s truck, and a small scrum developed as the young men wrestled over who would have first go at the automatic weapons. It looked as though if Brownlow hadn’t taken strict charge, someone would have been

shot for sure: but of course, it was actually safe enough. The relatively experienced soldiers, Kelly, Burgess and Tullett, had at least fired rifles before, so were less excited, and knew about safety, but neither Watson nor Green nor any of the four Italians, even knew how to load the Bren and Beretta sub-machine guns, so really, the only risk was in somebody getting their finger caught in the trigger guard.

Brownlow had already found an open area a little way from what they were calling the cave, and, with Kelly as assistant, soon had all the men, soldiers and Italians, practising with the rifles. He insisted on Dodd joining in, handling the rifles, stripping and cleaning them, and even had him firing a few tentative shots, though he was as nervous as the others were enthusiastic.

And then came the time all the young men had been looking forward to – the automatic weapons. Brownlow was surprised to find that not even the tall Australian, had fired one before, so after having the men strip and reassemble the weapons several times, he had to demonstrate the proper firing positions himself, first laying in the prone position, and using the Bren's bipod to support the gun, then kneeling and finally, standing. He pointed out 'When firing while standing, the weapon should be held like a rifle, at shoulder height, not like you see in the movies, being fired from the waist by American hoodlums.'

Dodd balked at taking a turn, but all the others jostled to have a go at both the Bren and Beretta, and as soon as they'd used their allotted ammunition, immediately joined the back of the queue for another go, excitedly explaining to each other as they waited how the gun had gone off before they were ready before, but next time, they'd shoot the crap out of that tree, no danger.

The boys would have been happy to spend all the afternoon in this way, but eventually, Brownlow called a halt.

'All right, lads, that was good.' He nodded towards the Italians and said 'Bene, boys, very bene.' All four of them simpered and giggled with pleasure. What stories they'd be able to tell when they got back!

'So, now you know it's not that easy to aim accurately, but it's not that hard to just fire and make a lot of noise and scare the opposition shitless. Sort of work I reckon we'll be doing, surprise'll be the main thing – you know, we want to get stuck in, do the business, and get out quick. The last thing we want is to get into a fire fight with experienced soldiers.'

He let that sink in for a minute.

'So, we'll give you another practice if the chance comes along, but now, you know what we have to do now, don't you Gilbert?' Brownlow had always had a bit of a soft spot for Green, ever since the three legged episode back at the hut, and occasionally selected him to answer the easy questions.

Green smiled. 'That's what Bill and I are *really* good at, Sarge.'

'And that is?'

'Cleaning the bastards!'

It was late afternoon, and the last of the sunlight was washing out of the arena, like a receding tide, when Watson strolled up to Dodd, who was sitting on a wooden box, half in shadow, writing in tiny letters on his apparently everlasting supply of scraps of paper.

'Would I be interrupting, Sir?'

'Not at all, Watson, not at all. I'll be glad of a break to be honest. I've been trying to get down the gist of what we've been up to these last weeks.'

He glanced at the young private gloomily. ‘I suppose I’ll be expected to write some sort of report when we get back. Somebody’s bound to ask what we’ve been up to, don’t you think? Then there’s my wife, you know. I suddenly thought I should have given that soldier who took the prisoners back a note about who we were, so our families can be told we’re still alive. Kitty, that’s what I call my wife, you know, she’ll be dreadfully worried. She’s always been a worrier, and now, not having heard from me for so long, well’

Watson sucked in air through his teeth. ‘As far as I can see, Sir, women worry pretty much all the time anyway. There’s really nothing you can do about it. I think you’ll find you’ve just given her something *else* to worry about.’

Dodd considered that for a moment, and said ‘That’s very profound for such a young man. Had a lot of experience of the fair sex, have you? Isn’t it odd, after all we’ve been through, I don’t even know if you’re married?’

Watson was astonished at the question. ‘No, Sir! Never had a girlfriend, even. Well, not really.’ Watson blushed at his admission.

‘So how do you come to have such an intimate knowledge of women?’

‘You remember I told you my dad wasn’t well for a long time?’

Dodd nodded.

‘Well, when he wasn’t quite the ticket’ His voice tailed off for a moment. ‘That’s what Mother used to say, ‘not quite the ticket.’ When he was all right, and somebody asked after him, she’d say he was grand, but even when he was in a terrible state, raving and chucking things about, she’d only say ‘Oh, he’s not quite the ticket, you know.’

‘At any rate, when I was little, I was quite often sent off to stay with my aunt. I realise now that I was being sent away from seeing Dad at his worst, but I didn’t at the time, of course. I hated it because it was a house full of women. There were three sisters, my cousins, all teenage girls, as well as my Aunt Maude, and a couple of servants, both women, of course. Even the cat was a female! And they all pretty much ignored me – carried on as though I wasn’t there often as not, so listening to their conversations, I learnt a good deal about the way they think. And in light of that experience, I can say that women are supreme worriers. Absolutely supreme. They worry about things you and I wouldn’t even think about: wouldn’t even know existed.’

Dodd was intrigued. ‘Really? Give me an example.’

Watson thought for a minute before replying ‘Honestly, Sir, it’d make your head spin, just to contemplate it all. But let me ask you this. Have you ever known a happy-go-lucky woman?’

Dodd thought for a long time. ‘I’d say both my daughters were pretty carefree. They seemed to be forever dashing off to parties, and picnics, that sort of thing. And joining up, well, that was just one more excuse.’

‘Ah, yes, maybe, on the surface. But if you could listen to their conversations when they were getting ready to go to one of those parties, you’d be amazed at the odd things they’d be worrying about. If the shoes go with the handbag – well, all right, one can at least understand that sort of thing. But then there’s whether this dress is suitable because it’s autumn, and the invitation said dress informal, but it’s after six, and there’s a whole set of different rules for each, apparently. But even that, at least you can sort of see what it’s about, to a degree. Where it gets completely beyond me is what somebody is supposed to have said to somebody else about someone else again, and did they really say that, and if so, what did they mean by it, but if not, what did the other person mean by *saying* the person had said that ... Honestly, Sir, your head

would explode just trying to keep up. It seems to me that in a woman's world, every comment has a hidden meaning, every action an ulterior motive.'

Watson shook his head, remembering the disbelief and confusion of listening to his cousin's conversations. 'There's all sorts of signals, you know, the way one of them looks at another, or turns away, or pretends not to hear, or, or ...'

He stopped, unable to express the incomprehensibility of it all. 'But the most scary thing of all is that all other women *understand* all this, and spend hours dissecting it. Just let me ask you this, Sir. Both your daughters are in the forces, I think you mentioned?'

'That's right,' Dodd replied proudly. 'Alice is in the WRAF, and Victoria's a WREN.'

'Did they say why they chose those services?'

'I don't recall, no.'

'Well, I'll bet it's to do with the uniforms. Maybe one preferred the navy blue to RAF blue, and the other thought the cut of the WREN uniform more flattering, or some such. No disrespect intended, but I'll bet neither of them thought about the actual work. But, really Sir, it's not for me to speak to you like this. I did want to mention something, though.'

Their corner was now deep in shadow, and Dodd interrupted. 'Hold on, let's move over a bit, and stay in the sun.'

They shuffled over a few feet to catch the last of the sunshine, and Watson continued.

'I was going to say, Sir, that something a little odd's happening. I'm beginning to understand a good deal of what the Italians say. At least, I can catch quite a bit of it when they're speaking to you. Then all of a sudden, when they talk among themselves, I can't understand a word of it again. What do you make of that?'

'Did you get on all right with latin at school?'

'Oh, yes, of course! That's it! I did pretty well, actually, and it's all coming back to me now. Well I never!'

He laughed. 'All those hours, wasted, as I thought then, when I could be playing cricket, and it might be useful after all! But I'm sure I couldn't make myself understood if I tried to speak Italian, and then there's whole conversations where I can't understand a thing.'

Dodd smiled and said 'I can explain that easily enough. When they're talking to me, or want me to know what they're saying among themselves, they speak Italian, but just among themselves, they'll fall into *dialetto*, the local dialect, you know. Did you know that Italy only became a unified country in 1861? And even then, there were some city states that didn't join the Kingdom of Italy until after the Great War. Amazing, isn't it? Before that, for hundreds of years, there had been a dozen or more separate states, each with their own laws, customs, language, the lot. So it's not surprising really that there are many dialects, some of them ancient and only understood among the people of a certain area. I don't even try to understand it myself. But I'm really interested to know you can grasp some of what they're saying in Italian. If you like, when we have a bit of spare time, I'll give you a bit of coaching, grammar and so forth, and maybe you can have a go at speaking?'

'Really? Thank you Sir. I'd really like that.'

In the meantime, the Italians had insisted on again producing the evening meal, while the sergeant was tending to his vehicle, and, having checked water and oil, and given the tyres a good solid kicking, was contentedly fussing about under the bonnet, humming quietly while he

checked connections and wiped things with an oily rag. This left the other soldiers, Kelly, Burgess, Tullett and Green, to while away the time, doing what squaddies do best, loafing about, grumbling about nothing, smoking and making endless mugs of tea.

A single fly, apparently unwilling to settle for the night without irritating Tullett a little more, was trying to get up his nose, resulting in ever increasing retaliation from Tullett, accompanied by ever more flamboyant language. It had started with a wave and a lazy “Piss off, fly”, escalating to frantic flailing and “*Will* you fuckin’ fuck off, you bastard!”

Kelly watched interestedly, since, being Australian, he considered himself a considerable expert on flies, then commented ‘Not taking much notice, is he, Stan?’

Tullett responded with a glare and another swipe. ‘Fuckin’ things, ain’t they Corp?’

‘Yairs, mate, they are. But you know why this one’s not taking any notice, don’t you?’

Tullett paused in his battle and looked interested.

‘Yairs, it’s ‘cause it’s an Italian fly, see? Don’t know what you’re saying, eh? Why don’t you get Mr Dodd to tell you how to say “Fuck off, you little bastard?” in Italian?’

It took a moment for Tullett to consider that before he resumed hostilities with the fly.

Chapter 3

Brownlow finished pottering with the British truck, and strolled over to Angelo's old Lancia. Angelo, who had been sharing the cooking duties, which involved opening cans and sniffing the contents suspiciously, became aware of what the sergeant was doing, and watched anxiously as he raised the creaking bonnet and leant into the engine space. Brownlow's head shifted back on his shoulders in surprise, and he stood in that attitude for several seconds, his slowly raising eyebrows his only movement as he gazed at Angelo's carefully guarded secret.

A couple of years before, during the last of the good times – though he didn't know that then – Angelo had realised that his old truck wouldn't last forever, but he was torn. It didn't do to let others know about one's financial affairs, and if he had appeared with a shiny new vehicle one day, lots of people would suddenly start taking a serious interest in his business activities – an interest that Angelo would find most unwelcome. After a lot of thought, Angelo had hit on the perfect solution: he took his truck to a town where he wasn't known, and bought a brand new one, on condition that the dealer replaced the shiny new body with the old one. That was not quite as daft as it sounds: then, as now, commercial vehicles were sold as a chassis and cab only, so the customer could put a body on it that suited his purpose. Even so, the dealer took a lot of convincing, mainly by being paid up front, in cash, that Angelo was not, in fact, barking mad in wanting to have the nice, shiny, comfortable cab replaced with his old one, and to have the rest of the body swapped over as well. Since none of his mates had any idea about motor vehicles, Angelo had managed to keep them, and everybody else, in the dark. Hence his concern that Brownlow had discovered his secret, and he began to walk towards the sergeant, who had now dropped to the ground and was peering underneath the truck, confirming his suspicion that under its tramps clothing, there lurked a prince of a vehicle.

After what seemed to Angelo a long time, Brownlow scrambled up, and, brushing himself down, turned to look at Angelo. Angelo returned his gaze for a moment, then gave a miniscule shrug. Brownlow's right eye slowly half closed in a conspiratorial wink, and Angelo knew then that his secret was safe.

The other soldiers were sitting round the remains of last night's fire, drinking tea. Tullett swirled the dregs of his last mug around before expertly giving the mug a flick, leaving it clean of any tealeaves.

'Funny thing, chum,' he mentioned to no-one in particular, 'I'm not all that keen on fuckin' tea any more. Just as soon 'ave a 'kin' coffee, eh?'

Burgess reluctantly agreed. 'Yeah, 'specially if you ain't got any milk, eh?' He shook his head slightly, and looked glum, as though to say 'What's the world coming to?'

As if to change the subject, Green inserted 'Here, chaps, you know we were talking back there' he jerked a thumb in the direction of back there, 'about nicknames?'

He got a couple of half interested nods in reply. 'Well, I suddenly thought about this lad at school. Had these huge bloody ears, stuck right out. 'Wingnut', we called him'

He demonstrated by putting his index fingers behind each ear and pushing them forward, twisting his head this way and that by way of demonstration. That caught the interest of the others, and soon they were all at it, sitting cross legged in a circle, fingers behind forward

thrusted ears, pointing their faces this way and that, and, inexplicably, all chanting ‘wobble, wobble, wobble.’

At this point, inevitably, Dodd and Watson came back to the group and watched for a long second, then, catching each other’s glance, Dodd managed a wordless shake of the head, and a helpless wave of his hands, but Watson understood the boyish absurdity of the scene immediately, and pushed his way into the circle, intoning ‘wobble, wobble, wobble’ even before he’d sat down.

Tiring of that, Burgess remarked to Tullett, whose own nickname, “Kinnell,” wasn’t often used now, ‘Hey, Stan, talkin’ o’ nicknames, d’you remember that miserable welsh bastard, lived down Victoria Road?’

‘What, Dismal Daffyd, you mean?’

‘Yeah, that’s the one. If ever there was a good nickname, that was it, eh?’

‘Kin’ ‘ell, yeah,’ Tullett chuckled. ‘E *was* a long streak o’ misery, and no mistake. Dismal was just about right for ‘im. Mind you, the whole fuckin’ lot of ‘em, they’re all the same, ain’t they, them taffies?’

Kelly thought that was a bit rich, and said so, but Burgess backed up his mate. ‘No, Corp, ‘e’s right. I never met a taffy what wasn’t a right bleedin’ misery.’ Tullett nodded vigorously. ‘O’course, they’re prob’ly entitled, ain’t they, what with all them mountings o’ slag from the coal mines, an’ them pixie people, an’ choirs, an’ that.’

Kelly wasn’t satisfied. ‘What pixies are these, then?’

‘Oh, you know, Corp, what they call ‘em? Lepercorns.’

Dodd broke in. ‘I imagine you’re thinking of leprechauns, are you?’

A little miffed, Burgess agreed and Dodd, in a kindly tone, said ‘Well, I think you’ll find they’re Irish, aren’t they?’

Burgess sniffed and glared at Tullett, as though it was his fault Burgess was in this spot, but Tullett had found something fascinating on a fingernail that demanded his full attention.

Burgess had to have the last word. ‘Yeah, well, all the same, ain’t they? Miserable bastards, the lot of ‘em. An’ don’t even get me started on them miserable Scottish bastards. They’re the worst o’ the lot.’

The others wisely left it at that.

The sun came up early on this side of the mountain range, and the morning dawned clear and bright, a gentle breeze from the east having cleared the overnight mist, as well as bringing an occasional distant rumble as a reminder that this mountain tranquillity was not replicated down on the lower country.

Angelo’s plan was to lead them back down and through the foothills until they were almost back at the river, before finding his way onto a minor so-called road that would take them north-ish, following the base of the mountains. The road would be unpaved, and would make the presence of the miniature convoy a lot more evident: even at the slow pace they could travel at, they would be towing a plume of dust, advertising their presence to any interested party, but against that, it would be much faster than labouring along the barely recognisable rough tracks winding their undisciplined way up among the foothills, and would save a lot of fuel, as well as being much less arduous for drivers and passengers. And, as Angelo explained, via Dodd, the

country became much more difficult to travel as they pushed north, and further into the mountains, so they should take advantage of the road while they could.

The sergeant was wary of their exposure, and said so, reminding the company that they needed to be sure they were back behind the fighting front, which might mean passing the German defences. But after a serious chew of his bottom lip he allowed himself to be persuaded that if there was any trouble, they could retreat into the foothills or hide up until the coast was clear.

They had done most of their preparations the night before, and were off early. The mood was mixed: some of the soldiers had begun to ruminate on their situation, and wonder if they'd done the right thing by staying out. It had crossed some minds that maybe it would have been better to rejoin the main forces when they had the chance, after capturing the bridge, the bravado and what Brownlow called 'camaraderie' having worn off a bit overnight. But there was also a sense of anticipation, especially among the Italians, who were excited at what was happening. And one thing everybody was agreed on – it was good to be getting on the move, though opinions about that began to waver as well, as they were thrown about in the back of the three tonner. On the journey downwards, the going was mixed: in some places, they were able to move along quite well, but often as not, this was followed by a really rough patch. It might have been easier on the vehicles, but to the men, it seemed a lot rougher than the toiling ride upwards, somehow.

After what seemed an age, they stopped for a break and some food. Angelo told Dodd he was pleased with their progress, they were almost back to the lowlands, and from now on, they would have to keep a close watch for what the opposing armies were doing. The last thing they wanted was to bump into a German patrol, watching the retreating army's flank. And an encounter with the Allies might not be any better – everybody out there would be in a mood to shoot first and ask questions later. No, they all agreed, better to keep out of everybody's way, and press on invisibly, until they were well past the fighting, and ready to attempt the passage over the mountain.

Of course, that proved a lot harder in the doing than in the saying. Soon after they had reluctantly mounted up again, Angelo turned left, off the downward track, and immediately, the terrain became more difficult. They were still in the foothills of the mountain, and had to duck and weave, it seemed, for every small gain. Everywhere they looked, there were steep hillsides and rugged outcrops of rock, the going made even more difficult by the ever thickening woodlands which made searching ahead for their best route impossible. Angelo wasn't worried though. While they squirmed and meandered in all directions, seemingly, he soothed Dodd by repeating that he knew exactly where he was, and they'd be striking the road soon.

He said that often enough that Dodd was finding it increasingly difficult to believe, but, sure enough, by late afternoon, Angelo stopped his truck in one of those inexplicable tiny clear spaces among the trees, and clambered out. The men followed, stretching and grumbling. The chunky Italian drew their attention to a gap between the trees in front of them, and announced that that was the way onto the road, which was just over the next hill, and they should investigate before blundering from cover. Maybe there would be enemy soldiers. Angelo waggled his head from side to side – a nice change from the usual shrug, but it meant the same thing – who knew what was moving about on the other side of the hill?

Dodd nodded encouragingly at Watson, who gulped, then quietly, a little embarrassed, translated for the soldiers. Green, proud of his mate's new accomplishment, led a small smatter of applause to reward his first outing as a translator.

Sergeant Brownlow pointed at Kelly, then Angelo, then himself, and finally, towards the rising ground before them. The silent procedure seemed a bit superfluous, since they'd just stopped the grinding and roaring of their vehicles, but it did remind everybody that they didn't know what to expect.

The three men moved carefully off, Angelo leading, but came sauntering back just a couple of minutes later, calling everybody forward to have a look, and the remaining knot of people surged through the trees to the diminutive summit.

The scene before them was so ordinary, it was almost shocking. From the top of their hill, they could see that the country had changed from the flattish plains they'd left the day before, and had become much more hilly. The open forest of the near distance below them gave way to dotted stands of trees among tiny fields plastered onto plump hillsides, as though they'd been stitched there, many of them striped with lines of grape vines, others green or gold with ripening produce, others again showing the reddish soil where the crops had already been stripped. Occasional grey green rocky crags imposed themselves on the scene, their outlines sharp where the sunlight still caught them, their shadows, all but out of sight behind them, draped along the contours. To the English soldiers, used, if they had taken notice of it at all, to the flat or gently rolling countryside of their homeland, it looked like fairyland laid out before them. Here and there, the bright terra cotta roofs of isolated clumps of farm buildings glowed in the slanting sunlight. The horizon to their front and right was lost in haze, and to their distant left a great black-grey protrusion lay, silent, looming and mysterious, as though the mountain had thrown out a giant arm with a clenched fist to block their progress.

Far, far away, half a dozen tiny people moved in a line across a tiny field, half of it yellow, the other red brown, as the farmers laboriously brought in their crop. Two miniature horses dragged their miniature wagon along the line of reapers.

The soldiers were astonished at the change in the countryside, all except Dodd, who nodded and remarked, almost to himself, 'Yes, this is more like the country I remember.'

The hilltop they were on dropped sharply away to reveal their immediate objective. To a modern eye, it would be an act of extreme generosity to use 'road' to describe the twin narrow, dirty yellow-grey stripes of dust and gravel, separated by a metre of sullen grass, that emerged from the trees to their right and disappeared again among the hills to their left, all within a hundred yards or so. On the other hand, it was typical of most minor roadways in Italy at the time, only the most important arteries being sealed, especially here in the rural south. In any case, it was a gigantic improvement on the alleged tracks they'd been on for the last days.

The men moved out from the trees, walking into the last of the bright sunlight as they stood on top of the small rise, and silently absorbed the panorama below them, until Brownlow broke the spell.

'Yes, yes, all very pretty. But we need to be sure the road's safe to move along, so Corp, take Watson and have a scout round up ahead, and you, Burgess, you're with me. We'll take a look back down the other way. OK, Mr Dodd, Sir?'

Dodd was well rehearsed in Brownlow's reverse order giving trick by now, and, to give an air of urgency, replied briskly 'Right, Sergeant, off you go' as though it was he who'd given

the orders. 'Keep the road in sight though. We don't want anybody getting lost. And while we're waiting, we'll start putting some supper together. Who's on cookhouse duty?'

Within twenty minutes, both sets of scouts were back. They joined the circle of men sitting round the spirit stove, grabbed their food, and reported what they'd found. In both directions, the terrain was so hilly, and so heavily wooded, that as the road wound among the hills, it was impossible to see more than the sort of range they had from where they all stood.

Dodd translated for Angelo then turned to speak to his men, while Angelo spoke to his. 'Now, pay attention, chaps' and clapped his hands together, as if his audience might have had something more interesting to be thinking about. 'As you can see, the track Angelo has brought us to is far better to travel on than crashing through the hillsides as we have been doing, so it'd be much quicker, and much, much better for the petrol supplies, to go as far as we can on it. In fact, if we have to travel all the way as we have done,' he flicked a glance at the mountains behind him, 'Angelo doubts we'll have enough petrol to get us to Naples. In which case, we'll have to walk over the mountains, carrying all our kit.'

Dodd paused to let that sink in.

'On the other hand, as far as we can tell, the road ahead is just like the bit you can see now: that is, there's at least a chance that we might come round a corner and find ourselves facing a German road block, or a convoy coming towards us. So, there's the problem. To use the road, and take a chance, or play safe by staying up along the mountain tracks.'

A new thought struck him. 'Of course, we don't actually know if we're behind the German lines as yet. That scene we saw down below - was that the peaceful countryside before the fighting rolled over it, or after, or didn't the war come this close to the mountains?'

He looked at each man in turn.

'Any thoughts, chaps?'

The English soldiers responded with blank faces. They were only just getting used to being told what was going on, never mind being asked for their opinion on anything.

'Sergeant?'

While Brownlow sucked his lip, Tullett had a question. 'Ere, Sir? 'Ow far we got to go, then?'

'Yes, fair question, Tullett.' Like the rest of the party, he'd managed to wean himself off using Tullett's nickname of 'Kinnell.' Dodd interrupted Angelo to ask him the question, and immediately wished he hadn't. The inevitable row ensued, each of the Italians having their own idea of the answer. Eventually, Angelo turned to Dodd and sheepishly admitted they didn't really have any idea. They thought it was at least two hundred kilometres, but no more than five hundred. Angelo defended this lack of precision by saying they didn't really measure travel by distance, but by time. Dodd remembered that the same mad recital of petulance and tantrums had taken place when he'd previously asked how long the journey would take, but, unwilling to invoke another display of childishness, simply pursed his lips, and enquired 'All right, fair enough. So, how long do you think it would take us to get from here to Naples, up along the tracks?'

Angelo was about to turn to his mates, but Dodd stopped him. 'Just your estimate will be fine, Angelo. I'm not sure I could cope with another one of your discussions.'

Angelo looked offended for a moment, then did the head wagging thing while replying 'Maybe three days, Colonello, if there's no rain. Maybe four. And if'

This time, he went back to the old faithful shrug. *Who knows? These things are in the lap of the gods.*

Dodd went back to his men. ‘Well, chaps, according to Angelo, *if all goes well, and if the petrol lasts out, we’ve got at least another three days on the mountain tracks, and quite likely more. Or, if we take our chances on the road, we’ll have to take the long way, round that spur of the mountains you see over in the distance.*’

He pointed to the gigantic knuckles at the end of the mountainous arm that barred their way. ‘But if we go that way, I’d hope it’d be a case of the longest way round being the quickest way home.’

Burgess smiled, hearing that old saying for the first time in many years. Dodd noticed and asked, ‘Yes, Burgess? Is that an issue?’

Burgess came back to the present and explained. ‘Oh, sorry, Sir. It’s just me ol’ dad used to say that, when ‘im an’ me was off for a ‘ike, of a Sunday afternoon, like. Only ‘e used to say, ‘Sometimes the longest way round’s the quickest way home *even if it does take a little bit longer.*’ Don’t make sense, does it? I used to think an’ think about what was wrong with it, but then, I just used to end up believing it at the time, o’ course. Because me dad said so, like. You do, don’t you, when you’re a kid. If your dad said so. But lookin’ back, I reckon ‘e just used that as an excuse when ‘e got us lost.’

Brownlow butted in. ‘Blimey, son, you don’t half go on, sometimes. Got any more wassnames, brilliant ideas, for us?’

Burgess sniffed and sat up straight. ‘Matter of fact, Sarge, yeah, I do. We been rattlin’ about in the back o’ that bloody thing’ he thumbed towards the three tonner, ‘for bleedin’ ages, seems like, an’ ‘alf the time we’ve ‘ad to cling on ‘ard just to stop gettin’ slung out the back. Due respect, Sarge, an’ to you, Mr. Dodd, Sir, but I bet it’s been a lot easier for you up the front. Due respect.’

Burgess scowled round for support, and, having got grumbled agreement, carried on. ‘Seems to me, Sarge, from what we seen over the ‘ill, like, it’s peaceful as can be all round ‘ere. Not a sign of anythin’ at all, is there, not even from our lot, not for miles an’ miles. Not even any planes, is there? So what I reckon is, we give the road a go, eh?’

Not even Brownlow had an argument with that, and the decision was made to camp where they were, now that they were tucked away out of sight of the road. The sergeant ostentatiously checked that all the weapons were fully loaded, just in case, he said, without, as usual, specifying in case of what. He also insisted that sentries be set on the road at the limit of their vision, but by the time full darkness had enveloped them and not a single cart, or even a single walker, had been seen on the track, he agreed that the placing of sentries was unnecessary. But they could have done with them later on.

Next morning, they awoke shivering in their damp and misty little hollow, and the soldiers were glad they’d got out of their desert uniform in favour of the heavier battledress blouse and trousers. The Italians, who appeared impervious to any change of temperature, remained in their invariable black three piece suits and collarless shirts, augmented by their prized new British army boots.

Everybody was anxious to get going, if only to get away from this dismal hollow, but over a scanty breakfast, Dodd began a discussion.

‘I woke up in the middle of the night, feeling pretty shaky, I can tell you. I don’t know if I had a dream about it, but I woke with an image of what might happen if we were on the road and came upon a German vehicle coming the other way. It seemed to me that with Angelo in front, we’d be in a pretty poor condition to do anything about it.’

Angelo became interested at hearing his name, but Dodd indicated that he’d come back to him, before continuing. ‘I thought that Angelo would have to stop, and couldn’t warn the people in the following truck. What would happen then? We’d assume it’s time for a break and we’d all just jump out, like we usually do. If the Germans were on the alert, bang, bang, we all fall down.’

Brownlow saw the point immediately, and was annoyed with himself for not having thought of that already, but after a vigorous chew of his lip, decided that he would have realised it, as soon as they got on the road. To avoid following up the thought that it would be a bit late by then, the road being mostly too narrow to allow them to change places, he agreed.

‘Right, Sir. Quite right.’ And, having learnt from Dodd the art of swift recovery from a blunder, he hurried on ‘Now, as I understand it, we’re just going to follow this track, eh? So Angelo doesn’t *need* to lead until it’s time to turn off. So what I suggest is we put our truck in front, with two men with Brens looking forward always on sentry.’

And Burgess, who had never quite got over the episode soon after they’d first staggered ashore, when he’d had the piss taken for proposing that they should have bird noises for a recognition signal ‘like the red indians,’ finally got his moment of justification when he suggested ‘Ere, sir, I reckon we’d need to let Angelo what’s goin’ on. How ‘bout one toot on the horn’s a warning of danger, but two toots would be, er ...’ He thought desperately for a moment, then ‘Oh, yeah, two toots means we’re goin’ to stop for a slash an’ a brew up.’

There was a flurry of snorting and eye-rolling, but it made sense, and the plan was accepted. Dodd explained the new arrangements to Angelo, who, predictably, was enraged. He leapt to his feet, took up his Mussolini stance, and launched into an impassioned speech accompanied by much arm waving, and finishing with a statuesque stance, knuckles on hips and chin jutting impossibly high. There was a strong feeling among his audience that if he’d been wearing a hat, he’d have thrown it to the ground and given it a bloody spiteful kicking. His countrymen stood and applauded, frankly proud of their leader, while the soldiers looked to Dodd for interpretation.

Dodd looked sheepish and admitted ‘Look, chaps, Angelo was speaking in *dialetto*, his traditional local language, you know, and I only caught the general drift of it. How about you, Watson? Did you understand any of it?’

‘Hardly a word, Sir, but really, we don’t need to interpret that little performance word for word, do we? I think we can grasp that Angelo is not at all happy about not leading.’

A little discussion followed. The lieutenant proposed allowing the Italian truck to stay in front, arguing that if they were confronted by Germans coming the other way, the sight of the ancient Lancia would not put the Germans on guard, and might give his soldiers a chance to get into defensive positions. By contrast, the sergeant said it would be madness to just go blundering along without the ability to put up an immediate return of fire.

The answer occurred to them both at the same time, and Dodd proposed to Angelo that the Italian truck should continue to take the lead, but the load should be shifted to allow two soldiers to stand in the back, peering through the canvas just behind the cab, armed with Bren guns, in

case of trouble. Angelo was mollified by this, and only put up a half-hearted insistence that the men in the back should be Italians.

After this was agreed, there was a rearrangement of Angelo's load to allow access by the sentries, starting with Kelly and Watson, who made a bit of a performance of getting settled and checking their weapons. In Watson's case, of course, this was only the second time he'd handled a Bren gun, so his "checking" involved Kelly making sure the safety catch was on, and reminding Watson how to disengage it, along with threats of mayhem if he took it off safe without Kelly's instructions.

But they were soon lurching along the track, Angelo in front, with Dodd in the cab beside him, trundling along at close to twenty kilometres an hour, which, in those days, in those vehicles, on that road, was very good indeed. Behind Angelo's head, Kelly and Watson were flat out standing up and hanging on with one hand, while trying to keep the unwieldy weapons pointed at the road ahead with the other. To be fair, the track was mostly in quite reasonable condition, except where streams had cut shallow valleys through the surface, but they were carrying little water now, never more than an inch or two, and easily passable by the trucks. Dodd thought it would be a different matter in a couple of months time, when the winter rains would have started, feeding the surging streams, and made this road all but impassable for months ahead. But that didn't matter to them, and they moved through the same sort of countryside they'd seen before, hilly and forested, sometimes lightly but often thickly, where the fields stopped, and the foothills began.

At first, at every bend, or hill's brow, Angelo had stopped, got out and walked forward to check that the road was clear. But there was almost no traffic on the road, and what there was could have been doing the same journey for a hundred years – just one or two horse drawn carts, loaded with farm produce, going from where to goodness knows where, for there were no villages, or even farmhouses up here, usually with just a driver, once with another man beside him, but none of them appeared to be at all surprised at the appearance of the little convoy: in fact they seemed not to have noticed the trucks at all, until they found space to draw their cart to one side to allow passage. Gaining confidence, Angelo gave one a jaunty toot as he passed, and the old man on the cart watched in amazement as the following British vehicle slewed to a halt and a mixture of armed soldiers and Italians poured out of it and disappeared into the trees.

Chapter 4

Hour after everlasting hour, with just a couple of short breaks for food and the calls of nature, and a change of lookouts, the great spur of the mountains loomed slowly closer, and the track nudged them ever nearer to the fist and knuckles at the end of it. As they crept on, easing downward, the trees became more and more packed together, and sometimes even met overhead, giving the drivers the impression they were passing through a tunnel. Eventually, Angelo, remembering the signals, tooted twice and pulled over to the side of the road. Brownlow drew up behind, and everybody clambered out, keen to take the opportunity for a stretch and a moan. Angelo and Dodd conferred, then announced to their respective groups that since it was late afternoon, and they were obviously not going to get round the end of the spur today, as soon as Angelo spotted a suitable site they'd pull off the road and stop overnight. Everybody scrambled back to their now accustomed places in the vehicles, the mood lighter, lifted by the knowledge that the day's travel was nearly done.

It was only ten minutes later that Angelo saw his chance, an almost dry stream bed running up to their left, between two low but wooded hills, with a small glade just visible behind the second hill, and slowing right down, turned his truck left, grinding and staggering up the stream bed, then right, up the gentle bank, such as it was, and into the clearing. This time, everybody jumped out quickly, stretching again, but grinning this time, glad to be finished with the trucks, and secretly relieved to have come so far without sight of the enemy.

The familiar ritual of getting organised began, the men all comfortable with what needed to be done, and their part in it. Before long, they'd had a tea and a smoke, the vehicles were checked and refuelled, and a second brew up was under way. Green and Tullett, the cooks for the day, were mulling over the menu, a task which, in essence, amounted to extracting a few cans at random from their storage sacks, scratching the back of their heads, and looking thoughtful.

Burgess was holding court. 'All right, lads? Bloody good idea comin' on the road, eh? Still be stuffing around bleedin' miles back, if we'd stayed in the 'ills, wouldn't we? Might ha' run out o' petrol by now, eh? Or broke the trucks, most likely.' He swilled the remains of his tea round his mug. 'Anybody remember whose idea?'

Kelly, who'd been lazing on the grass, suddenly sat up with an urgent 'Shush, shush' and after a second was on his feet and racing for Angelo's truck.

Brownlow was only a moment behind him. In the stunned pause that followed, the rest of them caught the unmistakable grinding whine of a heavy vehicle, and, like a mob of startled sheep, the sitting men scrambled to their feet and chased after Brownlow. The noise became suddenly louder and the men realised the vehicle had emerged round the bend in the road away to their left.

Brownlow called 'The Brens, Corp, the Brens' as Kelly clambered into the truck. He emerged a second later carrying the three machine guns. He gave them to Brownlow.

'Good man, Corp. And the Berettas. Then a few rifles.'

'Coming up, Sarge.'

Kelly handed the weapons down and jumped out of the truck.

Brownlow was waiting for him. 'Right. Now, everyone, just keep quiet and still. OK? They might be locals, or they might be jerries. They might not see us back here, and just keep going. Mr. Dodd, Sir, can you tell the boys?' But Dodd was already on it, talking quietly to the Italians.

Brownlow spoke quietly and calmly to Kelly again, as the noise from the hidden vehicle told them it was getting close. 'Right, Corp, if they look like stopping, I want you to take Watson and Green.' He handed each of them a Bren. 'Get up above 'em.' He pointed to the hillside to their right. 'And if it turns out they're jerries, and they come looking, keep 'em occupied. Lots o' noise. Make sure you don't let 'em get above you. We'll come in from the side. All right?' Kelly nodded.

'All right, lads, now get down low, keep still, and like the donkey, OK?'

The engine noise suddenly became louder still as the vehicle ground past the little dip between the hills, then muffled again, as it moved behind the next hill. Brownlow looked up, and his worst fears were confirmed: he only saw the roof of the cab, and the metal framework over the back of the truck, but that was enough – a German military truck. He held his breath as he watched the sliver of metal pass behind the hill to his right. He sensed, rather than heard, movement around him as the soldiers relaxed, and hissed 'Quiet! Keep still!'

The sound of the engine began to fade. But then, there was a squeal of brakes, a door slammed, followed by shouts. Dodd said quietly 'He's telling them to get out, and bring their weapons.'

Brownlow was on his feet instantly. 'Right, Corp, Watson, Green. Off you go, quick as you can. Lots of noise, soon as you're ready, and remember, don't let 'em get above you.'

Kelly led his minute army off at a run towards the tree covered hill.

Brownlow turned back to the remaining men. 'Mr. Dodd, Sir, you're with me. Keep close: I need you to tell the chaps ...' He nodded to the Italians.

'Now, Tullett and Burgess, I need you experienced blokes to guard the vehicles. We can't afford to lose 'em. Get rifles and get under cover in the trees back there. Anybody gets past us, shoot 'em, OK?'

They both nodded reluctantly, feeling excluded from the main action. But they knew the sergeant was right, the trucks had to be safe, and, collecting rifles, trotted off into the trees above the glade.

'Now, Sir, we're going put the pressure on 'em, yes? We're going to form a line across the trees' he pointed from the dip down to the road, to the trees to his right, 'and soon as we hear Kelly firing, we're going to slowly move forward and push 'em back. Understand?' Dodd nodded and translated for the Italians, who exchanged nervous glances.

Brownlow noticed. 'Tell the boys it'll be all right. Tell 'em just to watch me and do what I do. There's probably only a few down there, and we've got position and firepower. Tell 'em that.'

Dodd passed it on, but it didn't seem to make them any happier.

As soon as he got into position, Kelly saw movement in the trees below him, and unleashed a spray of bullets. Watson took the hint, and followed suit. Green pulled the trigger of his Bren several times without any result, until, half panicking, half crying, he remembered to flick the safety switch off, and joined in, though he had no idea what he was firing at. Near panic turned to

exultation and he whooped with delight as below him, leaves, twigs, and bits of bark jumped and flew about under the flail of bullets.

A stinging pain at the side of his head brought him back to earth. He'd been struck by a sliver of wood. He suddenly realised he'd been so jubilant at the act of shooting at some hidden enemy, that he was standing in the open, and they were firing back!

He dropped, and rolled into the cover of a tree. He closed his eyes for a second, thanking providence he was still alive, then cautiously peeped round the tree trunk. Immediately, there was a shocking 'thunk' and a large lump of bark exploded off the tree, inches from his face. Instinctively, he pulled back into relative safety. Shit! He looked round. Where were the others? Were they still alive, still shooting? To his relief, he saw movement to his right and watched Kelly on his belly, squirming forward, firing single shots, and further over, Watson kept station with him, doing the same. He heard voices, and suddenly, it came to him that his name was being called. Kelly shouted again. 'Green! Gilbert! You all right?'

Green raised a shaky hand in acknowledgement, and wondered what to do. Looking round, he saw another tree close by ahead and to his left. Taking a deep breath, he lunged out of the safety of his tree, and bellied towards his target. He felt a sudden tug at his boot as a bullet gouged a groove, but kept going, into the lee of the tree. When he got there, he let loose a downhill spray of bullets and abuse, before looking round once more for the others. They were still a bit ahead of him, but not moving forward any more, just firing occasional bursts, though Green couldn't see what they were firing at.

Then, below and well to his left, Green heard a new wave of shooting, and heard Kelly calling out. 'You right, Bill?'

'Absolutely, Corporal! Great fun, eh?' Green was shocked to notice a jocular tone in Watson's voice, as though he was really enjoying himself!

Then, from Kelly, 'You right, Gilbert?'

Green tried to sound unconcerned. 'Yeah, Corp. I'm fine.'

'Beauty! That shooting you're hearing will be the sergeant pressing into 'em from the side. All we need to do is keep 'em from getting up here. OK?'

That sounded good to Green. 'Right, Corp.'

'And don't go down any further, all right? We don't want to run up against Brownlow.'

Green actually laughed! As if he was thinking of going any further!

When Brownlow heard the Brens firing from up in the trees, he checked that his little army of four Italians were spaced out in a line, two each side of him, all looking anxiously at him, and that Dodd was close by his side. Brownlow waved both arms forward, as though rounding up chickens, and started walking slowly forward. His Italian shadows kept silent formation.

They were quickly into the edge of the timber. Brownlow crouched behind a tree and watched as his mimics did the same. Then he held out his sub-machine gun and mimed firing it in a spraying action. He received anxious nods, then stood away from his tree and fired a short burst into the trees. He heard yells on both sides as the Italians copied him. His first thought was they'd been hit, but he quickly realised that like Green, their sense of danger that someone in the trees was waiting to try to kill them had been overwhelmed by the primeval sense of power that came with threshing a stand of timber, and quite possibly, the people in it.

Brownlow checked that Dodd was right behind him and said 'Mr. Dodd, tell Angelo and Dino to get ready to give covering fire while the rest of us move forward on my signal. You stay right with me.' Dodd called out the instructions and got excited acknowledgements. Brownlow shouted 'Go!' and ran forward a few paces to another tree, conscious of the firing from both sides, and Dodd collided with his back. 'Right, Sir. Now tell 'em we'll cover 'em as they come up to us.' Dodd translated, and once again, Brownlow shouted 'Go!' as he fired short bursts into the trees. He watched as Dino and Angelo came forward, but then, to his horror, Dino went down, scrabbling at this face. Angelo saw it too, and went berserk. He started running forward, his Beretta held at his waist, firing wildly and shouting, shouting. Brownlow saw what was happening, and realised the only thing to do was to support Angelo and hope the surprise would be enough to bewilder the enemy and scare them off. He started running and firing too. The other Italians followed their instructions to do exactly what he did, so suddenly, there was a wild charge through the trees behind a hail of bullets that caused mayhem in front of them, twigs, leaves, bark and the occasional whole branch dancing and crashing under the onslaught.

Within a few seconds they were at the truck, in time to see two or three German soldiers running for their truck, but instead of getting in, they ran behind it and ducked down.

Brownlow heard movement behind him and Kelly shouted 'You mad bastards! What was that about?'

Breathless, Brownlow managed to call back. 'They got Dino, and Angelo went fuckin' barmy, so I thought we'd better back him up. Get down here quick, Corp, and we'll finish this job off. There's a few of 'em hiding behind their transport, but they don't seem keen to put up a fight.'

As if to show they'd heard that, and wholeheartedly agreed, a handkerchief waved from behind the truck. Dodd, who, though unarmed, had faithfully stuck to his task of staying right by Brownlow, shouted in German that they were to stand up and move clear of the lorry. This they did, and then, on instructions, walked up the road towards where Dodd stood, their hands in the air.

As they moved forward, Kelly and his men showed themselves and clambered down through the trees. Kelly looked at the group watching the Germans approach, and said 'I thought you said Dino got shot?'

Brownlow grunted agreement.

'He don't look all that shot to me, Sarge'

Brownlow spun round, and saw everybody was present, and upright. Dino became the centre of attention and Dodd asked him what had happened, then burst out laughing. 'He ran into a spiders web!'

Brownlow froze for a moment, while the others watched, waiting to see him go barmy himself, but the mood was broken by the arrival of their prisoners, and Brownlow grinned and clouted Dino round the ear, but only gently, then called him a dozy daft bastard, which Dino took to be a compliment.

The whole episode had taken maybe ten minutes, maybe less, from start to finish.

A few minutes later, everyone was back in the glade, resuming the brewing up that had been abridged by the arrival of the Germans. Bimbo had taken up his guarding the prisoners role and

had the three Germans sitting with their backs to the British three tonner. Dodd interrogated them, but their main attention was on the giant Bimbo.

After a while, Dodd stood clear of them and announced 'Right, chaps, here's their story. There were five of them when they started out, so we're missing two. Sergeant, we'd better get a couple of men back down to their vehicle in a hurry. We don't want them getting away and'

Kelly interrupted. 'No need for that, Sir. There's a couple of bodies back in the trees.'

Dodd was shaken. It was the first time the life and death seriousness of their action had struck him. 'Oh. Injured, are they?' he enquired hopefully.

Kelly recognised Dodd's emotion, and bit back a harsh reply. 'Sorry, Sir. When you get in the way of a burst from a Bren' He left the sentence unfinished.

Dodd blanched, and walked off a few yards, staring down the empty stream bed towards the beautiful country below them. Brownlow knew how he felt: in some ways, it was just as shocking as having one of your own people shot. It was the sudden realisation of the responsibility that got you. Brownlow decided to give him a minute and said 'All right, I'll just go down and drive their vehicle back up here, out of the way. Then Mr Dodd can finish telling us what're they're about, and we'll decide what to do from here.'

By the time Brownlow had got the German truck into the clearing, Dodd was back with the group, even paler than usual, but in control of himself. He explained that the Germans were from the far western flank of their forces, pulling back as fast as they could, and their unit had somehow got cut off from the main force. They'd had no supplies and were out looking for food, when they'd been strafed by an Allied fighter plane which had chased them through the country tracks. By the time the airman had tired of his sport, they were completely lost. They were still trying to figure out where they were, when they happened to spot the trucks parked off the road, and had decided to investigate and maybe ask for directions.

Dodd concluded, 'And their only driver was one of the ones who So, they couldn't even drive away. Anyway, just bad luck for their little outing, all the way along, eh? Question is, what do we do with them now? Obviously, we can't take them with us, so ?'

In the silence that followed, the men all found something to be examining closely, until Watson suggested 'I vote we let them go.' This brought a hubbub of dissent, until Watson said 'What choice is there? They can't come with us, and we can't shoot 'em, so what else can we do? And what if we do let them go? They don't even know where they are, and it's obviously a long way back to their lines, even if they can catch them up. And by the time they do find their way back, we'll be long gone.'

A short silence fell while Dodd quietly related Watson's thoughts to the Italians. Angelo saw the point immediately, and smiled. 'Bene, Billy, bene.' Suddenly, everybody thought it a brilliant idea. Dodd told the Germans what was going to happen – they looked a little uncertain, perhaps wondering if this was some sort of a trick .

The sergeant then started getting things organised once again. 'Right. Tullett and Green, you were on cookhouse duty, yes? All right, get on with it then. We'll be losing the light soon. And we'll be needing to do the business for the ...' He was about to say, the dead men, but, out of sympathy to Dodd, just flicked his head towards the trees. Dodd got the Germans on their feet and sharing a shovel from the British truck's kit, and, with Bimbo to watch over them and Brownlow in charge, they set off back into the trees.

While the burial party was away, the remainder sat in a circle of silence, apart from the little domestic sounds of the meal being prepared. Soon the little group was back, and dispersed into the circle. Brownlow reported that they'd got the bodies down to the roadside and buried them there, with markers made from branches, so that they could be easily found.

The meal was served then, but the silence remained, the whole assembly cloaked in, well, not melancholy exactly, more a sombre realisation. Each man was reflecting on what had taken place, and his part in it. All of them, Tullett and Burgess excepted, wondered if it was their shots that had caused the deaths of the Germans. Except Dodd, of course, but he felt himself responsible anyway. For Green and Watson, and all the Italians, there was the satisfaction, elation, even, of having been under fire, and coped all right, mixed with the awful recognition that it might have been each of them that had killed a man, maybe two. It made a man think. And for the seasoned soldiers, Brownlow, Kelly, Burgess and Tullett, there was the familiar feeling of there but for the grace of God

The silence hung as the darkness crept in, until Burgess sat up straight, cleared his throat and said 'As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted

The wave of laughter broke the philosophical mood, the tension drained away, and soon there was the usual exchange of cigarettes and falsehoods.

Green took off his boot and proudly passed it round, and everybody examined where the bullet had gouged it. Kelly mentioned that Green had more arse than a working bullock, to have got away with that, an Australianism the men didn't understand, but they were used to Kelly's odd expressions by now, and didn't bother asking for an explanation.

Giovanni wished he'd had a bullet hit his boot, too. What stories he could tell about that! But he looked at his own boots, and thought, *No! Are these not brand new boots! And would not a nasty furrow like that spoil them?*

Later, much later, most of the men were still awake, but quiet now. Every now and then, someone would stir to light a cigarette, someone would catch their eye, and the cigarette would be silently shared as they went over in their minds what they'd done, and how they'd felt.

These were men who'd been under fire together, and that made a difference. Without realising it as such, and certainly without speaking of it, they had truly become, as Angelo had called them, brothers in arms.

They were all astir early, and as soon as the sun gave them enough light through a bit of haze, fed, mostly packed up and close to ready.

It reminded the Australian corporal of his times droving cattle in the bush, when the men were always breakfasted, packed up and ready to start the beasts moving as soon as the sun came up. Often enough, after good rain there was an early mist back then too, low down so from a distance, only the top half of the cattle were visible. Same musty smell as well: moist, but dusty, too. He'd done a couple of jobs droving sheep, but disliked the sheep work – they were far too stupid, but the cattle, well, they were fractious for a few days, especially when you got a mob fresh from the scrub, which was mostly, but they soon got the hang of it, and settled down to a routine. There was always the ones that liked to be out front, and those that preferred following along at the back, and once they'd got all that sorted out, life on the drove was usually pretty straightforward. Unless something spooked them, when all hell broke loose. Kelly recalled the

time, he was still a bit green and doing pretty much his first stint on the night watch, just riding slowly round the mob, talking to them and occasionally breaking into a quiet song, just to keep them settled, when for no reason he ever discovered, might have been a snake, but it might just as well have been a falling twig, or nothing at all, one took fright and in a second, they were all off, eight hundred head of bush steers careering off into the night.

Kelly paused and smiled as he remembered that mad gallop through the scrub, could hardly see a thing, relying on his horse to keep away from the trees that would wipe him off the saddle, knowing it was up to him to get in front of the mob and turn them before they hurled themselves into a dried up river bed, and half of them broke a leg while the other half trampled all over them. He'd managed it though, and had them down to a walk when the rest of the men caught up. He recalled how delighted and proud of himself he'd been, but nobody had said anything, not even when they got back to camp, but old Billy Wilson, the boss drover, had caught his eye and nodded a single nod, and that had meant the world to Kelly.

He snapped from his reverie, as Brownlow called him to help siphon off the petrol from the German truck; there wasn't much, but every little helped - and then they smashed the engine's distributor cover, to make sure the prisoners couldn't somehow get back and manage to drive it away. Then, in an odd little ceremony, the Germans had been given some food, water and cigarettes before being sent on their way.

The mood was different this morning - more, well, conspiratorial - as the men began to get used to their new closeness. Finally, as if to show they were all one, amid jokes and grins, Dino wandered over to share Brownlow's cab, so Dodd clambered up into Angelo's old truck, and they were off. As they jinked and staggered along the track, almost invisible in places but for the gaps in the trees, Dodd came to wonder out loud how it came to be there at all. It didn't appear to lead anywhere, there were no villages up here, no farmsteads, even, to justify its existence. Angelo explained.

'You remember, *Colonello*, that it wasn't so long ago - a hundred, maybe two hundred years' (ancient history wasn't one of Angelo's strong suits: by allowing a century variation, he was pretty sure he'd got the period covered) 'that Italy was still just a lot of little countries, principalities, dukedoms, and so on.'

He fluttered a hand, to indicate a certain lack of clarity on the subject. 'And each of them levied a kind of customs duty at their border on any goods that entered or left. So if a farmer wanted to sell his produce over a border, he would lose a lot of his profit in duties. At any rate, it got so bad that trying to go right through one principality to sell in the next but one was unrewarding - any profit got lost in duties. Now, remember, that was going on for many many years. So over that time, farmers and traders began to travel up here, through the foothills, to keep out of the way of the customs posts. This road goes from way down south, right up to, I don't know how far, I've never been to the end of it. Some even say, right up as far as Rome itself. Rome!'

Angelo blew out his breath through pursed lips, as though to demonstrate scepticism.

'You'll see a bit of history in a little while - there's the ruins of a castle one of these princes built, above the road, high on the tip of the headland we need to pass. The story goes that he thought that was the best place to build it, above the road, so nobody could get past without paying their duty. And to make sure, he built a tall watchtower so he could see even further, to make sure people couldn't try to sneak past off the road. But he made two mistakes, *Colonello*,

so the story goes. The tower faced east, over the farming country - he didn't realise that the people were already using this new road up here to bypass his land. And he'd miscalculated: the watchtower cost so much that he ran out of money before the castle was finished, and he was ruined. Of course, the local people stole anything worth taking away, and destroyed the rest – it's just a pile of boulders now - but they left the tower standing, just as a reminder to anybody else who might think of trying.'

Angelo nodded firm agreement that that was the correct thing to do, and continued, 'The road we're on fell into disuse after all the old borders disappeared, but for the last ten years, since Mussolini started stealing all the farm produce, we've taken to moving stuff around and storing it up here. We've already passed a couple of stores, hidden away in the trees, this morning. Maybe more.'

'Really! I'm amazed. I haven't noticed anything!'

Angelo smiled. 'Well, if you could see them, they wouldn't be hidden, would they?'

Dodd chuckled. 'You're not worried about one of them telling the Germans or the police they've seen us?'

'Who would they tell, up here? And why? It's none of their business if we want to drive along this track. In any case, it would be against all tradition to tell anybody in authority about even the existence of this road, and they might be asked awkward questions about what they were doing on it themselves.'

Angelo nodded again, emphatically, as if to say, that was the end of it.

Chapter 5

By the end of the morning, they were almost at the far eastern point of the gigantic spur. Angelo stopped his vehicle on a bend in the road which stood on a small high point, a tiny echo of the promontory above them, from where they had a panoramic view of the countryside. To the east, the country was what they had become used to, when they got a glimpse of it, though the track had brought them down almost to the lower edge of the trees now, and the fairyland fields, with their luminous red farmhouse rooftops, lay draped over the hilly terrain all the way to the hazy distance. Towards the north, the view was the same, with the interesting difference that from up here, they could see that while the mountain range and its forested foothills swung back sharply towards the west, a road, an actual road, broke away and headed more or less north, wide open and glimpsed here and there for miles, snaking round among the hills. And looking back to their right, they could see the same road, bouncing back among the hills to the south. From far away to the south east, there was the distant, but distinct, occasional crump and rumble of artillery.

Clearly, a brew up was called for. Angelo pointed ahead, to where a washed away section of track indicated the presence of a creek bed, and, sure enough, the shallow fissure allowed the drivers to turn the vehicles off the track, sloshing up the crystal rivulet until they were out of sight of the road, for the sake of Brownlow's peace of mind.

While the water boiled, a conference assembled in a circle round the little stove, with Watson hesitantly interpreting what the Italians said – he missed a fair bit here and there, and was occasionally completely incorrect, but as long as he got the gist of it, Dodd considered that good enough - while Dodd translated into Italian.

Obviously, as the distant percussion told them, they were definitely behind the enemy lines, and they would be sitting ducks if they were spotted crossing that great open area they'd glimpsed just now. But Angelo pointed out that there was a river maybe ten kilometres away to the north. The river was all but impassable among the lower slopes of the mountains, and a bridge had been built to take the road over it at the first place a crossing was possible. And, as is the way of these things, a village had built up at the crossing, which would make a passage through it dangerous. They could go back on themselves, and go up higher to seek out a crossing place Angelo knew of further up into the mountains, or risk a crossing of the rolling plain below them, and make for the bridge. Angelo estimated that, in addition to going through the village and across the bridge, they would have to go about twenty five kilometres in the open, which would take them, all being well, just a bit more than an hour, against all day, or more, among the hills. And as for the petrol situation, Angelo grimaced, and his mates copied him. No need for the non-committal shrug now – he did not have enough petrol to go way back and then force his truck through the rough country higher up, and he supposed the British truck was in the same condition.

Angelo concluded 'If I were you, *Colonello*, I'd carry on following *this* road.'

Dodd, who was mulling over the fact that going back and up was out of the question, against the risk of being found in the open, was caught out by the thought that there might be another option. 'What? What do you mean?'

'Well, *Colonello*, down there,' he indicated with a twitch of his head, 'that's what we call the new road, and this' he stamped, to make it clear which was which, 'is the old road.'

Watson, who was concentrating hard on translating for his mates, unconsciously copied the stamp. Angelo went on. 'Now, just down there, a kilometre, maybe a bit more, the old road joins up with the new, and goes round the base of the mountain, yes?'

Dodd nodded.

'But after that, the old road' he stamped again, in case Dodd was not keeping up, 'carries on in among the trees, like this, and there is a crossing place where we can get over the river, while the new road goes through the open country.'

Dodd was annoyed; he told his men that it was obvious that they should simply get on to the new road while it rounded the spur, then move back onto this track. They could have decided that yesterday, he said, with an uncharacteristic snap in his voice, if Angelo had mentioned the issue earlier.

Kelly, who had found a spot to gaze down at the panorama below, squatted on his heels in that uniquely uncomfortable Australian way, watching a line of maybe six trucks grinding southwards along the road, silent at this distance, called 'Listen, chaps, I reckon you might want to have a squizz at this before you make a final decision. But just keep low, eh.'

The soldiers exchanged glances and crept, half crouched, to join the corporal, while the Italians, not quite sure what was going on but anxious not to miss out, moved with them.

The group stared out at the vista for a few seconds, then Watson broke the silence. 'What're we looking at, Corporal?' Watson held Kelly's abilities with explosives in awe, and still often called him by his rank.

Kelly turned and regarded Watson, then the others. 'You don't notice anything?'

They all looked baffled, and looked again.

He gave them a clue. 'On the road. Look at the road.'

Silence.

'Strike me lucky, boys. Don't you see?'

Silence again.

'Traffic! There's vehicles on the road.'

Dodd almost jumped. 'Oh, yes! I see now! It all looked so ordinary, I didn't notice!'

Brownlow was next to realise the significance. 'Oh, yeah! Shit! If we go that way, we'll have to cross that road. And look, people, too, going the other way. They'll be wassnames, refugees, I expect, trying to keep out of the way of the fighting.'

They crouched there for a minute longer, then, in dribs and drabs, moved back to stand once more around the stove, in morose silence this time.

Dodd did his take-the-hat-off-and-scrub-the-head gesture. 'All right: where does that leave us? Now, just for the record, Sergeant, we don't want to *cross* the road, we need to drive along it for, er, hang on a minute ...' He switched to Italian and spoke to Angelo, then came back to English. 'Angelo thinks we'd need to stay on the road for about three kilometres, that's about, oh, say two miles. So that'd take, say, er, let's allow ten minutes. Now, Corporal, would you say they were military vehicles?'

'Just a guess at the minute, but I'd say definitely, Sir. We've not seen any civilian motor traffic at all, barring Angelo, have we? And if they were civvies, why would there suddenly be so many of 'em, and why would they be going south?'

Dodd agreed and looked at Brownlow, who nodded a despondent agreement.

Exasperated and frustrated, Dodd exploded at Angelo. 'For goodness sake, Angelo. Why didn't you think about this before? We can't go back, and now we find we can't go forward, either. Didn't it occur to you that we'd end up in this situation? Now look where you've led us!'

Angelo was shocked, as was everybody else. They'd not seen Dodd lose his temper before. 'Are you not the *Colonello*, Dodd? And am I not just a farmer? I have driven that road many times without incident. If it is a problem for you' He shrugged, as if to say that he couldn't be expected to anticipate all Dodd's little foibles.

The lieutenant stood for a long moment, head down, deflated, as though a favourite student had presented a hopeless essay, then puffed out his cheeks, accepting the situation, and continued 'Well, let's assume they're Germans. We've already decided going back is not an option, so we'll have to consider what else we can do. Sergeant, what do you think?'

'You know what I'm going to say, Sir. We need information. We need confirmation they're military, and they're German, though I don't see how it could anything else. And we need to know if there's much of it. Maybe what we saw was all there is. Or maybe it's just the occasional vehicle or two, and we might be able to take a chance on whipping round onto the track on the other side without anyone seeing. So I reckon we'd best get someone down closer to the road, just to check whose transport it is, and keep a watch on the numbers as well, which we can do from up here. All right, Mr Dodd, Sir?'

Dodd nodded. 'I agree. I'll pop down to the road and get a closer look' but when Kelly said it'd be best if he went, Dodd didn't argue, grateful that he wouldn't have to clamber back up that steep slope. Kelly left immediately.

In the meantime, Brownlow organised shifts, an hour for each man, to carefully study the volume of traffic on the road from their little lookout, until it got dark. He exempted Dodd, but the lieutenant, a little embarrassed at giving up the trip down the hill so easily, insisted on being included, and took the first watch.

Dusk fell early on this side of the mountains. The men prepared their evening meal and began eating as soon as Bimbo finished his watch.

Kelly had returned long ago, confirming what they already knew, deep down: the southbound trucks were all German, though they all had the canvas covering their loads done up, and Kelly had been unable to see what they were carrying. He estimated they were all keeping to about fifteen to twenty miles an hour, which Dodd converted for the Italians to about twenty five kilometres an hour.

Dodd now led the conversation. 'All right. We know who they are. Now, how many, and how often? I can tell you that in my hour, which was about noon to one pm, I saw twenty two vehicles, mostly those covered trucks, and a couple of tankers, going south. The main pattern I saw was two convoys of five, and two of six, with about twenty to thirty seconds between each vehicle in the convoy. There was one break of twenty minutes between convoys, but I'd say that mainly, the gap was probably only about ten minutes. And there was also one column of trucks going north. Now, who was next?'

Like a schoolboy, Burgess raised his hand. 'That was me, Sir.' He consulted a scrap of paper and cleared his throat. 'Two oh eight, convoy of five trucks, all German, heading south.' He studied the paper again, and was about to continue, when the sergeant intervened. 'Just a summary'll do, thanks, son.'

Burgess, a little put out after all his painstaking and laborious jotting, confirmed a similar pattern of traffic to Dodd, and he had also seen two columns of military vehicles going north. But not to be thwarted of a moment of attention, Burgess concluded 'Any rate, I crept down and found meself a comfy little spot pretty close to the road,' he glanced at Brownlow, 'not too close, obviously, but close enough so I could get a fair look at the people walking. You know, the refugees, like. Pitiful lot, they were too. Most of 'em looked like they'd lost interest, you know? Just putting one foot in front of the other, just followin' along.'

Dodd was about to reprimand him for his lack of sympathy, but he noted something in Burgess' tone, maybe subconsciously learned from his time questioning prisoners, that made him hold back, and the young man continued. 'Poor bastards, eh? Some' of 'em with little 'and carts full o' bits an' bobs, all they've got, I s'pose, some with prams piled 'igh an' carryin' the baby, with a couple o' kids an' all, some with just a suitcase, some with less than that, maybe a parcel done up in paper. Imagine that, boys – walkin' along, carryin' everything you own. I seen a bloke, 'e'd got a 'orse an' cart – well, I say a 'orse, me uncle Ted would ha' called it a gluepot walkin' - any rate, it was loaded up with sacks an' boxes full o' stuff, an' on top'o' all 'is kit, there was 'undreds o' little kids, seemed like, gettin' a ride, an' a bunch o' women totterin' along behind, their mums, I 'spect. An' just down from where I was, there was this woman sittin' by the side, 'avin' a bit of a rest. Right bugged, she looked, too. 'Er 'ead was right down on 'er chest, like. She's got two little kids sat by 'er an' a babe in arms. So this bloke with the cart, he stops right by 'er, an' goes round the back o' the cart, an' just chucks a suitcase in the ditch, then 'e puts the two little 'uns on the cart, 'n' whacks the woman on the seat where 'e was sittin'. Then 'e goes round the front, grabs the 'orse by the bridle, an' off they all go. Far as I could see, none of 'em said a word. 'Ow's that, boys? All right?'

Burgess nodded firmly, to emphasise his point, while the others wondered why they hadn't thought of getting closer to the road themselves.

'But the best thing was,' Burgess continued, now he had his audience hooked, 'there was this old chap with one o' them ice cream bikes. You know? With two wheels in front and a great big tub between 'em for the ice cream?' He waited for acknowledgement, then continued. 'Well, d'you ever see a double one? With two tubs side by side?'

Nods from most of his audience and Watson exclaimed 'Yes, of course! Strawberry and vanilla!'

'Well, this old chap's got the double one, see? An' in one, there's the suitcase and a load of other stuff pokin' out, an' in the other one, there's this little old lady, sittin' there, bright as a button she looked, lookin' all round, an' smilin', like she's on an outing!'

Tullett summed it up. 'Kin' 'ell!'

Man after man reported, and a clear pattern began to emerge, by and large confirming what Dodd had seen – small convoys of between five or six vehicles going south, mostly trucks with an occasional tanker, each vehicle well spaced, and each convoy separated by around ten or fifteen minutes. There were more vehicles travelling north as well, with much the same pattern of dispersal. Brownlow had professionally approved of the spread, explaining that the wide dispersal would make air attack unprofitable, though, as a professional, he was surprised that none of them had any sort of advance guard, or even any lookouts, as far as anybody had seen. Obviously, way back behind the fighting front, the Germans were not expecting any trouble.

‘All right,’ Said Dodd, ‘let’s see what we can make of all this. Any thoughts, Sergeant?’

Brownlow was ready for him, and cunningly volleyed. ‘I’m still digesting it all, Sir. Could you sum up for us?’

Dodd was pleased, though he knew the sergeant would have made his own analysis already. ‘Oh, right. Well, as I see it, this is the problem. If we go back, we’ll run out of petrol, so we’ll just have to wait for our troops to go past us, then give up. I must say, I’m not at all in favour of that.’

He received vigorous agreement from his soldiers, and when he translated the “go back” proposition for the Italians, they all glowered, and he thought for a moment he was going to be treated to another outburst of posturing and hat kicking, but they settled for a short speech from Dino, more emphatic because he rarely said anything much.

Dodd advised his men ‘Yes, well, that’s not really a surprise. Dino says they’ll be going on with us or without. So, what else?’ He used a trick he’d employed back in Oxford to keep his students attention, and selected one of his audience at random. ‘Green?’

Green looked startled for a second. ‘Well, Sir, I was wondering if there was any chance of getting some petrol from somewhere? You know, maybe there’s a village back down there where we could just buy some?’

Dodd let him down lightly. ‘Yes, I’d had the same thought myself, and I asked Angelo about it. He said that as far as he knew, he’d had the only store of petrol the military hadn’t taken for a thousand kilometres. I imagine that’s a bit of exaggeration, but if anybody has any, they’ll have it very well hidden. So, no, the only people who’ve got any fuel are the Germans.’

Watson, relieved that Green had asked the question, because he’d been about to ask it himself, added ‘Yes, Gilbert, so could you pop down to the road with a petrol can? I’m sure they’d be happy to help.’

Green grumbled that at least he’d had something to say and Watson gave him a gentle punch on the shoulder by way of apology.

Dodd continued ‘Yes, well, that little matter’s cleared up, so we can definitely eliminate going backward on ourselves. I think we can also rule out going over this headland from here: it’s simply too steep, too rugged, too heavily wooded. All agreed on that?’

While Dodd repeated the question for the Italians, several of the soldiers turned to look upwards again. Dodd then interrupted the shaking heads and muttered negatives.

‘So, where does that leave us? It means we *have* to get round the headland, one way or another. Now, what did we decide about driving round? We believe we’d need to travel about two miles or more on the road, if Angelo’s estimate is right, which we reckon will take about ten minutes, allowing time to get onto the road and off again without being seen. There’s regularly a gap between convoys of ten or fifteen minutes, so, if all went well, *and* Angelo’s estimate of the distance is right, *and* we didn’t run up against a closer than usual convoy, we could just about get round. Any comments?’

Brownlow chewed his lip for a second, then said ‘I’m not thrilled, Sir, not thrilled at all. I dunno if we should take a risk on getting round between convoys. For a start-off, what if Angelo’s wrong about how far it is? He’s not been all that brilliant on distances so far, has he? He only needs to be half a mile out, and we’re stranded. Or there’s heaps of other things could go wrong. We’ve seen there’s a more or less steady stream of refugees going north. What if we

come up behind one o' them farm carts and he won't let us past? Or his cart breaks a wheel and tips his load all over the road?'

The young soldiers gaped at the sergeant, aghast. None of that had occurred to any of them, but as Brownlow spoke, they could see the rightness of what he was saying. Tullett nodded and said solemnly 'Be a fuckin' shambles, eh, Sarge?'

Brownlow's eyes narrowed for a second as he wondered if Tullett was taking the piss, but nodded and summed up. 'Hell of a risk, I reckon, eh Mr Dodd, Sir? Hell of a risk. Too much.'

Dodd didn't try to argue – he agreed completely. 'All right. So, what else is there?'

After Dodd had brought the Italians up to date, a long and gloomy silence fell, eventually broken by Kelly. 'What about at night? D'you reckon they'll keep going all night?'

Glad to be doing something useful, the men sorted out a timetable for keeping watch on the road overnight, and Green, the first man up, left immediately to stumble as unobtrusively as possible down the steep slope in the darkening murk.

Dodd did his little hand clap gesture, to get the remaining men's attention. 'Now, I think a small fire would be safe enough, don't you, Sergeant?'

'I think so, Sir, long as its only small, and well back from the track, and between the trucks, lads. I reckon we need a bite and a brew up, eh? And while we wait for Green, let's keep thinking, yes?'

As the darkness began to envelop them, the men crouched around a tiny fire, more for the comforting glow than for warmth, and took up expressions of what they hoped looked like intense concentration. Tullett, for example, appeared to be lost in thought, staring blindly up at the peaks, silhouetted black now, against the remains of the daylight. Burgess noticed, and tried to screw his brow up into ever deeper furrows, which he imagined made him look thoughtful, but in fact merely resulted in a scowl fit to scare a seaside landlady. And he soon had to give it up, the effort was giving him cramp and he had to massage his temples to ease it. Truth be told, though, Tullett was thinking how those two peaks reminded him of a nice pair of tits, but to be fair, he was a young man of twenty three – most things made him think of a pair of tits.

It was really only Dodd, Brownlow and Kelly who were used to thinking for themselves, and the others, including the Italians, felt that realistically, they couldn't be expected to come up with something worth considering.

So it came as a small surprise to Kelly when Watson took him aside and whispered to him. As Watson spoke, a small grin appeared on Kelly's face, and he nodded enthusiastically before addressing the group.

'Hey, you blokes, Bill here's had a bit of an idea. If we can't go all the way on the road, maybe we can at least get across it, eh? And once we're across, and into the paddicks, er, fields, on the other side, maybe we can get round that way. What d'you reckon, Boss? Sarge?'

The idea was met unenthusiastically, the general feeling being that it would be all but impossible for the vehicles to traverse even the tiny fields, never mind the hedges and walls enclosing them, and especially not while remaining invisible to the road.

Watson spoke up. 'Yes, we know it's a bit of a long shot, but we're willing to slip down and have a stroll about, you know, just for a look. All right with you, Sir?'

Dodd was happy to clutch at any straw, and glanced at Brownlow, who had no better ideas, and gave a minute shrug, so Dodd agreed and asked when they would go. ‘Oh, soon as Gilbert gets back, if that’s all right, and we’ll go down with Johnny.’

Green clambered back through the darkness to report that the vehicles had kept coming along much as they had before, the only difference being that the slits of their headlight beams were all but useless, and they seemed to be going slowly as a result. The only real change was that the dribble of refugees had dried up for the night.

Burgess slunk off to take a turn on watch, accompanied by Kelly and Watson, sent on their way with the sergeant’s reminder about the forest being different at night, and to remember the story about the donkey.

The others discussed whether the slower moving vehicles would help, but decided it was all relative: the Germans would take more time to traverse the vital section of road, but Dodd’s group would also be handicapped by the darkness, because it would take a lot longer to get round and off the main road again. So night-time only made things worse, really, unless the gap between convoys increased at night.

And as the night passed, and man after man came back with the same dispiriting information, the chance of a night passage on the road dwindled to zero, and the sleepers turned and mumbled restlessly.

The rising sun took the early morning chill from the eastern slopes of the mountains. Thick cables of mist, like the ghosts of enormous snakes, oozed down the dry stream bed and sidled round the trucks before slithering on downwards.

The little fire had long since burnt itself out: it had been there mainly to warm their evening meal, and to give the men something to sit around. But now the first men to wake shivered and grumbled because Kelly wasn’t here to light the little petrol stove, a task that had become his own, mainly because everybody else was a bit frightened of it.

Dodd, the only other person prepared to try to coax the stove into life, pumped and primed, fussed and fiddled with it, putting off the evil moment as long as possible, but finally struck a match and held it to the stove, which hissed and spat for a long moment, before giving its customary “whoomp” then settling down to its comforting faint roar, and the familiar smell of singed hairs from Dodd’s forearm wafted among the men.

Green fretted about his mate. ‘D’you reckon they’re all right. Sarge? They’ve been gone a long time, eh?’

Brownlow considered that for a bit, sucking his lip, then responded sympathetically. ‘Well son, I reckon that’s a good sign, don’t you? Means they’ve been to check the passage all the way round, maybe.’

He had no need to develop his theory, because at that moment, Kelly and Watson staggered out from the trees below them, filthy and weary. They were immediately engulfed with handshakes and questions, which Green fended off as best he could while he thrust mugs of coffee at the adventurers and fussily got them seated in the midst of an attentive audience.

Kelly spoke first. ‘Well, boys, we’ve been right round to the other side, and a fair cow of a trip it was, eh, Bill?’

‘Absolutely right, Corporal.’

‘Yep, I’ll tell you what, we were flat out making *any* progress some of the time, fair dinkum we were. Never mind half the ground being ploughed, so that’d be real hard for the trucks, there’s all these stone walls everywhere, and where there’s not a wall, there’s a hedge with a ditch all along it.’

Kelly saw Dodd was about to interrupt, and carried on quickly. ‘Sure, there’s gateways for each field, but the gates don’t always lead in the direction we’d want to go. Now, maybe you *could* find your way through, sooner or later, but it’s a proper maze down there, my bloody word it is. You could wander round all right, climbing over the walls, but with the vehicles’ He shook his head. ‘So bugger me dead, Boss, I reckon it’s a no go, and Bill reckons the same, don’t you Bill?’

Watson nodded sagely but said nothing, and let the moment hang, looking at the glum faces all round. The Italians didn’t know what was being said, but didn’t need an interpreter to know it wasn’t good news. Angelo felt it was time to air another sample of English as taught by Tullett, though he was beginning to suspect that something about his learning was maybe not quite right, so he was a bit tentative when he muttered ‘Bastard.’ But his faith in Tullett’s linguistic abilities was restored when Brownlow agreed. ‘Yeah, a bastard, Angelo, right enough’ and the other Italians nodded and emphatically agreed. ‘Bastard.’

Then Watson sprang to life again with a smile. ‘So, it looks like our original plan, eh, Corporal?’ Kelly responded with a wide grin of his own. ‘Yes, boys, and we reckon it’s a bottler! A real little ball-tearer, eh, Bill!’

Dodd, cautious, intervened ‘Can we take it you mean it’s a good idea?’

‘A good one? It’s an absolute ripper, Boss! Tell ‘em, Bill – it was your idea.’

Watson was embarrassed. ‘Oh, I don’t know about that, Corporal, I’m sure somebody else would’ve thought of it as well, I just happened to be first.’

‘I don’t know about that, mate, fair dinkum. I mean, this is your speciality, isn’t it?’

‘Maybe, but I couldn’t do it without’

Brownlow, irritated, broke in. ‘All right, you’re both a couple of wassnames ...’

‘Smart-arses?’ suggested Green.

‘I was thinking, er, thingies, clever people. Any rate, could you let us in on it?’

Watson smiled again. ‘Righto, Sergeant. Well, we can’t go back, we can’t go over the top, we can’t go round in the fields ...’

Brownlow suddenly remembered. ‘Genuises! That’s the word! Geniuses’ and Watson, nodding thanks, continued. ‘So we *have* to go along the road. All agreed?’ Dodd was whispering in Italian and the whole group nodded.

Watson continued ‘But the Germans are using the road. So the logical answer is to get them to stop using it for a bit while we pop round to the track on the other side, isn’t it? So, the corporal and I will sneak round to the other side at night – it’s easy enough if you’re not looking for a route for the vehicles, – and ...’ He allowed a long pause while he grinned at the sea of expectant faces, ‘... and we blow the bugger up!’

The stunned silence, excepting Dodd’s muttered translation, seemed to go on for a long time, the audience glancing at each other, hope that this might be the answer enveloped by the fear that the idea might be seen to be militarily ridiculous.

Eventually, Dodd found his voice. ‘Well, Sergeant, what do you think?’

Brownlow had been pensively sucking his lip, and continued for a while, then took a sharp intake of breath and replied 'I might've known it'd be Watson come up with that idea. Blowing up the road! S'cuse my language, Mr Dodd, Sir, but what a fuckin' ...' and the soldiers all chorused 'Shambles, Sarge!' but Brownlow grinned and said 'I was going to say it was a fuckin' marvellous idea! Look, we no, you tell, 'em, Billy. I dare say you've got it all worked out'

Watson, pumped with pride at being called Billy by the sergeant, explained. 'It's pretty straightforward, actually. The corporal and I creep round to the other side of the headland at night, in the fields, and go a little way past where the track veers off from the road, and we set a nice little charge. We know that's not a problem, we got close enough to do it last night. Then we get back behind a wall, where we can get a clear look at the road. Then, at first light, before the refugees have got going, and as the lead vehicle of a southbound convoy comes along' he mimed pushing the detonator plunger, 'BANG! When you hear that, off you go. The previous convoy will have gone past you, so you'll be able to just drive round and join up with the track. Job done!'

Watson grinned round and received a smatter of cautious applause, while the men waited cautiously for Dodd and Brownlow to mull it over, and maybe realise it wasn't going to be a goer. But to their relief, Brownlow remained enthusiastic. 'I reckon that would work, don't you Sir?' he asked Dodd, who replied 'Excellent! Remarkable! Superb! We get round the headland and Watson gets to blow something up! Everybody's happy!'

At that, the soldiers all jumped up, laughing and shaking each other's hands, and, as soon as Dodd had explained the plan to them, the Italians were in it too, shaking hands, punching each other's shoulders, and making a special fuss of Watson, like excited young men anywhere.

Dodd let the energy flow while he had a quiet talk with Brownlow, then did his little hand clap. 'All right, chaps, we need to get down to the detailed planning, timing, signals, and what have you. And, what do they call it Sergeant? Covering fire? Is that the right expression? If the Germans from the convoy got into the trees, they could easily ambush our vehicles on the track, couldn't they?'

Kelly was impressed, and thought it must have been Brownlow who'd thought of that. He was right, but it was Dodd who'd thought of another issue. 'Plus, we need to be sure we get a clear run through, and there's no refugees in the way when we blow the road. It seems to me we'll need to stop them being on the whole length of road. We can't have them slowing us down, or getting injured in the explosion. Now, it appears they simply stop moving at last light and sleep where they are, and at the slow pace they're moving at, they'll take a good half hour, no, more than that, to walk from here, round the headland, and past the explosion site. So, we'll need to get them to stop moving about an hour before last light, which will give the last ones through time to get well clear. I'll work on organising that with Angelo and his boys.

'Sergeant Brownlow, of course, will have to stay back here, to drive our truck, so that leaves Green, Tullett and Burgess to supply the covering force. You'll need to get into position in among the trees, to stop any Germans getting in there. All right with you, chaps?'

Green raised a hand. 'Er, Sir, do we get a go of the Brens?' referring to their sub-machine guns. 'I reckon we need the Brens.'

Burgess and Tullett vigorously agreed.

Dodd caught Brownlow's miniscule nod and agreed: the three revealed how close to boys they still were by leaping about, firing imaginary automatic weapons and making 'rat tat tat' noises.

Dodd smiled and Brownlow shook his head. 'I dunno, Sir. Look at 'em, nothing but bloody kids. Can they be trusted with grown ups weapons?'

But Dodd realised he was joking, and said 'I think that's all, Sergeant?'

'I reckon so, Sir, for the moment. Reminds me of being back at the hut, eh, before we did the army camp job? We'll go through the details shortly, exactly who goes where, does what, and when, all that.' He was half expecting a chorus of complaint at that, but the men had learnt from experience that the groundwork was vital, even though this seemed a much more straightforward operation.

Burgess piped up 'The Sarge's right: it's just like at the 'ut, eh, boys?'

All agreed, but Burgess had more to say. 'No, not just practisin'. Back at the 'ut, we was creepin' around, keepin' out the way like. Then, after some dozy bastard got hisself blown up on a mine,' he glared at Tullett, who cackled, and waggled his damaged foot in the air, 'we started to, er, what d'they call it, go on the offensive.' He was pleased with himself for having remembered that, and repeated it. 'Yeah, go on the offensive. Well, this is the same, ain't it? We've been keepin' our 'eads down, makin' sure we don't get seen by the jerries, an' now, off we go, we're goin' to do some damage.' He paused and contemplated that for a moment, then rubbed his hands together. 'Good, innit?'

Dodd agreed 'Yes, you're exactly right! Back there, we'd sort of forgotten we're soldiers, at war. At least, *I* had. And now, I've just been keen to stay out of trouble, really. But if we're only going to drive about, keeping out of the way, we might as well have stayed with our lot at the bridge, when we had the chance. So, gentlemen, if we're all happy?'

He was met with a subdued cheer of approval, and switched to Italian to outline the proposed plan again. After the usual discussion, involving wild gesticulations, posturing and pouting, Dodd explained that Angelo and his mates were extremely unhappy that none of them would be there to witness the explosions, and, perhaps, fire their machine guns again. Angelo recognised that he himself would have to stay back, to drive his magic Lancia, but said the others should go with the demolition party. Brownlow was against this, saying too many people in the forward party, creeping about in the trees in the dark, especially the inexperienced Italians, could easily turn the attack into a right fucking shambles.

Dodd put this to the locals, diplomatically changing the reason to the need to manage the refugees, but, after more near hysterics, an agreement was negotiated whereby Bimbo would reluctantly stay with Angelo and Dodd - his bulk would be valuable in controlling any upsets among the refugees, and Green, Tullett and Burgess would slip into the trees to stop the Germans infiltrating them, whilst Dino and Giovanni would go past the ambush site to cut off any possible German retreat along the road.

By the time all this had been sorted out, Brownlow was ready to start talking through the detailed plan, but Kelly objected. 'Aw, cripes, Sarge, fair go! Bill and me've been up all night. I reckon we're due a bit o' tucker and a decent kip.'

Brownlow acknowledged that. 'Fair enough, Corp. You two do that, and the rest of us'll get on without you for now. After all, you're the only ones so far who actually know what you're going to be doing. Before you go, though - any reason why we don't do the job tonight?'

Kelly pushed his hat down over his face and rubbed the back of his head. “No, Sarge. Best do it as soon as, eh, in case their convoy discipline changes.”

While the men went into their hand shaking, shoulder thumping, cigarette exchanging routine, Dodd clapped his hands gently and, smiling and nodding like a benevolent pope, said ‘Excellent. Excellent.’

Chapter 6

By the time Kelly awoke, plans had been settled then scrapped, and settled and scrapped again. First, they'd decided to blow the road when a convoy was passing over it, then abandoned the idea, then wanted to blow up the first and last vehicles, to stop the whole convoy from escaping, but realised that was too hard, and went back to blowing up the first vehicle. They'd decided on a complicated system of signals, and discarded it, and played with positioning the men first behind cover in the fields, then among the trees, first in a group, to concentrate fire, then spread out to cover most ground, whether to open fire into the trucks, the idea of which made Dodd wince, or await a reaction from the Germans. If there was any possibility for divergence of opinion, on the what, when and how, it was argued over. The young soldiers loved every minute of it: before this adventure had begun, they'd never even heard any tactical discussion, and now they were actually involved in it. On more than one occasion, Dodd suspected that an idea was being put up just so the speaker could be part of the discussion, but he let it run – he'd seen it often enough in his lecture rooms in Oxford, and realised that the mere act of contributing would make the participants more connected to the final plan.

After a while, one decision was agreed by all – it was time for a brew up. As the ritual was being carried out, Brownlow flicked his eyebrows at Kelly in a sign he wanted a quiet word, and the pair moved away from the main group. 'I'm thinking you'll be a bit light on troops, Ted. I won't be there, and you and Watson'll be tied up with doing the business. So that leaves, er, Green, Burgess, Tullett, Dino and Giovanni to stop the jerries infiltrating the trees, lay down fire on the last truck, maybe hundreds of yards back *and* give you and Watson covering fire. Not exactly overwhelming firepower, is it? Only needs to be a dozen proper soldiers in that convoy and you could be in serious shit.'

Kelly thought about that, and ticked names off on his fingers. 'So, you'll be back here, with Angelo, Bimbo and Mr Dodd, right? And as you said, there's Green, Burgess, Tullett, Dino and Giovanni, that's nine. Who's the other two? Oh, yeah, me and Bill. Yeah, and some of our blokes aren't exactly veterans, are they, Sarge? They all did well back there,' he flicked his head backwards, 'specially the local boys – they'd hardly even fired a weapon before, 'cept maybe a shotgun – and Watson and Green did all right too, it being their first action under fire. My word, they did. But we did have plenty of firepower, and the terrain favoured us too. This time, not quite the same, eh?'

'*And* we had surprise on our side, *and* what they call the initiative, too,' Brownlow said. 'You've got to keep the initiative, Ted. You're never going to do well if the other bloke's deciding where and when to fight.'

He thought again, with a ruminative chew of his bottom lip, 'Right, so, we'll have surprise again, plus we decide where and when, *and* we get to place our chaps in the best position for us, and this time won't be their first. So it's not too bad is it, if you think of it like that. So we'll just put our chaps in the trees, well spread out, and get them to give the jerry trucks a quick spray, just to keep 'em quiet, then scarper. And Mr Dodd'll like that better – less casualties, plus they'll report a good dose of automatic weapon fire, more like a military action than wassnames, civvies having a go. Patriots, is it? No, partisans. Any rate, less chance of reprisals. Now, there's another thing.'

Kelly groaned – all he'd wanted to do was to creep round and blow up the road: this was all getting a bit too complicated. 'What's that, then, Sarge?' He called Dodd 'Boss' or 'Skipper' out of earned respect, but only ever called the sergeant Sarge - he recognised a professional soldier when he saw one.

'Look, we're going to be waiting back here for you to blow the road, then we come racing round to you, right?' Kelly nodded.

'So we'll be listening for the sound of the explosion? That'll be the signal for us to start?' Another nod.

'Well, will we hear it? You'll be at least two miles away, with a bloody great mountain between us. Now, bearing in mind it's vital we *have* to go as soon as you do the business, can we take a chance?'

Kelly unconsciously mimicked Brownlow's lip chewing while he thought that over. 'Yairs, I see what you mean. My guess? If the wind's against, you won't hear it. Or even if the wind's making a bit of noise, that might cover the sound. That's a fair cow, eh, Sarge?'

'That's what I thought, too. We're going to have to put somebody on the point with some sort of positive signal, a torch, maybe, or a rifle shot, when you blow the road. I'm thinking we get Watson to help you set up, than he can nip off to where he can signal to us. That means we're another man short. So, let's see where we're at. There'll be Angelo and me with the trucks. Have to be – no ifs or buts. Then we need Bimbo there to, er ...' he was about to say 'intimidate' but managed to change that '... persuade the refugees to stop, and Mr Dodd will be with us too. He's best off there, d'you reckon?'

'Definitely, Sarge. Definitely. He might make all the difference talking to the refugees, eh?'

Brownlow nodded slowly. Neither of them wanted to put into words that Dodd would be better out of the way of the attack. He'd only be getting himself into a state about casualties on both sides, and how they were his responsibility.

'So, that's four, plus you to set the charge and Watson to assist, then do the signal. That only leaves five to cover maybe four hundred yards of road, never mind stopping the last truck from getting away. If there's troops in them jerry trucks, we might be in trouble. But we've only got to stop 'em getting established in the trees and stopping our vehicles getting past. So our chaps can just fall back up to the track and hold 'em off 'til our vehicles get past. And you'll be in the trees as well. We've got six automatic weapons: six of you could make 'em think twice about trying to come up at you, eh?'

Kelly rubbed the back of his head, pushing his hat down his face. 'Yeah, sounds all right. I was going to set up in the field, but now you say it, working from in the trees makes more sense.'

The two soldiers squatted, mulling over sketches in the dust, poking and pointing with sticks, until they were satisfied.

Brownlow rose and said 'Right, Ted. Now we're got a solid story for Mr Dodd. I'll go and tell him. I'll play it gentle, eh, just a bit of a tweak to the plan, all right? No need to get him worrying, eh?'

And, under the interested but anxious gaze of the men, the sergeant went off to find the lieutenant, who was crouched on a box, engaged in his everlasting writing of miniscule notes on scraps of paper.

While Brownlow and Kelly were away reviewing the proposal, Dodd had found himself a comfortable spot in the cabin of the British truck, “to write up his notes” as he explained to the soldiers, but, as well, because he still thought, correctly, that his presence stifled their conversation somehow, made things more formal.

The four private soldiers had been loafing about, waiting for the water to boil, idly talking over their recent short but ferocious fire-fight, which was natural enough, as the prospect sunk in of another exploit tomorrow morning. But they were also keeping a wary eye on the sergeant and the corporal, in their earnest conversation. The men were worried that some flaw in the plan might be emerging.

Suddenly, Burgess guffawed and sat up straight. ‘‘Ere, Gil, remember when you and Bill and the Corp were moving down the ‘ill into the trees?’

‘Remember? Of course I fucking remember! I had people shooting at me, didn’t I?’ He pointed to his boot with the groove in it. ‘That sort of thing, well, it sticks in your mind, you know!’

‘Right, right. Well, d’you remember the Corp shoutin’ out to you?’

Green had to ponder on that for a second. ‘Oh, yeah. There was loads of bullets coming up at us, bits of bark and stuff going everywhere, and he called out to see if I was all right.’

‘D’you remember *exactly* what he said?’

‘No, not really. Just, are you OK. Something like that.’

Burgess smirked. ‘I just remembered exactly. We was up guardin’ the vehicles – we couldn’t see anythin’ but we could ‘ear all right. ‘E shouted “Green! Gilbert! You all right?”’

Tullett sat up now, amazed. ‘Well, fuck me down the end of our street! I never noticed before! ‘Kin’ ‘ell!’ He threw back his head and hooted with laughter. Burgess joined in and they took turns to shout ‘Green Gilbert!’ which made them laugh even more.

Green looked blankly at Watson, who shrugged and shook his head as if to say he had no idea what was going on, so Green turned back to Burgess, asking ‘What’re you rude bastards on about?’

They took a while to compose themselves enough to explain. ‘Well, we never twigged it before, did we? All this time, an’ we never twigged, see? Green Gilbert!’ and that set them off again for a bit.

Green was getting cross now. ‘What’s so funny ‘bout my name, eh? Come on, spit it out!’

Burgess realised Green was upset and tried to calm things down. ‘Well, Gil, it *is* funny, ain’t it?’ But he could see Green had no idea what he was on about, and neither did Watson. ‘You never heard of a Green Gilbert?’

‘Only me’ Green replied huffily.

‘Well, you know when you get bronchitis or that, you cough up all loads o’ stuff?’

Green nodded, uncomprehendingly.

‘An’ it’s all different colours?’

Green winced, but nodded again.

‘Well, when you get a green one, what’s that called?’

Green shook his head. ‘No idea.’

‘It’s a Green Gilbert, innit?’

Tullett started to laugh again, but Burgess could see Green was upset and glared at his mate. ‘All right, Stan, joke over, eh?’

‘Yeah, OK, fair do’s, but fuck me eh! Sorry mate. But Green Gilbert! I never twigged!’

To change the subject, Watson asked Burgess ‘I say, John, d’you have any more stories about the Wild West? You know, cowboys, and so on?’

Tullett saw his chance to get back on good terms, and added ‘Yeah, ‘e’s got millions o’ stories! Fuckin’ millions!’

Burgess, happy to defuse the atmosphere, did an impression of a man thinking for a second, then offered ‘What about the Pony Express? You coves’ve ‘eard o’ that, I s’pose?’ and Green, still feeling a bit uncomfortable about the last conversation, was suddenly enthusiastic. ‘Oh, yes, o’course! Was that real? I thought it was just a story, like those other cowboys you told us about. You know, Tex Ritter and so on.’

Burgess was in his element now, and replied ‘Look, Gil, the kettles boilin’. Let’s get the brew up sorted while I tell yer about it.’

There was a flurry of activity while Burgess started. ‘Well, I’ll tell yer straight up, there’s a lot o’ bollocks told about the Pony Express, for a start. I ‘spect yer think it started on one side o’ America, New York, say, an’ finished on the other.’

Nobody queried that, their knowledge of the whereabouts of New York being vague. ‘Well, that ain’t true, fer a start off. They started from a place called St Joseph, whats in Missouri, but then they did go all the way across from there to Sacramento. Mind you, that’s still a bloody long way, ain’t it?’

There were no disagreements, since the communal knowledge of where St Joseph, Sacramento, or even Missouri might be was even more blurred.

Burgess continued ‘Yeah, best part o’ two thousand mile, that is. *Bloody* long way. Any rate, the idea was to make it quicker to get letters, what they called the mail, across America quicker. First off, the only way was to send letters by sea right round, then the stage coaches come along, but it still took ages. More’n three weeks, mostly, for the same route. But these chaps reckoned they could get the mail from St Joseph to Sacramento in ten days! O’ course, nobody reckoned they could do it: I mean, nearly two thousand mile, no roads or nothink, hardly, over rivers and mountains an’ that, in ten days! But what they reckoned was, the coves that tried it, that they’d put places all along the route where the riders could change ‘orses, and so on, an’ that’s what they did. See, an ‘orse can only run about ten mile before it gets knackered, so they ‘ad these places ‘bout ten mile apart, best part o’ two ‘undred of ‘em! Bloody yanks, you ‘ave to give it to ‘em, don’t yer. They ‘ad a ‘undred an’ twenty riders, four ‘undred ‘orses plus all the chaps to look after ‘em, ‘undreds o’ them, there was, an’ you know what, they put the whole thing together in two months! January and February 1860, this was.’

Burgess was really getting into his stride now, and barely spared a moment to glance at the mini-conference going on between the sergeant and the corporal.

‘Yeah, it was bloody ‘ard work for the riders too. They was only little coves, not allowed to weigh more’n nine stone, they were, an’ they ‘ad to go about eighty mile, maybe a ‘undred, day an’ night. They reckon there’s a famous advertisement what went "Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."'’

Watson was caught up in the story: ‘Yes, that would be on account of the bandits, and the indians! I’ve read about that, and we’ve all seen them at the cinema, eh!’

‘Well, Bill,’ said Burgess, ‘you’re right an’ you’re wrong. Why would bandits try to rob the Pony Express? See, it cost ‘eaps to send anything, \$5 a half ounce, as I recall: dunno what that’d be in real money, like, but a *lot*. So yer wouldn’t be sendin’ gold or anythin’, would yer? It’d cost more’n the stuff was worth. But indians, well, that was another story, what they called the Paiute War, after the tribe what done it. Din’ last long though, only a coupla months really, but that was the only time the Pony Express din’ get through. An’ the people at the ‘orse stations got a right clobberin’, too.’

The audience nodded knowledgeably, Tullett because he’d heard it all before, and Watson and Green because they’d seen movies where the brave but lonely riders and station keepers fought off the indians who, in the films at least, always resorted to underhand tricks like using overwhelming forces, letting the horses out, using fire arrows and other completely unfair tactics. And the indians seemed to take particular delight in abducting the beautiful young daughters of the station keepers, especially if they happened to be innocently bathing in a conveniently located pool, completely unaware of any danger. Bastards.

‘Any rate,’ Burgess went on, ‘youse’ve prob’ly ‘eard o’ Buffalo Bill?’ He got nods in affirmation. ‘Well, ‘is proper name was William Cody, an’ ‘e was probl’y the most famous o’ all the Pony Express riders. Funny enough, ‘e sort o’ fell into the job. ‘E was on ‘is way to California, lookin’ for work, when ‘e met up with a couple o’ Pony Express agents on the road and signed on as a general ‘and, like, odd jobs an’ that. After a bit, ‘e started as a rider, doin’ short trips an’ that, an’ ‘e was soon doing the full size jobs. Matter o’ fact, e’ did the longest non-stop ride from one station to the next an’ back’ he paused for emphasis, ‘an’ back, mind you, when ‘e found ‘is relief rider had been killed. It was one o’ the most dangerous sections of the entire trail an’ ‘e was non stop for twenty one ‘ours. Ol’ Wild Bill used twenty one ‘orses doin’ it. O’ course, that was only the start for ‘im. ‘E was mixed up in the gold rush, the building o’ the railroads, cattle, all sorts.’

Watson was fascinated. ‘So, how did he get his nickname, John?’

Burgess wondered for just a second if the piss was being taken, but Watsons face was a picture of enthusiastic innocence.

‘Well, ‘e was a scout for the army in the Civil War, an’ I believe they started callin’ ‘im Buffalo Bill then. Funny thing about the Pony Express though: it only lasted eighteen months or so. Seems amazin’ don’t it, it bein’ that famous an’ only lastin’ eighteen months. But it was the telegraph lines, y’see, that an’ the railways goin’ further an’ further. So nobody needed the Pony Express any more, did they? Bit of a shame, eh?’

Tullett had been keeping a wary eye on the two non-coms, and muttered ‘What’s doin’ over there, would yer reckon?’ and heads turned to watch as the sergeant moved off towards Dodd.

‘Ello, Boss, keeping up with the paperwork then?’ asked Brownlow, by way of introduction, then casually mentioned the proposed change of plan. The business about fields of fire and securing their flank was a bit beyond Dodd, but he watched Brownlow’s eyes as he spoke, and realised he was not getting quite the full story, and this was not going to be quite as easy as he’d hoped.

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his thinning hair. ‘Tell me honestly, Sergeant, is this going to work? I need your honest opinion. It’s my responsibility, you know, and I feel it

heavily, not just for our chaps, or Angelo and his boys, but there's likely to be German casualties as well. So, is it worth the risk?

Brownlow understood, and sympathised. But they *had* to get round the headland. Brownlow spoke. 'To be honest, Sir, it all depends what the trucks are carrying. If it's just supplies, we'll piss it in, but if it's troops, well, that's maybe a different story. But I reckon it's supplies.'

Dodd pounced on this snippet of good news. 'What makes you think that, Sergeant?'

'Well, first off, if you were retreating towards what they call a prepared position, a defensive line, why would you be sending more troops forward? You'd be wanting all the spare troops you had to build and man the defences, wouldn't you? But the soldiers falling back, they'd still be needing stuff: not just ammunition, but food, water, petrol, medical stuff, all sorts.'

Dodd saw the logic of that and agreed. But Brownlow hadn't finished. 'But mainly, I reckon it's supplies 'cause the covers of the trucks are all done up tight. Did you ever see a truck full o' soldiers with the back closed up? Nah: it's supplies. Definitely.'

After a moment, Dodd confirmed 'All right: we'll go tonight. Let's tell the chaps. But about the signal: we've still got a couple of flares from the rafts. They'd be just the job, eh?'

Kelly strolled back and crouched on his heels, in that horribly uncomfortable Australian way.

'What's happening, chaps?'

Tullett responded 'We was 'opin' you was gunna tell us, Corp.'

And Kelly replied 'Best Mr Dodd tells you, eh, lads?' But he winked a gigantic wink before continuing 'So, what were you talking about?'

'Johnny was telling us about the Pony Express, Corporal,' replied Watson, who always addressed Kelly, Brownlow and Dodd by their rank, 'and jolly interesting it was too. Did you have anything like that in Australia?'

Kelly did his pushing his hat forwards while he scratched the back of his head gesture, then replied 'Bill, mate, I don't reckon we ever did. All the long distance mail and that went by sea, or if it had to go bush, it had to wait 'til someone was going that way. All pretty informal, in the early days. But we did have stage coaches, by an' by, 'specially after the gold rushes.'

That got everybody's interest, and Kelly was besieged with questions, but was saved by the approach of Dodd and Brownlow who confirmed what Kelly's enormous wink had suggested.

The light was fading, the colours of the day just taking on a greyish tinge, when Dodd, Angelo and Bimbo set the operation in motion by undergoing a cascade of handshakes and hugs before clambering down through the trees towards the road. Dodd had worried that he would start slipping and slithering out of control down the steep slope, and be flung against a tree, or worse, find himself spilt out into the road among a belligerent stream of refugees, so he was pleased when he'd got almost down to the edge of the road safely, and his mental image had come to nothing. The plan was that at the last of the trees, they would wait for a break in the column of refugees, but as it turned out, that wasn't a problem – there was only a thin trickle of plodding migrants anyway.

At Dodd's signal, all three of them stepped out into the road, and spread themselves across it, Bimbo in the middle. They'd expected at least some opposition to their order to stop, but there was none at all: the first few dispirited people simply shuffled to a stop, and the

latecomers came to a grateful halt as they arrived. There had been a lengthy discussion as to whether the refugees should be given reasons to stop: Dodd favoured offering a story about an unexploded bomb needing to be disarmed, while Angelo and Bimbo said there was no need for that – the people should be told the truth. In the event, the walkers seemed to be disinterested in any reason. They were dead tired, footsore, hungry and thirsty, and if somebody said it was time to stop walking for the night, they were in no mood to argue. The main query to Angelo was whether there was any water nearby, and whether he had any food they could have.

By nightfall, only another handful of weary plodders had closed up to where the front ones had been stopped. Bimbo had been back up the hill to fetch whatever water could be spared, and to collect some of the provisions that had been supplied back at the railway bridge. Angelo had reminded him to bring cigarettes, treasure more valuable right now than hard cash, even to non-smokers.

By the time Bimbo had got back up the hill to gather the supplies, the trucks were packed and ready to go. When some provisions had been put together for the refugees, and Brownlow had checked over the weapons for the last time, all the men but Brownlow moved down the hill together, Kelly and Watson carrying the all-important explosives and detonating equipment. Brownlow would have possibly the toughest job of all – to stay with the vehicles and wait, on his own until Angelo got back. At the road, a further modest flurry of hand shaking and well wishing took place, in which some of the refugees joined, grateful for the food they'd been given, before the attack group faded into the darkness of the fields.

Kelly led the group off, and the traverse round the headland went without incident. Kelly had promised Dodd he would be cautious, and he'd kept his little retinue well clear of the road on the way round. There was no moon, but plenty of starlight, and at the sound of an approaching convoy, Kelly had signalled the men to go to ground. Kelly was aiming to get to a point he'd selected about a hundred yard past the point where what Angelo had called the old road separated once more from the new road. They'd allowed plenty of time and arrived at the point Kelly had been aiming for well before dawn, which was a disadvantage in some ways, because they now had nothing to do except sit quietly and imagine all the things that could go wrong. Kelly went over it yet again in his mind. If the loads were supplies, Kelly was confident that his soldiers would be able to cope with the handful of drivers and their mates. They'd probably try to run away – that's what he'd have done in their circumstances - it'd be the sensible thing. But if there were German soldiers under those canvas covers, chances were they'd be seasoned troops being sent to bolster the retreat. *That* would be bad – very bad. They'd be out of the trucks and into defensive positions in seconds, and before Kelly could pull his men back, they'd be swarming into the trees. And they'd be well spread out, too, maybe hundreds of yards back, and

Watson sidled up to him – it was as though he'd read the Australian's thoughts. 'All of a sudden, Corporal, I'm not quite so sure this was a good idea, eh? How did it get so complicated? It was just going to be you and I and a bag of explosives, and now, we've got people messing about all over the place. This is not how I imagined it at all.'

Kelly Tried to summon a confidence that had been wavering. 'Yeah, well, Bill, it's just how the army works, ain't it? Think of it this way - would you rather be here, doing the attacking, or sitting in the first truck, waiting to get blown up?' He realised the others were probably having the same doubts, and, remembering what Brownlow had said, signalled the group together. 'All

right, boys, it won't be long now, so just keep calm. Don't forget, we've got surprise on our side, and that's worth a lot. And Mr Dodd wouldn't have approved of this, but, when I blow the road, I want you to whack a few rounds into the nearest truck to you, all right? Just to keep 'em confused. We can't afford to let 'em get organised and come after us, OK? Least, not until we've fallen back and our vehicles're through. Then we'll be up through the trees, into our trucks, and away. All right boys? Tell Dino and Giovanni, eh, Bill?'

Watson said he was all right understanding what was being said in Italian, but wasn't up to speaking it. Kelly put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. 'Just do what you can, eh, mate? Anything to settle 'em down, eh?' Watson did his clumsy best and it seemed to help, if only because the Italians found his attempt amusing. But they appreciated the effort, and each gave Watson a hug. Giovanni even remembered a snippet of English as taught by Tullett, and said 'That's fuckin' nice.'

As he listened to the sound of a convoy fade away, Kelly gazed at the first faint smudge of grey purple dawn in the sky away to the east, looked at his watch for the millionth time, and whispered 'Right, boys, time to go.' He added a final reminder. 'Remember, boys, molto rat-tat-tat.' He mimed spraying automatic weapon fire around. 'Molto, eh?' Tullett and Green headed off at an angle to aim for two hundred yards or more up the road, while Dino and Giovanni would place themselves about in the middle, as best they could guess.

Tullett had nothing to do for the moment. He was to wait for Kelly to finish then accompany him into the trees, from where they would attack the second truck after the first had been blown up.

Getting set up was easy: Kelly and Watson ran out the detonating wire from the hiding place they'd already selected among the trees to the road. That was really the only two man part of the job, and having done it, Kelly muttered 'OK, Billy, I'm right now. Off you go. Got your flare?' Watson held up the cylinder and was overtaken for a second by the similarity of this gesture with the holding up of the safety wires in the attack on the transport camp – it seemed like ages ago now – he shook Kelly's outstretched hand and slunk away. Kelly laid the already prepared package of explosives in the middle of the road, attached the wire, and checked everything carefully before retreating to his lair.

In the few minutes while he waited for the next convoy, and anxiously watched the light creep upward, Kelly squatted and wondered for the first time what would happen if a northbound convoy arrived first. He couldn't let them past – they'd probably run over the package of explosives, and knock the detonator out, but if he blew the first vehicle, the others would stop and block the way for Angelo and Brownlow. He wondered how, in all the discussions and planning, the possibility of the wrong convoy showing up first hadn't come up.

Watson was jogging back down the road towards the headland when the same thought struck him and stopped him dead. What if a northbound convoy came chugging into sight right now? He half turned, as though to go back on himself, then realised that even with the light coming racing back, he could easily get out of the way without being seen. But what would happen to the plan? He shook his head, and continued running towards the point, but faster now.

Way back, the other side of the headland, Angelo sat with Bimbo in his ancient Lancia, while Brownlow and Dodd waited in the British three tonner. They'd moved the vehicles down the track as close to the road as they dared, and from there, they all had a clear view towards the headland, the outline of which was emerging as a greater dark against the lightening mauve of the sky. The problem of the possible arrival of a northbound convoy had occurred to Dodd a while ago, and the four of them had discussed their options. But nobody had any suggestions as to what to do about it, except to continue, so they now sat there, each in their private world, pleading with the gods of war to let them get a clear run round, desperate for Watson to fire his flare. Angelo sat, clenching his steering wheel and rocking slowly back and forth, Dodd kept removing his hat and scrubbing his head, and even Brownlow was showing the strain, both legs trembling up and down. Only Bimbo sat motionless, imperturbable.

Tullett, on the other hand, was humming contentedly to himself. He'd found the perfect spot, well concealed in the trees but with a clear view of the road to his right, where, ninety yards away, the bundle of explosives lay on the road, and he could see back for nearly a hundred yards to his left. The second vehicle in the line would certainly stop well within his line of sight, and all he had to do was spray the second truck with his Bren, to make sure the occupants didn't entertain any ideas about coming this way, while keeping an eye on the front truck for signs of aggression. Easy.

A hundred yards to Tullett's north, the two Italians, Giovanni and Dino, chattered, excited as children, as they contemplated firing their Berettas again. Last time, it had all happened in a blur, and neither of them had any clear memory of what had occurred. But this time, they had time to savour the thought of giving the nearest truck a good squirt. They weren't bothered about tactics, about making sure the Germans didn't get past them and hold up Angelo and Brownlow - it didn't even occur to them that somebody might be upset enough to fire back at them.

A hundred yards further north still, the last pair, Burgess and Green, had just selected their positions, maybe thirty yards apart, and now stood quietly together, aware of their responsibility to make sure none of the enemy got round them, but confident they could hang on long enough to let their vehicles through. Burgess caught a distant rumble, tapped Green lightly on the shoulder, and said 'Here we go, Gil. Safety catch off, soon as you get in position, eh?'

Suddenly dry throated, Green searched for a smile, couldn't find one, so simply nodded, and slunk away to his chosen site.

Chapter 7

Gefreiter (corporal) Hans Galle was sick and tired of this job: so sick and tired he'd even got sick and tired of telling his offsider, Private Dieter Kidde, how sick and tired he was, chugging up and down this sodding road, seemed like for sodding ever, night and day, rain or shine, hardly time for a kip – a kip! What?! Hardly time for a shit and a smoke, while some other poor bastards unloaded one lot of stuff and bunged another lot back on. Hans threw a gloomy glance at his companion and wondered whether to give him another earful. He decided against – Kidde had threatened to throw himself out of the truck if Hans started going on about it one more time, and Galle wasn't entirely sure he was joking. Galle wouldn't have minded much – Kidde was pretty close to useless, but the feldwebel would be bound to make a sodding fuss if he showed up without his sodding assistant. Only good thing was that it seemed that every time they came south, they had a bit less distance to travel, as the Germans fell back and the opposing armies fought over worthless fields and nameless piddling streams.

Wouldn't be quite so bad if Feldwebel "Bernd" Rosemeyer (the German equivalent of a sergeant, and nicknamed after the famous Auto Union racing car driver) up front would change the pace from time to time, just to make it a bit more interesting, but he'd been told to lead his convoys at 25kph, and he was famous for doing that exactly. Didn't matter whether it was pissing rain, or clouds of dust, or the middle of the sodding night, with these useless bastard excuses for headlights, or pissing rain *in* the middle of the sodding night, when doing twenty five felt like sodding madness on this rough and bendy road. Or worse, clear weather, daylight, good stretch of straight road, still sodding twenty five. Galle whacked his steering wheel in frustration, which woke Kidde. He growled an apology, but Kidde knew he'd done it deliberately. Dieter had made the bad mistake of disagreeing with Galle about their task. He thought it was great – he could doze most of the time they were driving, because Hans was the designated driver and Dieter never tired of pointing out that he was *only* the navigator/mechanic, and then get a leisurely meal and a wash and shave, and maybe even find a beer, while some other poor sods were loading and unloading. Cushy billet, really, except for bloody Galle whining all the time.

Dieter shifted position and gazed disinterestedly out of the window. Vague shapes were beginning to emerge from the blackness, which was hardly dented by the tiny slits of light which were all they were allowed from their headlights. Not that it mattered much: all Hans had to do was follow the single tail light of Rosemeyer's truck and keep station eighty metres behind him, just as the vehicles behind were keeping station in turn. He shifted again, knowing they were still a good hour from a meal break, trying to find that least uncomfortable position for another snooze.

As it happened, Kelly didn't have long to dwell on the northbound convoy scenario: the now familiar rumble and tiny glints of light announced the impending arrival of a southbound convoy. Kelly sighed with relief, checked his connections one last time and lifted the detonating plunger.

As he cautiously raised his head, he was pleased he could clearly see the marker of white cloth he'd hung on a bush to show him exactly where the explosives were, and took a firm grip on the plunger handle. Now the uncertainties were cleared away, he felt calm and confident, and breathed easily as the first truck rumbled closer, closer.

And just at exactly the right second, down went the plunger and BOOM!, with an enormous roar, the lead vehicle leaped up and to one side, all but torn apart. Hmmm, thought Kelly, I might have overdone that a bit, as he squatted behind his tree, cringing away from the rain of debris.

Watson had only just arrived at the point of the headland when he heard the explosion and immediately fired the flare, which lit up the whole area with a jaunty reddish pink light. He threw the flare out into the road, and immediately turned back towards the site of the explosion.

The driver of the second vehicle in the southbound column was shocked at the sight of the lead truck being thrown about, and reacted slowly. Unfortunately for him, this brought him almost exactly opposite Tullett, who, having seen the devastation of the lead vehicle, knew he only had to concern himself with the second one, and raked the truck from front to back, still humming to himself. He saw the cab door furthest from him open, but nothing more happened that he could see, and he assumed that the occupants of the cab had got out and were away into the fields opposite. Tullett stopped firing and waited.

Dino and Giovanni were not so controlled. The third truck had stopped about thirty yards past them, so they were unable to see what was happening in the cab, and in any case, they were too inexperienced, and too excited, to aim at anything as small as the cab: the general direction of the truck was the best they could manage, but what they lacked in skill, they made up for in sheer enthusiasm, firing and firing until their weapons were empty. They had so far forgotten themselves by then that they were standing in full view of the road, so it was just as well for them that nobody started firing back. They couldn't have responded then, if they'd been attacked, because neither of them remembered, in the heat of the action, how to reload, so, after a last awed gaze at the carnage they'd brought down on the truck, they started moving back up the hill towards the track.

Further up the road, Green fired a few careful rounds at the fourth truck, which was stopped and showed no sign of life, and Burgess concentrated on the fifth, conscious that it was already reversing away from him. The sixth and last vehicle in line had also started moving backwards, but got a wheel into the ditch by the side of the road and slewed sideways across the road, maybe two hundred yards from Burgess who, watching both vehicles in the gathering light, yelled 'Gil, to me! To me!' and Green, after a last look at 'his' vehicle, and seeing no movement, ran to Burgess. The last vehicle was blocking the escape of the other one, and they had light enough now to see three soldiers dragged a body from the cab of one of the vehicles before disappearing into the greyness. Green was about to fire, but Burgess stopped him. 'Forget it, Gil. They're not goin' to be chasin' after us. All we got to do now is get up the 'ill an' wait for Mr Dodd.'

Green accepted that with some reluctance: he'd hardly got started on firing the Bren, and now, the whole thing was over in seconds, and there was nothing left to shoot at. He considered another burst at 'his' truck, but was arrested by indecision – the childish wish to shoot something contesting with the thought of Burgess thinking him childish, when a thought struck.

'Hey, Johnny, d'you think they might have spare cans of petrol on those trucks?'

Burgess grinned broadly. ‘As the Corp would say, Gil, you little beauty! Let’s nip down and ‘ave a look!’

Dodd and Brownlow back up on the track sat in their cab, anxiously dividing their concentration between the headland, where the flare would tell them to move, and the road, conscious that a northbound convoy hadn’t arrived for some time, and the eastern horizon, where the encroaching light told them that it would have to be any time now. Brownlow was muttering ‘Come on Ted, get a wriggle on’ when, above the gentle clatter of his engine ticking over, he registered the very sound he didn’t want to hear – the grinding rumble of an oncoming northbound convoy.

‘Oh, fuck, beg pardon Sir, but oh fuck it. I just hope Angelo keeps his nerve, ‘cause if he don’t go on the signal, we’ll be buggered, good and proper. I’ll have to go round him.’

They’d discussed what to do if this happened, decided there were no options- there was no point in staying where they were - and now it was going to take place, Dodd felt strangely calm, almost fatalistic. ‘He’ll go, Sergeant. If he doesn’t, we’ll go past him, but he’ll go.’

Dodd might have added ‘Watch this’ because at that moment, the headland was silhouetted by a bright pink glow. Dodd just had a chance to wonder if the Germans down on the road saw it too, when Angelo’s truck burst into life and immediately pitched forward, accelerating and bouncing down the track. Brownlow threw the Bedford into gear and followed as close behind as he dared, since neither vehicle had any lights on.

The road came into Angelo’s sight, and he swore bitterly as he saw the dark bulk of a German truck pass in front of him. Dino just had time to cross himself, and then, with a lurch, the Lancia was on the road and keeping pace with the leading German vehicle.

The German Sergeant Rosemeyer, driving the leading northbound vehicle, seemed not to have noticed the stray vehicle lumber in behind him, and Gefreiter Galle, the driver of the second German vehicle, eighty yards back from Angelo, was jerked from his semi-trance when he caught a quick glimpse of a black shape that suddenly appeared, then blocked his vision of Rosemeyer’s tail light. Galle shook his head, wondering if he’d seen correctly, and if so, what to do about it. He had no radio, no weapon and no instructions as to what to do if a civilian vehicle interleaved itself in his convoy.

He turned to Kidde. ‘Did you see that?’

‘No. What?’

‘I swear a truck just came out of the trees and slipped in between us and Bernd up there. Look! You can see it keeps getting in the way of his light, see?’

‘Yes, I see it! Well, bugger me! Where’d he come from then?’

‘Stuffed if I know. What should we do, d’you reckon?’

‘Don’t ask me, mate: you’re the gefreiter. Anyway, what can we do?’

Galle was pondering that when his eye caught a glinting movement in his mirror. ‘Well, I’ll be buggered! I think another one’s just come in behind us! What’s going on?’

What was going on was that, in desperation, Brownlow had put things in the hands of the gods and taken his turn to follow Angelo and hurtle his truck down the all but invisible track. Dodd was sitting with his feet rigid against the footwell, and his back forced against the seat back, teeth clenched to stop himself yelling, and hung on to the door strap as Brownlow savagely wrenched

the steering wheel round and managed to force the protesting vehicle onto the road, missing ramming the back of Galle's truck by a whisper as he got their speeds matched.

His shoulders sagged and he laughed, just a bit hysterically, as Dodd thought afterwards, but fair enough, Dodd was clapping and laughing too. 'Oh, excellent driving, Sergeant, truly excellent! I must say, that was most exciting! Great fun, eh?'

Brownlow glanced at Dodd as if he'd gone barmy, and realised he really was enjoying it. Dodd obviously had no idea how close the truck had come to turning over, or ramming the German vehicle, or simply overshooting the road and finishing in the ditch on the other side. Any of those results would have put paid to their adventure and ended with their capture, if it didn't kill them, but Dodd seemed completely unaware of it. Brownlow consciously tried to unclench his grip on the wheel and said nothing, and as he waited for his heart to settle down a bit.

After a few seconds, Brownlow shook his head and said 'Well, Sir, that's the worst bit over with, eh? If they just leave us alone for a few minutes, we'll be round and away! And I can't hardly believe it, but they don't seem to be too bothered, do they?'

Galle and Kidde were perplexed. The interlopers in front and behind them didn't display any inclination to ram them or shoot at them, or even get in their way, and if they had, the Germans couldn't have done anything about it, because they had no weapons. Up front, Feldwebel Rosemeyer remained blissfully unaware of their presence, and if he'd known, it was hard to think what he could have done anyway.

They'd made the final turn round the headland before Galle began to relax: having thought it over, he couldn't think of a way he could be blamed, and began to amuse himself with imagining what "Bernd" would do when there was enough light for him to see that not one, but two, extra vehicles had joined the convoy. He might not have been so entertained if he'd known the vehicle behind him was a British Army three tonner. Then again, if he'd known the tommies in the cabs were as unarmed as the Germans, he might have found the whole thing hilarious. But suddenly, the situation suddenly became even more bizarre.

Watson, still half blinded, having fired his flare, had started moving back along the side of the road towards the place where the track left the road again, to await the arrival of Angelo and Brownlow, one of whom would pick him up. He heard the sound of vehicles approaching and turned to face them. It would have taken a genius to note the headlights shrouded down to slits and instantly realise that these were not the lights of Angelo's truck, so he simply waited by the roadside, grinning and waving as the vehicles approached.

Feldwebel Rosemeyer picked out movement in the gloom up ahead, and prepared to ignore yet another refugee trying to cadge a lift, or food, or cigarettes. He barely cast a glance at the figure, and only just had time to grasp that it was not a refugee, but a British soldier, grinning and waving, as though to flag Rosemeyer down. Their eyes met for just a split second, not even time for Watson to stop smiling and waving. Rosemeyer glanced at the sleeping form of his offside in the passenger seat. He was still trying to take in and understand what he'd seen, when out of the gloom in front of him, he began to pick out the shapes of vehicles strewn across the road. The roadside soldier forgotten for a moment, Rosemeyer suddenly understood that the black stain on the road ahead was not a shadow but an enormous hole. He jumped on his brakes, at the same

time shouting to his passenger to wake up, though, realistically, he might as well have left him, for all the good he could do. Rosemeyer grabbed his torch and leaped from the cab, to signal the following vehicles to stop.

The final turn round the headland was well behind them now, and Bimbo, anxious and childlike, was muttering 'Keep going, keep going.' Angelo, hunched over the steering wheel, joined in, 'Not far now, come on, not far now' when the truck in front of them slithered to a halt and a man jumped out, already flashing a torch at them. Had they been discovered? It didn't matter, they couldn't stop – if the Germans looked in the back and saw the weapons and explosives – no choices – Angelo threw on his lights, floored the accelerator, swung past the stopped vehicle, saw the turn off for the track, and was gone in seconds.

To Rosemeyer's amazement, the truck kept coming, and seemed, if anything, to be going faster. He was still frantically waving the torch when the renegade's headlights came on as it came straight at him. Rosemeyer threw himself into the ditch at the side of the road as the truck roared past and suddenly, without slackening speed, suddenly veered off into a gap in the trees.

The British three tonner sat innocently in line, behind Galle's now stationary truck. Brownlow had been sitting perfectly still in the hope this would make him undetectable, but now took a firm grip on the steering wheel and looked at Dodd, who yelled excitedly 'Right-ho, Sergeant, show me what this thing can do!' Brownlow told Dodd to get his head down, switched the lights full on, then stood on the accelerator, wrenched the wheel to the left to clear the truck in front, then right to stay on the road, and threw the vehicle into second gear, then third. He was just in time to see Angelo's truck up ahead lurch off the road to the left as he found the ancient track, and concentrated on the exit point, thinking that this was more like it, he was fed up with driving on the "wrong" side of the road, and was much happier driving on the left. Had he not been dividing his concentration between the exit and the German clambering from the ditch, he might have noticed his lights briefly illuminate Watson, who'd now realised he wasn't about to get a lift, scurrying into the trees.

Rosemeyer was still clambering out of the ditch when, in a fantastic finale, another vehicle, lights ablaze, came charging out from behind the second German truck, forcing Rosemeyer back into the ditch, and followed the first spectre into the forest.

In fairness, the feldwebel recovered brilliantly. Where a less prosaic man would have been left sat in the ditch, rubbing his head and wondering just exactly what the fuck was going on, Rosemeyer was out of the ditch again in a second, the mystery of the phantom trucks put to one side, and was shouting orders. Within a couple of minutes, he had men with torches at the tail his convoy and at the remains of the southbound trucks, to wave down and stop the next convoys, while others searched the damaged vehicles for survivors. As Watson sidled on through the trees, he watched Rosemeyer's performance with admiration. He felt that if the feldwebel had men who were properly armed, he, Watson, could have been in trouble: he had no doubt that in other circumstances Rosemeyer would have quickly sent patrols out.

Watson shivered and moved on especially carefully. He was very confident that his colleagues, mostly heavily armed and full of adrenaline, would be looking for somebody else to shoot at, and he didn't want it to be him.

It wasn't Watson who was causing anxiety around the trucks – it was expected that he'd take a while to get up to where his comrades were waiting, especially after the arrangement to pick him up had been forgotten in the mad charge along the road – but Burgess and Green were still missing, too. Their absence was a mystery: there'd been no return fire from the Germans, and none of the others had had any trouble at all. And the sunlight had already crept down the mountain to them, making the trees around them glitter in the new day, so it wasn't likely they'd been disoriented by the darkness: Green, maybe, but not Burgess. He was too smart, or at least, too cunning for that.

Sergeant Brownlow was reluctant to send a party out to look for them. What with Watson still being adrift, and now Burgess and Green unaccounted for, he was getting short of people if the Germans did manage to mount an attack. He conferred with Dodd and brought Kelly into the conversation, each of them, including Dodd, recognising that this was not Dodd's area of expertise. Kelly offered to 'slip down and have a squizz' but he'd been gone only a minute or two when he came clambering back to report that the two strays were not far behind him.

Soon, Green staggered into sight, carrying, or rather, dragging, a grey jerry can as he came. Burgess followed, breathing hard under the burden of the two Bren guns. Kelly went forward and grabbed the weapons, enabling Burgess and Green to lift the fuel can between them and present it like the prize it was to the delighted Dodd. Brownlow quickly unscrewed the top and sloshed the contents around, sniffing as he did it. He grinned broadly and said 'It's petrol all right, and full too. You've done very well, John. You too, Gilbert. These things hold 20 litres, which I reckon is close to five gallons, eh, Mr Dodd, Sir? That should help no end, eh? How'd you get it, boys?'

Green and Burgess beamed and a little sheepishly shook hands, before Burgess said 'Oh, it was Gil's idea, Sarge. 'E thought they'd 'ave spare petrol, so when the shootin' stopped, we reckoned we'd nip down an' see. An' sure enough, there was these jerry cans strapped on the sides. Easy, weren't it, Gil? Right, then, chum, let's get the other one.'

Dodd was thrilled. 'What? Another one? Excellent! Excellent!' Dodd explained the situation to the Italians, who all joined in a round of wringing Green's and Burgess' hands, and Dino and Bimbo insisted on going with Burgess to help retrieve the other fuel can, while Brownlow, Kelly and Green fanned out down the hill to look out for any signs of aggression from the Germans.

They needn't have bothered: the Germans could only raise half a dozen rifles between the four convoys that were now stopped by the gaping hole in the road, and Feldwebel Rosemeyer was far more interested in getting things organised on the road than having his soldiers wandering off among the steep and heavy undergrowth on the slopes towards the mountains.

Watson was well past the scene of the explosion now, and reluctantly lost sight of the German activity as he moved on and upwards. Keeping half crouched, he found the faint track, and crept along, following it as much in the cover of the undergrowth as he could, until he thought he spotted the dark bulk of the two trucks emerging from the gloom up ahead.

He called quietly 'It's me – don't shoot' and nearly jumped as Green, who'd seen him minutes ago and been tracking along behind him, said 'Course it is, Bill!'

'Jesus, Gilbert! You damned near gave me a heart attack!'

Green smirked. 'Oh, sorry, mate. I saw you strolling along there, and thought you must've seen us, the noise you were making.'

'Oh bollocks, you stupid sod.' And, with as much dignity as he could manage, with his heart still racing, he stood and walked to the vehicles.

Watson's arrival resulted in the now customary burst of congratulatory handshakes and hugs, and demands for his side of the story. But Dodd was mainly interested in the German's behaviour. Watson put his mind at rest. 'I don't imagine we'll be needing the sentries, Sir. The chap in charge down there was still getting his people organised, but I don't believe I saw anybody with a weapon at all, come to think of it. But then, I was more keen to catch up with you chaps than sightseeing. It was interesting to watch, though' He added, hopefully, "To be honest, I wouldn't mind popping back down to see what happens next.'

Kelly agreed. 'Yeah, Boss, that'd be good. Professional interest like. See how big the hole is, and that.'

Dodd pondered for a second. 'Well, if the sergeant doesn't see any objection, I must say I'd be fascinated to nip down and have a look at our handiwork, wouldn't you?'

Brownlow, who had just rejoined the group, had to agree, but, cautious as ever for the wellbeing of his soldiers, said he and Kelly would go back down to check the scene first. They returned in a few minutes with the news that the cover was good, and it would be safe to go down in twos or threes, guided by Brownlow and Kelly.

The first group down into carefully selected positions, among trees well up the hill from the road, were thrilled to see the damage they had caused: as well as the destroyed lead truck and the gaping break in the road surface, there were the other trucks they had fired on, strewn along the road, the truck that had reversed into the ditch now sharply visible in the first full light of day, and men from the northbound convoy standing in small knots at the end of enormous shadows, waiting for someone to tell them what to do now.

But by the time the next group slipped down among the trees for their turn, the feldwebel was well in his stride. He realised all these vehicles standing about along the road were an open invitation to attack from the air, so he'd got the northbound trucks driven under the trees as much as possible, so they were less obvious from to a passing aircraft, but that wasn't possible for the vehicles on the open road to the north, so those that could be moved were being manoeuvred into a field that had a gate onto the road. The ditched vehicle was being hauled out.

After a while, another group crept down the hill to take the places of the spectators, and were almost disappointed to see that by this time, the vehicles under the trees had been further disguised with branches ripped from the vegetation. Meanwhile, the ditched truck had been recovered and moved into the field, along with the others, which were themselves being camouflaged with branches so that even from here, it was quite difficult to make them out. The only evidence left easily visible was the hole in the road, and the wreck of the leading truck.

The last three men down arrived at the lookout points less than an hour after the explosion. The transformation was dramatic: the wreck had been pushed to one side and draped with branches, and you had to look hard to see any others, but at the area of the hole, a dozen or

so soldiers were scurrying like ants as they took rocks from the roadside walls to begin filling the crater.

The men assembled back up at the trucks, the later watchers bringing the earlier ones up to date. Brownlow summed up. 'Dunno who's in charge down there, but he's doing a brilliant job, eh?' Perceptively, he added 'Must be a sergeant, eh lads?'

'Bloody oath, Sarge' agreed Kelly. 'If it was our lot, we'd still be havin' a brew up while we thought what to do, eh? Yeah, you have to give it to 'em. My bloody oath, you do.'

Tullett voiced what some had been thinking. 'S'right, Corp. 'Ardly worth the fuckin' bother, was it, for one 'o their trucks bugged an' a few shot up? 'Kin' 'ell!'

Dodd disagreed. 'Oh, no! Goodness, no! That's not right, not right at all. Remember, our objective was to get round the headland, and here we all are, safe and sound. So anything else would be a bonus, really. And we've disrupted their traffic for, I don't know, maybe the rest of the day. And that could be pretty important, you know. We've seen how busy this road is, and they're not moving all those vehicles up and down the road for fun. No, I think, in fact, I'm sure, we've done a really good job here, don't you, Sergeant?'

Brownlow nodded firmly. 'Absolutely, Sir. Couldn't agree more. In fact, I wouldn't mind hanging about a bit, to see how they get on with repairing the road. Even if they fix it soon, their schedules'll be a right fuck... er, sorry Sir, a right shambles for hours – there'll be dozens o' trucks stopped all up and down the road – hundreds, quite likely, and that's all thanks to us. Good result, I reckon. So I agree with Mr Dodd. Excellent, in fact. Excellent.' He smiled at Dodd, to show he meant no harm in mimicking one of Dodd's expressions. 'And I don't see any sign of 'em coming to find us, either. So, long as we move our vehicles well out of the way, ready for a quick getaway, I reckon we'd be safe enough to hang about a while, just for interests sake.'

Dodd replied delightedly 'I'm really happy to hear you say that, Sergeant, because I was thinking that perhaps we could search out some water – Angelo says we'd only need to follow one of the stream beds up, and there's bound to be a pool, at least enough to refill our water bottles and perhaps do a bit of laundry – and we could have someone keeping an eye on their progress with repairs: whether they bring up engineers, special equipment and so on.'

Brownlow began to suspect a plot. 'Why'd you want to know all that, Sir, don't mind me asking?'

Dodd grinned and opened his palms. 'Well, wouldn't you chaps be interested to see how much, er, inconvenience we've caused? I know I would.'

There were enthusiastic replies all round. *This is wonderful*, thought Watson. *Not only do we get to blow up a whole road, we then get to have a day off while we watch them putting it back together again. Absolutely fantastic!*

Kelly was thinking, and mused 'Maybe we should give 'em a bit of a spray with a Bren, eh? That'd slow 'em down a bit, eh? Bound to, eh?'

Dodd disagreed. 'Actually, Corporal, I thought we'd just keep an eye on them while they repaired the road, let them get on with it, you know. See how long it takes them.'

Kelly looked a bit disappointed, until Dodd added 'And then we'll blow it up again!'

Chapter 8

Down below, Feldwebel Rosemeyer was pleased with the way things were going. An officer who happened to be on the next southbound convoy had come stamping along, countermanding half of Rosemeyer's orders, then changing his mind, and generally making a complete bloody nuisance of himself, until Rosemeyer had suggested he should turn a truck round to go back and report the problem, and get some heavy equipment to speed up the repair. The officer liked that idea, picturing himself leading a procession of engineers, like the cavalry charging to the rescue of the wagon train, and scurried off, allowing Rosemeyer to get on unhindered. His problem was he had too few bodies – his own convoy only contained ten soldiers, including himself, and the men who had escaped from the attack on the first southbound convoy had still not returned. Rosemeyer thought, correctly, that they'd seen that his men had been put to gruelling work, shifting rocks to fill the hole, and were keeping out of the way. And the men from the succeeding convoys had also seen that hard work was involved up front, and had considered that their duty lay with staying with their vehicles.

As the morning wore on, and a stretch of stone wall had been entirely dismantled and thrown into the crater, Rosemeyer tried getting a truck round, off the road, onto the adjoining field, and back onto the road past the hole. With a lot of manual assistance, the vehicle had finally achieved its objective, but the operation was not a success. Just that one truck had churned up the ground at the roadside very badly, and was lucky to have got back on the road, even with a lot of pushing and an extravagant ration of swearing: another one or two, and the whole area would be completely impassable. So the imperturbable feldwebel put his men back to scavenging rocks from the wall. The problem was that as they used up the nearby rocks, they had to go further to get more, and more importantly, further to bring them back. Rosemeyer left Gefreiter Galle in charge of the work while he strode back down the road to round up the reluctant drivers and their mates from the following convoys. He was getting cross: he'd hoped that he'd be able to get the road repaired before that useless bloody officer got back with help, but that wasn't going to happen. It was well after noon now, and he'd have to let the men from his convoy have a break. They'd been held up for the best part of six hours, and he'd had them working hard all that time, apart from one short stop to eat. But he just knew that as soon as he let them stop, the officer would appear, bawling him out for letting his men laze about while there was work to be done.

And when he herded his new conscripts into the task, and allowed the old hands to gratefully collapse for a while, Tullett was watching.

By late afternoon, the efforts of Rosemeyer's sweating handful of men was bearing fruit: the engineer major who arrived at the head of an elephantine troupe of giant roadmaking plant was most impressed, and told Rosemeyer so. 'Well, Sergeant, I see you haven't left much for my chaps to do, but if it's all the same to you, we'll just take over and finish the job, eh? You might give your chaps a rest and something to eat – I'd hope we'll have them on the move again in an hour or so.'

And Burgess moved back up the wooded hill to report the arrival of the newcomers.

The engineer major was a little optimistic. By the time his machines had tamped, and compacted, and levelled, and compacted and levelled again, it was well after seven when the major pronounced himself satisfied, and watched carefully as the first southbound truck crept as though on tiptoes over the repaired section of roadway. The engineer then studied the surface again before signalling the remainder of the convoy onwards. He continued to watch the surface carefully as vehicles from both directions began to move, controlled by military police who had the vehicles moving slowly over the repair, and only in one direction at a time. But at least the trucks were moving again, after more than twelve hours at a standstill, and there'd be many hours yet before the backlog was cleared.

The light was fading now, in the vale of the mountain: Giovanni was about to slip away to tell the others, when he saw something that sent him scampering up to tell the others, as the road making plant moved aside for a new phalanx of heavy vehicles, like some ponderous ballet for enormous creatures.

In the deepening dusk, the men up the hill were getting their evening meal organised as they discussed, for the millionth time, the damage they'd done to the German supply train. One side considered that as soon as the road was mended and traffic flowed again, the supply shortage would be rectified, while the other argued that they had denied the Germans almost a day's worth of vital supplies, and caused them to use the heavy equipment which would otherwise have been used to continue building the defensive line "up north." Of course, the defensive line was mythical – they had no evidence where it was being assembled, or, for that matter, whether it was being built at all. But as it happened, their supposition that the Germans were preparing a major defensive line was spot on: the high command was determined not to give any more ground than they had to – at least, not without the Allies having to commit vast forces which they, in turn, needed for their planned invasion of France.

The Germans resolved the argument: as the men sat, surrounded by their freshly laundered washing, draped on branches around their little clearing, a burst of gunfire broke up their domestic scene.

'Shit' shouted Brownlow, leaping to his feet as the firing continued, 'that's a heavy machine gun! What's going on? Come on, Corp, grab a Bren, we need to find out what it's all about! The rest of you stay here.'

Well before they could see the source of the shooting, it was obvious that something major was going on. Below them, at the foot of the steep hill, the heavy machine gun fire into the hillside was pretty much continuous, the brilliantly glowing streamers of bullets hosing through the undergrowth, sending chopped bark and branches cascading everywhere in a blizzard of light and noise.

Brownlow and Kelly crouched behind a solid tree, well above the high tide line of the shooting, peering one each side and wondering what it was all about. But then the deepening dusk was torn apart by brilliantly bright light beams playing among the flotsam of the ruined trees beneath them. The two soldiers were motionless behind their protective tree trunk, amazed and dumbfounded, as they became aware that the source of the machine gun fire, invisible behind the lights, was moving along the line of the road, leaving the first area of devastation illuminated by the questing searchlights, which, in turn, made the surrounding area appear full dark.

And into that mayhem lurched the source of the lights - not one but two giant bulldozers, one beside the other, moving slowly, at no more than a man's trudge, struggling to keep station on the steep slope, but remorselessly pushing aside the remaining standing trees as though they were saplings.

As if that wasn't enough, behind the enormous machines came two black, blundering creatures that seemed to be carrying some sort of pole with a flame on the end. Brownlow recognised them instantly.

'Flamethrowers!'

As if that was their cue, the poles suddenly started throwing great spouts of fire up the hillside, setting fire to the remaining undergrowth and rubbish from the trees.

Brownlow suddenly understood. 'Shit! They're clearing the trees away from the road! Jesus! What a way to do it!

Kelly nodded, but said nothing, overwhelmed by the panorama below him. The unseen armoured vehicle with the machine gun had moved past them by now, and the bulldozers were struggling crabwise along the steep slope directly below. As the flamethrowers approached, burning everything in their path, pungent oily smoke came billowing upwards on the light breeze, thick enough to sting their eyes and catch in their throats.

Brownlow and Kelly looked at each other, blank faced, before the sergeant managed to speak. 'I reckon the others should see this, Ted. They won't believe it otherwise.'

They moved the short distance back to where the men waited anxiously, aware from back there only of the thunder of the heavy machine guns, the roaring of powerful engines and the crashing of timber.

Brownlow answered their fears. 'You'd all better come and look at this - you'll never see anything like it again.' Brownlow refused to respond to any queries, but simply, after a warning to be quiet like the donkey, turned and led them back to a safe vantage point.

The warning to be quiet was entirely superfluous in the barrage of noise. The vista below them was staggering: it looked like some mediaeval painter's image of hell - the gleaming yellow-white-orange streamers of the machine gun's tracers slashing from one side to the other, turning the lower branches and undergrowth into kindling, its carrier vehicle invisible now through the choking smoke, the gigantic bulldozers, their sides awash with the pulsating flame from the giants with flamethrowers, making it look for all the world as though the machines were alive and breathing. The flames leapt and crackled as they consumed the deep layer of trash and oddments.

Whenever Kelly remembered this extravaganza, even years later, and tried to describe it, the words wouldn't come, and he just closed his eyes and shook his head, still awed and amazed by this demonstration of raw power and determination.

The men stood, stunned into immobility, as they watched the procession of destruction move across the forest below them. It was only after the flamethrower men had passed, squirting great gouts of flame all round them, as though herding the giant vehicles in front of them, that Dodd's group began to move back to their vehicles.

Once there, still nobody spoke as they went about brewing up, Kelly, as usual, lighting the little stove with its customary *crump*, which they'd always regarded as somewhat scary, but now, after the scene they'd just left, seemed a bit pathetic.

The well known domestic routine of making a hot drink settled them down, after the shock of the vision of hell they'd been transfixed by, and their brains began to function again.

After the coffee had been distributed, and they'd all had a chance to reflect on what they'd seen, Watson opened the conversation. 'Well, that's that, then, I imagine. I was looking forward to being able to see the explosion this time.'

That got morose nods from most, including the Italians, who didn't know what he'd said, but then, they didn't need to know the actual words: the intent was obvious enough.

But Dodd wasn't convinced. 'Maybe you're right, Watson, but tell us what you're thinking.'

Watson grimaced. 'Well, remember back at the road bridge, Sir? You know, we went to blow it up, and found it swarming with Germans, so we couldn't get near it. This is much the same; we can't get close enough now, can we?'

This brought growls of agreement from all except Dodd. 'No, I can't agree. The way I see, it, it's not the same at all.'

A few heads came up, and Dodd saw he'd got at least some interest. His long experience as a lecturer told him how to keep his audience engaged. He saw Brownlow was about to comment, and shook his head slightly. 'Let's look at this from the intelligence point of view, see if we can draw any conclusions from what we know, eh?'

That got the young soldiers interest: they'd come to thoroughly enjoy Dodd's speculations and conversations with Brownlow about what to do next. But this time, Dodd decided it was time for them to start thinking for themselves, and threw them off balance by saying 'Let's hear what you young chaps have to say, eh?'

The squaddies exchanged glances. They'd been looking forward to one of Dodd's reveries, but were well out of their depth being invited to join in. There was a lengthy silence, before Dodd took pity on them, and prompted 'All right, let's have a look at what we know. Why do you think the Germans have done all that work down below? Green?'

Green looked startled for a second before remarking 'Well, they're clearing the undergrowth away from the side of the road, eh?'

Dodd nodded encouragingly. 'Yes. But *why* are they doing that, do you think?'

Green was ready this time. 'I reckon they've twigged that whoever blew the road used the trees as cover, and they want to stop it happening again.'

'Good. Do you agree, Tullett?'

Slightly to his own surprise, Tullett had been thinking along the same lines. 'Yeah, Sir, tha's right.'

'OK, but we know the forest runs right down to the road for at least two miles, probably nearer three. Do you think they'll clear the whole area, Tullett?'

'Have to, won' they? Bound to. No point fuckin' about just doin' a bit of it, is there?'

Dodd nodded encouragingly. 'Right. Quite right. But that's an awful lot of work, isn't it? It'll surely take hours, won't it? What do you think, Watson?'

Watson had been waiting for a chance. 'Certainly will, Sir. A lot of effort, using a lot of resources.' He was proud of that bit, and repeated it with emphasis. 'A *lot* of resources. I imagine they'd much prefer to be using all that heavy equipment to work on their defences further north. Quite apart from having to bring it all down here, and take it back afterwards.'

Dodd nodded again. 'Yes, certainly. So, what can you conclude from that?'

Watson hadn't got past his last thought, and had to ponder for a moment. 'Well, I suppose we can say that since they're spending all that effort, it must be important to them to protect the road.'

Burgess had something to add as well. 'Yeah, an' what I thought was, all that shootin', an' flames, an' that: well, you'd think there'd be a big risk of 'em gettin' seen by planes, wouldn't yer? An' they're takin' that chance, ain't they?'

Dodd was impressed and clapped. 'Yes, Burgess, very good. Excellent. That backs up the suggestion that the Germans *really* need the road, doesn't it? All right, what does that tell us?'

Watson was really getting into the way of things, and answered: 'Seems to me the Germans are looking at this a different way to us. All we wanted to do was to make a hole in the road to stop the Germans moving long enough for us to get round the headland, but they're taking it as an attack on their supply line, and responding to that.'

Dodd was pleased. 'Now, that's an interesting thought. Anybody agree?'

Tullett surprised himself again. 'Yeah, tha's what I was thinkin' too.'

Dodd nodded, and asked Tullett 'So, where does all this lead you?'

'Well, what *I* reckon is, if they're goin' to all that fuckin' trouble, an' takin' a chance on bein' spotted, that road 'as to be *well* fuckin' important, don't it?' Tullett rarely apologised for using bad language in front of Dodd: more often than not, it came so naturally to him that he didn't even realise he was peppering his comments with "fuckin'" and so on. 'Might be the only road they've got to move stuff up an' down.' He paused for a moment, unconsciously mimicking Brownlow's lip chewing, before adding 'Come to think of it, I reckon tha's right. Look at all the fuckin' traffic on it. They *got* to keep it clear, ain't they? Tha's what I reckon, anyway.'

Burgess looked at his mate admiringly, hoping that Dodd wouldn't tell him he was wrong. But Dodd simply asked Burgess for his view on that, and Burgess replied 'Yeah, Sir, what Stan said. Stands to reason, don't it?'

'Anybody disagree?' asked Dodd.

Silence.

'Well then, we all agree that we've stirred up a serious hornet's nest by blowing the road, even if that wasn't our intention. The question now is, what to do next? Time for the voice of experience, lads, eh? What do you think, Sergeant?'

Brownlow was ready with his answer. 'Well, Sir, I reckon the boys're spot on. Like you say, the thing is, what to do about it. We could just keep going up north, like we always intended, but that seems a bit of a wasted opportunity to me now.'

The soldiers sat and looked at Brownlow, then at Dodd, and back to Brownlow again. He continued 'See, there's the road – we know the jerries think it's vital – and there's us, and we've got plenty of explosives left. I can't see why we don't knock another hole in it, then nip off and leave 'em to it. Feel free to add your opinion, Ted.'

Kelly had been thinking along exactly the same lines. 'Yairs,' he drawled, 'seems a shame to disappear without giving it another go, eh? I imagine they'll be putting sentries along where they've cleared, but they can't guard the whole road, can they? Not out in the open. We could find a spot a bit further up to hide the trucks, then just a couple of us,' he winked at Watson, who beamed, 'could find our way over the fields to get close to the road at night, and Bob's your uncle. Shouldn't be too hard. And if we find we can't get close enough, well, we just come creeping back, and off we go.'

Perceptive as ever, Dodd saw that Brownlow was not too sure about that and asked ‘Something to add, Sergeant?’

‘Yeah, well, Ted might be right about them not guarding the whole road, but then, well, they’re not stupid, are they? They’re prob’ly thinking exactly the same as us.’

‘Which is?’

‘Well, we can see that the hills fall back sharply to our left from here, but the road goes more to our right, into wide open country. So, if we want to keep our vehicles hidden in the trees, if we camp a mile or two north from here before we set out to blow the road, we’ll have a long way to go across open country to get there. They’ll only need the odd patrol, maybe tripwires, maybe them bastard mines, or whatnot, but I reckon they’re not going to go to all that effort,’ he twitched his head back towards the scene below, ‘and not bother with the rest of it. Sorry, Ted, but I reckon it wouldn’t be as easy as you’re saying. And if you get spotted, you’ve got a hell of a long way back to our vehicles, eh?’

Kelly pushed his hat forward and gave the back of his head a vigorous scratch while he considered that, then replied, ‘Now you say it, Sarge, I reckon you’re right. We’d be better off staying and doing the bizzo from here. Nice and handy, eh? I get set, then just wait for a gap in traffic both ways – we could set lookouts like we did back at the transport camp – then I’d only need a couple o’ minutes to drop down, set the charge, and back up into the trees.’

He rubbed his head again while he contemplated that scenario. ‘Well, stone the crows, you’re right Sarge, no worries about that. That’d be miles better. We could do the job and be well away before they even knew what was happenin’, don’t you reckon?’

Brownlow was pleased that Kelly agreed, and said so, but, anxious not to offend the officer, asked ‘D’you agree, Mr Dodd, Sir?’

Dodd was happy he’d been included. ‘Yes, Sergeant, I do. Our options are to just pack up and head north, which I, for one am not fond of. And I don’t like the thought of our chaps getting caught out in the open.’ He stopped and imagined that for a second, then shivered. ‘No, I’m not attracted to that at all. It just seems better if we work from here. After all, the road is only, what, a hundred yards from here, maybe less. Granted, it’s a steep uphill climb to get back here, but if anything went wrong, you could be back here in a few minutes, and we’d be ready to go.’

Dodd felt one of his officer like moods coming on. ‘Right, that’s settled.’ He clapped his hands once. ‘We’ll do it tonight, working from here.’

‘Now, Sergeant’ said Dodd, realising that he might have overstepped himself, ‘how do you picture this working?’

Brownlow thought for a second. ‘Have to be simple, eh chaps, if we’re going tonight. We need to get some food into us, then get the vehicles packed and ready to go. But the job itself shouldn’t be too hard, eh, Ted? Quick in and out, yes?’

Kelly was ready. ‘Piece o’ piss, Sarge. Me and the apprentice’ he flicked a glance at Watson, who tried to nod casually, as though it was a foregone conclusion, but failed, ‘get the kit ready somewhere up the hill, I slip down with the charge and lay out the wire, then straight back up while Bill connects the plunger, and we fire it straight away. Easy.’ He was about to add *yairs, come to think of it, I can do the job on my own, no worries*, but thought Watson would be disappointed, and left it at that.

Brownlow wasn’t quite happy with that though, and arranged that when they were ready, Kelly would go and select a suitably safe place from where to detonate the charge, while Dino

and Green would go north and south to act as lookouts, while Tullett and Burgess, as relatively experienced shooters, would take Bren guns and act as covering fire, just in case, as Brownlow said, though he didn't specify in case of what.

So far, the job was going to plan. It was well after midnight when Brownlow declared he was satisfied that all the preparations were complete, the trucks were loaded and ready to go.

Kelly had been crouching over his equipment, checking and rechecking, while Watson stood by him, trying to look useful. Finally, Kelly stood, stretched, and announced that he was ready too and asked 'Are we right to go, Sarge?'

'OK, Corp. Off you go. You're going to locate your firing point first, right?'

And with a casual 'Bloody oath' Kelly slipped away.

He was back within a few minutes, looking grim. Dodd recognised his expression. 'Is there a problem, Corporal?'

'Wire! They've laid bloody miles of it all over where they cleared the trees. I'll tell you what: they are *real* keen not to get any more damage to the road, eh? My bloody oath, they are.'

Brownlow was first to react. 'Should I come and have a look Ted? D'you reckon you could get through it?'

A sea of anxious faces, including the Italians, who didn't know the details of what was being said, but knew it was bad, waited for the answer, and were bitterly disappointed.

'Have a look if you want, Sarge, but I'd say there's no chance. Because what I reckon is, if they've gone to all this trouble, the flamethrowers and whatnot, *and* the wire, they're pretty much bound to put sentries out, aren't they? And I don't have to tell you, Sarge, it don't matter how careful you are, you don't get through barbed wire without making a lot of noise. Right?'

Brownlow had to agree. 'So, no chance, then?'

'Well, I did have one thought, Sarge. Just a possibility. I need to have a bit of a sniff around back down the track a bit. Give me twenty minutes, all right?' To Watson's enormous relief, and Greens great envy, Kelly added 'Come on Bill' and jogged off, following the top of the steep slope.

Time hung heavy around the trucks: all the brew up kit had been packed away, so there was not even the opportunity for the squaddies traditional time waster. It seemed longer, but Kelly and Watson were back just on the twenty minutes, and were immediately surrounded and bombarded with questions. Kelly waved his audience to silence. 'We're on, boys, we're on.'

Dodd was thrilled. 'Excellent, Corporal, excellent! Tell us all about it.'

'Well, Skipper, you know that yarn, something about if the mountain won't come to Mohammed? Well, we'll take the mountain to the road!'

There was a confused silence. Kelly explained. 'Back down the track maybe a mile, or a bit less, right on the point at any rate, there's that old castle thingo we saw from the other side. You know, with the tower? Just a big pile o' rocks mostly, 'cept for the tower. Well, I reckon we can rig a few charges so's to bring the whole lot down, eh? Like an avalanche, eh? Bit o' wire ain't going to stop that, is it? And the beauty is, the jerries knocking all the trees down, well, that just makes sure it won't get stopped before the road! What do you reckon, Boss? Sarge?'

Dodd and Brownlow looked at each other, while everybody else held their breath and studied them. Brownlow's bottom lip disappeared into his mouth and Dodd rubbed his head, still looking at Brownlow. Then Dodd nodded slightly and Brownlow began to grin, saying 'Absolutely brilliant, Corporal. Brilliant!'

The audience gave a collective sigh of relief.

The plan didn't need to be changed: the two lookouts would still deploy up and down the road, and the two shooters would still deploy either side of the outcrop to give covering fire "just in case." Kelly simply added a couple of extra sticks of explosive to the bundle he'd already made up, then assembled another bundle and prepared another firing wire, and they were ready. That left Brownlow and Angelo to stay with the vehicles, so as to be ready for a hasty getaway, attended by Dodd, Bimbo and Giovanni, who, much to their chagrin, had nothing to do. Giovanni had showed off a bit, and suggested he and Bimbo should go along to watch, but the sergeant had vetoed that idea, saying it'd turn out to be a bloody shambles (he moderated his usual "fuckin' shambles" since he was communicating via Dodd) if things went wrong and they needed to get away quickly and there were people everywhere.

The moon was over the back of the mountains when the participants took off: they found the going tricky in the darkness, made deeper by an occasional billow of smoke as the breeze encouraged a smouldering log, and the air was heavy with soot. The men picked their way carefully, very conscious that they didn't want to send showers of loose rocks cascading down onto the road, but their journeys were uneventful.

Above the tumbled ruin, Kelly made a final check of his gear and made sure Watson was perfectly settled in a little hollow behind a solid tree about twenty yards down from the track, which put him about fifty yards above the road and ten above the top of the tumbled stones.

They watched through the remaining undergrowth as a northbound convoy ground past below them, then, as the noise faded, Kelly carefully set off down the slope - he only had to move down to the base of the piled rocks, leaving him somewhat exposed to view from the road, there being only ten yards of untouched foliage between the road and where he wanted to be, but he considered himself reasonably safe, as long as he wasn't moving about when a convoy passed.

It was almost as Watson had imagined it back at the trucks while he stood about "helping" Kelly get the gear ready. He'd imagined it being a bit lighter, but there was enough starlight to let him study the scene. And there he was, watching Kelly clamber down, paying out the cable as he went, Watson's only task being to squat by the plunger box with the end of the wire wrapped several times round his wrist to make sure it didn't go astray, and wait for Kelly to finish his side of things. Watson smelt, rather than saw, the smoke that was still puffing from the wreckage of the trees that had been ripped out and burnt, and specks of red and yellow twinkled and glowed among the embers. Watson even found himself grinning to himself as he pictured the explosion, followed by the mad scramble back up the hill and the chase to the waiting trucks, where they would be hauled aboard and smothered with congratulations as the vehicles raced away. Watson stopped his smiling as he heard the sound of another convoy approaching, but he saw that Kelly had heard it too, and was going to ground, all but disappearing into the darkness.

It was nobody's fault. Just bad luck really. Kelly had disappeared from Watson's line of vision round the bottom of the ruins, and was really happy with the place he'd found for the first charge

– a deep cleft in the rocks right at the base of the watchtower just made for his bundle of explosives. He inserted the detonator, which already had its wire connected, and moved back the way he had come, carefully paying out the wire and seeking a suitable place to stash the second package. He simultaneously saw just the spot in among a tumble of gigantic squared off rocks and heard the next in the seemingly interminable stream of vehicles, playing catch-up, he supposed, the dispatchers trying to get back onto schedule. He just had time to insert the bundle of explosives in between two rocks, forcing the detonator deep into the package and checking the connections, then flattened his body among the rubble as the leading vehicle came close. He lay still, relaxed now, going over in his mind what he'd done, but confident that everything was done down here, and all that needed doing now was the connecting of the wire to the two terminals on the plunger, lifting the handle, and that was that. But as he lay there, a smouldering tree trunk, which had been stricken by the flame throwers but escaped the bulldozers, collapsed in a spectacular crash and shower of sparks and brightly glowing embers.

Kelly realised immediately he was in trouble. The vehicles were right there below him, and stopping. He knew what was going to happen next, and began to slither round the side of the boulders to begin his retreat. He heard shouted orders from below: a light, not a searchlight, thank goodness, but bright enough, began to play about the hillside and a second later, a heavy machine gun joined in, thundering a brilliantly glowing stream of bullets randomly into the trees.

Kelly managed to scramble up to the top side of the ruin, where he lay panting for a second. He was just thinking he should be able to ease his way back up the slope in the lee of the jumbled stones, when he heard more shouts from below and the machine gun stopped, though the light continued its dance among the trees. The sudden silence was almost more scary than the noise. Risking a look down, his blood ran cold: a line of German troops was beginning to fan out across the face of the slope below and either side of him. Kelly knew what he had to do and called in a stage whisper 'Bill! Bill! Are you there?'

'Yes, Corporal, I hear you. I see you too. You'd better get up here in a hurry.'

Kelly grimaced a grim smile. 'You reckon, Bill? Hadn't thought o' that! I'll make a dash for it, but we're out of time. You're going to have to connect the wires to the plunger box yourself. Nice and easy. Just like I showed you, OK?'

'But ...'

'No time to argue, mate. Just like I showed you, eh? Then you blow it, all right?'

'But ...'

'Don't worry 'bout me. I'll be right. Now, just like we agreed, OK?'

At that instant, from the brow of the slope above Watson, Burgess, who had been watching developments carefully, decided the German troops were getting too close to Kelly, and began spraying them with his submachine gun. Tullett immediately joined in. In a second, the big light beam moved up the slope, searching for the source of the firing, and the heavy German machine gun responded too, firing over the heads of the German troops, aiming for the source of the return fire. That was too much for Watson. He hadn't prepared himself for this: his mental image wasn't like this at all. It was supposed to be easy, no more than a game, really. Not like this. It wasn't fair. He wasn't ready. He cringed into his little hollow, reacting to the blizzard of bullets all round him. A cascade of leaves and twigs streamed down onto him but he didn't really notice. He was on the edge of panic now. The world seemed to be turning into an enormous firework with him in the middle of it. He was frozen, on the very verge curling up into a ball with

his thumb in his mouth, eyes screwed shut while he waited for it all to go away. That moment seemed to go on for ages.

Something heavy crashed into him from up the slope. In the state he was in, he pretty much ignored it, until an arm went round his shoulder and Green's voice spoke calmly in his ear.

'Right, chum, time to do your job, all right? Can you do it?'

The familiar voice brought Watson back with a start, and he nodded. Stirring himself, he moved to the plunger box. His hands were shaking badly and he only just retained enough control to complete the connections. But his success rallied him and he managed a ghoulish grin at Green as he grasped the handle and thrust down on the plunger.

The sky lit up with an enormous flash. Even on the upper side of the ruin, and protected in the little hollow behind the tree, they were shaken by the violence of the explosion, which completely drowned out the sounds of firing from all round them. Watson risked a look. For a second, he couldn't take it all in: the blast had knocked the nearby trees down and set them ablaze while the tracers from the Brens on each side of him and the heavy machine gun below only added to the display. But all that, and even the whereabouts of Kelly, was forgotten in that instant, when he saw that the looming black shape of the tower was still there, seemingly untouched.

'Look at this, Gilbert! The damned thing's still there!' Green poked his head round the other side of the tree and was transfixed as he tried to take in the scene of mayhem just below them.

The pair of them crouched, half a head poking out each side of the tree, gazing about them: suddenly, there was a movement in front of them and, as though by magic, Kelly appeared, scrambling up as fast as he could. 'Come on boys, stop sitting there like a pair of dickheads! The bastards going! Get away from here before the jerries get organised! Come on!'

There was an awful hollow grumbling, groaning sound, as though from the very bowels of the earth, and, very slowly at first, then gathering pace, the whole mass of piled stones began to slide down towards the road, taking the tower with it, toppling as it went.

Even Kelly had to stop to watch. There was a brief twang and scream from the barbed wire as the huge pile of debris poured over it like a wave, then, before silence had fallen again, Kelly had the young soldiers scuttling up to the track, and away.

One part, at least, of Watson's vision of the job came true. The three raced back to the trucks, where everybody else was assembled, and the vehicles began to move as they approached, stumbling now with weariness and relief from tension, and they were dragged aboard to receive the applause of their mates.

Much later, as the trucks continued their tortuous way north along the ancient track, Watson turned to Green and muttered 'Thanks, chum.'

Green feigned surprise. 'What's that for, then?'

'You know. Back there.'

'Oh, that.' Green shrugged. 'No, I saw the Corp go to ground, and realised it was up to you, but I saw you weren't moving, so I thought you'd been hit.' Green sniffed that expressive sniff of his, to cover the lie. 'But when I got there, I saw you were OK and fixing up the wires so I needn't have bothered. Could've saved myself the climb back up, eh?'

But Watson had to get it off his chest. ‘I was in a blind funk, you know. If you hadn’t come down to me, I’d still be there now.’

‘Oh, bollocks, come off it mate – I’ve seen you in tighter spots than that. What about when we were waiting to be attacked at the railway bridge; you were good as gold. And what about when we were digging around at the beach looking for land mines. Bloody hell, that was something, wasn’t it? And you were all right there, eh? So don’t give me that bollocks about funk, OK? So, we’ll say no more about it, eh?’

And they never did.

Chapter 9

They stopped around noon for a meal, after which Angelo explained it would get harder now - they would be leaving the “old road” as Angelo had called it, to commence the climb over the mountains. The others couldn’t believe their trip could get any worse, but Angelo was right: the track, such as it was, that they now followed was all but invisible to Dodd, who was again sitting with Angelo, but tended steadily upwards, with occasional plunges. There was little talking inside the vehicles – it was just too noisy as the trucks fought their way over the rough ground, engines roaring, gears whining and the equipment being thrown about, as Kelly commented, like a mad woman’s breakfast. Half the time, the men in the back were too busy just hanging on, and it was almost a relief on the several occasions when all the passengers had to get out and help push the trucks. Then they could see they’d made progress upwards, away from the cultivated lowlands, and the trees around them were becoming noticeably fewer and scrawny with it. Otherwise, the gigantic scale of their environment was such that it was hard to tell they were making any real movement. Twice, they had to unload both vehicles and all but carry them over the encroaching miniature landslides – an aspect of the trip which Angelo had not thought to mention before they started - and there were three halts to repair punctures, two of them in Angelo’s truck, much to Dodd’s relief.

It was getting cooler as they climbed, too, and by late afternoon, when they’d lost the sun over the peaks to the west, the travellers were bruised, weary, cold, hungry, and thoroughly fed up with the whole experience.

Eventually, though, Angelo brought them to a halt in among an impoverished stand of exhausted looking trees, and the men all clambered thankfully from the trucks, ready for a meal and grateful for the thought of a few hours without being thrown about. Angelo announced that they were close to the heights, and were within one days travel to Naples. This brought on the requirement for a celebratory feast, which, in truth, was exactly what they’d been eating regularly, but eaten in a more jovial frame of mind.

It was late, and Dodd and Brownlow were sitting comfortably, their backs resting on a wheel of their truck, enjoying a companionable silence as they watched their little fire burn low. After a while, Brownlow said ‘Er, Sir, you know how Kelly calls you ‘Boss’ or ‘Skipper’?

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You’re all right with that, it seems?’

‘Oh, yes, most definitely. I’m really rather proud of it, to be candid. You remember, he called me ‘mate’ for quite a while, then suddenly I became ‘Boss’ or ‘Skipper.’ Not very military, of course, but I’m pretty sure it’s meant as a sign of respect, don’t you agree?’

‘Yep. No question. But I’ve noticed the other lads have started doing the same, once or twice, just a slip o’ the tongue, like.’

Dodd was embarrassed. He’d become aware of it too, and was deeply pleased. ‘Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed.’

Brownlow glanced at Dodd. He was shrewd enough to know better. But he was secretly happy with what was happening too: it demonstrated what he called cameradeship.

‘I could pull ‘em into line if you like, Sir.’

Dodd hated that idea. ‘Oh, goodness no, Sergeant. I may as well admit I find it very, well, I don’t know – I just like it. Unless you think?’

‘No, I’m all right with it too. The corp calls you ‘Boss’ because he accepts you as the leader, and the others, well, it’s the same for them, I reckon.’

‘Do you think I should respond somehow? I really don’t know’

Brownlow pondered. ‘Well, I suppose you could call ‘em by their first names, if you like. I usually find calling a squaddie by his first name bucks him up no end. Me, though, I keep that for special occasions, when a lad’s done well, like. What do you think about that?’

‘What! That sounds marvellous! I’ll follow your lead, if I may. Do you know, I can’t remember ever being in a situation where I called another man by his first name before. Except relatives, of course. That sounds so old-fashioned, doesn’t it, but back in college, that was just the usual way we carried on. Even my friends’

He tailed off, thinking back, and realising with a jolt that he was much closer in companionship with these men around him now, who he’d only known for a matter of weeks, than he’d ever been to his university colleagues, most of whom he’d known for many years. He had a momentary vision of the future. ‘I imagine all that will be different after the war, don’t you? All those stuffy old conventions thrown away, eh?’

They mulled it all over for a minute, until Dodd chuckled. ‘One thing, though. I can’t see myself calling Tullett ‘Kinnell’! Luckily for me, they seem to have stopped that lately. I wonder why?’

‘Yes, I’d noticed that too. I reckon it goes like, when you first meet someone, you start off formal, don’t you, so if we were civvies, and just met, I’d call you Mr Dodd, wouldn’t I?’

Dodd saw the point immediately. ‘Yes, and as we got to know each other, we might leave off the formality, and I might simply call you Brownlow, or even “Brownlow, old chap,” or something like that.’

Brownlow nodded. ‘That’s right. And then, as we became pally, we might invent nicknames for each other, right?’

‘Yes, yes, I see.’

‘But then, there’s another stage, I reckon. If you’re really good mates, you don’t bother with the nicknames any more, just call your mate by his first name, eh?’ Brownlow looked at the lieutenant, to see if he was following. ‘That’s where these boys are now: that’s what I reckon, anyway.’

Dodd nodded agreement, though this was a whole new area to him. ‘But you, Sergeant: what about you?’

‘Me? Well, maybe I’m a bit old and set in my ways – I’ll give it a try, if you want, but I’ll probably still be calling you Sir or Mr Dodd, as usual, if it’s all the same?’

‘As you prefer. But what do we call you, was what I was wondering.’

Brownlow smiled again, a little embarrassed. ‘Like I say, I’m set in me ways, but I worked and struggled long and hard to get my stripes, and I’ll be wanting to keep on with Sergeant. Does that suit you, Sir?’

Dodd turned to face Brownlow. He wanted to say something like *‘If I could find another way to address you that would demonstrate that I’ve come to respect and admire you enormously, and that I rely on you completely, I’d be proud to use it. In the absence of anything better, I will continue to respectfully call you Sergeant.’* But of course, he could no more have actually spoken

those words than he could have eaten Angelo's truck. Instead, he simply held out his right hand, and when Brownlow took it, grasped Brownlow's with his left as well, and quietly said 'Sergeant.' And Brownlow replied 'Sir.'

Dodd had a thought. 'Should we tell the chaps, do you think?' But Brownlow had had enough of this intimacy for now. 'Naw. Let 'em work it out for themselves.'

It was only just light, and still cold, as Angelo set off the next day, with Dino, Bimbo and Giovanni with him. Their plan was simple: they would drive their truck over the top and down to as close to the outskirts of Naples as they dared, then hide it and walk in from there. Dodd had asked them to find out what enemy presence there was, what they were up to, whether there were Italian soldiers or guerrillas in hiding there, and what possible targets there might be for Dodd's group. In response, Angelo had shrugged the shrug that says 'I'll do what I can, but

Once in the city, they would split into two pairs and make contact with people they knew – Angelo with the family of the girl he'd known, and Bimbo with a cousin. They'd told Dodd they hoped to be back that evening, but he was not to be concerned if they didn't appear until late the following day. Angelo explained it may take some time to locate their contacts, and they would have to cover a lot of ground and talk to a lot of people. Angelo thought it might very possibly take a day or two to get a solid idea of what was going on.

Dodd suspected that there would be a good deal of drinking, eating, and bragging to be done as well, and certainly didn't expect them back the same day. Giovanni had thought about that too, and was beginning to regret not having groove on his boot made by a bullet, like Green's, which would help to verify the outrageous lies they would be telling, as he imagined it, to an admiring circle of young women.

On the other hand, Dodd had no doubt that they would be back at some point, and not leave the soldiers on their own.

As the day progressed, the remaining men went out on foot on small explorations, and soon found that they were camped in the last bit of flattish ground before, over a ridge, the mountains began to fall away to the eastern coast. As they breasted the ridge, they were caught by the wind, gusting fiercely enough for Kelly to complain it was "fit to blow a dog off a chain" but they soon found a more sheltered vantage point from which they could look out to the ocean, the crisp, clear air giving them a vast panorama: Dodd had his memory tested in picking out salient points.

'That big one there,' he said, pointing almost due south, 'that must be Vesuvius, ...'

Green was thrilled. 'What, the volcano?'

'That's right.' Dodd wanted to try out the new arrangements for addressing the men, but lost his nerve at the last moment. 'That's right, er, Green, the volcano that erupted and buried Pompeii in, 79AD, I think. The remains of Pompeii are pretty much the other side of it from us, if I'm not mistaken. And away past Vesuvius, you can just make out the Island of Capri. Supposed to be very beautiful, you know, a big attraction for the tourists. Never been there myself. And that island to the north of it, that'll be Ischia, so Naples has to be between us and Ischia, but we'll have to get over those last hills before we see it.'

But Green wanted to know more about Pompeii, and in an action that reminded Dodd how young his associates were, put up his hand. 'Sir, sir, that Pompeii, is that the place where they found all those people?'

Dodd managed to choke back a smile, and responded ‘Yes, well, not people, exactly, but their remains, most of them beautifully preserved.’

Tullett’s interest, which had been waning, was rekindled at that. ‘What? They found bodies, like? Buried by a volcano?’ He snorted. ‘Oh, bollocks, Sir, due respect. They’d all be burnt right up, wouldn’t they! By the lather, an’ that. You’re ‘avin’ a laugh, ain’t you, Skipper?’ And Burgess and Kelly pricked up their ears too.

Dodd admitted that his knowledge was a bit skimpy, but explained that it wasn’t lava, but cinders and ashes that buried Pompeii, along with Herculaneum, and killed the inhabitants not by burning, but by suffocation, and also preserved the buildings and their contents, right down to the details. Pompeii was accidentally rediscovered in 1748, as Dodd recalled, and was found to be amazingly well preserved. The site, Dodd noted, immediately joined the list of must-see sights for the wealthy grand tourists, who underwent great discomfort and considerable danger to have themselves lowered into the small parts of the city that had been excavated. In the early days, Dodd explained, it was like going down into caves, and the only light was from burning torches, so it must have been extremely spooky to be down there. Excavations had been carried out sporadically ever since, and the way of life in Roman times had been revealed in great detail at Pompeii by the excavation of some fragments of the streets and footpaths, the statue-decorated public buildings, and the shops and homes of the artisans. The excavations, Dodd said, even revealed graffiti on many walls.

The young men, Green, in particular, were fascinated by the whole idea of going down into the bowels of the earth and discovering perfectly preserved bodies, but Dodd had now exhausted his knowledge on the subject, and, to general disappointment, admitted it. But Green had one last question. This time, he managed to keep his hands by his side as he asked ‘Sir, that stuff they found on the walls? Was that the lava?’

Dodd was flummoxed for a second, then realised. ‘Oh, the graffiti, you mean? No, graffiti is just writing on walls, you know?’

Burgess wasn’t clear. ‘What, like “Eggs, a tanner a dozen?”’

‘Er, no, not really. More like that silly message you see everywhere: “Kilroy was here.”’

Burgess suddenly twigged. ‘Oh, yeah! Like yer see on bog walls! Now I know!’ He laughed. ‘Well, bugger me, I never knew there was a name for it, eh, Stan!’

Tullett laughed with his mate, and Watson was enjoying the conversation too. ‘Yes, jolly funny, some of ‘em, eh! There was one that stuck in my memory, on the wall of the toilet on Reading Station, I think it was. It goes:

“This bloody toilet is no good at all.

The seat is too high an’ the hole is too small!”

He got a snigger from that, but went on ‘But wait, another chap’d written underneath:

“To which I must add the obvious retort,

Your arse is too large and your legs are too short!”

Amid chuckles, Burgess added ‘Yeah, an’ what about that one that went “My mother made me a homosexual” and underneath, somebody else’d wrote “If I give ‘er the wool, will she make one for me?”’

More chuckles, and Burgess remembered another one. He said he’d seen painted on a fence somewhere “The meek shall inherit the Earth” and underneath, in a different colour “If that’s not too much trouble.”

Having run out of examples, Burgess turned to Kelly. ‘D’yer ‘ave them graffy things in Australia, Corp?’

Kelly pondered for a moment, then mentioned ‘Yairs, mate, we do. I did see an odd one once. It went “I had a hare up my bum.”’

There was a long silence while the men thought about that, then Watson asked ‘Er, was that h-a-r-e or h-a-i-r?’

Everybody considered the alternatives for a while, then Kelly responded ‘Would that make a difference, d’you reckon?’

Green gave that thought up, and returned to the earlier conversation. ‘So, Sir, if that wasn’t the lava on the walls, where *did* the lava go?’

Dodd replied ‘Well, there *was* no lava, you see. Vesuvius spewed out tons and tons of ashes and cinders, but no lava.’

Green wasn’t at all happy, and said so. ‘But Sir, I’ve seen pictures of volcanos, and there’s always lashings of lava pouring down, all burning and everything.’

He got support from an unexpected quarter too, when Tullett added ‘Yeah, tha’s right, Gil. We used ter get them volcano fireworks, di’n’ we? An’ they *always* ‘ad loads o’ sparkly stuff goin’ straight up, an’ loads ‘o lather bubblin’ down the sides, eh?’

He glared round, seeking confirmation, and received several nods. Dodd could see he wouldn’t be convincing his audience of the inexplicable absence of lava, so, to break the impasse, agreed ‘Oh yes, I used to like those! I seem to remember some of them were even called Vesuvius! But, really, I liked the rockets best.’ He made a whooshing noise and looked upwards, and everybody, remembering, went ‘Ooooooh!’

However, the general opinion was that the very best were the bangers, and the bigger the better. Watson didn’t agree: he’d always been a big fan of catherine wheels, but he was sensible enough not to say so.

Dodd was happy to ramble on about the general area, but the men didn’t have their heart in it, and soon wandered back to where the three tonner was hidden. Dodd was disappointed at first, but then chuckled to himself and thought how the people doing the Grand Tour of Europe spent a small fortune just to be near these places, and all his soldiers wanted was a cup of tea, a smoke, and a tall story or two.

The sergeant insisted they pass the time by getting more familiar with all the weapons, stripping and cleaning, stripping again and again until it became automatic, which they moaned about with the Tommy’s mechanical half-hearted complaint, but he rewarded them by allowing them to each fire a few rounds through both the Italian Berettas and the British Brens. But of course, then they had to clean them again. The day then passed lazily, apart from desultory comparisons about the merits of the two automatic weapons, but since Brownlow was the only one who had any worthwhile knowledge or experience of automatic weapons, the conversation was almost entirely bullshit.

The Italians didn’t get back that day, of course, and Dodd realised that they would be taking advantage of the opportunity to celebrate meeting old friends and family again, but if they were, it was hard to blame them. Even so, he would have been happier to have them back earlier – without information, it was impossible to picture even a rough sketch of what they might face in the city, and what action they might take.

The same questions had occurred to the men. By late the next morning, even Sergeant Brownlow had run out of tasks to set the soldiers to pass the time, and they fell into a rough circle, taking advantage of the warm sunlight after a very chilly night, hardly bothering to converse, until Tullett raised the subject that had been on all their minds.

‘Ere, Skipper, what d’you reckon we’ll be doin’ in the town, like?’

Several heads came up at that, and turned towards Dodd. It was the first time any of the privates had actually noticed one of them addressing Dodd in that way: they were fascinated to see how he and Brownlow would react to his being addressed as Skipper by an English private, but more keen to know what their future might hold. As regards the first issue, he gave no reaction, a fact noted with interest by the privates, and tucked away for later discussion, but as regards the second he wasn’t much help.

‘Yes, excellent question, er, Stan. I’ve been thinking about that myself, but I don’t think we can answer it until we’ve got more information.’

The use of the Tullett’s name caused a few raised eyebrows and sly winks, but Brownlow was right: there was a real sense of ‘camaradeship’ now.

‘It could be the Germans are there in strength - you know, machine gun nests everywhere, a tank on every corner, that sort of thing, in which case we’ll have trouble even moving about, never mind getting up to mischief. On the other hand, they might not have much strength at all, and be staying in their camp. That’s probably no better, as far as we’re concerned.’

Kelly was intrigued by that comment. ‘How d’you work that out, Boss? No good for us, I mean?’

‘Well, our idea is to do what we can to disrupt the German war effort, right?’

Nods all round.

‘Well, if they’re all safely tucked up behind wire, or a big wall or something, what will we do to disturb them? Another raid like our attack on the transport camp? I imagine we all know how lucky we were to get away with that one. No, I’d prefer it if they were moving about in the city – at least we’d have a chance of getting at them there.’

That elicited more nods, and Dodd continued. ‘And we don’t know what the locals are up to either. Do they have weapons? Are they taking any action themselves? Can we work something out together? We just don’t know any of that stuff yet, do we? I’m hoping Angelo and the boys will be able to fill in the gaps when they get back. So, sorry, chaps, until then, we’re all in the dark.’

Burgess sympathised. ‘It’s a fair bastard, innit, Stan, just ‘angin’ about. I’m gettin’ a bit jittery meself.’

Tullett bristled. ‘Who said anythin’ about fuckin’ jittery? I was just wonderin’, tha’s all.’

Burgess back-tracked. ‘All right, all right, settle down, mate, I was just sayin’! Bit fuckin’ touchy today, aren’t yer?’

Kelly saw the beginnings of one of those stupid fights that flare up suddenly, and nobody can remember the reason for afterwards, and broke in. ‘Speaking of jittery, Johnno, you remember that story you told about that time about when you was a kid, gettin’ shit-scared in the forest that night?’

Burgess shuddered. ‘*Do* I? That was *well* scary, that was. Why?’

‘I’ve wondered about that a couple o’times since. Was that the scarest you’ve ever been?’

Intrigued, Burgess thought about that. ‘Hmmm. Dunno, Ted. It’d be up there with the worst.’

‘Worse than anything on this trip? The crash? The camp job?’

‘Oh *shit*, yes. The camp job, well, that was fun, in a way, and the crash, well I dare say I should ha’ been scared, but I wasn’t, somehow. Didn’t ‘ave time, I s’pose. I was gettin’ a bit nervy waitin’ for the train to come, back at the bridge, but yeah, I reckon that business in the trees would be the worst. Not the other day, I mean. When we was kids.’

Tullett didn’t agree. ‘What about the advance at Alemein? If you tell me you wasn’t shit scared then, you’re tellin’ fuckin’ porkies.’

Brownlow was interested. ‘You boys were at Alemein? I remember you said you’d been at Tobruk.’

Watson and Green were deeply impressed, as was Dodd.

Burgess answered ‘Yeah, Sarge, we was there. You, too, as I recall, doin’ the mine clearance, weren’t it? Stan and me, well, our lot, we was down just south of Ruweisat Ridge, right next to them Greeks – fuckin’ mad bastards they were, eh Stan? Worse’n the Kiwis an’ the Aussies even, that lot.’ He considered for a moment. ‘Not as bad as the Poles though, eh? They was *completely* fuckin’ mad, eh, Stan? Ever meet up with the Poles, Sarge?’

Brownlow grinned. He was pleased that, even in this informal setting, no-one had tried to call him anything other than by his rank. It had all worked out very well. ‘Yeah, I did, and I have to agree: they were mad bastards all right. All they wanted to do was kill Germans. Not interested in orders, or discipline, or waiting for the main attack, or anything like that. Just wanted to get forward and kill as many Germans as they could. I’ve seen a Polak with just a rifle and a grenade, goin’ after a tank, stuff like that. Mad bastards, the lot of ‘em.’

There was a bit of a silence while they thought about that, then Burgess shivered slightly, and continued. ‘Any rate, our lot was due through the minefield about daybreak, and just as we got the order to go, one o’ them bastard whirlwind things got up – you know the bastards I mean, Sarge? Nothin’ one minute, then, whoosh, fuckin’ sand everywhere, in yer eyes, up yer nose, everywhere.’

Everyone was sitting upright now, paying close attention. Burgess shuddered slightly as he remembered.

‘Couldn’t ‘ardly see your ‘and, never mind the bloke next to you. And noisy as fuck an’ all. Not that that mattered, what with our artillery whackin’ ‘em over non-stop, seemed like the shells was just over’ead, they was screamin’ so loud, an’ there was the jerries firin’ back, seemed to be shells landin’ all round, fuckin’ scramplin’ whistlin’ about everywhere, might ha’ been mines goin’ off, for all I knew. An’ then there’d be a sudden burst from a machine gun, you just ‘ad no idea where it was all goin’, or comin’ from neither, come to that. So there we were, on the advance, and after a couple o’ minutes, the sand was so bad I couldn’t tell *which* way I was goin’. What could you do? I didn’t want the wind to suddenly drop and I was a mile adrift o’ me mates, so I just kept ploddin’ on, tryin’ to see the blokes next to me, shoutin’ out, fuckin’ stupid, in all that noise, but I’d well lost touch with ‘em. Seemed to go on for ever, that did. Didn’t know whether I was off line and wanderin’ about in an uncleared minefield, or on the line of our machine guns, or about to stroll into the jerry lines or bump into a fuckin’ jerry tank! For all I knew, I could be goin’ back towards our lines and about to ‘ave me arse shot off by one of our lot by mistake! Oh, yeah, now I come to remember it, *that* was the scarest I’ve ever been.’

He nodded firmly. 'Easy.'

There was a long and respectful silence while the men sat studying Burgess and tried to imagine what it had been like, and how they might have got through it.

In the end, it was Brownlow who asked 'So, what did you do, son?'

'I stopped and thought about it for a bit. Then I did what you'd ha' done, Sarge. I laid down an' curled up in a ball, an' tried to keep the fuckin' sand out o' me face.'

The young soldiers watched Brownlow with interest, to see how he reacted to the idea of him curled up on the ground, waiting for the wind to stop. He bit his lip for a bit, then agreed. 'Good boy, John. Only sensible thing to do.'

The others then nodded wisely.

After a while, Green remembered something. 'And what was that about you being called 'The Butcher of Tobruk,' John? What was that about, then?'

Burgess glared at Tullett while his fingers went to the scar on his forehead and traced the jagged outline. 'Look, forget it, OK? Just Stan fuckin' about, all right?'

Tullett grinned. 'Oh, come on, mate, it's a fuckin' good yarn, that. I'll tell it if you like.'

Burgess reacted sharply. 'No, don't. Just leave it.'

Tullett sighed. 'All right, all right. Another time, eh? But what about that time when we was kids, that bloke chased us all round the 'kin' place, eh? Shit, I *was* scared then. I thought he must be ravin' fuckin' barmy.'

Burgess grinned at the memory. 'Oh *shit* yes, you can tell 'em that one.'

All eyes turned to Tullett. 'Well, we was only kids, like. I dunno, ten or eleven, summing like that. Well, one evening', just gettin' dusk, we was playin' Knock Down Ginger. There was me an' Johnny, an' Daft Dickie Darkin, too. We ...'

Kelly interrupted. 'Hold on, what's this Knock Down Ginger?'

Tullett scoffed. 'Geez, mate, don't you know?'

Kelly shook his head, and the others, even Dodd, exchanged knowing grins.

'It's a game where you knock on somebody's door and run away. Usually, you 'ide round the corner and watch. Any rate, we.....'

Kelly wasn't happy with that. 'So what happens then? There must be more to it than that.'

Tullett glanced at Burgess, who avoided his eye, and looked uncomfortable. 'No. That's it.'

'I still don't get it. You just knock on somebody's door and run away? Why would you do that?'

Tullett, exasperated, blew out his cheeks. 'Look, it's just a fuckin' game, all right? What's the point o' any fuckin' game? Any rate, we knocked on this door and scarpered round the corner, an' sure enough, this bloke comes out an' looks round. Now, usually, they just sort of 'ave a look round, then fuck off back in again.'

Tullett could see Kelly was about to interrupt with another question, but just glared at him and pressed on.

'But this fuckin' bloke, 'e must ha' seen us lookin' round the corner, 'cause 'e come marchin' out towards us. O'course, we scarper down the road an' round the next corner. We can't hardly fuckin' run, we're pissin' ourselves wi' laughter so much. We 'ave a squint round the corner, and there 'e is, still comin' after us! So off we go again, down the street to the next fuckin' corner. Only we're not laughin' quite so much this time though, are we, Johnny?'

Burgess grinned back at him.

‘But when we look again, there ‘e is, still comin’! This goes on and on, an’ suddenly, we’re not fuckin’ laughin’ at all no more. It’s dawnin’ on us this isn’t s’posed to be ‘appenin’. I mean, who bothers to chase a coupla’ fuckin’ kids for miles just for knockin’ on ‘is fuckin’ door? That ain’t normal, is it? Not normal at all! It’s right dark by this time an’ we’re getting’ seriously frightened. ‘Kin’ ‘ell! I mean, this bloke has to be a fuckin’ nutter, don’t ‘e? An’ we could see ‘e was carryin’ a fuckin’ great club thing with ‘im, too! We musta been well panicky, cause we just kept doin’ the same fuckin’ thing, runnin’ to the next corner, lookin’ round it, there ‘e was, and off we went again. We should ha’ split up, an’ I thought o’ that, but I didn’t want to suggest it in case the fuckin’ bloke chased after me on me own!’

Burgess broke in. ‘Or we should ha’ kept runnin’ until we completely lost ‘im. We could easy ha’ done that – ‘e never ran, just kept comin’ an’ comin’, like a zombie or a tank or somethin’ – but it was like we was ‘yptonised, we ‘ad to keep stoppin’ to see if we’d lost ‘im.’

The audience sat entranced, imagining the horror of being hunted down by this clumping, single-minded monster, as Tullett took up the story again.

‘In the end, we found ourselves in the ‘igh street. Fuckin’ stupid, that was. There was no more side streets for a long way, see, an’ the only way off it was an alley down the side of the pictures.’

He caught some confused expressions and explained ‘You know, the cinema. We should ha’ known – we’d been down that ‘fuckin’ alley ‘eaps o’ times, to sneak in the pictures in the side door, if anybody’d not shut it prop’ly, an’ we *knew* there was no way out! Any rate, we stood there, seemed like ages, didn’t it, Johnny, whisperin’ that we’d lost the bastard, but shittin’ ourselves that we ‘adn’t, then we saw ‘im go past the end o’ the alley. We was just beginnin’ to laugh when, fuck me gently, there ‘e was again! Must’a realised we’d ducked in there, an’ come back! Down the alley ‘e comes – it’s only narrow, there’s no way past ‘im! There’s us, all tryin’ to get in the darkest corner, ‘e swings his club up, an’ suddenly, we’re blinded by a bright, bright light, can’t see anythin’ past it! ‘E’s got us trapped, good an’ proper, lit up like fuckin’ ...’

He shook his head, no words to describe it. After a moment, letting his audience picture the predicament, he continued ‘An’ he says, calm as you like, ‘What you lot up to then?’ Well, we’re too fuckin’ petrified to speak for a minute, then Johnny managed to speak, well, croak, really, ‘Nothin’ mister, honest. We was just playin’ Knock Down Ginger, like!’ Well, d’you know what the bloke did then?’

Tullett examined the men one at a time, allowing the tension to build, then said ‘Well, ‘e goes, ‘Oh, that’s all right then’ an’ fuck me, the light goes out, ‘e turns round an’ off ‘e goes! Just like that! ‘Kin’ ‘ell! We can even see ‘is club turns out to be a whackin’ big torch!’

He looked round, grinning, as his audience smiled uneasily, taking in the anticlimactic end of the story, and Kelly snorted ‘Strewth, Stan, that’s the most stupid yarn I ever heard! I just *knew* it’d be a fizzer, fair dinkum. Who ever heard of knockin’ on people’s doors as a game? I reckon that cove should have given you all a bloody good hiding.’

There was a thoughtful pause, which Burgess broke by commenting ‘Yeah, Ted, it does sound pretty stupid now, but at the time, it was just a bit o’ fun, like. There weren’t a lot to do for fun, round where we come from, when we was kids.’

Anxious to turn the spotlight elsewhere, he said to Watson ‘What about you, Bill? How did the well off kids pass the time?’

Watson looked uncomfortable – his younger life had always been full of entertaining pastimes - and Green rescued him. ‘Well, I’m sure I don’t know about well off. But we did have a game a bit like Knock Down Ginger, only we didn’t run away.’

That got everybody’s interest, and Watson, relieved not to have to admit to having had plenty to entertain him, asked the inevitable question. ‘Not running away? How did that work, then?’

Green smiled at the memory. ‘Well, we’d knock at the door, and when somebody answered, we’d politely ask for John Newbury.’

There was a silence while the men thought about that, before Kelly exploded. ‘What then? Geez mate, tell me there was something else?’

Suddenly, Green became sheepish. ‘No, that’s it, really. The people were always very helpful, you know, wanting to make sure what address we’d been given, and they’d often go indoors and ask if anybody knew where the Newburys lived.’

Kelly interrupted. ‘What! Fair dinkum, mate, that’s even more stupid than the other one! But just so’s I can get a picture, how *old* were you when this was going on?’

‘Oh, fourteen, fifteen, maybe.’

‘Fifteen! Strike me lucky! Didn’t you have somethin’ *useful* to do?’

Green sniffed. ‘It was just a game, Ted, just a couple of lads having a bit of fun on a Sunday afternoon, all right? Where was I?’

Kelly snorted, Green sniffed his special sniff, and doggedly continued.

‘Often as not, they’d ask what address we were looking for. Sometimes we made up completely stupid street names, but nobody ever questioned it. I remember we used to say the address was Crelge Street, or sometimes Grint Street. Funny how those things stick in your mind, eh?’

His good humour returned with the memory, and he snorted a laugh. ‘Crelge Street! Then sometimes, we’d say we didn’t know the name of the street, but we’d been given instructions how to get there from the station! When we did that, they’d usually want to go through it with us, to make sure we’d got it right. Once or twice, we even got a cuppa and a biscuit while the people tried to nut it out! One day, it was my turn to do the talking, I got a bit careless, and instead of asking for John Newbury, just asked for John. The lady who answered the door said ‘Yes, I’ll get him!’ I didn’t know what to do: I looked round at my pals, but they were already through the front gate and well on their way round the corner! Anyway, this kid came to the door, he was only about eight, and I asked him if he was John Newbury, and he said no, and shut the door!’

There were a few uncertain sniggers, but Kelly wasn’t letting Green off. ‘Now Gilbert, I’m just a simple colonial, so you’re going to have to explain it to me again, and this time,’ his voice steadily getting louder, ‘I want you to tell just exactly what the fuck the point of the whole bloody useless exercise was!’

Luckily for Green, because it was dawning on him for the first time that there was no point at all to a pastime that until now he’d always remembered as rather sophisticated, the distant tortured sounds of Angelo’s ancient truck drifted into the amphitheatre, and all thoughts, other than getting news of the city, were instantly forgotten.

Chapter 10

Angelo and his compatriots were soon out of the truck, and the now customary blizzard of handshakes, hugs and ‘Bollocks’ (which Tullett had taught the Italians, telling them it meant hello, or welcome) being exchanged by both sides took place, after which the Italians clambered back into the rear of the truck. Giovanni emerged first, waving a couple of the long black sausages that even the soldiers had now come to regard as a special treat, and he received a round of pleased applause. He was followed by Bimbo, who had an armful of the hard local bread, and Angelo, who held up a bottle of olive oil and a huge chunk of cheese, and they won more applause. Dino emerged last, carefully cradling a pair of flagons of wine, which brought delighted grins mixed with dramatic clutching of throats and smacking of foreheads.

While the young soldiers were thrilled with the goodies the Italians carried, Dodd and Brownlow hoped that they had brought with them something far more important – information. After a few minutes more of mutual congratulation, accompanied on both sides by grotesquely pantomimed gestures of drinking, eating, rubbing of stomachs and shouts of ‘bene!’ to indicate that they were all looking forward to feasting on the gifts, Dodd called for a little quiet and explained, first in Italian, then English, that he needed to question the Italians about what they had discovered. He pointed out that their future course of action depended on what had been discovered, and said there was to be no drinking of wine until they’d reviewed the situation and decided what to do. That little speech quieted them all down, Italian and English, and they all sat in a circle round the remains of last night’s fire.

For a while, all the soldiers sat and watched the proceedings, watching Dodd as he asked questions, and nodding solemnly at the replies, as he made notes in his tiny handwriting on the predictable scrap of paper, but of course, the discussion was entirely in Italian, and after a while, Brownlow stretched, stood and moved away to the makeshift stove, where he began to fuss over a brew up. He was quickly joined by Kelly, Green, Burgess and Tullett, leaving Dodd controlling the discussion, and Watson following the talk as best he could.

The first brew up was long over and the second well advanced when Dodd called to his men ‘All right, lads: bring that coffee over, and I’ll tell you what I’ve learned.’

The soldiers had prepared a meal of bread and cheese, and after the small performance of making sure everybody had a coffee and some food, they settled into a quiet ring, sitting among the Italians, and waited for Dodd to start. The men watched him expectantly as he re-read his miniature notes. Kelly wondered how Dodd kept finding these little bits of paper. Where did they come from? Why did he never have a decent sheet?

Dodd stood. ‘Well, chaps, Angelo and his boys have done an excellent job in intelligence gathering. *Eccellente*.’ He waved a hand at each Italian in turn and repeated ‘*Eccellente*’ The Italians simpered and looked at the ground.

‘Now, here’s the situation. Sergeant, you might like to comment as I go along. All right?’

Brownlow nodded.

‘The Germans have a couple of main positions in Naples, in the town hall, and so on, and they’re strongly placed and well defended.’

Brownlow growled ‘That’s not good. We don’t have the men or the gear to go attacking a strong point.’

‘*Non bene.*’ Dodd said. It was the Italians turn to nod sagely, and though they had no idea what was not good, they understood the drift.

Dodd continued. ‘I agree. And their main force is camped in the grounds of a mansion way up on the edge of the town, on the slopes of the mountains. Angelo says it’s well placed in its own grounds, behind a high brick wall, and well patrolled.’

Brownlow again. ‘Not good.’

Angelo, quickly catching on, added ‘*Non bene*’ and the other Italians grasped the meaning of ‘Not good’ and began to watch Brownlow intently, waiting for him to say it again.

Dodd saw what was happening, and smiled tightly as he continued. ‘But they do move about – they’re patrolling, except in the slum alleys, where they don’t go. When they see an Italian soldier, they’re making sure he’s got no weapons. They’re cutting telephone wires, and they seem to be systematically blowing up essential facilities.’

All eyes swivelled to Brownlow, who chewed his lip for a while, then baffled the Italians by responding ‘Well, that might be good and bad. Bad, obviously, that they’re making such a mess, but maybe good, that they’re moving about.’ He turned to Angelo, forgetting the language barrier, and asked ‘What’s the strength of the patrols, and how do they get about?’

Dodd repeated the question in Italian, and Angelo replied to Brownlow, with Dodd translating.

‘From what they understand, the Germans started going out in twos and threes, but they quickly realised there was some resistance, and now there’s invariably at least six, generally more, and they always have transport, usually a truck and maybe a tank, according to Angelo, but I imagine it’d be more likely an armoured car in those narrow streets..’

Brownlow had picked up on the Italians saying *non bene*, after he’d said ‘not good,’ and confused them by responding ‘*Bene.* That’s good. They’re open to attack when they move around. And another thing – why do they think they need to patrol in numbers? Have they been attacked?’

Dodd had a quick word with the Italians, then returned to English.

‘I’d better fill you in on a little bit of recent history, chaps. There’s always been plenty of poverty in Naples, for centuries, really, and for the families at the bottom of the ladder, every day is a struggle to know where the next meal is coming from. The children of these families have to pay their way from an early age, so the place is alive with young children trying to scratch a few coins to help feed their brothers and sisters. They used to be able to make a few lire entertaining the tourists, or fleecing them - most of them would be just as happy stealing cash as earning it. These urchins have been around for a long time: they’re something of a Neapolitan tradition, really, and they even have a name for them, *scugnizzi.*’ The Italians recognised the word and nodded, ‘*Scugnizzi, si,*’ as Dodd continued, ‘Which is a bit of a Neapolitan joke, but never mind that for now. They’re not homeless you understand, well, most of them, anyway. Suffice to say, these *scugnizzi* spend their time trying to make a few coins.’

Burgess was thrilled. ‘How old would these scun, ...scuzz, kids be, Boss?’

Dodd fired a question at Angelo a got a brief reply.

‘Anything from about seventeen down to about ten.’

Burgess whistled, thrilled and impressed. ‘What, are they in gangs, like?’

‘Well, I don’t know about that. At any rate, it appears one of these *scugnizzi* saw an Italian soldier shot for refusing to hand over his rifle, and the boy grabbed the rifle and shot a German soldier with it, then ran away. The Germans hunted him down and publicly executed him. Since then, the *scugnizzi* have got hold of a few weapons, and they’ve been attacking the German patrols. More nuisance value than anything else, I gather, but it *has* forced the Germans to reinforce their patrols. The lads have been trying to drum up support among the adults, handing out firearms and so forth, but there’ve been few takers.’

Brownlow had been thinking. ‘Where’d they get the weapons, Sir?’ He still had trouble addressing Dodd other than as Sir. He’d tried ‘Boss’ once or twice, but as he’d predicted, his heart wasn’t in it: it didn’t seem right, coming from him.

Again, a quick question to Angelo, which brought an expressive shrug, which needed no translation.

Dodd continued: ‘Well, at any rate, there’ve been several other clashes. For example, it seems there was a confrontation between the Germans and a couple of Italian air force trucks. Apparently, they were ordered to stop by a German patrol, but the one at the back didn’t see the signal, and kept coming. The Germans used a grenade to stop it, and two Italians were killed. It appears dozens of *scugnizzi* soon appeared and the Germans retreated. The boys then formed a procession, parading the bodies, in an attempt to drum up some adult support, but the adults told them to have more respect.’

Dodd paused for a second, and raised an eyebrow at Brownlow, who said ‘Not good’ and the Italians, who’d been waiting patiently, shook their heads and muttered ‘*Non bene.*’

Brownlow explained. ‘That’s just the sort of accident you’ll get. Bound to happen. All them kids’ll be doing is unsettling both sides.’

Dodd wasn’t sure the sergeant was right. ‘Well, I don’t know about that either. The Germans seem determined to upset the locals without any help from anybody else. They burned the university, then picked a man from the crowd that was watching, and executed him on the spot. Nobody knows why.’

Green was staggered, and spoke for all the soldiers. ‘Bloody hell, Boss, they can’t do that!’ There were mumbles of agreement, but Dodd pressed on.

‘That isn’t the only example, it seems. And there’s plenty more, too. Now they’ve commandeered all the motor vehicles, not that that was a great loss, there’s no petrol for civilian use, you see, and they’ve taken, well, looted, I suppose would be the right word, a lot of good quality property from the shops to send back to Germany. They issued a demand that the shops were to provide one thousand watches, and the same number of radios, and cameras. And you won’t believe this – I’m still not sure I do – but they also demanded one thousand accordions!’

He paused for effect then repeated ‘Accordions!’

He paused again, then went on. ‘Now, all right, I suppose you’d expect some, er, official appropriation of valuable property, but I gather there have been many instances of individual German soldiers looting for themselves, too. And it gets worse. Now they’ve started demolishing buildings, to deny them to the Allies when they arrive, I suppose. The little old fishing port - it’s a famous beauty spot, you know – it’s been blown up, the main port’s been badly damaged, and now they’ve made a start on destroying the factories and workshops.’

More shocked gasps and rumbles from the men, and the Italians, though not understanding which atrocities Dodd was describing, picked up the feeling of it, and joined in with '*Non bene. Non bene.*'

Dodd held up his hand for silence.

'And now, just a couple of days ago, the Germans announced that all males between eighteen and thirty three were to go to designated points round the city, where they would be transported to Germany as labourers. They tried to suggest it would be good for the men, you know, that there was no work in Naples, and in Germany they'd be well treated and well paid, all that sort of thing, but of course, few believed it, and hardly anyone showed up to be transported.'

Kelly had had enough, and was on his feet, exploding 'Shit, Boss, what's the matter with these Italians, just lettin' the jerries walk all over 'em?'

'Yes, a fair question on the face of it, Corporal, but think about what these people have been through. It's been a lot worse for them than for the country people, you know. For most of them, their livelihoods are in ruins, they wouldn't have had a good meal for, well, years, maybe, unless they've got relatives on nearby farms to help them out, and ...'

Tullett chimed in then. 'Due respect, Boss, that don't make no sense. Angelo and the boys brought all this scoff back with 'em, din' they? Don't look like they're 'ard up for a 'kin' feed to me.'

Dodd spoke quietly to Angelo, who directed the question to Dino. Dino replied and Dodd translated.

'That's just as I was saying. Dino has relatives on a farm up to the north of here. What we've been given is all from the farm. He says he didn't want to take the stuff his people offered, but it was a gift, and it would have been bad manners to refuse. Traditional Italian hospitality, you see. What they've given us is probably all the decent food they had. So the townspeople won't be eating well, I assure you. In fact, we'll certainly be needing to take our own food with us. We can't expect the locals to feed us - we'd be taking food from their own mouths.'

Dodd realised he'd got off his track a bit, returned to his theme. 'And remember, the population of Naples is almost all women and children, and older men. Most of the menfolk of fighting age have been away at the war, and those that have come home since the surrender are keeping out of the way in case they're arrested for desertion or packed off to Germany. And as for the town leadership, the mayor, the police chief, and so on, they'll all be Fascists and Nazi sympathisers. If they weren't, they'd have been replaced long ago. Now, boys, think about your own home town for a minute. And think about how your home town might have got on, in the same circumstances.'

He let that sink in for a minute.

'And there *are* signs of resistance. Quite apart from these *scugnizzi* and their attacks, there's a story that the Germans arrived at one pick-up point to collect the men to go to Germany, and they'd even got a few young chaps in the back of a truck. It seems the sight of their young men about to be taken away got too much for the locals, and a crowd suddenly appeared and surrounded the truck, waving knives, hammers, anything they could get hold of, and yelling at the Germans. The crowd made it clear the truck was going nowhere with the young fellows in it, and eventually the Germans let them get out, and they disappeared into the crowd, which then parted and allowed the Germans to go. So, Ted, there *are* signs that the populace has had enough.'

Brownlow broke in. ‘Good. That’s good.’ As his Italian acolytes nodded sagely and muttered ‘Bene, bene,’ Brownlow continued. ‘Seems to me, Sir, er, Skipper, what we’ve got here is a right fuck... er, bloody shambles, don’t we? But it’s not the end of the world, is it? I mean, there’s at least some people standin’ up to the jerries, even if it *is* mostly kids. And they’ve got a few firearms, though we don’t know what they are – might be wassnames, for all we know, blunderbusses. And jerry *is* moving about, which means we can have a go at him.’

Kelly interrupted. ‘And you know what? The jerries seem to be doing whatever they can to give the Italians the serious shits, eh? Dunno about you boys, but if it was me, I’d be mad as a cut snake by now, eh?’

Burgess looked up. ‘A what, Stan?’

Kelly explained. ‘It’s just an expression, mate, like “wild as a mallee bull.”’

Burgess blinked at Kelly, but understood.

Dodd agreed with Kelly. ‘I’m sure you’re right, Ted. I’m thinking that what these Italian lads need is for the adults to be encouraged to start joining in. If the Germans see a serious uprising coming on, they’ll have to respond by putting a lot more troops in, or pulling out. Agreed?’

Watson didn’t see the logic. ‘What’s good about them sending more troops? That would be bad, surely?’

‘No. Our job is to disrupt the German war effort, right? Now, we don’t have the strength to drive them out of Naples, or even to seriously threaten their strongpoints. So really, all we can do is force them to use more and more resources just to move around, ‘til it gets to the point where it’s not worth their effort to keep doing it. Do you follow me?’

Watson nodded thoughtfully, as Brownlow added ‘And the more troops we can tie down here, the less there’ll be to resist the Allies.’

Watson understood that bit. ‘All right. So what do we actually *do*?’

Dodd responded to that one. ‘Ah, that’s the question, isn’t it? The first thing we’ll be wanting to do is to meet these lads, these *scugnizzi*, find out their strength, their capabilities, what their plans are, and so on.’

Brownlow agreed. ‘Quite right, quite right. All we’ve got right now is a broad picture. I reckon we need more intelligence before we can set any actual plans.’

Dodd rubbed his hands together. ‘Good, good. Excellent, because Angelo’s arranged a meeting with them for tonight.’

More by luck than judgement, they’d timed it just right: by the last of the autumn twilight, so they didn’t need to use the lights, the trucks had been hidden as best they could in a scrubby stand of trees.

The men hefted their allotted burdens, which, in addition to food and their personal kit, included the three Italian and three British sub-machine guns, and three of the German rifles taken from the platoon at the rail bridge, and ammunition for all of them. Their original plan had been to take all the weapons and ammunition, to hand out to whoever would be prepared to use them, but they’d quickly realised that when they entered the town, they needed to be quiet, and agile enough to evade any patrols that might be around. In any case, they already had enough that nobody relished carting extra equipment around. They’d discussed leaving Tullett behind ‘to

guard the vehicles' but the air, thin as it was, turned a very nasty shade of blue when he heard about that idea.

'You fuckin' *what?* Leave me be-fuckin'-hind *again?*' He managed to hint, by his tone, that it was somehow everybody else's fault that he'd got himself blown up back at the beach. 'I've already missed 'alf the fuckin' fun, an' now you want me to sit about 'ere again? Not fuckin' likely! I'll carry me load all right, don't you fret about that. Look, I can carry a backpack on me back, an' a rifle over me shoulder, an' still 'ave a spare 'and for me stick, all right?'

Dodd looked doubtful. 'We're only thinking of you, Tullett. Look, we've got four or five miles march, at least. And what if we have to run for it?'

Tullett's chin jutted. 'I'll manage. But I'll tell you straight – I ain't stayin' 'ere!'

Dodd looked at Burgess for guidance, but Burgess just shrugged and said 'Is minds made up, Boss, and once Stan's made 'is mind up, that's it. Any case, you should ha' seen 'im jumpin' about on them rocks back at Angelo's 'ideout. Reg'lar thingy, 'e was. Mountain goat. I'll see after 'im, if we get in trouble.'

Kelly agreed. 'Yair, Boss, we'll see him right. We're not going looking for strife tonight, are we?'

And oddly, it was Brownlow who presented the clinching argument. 'We can't leave him here, Skipper, Sir – God knows what damage he'll do to himself if we leave him on his own.'

So the eleven of them set out on the last part of their journey to Naples. Dino (who earned the honour by the skimpy virtue of having relatives not far away, and was thus the closest thing they had to a local guide) took the lead. He was followed by Brownlow and Kelly, weapons ready, and the rest in a loose chain behind.

The trees were few and wind tortured, leaving only bedraggled undergrowth clinging precariously to life, and by the time they breasted the final rise, even that had gone. They stopped, partly to take in the panorama, and partly to adjust to the chill wind - brisk enough, out of the lee of the crests, to make their clothes flap and shudder. Naples and the bay spread out before them. Not that they could see anything of the city – the last of the daylight was long gone, and there was no moon as yet, the only light provided by the stars. The men could make out the water of the bay, which gave a faint glow in the glimmering starlight, but there were no lights showing anywhere in the city, which was visible only as a darker stain upon the darkness below them.

Dino turned and spoke softly to the group, and Dodd interpreted. 'We're going to be making for the *scugnizzi* headquarters, which is in the kitchen of a big hotel right down at the water. The first part of the journey down through the town is the most dangerous – it's where the wealthy live, and most of them are fascists who'll raise the alarm if we're seen. And the German patrols are more frequent up there as well. We're only fifteen minutes from there. Once we're through that area, we'll be moving down into the poorest part of town, and if we're seen there, we'll more than likely be ignored. Then we'll go down to another danger zone, where the shops and warehouses are and their owners live, those that haven't managed to get out, before we get to the hotel. It seems the advantage of it is the boys can get in and out through the back without being seen, and there's plenty of room for them in the kitchen and store, where there's no windows, so they can have a light.' He paused for a second, rubbing his brow. 'Now, is everybody ready?'

His gaze was met by a line of nods from set and expressionless faces, except from Watson, who didn't trust himself to speak, but managed the usual ghastly grin he reserved for stressful times. Brownlow muttered 'Here we go, lads, it's donkey time,' which provoked a few nervous titters. Dodd turned and nodded to Dino who, needlessly motioning for silence, moved off down the slope. The men, packs on backs, hefted their weapons, all except Dodd, who looked incongruous and faintly ridiculous carrying his suitcase.

The little crocodile of men soon found themselves moving down among ever thickening trees again, and after a half hours march, the soldiers were surprised to find themselves approaching the looming mass of a high stone wall. Dino changed direction to walk alongside it, his train dutifully following. After a few minutes more, they arrived at a road - a broad and properly surfaced road, Dodd noted - and Dino, after turning and signalling for silence once again, moved onto it. The rest followed as previously agreed, half on one side of the road, and half on the other, dark shapes instinctively half crouched, as though that would make them less noticeable. They were passing through the band of grand mansions at the top of the city, but the homes themselves were set well back, and the walls were high - the only glimpse they got was as they passed the occasional imposing gateway. But no lights showed, and in the darkness, they couldn't pick out any detail.

As they continued stealthily downward, the road became narrower and the walls lower. The homes were visible now, with gardens between them and the walls, but still there were no lights, and the men began to realise they were no more conspicuous on the unlit road than somebody would be moving about among the houses. The gardens grew smaller, the further down they went, and then disappeared altogether. The houses on either side began to close in on them as the road narrowed, and Burgess began to feel quite at home: many were the hours he and his boyhood mates, Tullett included, had spent moving silently along darkened roads lined with houses just like this, playing some game of soldiers, or on some other imagined adventure. He turned and grinned at Tullett, who seemed to understand his thoughts, and gave him a nod and a grinning thumbs up in return.

Down and down they stole, the roadways becoming ever narrower, and the clean scent of the mountains gave way to the musty, dusty aroma of the town as they moved into an industrial district, the houses replaced by small factories and warehouses, all closed up and looming blackly around them.

They were almost past a gap in the buildings to their left before Dodd realised they were passing their first evidence of the bombing that Naples had already suffered. Not that they could see much - a glint off a tile here, the remains of a ghostly wall there - but as they continued downwards towards the ocean, the bombed sites would become more frequent: the Allies had tried to destroy the key assets that made Naples so important to this part of Italy, primarily the port facilities, to deny them to the Axis forces. Soon, it would be the Germans turn to do the bombing: Naples would finish the war with the dubious honour of being Italy's most bombed city.

Just as they were feeling confident they wouldn't be overlooked, and began to walk upright for the first time since they'd been in the town, two men, chatting quietly as they walked, rounded a corner just twenty metres in front of Dino and began to walk up the slope towards them! Dino stopped dead, and his trail of followers froze as well - there was no time to hide, and

the high walls on either side gave them nowhere to slither away to. They were discovered! But the two men, after a momentary break in their stride, continued to walk, keeping their heads well down and their eyes averted, as people do when climbing a steep path. True Neapolitans, they immediately understood that there were some things it was best not to see, and they trudged between the two lines of intruders without the slightest acknowledgement of their existence.

Dino stayed motionless for a full minute after the Neapolitans were out of sight, then, with a grimace and an expressive shrug, signalled his followers on.

Soon they were down onto the flat area between the hill and the ocean, the salty, fishy tang of the sea strong around them now. At the entrance to an alley between two high walls, Dino halted and gave a low whistle. Immediately, a phantom figure appeared from the deeper darkness of a doorway off the alley and signalled Dino forward. Dino walked towards him, and the rest of the men began to follow, but the newcomer whispered to Dino, who held up his hand to tell them to stop, then pointed at Dodd and beckoned him to follow.

Dino and Dodd followed the apparition through the door and found themselves in almost total darkness, but for a puddle of dim light on the floor ahead, escaping under a closed door. The ghostly figure ensured the entrance door was shut behind them, then moved past them and opened the interior door, allowing weak light, more orange than yellow, to spill out. The light now revealed the ghost as a lad of, Dodd guessed, about fourteen, who indicated that they were to follow him into the room.

Once inside, they were confronted by a scene eerily lit by a single oil lamp. The room was quite large and the racks of broad timber shelving lining the walls showed the room had in better times done duty as a store. The dim light gleamed dully on overhead rails fitted with large hooks. Dodd guessed that sides of beef and pork had once hung there, and the faint sour tang of ancient fat and sawdust ratified that this had been the hotel's food store. In the middle of the room there was a large wooden table, on which the lamp stood. Behind it, their faces grotesque in the flickering light, sat four lads, whose attempts at neutral expressions couldn't conceal their interest in the new arrivals. Behind them, dimly perceived shapes on the edge of darkness, more bodies stood. At a word from a lad at the table, these ghosts moved forward, and their rifles, pointed at Dodd and Dino, were picked up by the sickly glow.

The boys at the table studied their two visitors, who waited in silence, studying the boys in return. Dodd was shocked: even though he'd been told these *scugnizzi* were teenagers, he wasn't expecting them to be quite so young. They were dressed in the universal Italian poor man's uniform of shabby dark suit jacket, undoubtedly handed down from many previous owners, collarless shirt half concealed behind a loosely knotted scarf, and, Dodd guessed, dull and heavily repaired boots, or wooden clogs, quite likely. He guessed that the one who had spoken was the leader, though he seemed to be no more than about sixteen, and the lad on his right seemed even younger, whilst on his left sat a lad of perhaps seventeen, and alongside him, another no more than fourteen.

After a minute, the boys confirmed Dodd's guess about who was the leader, by flicking glances at him. He let the moment hang a few seconds longer, then spoke to Dino.

'So, this is the leader, the *Colonello*?'

Dino nodded, and, misinterpreting the tension, said 'It's all right, we weren't seen on the way in.'

The leader snorted. ‘*That’s not true, is it?*’ and Dodd, the trained interrogator, watched Dino becoming suddenly flustered under the gaze of the boy. He recognised the reactions he’d created a thousand times in others. Dino looked down, then rubbed his forehead with his hand. ‘What? What do you mean?’

‘*We saw you, watched you all the way down.*’

Dodd was sceptical. It took serious organisation to have lookouts right across the town who could report in so quickly.

The boy spoke again. ‘*And we weren’t the only ones to see you, were we?*’

Dino, confused and anxious with it now, shrugged helplessly.

‘*You passed a couple of workmen who walked between you.*’

Dino suddenly remembered! ‘*Of course! Yes!*’

Dodd was very impressed. So they *did* have a network of lookouts! The boy addressed Dino again.

‘*My friends are worried this might be a German trap. How do we know he is English?*’

Dino, relieved to turn the spotlight elsewhere, looked at Dodd, an eyebrow raised.

Dodd thought for a moment, then, realising he was still carrying his suitcase, moved forward and put it on the table, flicked the latches open, then turned it towards the boys and said in Italian ‘*See if you can find anything in there to satisfy you.*’

The lads craned forward and watched interestedly as the leader rummaged through the contents, taking out and studying Dodd’s spare uniform shirt, then the suit and other odds and ends, and the little spirit stove, which mystified them. Finally, he hit on the teacup and saucer, carefully wrapped in the old shirt. He unwrapped the saucer and placed it on the table in front of him, then unwrapped the cup, and carefully centred it on the saucer. He gazed at them thoughtfully, reaching out once to turn the cup handle to a better angle. Everybody in the room watched the boy, as though awaiting a learned opinion on a valuable antique.

Finally, he reached out again, this time lifting the cup in one hand and the saucer in the other, and, with little finger extended, solemnly pantomimed drinking tea. He grinned suddenly, revealing the youth behind the face, and, turning in his chair, repeating the gesture for his comrades. After a moment of incomprehension, first one boy, then another, and another, saw the point, that only the *Inglese* would carry a teacup to war with him, and soon they were all at it, caricaturing drinking tea, and screeching with laughter. In an instant, the atmosphere relaxed suddenly, as the boy nodded to the other lads and said ‘*Inglese, si!*’ The rifles behind him went down.

He stood and self-consciously held out his hand to Dino, who shook it, and then to Dodd, who did the same, and introduced himself in Italian as Lieutenant Dodd. The boy asked ‘*But I thought you were a Colonello?*’

Dodd, having been among Italians for some time now, just looked at the lad and shrugged. The boy understood immediately – the soldier was a lieutenant, why would he lie about that? But he was known as *Colonello*. It was of no consequence, not worth the bother of explaining.

He spoke again. ‘*They call me Toni, Colonello. Like your title, it is not my real name, but ...*’ Another shrug, this time from the boy, and Dodd nodded understanding. ‘*And these are my friends.*’ He waved an arm round the room. ‘*Some of them, anyway. We wanted to have a close look at you before we accepted you, you understand.*’

‘I do. But now you’re satisfied, can I bring my men in? We’ve travelled many days to get here.’

‘All right, *Colonello*, bring them in.’

Dodd groped his way back to the alley, where his group was anxiously waiting. ‘All right, chaps, you can come in. But listen, you know Angelo told us these people are mostly very young? Well, he wasn’t joking. The leader of the gang in there looks to me as though he’s about sixteen, and he’s one of the older ones, as far as I can see. So remember, these may only be youngsters, but they’re game to have a go at the Germans, and we need their co-operation, so let’s treat them with respect, all right?’

He then turned and floundered back to the dimly lit room, the men trooping in behind him. Toni moved forward and began to stiffly welcome the newcomers, but as he saw he was being greeted as an equal, he immediately became more friendly, and the other boys relaxed and came forward to greet the adults.

When this performance was over, Dodd asked where his men could light a fire for a brew up. Toni explained that there was nowhere here that a fire could be safely set without risk of the smoke being spotted by a passing patrol, or a fascist local: the only part of the building where a light could be used was the windowless room in which they stood, and a fire in there would quickly make it uninhabitable. Dodd asked if the electricity had been cut off, and the lad explained that the Germans had been out destroying installations that might benefit the Allies, and the electricity generation plant had been put out of action several days ago. He went on to point out that the boys did not live there – it was merely a safe meeting place – and they had no need to cook. Dodd revealed his little stove and explained its purpose, and Toni, hesitant but intrigued, agreed it could be used.

Dodd turned to Kelly and nodded. Kelly stepped forward and, before an interested audience of youthful onlookers, made a little show of preparing the stove. When it was ready, he lit a match and the ‘whoomp’ and flash as the petrol lit sent the boys scuttling backwards, before they settled down, grinning sheepishly.

In the meantime, Brownlow had been collecting food from the packs the men had brought with them, and produced enough bread and cheese, and a little sausage, to provide a snack for the men, and the same for each boy. The lads fell upon the food gratefully, and Toni explained ‘As you see, *Colonello*, life is not easy in Naples. There is little work, and less to eat. If you stay here, welcome as you are, we cannot feed you.’

Dodd put the lad at ease. ‘We know that times are hard, and expected supplies to be short, my friend.’ Toni sat up a little straighter at being addressed that way, and looked round to make sure his mates had heard that the *Inglese Colonello* had called him ‘friend.’ Dodd continued. ‘We have enough with us to supply ourselves for a day or two, and there’s more in our vehicles.’

Looking round the room, Dodd saw the men settling down among the boys, who were chatting excitedly with the Italian men. Calling Angelo over to listen in, Dodd began to gently interrogate Toni for the latest information.

Chapter 11

After maybe fifteen minutes discussion, Dodd asked Angelo to tell his comrades what they'd learnt, then called his men to one side.

'All right, boys, here's what I've just found out. From what Toni tells me, the Germans seem to be going out of their way to make life difficult for the townsfolk, but at the same time, they've done some very strange things. They blew up the electricity plant, but the ordinary people don't have electricity anyway, so the only ones missing it are the well-to-do, who are mostly fascist sympathisers. Exactly the same with the telephone system. Then they completely destroyed the gas works, but there's been no gas for months: it was damaged by bombs long ago. It's as though they've got a standard list of facilities to destroy, regardless of the circumstances.

'But the strangest thing of all is that they've blown up two main road bridges in the town. You see, Naples is an ancient city, mostly made up of tiny little narrow streets, well, alleys, really, a lot of them. There aren't very many roads wide enough to get vehicles through to start with, and now they've made two of them impassable to trucks and tanks, with the result that to get vehicles into the town from their headquarters, they're restricted to only two possible routes! Absolutely potty! And you remember I told you they wanted to send the young men to Germany as volunteer labour? Well, after that failed, they announced they're going to round up all the young chaps and ship them off as forced labour. Imagine that! They gave dates and places for them to congregate so they could be loaded on to trucks, and they just expected the lads to be there! Naturally, nobody arrived, and the Germans have now declared that if they don't give themselves up, the young men will be shot on sight! Of course, they've all disappeared, those that hadn't been in hiding already.

'But even after all that, these young lads here seem to be the only thorns in the Germans side at the moment. Well, these and quite a few like them. Toni says he's not sure how many of them there are, it seems to vary from day to day. It's all pretty informal, as you'd expect. Now, they have perhaps twenty modern rifles squirreled away, and a little ammunition, as well as dozens of old shotguns and hunting rifles, but they've no ammunition for them. Other problem is, they don't really know how to use the rifles. Toni says they were shocked at how hard it was to hit anything. He says they'd all seen the cowboy movies, you know, how the hero would quickly stick his head round a corner and shoot somebody a hundred yards away.'

Brownlow snorted derisively, and Dodd acknowledged the point. 'Yes, well, they've discovered it's not really like that. But at least they're game to carry on. Toni tells me there was a shooting match just a couple of days ago in a department store, of all places – the boys had heard a group of Germans were going to break in and do a bit of looting, so the boys broke in first and set up an ambush. They were on some sort of internal balcony, behind a barricade made of furniture, and opened fire when the soldiers entered. They think they hit one or two of them before the soldiers got away, but their problem is the Germans know what they're doing and the lads don't. They did discover the value of a barricade, though, and their latest tactic is to throw a barricade across a street they know the Germans regularly use, and hide behind it, then when the patrol stops to clear it, they fire a few shots and clear out before the Germans can return effective fire. So there it is. They're doing what they can, pretty much on their own. What do you think, Sergeant?'

Brownlow sucked his bottom lip for a while, then rubbed his hands together, saying ‘Lovely. Just right!’

‘What?! I’m surprised to hear you say that!’ Dodd responded. ‘It doesn’t sound very hopeful to me.’

‘Well, Skipper, Sir, what these lads are doing, frankly, it isn’t much, is it? More nuisance value than anything. But if they were going well, they wouldn’t need us, would they? We can show ‘em how to use the weapons, maybe improve their tactics, make ‘em more effective, and if we’re successful, maybe the adults’ll see it working and join in. What about them young chaps who were supposed to be shipped off to Germany? They might be useful.’

Dodd spoke with Toni, and explained ‘They’ve gone into hiding. The Germans have issued orders they’re to be shot on sight, remember, so they’re keeping their heads well down.’

Brownlow pondered a moment. ‘All right, so it’s just the boys and us, for now. How many of ‘em are there?’

‘They’re not sure, exactly. It varies from day to day, but maybe thirty regulars, and maybe another fifty more who show up from time to time. It seems the numbers are growing day by day.’

Brownlow had another question. ‘Their firearms, Mr Skipper, Sir. Where’d they get them?’

Again, the discussion with Toni, which left Dodd rubbing his forehead as he explained ‘This is all getting more bizarre by the minute. First, there’s the shotguns. The Germans demanded all privately owned firearms be handed over, and then simply threw them into the sea. The boys – some of them used to make a living diving after coins the tourists threw for them, you know - simply dived down and recovered them. But they’ve no ammunition for them. Then there’s the military rifles, and you’ll just love this, Sergeant. When the news of the Italian surrender arrived, most of the Italian soldiers simply changed into their civilian clothes and went home! Just went walking off! They left their barracks as they were, and the *scugnizzi*, rummaging through the barracks after food, managed to pinch a few rifles and some ammunition.’

Brownlow chewed his lip for a while then addressed Dodd again. ‘D’you know what these kids need more than anything else?’

‘No. Tell me.’

Brownlow grinned and spread his hands wide. ‘Us! They know their way around, they know what the jerries are up to, they’ve got some weapons, and they’re keen to hit back, but it seems they’ve got no real strategy, no firearms training, and I bet their attacks on the patrols are more dangerous to them than to the Germans.’

Kelly was enthusiastic. ‘Yairs! We can sort all that out! You beauty! Just the bloody job!’

Dodd was pleased. ‘I’m glad you’re happy, Corporal. What are you thinking?’

Kelly’s smile faded. ‘Er, well, stuffed if I know, exactly, Boss, but they’ve got the local knowledge and the bodies, and they’re keen to get stuck in, and we’ve got the skill and experience, and some decent weapons, and we know how to use ‘em.’

He decided to spread the burden, and looked round at the other soldiers. ‘Put all that together, and you must have a useful outfit, eh, boys?’

The soldiers responded with enthusiastic nods. Even the sergeant agreed, but spoke as though talking to himself. ‘Yeah, we should be able to work something out, don’t you reckon, Skipper, Sir?’ Without waiting for a reply, he went on. ‘Now, this is a lot like the situation at

Casagrigo, isn't it? The Allies need to push the Germans out of Naples, and they won't go willingly. There'll be plenty of shelling, prob'ly bombing too. If they resist street by street, there'll be a lot of blood spilt on both sides, and plenty of civilian blood too, before it's over. So just like at Casagrigo, we want to, er, encourage the jerries to pull out before the serious stuff begins.'

Dodd was frowning. 'Sorry, Sergeant, I'm not with you. It seems to me that if the Germans were going to defend the town, surely they'd be building defensive positions, and we've no reports that's happening. We're only hearing about them destroying installations that might be of use to the Allies. That's a bit ironic, as it happens: our side has been bombing Naples for quite a while, and now the Germans are targeting the railway, port, and so on. At any rate, it all says to me that as soon as they've finished working through their list, they'll pull back.'

The lieutenant and the sergeant then got into a discussion as to what the Germans intentions might be, Brownlow drawing on his own experience, and Dodd relying on the little information they had about what the Germans were already doing. After a tense few minutes, arguing back and forth, with lip chewing from Brownlow matching forehead massaging from Dodd, Green interrupted. 'Does it matter?'

Dodd and Brownlow both looked at him.

'You're very likely right, Sarge, or maybe Mr Dodd is. But let's not worry about it. We've come a long way, and now we're here, our job is to fight Germans, so all what we need to do is sort out how to do it.'

The room fell silent as the two senior men continued to stare at each other, absorbing that argument, until, as though on a hidden signal, they both began to smile and the tension snapped.

Dodd spoke. 'You're right, Gilbert, of course you are! We're here to make a nuisance of ourselves, and help these lads. So, instead of worrying about the enemy's thinking, we should think about what *we* can be doing.'

Brownlow agreed, pleased that the tension between him and Dodd was gone. 'Well, Boss, first off, I reckon we should get some o' these lads out in the country, somewhere quiet, and give 'em a bit of weapons training.'

'Yes, excellent, Sergeant, and while you're doing that, I'll take the corporal and go out with the boys who stay in Naples, have a look at what they get up to, eh? You OK with that, Corporal?'

Kelly smiled and replied, 'Bloody ripper, Boss! You know me – I'm red hot for anything.'

'I'll take that as a yes, I imagine. Right then, that's settled, assuming the lads agree. I'll talk to them now.'

And so it was agreed. Toni instructed one of his lads to lead Brownlow, Burgess, Green and Watson into the hills behind the town, along with Angelo and his men, where they would be met by a group of about twenty *scugnizzi*. They'd collect the rifles and ammunition they'd left in the truck, along with all the remaining food and other supplies, then spend the day in weapons training.

Watson had been pleased to be included in that group, saying 'Oh, yes, we could do with the practice, couldn't we, Gilbert?'

'Not half, Bill. Back there in the woods, I had *no* idea what I was doing! And then when we did that practice back in the mountains, well, I'm sure I could get better if I had a few more goes at it.'

Brownlow pretended astonishment. 'What? And here was me thinking a couple of His Majesty's soldiers, been in for what, three years, might be a bit useful showing these lads what to do!'

The young men looked sheepish and Green pointed out 'Well, if you want the boys to be smart at drill, you know, slope arms, stamping about, all that, we're your men. Or cleaning the rifles, we're *really* good at that, aren't we, Bill? But actually firing the bastards? We'd not hardly done any of that.'

'Blanks.' Watson mentioned hopefully. 'I've fired quite a few blanks.'

Green raised an eyebrow, and Watson conceded 'All right, a few. On a newsreel. You were off doing a fighter pilot job, and'

Irritated, Brownlow interrupted 'All right, Betty Grable, we don't need your entire life story. You'd better both come and get some more practice in.'

Tullett suddenly realised that while all that was going on, Dodd and Kelly would go out with Toni and the other group of lads, and Tullett was going to be left behind. He began to insist on going.

Dodd said it was up to Toni – if he was prepared to have the limping Tullett with him, Dodd was prepared to accept it too. Dodd spoke to Toni, who listened to Dodd but looked at Tullett. There was silence for a long second, then Toni, seeming to see in Tullett a fellow sufferer at the hands of fate, smiled and nodded to Tullett, who grinned back and said 'Fuckin' good on yer, son!' and tried, and almost managed, to do a little jig by way of celebration and demonstration of fitness.

When all was settled, Dodd told his men to get what sleep they could. The weapons training lot would be leaving before first light, and the others wouldn't be much later.

It was late afternoon when the weapons training group got back, tired and heavily laden with booty from the truck, and they found the group who'd stayed in Naples waiting for them. The boys fell on each other, talking over each other, the truck group opening their packs and displaying what they'd brought, the others wide eyed at the cans and packs of food, and as their stories of the day were exchanged, they were getting rowdy until Toni called for less noise.

Dodd called his men to one side and said 'All right, lads, I think we'll let the boys get it out of their systems before we eat, so now's as good a time as any to exchange notes. After you, Sergeant.'

'Righto, Sir, Boss. Well, getting out of town was easy – dunno how they did it, but the boys took us through narrow little alleys and across these little open spaces, like town squares, you know, seemed to be a lot of 'em, but we never saw anyone. Fair bit o' bomb damage as well. One stray bomb in these old places, packed in tight, well, it's going to leave a mark, isn't it?'

He paused. 'I've just thought, now I mention it, that was odd, not seeing any locals at all, hardly. Now I think of it, I reckon they must ha' been keeping out of our way deliberately. I know there was a bunch of kids on the rooftops out front of us and keeping station, like: you could see 'em scampering here and jumping there, if you looked hard enough. Regular wassnames, they are, mountain goats. And there was another lot on the ground up ahead: maybe they were clearing the way. Any rate, there we were, strolling along, nice and quiet, and up loads of stairs between buildings, this way an' that: I tell you what, I'd never've got back if we'd got separated! Mind you, I reckon we were well safe from bumping into a jerry patrol. What with the lookouts, and

the way we went, you wouldn't get a bike past half of it, never mind a vehicle. Same comin' back.

'Any rate, all of a sudden, we were way up, out of the town and in the trees, and after a while, Corrado there,' he pointed out one of the lads, who heard his name and beamed, 'he was guiding us, signalled us to stop and he went off. It was full daylight by then, and after a minute, he was back, and called us forward again, and we met up with another bunch of young chaps. Then off we all went, for, I'd guess a couple o' miles at least, maybe three, right over the top 'til we came to the place where the trucks was hid. We took all this lot,' he waved an arm at the stack of kit and weapons, 'and marched on for half an hour or so, 'til we were well out of the way of any jerry patrols. Pretty rough country by then, rocky and hilly, well steep too, some of it. First off, I thought this'd be no good as a rifle range – you couldn't find a flat bit even a couple o' hundred yards across, but then I thought it didn't matter, we're not interested in making these boys into marksmen, and they'll be working in the streets, be a lot closer than two hundred yards, won't they?'

Brownlow paused and looked at Dodd, who replied 'You're right. From what I saw today, they'll be up closer than two hundred yards. Much closer.'

Brownlow studied Dodd for a second. 'That's what I thought. But not that it matters, as it happens.' Dodd wondered what he meant by that, but let him continue. 'So we got ourselves organised, and what with showing the boys what to do, and signs, and a bit of help from Bill, they soon picked up what to do. Did you know Bill speaks Italian?'

Surprised, the men all looked at Watson, and Green was offended. 'Blimey, Bill, I never knew that. You kept *that* a secret, didn't you? Anything else I don't know about? Concert pianist, maybe?'

Watson spread his hands. 'Honestly, chaps, I don't really speak Italian. It's just a bit of latin I learnt at school, and sometimes I can understand what they're saying. I had a go at translating the other day, if you recall. *Today* was the first time I've tried to actually *say* anything. I was pretty much hopeless, as it happens. Funnily enough, we never covered expressions such as "pull the rifle butt into your shoulder" and squeeze the trigger gently" in my latin classes.'

Green sniffed his special sniff and looked sceptical, but said nothing more, and Brownlow went on. 'So, after we'd given everybody a few rounds in the prone position, they soon began to get the hang of it. We tried 'em kneeling then, but they were pretty bad, 'specially the littler lads, and then standing, and that was worse. That's what I meant about it not mattering about shooting at a distance, Boss. Laying down, I reckon Bill and Gilbert'd be able to hit a man at a hundred yards, if he was stood still, like, often as not, but Angelo and his chaps would struggle, and the boys, well, they'd have to be lucky. Too small, most of 'em. See? Just too small to get the butt into the shoulder properly. And kneeling or standing, all of 'em would be useless beyond fifty yards. Just for fun, we tried a bit of snap shooting, like they might have to do in real life. I got 'em behind a rock, and they had to jump out, fire, and get back behind the rock, quick as they could. The boys loved it, but not one of 'em hit a man sized target about thirty yards away. Me neither, if I'm honest.

'Last, we gave everybody a bit of a go with the automatic weapons. Angelo's chaps liked that - I reckon they were prob'ly telling the boys about how they'd fired them before, back in the trees - and the boys, they couldn't get enough of it. Bill reckons they were pretendin' like what they'd seen on the films, gangsters an' that, same as when they were snap shooting. Half of 'em

got knocked down by the recoil, but they kept comin' back for more. Bloody funny, really, if it weren't so serious.'

He turned and called 'Hey, Primo!' And when a boy looked up, Brownlow stood and fired an imaginary sub-machine gun, complete with rat-tat-tat noises. The boy stood and did the same for a second, before throwing himself backwards into his friends. He rose amid laughter and applause.

'Any rate,' Brownlow continued, 'at least the lads've had a chance to get a bit familiar with the weapons.'

He caught the look of enquiry on Dodd's face, and added 'I reckon they're game enough, but to be honest, Sir, we can forget 'em as useful shooters.'

There was silence among the soldiers for a few seconds, as that information sunk in, then Dodd gave them the story of his outing.

'We, that is, the Corporal, Tullett and myself, along with Toni and about a half dozen of these young chaps, set out to what was obviously a pre-planned destination. Much like you, we went through a maze of those little alleys between high walls, up and down flights of stairs, across those little squares – they're called *piazas*, by the way. Once, there was a whistle from a rooftop up ahead somewhere, and we were pulled into an alleyway and told to be quiet. But after a couple of minutes, there was another whistle- false alarm, I suppose - and off we went again, until we came to a certain street. Just about the only street wide enough for vehicles we saw all morning, I'd say. Picture this. The street is about a hundred yards long, maybe more, and straight too, not at all like the little alleys we'd been moving through, quite tall buildings either side, little shops on the ground floor, with doorways in between, and I suppose two or even three stories of living quarters above. The road came right up to the walls, with no pavement, and from one side to the other was, I'd guess, no more than about twenty feet.'

Dodd stopped, picturing the scene. 'Less, probably. It was still early, not many people about, the odd shopkeeper just opening up, but Toni gave a whistle - you know, that piercing, two-fingers-in-the-mouth whistle - and suddenly, there were *scugnizzi* coming from everywhere! Toni gave some instructions, and after the usual arguments, shouting, and so forth, they started to build a barricade across the road, just about halfway down it. I must say, they did it really well. One minute, there was nothing, and five minutes later, there was a fairly decent barricade right across it! There was all sorts, old furniture, tables and a sofa, sheets of corrugated iron, I saw an old pram, and a gas stove, and there were several mattresses. Apparently, Toni regards mattresses very highly as barricade material. I asked him where they all came from, and he explained that usually, they recover what they can after the Germans have gone and use it again. And in any case, he said that after the German soldiers had had a go at looting the department store, quite a few locals thought that was a good idea, and suddenly, there's plenty of unwanted old furniture around!'

Dodd smiled, and the men grinned back as he continued. 'So, there we were, quite a crowd of us, just standing around then. Toni pointed at the roof of a building at the end of the street, and waved. It was pretty high - all the buildings around the end of the street seemed to be at least three storeys high – and someone on the roof waved back. Toni explained the chap on the roof'd give us warning when a patrol came this way. He said there was a good chance they'd come down this street – it's a regular route for them, apparently. As we know, there's only a few streets wide enough to allow the Germans to get their vehicles down from their main camp to the

lower part of the town, and, I mentioned, didn't I, they've restricted their options even more by blowing up a couple of bridges?

'So, we just stood and waited. Then suddenly, there was a whistle from the roof, and all the adults who'd been about, and half the boys disappeared, while the rest, I suppose about eight or ten of them, all carrying rifles, climbed over the barricade and stood to. The corporal, Tullett and I were led into a house, and up to a third floor window, where we had a grandstand view of the whole street.

'Sure enough, after a few minutes, we heard the sound of engines and then an armoured car appeared, followed by one of those open jeep things, like the Americans have.'

'Kubelwagen' Brownlow suggested.

'Yes, Kubelwagen, that's right. I say, those armoured cars *are* big, aren't they? I didn't realise. Much bigger than ours, I'd have thought.' Dodd paused as he pictured it. 'Six great big wheels, almost a tank, really, except for the tracks, and the gun, of course. This thing only had a machine gun sticking out in front, not a big gun.'

Dodd saw the sergeant nod and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Brownlow explained. 'That'd be right, Sir. They wouldn't risk a tank in really tight spaces, and anyway, you couldn't get the gun to traverse in them little streets. Be more trouble than it's worth. No, a machine gun'd make a lot more sense.'

Dodd nodded acknowledgement and continued 'At any rate, behind that came an open truck full of soldiers. They weren't going fast, you understand, just chugging along, not much more than walking pace, making that horrible grinding, whining noise they do when they're going slowly. The armoured car had its hatch closed, 'buttoned up' I think the expression is. That seemed a bit odd to me, because the Kubelwagen was open topped, we could see there was a driver, and an officer loafing in the back, and of course, the soldiers in the truck were exposed too.'

Kelly butted in. 'Yairs! Seemed a bit odd, didn't it Boss? See, the armoured car stopped maybe ten yards back from the barricade, with the Kubelwagen right up behind it and the truck well back. Looking at them, I thought the Germans knew to expect an attack from in front of them, and that's exactly what happened. There was a couple of seconds silence, then the boys started shooting from behind the barricade, and two or three petrol bombs came over at the armoured car, but two fell short and the one that hit it didn't catch fire. A couple of bullets took a bit of paint off the armoured car, but that was about all the damage done.'

Dodd continued. 'The Kubelwagen was safely in the lee of the armoured car, you see, and the truck was a good way away. The chaps in the cabin had ducked down out of sight, and the ones in the back were crouched down on the floor, so they were pretty safe too. Nothing happened on the German side for a second, then suddenly, the machine gun in the armoured car started raking across the barricade, firing through the flames from the petrol bombs. My goodness, that was a frightening sight! And the noise echoing off the walls made it ten times worse! Don't you agree, Corporal?'

'Too bloody right, Skip. Soon there was bits falling off the barricade, splinters flying everywhere, stuffing bursting out of the sofa, and so on, but by then the boys behind it had stopped shooting and legged it round the corner. The machine gun kept going until the barricade was falling to bits – the flames from the petrol were finished by then - then the officer shouted something, and the troops got out of the truck and dragged the stuff out of the way to make a gap

big enough for the vehicles to get through. When that was done, the soldiers got back in the truck, and strike me lucky, the procession just carried like nothing had happened! Amazing, really, don't you reckon, Boss?'

'Oh yes. Absolutely! I got the impression it was pretty much every day routine for both sides! Didn't you, Corporal, er, Ted?'

Kelly was pleased with the use of his first name, but was picturing the scene, and didn't answer for a moment, then drawled 'Yairs, mate, that's exactly right! Both sides seemed to know what to do, and what would happen next, didn't they? And you know what? I don't reckon there was much real danger on either side. It was like both sides'd done their job, you know? The boys had forced the jerries to use three vehicles and, what, twenty people, to simply move about the streets, and the jerries'd forced their way through a barricade and showed themselves they controlled the streets. Everybody's happy, right? Just like a drill.'

Dodd was sceptical. 'Well I'm not sure that's quite right.'

But Kelly was keen to defend his view of the action. 'Did you notice what the soldiers in the truck did, Boss, when the convoy stopped in front of the barricade?'

Dodd pondered, rubbing his forehead. 'I don't recall them doing anything: just sitting, maybe crouching down a bit?'

'Exactly! They just sat there, keeping their heads down! They knew what to expect! Didn't even have their rifles at the ready.'

Tullett, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet until then, exploded. 'Well, fuck me dead, that's *it!* I fuckin' *knew* there was summing not right with what was goin' on! Just couldn't put me finger on it 'til you said it, Ted! Well, fuck me gently!' He went silent again, while he mentally reviewed the scene, then turned triumphantly to Brownlow. 'What d'you make o' that, Sarge?'

Brownlow, unconsciously imitating the lieutenant, rubbed his forehead while he pondered, then asked Dodd, 'Would you agree with Ted's recollection, Boss?'

Dodd said he did, and Brownlow grinned. 'Well, if that's all the opposition we've got to deal with, I reckon we should be all right. First thing that strikes me, if they're serious, the boys should be on the flank, in the buildings, not behind the barricade. Then you can forget about the machine gun in the armoured car – they won't be able to bring it to bear right round behind, and you can pour all your fire into the truck. Even this lot'd have trouble missing a truckload of blokes from five yards! And if the boys were hiding in the buildings, that'd give 'em some protection, too.'

Dodd burst in, remembering something the German Major Bock had criticised him for back at the bridge. 'You'd want all your shooters on one side of the road, so as not to be shooting at each other.'

Brownlow looked at Dodd carefully, wondering if he'd worked that out for himself, when Dodd surprised him even more. 'Better still, if you placed your shooters up at the upstairs windows, you'd be even better off – no risk of crossfire and more surprise.'

Kelly grinned. 'Cripes, Skip, what a bloody ripper! Then, having whacked 'em with a nice little volley, we scarper before they have a chance to get organised and shoot back! Plenty of damage on their side, none on ours. Bloody beauty!'

All the soldiers sat for a moment, smiling and nodding in the dimming light, as they pictured the result of a properly thought out ambush.

‘Well, Sergeant, does all that sound all right to you?’

‘It certainly does, Boss, as long as Angelo’s lot and the boys agree.’

Dodd called the Italians together, and began to explain the thinking. The soldiers could see that at first, the lads seemed suspicious, and the men whispered among themselves that the boys would be resentful that these *inglesi* came here and started telling them what to do, but as Angelo and his men acknowledged the sense of what was being said, the boys sat up straighter, their eyes locked on Dodd’s face, then intently followed his gestures as he himself got more involved, using odds and ends that were strewn about the table to illustrate his points. Soon, the lads were all on their feet, which encouraged Dodd to become more animated as he went on, and stood, pointing an imaginary rifle downwards, as though standing at an upstairs window, and finally, caught up in the moment, shouted ‘BANG!’ at which point the boys broke into applause, and were joined by all the adults in the room.

Angelo shouted ‘*Eccellente!*’ and gave Dodd a hug, and all the Italians, men and boys intermingled, stood in an unruly bunch to shake his hand, the boys laughing, wrestling and playfully punching each other, as excited boys do.

Brownlow pulled a wry face and said ‘I’m guessing they like the idea, lads. So it looks like we’re on. So, where’s that food?’

The entire group spent the next hour gobbling food as a sideline to sitting about, or standing, more likely, happily explaining to each other, regardless of whether the listener could understand the language or not, what had already been agreed, embellished by the customary lies about who’d thought of the idea first, and an explanation, accompanied by mime, of exactly the heroic part the speaker would be playing in the action. Everybody thought this an admirable way to pass the time.

All except Tullett, who stood a little to one side, not joining in the general frivolity. After a while, he plucked up courage and announced apologetically, ‘I got an idea.’ He said it quietly, embarrassed, as though he’d never had an idea before, and now he had had one, wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Nobody seemed to hear, focussed as they were on their imaginary adventures, so he tried again, louder this time, but still diffident. ‘I said, I got an idea.’

Dodd heard him, and with a clap of hands, called to the soldiers ‘Hold on, chaps. Tullett, er, Stan has something he wants to tell us about.’

Tullett glanced at Dodd to see if he was being facetious, but he just smiled back encouragingly, and waved a hand, as though introducing him to the soldiers, who had turned to Tullett, interested. The Italians, engrossed in their own fantastic yarns, continued their conversation.

Tullett started timidly, awkward now all the attention was on him. ‘Well, I was thinkin’, when I was a little kid, I ‘ad a dog. Sonny, ‘is name was.’

Burgess was suspicious. ‘Really? I don’t remember no dog.’

‘No, well, this was before we moved over your way. Like I said, I was only little. I can remember me Dad bringin’ ‘im ‘ome, ‘is little face stickin’ out o’ Dad’s coat. Gawd knows where Dad got ‘im from. Anyway, it don’t matter.’

Kelly was about to interrupt, to complain, but Dodd caught his eye and shook his head minutely, and Kelly subsided as Tullett went on.

‘Only little, ‘e was, even after ‘e’d grown up, an’ black as Newgate’s knocker, ‘cept for a coupla brown patches, an’ one o’ them busy little bastards, know what I mean? Always trottin’ everywhere, always like ‘e was off on an important job, you know?’

His audience nodded - they knew the type.

‘Any rate, ‘e loved to be out an’ about, our Sonny. I couldn’ go out without ‘im, little bastard, ‘cept to school, like, didn’t want to neither. But when I went to school, Mum used to reckon ‘e wouldn’t settle when I weren’t there, so she’d let ‘im out on ‘is own, an’ off ‘e’d go, scurryin’ about the neighbour’ood, sniffin’ ‘ere, ‘avin’ a widdle there, always up to summing. It was like ‘e should’ve ‘ad a satchel an’ a bowler ‘at, like them insurance blokes what come round for yer tanner a week. Any rate, it got so’s everyone local knew ‘im, an’ we often got reports, like someone’d say to Mum “I seen your Sonny up the shops this mornin’ Mrs. Tullett. Looked like ‘e ‘ad a big job on” or summing like that.’

Forgetting the point of this excursion from the conversation, several of his audience nodded again, enjoying Tullett’s fond memories.

‘An’ smart! You couldn’t put nothin’ past ‘im, the little bugger. Crafty as buggery, ‘e was, ‘specially if there was a chance of a bit o’ food, or a bone. Fuckin’ loved a bone, did Sonny.’

Tullett paused, his eyes smiling, remembering, and the men smiled with him. But then, something changed about him somehow, and his audience, sensing the change, waited silently for him to carry on. When he did, the warmth had gone from his voice.

‘Then, one day, ‘e didn’t come ‘ome for ‘is tea. I was worried straight off – reg’lar as fuckin’ clockwork for ‘is tea, ‘e was. Then it got dark, an’ ‘e still ‘adn’t come back, an’ I knew then summing bad ‘ad ‘appened. Me Dad went out on ‘is bike, all round the streets, lookin’ for ‘im, ‘alf the fuckin’ night, it seemed, but ‘e ‘ad to give it best in the end. I remember that night like it was yesterday, an’ I tell yer, I don’t want another like it. ‘Kin’ ‘ell, I don’t.

‘Next mornin’, soon as it was light, I was off lookin’ for ‘im, round all ‘is reg’lar places, like, Dad too, askin’ everyone ‘You seen our Sonny? You seen our Sonny?’ but nobody ‘ad. Everyone promised to fetch ‘im ‘ome if they saw ‘im, but d’you know what?’

Intent, leaning forward, nobody answered, nobody moved, even.

Tullett’s shoulders sagged. ‘We never seen or ‘eard of ‘im since, from that day to this. Not a fuckin’ word, not a sight of ‘im by no-one. Nothink.’

He sat back, slumped, his head shaking, and the men regarded him silently. One or two of the men glanced at each other, and pulled grim faces.

After a while, he pulled himself together and muttered ‘It was not knowin’, see, made it ten times fuckin’ worse. We worried about ‘im for months after. I’d keep ‘earin’ ‘im scratchin’ at the front door, like ‘e used to, an’ goin’ anywhere, I’d always be on the lookout for the little bugger. All the neighbours was always askin’ after ‘im, ‘Any news about Sonny, Stan? Any news?’ Terrible, it was. Would ha’ been better if we’d known he’d been run over or summing, you know? Miles better.’

He looked round at the faces watching him, seeing understanding. ‘But not knowin’, always wonderin’, that was ‘ardest.’

In the silence, the soldiers nodded sombrely, acknowledging the sadness in the story, until, uncomfortably, Dodd spoke. ‘That must have been awful for you Stan, and your family. But.....?’

Tullett jerked himself back to the present. ‘Well, Boss, my idea was, what if we made some Germans disappear, just like Sonny?’

The audience all stared at Tullett, gap mouthed, stunned, until Dodd, rubbing his forehead, found his voice. ‘What? I’m not sure I ..?’

‘I mean, the next patrol, capture the fuckin’ lot o’ them, trucks an’ all, an’ hide ‘em somewhere.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Gone! Just like that! No trace, no clues, no radio message, nothink!’

Another silence, longer this time, and the men continued to stare at Tullett, bewildered by the novelty of the idea, while Burgess didn’t know whether to be proud or embarrassed, and scanned the other faces anxiously for signs of impending laughter or ridicule, ready to jump to his mat’s defence.

Eventually, Brownlow said quietly ‘Well boys, I don’t know about you, but I reckon that’s just about the most brilliant thing I ever heard.’

Dodd agreed. ‘Oh, yes. Quite mad, of course, but brilliant too! Imagine the German commander, sending out a patrol of several vehicles and what, twenty men, and they simply disappear! I don’t know what *he’d* make of it, but it would certainly put the wind up me! Do you think we could do it, Sergeant?’

Brownlow chewed his bottom lip for a while, then grinned. ‘You know, I really can’t see why not, if we can catch ‘em by surprise, like we did at the bridge. You know, fix it so they’ve no choice but surrender, then whisk ‘em off somewhere out of the way. What we’d have to do is show ‘em overwhelming force, so they’ve got no option.’

Dodd nodded. ‘Tell us what you’re picturing, Sergeant.’

‘Well, we’d want ‘em to see our uniforms: let ‘em know, or think, at least, they’re surrounded by proper soldiers, and maybe let ‘em know we’ve got automatic weapons, as well. So, I’m thinking, we put our boys on the ground, waving the Brens about, maybe even a quick burst, if they look like they’re going to fight, and Angelo’s lot, and some o’ the bigger boys, we’ll rustle up a bit of uniform for ‘em, and let the Germans see them too. Them we can’t kit out, we can put at upstairs windows, just the rifles showing. We only need to fool ‘em for a minute, ‘til they’ve put their weapons down, don’t we?’

‘What about the armoured car?’

‘We don’t need to worry about the machine gun, they won’t be able to bring it to bear behind them, but we need to figure out how to get the crew out, and stop ‘em getting on the radio. I *suppose* it would have a radio?’

Dodd thought for a second, then replied ‘I’m sure I saw a radio antenna on it – do you agree, Ted, Stan?’ He was beginning to feel a little less uncomfortable with this first name business, though it still didn’t come easy.

Tullett shook his head, palms up, indicating he didn’t know, but the corporal said ‘I’m pretty sure there was one. Great big whippy thing, and there’s bound to be one in the jeep for the officer, too, wouldn’t you reckon? We’ll need to knock ‘em both out pronto. But the crew of the armoured car, leave that to me, Boss. I’ll get ‘em out quick smart, no worries.’

All this time, Watson, Green and Burgess had been following the conversation like tennis spectators, heads swivelling from one speaker to another, and it came as a small shock to them when Dodd brought them in to the discussion. ‘Well, chaps, what do you think?’

Green said ‘I’m game, Boss. What about you, Bill?’

‘Oh, definitely. The only thing I’m unhappy about is there’s no blowing anything up! I’m getting quite a taste for seeing things exploding.’ A wistful sigh escaped from him. ‘No chance of something along those lines, I suppose?’

Burgess put him straight and reminded him of Tullett’s plan. ‘Sorry Bill, the plan is for the patrol to mysteriously disappear, not get blown to buggery. That’d be liable to leave a bit of a clue, d’you reckon?’

Watson shrugged. ‘Oh well, count me in anyway.’

Dodd looked round at his men one more time, then, with a decisive nod, went to the other end of the room and called all the Italians together. The soldiers watched with interest as the expressions on the listeners faces began with disbelief, and quickly changed to wide grins as Dodd went through the outline of the plan. A lively conversation ensued, as questions were discussed and answered, Angelo and his mates finally falling silent as the discussion among the *scugnizzi* descended into the inevitable shouting, posturing and finger prodding. Dodd left them to it and returned to the soldiers.

Brownlow, still looking at the Italian uproar, asked ‘They don’t like the idea, then?’

Dodd looked back to where the debate was at the pushing and pouting stage. ‘Oh, no, they love it. As far as they’re concerned, it’s fixed! They’re just discussing where to put the prisoners and their vehicles, once they’re captured!’

The soldiers started a brew up and made themselves comfortable. Dodd reflected that they’d soon got used to the Italian way of making a decision - they watched through the gloom as one after another, various protagonists left the argument, usually in a huff, looking disgusted and deeply upset, until, in the end, Toni came to Dodd and a short discussion followed, then Dodd turned to his men.

‘As you saw, they had a pretty vigorous chat before deciding on a hidey hole that seems absolutely perfect! There’s a place they call St Efremono. It seems most of the boys know it well – it’s a kind of hostel for young offenders, well, part hostel, part prison, I suppose. There’s lots of rooms - cells, almost, I suppose - that’d be ideal to hide the soldiers, but they’re worried about hiding the vehicles. They’re having a chat about that now.’

Dodd glanced over to the boys, who were back at their energetic argument, though some of the steam seemed to have gone from the debate, and announced ‘Right, so, assuming the lads find somewhere suitable for the vehicles, the hostel seems ideal, really, so goodness knows what all the shouting was about. Anyway, it looks as though the great German convoy disappearing trick is worth a careful look. So, Sergeant, can we talk each other through the details?’

Brownlow was caught off guard, deep in thought. ‘Only thing I’m worried about is hiding the vehicles. There wouldn’t be all that many places you can put three bloody great things like that, would there? The Germans’ll soon figure that out, and send out search parties. Wouldn’t be that hard, would it? I mean, most of the streets in this town, they’re so narrow, or steep, or just steps, you couldn’t get the bloody wassname, jeep thing down ‘em, never mind a truck. And as soon as they found the vehicles, well, the spell’s broken, know what I mean?’

Dodd vigorously massaged his forehead for a moment, then addressed his men. ‘The more I think about it, the more convinced I am the sergeant’s right. There will only be a handful of possible places to put the vehicles. All the Germans have to do is ask a couple of knowledgeable sympathisers, the mayor, say, and they’ll have a list of buildings to focus on in half an hour.’

He jerked his head at the boys. ‘Unless they come up with a place they know about but the city officials don’t, well ...’

He let the sentence hang, unfinished.

The men morosely watched the *scugnizzi* getting ever more wound up, until all of a sudden, the discussion was over, and Toni, awkward, turned and spoke wearily and at some length to Dodd, who translated: ‘They can’t agree on a place to hide the vehicles. Like you, Sergeant, they realise that even though they know Naples very well, they can’t think of anywhere that wouldn’t be obvious to someone from the town hall.’

The soldiers looked crestfallen.

Chapter 12

‘They did have one idea, though,’ Dodd continued, ‘and that was to put the problem to a chap they call the Doctor. They seem to put a lot of store by him. Hold on a minute: I’ll see if I can find out a bit more about him.’

Dodd turned back to Toni and a brief conversation followed, then Dodd switched back to English. ‘His name’s Doctor Danielli. It appears he’s a bit of an unofficial leader here. Perhaps not a leader, exactly, but a man with connections and good common sense, and people put a lot of faith in him. I don’t know about you chaps, but I think Tull.... Stan’s idea is an absolute corker, and I’m really reluctant to let it go, so I think we should at least go and have a chat with this Danielli, eh?’

When he’d received a round of unhappy nods, Dodd spoke to Toni again to arrange for a meeting the next day. He was shocked at the reply. ‘But *Colonello*, it is only just nine o’clock: we can probably get in to see him today, but he may not be available yet: we should go to the *Farmaccia*, and wait for him. He gets very busy later, you see.’

Dodd felt his grip on things slipping and rubbed his head ferociously. ‘What! It’s nine at night! Is the pharmacy still open? And how can a doctor not have started work yet?’

Toni sniggered understanding at Dodd’s discomfiture, and displaying the talent for decision-making that had taken him to leadership of his group, he added ‘Now, we can’t all go; the Doctor would be most upset. I will take you, *Colonello*, but everybody else must wait here.’

Dodd explained the situation, which Brownlow objected to, but Dodd saw the sense of it, saying that this doctor would be nervous about meeting a tribe of soldiers who he didn’t know anything about. Corporal Kelly sighed, acknowledging the soldier’s everlasting need to wait, and set about fiddling with Dodd’s little stove for a brew up, which sent the remaining *scugnizzi* slithering and giggling for shelter in the furthest corners of the room.

Before they set out to visit the doctor, Toni reassured Dodd that where they were going, the Germans almost never went – it was too easy for them to get lost in the labyrinthine passages. In any case, Toni continued, the narrow alleys made it too dangerous for the Germans, and managed to make it clear, without actually saying so, that it was the activities of the *scugnizzi* that had made it so. Nevertheless, Dodd felt it right to change into his civilian suit, so as not to be conspicuous, as he explained, but also, secretly, because he was of the generation that always put on their good clothes when they went to see the doctor.

As they walked, Dodd realised the truth of what Toni said: within half a minute he was getting disoriented. Down here, towards the sea, the going was fairly flat, but even so, the narrowness of the alleys combined with their twists and turns, their apparent sameness and the darkness would have made navigating them impossible to an outsider. But Toni obviously knew exactly where he was going, so Dodd followed along.

They’d only been going for a few minutes, though Dodd was by now irretrievably lost, when Toni, half way along a narrow lane, turned into an even narrower passage and stopped at a doorway set well back into the wall. A sign above the doorway, almost invisible without light, depicted a weathered blue cross and the word *Farmaccia*. Pharmacy. Toni knocked, and after a minute, a thirty centimetre square of dim yellow light appeared in the door, quickly obscured by

the silhouette of a head. Toni, clearly well used to the process, told the opening that he needed to see the doctor as a matter of urgency. The silhouette silently studied Toni for a few seconds but Toni stood impassively, until the hatch closed and the door opened a little. Still no sound, while the examination continued from round the side of the door, but then the door opened wider. Following mumbled instructions from within, Toni told Dodd to wait while he spoke to the doctor, then went inside. The face, or rather the outline of it, reappeared at the edge of the door. Dodd couldn't make out the details of the face, but had the uncomfortable feeling he was being glowered at. The door inched closed.

Dodd, with nothing to do while he waited, was beginning to speculate: it occurred to him, belatedly, that possibly, this was no ordinary doctor's surgery. He shivered as he felt the night chill begin to settle, and noticed again the tang of the sea, dank among these ancient walls. Several minutes went by until, of a sudden, the door was thrown open once again, and the shadowed face reappeared, now with a body attached. From behind him, Toni, confident now, beckoned Dodd in.

Dodd found himself in what at first seemed to be a pool of darkness, rimmed by the ragged pinpoint flames of many candles. He began to get the feeling, a sensation that was becoming increasingly familiar to him, that he was living in some kind of dream, and stood immobile, waiting and hoping for his brain to begin to make sense of things.

He perceived that he was in a large room, big enough that the walls and even the ceiling were hidden in the darkness, but as his eyes became accustomed to the murk, some details began to emerge. The candles were set on maybe a dozen circular tables, illuminating, albeit vaguely, that many of the tables were occupied by small groups of men, and some women, all of whom were gawking at the newcomers with undisguised interest. A glint from high up in what seemed to be the middle of the room triggered Dodd's memory of something faintly familiar, and as he gazed at it, trying to clarify his thoughts. *Of course*, Dodd realised with a jolt, *that thing up there's one of those great mirrored balls they have in night clubs. What's going on?*

The lieutenant was perplexed. He stood gazing about him, like an anxious boy on his first day at school, hoping to see something he understood, while the sitting people returned his stare: not aggressive, not upset, just interested. And there was music too, after a fashion: following the sound, Dodd noticed on the edge of his vision a grotesque trio, violin, saxophone and accordion, each being listlessly attacked by elderly men who may have started off playing the same tune, but it seemed they might have since wandered off on their own. A few couples were dancing, or rather, leaning on each other and swaying, pretty much oblivious to the music.

From out of the gloom, a completely unexpected vision appeared – an elegantly dressed man, resplendent in a beautifully cut dinner suit, radiantly white shirt and crimson bow tie. His black hair was brushed straight back and gleamed with brilliantine: he was clean shaven, but for a sliver of moustache which completed the film star image. He stood at the edge of the light for a few moments, taking in his visitor. The man, whose confident stance told Dodd he was the owner of this place, was possibly forty, maybe a little more, medium height to Dodd, so something over medium to the locals. He finished his examination, and strolled gracefully towards Dodd, acknowledging the calls of '*Caio, Dottore*' with a wave here, a smile there, held out a languid hand to Dodd and addressed him in English.

'Good evening, sir, I am Danielli. Welcome to my establishment.'

Dodd was not surprised at the man's almost accentless English – it seemed only natural somehow, appropriate. Anything less would have been out of place in this fastidiously turned out man. Dodd introduced himself, but immediately began to feel out of place, suddenly conscious of his dingy and unpressed suit, a scruffy yokel in the presence of a gentleman.

'Please, sir, join me at my table.' The doctor wafted a hand to indicate a small circular table, set discreetly aside from the others, and made a small fuss of making sure Dodd was comfortable, and had wine and bread.

Dodd spoke in Italian. 'I must confess, *signor*, I'm confused. I'd understood we were meeting with a doctor, and I saw the pharmacy sign outside, but now ...' He mirrored his host's wave of the hand to indicate his surroundings '... this is not what I expected at all.'

Another man, a less cultured man, might have laughed at Dodd's discomfiture, but this gentleman understood and sympathised. He spoke in English. 'I say, Mr Dodd, would you mind too much if we spoke in English? I get so little in the way of opportunity to use it these days. But, yes, I dare say it's all a little unexpected, and so on, so let me explain. I *am* known as the doctor, though, as you see,' and did the languid wave again, 'I do not practice as a physician, and the reason for that, to be candid, is that I am not actually a doctor at all! No, not of any kind! What a lark, eh?'

He laughed self-deprecatingly, as though not being a doctor was all due to a silly oversight, but too much trouble to put right. 'It all started, you see, many years ago, after I returned from London, where I had been to improve my English skills, if you follow me. I had been working as a waiter in an excellent hotel – do you know Claridges at all? - which gave me many opportunities to listen to English as spoken by the better class of people, and I soon found I could get along pretty well in that way. Quite apart from the accent, and so on, I picked a tremendous range of expressions in common use, as it were, which I later found most helpful.'

Danielli remembered something and chuckled. 'A friend of mine, also a guide with good English, went to France to learn their language. You will understand that fluency in several languages means more work for a guide. Of course. But he returned after a year in Paris: he had failed to learn French, but he now spoke English with a French accent! Very amusing, eh? Very droll! But I stray from my history. When I came back, with my new fluency in English, I soon picked up a job right here in Naples, in one of our better hotels, as a guide for the hotel's clients. I dare say you know that Naples is a wonderful place to visit, and therefore a wonderful place also to be a guide – there are so many things to see and do here. Or at least, there were until the present unpleasantness.'

He picked an imaginary speck from his gleaming silken lapel. 'At any rate, I soon realised that working for myself would be far better than working for others, and I set up on my own, handing out business cards to the wealthier looking tourists as they came from the railway station. At first, I won little business – many others had the same idea, you see, and the scene at the station sometimes became, well, a little unpleasant. But for most of my competitors, their English was not of the first water - and then I hit on the idea that I might be more highly regarded if I called myself *Doctor* Danielli – it gives a scholarly impression, wouldn't you say? And what with that, and my English skills, the work came rolling in, particularly among the Americans, who loved the idea of being guided by a doctor. And since the Americans were the wealthiest, we suited each other down to the earth. You know, many American ladies spoke to me of their medical conditions, of which, I might say, there were often a tremendous number, and I had to

advise them that I was not that sort of a doctor. Naturally, they would then enquire as to what sort of a doctor I was, and I always replied “What sort would you like me to be?” They always thought that was terrifically witty.’

He chuckled at the memory of his own humour.

Dodd, still baffled by his situation, glanced around discreetly, as he thought, but Danielli picked up on it. He leant forward conspiratorially. ‘Ah, you’re wondering why I’m telling you this? Well, my dear fellow, I suppose that a British soldier, whether in uniform or not, in Naples just now, might feel the need to be a little careful in whom he talks to, and so forth, am I correct? So I want you to know that I have fond memories of my time in England, and I like to think of myself as an honorary Englishman. I can be trusted by you, and if you’re here to help rid Naples of the detested Germans, I stand willing to help as best I can. Let me continue, and you will understand.’

He poured more wine, then leant forward again. ‘I continued to concentrate on cultivating the Americans, and the wealthier British, and soon I was getting word of mouth recommendations. I became the most sought after and best paid guide in the whole of Naples and candidly, sir, I took the role to heart. The more I studied the mannerisms and the speech of my clients, and the more I dressed in their style, the better they liked it and the more I could charge. It was wonderful! Good heavens, yes!’

As the man talked, Dodd, ever the intelligence officer, had been making a more careful study of his host, as far as the candlelight would allow. He examined the hands first, resting quietly on the table for the moment, and noted they fitted the man well, long fingers, skin soft and nails well manicured, but the shirt cuffs were frayed and the dinner jacket cuffs also showed signs of wear. Dodd’s eyes moved to the collar, and the pattern of careful maintenance of good quality but overused fabrics was repeated. He brought himself back to listen to the continuing story.

‘Soon, I had a beautiful conveyance, a gigantic Hispano-Suiza converted into a magnificent eight seater coach, I had a driver, a secretary, a valet to look after my dress and what have you. When the war came, I had just bought a nightclub up in the fashionable quarter, and spent a fortune decorating it, but of course the tourists stopped coming. I lost everything.’ He snapped his fingers ‘Just like that. The point I hope I’m making, Mr Dodd, is that I blame the detested Germans for everything that’s happened. And I want them gone.’

He thought for a second. ‘Dead, if possible, but in any case, gone. Not that they were here at that time, you understand – they actually arrived here only recently. The idiot Mussolini was bewitched by Hitler and drawn into the war, not that he needed much leading. He was quite capable of turning Italy into a wasteland on his own. But it’s so much easier to blame a foreigner, don’t you agree? You English have had plenty of practice at that, have you not?’

Dodd responded. ‘Thank you for telling me all that, *signor*, or *Dottore*, I should say. As it happens, it hadn’t occurred to me that I should be careful about you: I simply assumed that if the boys trusted you, I could too. But it’s a fascinating story in any case. One thing, though, if I may? How did you come to be here, in this place? It does seem, well, out of keeping with your previous existence.’

Danielli repeated ‘Out of keeping, yes,’ storing that expression away for later use when the good times returned, ‘out of keeping indeed. Another piece of ill fortune visited on me by the detested Germans. I took the lease on this place, which had once been a *farmaccia*, but was being run as a nightclub. Not my style of club, as you correctly notice, but I thought the name rather

droll, in view of my, er, honorary title. Quite amusing, wouldn't you say? But within a week, the Germans marched in, and what little business there was collapsed. I can tell you, by that time, they were really getting up my goat.'

He frowned for a second, thinking that didn't sound quite right, but pressed on 'As you see, the place stays open, but why, I'm not quite sure. And there it is.'

Danielli shrugged – the matter was closed, ancient history. 'But now, my dear *Colonello*, as I understand we must address you, I believe you have an issue that I might be of assistance with, and so forth.'

'Well, yes, Doctor,' Dodd responded, and, taking up Danielli's almost excessively polite usage, added 'if that is how you prefer to be addressed?'

Dodd wondered, as he said it, if his host might think he was being sarcastic, but Danielli gave a slight bow and fluttered a hand, indicating it was of no consequence to him, but he had a certain position to uphold, so

Dodd nodded understanding, and continued. 'Well, I don't know how much Toni has told you, but we need to conceal, er, certain property – property of some considerable size, I might say, and ...'

Dodd broke off, flustered, realising suddenly that now the doctor had put the thought in his head, he wasn't sure how much information to trust his new acquaintance with, and secondly, that he was beginning, without meaning to, to imitate the doctor's quaint manner of speech.

Danielli understood at least the first part of Dodd's discomfiture. 'My dear *Colonello*, we must be entirely open with each other.' He signalled to Toni, who had been lurking in the shadows, watching their every movement. 'Toni here can vouch for me: we have worked closely together since well before the Germans came, don't you see?'

He spoke to Toni, who nodded vigorously.

Danielli smiled. 'I fancy I see myself as Fagin to his Artful Dodger, if you follow me. We do a little business you know: he and his chaps sometimes, er, acquire certain items, and I find a market for them, and so on, and so forth.'

Dodd smiled back, thinking that Angelo would be very interested in a chat with Danielli, to compare notes professionally.

Suddenly, he couldn't have said why, Dodd knew this extraordinary man could be trusted, and that it would be best to give him the complete story, but where to begin? The whole thing seemed so outlandish, now that he had to explain it to an outsider. He took a deep breath, and plunged in.

'Well, as you know, the boys put up barricades to block the Germans patrols.' Danielli gently waved both hands and made a puffing noise. It said, as clearly as words, *Yes, I know, and what a monumental waste of time that is.*

'Well, we're proposing to capture an entire patrol and make it disappear.'

Now that he said it, Dodd realised how preposterous it sounded, but Danielli seemed unsurprised. He simply nodded slightly. 'Yes, that's what Toni said. I just wanted to be sure he had it right. The vehicles *and* the troops? What a lark, eh! Quite an undertaking, though, wouldn't you say?'

To his own amazement, Dodd found himself a little offended at the suggestion, however delicately put, that the proposal might be too ambitious, and replied a little tetchily, 'As it happens, doctor, we have every confidence that we'll pull it off. Our only concern is where to put

the vehicles so the Germans don't find them. And Toni thought that if anyone could come up with a place that's not obvious, it would be you.'

There was a long silence while Danielli sipped his wine and thought about the problem. 'Yes, *Colonello*, a pretty question, wouldn't you say? I see the difficulty. If we can hit upon a location to hide the patrol, the Germans will quickly come across it too. They'd only have to squeeze those lemons in the town hall, and they'd have a list of possibilities before you could say Jack Spratt. But not the end of the planet, eh? A fascinating riddle, that requires some thought, etcetera. Tell me, do you propose to do the job tomorrow, or would the next day be just as suitable?'

Dodd conferred briefly with Toni, then responded 'As you heard, doctor, one day is much the same as another. Why do you ask?'

'Because, my dear sir, a problem of delicacy such as this requires careful thought, as it were. I suggest we sleep on it and agree to reconvene here tomorrow. Is that suitable to you?'

Dodd nodded.

'Very well, *Colonello*, we will make an appointment for nine in the evening tomorrow. Now tell me, how many are there in your party?'

Dodd wondered for a moment if he should reveal such details, but took the plunge 'Six English, including myself, and an Australian, plus two Italians.'

'An Australian? Fascinating! How very, er, exotic! Feel free to bring them with you, though I'd wish to converse in English, so perhaps just the English speakers, eh?'

Dodd demurred. 'Hmm. As you might imagine, Doctor, your countrymen, who have shared our adventures, would not take kindly to being left behind, whether they can follow the conversation or not, so with your permission, they will come too.'

'So be it, my dear sir. So be it. Now, if there's nothing more I can help you with? I have some very fine cheese for sale at this moment: also a selection of clocks? No? Of course. Very well. Now, I have another appointment, as luck would have it, so until tomorrow then. I will arrange with the boys for you to be guided.'

Danielli stood, bowed slightly, and disappeared into the shadows.

Time hung heavy for the soldiers the next day. It had been decided that they would not risk spoiling the plan to make the patrol vanish by being spotted moving about, even in the twisted alleys, so it was left to the *scugnizzi* to continue their harassment of the Germans, as usual. The evening, where they might learn whether Danielli had come up with a bright idea, seemed long away so, just to pass the time, Corporal Kelly and the privates wandered off to explore the remainder of the hotel, leaving Dodd to his everlasting miniature notes, and the sergeant quietly humming to himself as he settled down to enjoy what seemed to be his favourite pastime, cleaning and checking the weapons.

They soon exhausted the possibilities of the lower floor where the store room and other service areas lay, the erstwhile domain of the hotel's servants and took the stairs to find themselves in the lobby of the hotel. It was stripped now, of course, of all but the useless fixtures, but even so, in the half light from the poorly boarded up windows, was grand enough to make them all slightly uncomfortable, out of their comfort zone.

All, that is, but Watson, who, as the pampered only child of a well off family in his pre-soldier life, had been quite familiar with staying at swanky hotels when his mother took him to

London for shopping and to visit relatives. And once or twice, his father had come too, when he was well enough, and they made quite a holiday of it.

Watson stood transfixed, amazed that his surroundings, stripped and half-lit as they were, brought back those memories so strongly that he was transported back to his boyhood. Involuntarily, he closed his eyes, recalling his visits to the zoo at Regents Park – his nostrils flared as that pungent musty animal smell came back to him - or exploring the Tower, followed by a boat trip on the Thames, or even better, the annual pre-Christmas shopping expeditions to Harrods then Hamleys, the famous toy store. He could summon the barely restrained excitement of trotting through Hamleys main door even now. Ah, happy days!

But the best, most precious memory of all was of that jaunt when he was, what, eight, or possibly nine, before his father's experiences in the Great War had finally toppled him into insanity. That special day, his father alone took him to Madame Tussauds, and on the way back, they'd strolled back through Regents Park, and as they walked, his hand rested on Watson's shoulder. It had made the boy so proud and happy, and he remembered it yet, just walking with his dad, the hand lightly resting, the mere contact all the more intimate for its rarity. Just for a second, the memory was so strong, he moved his left hand to his right shoulder.

Tullett, misinterpreting Watson's immobility and odd stance, approached Watson and confided 'Yeah, bit fuckin' creepy, ain't it, Bill?' and even managed a small shudder in sympathy.

Watson jumped slightly, and grinned. 'No chum, I just had a sudden memory of a holiday I had when I was a lad. Eerie, really: it was so strong, you know? That ever happen to you?'

Tullett misunderstood again. 'Nah, mate, we din' get much in the way o' 'olidays when I was a nipper. Just odd days out now an' again, like. We use'ter go down Southend, (which he pronounced "Saaufend") when the ol' man got a chance to get a day off, an' 'e 'ad a few bob spare.'

Watson was amazed – *what, no holidays? How could a family not have holidays?* – but he managed not to show it. 'Just a day here and there, then? No staying away?'

'Nah, mate, that was for the nobs, weren't it? Bed 'n' breakfast, an' that. We did 'ave a fam'yly down our street, 'ad a caravan down Tilbury or somewhere, but...'

He shrugged and smiled. 'Any rate, when we went down Southend, we 'ad a real proper blowout, an' no mistake. Dunno why we went to Southend, the tide was always fuckin' miles out, an' yer just got this little bit o' sand, well, mostly stones an' that, then fuckin' miles o' fuckin' 'orrible mud, so yer couldn' swim, not that I *can* swim, not proper, like, an' that little bit o' beach was packed to buggery, o' course.'

Tullett snorted derisively at the memory, but then smiled again.

'Mind you, they 'ad a fuckin' 'normous long pier, even 'ad a railway train on it, to take yer out to the end – there was a caff an' stuff at the end. We never went on the train, o'course: yer 'ad to pay, so we just walked.' He stopped for a moment, and added wistfully, 'But I always wished we'd 'ad a ride on the train.'

Watson sympathised. 'Perhaps when you get home, you'll be able to go to Southend and get that train ride, eh, Stan?'

'Yeah, well, I reckon I. Never know, do you? Any rate, mum always 'ad bags o' sandwiches for us kids, an' the old man always managed a penny or two fer treats, candy floss

an' that. An' we always 'ad a stick o' rock with "Southend" writ all through it. Yer could break it in 'alf anywhere yer liked, an' there it was, "Southend." Fuckin' amazin', that, eh?

Watson could see that Tullett was now where Watson himself had just been, back in the land of his boyhood, and let his comrade continue. 'Yeah, good, that, eh? But the best bit was, just when we're gettin' back on the coach, the old dad would disappear an' come back with a whackin' great parcel o' fish an' chips to scoff on the way back! 'E *always* did it, every time, but mum always got us to pretend it was a big surprise, an' we all made a big fuss o' dad.'

He stopped, embarrassed. 'Don' s'pose it sounds much now, but, well, that was all we 'ad, an' we didn' expect no more.'

Kelly, who had been exploring further with Green and Burgess, came through an ornate doorway and called 'You chaps all right? I thought we'd lost you.'

Watson responded. 'Yes, Corporal, we're fine.' He always gave the corporal and the sergeant their full titles, and had trouble addressing Dodd as anything but "Sir," even though their occasional chats had brought them closer together. 'We were just reminiscing about holidays, before the war.'

Kelly was not sympathetic. He'd not had much in the way of holidays himself, as a lad: times were pretty tough for his family: when school broke up for the holidays, and quite often when it hadn't, Kelly had found himself farmed out to his uncle Bob's smallholding at Beacon Hill on the northern edge of Sydney "to help out," though he'd realised as a teenager that he'd really been sent there to ease the burden on his parents. But in a way, those times *were* a holiday, away from the grime and poverty of East Sydney in the Depression, and he was able to roam free in breaks from looking after the chickens and a couple of elderly milkers. But the novelty wore off, and he'd taken himself off to work as a dogsbody with a drovers "plant," or crew, and loved the work, the stories round the campfire at night, the comradeship. But no, not much thought of holidays in those days – just an occasional day or two back at mum's place when he found himself passing through Sydney, and dropped in to slip her a few quid.

So in a gesture he'd unconsciously picked up from Dodd, he clapped his hands and told Watson to get ready: Kelly and Watson were due to go out to the trucks with a mob of lads to get the spare kit and more food.

In the evening, Dodd and his group stood outside the half hidden door of the *Farmaccia*, accompanied by Toni and another lad, but this time, the silhouette face appeared in the opened hatch a second after Toni knocked, and, after a quick examination, opened the door.

Clearly, they were expected, and, as less exalted patrons at distant tables threw curious stares, they were ushered into a private room, as honoured guests might be. A waiter, unasked, brought wine and coffee. The assembly sat uncomfortable and silent, wondering what had become of the two boys.

Minutes passed. Then, with a flourish befitting his lavish costume of beautiful dinner suit, this time with silk waistcoat of many and brilliant colours, Danielli appeared and strode to the table.

'Good evening, gentlemen!' he addressed them in English. 'What a pleasure to see you all again. I hope you have had an enjoyable day.' Dodd mused that this might have been his regular script from his tour guide days. Dodd looked on admiringly as Danielli then moved round the table, speaking conversationally to each of the others, showing interest in their replies, making

the occasional joke, putting them at ease, switching to Italian as needed. Dodd could see how Danielli came to rise to the top of his profession, catering to the wealthy and well to do, yet able, as now, to make the soldiers and Italian country men feel comfortable.

But then, in a gesture which signalled that the pleasantries were over, Danielli took his place at the table and said in English, ‘Now, gentlemen, let us get to business.’

Danielli did that leaning forward motion, and lowered his voice, imparting an air of intrigue and confidentiality. ‘And so, we begin. Now, firstly, I say nothing about the capture of the patrol at the outset. It is not my area of expertise. If you gentlemen tell me you can do it,’ He shrugged, to denote, *it’s not my concern*, paused, and went on.

‘Consider. The issue is to make an entire German patrol mysteriously disappear, so to speak, in order to worry the enemy. I imagine we can all understand that to lose a patrol in action is one thing; to have it disappear,’ he flung out his hands and made a “pfffft” noise, ‘is quite another. That would certainly put the cat among the woodpile, eh? Most unnerving, I imagine.’

Danielli looked round the table for confirmation. Dodd noticed that Danielli was still using his wide selection of English expressions, some of them not quite right, and was thoroughly enjoying his return to being the centre of attention. It occurred to Dodd, a little uncharitably, that his companions had been invited to make up a decent audience.

Danielli was proceeding: ‘Now, the soldiers are easy, if you follow me. They can be spirited away in ones and twos. I’m sure your local chaps can imagine plenty of places the Germans won’t think of looking, or prefer not to look, due to the danger. In the slums, and so on, and so forth. Or they can be moved right out of Naples, into the hills. They only need to be hidden for a few days – enough time for the big wigs to be mystified, to be all at sea, so to speak.’

Danielli smiled at each of his guests in turn, then said, in a tone he’d previously used to get the attention of clients whose attention might be wandering. ‘Consider! It is the vehicles that are the conundrum. Any space large enough to contain them will be as obvious to the Germans as it is to us. That is the problem, am I correct in saying?’

His audience nodded.

‘Very well. We all agree, it is not possible to conceal the vehicles where they will not quickly be discovered.’

This time, the pause was for dramatic effect. He leaned even further forward, increasing the conspiratorial air. Automatically, his guests felt compelled to lean inward too.

‘It is inevitable, then. We will hide the vehicles in the open, in a public place!’

Danielli sat back triumphantly, smiling.

This time, the pause came from the others, who each gazed at Danielli for long seconds, before flicking glances at each other, as if to see whether it was Danielli, or themselves, that had gone barking mad.

Danielli let the moment hang further before continuing. ‘The vehicles are hard to hide, and when the Germans find them, the mystery is gone. Clearly, somebody has taken them and hidden them. Enemy action, yes, but understandable. Well, suppose we left the vehicles, but made the soldiers disappear? What would happen then?’

Dodd grasped the picture immediately. ‘What, leave them in the road?’

‘Consider that. Just where they stood, no damage, no bullet holes, and no sign of the soldiers. They’re gone! Pfffft!’ Again, the spread of hands to emphasise the point. ‘Gone!’

Danielli watched the faces of his audience with interest, as they tried to come to terms with the suggestion, but then broke in: "A fascinating idea, yes? But do you see the problem with it?"

Brownlow spoke immediately. 'Fuckin shambles, Mr Dodd, Sir, can you tell him?' forgetting that Danielli had been speaking in perfect English. 'Soon as the jerries see the vehicles, they'll just go twisting a few arms, and get plenty of eyewitnesses to give 'em chapter and verse within ten minutes.'

Brownlow added, forgetting that the entire conversation was being conducted in English 'Can you tell him that?'

Dodd, falling into the same trap, was just beginning a more refined Italian version of Brownlow's view when Danielli clapped his hands a couple of times, then offered his hand for Brownlow to shake, and said in English 'Yes, yes, first-rate, Sergeant. Absolutely spot on. The whole thing is preposterous. Absolutely. So, leaving the vehicles there is no good, and trying to hide them is no better. Gentlemen,' and here he leaned even further in, so his chin was only inches from the table, 'the answer now speaks for itself. As the great Sherlock Holmes himself might have said, when everything else is impossible, whatever is left must be the answer.'

He scanned the intent faces around him.

'What if we move the vehicles to some public place where there are no witnesses to say how they came to disappear and reappear; nobody for the Germans to interrogate. Would that be more suitable to the Sergeant?'

Brownlow's bottom lip disappeared entirely as he sucked it, seemingly for ages before his lip reappeared and joined the rest of his face in a wide grin. Once again, he spoke to Danielli through Dodd.

'Now *that* would be *most* satisfactory, Skipper! Does he have anywhere specific in mind, can you ask?'

Danielli smiled broadly. 'As it just so happens, I believe I do. Not far from here, at the seafront, the road that follows the sea wall curves inland a little bit, and the area between the road and the ocean is laid out as gardens and lawns and what have we, broken by broad paved paths for strolling tourists. If you could get the vehicles to the promenade on the sea wall, they would be a picture of innocence, and an utter riddle for the Germans, for heaven's sake. Now, Sergeant, how does that seem?'

Brownlow pictured that for a moment before bursting into laughter. 'Bloody wassname, Sir! Genius! What'd you make of that, if it was your blokes gone missing? There's three vehicles, neatly parked, all facing out to sea, just like a bunch of day trippers has parked there to admire the view, then just gone off for a stroll! Only they're not day trippers, they're twenty odd soldiers, completely disappeared. No clues, no nothing. Oh, yes, I reckon that should do it!'

Tullett screwed his face up and offered 'I don't really get it, Boss. What's the point, like?' He was pleased with himself for not saying "what's the fuckin' point?" to the officer.

Watson chipped in 'Don't you see, Stan? It's just like your Sonny, isn't it! Or the Marie Celeste, eh? When I first heard about that, I thought it was the scariest thing I'd ever heard!'

Tullett looked sceptically at Watson for a second, then asked 'All right, Bill, I'll buy it. What's that about?'

'The Marie Celeste? Well, the Marie Celeste was a sailing ship, back, oh, I forget when now, but one day, in the middle of the Atlantic, it was found sailing along,' he paused for effect, '... all by itself! They say there was a meal ready to be eaten, still warm, a fire in the

galley, table laid, everything neat and tidy, only not a sign of the passengers or crew! No sign of violence, no clues at all about what happened. Nothing at all!’ He shivered. ‘Yes. If the ship had disappeared, that wouldn’t have been unusual, would it, especially in those days. Ships went missing all the time. But well, just sailing along, nobody aboard, is that scary enough for you, Stan?’

Tullett spent a while imagining the scene, then nodded and grinned. ‘Fuck me tomorrer, that *is* scary! Let’s do it!’

After an early breakfast, Dodd, Brownlow and Kelly went through the plan again in detail, talking quietly, leaning over the table and moving bits and pieces around, under the pungent yellow light of the oil lamp and the engrossed gaze of everybody else. The tension in the store room was electric: occasionally, one of the boys would nudge his neighbour and offer some whispered comment, and the soldiers passed the odd word among themselves, until finally, the three men stood upright and nodded to each other.

The room went very quiet then, all eyes intently studying their faces, looking for clues as to the decision. Brownlow and Kelly gazed impassively back, until Dodd grinned and said ‘Well, chaps, it seems the great disappearing German patrol trick is on!’

The soldiers stood and clapped, and no interpretation was required for the Italians, who joined in the applause.

Chapter 13

On a cool and overcast morning, a group of maybe thirty, Dodd and his six, Angelo and his three, Toni and a crowd of *scugnizzi*, were standing about quietly, close to the remains of yesterday's barricade. They'd decided the street where yesterday's action had taken place was ideal – too narrow for the German vehicles to manoeuvre, and with plenty of first and second floor windows, as well as being on one of the only routes where the Germans could use their vehicles.

Brownlow, Green and Burgess carried Bren sub-machine guns, and Angelo, Dino and Giovanni had the three Italian Berettas. When the tasks were being allocated, Kelly had immediately whinged about being left out of the front of the attack, but Dodd quieted him down by saying he had a special job in mind for him, and took him aside to explain it to him. Bimbo was upset too, on finding he was not allocated an automatic weapon, but there was no uniform close enough to fitting him - the soldiers had managed to put uniform shirts and trousers together for Angelo and the two other men, and shirts for four of the biggest lads. All these also had either a uniform beret or a British army steel helmet, so would appear, at a quick glance anyway, to be British soldiers. But Bimbo and the remaining lads were in their own clothes, and all the Italians, men and boys, were wearing their own boots. Dodd had worried about that, until Brownlow pointed out either the ruse would work immediately and the Germans would surrender, or they'd fight. As Brownlow suggested, if your enemy was pointing a rifle at you, you'd likely be concentrating on things other than his footwear.

Brownlow might have been philosophical about that, but he'd insisted on a rehearsal of the plan on site: he wanted to make sure everybody knew where they were supposed to be well before the action started. The six men with automatic weapons would be hiding in the shops at the ground floor levels of the selected buildings, Dodd insisting they were all on the same side of the road. Green was close to the barricade, to stop anybody escaping from the armoured car and to threaten the Kubelwagen, and the rest were approximately where the truck had stopped the previous day. Watson would be alongside Green, but armed only with an axe, and he had a special job to do. Brownlow placed these men individually in their starting positions and went through their tasks with them, while the shopkeepers went about the usual bustle of opening their shops, pretending, as best they could, that the crowd of interlopers simply weren't there.

On the first floor, the same side of the road, Dodd would be at a wide window from where he could survey the entire field of action, ready to give the signal, which would be delivered by a young lad, Peppino, who was renowned for the piercing quality of his whistle. The boy was to stand close behind Dodd, while Kelly, with a rifle, was to place himself on Dodd's left. Also on that level, spread out among the windows, were all the others who had rifles and uniform shirts. Dodd had obtained permission, with varying degrees of reluctance, from the people who lived there, then took charge of placing this layer, and, as Brownlow had done, talked through what was expected.

On the floor above them, under Toni's instructions, about fifteen lads with rifles but no uniforms were spread out, two or three to a window, with orders that, on the whistle, they should brandish the rifles but keep out of sight themselves.

The plan was simple enough: when, as usual, the patrol stopped in front of the barricade, at the given signal, the Germans in the truck would be confronted by a bunch of soldiers with

automatic weapons, as well as another group of soldiers with rifles at first floor windows, and yet more, it would seem, higher up. The Germans on one side of the truck would be faced with overwhelming firepower, and the others, looking the other way, would not be able to bring their weapons to bear. The armoured car, at the front, couldn't swivel its machine gun back far enough to be of any use, and the officer in the Kubelwagen would also be covered by the automatic weapons as well as the rifles on the upper floors.

The only problem was that the plan relied on the co-operation of the Germans. Would they come out today, and if so, would they use the same route as yesterday? If they did, would they stop approximately where they had before? If they stopped well back, the armoured car would be able to use its heavy machine gun to attack the soldiers, while the troops in the truck had time to dismount and get themselves organised to pick off their opposition, who would be trapped in the buildings. Dodd had sleeplessly considered all this, and decided that if they stopped far back, he would have to abort the attack.

Thinking about it one more time, Dodd shook off the image of the carnage that a bad decision from him would bring, and called the men back from their assigned positions. In a minute, they were all back in the street and helping as a new group of lads, enviously regarding their mates with modern firearms, constructed a new barricade. They were careful to display a length of old pointed iron railings conspicuously, to discourage the armoured car from attempting to drive over the barricade to escape – everyone was right behind the idea of making the whole convoy disappear, so they had to ensure no Germans escaped to tell the tale.

Time began to hang heavy then, as they all milled about, getting in the way of the shopkeepers and their early customers, most of whom, Neapolitans all, stoically ignored the whole proceedings.

As the first hour, then the second passed, Dodd got to know his surroundings very well. Though he didn't know it, the time he had to study his surroundings enabled him, even many years later, to describe in minute detail the features of that road – the various small shops, with their wares spilling out of their peeling shopfronts, the occasional miniature shrines set high up into the ancient walls, the iron framed miniature balconies with their ornately extending frames on which washing lolled, stirring occasionally in a breath of breeze. And at the end of the road, there was a blank wall, featureless but for a mysterious window shaped hole - though there was no window or frame. An old lady sat at the hole, motionless but for the occasional suck on an empty pipe, glowering disapprovingly at the world.

The usual early trickle of early shoppers faded to almost nothing. Another hour, and Dodd was getting steadily more agitated, wondering if they could risk doing this another day without the setup getting back to the Germans through some fascist sympathiser. Perhaps those wheels were already in motion? Maybe that was the reason for the delay – maybe the Germans already knew, and were even now getting into position to capture them all, or wipe them out? What if...?'

Noon came and went, and shadows began their relentless clamber up the far walls, and still nothing. Dodd's only solace was that they'd had no signal that a patrol was out and going elsewhere today. But still, what did it mean? Were the Germans just methodically completing their preparations to capture or kill all the ambushers? Dodd continued his unstoppable mental torture of "what if ...?"

But finally, mid afternoon, there it was – the whistle from the rooftop that said the convoy was on the move and coming their way! Dodd was suddenly and strangely relieved: he thought briefly that now the ambush was going to happen, he should have become more anxious, not less, but after the last hours of imagining being responsible for a catastrophe, the prospect of action was quite a relief.

The sound of the whistle sent the whole group immediately and quietly to their assigned stations, and a mixed flock of seagulls and pigeons went shrieking and clattering away. Dodd saw now how wise the sergeant had been to insist on the dry run: as he climbed the stairs to ‘his’ window, he imagined the pantomime that might have taken place if this lot, especially the lads, had been left select their own places – they’d still be wrestling each other about the best spots after the convoy had passed!

At his position, Dodd turned and smiled tightly at Kelly, then Peppino, the little lad with the big whistle. During the practice run, Kelly had pulled up a high backed armchair, and had it facing the window. For a second, Dodd began to think he’d had some sort of breakdown, and was making himself comfortable as an interested spectator, until he realised he was going to use it to rest his rifle on. Now, Kelly carefully wrapped the sling of the rifle round his left arm to help steady it, then, crouching slightly, allowed the back of the chair to take the main weight of the gun.

Dodd, leaning to one side, looked down the now deserted street to the far corner, where he hoped the armoured car would appear. He then glanced round, uneasy – there was something wrong, something, well, just not right, but what was it? He scanned the scene again, looking for telltale signs of the trap, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. What was wrong? Then he realised! Of course: there was nobody in the street – no shoppers, no passers-by, none of the usual tiny knots of gossipers! Even the window shaped hole in the far wall was vacant. It seemed so obvious! Surely, the Germans must notice? What would they do? The armoured car would turn the corner then stop. Then what? At best, they’d simply take another route, but perhaps they’d send the soldiers from the truck round the back of the buildings to winkle out Dodd’s people, or surround them and call for reinforcements, or.....

Dodd almost jumped when the dull grey snout of the armoured car appeared at the end of the street, and Kelly heard Dodd say quietly, almost prayerfully, ‘Come on, come *on*. Down here.’

Kelly worked the rifle bolt with a solid click-click-*cluck* then settled his position at the armchair and waited, looking down the barrel of the rifle.

The great vehicle began to nose into the street, and excitedly now, but still quietly, Dodd said ‘Yes! Now, come on! Keep coming, keep coming. Do you see them Ted?’

‘I see the armoured car, Boss, not the jeep. Ah, now I’ve got ‘em.’ And Kelly found himself joining in with Dodd, imploring the Germans to take their positions. ‘Come on mate, close up a bit. You want to be right behind the armoured oh, yeah, that’s it, just right. You little ripper! What’s the truck doing, Skip?’

Dodd was watching it anxiously. ‘It’s stopped well back! Too far back! It’s no good, right back there!’ He crumpled. ‘It’s no use. We’ll have to leave it.’

As he said that, the jeep came to a halt almost touching the armoured car, its driver anxious to be well in the lee of the hulking vehicle. The officer turned to check the position of the truck, and irritatedly signalled it closer. Dodd almost shouted thanks as the driver showed his

displeasure by revving the engine and there was a loud crunch as he threw the vehicle into gear, and brought it forward. Again, Dodd unconsciously commentated: 'Come on. More. A bit more. Yes! Stop!'

He watched for an instant as the driver and the cab passenger began to duck down, waiting for the usual ill-disciplined fusillade from behind the barricade, and as the men in the back begin to do the same, Dodd half turned and asked Kelly 'Are you ready, Ted?' He'd been expecting something like the Australian's usual laconic 'Yair, mate, she's right' and was a little taken aback to hear a quiet but confident 'Ready, Sir.' Dodd wondered for a second if this whole Aussie disrespect for authority business was just an act, and there was a proper soldier underneath, but he just replied 'Right' and nodded to the boy, who'd been standing ready with his fingers in his mouth for the last several minutes, and who now blew a shrieking blast of a whistle.

As the bird populace screeched away again, Dodd saw his uniformed soldiers appear on the street, their automatic weapons at the ready, and took the one step he needed to be visible at the window.

'German soldiers!' he shouted, in their language. 'Stay perfectly still! You are surrounded by British troops! If you move, you will be shot!'

Dodd saw the officer look up, searching the windows, and saw that the German had seen him. Their eyes met for half a second, and suddenly - what happened next seemed to Dodd to take place in slow motion - the German, blank faced, began to rise, opened his mouth to shout a command, his pistol already clear of its holster. He was almost upright, his pistol waving high, when Kelly fired a single shot, shockingly loud in the quiet street and the German was flung backwards, right out of the Kubelwagen, and lay still, sprawled on the cobbles.

Dodd was transfixed, staring at the body of the officer as the echoes of the shot blatted along the ancient walls, until he was distracted by the sight of Watson, axe in hand, racing for the armoured car, and was brought back to the task in hand and nodded to Kelly.

He was surprised how calm he sounded as he said 'Excellent shot, Ted. Now, off you go.' He watched as Watson, looking like a madman, charged the armoured car with nothing but an axe, until, with a shout, a mighty swing and a *clannnggg* that must have deafened the occupants, he sheared the radio antenna clean off and sent it whipping into the barricade.

Dodd then reverted to German and bellowed, 'German soldiers! Remain still! Your officer tried to resist and has been shot! Your radio has been put out of action! Resistance is useless! Now, soldiers in the truck, put down your weapons and get out.'

There was no movement for several seconds, the crouched soldiers showing an understandable reluctance to move, then the driver's head slowly appeared above the bonnet of his vehicle. Dodd waited as the man stared dazedly around, seeing first the line of soldiers with automatic weapons pointing at him, then staring at the body of his officer sprawled on the ground.

Dodd watched and waited as the soldier turned in his cab and spoke to the troops in the back, then called, 'German soldiers, get out of the truck, and leave your weapons there. Remember, if you resist, you will be shot!' He then shouted in English, 'OK Sergeant, over to you' and Brownlow moved forward, his group following, to herd the Germans into a line against the far wall.

Meanwhile, Kelly had appeared at the head of the column, carrying a bulky backpack. He climbed onto the back of the armoured car, and clambered over the top until he could crouch on the turret, out of the way of the machine gun. He then edged round until he could be seen through the reinforced glass slot of the drivers porthole, and ostentatiously, like a conjurer, opened his pack and withdrew three sticks of dynamite. He then displayed the detonators to the driver and was about to start work when he heard the hatch on the roof of the machine being undone. Kelly yelled 'They're coming out, Gilbert! Are you right?'

Green, whose first job had been to be ready to send a squirt from the Bren into the vehicle's enormous tyres if it attempted to charge the barricade, brought his weapon to his shoulder and replied 'Yeah, Ted. I'm ready' and watched, fascinated, as the hatch slowly opened an inch or two. Nothing happened for a second, and he was getting tempted to loose a few rounds into the opening, just to encourage a proper attitude, as he explained it afterwards, when a whitish handkerchief was waved from within, but there was no other sign of movement.

Dodd called to Green 'All right, Gilbert, I'll be there in a second' and turned to the stairs, but Watson, seeing the impasse, swung his axe and struck the side of the hulking vehicle a ringing blow, and then another. The noise inside must have been ferocious, and was enough to persuade the man under the hatch to take a chance, because the lid opened and a cautious head slowly appeared.

By the time Dodd arrived, the crew of three was lined up outside their machine, keeping a wary eye on Watson, wondering what sort of lunatic could have attacked their armoured monster with an axe. Green, with a wave of his Bren and a flick of his face, moved them away towards their mates.

All this time, the officer's driver had sat immobile, as if he believed, having been traumatized by having his officer shot right beside him, that by sitting perfectly still he would not be noticed. When Brownlow came to get him to stand with the others, he ignored Brownlow completely, and sat, white hands gripping the steering wheel, eyes unseeing, until Dodd came and spoke gently to him, easing his hands off the wheel, coaxing him out to join his comrades against the wall.

By the time all the Germans and their vehicles had been searched, and all their weapons removed, the men and boys from the upper floors had come, shouting and laughing, to the road, where they fell silent as they examined the crumpled form of the German officer. One or two of the boys wanted to disfigure the body, but Toni stopped them, saying he was a brave man, who had recognised the desperate predicament he and his men were in, but he'd wanted to go down fighting, and he should be treated with honour.

Within a few minutes, the truck had been driven right up behind the Kubelwagen, and one group of boys had begun constructing another makeshift barricade on the other side of it, to conceal the vehicles from at least a casual glance from anyone passing the end of the street, while another group, proudly posturing, and supported by the English soldiers, was about to move the prisoners out. Toni took his place at the front of this little column, and with a self-conscious flap of his arm, signalled the caravan forward, and led them the kilometre or so to the young offenders' prison of St Efremo, his face a picture of studied nonchalance as they were given the occasional smatter of applause from knots of bystanders.

Once they were all in the inner yard of the building, Brownlow had a quick look round. On the ground floor there were several large rooms, obviously used as classrooms, a canteen and kitchen, and the upper floors were set up as a series of small four bed dormitories, cells almost, for the windows were high up in the walls, heavily barred, and faced the inner courtyard. The doors were thick and solid, with strong bolts on the outside.

The German prisoners were herded into these upper dormitories. If a German patrol should chance to enter the courtyard, they would find the institution officials, played, in this charade, by Angelo's mates Dino and Giovanni, supervising their charges, in the form of a herd of *scugnizzi*, all of whom were completely at home there. But Brownlow doubted the Germans would mount a serious search here – they were looking for heavy vehicles, not a bunch of kids, and pronounced himself satisfied, reasoning that they only needed to keep their prisoners for a few days, because by then, they'd either be discovered or the Allies would have arrived.

As soon as it was full dark, the final part of the operation commenced. The only tricky part in moving the vehicles was getting them across the last hundred metres or so. Until then, they would be very unlucky to be discovered, because the Germans rarely patrolled the narrow streets in daytime, and never at night. They manhandled the vehicles rather than starting the engines - even the armoured car rolled easily enough once they got it going. But getting across to the promenade was more of a challenge. The area between the hotels and the water had once been one of Naples' jewels, wide paths meandering through lawns set with neatly kept gardens. Now, though, the lack of care and maintenance showed clearly. There were many clumps of overgrown shrubs, a few meagre trees, and the now pathetic flower beds lay bedraggled and colonised by lank grass.

Even so, a large group of men and boys pulling and shoving an armoured car, a Kubelwagen and a truck would have been impossible to miss. Toni had sent out his rooftop lookouts far and wide, but really, if a patrol came near, all they could do was warn those at the vehicles to get away and abandon them where they were. But no patrol ventured down that way that night, and eventually, an exhausted but jubilant crowd of men and boys stood back to admire the result of their efforts – the three German vehicles, neatly lined up on the promenade, each facing the sea at the same angle, as though the drivers had all parked to sit and admire the view. They'd even managed to keep the heavy vehicles on the paved pathways, so there were not even any tracks on the grass to show how they got there.

The whole group stood back to silently study their achievement, until Toni quietly walked up and stood thoughtfully next to the armoured car, which made it appear gigantic next to the boy. He placed his hand on the flank of it for a second, and patted it once or twice, as though comforting a skittish horse, then quickly undid his buttons and urinated on it. He turned to the group, who all remained silent, fascinated by the glint of light on the now wet steel, while, out of the corner of their eyes, they watched Dodd's face for his reaction to this unmilitary action. Dodd looked at Toni impassively for a moment, then nodded once, and within seconds, all three vehicles were streaming and steaming as the onlookers added their contributions before they began to move back to their hideout, cackling and staggering with laughter.

Dodd was satisfied now. When the Germans found their vehicles, their conundrum would be no nearer being solved. The three machines stood enigmatically in a neat line, undamaged but

for the missing radio aerial, well away from any possible ambush site, the whereabouts of their crews a complete mystery.

Chapter 14

It was getting towards midnight, back in the gloomy hotel storeroom, and the *scugnizzi* lookouts had reported no German patrol activity at all, which Brownlow thought strange, but Dodd had anticipated, explaining, 'It's just as we'd hoped, you see: they don't know what to make of it! At first, the German HQ didn't even know there was anything wrong – they wouldn't expect their troops to call in if nothing was the matter, would they? And it's only now it's late, and the vehicles haven't come back, they'll be starting to seriously worry: why haven't they returned? What's happened to them? Surely, they couldn't have been attacked and beaten by the locals, at least without a radio message for help or reinforcements, and without the sound of gunfire? And even if that did happen, where are the vehicles? Not all three vehicles could have broken down, could they? And now it's too late to send patrols out until the morning, and even if they did, I doubt they'd send vehicles into those narrow lanes at night - it'd be asking for trouble. No, this is perfect, just the result I'd hoped for. Now the German commanders will have all night to stew about what's happened, and wonder what to do about it!'

He was exactly right. In the town hall, less than a kilometre away, the balding and dumpy commander of the German garrison in Naples, Colonel Hutt, sat and drummed his fingers on the extravagant mayoral desk, in the equally extravagant mayoral office, as he stared gloomily at a large map of Naples spread out before him. The splendour of the room was revealed in the electric light glowing off the highly polished furniture, twinkling from the chandeliers and highlighting the gold embossed fittings, but the magnificence was wasted on Colonel Hutt - the constant throbbing and fumes from the diesel generator gave him a headache. Hutt was wishing he was back in Germany, still managing his electric light bulb factory, and that he'd never heard of Naples.

Just a few days ago, he'd been sitting here in what his soldiers would call a cushy billet, just making a nuisance of themselves, really, without too much to worry about, when the Allies had landed at Salerno, less than fifty kilometres away. The news of the invasion brought orders to withdraw his forces northward, to man part of the major defensive line that was being constructed, and the German troops did actually leave the city. But within a day, the German high command under the brilliant Field Marshall Kesselring had acted to isolate the invaders, who'd found themselves up against a determined German defence. In fact, on 13 September and again the next day, the Germans almost succeeded in throwing them back into the sea.

Then, when it was realised that the Allies were having a hard time of it, Hutt had been ordered to return to Naples, disarm any remaining Italian troops who still had their weapons, then destroy as much of the city as might be of use to the Allies. The actual wording of the order was to turn Naples into 'mud and ashes.' Having done that, when the Allies broke out from their bridgehead, he was to delay their passage through Naples as long as possible, without losing his men and equipment, which was needed for the defensive line being assembled to the north.

All well and good, he grumped to himself, while the locals were no trouble, but these damned Neapolitans were beginning to be a real nuisance - putting up their stupid barricades, and sneaking about, shooting at his men and running away. Pah! What sort of fighting was that? Cowards! If he could get his tanks in among them, they'd soon have a surprise, and no mistake! He leaned over and peered at the map closely: his fingers traced for the thousandth time the lines

of the main streets. Pity about that bridge, Hutt clucked to himself. It had seemed the sensible thing at the time, with the Allies on the charge, to knock it down and restrict their movements, but now, well, maybe it had been, perhaps a little premature. And now there was this missing patrol to worry about. Damned fools! The only possibilities were that they'd been taken prisoner by the damned Neapolitans, or they'd deserted en masse. Hutt still couldn't decide which was the more ludicrous. But there it was – they were gone. Idiots! So now he'd have to divert troops from the important work of destroying Naples to look for the damned fools.

He snorted with frustration and glared at the map again, then made a decision. He shouted for his aide, Captain Schellenberg. The captain was yet another thorn in his side. Tall, handsome and elegant, everything that Hutt was not, even his name sounded better than Hutt's somehow, and his more or less permanent half smile always managed to make the colonel feel uncomfortable, as though everything he said and did was slightly ridiculous. Damned Berliners! Thought they were so superior! In fairness to Hutt, he was quite right about that – Schellenberg had made a name for himself as a humourist in the mess, entirely at Hutt's expense.

Hutt told Schellenberg he wanted that patrol found, and, moreover, he'd decided to stop pussy-footing about with these people, and to do that, he'd be putting his tanks into action, and to do *that*, if they needed to blast their way through the narrow streets to give them access, then so be it. As soon as it was light. And if they had to knock down a few buildings to do it, well, it was the Neapolitans own fault, was it not?

'Absolutely,' smarmed the captain, 'Their own fault entirely. Still, a pity about the bridge'

Hutt glared at his assistant with distaste. He was pretty sure he saw a flicker of a grin around the captain's eyes, but after a moment, contented himself with grumbling that he wasn't about to allow himself to be made a fool of by a handful of deserters, waiters and shopkeepers – he might have added junior officers.

Schellenberg's smile flittered across his face as he memorised that one, *waiters and shopkeepers*, for later retelling over a drink.

Hutt, warming to his task now, said he'd be needing more than the two tanks in his armoury too, and dictated a signal to the high command, explaining that the populace was getting unruly, and he needed as many tanks as could be spared to put them in their place. He told Schellenberg to get the signal sent straight away.

In the bowels of the hotel, Brownlow spoke on behalf of the others. 'So what d'you think'll happen tomorrow, Boss, Sir?'

Like a tennis audience, the men's faces swivelled back to Dodd, who volleyed. 'What would *you* do?'

Brownlow smiled and chewed his lip. 'I think I'd wait 'til it's light, then send strong patrols, maybe a couple of tanks, armoured cars, whatever I'd got, with plenty of infantry too. Show of strength, like.'

The audience, fascinated, turned back to Dodd, who nodded. 'That's what I'd do too. But here's the grand thing about our plan. What would you do when you *found* the vehicles? Remember, they're neatly parked in a big open space, so there's nothing to say they were ambushed, and anyway, there's no damage. Not a clue as to what happened to the men. So, what would *you* do then? And I'm not just asking the Sergeant, boys! Any ideas?'

There was a thoughtful silence while they all pondered that, until Dodd let them off the hook, and spread his palms wide. ‘That’s the point, you see? There’s nothing to go on at all. We can’t anticipate what they’ll do, because there’s nothing logical they *can* do. So, the only thing we can realistically think about is what *we’ll* do next. Any thoughts on that, anyone?’

Watson spoke up immediately. ‘I reckon we should wait until they find their vehicles, then, when there’s a crowd of them all around, blow ‘em up.’

Green guffawed. ‘I might have known you’d be suggesting a bit of explosive action, Bill.’

Kelly thought they might do a hit and run attack on the Germans as they examined the abandoned vehicles, suggesting that they’d got half a dozen automatic weapons, and could get close to a hundred yards from the enemy, then deliver a few squirts of automatic fire and be away before the Germans had a chance to react.

Brownlow had been doing his chewing the lip business, which Dodd had noticed, and asked ‘Sergeant, I think you might have something to add?’

‘Yeah, Boss. I don’t think we should be concentrating on the vehicles. We don’t know when the jerries’ll find them, or what they’ll do when they spot ‘em. If I was them, when I found ‘em I’d keep well clear – it’s just so obvious as an ambush or a booby trap. No, I reckon the one thing we can be sure of is they’ll be out and about again, in force, more than likely. And when they do, they’ll be vulnerable to hit and run attacks.’

‘I agree entirely. What we need is to be able to anticipate where they’ll be going, so we can be in position to hit them and get away before they can respond. And we know Toni and his clan have an excellent surveillance network that can help us out. Quite a few young girls involved in that, it seems: they’re more nimble than the boys, apparently, and more patient, according to Toni. At any rate, beyond that, I think it will be hard to plan another attack like yesterday’s – chances are there won’t be time for anything sophisticated. Looks like an exciting time coming up, chaps, so let’s get a few hours sleep.’

But Kelly wasn’t satisfied with that, and, unusually for the quiet-spoken Aussie, raised his voice a little.

‘Hold up a minute, boys. I still reckon it’s time we really start gettin’ under their skin. And we don’t want to wait ‘til they start moving about again, because when they do, they’ll be expecting trouble and they’ll be mob-handed, won’t they? Better if we get into ‘em tonight, I reckon. Don’t matter if we don’t do ‘em too much damage - just so’s they know they haven’t got it all their way, eh?’

He began a serious study of his boots, and, returning to his customary gentle tone, said ‘That’s what *I* reckon, anyway.’

The ball was back in Dodd’s court, and he stood blank faced while he thought about it. He caught Brownlow’s eye and noted the miniscule nod, then studied the other men’s faces in turn. Seeing only eagerness, he held up his hands in mock surrender and smiled.

‘Well all right, then, it seems I won’t be sleeping for a while.’

The immediate air of excitement was so obvious, both Angelo and Toni picked up on it, and began moving towards the knot of soldiers, though as yet they had no idea what was being discussed.

Dodd spoke again. ‘Did you have anything in particular in mind Ted?’

Kelly, still a little embarrassed, looked up from his boots and replied ‘Yairs, Boss, matter o’ fact I do. They’ve got troops in three places, right?’

He ticked them off on his fingers. ‘There’s the main base up by the hills, the mob down in the harbour master’s office – only a handful o’ them, I reckon, and then there’s the lot in the town hall, that’d be the HQ, so there’ll be the bosses there, plus odds and sods, you know, signals chaps, support blokes, guards an’ that. Right?’

Nods all round.

‘Well, I reckon there’s enough of us to shake some of ‘em up a bit. The town hall, well, they’ll have sentries out, o’ course, so we won’t get real close, but how about if we just gave the sentries a few rounds, and sprayed a few more through the windows? Like I said, just to let ‘em know they haven’t got it all their own way?’

The nods were more enthusiastic this time.

‘And the harbour office ‘ He paused and sought out Watson’s face. ‘You’ll like this, Bill. I reckon we could pro’bly get up close and drop a few sticks o’ dynamite against the back wall. Would you like that?’

There was an awe-struck silence until Watson groaned and spoke to Dodd pleadingly. ‘Yes. Oh yes please, Skipper. Let’s do that.’

Dodd glanced at the excited faces surrounding him, saw approval in Brownlow’s eyes, then grinned and said ‘Excellent! Quite excellent! It’s *exactly* the right thing to do! Even though we know we won’t be doing much in the way of actual damage, it will be an enormous shock for them. Until now, they’ve thought they were well on top of things, apart from the harassment from the *scugnizzi*, and now, out of the blue, they’ve lost a patrol without any clue as to what happened to it, and all of a sudden, they’re being attacked in all their bases! Brilliant!’

Being an officer sometimes came to Dodd easily now – it was as if he’d sometimes put on an invisible officers cloak. He clapped his hands together once, and said ‘Right! Sergeant, will you and the boys start organising the details? We want this happening tonight, so nothing too elaborate, eh? And let’s see if we can co-ordinate the attacks, so it’s clear to the Germans they’re not isolated incidents. All right?’

He got an enthusiastic response and finished ‘I’ll tell the Italians.’

As soon as he switched to Italian, the faces of Angelo and Toni switched from baffled interest to broad grins, which got broader as Dodd continued. As he spoke, the Italian leaders called their comrades over to listen, and he was soon surrounded by an excited mob.

As Dodd finished, Toni turned and spoke quietly in *dialetto* to one of his lads, who nodded and quickly disappeared into the shadows. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds until the lad came back, leading a group of eight or nine dishevelled and embarrassed-looking young men.

Dodd squinted at them through the dirty yellow light of the oil lamp, and asked Toni ‘Do we know who these chaps are? I’m pretty sure I haven’t seen them before.’

Toni explained the young men had been in hiding: four of them were Italian soldiers on the run, and the rest were dodging being transported to Germany as forced labour. They’d been attracted by the news of the ambush, and wanted to join up.

Dodd was delighted, and turned to his men.

‘Today gets better and better, chaps!’ He explained who the young men were, and continued excitedly. ‘This is excellent, chaps, absolutely excellent! It means the news of our little exploit has got about and the populace is beginning to think they *can* do something to resist the

Germans. What's more, some of these lads have been soldiers, and will be used to handling weapons.'

Toni grabbed Dodd's arm, and made a small speech, which Dodd, looking troubled, translated for his men.

'Now look here, chaps, perhaps we have a bit of a problem. It seems these new chaps are very keen to get stuck in. That's all very well and good, but it appears they're absolutely determined to attack the main German camp! Their plan, if you can call it that, is simply to go after the sentries so they can steal their weapons.' He raised his hands to forestall argument, and said 'Don't worry - I'm going to tell them they can't do that, at least not tonight.' And, switching immediately to Italian, that is what he did.

An emotional performance followed, with shouting, wild gesticulations, flouncing about, tearing off and trampling of hats, insults and threats, in fact the entire range of theatrics which passed for a reasoned Neapolitan exchange of views.

In the end, their chief spokesman, taking up the usual oratorical posture, reminded Dodd they were trained soldiers, and claimed they intended to attack the German sentries themselves that night to get weapons, which he managed to hint was Dodd's fault for not providing them, and Dodd was a man without honour if he didn't understand. The weapons they would be using were only borrowed, and they intended to get their own. The other young men nodded fiercely. The spokesman turned to Angelo for support. Angelo squirmed, and, opening his hands, shrugged an expressive shrug that said to Dodd, *he's right, of course. Are they not Neapolitans, and are they not soldiers? Who are you to say they are not to attack the invaders?*

Dodd turned to his men, explained the position, and asked 'Well, Sergeant, Ted, what do you think? I'm thinking they'd be less of a danger if they work with us. If they go off on their own, who knows what they'll be getting up to? And if we act together, at least they won't alert the Germans before we're ready.'

Kelly was happy enough. 'Boss, it's like back at the road bridge, remember? The Italians there were willing to take the big risks, and if these blokes want to have a crack at it, what's the problem? We can always keep an eye on 'em, and scarper if they screw it up, but if they do knock the sentries over to nick their weapons, well, that gives us longer to have a nose around, maybe get up to a bit o' mischief, eh?'

Instinctively, the men turned to Brownlow, who engaged in a bout of furious lip-biting for what seemed a long time before he spoke.

'I don't see how it can do us any harm, Boss, as long as they don't put the jerries on guard before we're ready to go in. No, matter of fact, I reckon we should support 'em, if we can. Ted, if these chaps can get rid of the sentries, could you blow a hole in the wall round their camp?'

Kelly was intrigued. 'What, instead of the harbour office bizzo, you mean?'

'I was thinking, as well as. We've got the German equipment off the truck as well as our own, haven't we? You could easy get the charges ready for the office, and show me what to do, eh?'

Dodd intervened. 'Hold on a minute, Sergeant. I was thinking you should lead the attack on the town hall.'

Watson saw his chance, anxious to redeem himself in Green's eyes after freezing back at the hillside. 'I'll do it, Boss! If Ted fixes the charges and the thingies, detonators, all I'll have to do is finish the connections and push the

‘It’s not as if we need anything clever – just knocking a hole in the side of the building.’ He paused for a second, grinning, picturing the scene. ‘As long as there’s a big enough bang, that’s all that matters, eh, Corporal?’

They all watched Kelly carefully while he thought about it, and when the corners of his eyes crinkled into a smile, the English speakers shouted their relief, and the Italians, realising it was good news, grinned with them. Dodd explained to the Italian newcomers that their attack on the sentries had to be co-ordinated with the others, and would be followed by an attack on the wall of the compound. He expected them to be thrilled to be part of a much bigger series of actions, but they didn’t seem at all happy, and began a discussion among themselves in *dialetto*.

Brownlow asked Dodd what was going on, and was answered with a shake of the head. The men waited while the discussion continued in *dialetto*, interminably, it seemed, with the customary vigorous arm-waving, grimacing and stamping about, until the spokesman for the newcomers, reverting to Italian, addressed Dodd, who listened in silence, nodding from time to time. When the man had done, Dodd nodded again, and explained to his men that the Italians would be proud to be part of the overall plan, but they could not agree to attack the sentries at a given time – they had to go when the moment was right, and the sentries were in the right place. The only option, the Italians had insisted, was that the attacks on the town hall and the harbour master’s office would have to follow the Italian attack on the main camp.

Dodd faced Brownlow. ‘Well, Sergeant? Do you think we could go along with that?’

Brownlow thought for a moment. ‘To be honest, Boss, my first thought was I didn’t like it, but I can’t see why not, ‘cept it puts the initiative with these coves.’ He flicked his head at the group of young men. ‘But when you think about it, it makes sense. So what happens is, first, they knock out the sentries, then Ted goes in and sets the explosives.’ He turned to the corporal. ‘How long, Ted?’

‘Just a couple o’ minutes, Sarge. It’s just a wall, so there’s nothing flash needed. I just nip in, do the bizzo, and leg it. Easy.’

‘Right, so all we need to do is be sure the other teams are ready, then as soon as they hear the explosion, they get on with their jobs. All right, Boss?’

‘Perfect. Now, let’s see. Sergeant, we want you on the town hall party, Ted goes with the main camp team, and Watson will do the bizzo, as Ted would say, for the harbour office.’ Dodd was quite pleased with that: he was getting comfortable addressing the corporal as Ted, though he was taking Brownlow’s lead and reserving first names for the others for special occasions. ‘Will you split the rest up as you think best? I’ll be happy to go where you think I might be useful. I’ll get Toni and Angelo to do the same with their chaps. And while that’s getting sorted out, and Ted’s getting Watson and the gear organised, the rest of us and I will get some food organised, eh?’

By two in the morning, the three attack groups were set. All the men and firearms had been allocated to one or another of the teams, Brownlow had checked and rechecked all the weapons, and Kelly had done the same with the explosives. He’d taped a small bundle of sticks of dynamite together, with the alleged assistance of Watson. He’d decided that to make a suitable hole in the back wall of the harbour office, just two sticks were all that was needed, but Watson had pointed out that they wanted to be *sure* about it, so he’d added another, and, seeing Watson’s disappointed expression, yet another. Watson, who, of course, had absolutely no idea what he

was dealing with, then gave a satisfied grin. Unable to keep still, he went to tell Green, who, according to Watson, was to be his assistant, while Green's version was that he'd be there to stop Watson making a complete balls-up of the whole operation. Kelly ignored them, concentrating on carefully setting the detonators and wires.

Four Italians, two of them ex-soldiers with Beretta sub-machine guns, had been detailed to join 'the harbour team' to provide covering fire if needed.

Kelly would nominally lead the 'camp team,' although the newcomer Italians in this group had made it clear they would be acting on their own timetable, concentrating on the sentries and their weapons. Burgess was to stay with him and act as assistant and sentry while he set the charges. Dodd would also be going with this group, so he could act as liaison between the Italians and Kelly if needed.

Brownlow would lead the 'town hall team,' taking Tullett with him, both armed with automatic weapons, along with Angelo and his three mates, plus eight of the largest boys, all of whom swaggeringly wielded rifles.

Each group had an unnecessarily large screen of *scugnizzi*, (because everybody wanted to be involved) who would ensure their paths were clear, and by the time they were ready, everybody had a team, and a task.

The early excited banter had dissolved now, and a silence, thick and palpable as the smoke from the lantern, had fallen. All of them, men and boys, twitched and squirmed uncomfortably as they watched Dodd, Brownlow and Kelly make the last arrangements. It was agreed that the town hall team would go first, so that Brownlow had plenty of time to study the area and carefully set his shooters. The harbour team would follow, again to ensure they'd have plenty of time to get in position, and the camp team, even though they had furthest to go, would leave last. It would involve a lot of waiting about for the town hall and harbour teams, but they *had* to be ready when they heard the camp attack go in.

At last, Dodd said in Italian, 'It's time,' and moved to the exit door.

Brownlow said 'Right, boys, to me.' It didn't matter that the Italians didn't know the words, they got the message, and as Brownlow moved to the door, his shooting group fell in behind him, while 'his' *scugnizzi* began to move out to form his forward scouts.

Dodd stood at the doorway, and shook everybody's hand, *scugnizzi* and all, as they left, and was last to leave.

The darkness was mottled, the moon throwing an occasional shadow between clumps of cloud driven by a stiff breeze, cold off the water, and of course, no lights showed from buildings, when Brownlow set off, accompanied by a considerable procession. The usual web of lookouts were in their places on roofs all over the city, and for added safety, or, to be honest, to give them something to do, a screen of lads was already well out in front. Then came Brownlow, led by his guide, then Tullett, followed by Angelo and his three men, intermixed with the armed *scugnizzi*, then a streamer of odds and ends, small boys who had refused to be left behind.

Brownlow was shocked when, after only ten minutes or so, the scouts began signalling that they were nearly there, and, as pre-arranged, the senior *scugnizzo* lad came back to personally guide Brownlow round the whole area surrounding the town hall, in preparation for placing the shooters. Laid out in front of him, across the square, maybe eighty metres away, the town hall stood behind a columned portico approached by a magnificent flight of steps, which

themselves protruded into the square, as though to get in the way of passers-by and make them notice (as indeed was the intention of the architect, a hundred years previously.)

Brownlow was also very impressed: from what he'd seen of Naples so far, apart from the wealthy enclave up in the hills, the place was a dump, what with being a city of slums and run down warehouses, and the fact that it was the most bombed Italian city of the war only served to accentuate the poverty, somehow.

As though to show the scene off to its best advantage, the moon appeared and cast a ghostly light which gave the ancient marble a spectral glow. Brownlow saw an armoured car and a truck parked at the foot of the steps, with a handful of German soldiers lounging about around the vehicles and on the steps. They were obviously on duty, but not expecting any trouble. Brownlow snorted derisively: hopelessly lax – there were even lights were still showing in a few of the upper windows.

Brownlow had just returned to the deep shadows where his group waited, having completed his second wide circuit of the building, checking positions for his shooters, when the quiet of the night was broken by a distant sudden clattering and banging which brought every dog in the world to life, it seemed. Brownlow swore and held his breath, wondering if something had gone wrong, but glad he was with his group to keep them calm. He didn't know the words, so simply held out his hands, palms down, and did a patting motion, nodding slightly. The message was clear – take it easy, no need to panic, let's see what happens. He risked a glance toward the town hall: the sentries were looking about them, suddenly alert, but not alarmed. As the dogs began to settle down, so did the sentries, and so, in turn, did Brownlow's group.

When he was satisfied that no harm had been done, Brownlow began placing his men. As he did so, he pointed out their 'targets,' acknowledging to himself that if anybody actually hit what they were aiming at, it would be pure luck. As he left each man, he put a hand on their shoulder and self-consciously whispered his newly learned words of Italian, '*Attende. Quieto. Bene fortuna.*'

Sometimes he got a grin in return, sometimes a curt nod.

For Watson and Green, the most direct route to the harbour master's office would have been through the public gardens by the sea wall, but it had been agreed that it was too exposed, so they had a longer walk. But they were confident in their forward screen of scouts, and it was easy to progress along the maze of narrow streets between the abandoned hotels and shops that lay back from the ocean.

Watson and Green moved quietly, reflexively half crouched for extra invisibility, even though they knew their screen of lads was out front making sure their path among the silent buildings was clear, and with two armed adult Italians in front, and another two behind. Watson understood from the easy way the Italian men moved, and their frequent grins, that they treated this whole thing as a great prank, and he knew how they felt. If he hadn't been so keyed up at the prospect of actually blowing up a building without Kelly there, he'd have felt the same way. Green had moved up beside him and given him a playful nudge and a grin a couple of times, but received only a determined nod in return, so gave up and plodded stoically on, bent under the burden of the reel of wire and the wooden detonator box. He muttered to himself that Watson would've got him carrying the explosives too, only he wouldn't let the precious bundle out of his care.

One of their shooters, walking twenty yards ahead, swung his rifle from one shoulder to the other, but lost his grip on the weapon, which, as bad luck would have it, went clattering and clanging into a stack of steel cans. The noise, shocking in the silence, was enough to make the whole group instinctively go into an immobile crouch: a nearby dog started barking, and that, in turn, started another, then another until it seemed to the squatting Watson that every dog in Naples was in on the game. He looked at Green, then his scouts up ahead, who all simply stared back, not knowing what to do, waiting to see what would happen next. But there were no signals from the overhead lookouts, no flashing lights or shouted challenges at ground level, and after a while, the tension began to fall away, and the group began to move forward again.

By the time their scouts indicated they were approaching the ancient harbour, they'd got their full night vision, and they slunk into the shelter of the last of the buildings, taking in the scene. They crouched at the end of an alley between high walls, seeing that in front of them, between their concealment and the sea wall, there lay the wide roadway that swept past the grand hotels and shops at the foot of the hills, and beyond that, an open cobbled area. After that, and to their left, only about sixty yards away, stood the black hulk of the harbour master's office, which stood out clearly against the sullen glow of the water behind it. To their right, they could make out the shapes of other harbourside buildings beyond.

They watched in silence for several minutes, without seeing any activity from the office. If there were sentries, they were either asleep or out the front, on the water side. Watson shivered. Staring at the black shape of the building, it had taken on a malevolent air, like a dragon sleeping. He shook himself, and realised everybody was looking at him, waiting for orders. There wasn't much to do – his screen of four shooters were to position themselves so that two of them each had a clear sight of each side of the building, but they understood they were not to fire unless Watson was about to be caught in the very act of placing the explosives.

Watson flapped his hands wide at the Italians and watched them move off, then checked that his *scugnizzo* lookouts were in position. He silently nodded to Green, and they both crouched even lower. Green held Watson's pack while Watson slowly removed the bundle of sticks of explosives, shielding the detonators with their attached wires as he did so.

They both breathed hard with relief when that was done, and sat on their heels for a moment before turning to Green's pack, which held the main spool of wire and the detonating plunger. Watson then connected the wires from the detonators to the main spool, and checked everything carefully, as Kelly had instructed. When he was satisfied, he tried to grin at Green, but the tension turned it into a travesty. He gave his scouts and shooters a thumbs-up.

Watson picked up the bundle of explosives and Green hefted the spool of wire. Mimicking Kelly's Aussie twang, Watson croaked 'Are you right, mate?' and Green responded 'Bloody oath, cobbler.' They both tittered nervously as they stood up, and with a final look round and a wave from their lookouts, the pair crept out of the shadows towards the building. In a matter of seconds, they were at the back wall and the bundle was placed lovingly at its base. Then, as planned, Watson held the end of the wire to make sure the connections were not disturbed while Green crept back to their alley, paying out the wire as he went. As soon as he disappeared and the pressure came off the wire, Watson followed him. When back under cover, Watson connected the wire to the detonating plunger and raised the 'T' shaped handle.

The two young men looked at each other, a little surprised that they'd got this far without incident. And now came the hardest part - it was time to wait.

Corporal Kelly waited until his scouts had had a chance to get into position, then moved off, sensing his team following. As expected, progress was easy through the narrow and twisted lanes of the lower part of town, but the higher they went, the broader the roads became, and the overhead web of lookouts did not reach this far. But the screen of boys ahead ensured that they slipped upwards through the town without incident, and led Kelly into the area where the homes of the seriously wealthy lay, mysterious behind their high walls and extensive grounds.

The *scugnizzi* had described to Kelly, via Dodd, what to expect. The grounds of the mansion the Germans had occupied were surrounded on all four sides by their eight foot high brick walls, each flank maybe two hundred yards long. At the road frontage the wall was broken by a pair of massive and ornate wrought iron gates (designed to emphasise the wealth of those who dwelt within) which was overseen by an equally ornate gatehouse. Until recently, an outsider would have been able to reach out and touch the side and rear walls from the shadow of the trees, and, as the boys knew, there had been good views of the grounds from the branch of many a tree, but now the Germans, careful as always, had cut the undergrowth back so there was an open pathway twenty feet wide between the trees and the wall, round which bored sentries trudged, night and day.

Kelly was about to follow the leaders into the trees when, from the city below, a dog barked, and set off every other dog in Naples. From up here, the noise seemed to Kelly to spread out like ripples in a pond and he wondered, for a second, if something had gone wrong with one of the other teams creeping about on their business in the darkness down there. He stopped and looked back, and barely choked a laugh. Before him lay the blackness of the town, dipping away to meet the indifferent ocean, but in the foreground, emerging from the dark, and moving with self-conscious stealth past him, came the stream of men, some uniformed, some in civvies, interspersed with the adolescents and boys who, to be honest, had no purpose in being here, but instinctively knew that they would be able to tell everybody they met, for the rest of their lives, "I was there."

Kelly turned again and followed the last of the stream into the greater darkness of the trees, and as he did so, he was oddly reminded of the time when he'd led the original small group of survivors of the plane crash from the sand into another forest. It seemed a very long time ago.

The men understood that realistically, they had little chance of inflicting serious damage at the main camp, and the plan of attack was simple. The objectives were to take the sentries' rifles and ammunition, and to make a lot of noise in the attack, so it at least appeared to the Germans in the confusion that they faced worthwhile opposition.

Dodd and Kelly pretty much knew what to expect but made a careful study of their target and the sentries from the depths of the trees. The Germans were obviously not expecting any trouble – the whole perimeter was patrolled by only four soldiers, two of whom were posted at the main gates, and the others strolled the outside of the wall, one in each direction, taking about ten minutes to complete a circuit.

So now, three pairs of Italian men slunk off into the darkness, one pair to the farthest rear corner of the wall, one pair to the nearest rear corner, and the third, most dangerously, to go back across the road and get as close as they could to the gates.

Kelly gave them ten minutes to get into position, then waited until a sentry had plodded well into the darkness, moving from his right to left, away from the road. He then moved

cautiously forward, knowing he had several minutes before the next sentry was due, packed his sticks of explosives hard against the bricks, carefully checked the connections and slipped back into the darkness of the trees, paying out his wire as he went. Immediately, a boy set off through the darkness to let the shooters know they could attack on the next pass of the sentries, while Kelly, on his knees, busied himself connecting the detonating plunger, then drew the 'T' shaped handle up and grinned at Dodd.

Expectation hung heavy for a few minutes, then a shot rang out, shockingly loud in the silent darkness. It was followed by more shots, more muffled, as the second Italian fired at 'his' sentry. At that instant, Kelly pushed his handle down, and with a roar and a brilliant flash, a ten yard section of the old wall collapsed, leaving a fog of ancient dust in its place. On cue, the remaining two Italians used their automatic weapons to spray the sentries at the entrance gates with fire. Burgess was supposed to fire a squirt of bullets from his Bren through the gap in the wall from the safety of the foliage, but excitement got the better of him, and he rushed forward to the breach in the wall firing almost blind through the dust cloud. Dodd's calls to come away went unheeded, and it was only when he ran out of ammunition that Burgess came to his senses and faded back into the trees.

It had seemed to Brownlow that his group had been waiting a long time, and in truth, it was. It had only taken them a few minutes to get to the town hall, and even the careful positioning of his men hadn't taken long. Brownlow was beginning to worry that something had gone wrong up at the camp, and was troubled about how his team was coping with the hanging about. It only needed one of them to make a noise when moving to relieve straining muscles, and have a sentry come to investigate ...

Brownlow was just thinking about whether it was worth the risk of creeping round to each man to settle them down when a distant shot echoed, followed immediately by the expected explosion. In the same millisecond, Brownlow spotted a movement at a high window, instinctively raised the barrel of his Bren, and grinned like a boy as the windows exploded under the flail of bullets, sending a cascade of glass crashing to the piazza. The Germans around the town hall, who had reflexively turned towards the source of the explosion in the hills, were now startled into scampering for cover among the vehicles. Brownlow sent a long spray of bullets among them. Two or three fell before they got to cover. Brownlow, calm now, removed the empty ammunition magazine and replaced it, hearing, as he did so, the ragged volleys from his hidden shooters, and the whanging and clatter of the bullets hitting the vehicles and the building behind them. Within ten furious seconds it was all over, Brownlow and his men sliding back into the alleys, leaving several Germans injured, and the rest shocked by the sudden and ferocious attack.

The harbour team had been in place for about fifteen minutes when they heard the distant uproar of the attack on the main camp. Immediately, Watson pushed down on the detonating handle, and was rewarded by a blast that, even sixty yards away and in the lee of a building, was satisfactorily gigantic.

The two young men risked a look round the end of the building, and both yelled with delight. Where the office had been, there was nothing but a pile of blazing bits and pieces. There they stood, frozen and grinning, among the fragments of the building which were still falling,

until realisation came to Watson, and his grin disappeared as he blurted ‘Good God! How many were in there? We must have blown them to pieces!’

Green understood and said ‘Look, Bill, they were the enemy. If they’d seen us out there, they’d have shot us without a second thought.’ He was about to say more when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement from off to their right, and dragged Watson back into the shadows. He inched his head out, and saw half a dozen figures come pouring from another harbourside building. In the light from the blazing remains, the shape of their German army helmets stood out clearly.

Watson grasped the situation immediately. ‘Bloody hell, Gilbert, they’ve taken over *two* buildings! We were jolly lucky not to be spotted by the other lot, eh?’

At that moment, their lookouts reacted, and a spray of bullets sent the Germans ducking for cover themselves. Green and Watson, who were unarmed, slid off to make their half ecstatic, half sobered way back to their base.

Chapter 15

Thinking about it all later, Colonel Hutt was amazed at two things. First, he still couldn't believe how calm he'd stayed as the window and the wall behind him erupted under the flail of bullets. And secondly, he realised that he'd saved Captain Schellenberg's life, albeit accidentally, and grinned ruefully. They'd been up late, planning the next day's demolitions, and Schellenberg had been standing at a window of the mayor's office, taking a breather, when Hutt had called him back to the map. A second later, the night calm was shattered by the small arms fire and explosions, from, it seemed, all round them, and the window had disappeared in a storm of shattered glass.

Schellenberg had lost control for a moment and, with a couple of wild prancing leaps, threw himself into the furthest corner of the room. Oddly, though, Hutt had sat, unmoved: perhaps the whole thing had happened too suddenly for it to register with him. Be that as it may, Hutt sat calmly at his desk and watched as Schellenberg recovered himself and stood, smoothing his clothing with as much composure as he could muster. Hutt was delighted, and barely managed to stop himself clapping with glee.

'When you're *quite* ready, Captain?'

Schellenberg took his customary place at the other side of the desk, dusting himself and adjusting his uniform. He was about to take his usual seat, when Hutt, recognising the changed dynamic, rapped out 'Did I invite you to sit?'

Schellenberg, already half sitting, froze while he studied Hutt, realised he was serious, and drew himself up to his full height.

'Now, Captain, I want reports on exactly what's been going on, I want them within the hour, and I want a show of strength in the town first thing tomorrow. The extra tanks may or may not be here by then. Whether they've arrived or not, I'm making you personally responsible for regaining control out there. And finding those idiots from the patrol. Understood? *And* you'd better start making arrangements for us all to move back up to the main camp.'

Schellenberg nodded glumly, realising that the relationship of piss-taking subordinate and incompetent superior would never be the same again. He saluted and was about to turn to leave, when Hutt looked him in the eye, and said 'I'd be interested to know how you'll describe *this* little incident in the mess.'

The new and chastened Schellenberg hustled a small group of soldiers into the mayor's office, where they stood at attention in front of Hutt, who raised an eyebrow at the captain.

Schellenberg explained. 'I thought that rather than pass on reports second hand, I'd let you hear them direct.' He stopped and Hutt glared at him. *Yes*, he thought, *and you'd rather someone else gave me the bad news*. Schellenberg misconstrued the delay, and added a reluctant 'Sir.'

'All right,' barked Hutt, secretly delighted with his change of circumstances, even if it had taken an attack on his troops to do it. 'I want to hear about the attack on this building first.'

A dejected lieutenant stepped forward and explained it all happened so suddenly that the guards outside on the town hall steps had little chance to react. They heard the noise from what they now knew was the attack on the main camp, and immediately, they were under a hail of fire

from all directions. Of course, the lieutenant pointed out, as soon as his men were under cover and returning fire, they were able to drive the attackers off, but they had not been able to go after them, for fear of ambush.

‘How many?’ asked Hutt

‘Killed, Sir? None, but we have several wounded.’

‘No: how many attackers were there?’

‘Oh, sorry. Sir. Hard to say, Sir. It was all over so quickly, but there was fire from all directions.’ He thought hard, and added ‘They even had men on the roofs.’ He liked that little invention – it gave the impression there were shooters everywhere. ‘I’d say not less than a dozen.’ He saw Hutt was unimpressed. ‘If not more.’ No response from Hutt. ‘Maybe twenty’ he offered finally, and subsided.

‘And the attackers? Who were they?’

The lieutenant looked blank.

‘Well, were they soldiers or terrorists?’

The lieutenant hadn’t thought about that. ‘We can’t be sure, Sir, they came and went so quickly. Nobody got a good look at them. But they had to be soldiers: they were far too organised to be terrorists.’

Hutt continued to stare at him. ‘What weapons did they have?’

‘Mostly light machine-guns, I think, judging from the weight of fire.’

Hutt looked at him expressionlessly for another second, and said ‘All right. The first attack was up at the main camp, then. Let’s hear about that.’

Another soldier, a captain this time, stepped forward as the first man edged gratefully to the rear.

Hutt scowled at him and said ‘Well, Kurzman, I hope you can tell us a less incompetent story?’

Captain Kurzman, who’d learnt from the last man’s grilling, began in clipped tones which he hoped sounded efficient. ‘They started with volleys from outside the walls at the north-east and south-east corners, Sir. Automatic fire, mostly. I’d say about five or six at each corner. Our sentries had no chance at all. Shot to pieces, both of them. Instantly, they blew a massive hole in the north wall, and at the same moment, another group laid down heavy fire at the main gates. Then there was more heavy fire from the breach in the wall. We returned fire immediately, of course,’ he thought of the pandemonium inside the compound, men running in all directions, shouting, firing at random, ‘and drove them off before they could get inside.’

Hutt raised an eyebrow in unspoken inquiry.

‘There would have been at least twenty of them, Sir, and they had automatic weapons. Allied soldiers, obviously. Commandos, I’d say. It was a very professional attack. My men did well to hold them off.’

Hutt snorted. ‘Commandos!’ Kurzman stood to attention, eyes front, avoiding Hutt’s sceptical gaze. After what seemed to him an age, Hutt returned his glare to Schellenberg.

‘Not *spectacularly* impressive, would you say, Captain? So far, you’ve let a bunch of farmers’ - he moved the spotlight of his glare to the officer who’d said the attackers were commandos - ‘get close enough to fire on our two most important installations. And more than that, you’ve allowed the locals to amass a large supply of automatic weapons and ammunition.’

He paused to let the 'you' sink in. 'If, and I say *if*, the enemy forces estimates in these reports are true, of course.'

Another pause – another glower at Schellenberg.

'All right, Captain. Let's hear about how your troops at the harbour got on.'

It was a corporal who moved reluctantly forward this time, but he had his story ready.

'They were crafty, Sir, I'll give 'em that. Or cowards. What they did, Sir, was they blew up the booking office for the ferry – blew it to fragments, they did. Not brave enough to try it on with us in the office, you see, and just waited 'til we turned out to see what was going on. Then, as soon as we got outside, they were ready for us and fired at us from all directions.' He remembered what the officers had said. 'They had men everywhere, all round and on the roofs as well. How they didn't kill any of my men, I do not know, Sir.'

Hutt snorted. 'And I suppose there were at least twenty of them?'

The corporal squirmed, but held his ground. 'That would be right Sir.'

'With automatic weapons?'

'Most of them, yes, Sir.'

'And I suppose they were commandos?'

The corporal was ready for this and surprised Hutt. 'No, sir, I don't reckon so. I mean, the tommies are all over the other side, aren't they? It's all yankees over here, ain't it? No, I bet they were them Texas Rangers.'

Hutt rocked back in his chair and snorted again. He couldn't remember when he's enjoyed himself as much. 'So, we've been ferociously attacked by what, upwards of fifty specialist storm troops, most of them with automatic weapons, and our casualties are two men dead and a few wounded.'

He let the unlikeliness of that hang for several seconds, while he enjoyed the mens discomfiture. He then spoke in a sympathetic tone. 'It's not going to make attractive reading in my report, is it, Schellenberg? Let's hope you do a little better tomorrow, eh?'

Schellenberg almost whispered 'What about the extra tanks, Sir?' and Hutt found a little extra pleasure in replying 'You know we haven't had confirmation yet. You'll have to do the best you can without them.'

Watson and Green never realised they'd blown up the wrong building.

The sky to the east was just showing streaks of salmon pink when Dodd and his party, last ones home, got back to the abandoned hotel, the Italians brandishing their newly stolen weapons, and newly concocted fabrications about their exploits. The entire gang was all still awash with excitement and the thrill of their successes, and everybody was laughing and talking over one another, arms running amok, as they described their adventures to anyone who'd stop telling their own falsehoods long enough to listen.

They had not been at all surprised to find a new group of a dozen or so young men had arrived. After the handshakes and introductions, Dodd explained to his men the new arrivals were the now usual mixture of deserters and civilians on the run. A thought suddenly struck him. 'And they might even have some news about what's going on outside. Hang on, I'll have a chat with them.'

He walked back to the newcomers and began to ask questions. After a while, he managed to break free and return to his own group.

‘Well, boys, the news couldn’t be better, really! The Allies landed at Salerno, as you know, and you also know they established a decent bridgehead before the Germans - you have to give them credit, you know – pinned the invasion down. But it seems the Allies, mainly Americans, apparently, are pouring reinforcements in, and they’re bound to break out pretty soon. Once they get going, I imagine they won’t take long to get to Naples, it’s only about, oh, fifty kilometres, I think, say thirty miles. And on the other side of the mountains, our lot are doing even better, pushing up steadily, and if the Germans here aren’t careful, they’ll get overtaken and cut off from that side. But they’re not stupid: they know what’s going on, and they’re building a really strong defensive line north of us, to defend Rome, I suppose.’

He offered the group a small smile. ‘So, with a bit of luck, they’ll make a few last forays into town to look for their missing patrol, blow any remaining facilities or create road blocks or booby traps, or whatever else they have in mind, before they move back to this new defensive line.’

Kelly saw the point in a flash. ‘And when they come, we’ll make it red hot for them, eh, Boss!’

‘That’s right, Ted. Suddenly, the pendulum’s swinging against the Germans! It seems to me it might not take much to hasten their departure’

He was interrupted as a boy burst in, ran to Toni, and hopped about with excitement as words began to tumble out of him. Dodd translated.

‘They’re coming, boys. This young chap says there are many vehicles, including two tanks, heading into town. But I’m not sure I believe him about the tanks – you’d have to be potty to put tanks in these little streets, so I’d guess they’ll be armoured cars.’

He stopped dead then, frozen for a second. They were all tired – none of them had had much sleep in the last twenty four hours, and on top of that, they had no time to arrange a set piece ambush, in which they held all the trump cards. If they were going to attack the column, it would be piecemeal - every man for himself, just about. For a long moment he remained immobile, realising that this was *the* moment: the hinge on which everything turned. If he failed now, well, he might just as well have stayed in Oxford. But suddenly, Dodd saw clearly what needed to be done.

‘All right, chaps,’ he snapped. ‘We need to move quickly. We’ll split up into two groups to give ourselves the best chance of getting into contact with the patrol. I’ll get the lads to lead us out to where they think the best chance of an encounter is. Sergeant, split the men up, and divide the weapons between them, would you? Grab some food, chaps, and make sure you’ve plenty of ammunition. And take your water bottles. Ready in five minutes OK, Sergeant? You’ll lead one group and Ted, I’d like you to take the other.’

Brownlow simply nodded, but Kelly drawled back ‘Ripper, Boss, happy to, but what’ll you be doing?’

Dodd was amazed at his own decisiveness and clear thinking, and even Brownlow was impressed. ‘We need to have somewhere each group can report to - let everybody know what they’re doing, and what have you. A headquarters, I suppose and it needs to be manned by someone who speaks English and Italian, which makes it me. I’ll keep a few of the lads with me to act as runners. Now, Stan, how’s the foot holding up? Do you fancy staying here with me?’

Tullett smiled. ‘The foot’s good, Boss. I’d like to stay with you, honest I would, but ‘kin’ Johnny’d only fret if I wasn’t with ‘im.’

Brownlow and Kelly started getting organised, while Dodd spoke rapidly to Angelo and Toni, who both gave enthusiastic nods and began dividing their respective groups. The air of excitement was palpable, except among the four young lads who were allocated to Dodd as runners. Three of these looked crestfallen, and the other, no more than nine or ten, actually began to cry, until Dodd saved their pride by reminding them that they'd be working directly with him, the *Colonello*, and he had allocated the job to them because of its importance and their ability to navigate the alleys.

Within a few minutes, there were two groups ready to go. The soldiers, Angelo's men and the newcomers were shared around, with just enough firearms for each adult. Each group was accompanied by several boys who would act as guides and reporters.

Dodd called for silence, then spoke, first in English.

'Men, the Germans will be out looking for their lost patrol, but we also believe it's their intention to continue to destroy or booby trap as much of the city's facilities as they can before they pull out. Things like the electricity power supply, which they've already damaged, the gas and water supply, main road and rail links, food stores, anything that will divert Allied resources from chasing them. But I expect their main effort will be to try to make the port unusable. Our task is to stop them, or at least, slow them down. We've already made it hard for them – having lost their force yesterday, they'll have to reinforce their patrols and be more cautious. And the attacks last night put even more pressure on them.

'Now we're going to tighten the screw a little more. To do that, we must strike at the troops, disable their vehicles if we can, and then get away before they have a chance to get a defence organised. Not very heroic, I know, but it's what we have to do. If we end up in a shooting match with a group of trained infantrymen, we're bound to come off worst. Don't worry about them getting on the radio any more – we won't be looking to capture them, so those who get away will soon be able to tell what happened. And listen, this is most important ...'

He paused, to emphasise the point, and astounded Brownlow when he carried on: 'I'm hoping that as the townspeople see the Germans can be effectively attacked, we'll find more and more will join us. So, we want to get hold of any weapons they leave lying about – rifles, automatic weapons, grenades - especially grenades. But I don't want anybody getting shot trying to pick weapons up, all right? The whole point of what we're going to do is to hit them, then get away before they can hit back.'

He repeated the message in Italian, then moved to the doorway and said, in English, 'Good luck, men.' His tone was enough for the Italians to understand, and the whole group, some solemn, some with tight lipped grins, collected their kit and began to bustle through the door. As he had a few hours ago, Dodd shook hands with every one, men and boys, as they moved past him.

The Germans were out in force, and almost immediately, Dodd realised his plan was in trouble. He suddenly realised why frustrated people threw their hats down and kicked them: he'd have done that now if he'd been wearing his. There were young people out there, girls, some of them, risking their lives scampering about on rooftops just to let him know what the enemy was up to, and succeeding, but he couldn't use the information to direct his teams. For a start, he had no map, so the information being sent back to him was meaningless to him. What was the point of being told the Germans had turned into a certain street and were searching a warehouse there, if

he didn't know where that street was and couldn't guess where they might go next, so couldn't warn one of his parties to get in position.

And in any case, he was too far from the action. Runners were taking too long to get to him, and by the time he'd passed on information via another runner, too much time had been lost.

The old Dodd (of just a few weeks ago) might have given up, but the new Dodd was made of stronger stuff. He called his *scugnizzo* boys to him and explained the need for a map. Any map would do, maybe just one of those outline maps given to tourists, showing the main roads and points of interest? Two of the boys murmured together in *dialetto* for a moment, and raced away.

To Dodd's amazement, they were back in minutes, staggering under the burden of a large map of Naples, mounted on a board. The boys gleefully explained the map had been on the wall in the foyer of the very hotel they were in. All they had to do was prise it off and bring it back. One of the lads rummaged in a pocket and solemnly produced a thick black grease pencil, followed by a red one. He didn't really understand maps, but he'd seen them being used, and knew people liked to draw lines on them. Dodd was delighted, and the lads blushed crimson under his congratulations – they were unaccustomed to being praised – and they listened carefully to their next instructions, which were to find Toni and send him back to Dodd to discuss a better forward headquarters.

Twenty minutes later, one of the boys was back, bringing a message from Toni that he was too involved to come back, but he advised Dodd to move to a burnt out boot factory almost at the centre of the city, which was a regular haunt of the *scugnizzi*.

Did the boys know the place? Of course, *Colonello!* Could they get Dodd there without bumping into a German patrol? Nothing could be easier! And so, with two bigger lads humping the map on its board, and two more out front to act as scouts, Dodd left the hotel to move to his forward communication post.

It was an odd journey. At first, Dodd thought he should have changed into his civilian suit – after all, the sight of a uniformed British officer just walking up a street in occupied Naples was, well, out of the ordinary. At first, self-conscious, Dodd saw only curious looks from passersby, but his mood brightened with a smile from a shopkeeper and salutes from a pair of grizzled old men, survivors of some ancient war of their own.

As the little procession moved on, something utterly unexpected happened. Two young men in Italian army uniform appeared from nowhere, it seemed to Dodd, and took the mapboard from the staggering lads. Dodd was still wondering at that when an elderly woman, swathed all in black and with the crumpled leather face of the peasant, scurried from her doorway and called Dodd back. She offered him a paper wrapped parcel. He took it from her and saw inside two lemons and a handful of olives. Dodd tried to thank her, but the words wouldn't come, and after an emotional moment, he nodded a smile at her, and moved on.

Within a few more minutes, Dodd and his entourage were exploring the badly damaged boot factory, and they soon found a room that had mostly escaped the fire, except that the roof had collapsed and it was open to the sky. The floor crunched underfoot with the thick layer of charcoal and rubbish - the remains of the roof - and there were long streamers of soot stains all around the walls, but it would do.

Dodd immediately sent out runners to tell his patrols where he was and to find out what was happening.

Abruptly, from quite nearby, there came the bark of gunfire, the two or three different notes of an attack and a reply, but Dodd had no idea which sound represented which side.

There was nothing to do until a runner came with information, so Dodd busied himself and the two new soldiers with dragging the frame of a bench against a wall to prop his map on. He then asked the soldiers to point out exactly where they were, and where the Germans were quartered. To his surprise, he saw that the building he was in was only a couple of hundred metres from the centre of the town, and he could have walked to the town hall in a matter of minutes, or the main German camp wouldn't have taken much longer.

He was just thinking that Toni had chosen this place well, when a breathless lad burst in, his face aglow with excitement.

'*Colonello, Colonello!* They did it! They actually did it!'

Dodd patted the air to calm the boy down. 'All right, lad. Tell us what happened.'

The boy struggled to catch his breath, then described what had taken place: Brownlow, whom the boy called the *sergente*, had his forward screen of boys out to try to locate the Germans, and they had bumped into one of the *scugnizzi* who Toni had sent to keep tabs on the enemy. He was only just staying ahead of the Germans, on the only street in the area suitable for their vehicles. So, by luck, the *sergente* had had a few seconds to position his men in ambush at second storey windows. He put himself closest to the German patrol, and would give the signal for the others to open the attack.

The patrol was headed by an armoured car, followed by an open truck full of infantry, this time alert and ready for action. But this time, there was another armoured car and another truck full of soldiers, with yet another armoured car bringing up the rear.

The *sergente* had waited until the German vehicles had ground past, then fired a three second burst from his sub-machine gun into the back of the last truck carrying infantry. As he did so, the rest of his force followed suit, some of them firing pretty much at random, just glad to be feeling they were doing *something*, before the Germans were able to react and return fire. It was all over within seconds, and left the Germans firing at now empty windows as their attackers escaped out the back or onto the roofs.

Within a short time, Brownlow's group began to swagger into the blackened factory, all thrilled to have taken part and anxious to re-live the experience. After making sure there was a good perimeter of lookouts, Dodd let them relax and tell each other what they'd done, while he dragged Brownlow away from a group of admirers, all trying to brag to him about their experiences, whether they could speak English or not.

'So, Sergeant, a successful patrol?'

Brownlow sucked his bottom lip for a second, then, to Dodd's surprise, shook his head.

'Well, Boss, maybe yes, maybe no. We shot up a couple o' trucks full of infantry and I'm sure we'll have done them damage, but I reckon that column will have carried on with their mission after they'd sorted out their wounded. And we didn't get hold of any weapons either. Didn't even come close they started shooting back at us pretty heavy. One thing though. You know yesterday, the people weren't keen on us being there to shoot from their windows? Well, today, some people actually waved us in. And there was no open Kubelwagen with the officer

lolling about in it this time, either. So, maybe things are just starting to go our way. We'll just get a bit of something to eat and stock up on ammunition, and get out for another crack at 'em, eh?'

But as though to prove that pride comes before a fall, the building was shaken by an explosion that sent a flurry of soot and ash cascading around them. Something nearby was getting blown up. The soldiers automatically crouched, but the locals were used to it, and merely muttered and pulled faces as they brushed the debris away.

Dodd nodded at Brownlow. 'Yes, I see what you mean about not stopping the patrols. But what can we do about it? We're just not strong enough to go toe to toe with them, are we? In any case, we never thought we could beat them – only harass them, slow them down, eh?'

'Yeah, you're right, Boss, Sir, but we were just lucky, being able to get into position before they were on top of us. The kids on the roofs, y'see, well, I reckon it's more than a bit dicky up there, and sometimes they just can't move quick enough to let us know what's going on, give us time to get organised. So I reckon we have to be able to do something better than just wandering about, looking for trouble, eh?'

Pleased with himself, Dodd indicated the big map, now covered with a fine film of dust and soot shaken loose by the explosion. They looked like a caricature of two men thinking hard – Dodd rubbing his hand through his sparse hair, and Brownlow nibbling at his bottom lip – and they were still in this pose when Kelly and his group plodded disconsolately back.

The lieutenant and the sergeant turned to the newcomers with raised eyebrows, and Kelly responded 'Well, *that* was a fair dinkum waste of time. We made contact with a German column and followed 'em for a while - I reckon they were still looking for their missing patrol, 'cause they kept stopping and searching all the bigger buildings - but they're being *real* careful. Every time they stopped, the first armoured car went forward, and the last truck and armoured car stopped well back, and we couldn't get close enough to have a go at 'em.'

Brownlow nodded. 'Yeah, we were just wondering if we could do a bit better, weren't we, Boss?'

'That's right. But let's not be too pessimistic. You know, between the lads and ourselves, we've given the Germans a real fright and a serious problem. They're having to use a lot of resources to do a simple job of patrolling, never mind offensive action, and their demolition works must be taking far longer than they'd have expected. It must be getting very marginal for them as to whether what they're doing is worth the effort. What we're doing may even be enough to persuade them to fall back before they intended to. But it's true we might do *even* better. I was thinking, you know, that looking at the map, perhaps we could predict where they might be aiming for. That'd be helpful, don't you think? And there's only so many roads they can take, if they're going to keep using their armoured cars or even their trucks. Let's see if we can work anything out.'

Dodd called for Toni and began to ask him questions about the layout of the city. But although Toni had a comprehensive grasp of the whole area, and could easily describe the route from anywhere to anywhere else, he struggled to translate that knowledge onto the map – he'd never had the need to use one. But the two recently joined Italian soldiers were locals, and marked out on the map the main routes through the town, pointing out to Dodd how the Germans had restricted their own access options. Many of the narrow, steep and twisting ancient city streets and lanes were completely unusable for their ordinary vehicles, never mind armour. And the Italians pointed out how the Germans had made things much worse for themselves by

demolishing two vital bridges, which made it almost impossible for them to deploy tanks - except in one or two residential areas on the upper fringes, where there was nothing worth blowing up.

Soon the map was strewn with marks and lines which meant little to Toni and the audience of boys who stood in a half circle and watched, impressed but baffled. The other soldiers and adult Italians, who formed another semicircle behind them and understood the value of the exercise, whispered explanations to the lads as to what was going on.

There was a sudden silence when Dodd stood back from the map and studied it, watched in silence now by his spectators.

Dodd spoke in English. 'Well, I must say, that was ten minutes well spent. Look, chaps,' pointing to a red circled area almost at the right edge of the map, 'here's the main German base, and we are here,' indicating a black crayonned circle almost at the centre, 'and we've also marked the principal facilities, electricity station, telephone exchange, and so on - that's these splodges here, here, here. Now, most of these have already been disabled, and they've started on the industrial sites now, mostly around here.' He indicated an area close to where they were. 'And of course, there's still the port: I'd imagine that since our lot spent so much effort trying to put it out of action so the Germans can't use it, they will now return the favour. So I imagine the port will be a major target for demolition.'

Dodd was in his element now, enjoying himself in front of an audience far more attentive than any he recalled from his days as a university lecturer.

'As you can see, there are only two roads open to them to get their vehicles down into the town from where they are. So, all we have to do is work out the best positions for us: Toni's lookouts will keep the Germans under surveillance, so with a little luck, we can anticipate where they're going, then we can sit and wait for them. All right? But first,' Dodd nodded around him, to where lack of sleep was overtaking the excitement of most of the younger boys, 'we all need a couple of hours sleep, I think.'

Chapter 16

Just a few hundred metres away, at the town hall, a messenger arrived with the news for Colonel Hutt that the missing patrol had been found, or at least, their vehicles had. As the captain would recount later in the mess, as he pantomimed Hutt's reaction, to the immense amusement of the other officers, Hutt was transfixed by the news. After Schellenberg's panic attack, Hutt had felt himself to be firmly in charge of the situation, but this information threw him off balance. After several motionless seconds, he managed to splutter 'What? All three? Lined up on the promenade? Facing the sea, you say? And the men? No sign? The sea? Are you sure?'

Hutt returned to his desk and slumped in his chair. After a minute he asked the messenger if the vehicles were damaged, and was told they hadn't been approached for fear they had been booby trapped. He nodded morosely, and waved the messenger away, but the bad news kept coming.

Hutt was still sitting motionless, picturing the deserted vehicles, wondering what it all *meant*, when a few minutes later, a soldier entered the office holding a message form as though it was about to explode. He handed it to Hutt and hastily retreated.

Hutt glanced at it, sighed, and smiled grimly.

'Well, Schellenberg, I hope your plan wasn't relying too heavily on more tanks. I've just got a reply from Division about my request, and not only are we not to get any more, but they've demanded the two we do have be sent up to them immediately.'

Schellenberg, finding something of his old form, smiled back and replied 'It doesn't matter, really, does it? Since you ...' he managed to place just the slightest emphasis on *you*, '... ordered the main bridges be demolished, we can't get tanks down where the action is anyway, so I hadn't planned to use them. Unless you want to continue with your plan to bulldoze them through?'

Hutt, who had realised the value of shoving the responsibility for this fiasco onto Schellenberg, returned the captain's volley. 'No. In any case, they're to be sent up to Division, remember? Do try to keep up, Schellenberg.'

Schellenberg replied 'At least we don't need to waste resources searching for the lost patrol anymore – looking for the troops would be a complete waste of time: they could be anywhere in that rabbit warren down there. We'd lose more men searching for them than we've already lost. I'll just keep sending out strong patrols to finish the demolition work.'

He'd recognised that Hutt was trying to load all the responsibility on to him, and ventured 'With your permission, of course, Colonel?'

And Hutt, who had no intention of getting caught so easily, replied 'What? Just abandon our troops at the first sign of resistance? No, Schellenberg, that's not the way we do things in the German army. You can't do that, and you can't lose control of the streets either. So get some action going out there to re-establish the initiative. Show these peasants who's in charge. As I said before, knock some heads together. And where are the vehicles to move us all back to the main camp? I want to be out of here before they have another go – you might not be so lucky next time.'

Hutt almost laughed at that last bit, and waved Schellenberg away, but his mood was broken as he returned to wondering about the mystery of the vehicles on the promenade, and the disappearing troops.

Late morning, the occupants of the hotel were woken to the news that a German convoy had not followed any of the usual routes, but made its way to the museum. Dodd's men and the Italians spent a deeply frustrating time failing to get into position in time to attack, and then couldn't get close enough while the German troops spent time carrying off truckloads of antiquities. They then set fire to the building before returning to the main camp, completely unaware of the disappointment they'd caused among the people trying to harass them.

In the late afternoon, it seemed at first that fortunes had been reversed - Dodd's people were able to anticipate the route of a fresh German convoy. Schellenberg himself was in command, and his patrol was met with a hail of fire, more enthusiastic than accurate. Nevertheless, it was enough to bring the unarmoured trucks to a halt.

Schellenberg might have been a smarmy adjutant, but he was a good infantryman: he rapped out orders and his soldiers quickly fanned out into the roadside buildings to clear them while the armoured cars sprayed the windows with bullets. But most importantly, Schellenberg sent men onto neighbouring roofs, forcing away the snipers at the windows, and the spotters on the rooftops.

When the messengers came in to report, Dodd sent out runners with instructions to his forces to avoid getting into a shooting match, and to take up new positions further back, from where they could get the whole process started again.

Nevertheless, the experienced German troops put on a dogged performance and continued to force their passage towards their objectives, though they were slowed to a crawl. Dodd knew this was the best he could hope for and sent *scugnizzi* lads out to the fighters with messages of encouragement.

At last, by about seven that evening, as the long summer dusk leached the colours out of the day, spotters had come in to report that the last German patrol had returned to their camp, and Dodd had called his men back to the hotel kitchen, where the air was electric as everybody talked, or rather, shouted among themselves, reliving their part in the attack.

Even the experienced soldiers had trouble putting together the sequence of their actions that afternoon: for all of them, it was a bit of a blur, what with the arrival of messengers reporting the whereabouts of the Germans, the confused exhilaration of racing this way and that, scrambling breathlessly up dark and narrow stairs to get into position at high windows then the pause, heart pounding, while they waited, the elation as the vehicles edged into view, the flurry of gunfire, the sudden realisation of the difficulty of the steeply downward shot as their targets scurried away from their trucks into cover, the sudden shock of being shot at in turn, the shouted command from the *sergente*, "Out! Out!" the more than half-panicked flight. But trying to put it all in the correct order, it just wouldn't all fit together, somehow.

One thing was certainly clear though: the German commander putting troops on the rooftops was a terrible blow: not only were the shooters at windows sitting ducks from above, but Dodd's one advantage - the network of spotters up high - had been forced away from the action.

Dodd pointed out that the strategic pendulum had swung badly against them, which caused one of those long moments where everybody stood about trying to take in the significance of the announcement. Dodd rubbed his forehead and looked forlorn, wondering if it was even possible to continue, if their overhead spotters were out of action.

It was Green who astonished everybody, including himself, by beating even Brownlow to the answer. 'Well, boys, we can't have that, can we? We'll just have to get up there and stop 'em, eh?'

Brightening a little, Dodd asked 'Is that possible, do you think, Gilbert?'

Green blushed at the use of his first name. 'Don't see why not, Boss. The jerries pushed our people away, but our kids couldn't fight back, could they? But they know their way around the rooftops, and the jerries don't. So, what if some of us got up there with the kids to guide us, that'd give us back the advantage, wouldn't it? What do you think, Sarge?'

Brownlow had seen the idea immediately, though, by way of variation from the usual lip chewing, he sucked in his cheeks while he thought about it. 'Well, I reckon it's much the same as on the ground: that is, we'd be wanting to slow 'em down, stop 'em keeping station with the vehicles and I reckon we could do that all right. Maybe even stop 'em. Like I said before, it'll be pretty dicky up there unless you know exactly what you're doing and where you're going. You know what I'm going to say next, don't you Green?'

Burgess interrupted with 'Fuckin' shambles, Sarge?' but Green had the correct answer. 'I reckon we need to get up there and have a look around, eh, Sarge?'

'Good boy, Gilbert. Very good. We'll make a soldier of you yet. So, you and me then, all right? Just like back at the hut, eh?'

At this almost unheard-of recognition by the sergeant, Green simpered until Watson gave him a gentle-ish whack. Dodd and Tullett were relieved not to be invited: they both realised they'd only be a liability, trying to scramble about up there, but Kelly, Watson and Burgess each started to argue. Brownlow was pleased but said he was thinking of himself and only one other. 'Can't have everybody strolling about up there: it'd be a right ...' and the men chorused 'Fuckin' shambles, Sarge!'

But Kelly put his case. 'See, Sarge, I was wanting to have a bit of a squiz up top. See, you know the boys nicked the fuel out o' the jerry vehicles? Some was petrol and some was diesel, right? Ideal recipe for petrol bombs, that. So I was thinking if we could get up there, we could drop the odd petrol bomb on 'em. That's shake 'em up good and proper, eh?'

Brownlow was enthusiastic. 'Oh yes, Ted, that *would* be nice.' He rubbed his hands. 'Lovely! Bloody good idea, draining them jerry vehicles, eh?'

Now Dodd was getting more confused than ever. 'Look, er, Ted, two questions. If we had petrol bombs available, why haven't we used them already? And what's so special about diesel rather than petrol.'

'Well, Boss, we haven't thought of using petrol bombs 'cause we were always going to be working from windows, and you don't want to be lighting petrol bombs indoors, do you? Too bloody dangerous: one mistake and you'll burn the whole building down – prob'ly most of Naples too. Agreed, Sarge?'

'Quite right, Ted. And diesel, well Boss, you ever tried putting diesel in that little stove of yours?'

Dodd pondered for a moment: ‘Now you mention it, I did try it once, when petrol was scarce. My goodness, what a disaster! There was so much smoke, I barely found my way out of my tent, and then I had to wait for it to burn all the fuel off before I could go back in! It’s terrible stuff! Hopeless!’

‘Yeah, well, hopeless for brewing a cuppa, but a bloody ripper for making petrol bombs with loads o’ smoke, eh!’ Kelly rubbed his hands enthusiastically. ‘My bloody oath!’

Brownlow agreed. ‘All right, Ted, you’d better come, but nobody else. All right?’

Watson and Burgess were disappointed – scrambling around rooftops at dusk was just the sort of thing that attracted kids of any age – but realised that Brownlow was right.

Dodd and Toni conferred for a minute or two, after which Toni sent one of his lads to fetch the leader of the current shift of roof lookouts. He was back in ten minutes, accompanied, to the soldiers surprise, by a girl who looked about twelve, judging by her boyish figure. But it was hard to tell – she wore mens trousers and jacket. Somehow, though, around the face, and by the self-confident way she carried herself, she might have been much older. A typical Neapolitan, olive skinned and dark eyed, her natural beauty was camouflaged by her unkempt black hair and scruffy clothes.

Toni introduced her to the soldiers as Sofia: she misinterpreted their surprised stares, combed through her short hair with her fingers and said defiantly ‘You’ll be dirty too, when you’ve been up there for a few hours.’

Dodd apologised on behalf of his men, and explained they hadn’t been expecting - he was about to say, a girl, but corrected himself in time - a young woman to be their guide. Mollified, she solemnly studied the soldiers one by one then pointed to Kelly and announced ‘I will take this one. And you want guides for two others? Very well, but on the roofs, it is delicate work - that is why many of us are girls – so ...’ She looked pointedly at Dodd and Brownlow, and wagged her head from side to side. The message was clear: up there was no place for old men.

Green had already been guaranteed a place by virtue of having thought of the idea first, and stepped forward. The girl glanced at him and nodded. Watson realised that with Brownlow having been given the stare of disapproval, there was suddenly a vacancy and was about to put his hand up but Burgess beat him to it. ‘I’ll go!’ he said firmly as he stepped forward. This time Sofia studied Burgess more carefully but after a moment, to Burgess’ embarrassed relief, she shrugged and nodded again.

Sofia, firmly in charge now, addressed her charges, while Dodd translated. ‘We should go now, while there is still some light. In darkness, it will be more difficult – not for me, you understand – but for you. You must stay close to your guide,’ for the first time, she allowed a small smile for Kelly, ‘and follow exactly. Am I clear?’

As Dodd interpreted, the men nodded.

‘Very well. We go now.’ She spoke a few words of *dialetto* to Toni, and her charges began to collect their weapons. ‘No,’ Sofia said, ‘no guns. We are going for a look round, not to start a war.’ With that, she moved off without waiting for Dodd to translate. The three soldiers put down their weapons and followed a little sheepishly.

Once outside in the diminishing light, they were joined by another girl of about fourteen and a lad, maybe a bit younger. Sofia established proprietorship by standing in front of Kelly, leaving the others to sort themselves out. She said something to Kelly which he didn’t understand

so she pointed at herself and said ‘Sofia’ then gently prodded Kelly’s chest. He understood and said ‘Kelly.’ Sofia smiled a grown up smile and replied ‘Kel-lee, si, Kel-lee.’

The guides immediately demonstrated their value: on their own, the soldiers would have been wandering about, wondering how they might even get up to roof level, never mind actually moving about up there *and* doing something useful. But Sofia led them up a steep lane then turned into an even steeper alley – more a flight of steps, really – at a pace that even Kelly had trouble keeping up with. Of a sudden, Sofia stopped and pointed upwards: the path was so steep that the roofless shell of a bombed building they were standing alongside, which twenty yards ago had been of three storeys, was now only one. Kelly grinned and clapped silently at Sofia, who smiled shyly back and slipped inside through a door which clung on by one hinge. Inside the gutted walls, where the smell of ancient brick dust and recent soot hung heavy, shattered rafters, debris and rubbish lay in tumbled heaps. The pile in the far corner looked no different to any others, but Sofia went straight to it, clambered nimbly to the summit, reached up and grasped the top of the wall and from there, in one smooth movement, swung herself up so she was sitting astride the brickwork, then stood. She grinned down at her spectators, aware that she’d made it look effortless (having done it a hundred times before) and beckoned to Kelly.

The tall Australian scrambled to the top easily enough, though if he’s been a gymnast, he’d have scored no points for artistic merit, and, following Sofia’s lead, stood atop the wall and walked carefully along until he could step onto the roof of the building next door. With a minute or two, they were all up there, the soldiers gazing about them, wondering what they’d let themselves in for.

Kelly was utterly surprised: somehow, he’d pictured the roofs being mainly flat topped – how else could the watchers get about so easily? - and those roofs that were pitched, well, they’d be mostly of the corrugated iron sheets he was used to seeing in Sydney. And again, in his mind’s eye, he’d imagined the overall roofscape to be flattish. He was completely wrong on all counts. As far as he could see, every roof was pitched, though not steeply, and every roof was tiled with orange-red terra cotta tiles, punctured by brick chimney stacks. And of course, though there were minor peaks and troughs, as two and three storey buildings sat side by side, the roofs generally followed the stiff slope from the ocean up towards the mountains.

Sofia didn’t give them time to settle - she was concerned about losing what was left of the twilight. She reckoned to Kelly urgently, saying ‘*Venire, Kel-lee, seguire, seguire*’ which Kelly didn’t understand, but the girls tone said enough – follow me, and be quick about it.

The men soon began to realise how difficult it would be to traverse the roofs if you didn’t know them intimately. Most of the time, it was quite easy to move from the roof of one building to another: even where the buildings were separated by an alley, perhaps two metres wide, the gap between the roofs was often only one metre - no more than a bold step, really -no trouble, as long as you didn’t look down at the shadowy cobbled corridor maybe three storeys below. But where the path was wider, even a moderate three metre thoroughfare produced a gap of at least two metres at roof level, far too much for an inexperienced soldier with no space for a run-up. But of course, Sofia and her mates knew the roofscape as well as they knew the map at ground level. Once or twice, Kelly felt, rather than saw, that one or both his companions had disappeared, then they popped up again, and he realised the other guides had taken different routes, but to where, he had no idea. Kelly was amazed at how far and how fast they could travel, allowing for the circuitous route required to avoid the wider gaps. But even then, once or twice

they had to scramble down through the remains of one bombed building, and scuttle along a laneway before disappearing into yet another tumble of broken walls and rafters, to emerge at roof level once again, on the other side of a road.

After what seemed to the soldiers a lengthy and lunatic chase along roof ridges, scrambling up and down the standing fragments of collapsed buildings, half slipping as they raced along tiled slopes and dodging chimney stacks, Sofia stopped on a peak. She turned and gave Kelly that small smile as she waved her arms all round her, almost pirouetting on the ridge of the roof. The soldier clambered towards her, feeling like a carthorse clomping after a gazelle. Kelly clutched gratefully onto a chimney stack, then, for almost the first time since they'd started moving, was able to look around instead of simply concentrating on keeping up with the graceful girl ahead of him. Naturally, he hadn't been concerned about injuring himself, or aborting the mission: he'd been more worried about crashing down the roof and making an idiot of himself in front of the girl.

Ahead of him, Kelly could see in the remnant light of the sunset, that marching up towards the mountains, the buildings were bigger, more ornate, and above all, more widely spaced. Travel on those roofs would be impossible. This, then, was the furthest outpost of the domain of the roof people –Sofia had brought them to the last roof before the main road cutting across Naples divided wealthy east from impoverished west. To his left, Kelly saw a similar roofscape, separated from him by one of the only roadways, cutting across the main road, wide enough for the Germans to get their vehicles through, on their way down through the town.

Realising the precarious position he was in, Kelly wisely did not attempt the graceful spin demonstrated by Sofia, but gingerly, one hand on the chimney stack for balance, turned to face the ocean and was amazed to see the world had suddenly got darker – much darker. Looking away from the sunset, the roofs had caught the last of the daylight, but facing this way, the roofs that faced him now were in deep shadow. He was so surprised, he almost lost his balance: Sofia reached out and took his free hand to steady him, and seemed in no great hurry to let it go. Kelly mentioned to Green and Burgess that they'd be having a dick of a time getting back, it'd been tricky enough on the way up, but fair dunkum, getting back in the dark was going to be a fair cow. But he was wrong: Sofia, still clutching Kelly's hand, led them back along one rooftop, followed by a slither down to gutter level and a not particularly wide step onto the next roof, but gut churning nevertheless across a chasm of darkness, then over another ridge, and from there, down to ground level via the customary bombed out building. From there, it was an easy stroll back to the hotel.

Meanwhile, Dodd and Brownlow went over their options again, watched closely by Tullett and Watson. Dodd opened by admitting he felt hampered by lack of information.

'We don't know what the German commander plans to do next. What resources does he have – number of troops, heavy weapons, and so on? Is the intention to destroy as much as he could then pull out, or does he intend to stay and fight street by street?'

Brownlow added. 'Yeah, and time. How long do we have to hold them back?'

Dodd frowned. 'Is that important?'

'Yeah, Boss, it is. We don't have that much ammunition, and we're using it pretty quick, what with the lads squirting bullets about at random, almost. And food, too. We're right for a day or two, but after that, we might have to pull out.'

Dodd accepted that and sat in silence for a minute while he did his full thinking repertoire, first running his fingers through his hair, and followed it with the two handed face scrubbing gesture. The audience sat and watched, and waited.

Suddenly, Dodd sat up and completed his catalogue of gestures by clapping his hands together.

‘There’s a lot of things we don’t know. So we’ll have to proceed on educated guesses. All right?’

This whole officer thing was becoming much easier for him now. The episode where he’d pretended to be a colonel seemed to have given him the confidence he’d been short of previously. He raised an eyebrow at Brownlow, then his audience of two. Nobody disagreed.

‘Fine. Now, Sergeant, on what you’ve seen so far, could you estimate the German strength, weapons, troops and so on?’

And Brownlow, having already thought about it, had no need to go through his thinking inventory.

‘Well, Sir, er, Skipper, I reckon we *could* make an estimate, as it happens. I’m pretty sure they’ve no tanks, or won’t use ‘em, at any rate. And I’d say they’re the same with artillery. Mortars? Well, they’d be very handy for doing damage to targets in the town, but there’s been no sign of that, so I reckon they only have small arms – the odd heavy machine gun mounted on armoured cars’d be their heaviest weapon, I’d say. And I don’t think they’ve got too many of them, either. Armoured cars, that is.’

Dodd nodded encouragingly, his interrogators skills coming out. ‘Excellent news, Sergeant, excellent. But why do you say that?’

‘Well, Boss, before we got here, they didn’t need to bother too much, did they? But now, they’ve stiffened their patrols a lot, but not so much so’s attacking them’s impossible, which suggests to me that they’re not all that well off for armour. Same with troop numbers, I reckon. If they had plenty of squaddies and armoured cars, they’d be bound to send out much stronger patrol groups, eh? I would, anyway.’

He glared round, suppressing any possible disagreement before concluding ‘So, my guess would be, oh, no more than about a company strength of fighting soldiers – say, a hundred and fifty.’ He paused for a moment, and allowed himself the luxury of a gentle

sucking in of the cheeks. ‘Yeah, a hundred and fifty, tops. And a handful of armoured cars: I can’t see ‘em having more than half a dozen or so, less the one we took away, o’ course. But plenty o’ trucks, I’d imagine. Be needing ‘em to move out, when they’re ready.’

Dodd was thrilled. ‘My goodness, Sergeant, we’ll make an intelligence man of you yet! Exceptional! Anybody disagree? No? Well, the next question, I suppose, is what do we expect them to *do*? Any thoughts on *that*, Sergeant?’

Brownlow smiled and replied ‘About time somebody else had a go, I reckon, Boss.’

Dodd smiled back. ‘Yes, fair enough too. You’ve done very well. So, let’s try to think what the Germans might be wanting to do.’ He scrubbed his face again. ‘If you’re right, Sergeant, and I’m happy to accept your thinking, they don’t have sufficient forces to put up a serious defence of the town, agreed?’

Brownlow nodded emphatically, and Tullett and Watson followed suit.

‘So, assuming that, what can we expect them to do?’

Watson was ready with an answer that reflected what *he* 'd do. 'They'll keep blowing stuff up, I'd say.'

Tullett chortled. 'Might ha' fuckin' known it's be you thought o' that, Billy! 'Kin' 'ell!'

But Dodd pressed Watson for more. 'All right, Watson, what's on your list to blow up?'

Somewhat to his own surprise, Watson had an answer. 'Well, you know, Sir, I've been thinking a bit about that. Not sure if it makes sense though, so stop me if you think I've got it all wrong. Now, they've been destroying some pretty surprising stuff, haven't they? I really can't think why they'd demolish the boot factory – it's not exactly a strategic asset, is it? It seems to me they've just been hanging around, waiting for something. And they've left most of the main port undamaged. Does that strike anybody as, well, odd? But then I thought about the railway bridge, and I wondered if the Germans were leaving the port intact so they could use it to bring in reinforcements, or maybe they thought of bringing in a ship to evacuate their soldiers when they're ready?'

He scanned the faces around him for signs they thought the idea ridiculous, but he saw only interest, so he continued. 'Now, I imagine it's too late to bring in more troops – the Americans'll be here in a few days – and really, now I think of it, why would they risk a ship when they can just drive off along the main road? So here's what *I* think. They've just been making a damned nuisance of themselves, simply because they've had little opposition until now. But suddenly, they're on the receiving end for a change. So, I think they'll pull out pretty soon, especially if we encourage them.'

Dodd was impressed. 'Bill, (remembering Brownlow's advice about using a squaddie's first name when they'd done well) you know I think you might be quite right. So, do you think they'll simply move out?'

Tullett broke in with his opinion. 'Be bugged, they will. They'll make it as tough as they fuckin' can fer the yanks. Stands to reason, don't it? So, what I reckon is, they'll blow the port to buggery, make sure it's no use at all, then they'll scarper. Prob'ly knock down a few buildin's on the way, an' all, make it 'ard to get transport through, like.' Tullett was getting warmed up to his task now. 'Yeah. P'raps a few booby traps an' all, eh? Or mines, eh Sarge? Bastards.'

Brownlow nodded agreement and added 'Don't forget about their missing soldiers, lads. I'd say they'll be wanting to have another go at finding them before they go.'

The quartet sat and pondered all that for a while, then Dodd did his hand clap and said 'All right, let's put all that together, and see where it takes us.' He stared blindly at the ceiling while he collected his thoughts, then started ticking items off on his fingers. 'So, first, the Germans don't have heavy weapons, or a great many soldiers, certainly not enough to mount a solid defence of Naples.' A second finger went up. 'They'll make a big effort to find their missing soldiers.' A third finger. 'Before they go, they'll make the port unusable.' Four fingers. 'They'll make the main road impassable.'

There was a short silence while they all mentally congratulated themselves on their communal brilliance then Dodd went on 'Now, is there anything else we can expect?'

Silence.

'All right, chaps, that's exceptional work. Exceptional.' Brownlow nodded while Tullett and Watson grinned and punched each others shoulders, but Dodd soon brought them back to earth.

‘So, let’s assume we’re right – and we have no choice, of course – what should we do about it? This one’s for you, I think, Sergeant.’

Brownlow pursed his lips *and* sucked in his cheeks before saying ‘The roofs are the key, I reckon. If we can keep people up there on the lookout, we’ll have a good chance of doing the jerries a serious damage, ‘specially if we can use the petrol bombs. To look at it another way, we *have* to have the lookouts keeping an eye on the jerries, or we’re fighting blind. If Ted and the boys come back and say it’s impossible, we might as well go quietly: no lookouts, no surprise, no petrol bombs.’

They were still contemplating that when Kelly and the others burst into the storeroom. Kelly immediately noticed the anxious looks he was getting and tried to put their minds at rest. ‘We can do it, Boss, my bloody word we can.’

He, Burgess and Green broke into the circle of sitting soldiers and sat among them, and, anxious to maintain their privileged position, Sofia and her assistants edged in next to their charges.

‘Strike me lucky Skip, these kids are bloody brilliant. Am I right, lads?’

Burgess and Green enthusiastically agreed, while Kelly continued. ‘Without ‘em, I’d be fair dinkum struggling to actually find a way onto a roof, but once they showed us, it wasn’t that hard. But moving about, well, I tell you what, they’re like bloody mountain goats, make it look real easy. And best of all, they can get you where you want to go. All round the houses, like, have to zigzag about a fair bit to avoid the wider gaps, but they’ll get you there all right. We,’ he indicated his colleagues in the adventure ‘would ha’ been bushed straight off. So, I reckon that without the kids it’d be hopeless, but with ‘em, we’ll be the boss up there, no queastion. Don’t you reckon, boys?’

Green and Burgess enthusiastically agreed. Burgess grabbed his guide’s hand and held it up like a winning boxers, and Green followed suit. Kelly would have reached for Sofia’s, but found she was already holding his, so, a little embarrassed, he simply held his hand up, taking Sofia’s with it.

Making the most of their mate’s jealousy, Green and Burgess then embarked on a detailed description of their adventure. Meanwhile, Kelly mentioned to Dodd that as long as the Germans didn’t put a soldier on almost every roof along the next patrol’s route, he was pretty sure that he could launch petrol bombs against the vehicles from the roofs. Dodd was delighted and called to Toni, who, in turn, punched the air and said something in *dialetto*: three *scugnizzi* lads scuttled into a dark corner and came back, each proudly proffering a pair of bottles full of liquid with a bit of rag stuffed in the top. Dodd waved a hand towards them and announced ‘There you are, then, Corporal. Half a dozen best quality petrol bombs, part petrol, part diesel, part sump oil, as ordered.’

Kelly examined each one, gave them an appreciative sniff, and responded ‘You bloody ripper, Boss.’ He turned to Watson. ‘Now, Billy, I’ll make up a bundle of explosives for you, OK? Might come in handy to slow ‘em down, eh?’

Watson was shocked. ‘What? For me? What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’m thinking you might be able to put it on the road, maybe throw a bit of rubbish about to disguise it, then time it so you detonate it under an armoured car. That’d be bound to slow ‘em down, don’t you reckon, Bill?’

Watson nodded, but still confused, asked ‘Absolutely, Corporal. But you’ll be there to look after it, won’t you?’

Kelly waggled the two petrol bombs he was holding. ‘I’ll be a bit busy meself, mate, and you’re the nearest we’ve got to a spare explosives bloke.’ He smiled sympathetically. ‘Come on, mate, you’ve done it before. It’s just a question of being careful and getting the timing right, eh?’

Watson swallowed, acknowledging that he was the obvious choice if Kelly was going to be on the roofs, and turned to his mate. He was about to ask Green to accompany him, but Green got in first, grimacing as he held out his own two petrol bombs.

Watson thought for a second: the rooftop people were committed, Brownlow would be supervising the ground attackers, and Dodd, of course, would be the HQ man. That left himself and Tullett, who came to the same realisation at the same time.

‘Fuckin’ lovely, Billy.’ He rubbed his hands together in genuine and joyful anticipation. ‘Just what we wanted, eh? Blowin’ up a fuckin’ tank eh? Just right, eh, kin’ ‘ell, it is.’

Making the best of the situation, Watson agreed and went to watch Kelly put the small bundle of explosives together, and insert the detonators.

Dodd did his hand clapping thing and called the group to order, first in Italian, then English, but the message was the same. They needed to put together some sort of plan to attack the patrol. As Dodd said, they couldn’t map out anything detailed, just the outline would have to do, and they’d work with that. After questioning the Neapolitans about the most suitable places for an ambush, (discussion of which would of course, have taken all night if Dodd had allowed it) teams had been allocated and Dodd made sure the all-important guides understood exactly where they were to lead their charges, and who was doing what.

Dodd was satisfied and summed up. All they needed for a successful attack in the morning was the usual dedicated work from the lookouts, a little co-operation from the Germans, and a good helping of luck, but now, they’d best get themselves ready for a quick start tomorrow, then get some sleep.

Chapter 17

Late that evening, (after Colonel Hutt had repeatedly made it quite clear that the captain would be copping the blame for anything bad that happened from now on) Schellenberg decided to make a complete review of the situation. Like Dodd, he realised that the resistance his patrols were experiencing in getting on with their work of destruction had gone well beyond the merely irritating stage. Something had to be done, especially because he was acutely conscious of Hutt's baleful gaze whenever he reported the very limited progress being made.

He commandeered the big map of Naples and found himself a small room and a large brandy, where he thought over everything that had happened and what might be expected to happen.

After a while, he glanced round to ensure he wasn't being observed, then self-consciously took from his tunic pocket a small black notebook which had a little gold propelling pencil stored in its spine. While in officer training, he'd seen a movie in which the senior general was always making notes in a little notebook with a matching pencil, and Schellenberg had been so impressed he'd immediately gone out and bought one as similar as he could. He'd carried it with him ever since, but this was the first time he was actually going to write in it. He was quite excited by the thought.

Yesterday's action had confirmed to him that he was facing a co-ordinated attack and not just random acts of violence by local trouble-makers in the streets. He thoroughly approved of his opponent's hit and run tactics - he would have done the same in the circumstances. He also realised that every movement of his troops was being watched and somehow, that information was being fed back to some sort of command centre somewhere in the city so that his opposition could be directed accordingly. That, too, was impressive, especially since most of his intelligence suggested that the resistance was entirely civilian, and youthful at that. However, he found it impossible to believe the reports that said they were *children!* He couldn't accept that, and he was seriously dubious about the reports of uniformed British soldiers being involved, though that would account for the automatic weapons his troops were talking about.

Thus, after more thought, he flipped open his notebook with a flourish, wrote on the first page "Who are the terrorists?" and underlined it.

Schellenberg recalled Hutt's interrogation about the three attacks on his troops, and pulled a small face. Undoubtedly, Hutt was half-witted, but Schellenberg was pretty sure that on this occasion, the colonel was right: if the attacks had been made by well trained soldiers, the result would have been far more destructive, and in any case, if the Allies had sent troops to attack the garrison, surely they'd have been given appropriate hardware. There would have been anti-tank rifles, at least, maybe even mortars, and grenades – lots of grenades.

Schellenberg mulled over the rumours of behind the lines attacks over on the other side of the mountains. The word was that there'd been a major action against the Germans main supply route: apparently, they first blew a gigantic hole in the road, and, as soon as it had been repaired, they blew half the mountain down on top of it. But that was obviously an expert attack by special forces troops who knew exactly what they were doing, and had exactly the right equipment. US Marines, possibly, or one of those private armies the tommies seemed to like so much, Special Air Service, or Long Range Desert Group. Parachuted in, obviously. Schellenberg imagined for a

moment the carnage if one of his patrols had been attacked by determined troops with grenades. No, these were not commandos. He managed half a grin. And they're certainly not Texas Rangers!

So they must be local rabble, mostly Italian soldiers who'd been in hiding, more than likely. But it would be a big mistake to underestimate his opposition. After all, they were causing him serious delays in his demolition schedule, and forcing him to use far more troops than he should have needed.

And their surveillance network? Well, that was where the "youths" came in - he couldn't bring himself to think of his opposition as children - it must be them who were keeping watch and supplying information to the adults.

OK, so the opposition was ex-soldiers supported by youths. He ticked through his first question, then wrote "Where is their base?" and underlined that too.

They must *have* a base, thought Schellenberg, if only as their communications centre. But then, they needed somewhere to stow their arms and equipment, and, assuming Schellenberg was right about their being mostly Italian soldiers in hiding, or even if they were Allied troops, they'd still need somewhere safe to rest and eat as well.

He smoothed out the map on his little table and studied it again, carefully, though he knew it well enough. He felt as though the answer was there in front of him, if he could only see it. He let his fingers run over the familiar main lines on the map, eliminating the obvious impossibilities - the residences of the wealthy, the area round the town hall, the industrial areas they'd already searched, or demolished.

The captain mulled that over for a while, and came to a logical conclusion. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was. It was obvious, really: surprising that even the idiot Hutt hadn't realised. The very place the terrorists would have considered themselves safe, where the Germans did not patrol. It would be where, if his soldiers did attempt it, the lookouts would be able to give sufficient warning for them to be able to melt away among the dark twisting alleys and shadowed passages: it would be where they could hide an army of trouble makers, especially local "youths," as well as a thousand prisoners, if need be, never mind just twenty.

Schellenberg snorted, and wrote "Where are our lost troops?" this time with a double underlining to demonstrate his irritation at their stupidity in getting lost in the first place. The slums: had to be. No question. And then, with a firm nod to himself, ticked through both questions.

He felt so pleased with his thinking that he treated himself to a fresh page, and wrote "How will I destroy their ability to resist?" This time, he allowed himself to a triple underline. He thought for a while, then added "and prosecute the mission to complete the destruction of useful property?"

Schellenberg was pleased with that wording. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought his notebook might be useful one day, perhaps when he wrote his memoirs, or, if it all went pear shaped, it might be useful evidence at his court martial.

The answer was obvious: he needed to destroy their headquarters. Without organisation, they'd be nothing more than a handful of jobs roaming the alleys. Thus, after mature reflection, Schellenberg formulated his strategy based on the sensible assumption that the terrorists would have their headquarters in the slums, and his missing troops would be hidden there also.

Obviously, they didn't believe that the Germans would dare enter the maze of tiny alleys. Well, he thought, we'll see about that.

Finally, Schellenberg thought about the issue of the lookouts on the rooftops. That was a tricky one: clearly, the enemy could see exactly what the Germans were doing, which was obviously not good. Even if he did break their headquarters up, there was always the likelihood that their key people would escape and regroup elsewhere, but if he could destroy their lookout organisation, well, that would be the fatal blow to any resistance. He couldn't imagine himself ordering his troops to get onto the rooftops and start shooting at children, though, and if he did, he doubted anyone would follow that order. He sat and stared at the ceiling for a full five minutes before the answer came to him. He was so pleased he wrote the details down in his little book, conscious that this could be his big moment. He detailed his thinking so far (without mentioning any squeamish uncertainty about ordering his troops to fire on children) then wrote: "Gaining control of the rooftops would require committing a disproportionate number of troops to the task." Pleased with the tone of that, he read it out loud to himself, then continued to write: "Thus, I will let their observers continue. But they will see what I want them to see."

Having made that decision, the whole plan then fell into place. It only remained to get things moving quickly, so as to catch the opposition off balance and not give them a chance to consider a response. By four in the morning, he was ready to put his ideas into motion. He'd withdrawn the troops from the harbour master's office and stripped the grumbling headquarters staff of all but the essentials, so as to assemble the maximum possible force of vehicles and men, leaving only the bare minimum to defend the mansion and its grounds.

Back at the hotel, they'd been finding it hard to settle, so by the time Schellenberg was ready to move, Dodd had shifted to his forward HQ in the burnt out boot factory, and the *scugnizzi* lookouts were, as always, in their positions on roofs all over the town, their runners beside them. It wouldn't be long before they had work to do.

Dodd and Brownlow stood gazing at the giant map, as though it might tell them something important, when the first runner came in and breathlessly gave Dodd his news. Dodd explained to Brownlow that a column of a hundred troops (Dodd put an emphasis and raised an eyebrow on the number, to suggest it seemed very high) had exited their main camp and were actually marching, yes, marching, down towards the ancient centre of the town, where the Germans almost never ventured, due to the narrowness of the thoroughfares.

In a minute, the news was confirmed by another runner, who was able to say the soldiers had been counted as they passed, and turned out to be eighty. One of the Italian soldiers started plotting the column's progress on the map: it was immediately obvious that these troops weren't anywhere close to the usual routes. Dodd was perplexed, and rubbed the top of his head, wondering what was going on, but Brownlow had no such uncertainties. 'Right, Sir, Boss, let's get after them.'

Most of the others round the smoke soiled room were standing, getting their weapons and kit together, ready to move.

But Dodd didn't agree. 'No, Sergeant, I think we'll wait until we have a better idea what they're up to.' He called for a runner and gave orders that he was to be kept informed of the enemy's whereabouts every minute. The lad shouted to his mates and the group set off, looking determined.

Brownlow still thought they should get moving immediately, but Dodd again resisted. 'Look, Sergeant, this marching column is unprecedented, isn't it? And the timing, too. They never come out in the darkness, do they? No, we need to wait, to see what they're up to.'

Dodd pondered, watching the red line dribbling down the map as reports came in, and the Italian soldier marked up the map. It occurred to him in a flash of inspiration what was going on. 'Of course! They're going for the slums!'

Brownlow looked sceptical, and said as much.

But Dodd replied 'I know, I know. They've not been there before, but I just know they're going to search the slums for their missing soldiers and try to root out any of our lot hiding there. That's why they're on foot, you see. They're going where their vehicles cannot go.'

The audience had gathered at a respectful distance round the map, watching the officer and the sergeant. Dodd was aware of this, and, like Brownlow, felt the need to get his troops moving, but something still held him back. The Germans must be doing this for a purpose, and he needed to work out what it was. As though to prove him right, a wheezing boy arrived to report that a mass of vehicles was forming up outside the main enemy camp.

Brownlow rubbed his chin doubtfully as Dodd continued. 'Yes! You see, they're assuming that our base is there, and they're hoping that we'll put all our resources into defending it, while their motorised column gets on with their demolitions unhindered. And the early start, well, I imagine they think they'll catch us off guard, maybe panic us into a bad move.'

Brownlow didn't disagree, but had firm thoughts as to how to respond. 'Seems to me, Sir, that we've got a chance to really put the wind up 'em. That marching column'd be a pretty soft target, eh? Due respect, Sir, but we need to get in among 'em soon as.'

As he spoke, yet another lad crashed in with the news that about half of the marching men had peeled off into smaller groups and were moving in different directions. The manouvre was immediately drawn onto the map, and Dodd nodded excitedly. 'Yes, look, the main body's making for the eastern edge of the slums, and the others will be going to the flanks and the west side. Now, I know you're anxious to get moving, but let's just take a minute. If I'm right, the larger group will spread out into the slums to look for their men, and try to flush any resisters out into the arms of the troops at the edges. What *we* have to remember, though, is that our main task is to stop the Germans finishing their demolitions.'

Yet another runner came in. 'Now what?' Dodd asked himself, and listened to the report, which was accompanied by wildly flailing juvenile arms. 'Well that confirms it. They're putting men at the high windows of the buildings around the area. Well, Sergeant, what do you say?'

Brownlow had been giving his bottom lip a savage chewing, and continued to do so, while studying the map. 'These slums, Sir. Like where we've been, are they? All little alleys and that. Like what we've seen?'

'Look, I confess I've not been there, but I have been into slum areas in Rome, and if they're anything similar, I'd say they'd be even more difficult than what you've seen so far.'

Brownlow never ceased to surprise the lieutenant. 'Well, then, I'd say ignore 'em. They'll have enough to do just finding their way through, never mind doing any damage. We might put the odd shooter on a roof or two, well back, just to keep 'em occupied, but other than that, forget 'em, Sir.' Brownlow sucked his lip again. 'And I apologise, Boss. You were right to wait. Quite right.'

Dodd brushed that aside, but realised that he'd done a seriously officer-like thing in insisting on waiting until it was clear what the Germans were up to. In later years, Dodd thought back on this moment as one of his best. 'There it is, then: we'll leave the foot soldiers to it. They'll do us no harm if they stay in the slums: there's nothing there we need worry about. So, let's get on with slowing the demolition column down. Corporal!'

The markings on the map confirmed that the German vehicles had moved off and were following their predictable route: the men and boys were quickly split into their allocated groups of shooters, screeners, lookouts and runners, but now with the addition of the explosives team and rooftop attackers. The rooftop soldiers carried rifles and Sofia and her assistants carried the petrol bombs in, incongruously, shopping baskets lined with straw.

Now the decision had been made, the sense of excitement and urgency caused a great deal of hopping from foot to foot and attempted grins. Dodd, as usual, stood at the door and wished each man, girl and boy well as they plunged into the darkness.

To Kelly, it seemed that bit easier this time, even though he was carrying a rifle: he knew he didn't have to worry about where they were headed – he had complete faith in Sofia getting them to their position, high above the road – and there was hardly a cloud to obscure the ample moonlight. In a couple of minutes, they'd scampered through the usual twisting confusion of alleys and clambered up the side of a derelict building to the roofs. It all seemed so commonplace now. Kelly was surprised how soon Sofia brought them to a halt at a chimney stack at the end of a roof, where two watchers already lurked. Sofia indicated to Kelly that they had arrived, and pointed to the peaks to either side. Her meaning was obvious: her assistants would be settling Green and Burgess at their own chimney capped peaks.

A warm and gentle breeze brought the dusty aroma of wheat and soil down from the hills, not that they noticed it. They were more attuned to the grinding, clattering sound of the approaching vehicles, amplified to giant values as it blatted back and forth against the encroaching ancient walls. They didn't have long to wait: within a couple of minutes the noise level suddenly increased from a rumble to a roar as the convoy rounded the last bend. It was dark down there, the moonlight only glancing in, but even so, the vehicles were easily seen. The first one into sight was an armoured car, closely followed by a truck, the canvas top removed. As they came closer saw a crowd of soldiers in the back, all fully alert with their rifles ready for use. Behind the truck came another armoured car, followed by another truck full of soldiers and yet another armoured car brought up the rear. Kelly winced: he didn't fancy Brownlow's chances of getting his motley crowd of civilians anywhere near enough to do any harm.

By now, the first vehicle had already ground past Green, on the rooftop to Kelly's right, and was passing directly below Kelly, who glanced at Sofia. She understood and held out the bottles she'd been carrying in her basket.

Kelly made a small play of searching his pockets before retrieving a box of matches, and Sofia smiled, grateful for the gesture.

In the meantime, Watson and Tullett were having a terrible time. Watson was lovingly nursing the small bundle of explosives that Kelly had prepared last night, wrapped in rag, and the larger Neapolitan lad had the skein of cable over his shoulder. This left Tullett to lug the detonator box, which he refused to admit was a struggle for him. They'd been led off by their two young guides

confidently enough, but as they scuttled in and out of the narrow alleys, the lads began a whispered argument as they went, with much pushing and gesticulating and furtive glances back towards the soldiers. After a while they stopped, the older boy indicating to Watson that they were at the designated place, but clearly, this couldn't be correct - the road they faced was too narrow to allow passage to the heavy German vehicles.

Watson felt the clutch of panic grabbing at his guts: if he couldn't stop or seriously slow down the leading armoured car, the Germans could, if they kept their nerve, simply drive through Kelly's petrol bomb attack. In halting Italian, he told the Italian lads this couldn't be right, whereupon they re-commenced their whispered squabble. Trying to keep his voice under control, Watson reminded the boys of the name of the road they were seeking, when the smaller lad took off his hat and smacked the larger one with it, giving him a solid earful of whispered *dialetto* while he did. The bigger lad looked crestfallen: tears began to form. Watson was aware that vital time had been wasted, and, panic rising, demanded they hurry to the correct place. The younger boy nodded and took the lead as they scurried off, chased along by Watson's half-squeaked '*pronto, pronto!*' quite unnecessary as the sound of the approaching vehicles got ever louder.

It was only a couple of minutes to the right place, but they were vital minutes, irretrievably lost. Watson and Tullett peered out from the end of the alley they stood in, caught each others' eyes and nodded. This was the place as described to them: they were almost at the bottom of a road, wide enough to let the military vehicles through but with little room to spare. Watson, heart pumping, unwrapped the rag covering the bundle of three sticks of explosives he'd been hugging into his body as they ran and saw with relief that the detonators were still in place - he wouldn't have been at all sure he could replace them if they'd become dislodged - and watched as Tullett breathlessly put down the plunger box he'd been lugging.

The noise of the convoy was getting louder every second now as Watson started connecting the wires to the detonators. His hands started shaking badly as he crouched over his work and for a moment, he thought he was about to lose control again. He let his hands slip to his sides and his head drop as he closed his eyes. Tullett thought he'd had some sort of fit and nudged him. Watson glanced up and muttered 'I'm all right Stan. I can do this. Just give me a minute, eh'.

Tullett was amazed. 'Fuck me, Billy, I don't think we got a minute. Listen!' The sound was all but overwhelming now as it bounced between the walls.

Watson's head came up and he said matter-of-factly 'OK, Stan, let's finish this job.' His hands had lost their shake as he finished the first set of connections. 'OK, done. I'll just nip out and set the bundle - hold the wire steady - and we're ready to move.' With that, Watson crept out into the road and was shaken by the proximity of the sound, but made sure the connections hadn't been disturbed before he scampered back into the alley they'd come down.

'My goodness, Stan, we cut that a bit fine, eh? Now, quick, move back as far as you can with the box. And take the wire with you - I'll hold it steady here - then give me a call when you're done.'

Tullett jogged back down the alley, but was soon pulled up by the end of the cable and in a stage whisper called 'Fuckin' shit, Bill, that's all we got. 'Kin' 'ell!'

But a feeling of calmness, fatalism, really, had enveloped Watson. He replied 'OK, Stan, I'm coming' and, inexplicably, crouched as he trotted back down the alley. Once there, he turned and looked back along the alley towards the road, where, no more than thirty yards away, the

bundle of explosives lay in plain sight. Watson nodded. ‘Hmmm. I see what you mean Stan. It’s not ideal, is it? If we get a sec I’ll nip along and move it along a bit, so the blast

He didn’t finish the sentence: the mechanical noises told them the vehicles were right on top of them. There was no time left, but, still icy calm, he knelt as he busied himself making the final connections then pulled the plunger handle right up.

‘Right, Stan, we’re done. Everybody, get down behind me and hug the bottom of the wall.’ He laid himself down and pressed his body into the angle of the wall and pavement, leaving one hand on the plunger.

Sergeant Brownlow, in charge of the rest of the attackers, had had trouble convincing his people, a mixture of Angelo and his gang, other Italian adults and numerous *scugnizzi*, that they must not get themselves into roadside buildings to await the convoy. He was worried that if the attack went well, the German soldiers would automatically run for cover in the buildings, and his mob would be no match for them. The last thing Brownlow wanted was a stand up shooting match. Back at the hotel, he’d got Dodd to explain all this to them, but it seemed that that was then, this was now, and the natural thing was to get into close cover. Brownlow had to physically drag a couple of lads out and put on a tantrum before they accepted, with ill grace, that their job was to hang back and harass the Germans who tried to get back up the hill on foot.

Watson had only seconds to wait: the noise was overwhelming now, as the first armoured vehicle rounded the last small bend. Watson saw that the dim and hooded headlights did almost nothing to lighten the gloom, not until the last second, when the lumbering vehicle came into sight at the end of the alley. He waited until it was right over the bundle then whispered ‘please’ and forced the plunger down. That was the last he remembered until he found Tullett half carrying, half dragging him through the doorway of the boot factory, where Dodd and his staff were waiting.

Kelly had been getting a little worried: he’d watched the leading armoured car go past below him, followed by a truck and the second armoured car was already grinding past. But then, with a curiously muffled noise, the leading vehicle was silhouetted for a moment by the blast of Watson’s explosives. Kelly immediately lit the rag stuffed in the first bottle, waited a second to be sure the flame had caught, then threw it down at the first truck. Glancing down as Sofia proffered the second bottle, Kelly saw that the leading vehicle had kept moving but veered to the side of the road and was nudging its way along the wall, like some mortally wounded great beast. Burgess and Green had thrown their first bottles too – flames were already washing the trucks as the men on the rooftops threw their second bottles.

In a matter of a few seconds, the scene below was catastrophic. The road ahead was blocked by the disabled armoured car and both the trucks stood motionless in a sea of fire and thick black smoke, though the troops had quickly escaped and sheltered in the buildings. The rear armoured car was reversing up the street, the driver apparently half blinded by the smoke, or panic, as his vehicle pinballed its way between the buildings on its way back up the hill. Kelly found himself urging the driver of the second truck on, because, brave man that he was, he stayed with his vehicle and somehow reversed out of the maelstrom of smoke and flame. The middle armoured car took advantage of the empty road behind it and reversed out of the flames, then stopped, its machine gun waving, looking for targets as it covered the soldiers retreat.

Looking to each side, Kelly saw that his comrades felt the same way about the courageous truck driver: both were clapping and cheering, partly because of the complete success of their attack, but also for the courage of the driver.

Kelly was still looking down when the chimney pot a few inches above him exploded, hit by a bullet from a first floor window opposite. *Shit! These blokes are good! Just been rained on by petrol bombs and within seconds, they're in cover and shooting back!*

Kelly shouted 'Time to go, boys!' and they all began their elated chase back to their base.

The German soldiers who were to search the slums fared even worse than the motorised column. Of the forty soldiers who moved cautiously in among the alleys, only twenty nine emerged at the other side over a period of up to nine hours, and five of those were in their underwear, having had their weapons and uniforms confiscated. But they were the lucky ones. Nine were held by the slum dwellers and handed to the Allies when they arrived. And two completely disappeared, and were never seen again.

As the day wore on, the Germans stubbornly persisted in sending out patrols. Both sides were becoming more experienced at the game now: the groups intent on harassing the demolition columns were more thoughtful in locating positions to ambush the vehicles, and placed armed lookouts on the roofs above them to guard against being trapped from above, which was just as well. They had thought of themselves as the attackers, but when the Germans also started putting troops on the rooftops, the balance changed somewhat, but they hadn't discovered the trick of getting access via damaged buildings, and of course, they kept getting blocked by gaps in the roofs that were too wide for them to get across, while Dodd's people, guided by the *scugnizzi*, had no such problems. Nevertheless, the lookouts were slowly forced back and the Germans also sent out, in front of the vehicles, foot soldiers experienced in street fighting, who dodged from building to building, had a quick look round, then on to the next, slowly but surely clearing the way for their vehicles.

Thus, the Italians and British (for the Australian Kelly thought of himself as British) almost became the defenders, who usually only had fleeting chances to snap off a shot before having to retreat. They managed to make it slow work for the German troops, deadly slow, but inch by inch, doorway by doorway, the Germans pushed the locals back and edged towards their targets.

And that was the way the whole day passed. It was honours even, really. The Germans were able to force their way to a bakery and, with their demolition crews bravely working under fire, comprehensively demolished it, then bludgeoned their way on to other targets in the industrial area. On the other hand, progress was so slow that they were unable to press on to finish the destruction of the harbour installations, a work that had been in progress for some days.

By five in the afternoon, the last German patrol had scuttled back up the hills: it was all over for the day. The casualty list on both sides was amazingly small, bearing in mind the closeness of the fighting and the determination shown on sides: several Italian young men, unused to scrambling around the rooftops, had collected the sort of injuries that might be expected when a crowd of excited people were chasing about the skyline exchanging gunfire. A small queue nursing cuts, abrasions and sprains began to form outside the *Farmaccia* to await the amateur ministrations of Doctor Danielli, the place of honour unanimously being given to a lad

with broken ribs and a nasty gash on his head after a fall, and but surprisingly, in view of the amount of ammunition expended, there were no actual bullet wounds on either side.

Back at the overnight camp in the deserted hotel, Dodd stood among his people. It was after eight now but they were pretty much all standing, milling about even now, the adrenaline stopping them from sitting, or even standing still: although most were utterly exhausted, there was little chance of sleep. Tullett, in particular, had been severely handicapped by his damaged foot as the gruelling day went on, and by now was doing a creditable impression of a heavily overacted Richard III, half crouched and dragging his lame leg.

For most of them, though, exhaustion was overtaken by the exciting news from outside Naples that the Allies had finally battered their way out of their bridgehead and were pushing towards the city.

Brownlow, pretty much the only motionless person in the storeroom, was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, when Dodd approached and sat beside him.

‘Looks like it’s nearly over, Sergeant.’

‘Brownlow grinned and nodded. ‘Seems so, Boss, sir.’

‘So, is that it, do you think? They’ll just go away?’

Brownlow sucked his lip. ‘Well, if it was me, I’d be thinking of leaving a farewell present, wouldn’t you?’

‘Quite so, Sergeant, quite so. Any ideas as to what?’

Brownlow’s bottom lip disappeared again, then he responded ‘Dunno, Skipper. What do *you* reckon?’

Dodd chuckled. ‘Oh, no, Sergeant, you can’t get away with that all the time. Tell me what you think they’ll do.’

Brownlow smiled, a little embarrassed at having been caught. ‘Well, to tell the truth, I *have* given it a bit of thought.’ He began to lever himself to his feet. ‘I’ll show you on the map if you like.’

The pair stood in front of the map and Brownlow pointed out the main road bisecting Naples from north to south, quite easily seen simply because, among all the pencilled lines, arrows and blobs already drawn on the map, it was a wide road, not really suitable for Dodd’s people to set an ambush.

‘See, Sir, the jerries’re all up in the hills, now.’ He indicated the big red blob scrawled on the map. ‘So, all they have to do is come down to the nice big wide main road, no more stuffing about in little alleys and such, and they’re on their way north, right?’

Dodd nodded.

‘They’ll make good time on that road, won’t they?’

Dodd nodded again.

‘Point is, o’course, so will our lot, chasing them. So, if it was me, I’d be looking to get my vehicles out, then bugger up the road, beg pardon, Boss’.

Dodd replied ‘Yes, that was what I was thinking, too.’

It was Brownlow’s turn to nod. A few weeks ago, he’d have thought the officer hadn’t really thought of that at all, but now, he accepted that Dodd had actually been thinking along those lines. Dodd continued: ‘So, they’ll blow the road on the way out.’

‘Maybe not. Remember when we blew the hole in the road back there, Boss? How quick they got going again? And remember the blockage when we brought the mountain down on top of the road? That would have been much harder to clear, I reckon. So, if it was me, I’d look for a choke point where there was no way round if the road was unusable, and where I could bring down a load of buildings across it. That might hold even the yanks up for days, a week maybe, while they cleared it.’

‘Of course! Brilliant, Sergeant! So our job now will be to try to stop them doing that. Now, the great question is, when will they leave?’

Brownlow didn’t need to play for time with lip chewing. ‘Ah, Boss, that *is* the big question, eh? Depends what their orders are, how determined they are, what resources they’ve got left, all that. Can you imagine our lot trying to fight their way through all those narrow little alleys? No tanks, no artillery – all hand to hand, house by house. Be murderous, wouldn’t it? The jerries might hang on for days yet, weeks, even. Or they might be on the move any minute. Best be ready with some sort o’ plan, eh?’

They called the local Italian ex-soldiers and explained their thoughts: the Italians had a brief conversation in which they quickly agreed the obvious and ideal spot (thankfully, without any of the usual histrionics or hat abuse) and pointed it out on the map, explaining that at the northern edge of the city, the road was lined with many large buildings where the noxious local industries had gathered – tanneries, soap woks, and so on. Bringing down these ancient buildings, mostly massively constructed of stonework, would undoubtedly cause enormous problems for the Americans.

Dodd rubbed the top of his head and nodded. ‘I don’t think the Germans will be able to resist that, do you, Sergeant? So, what do you propose?’

Brownlow was ready with a reply: as he came to the conclusion, Dodd was all but clapping. ‘Oh, Sergeant, you’ve excelled yourself! Absolutely! I can’t wait!’

Brownlow smiled modestly. ‘Yeah, I thought it was pretty wassname myself! O’course, I’ll be needing Tullett to assist: I don’t suppose he’ll be all that keen, but still ... I’ll go and tell him now.’

‘All right. Better tell the corporal and the other chaps too. I’ll brief Angelo and Toni. And send Green and Watson over, would you, Sergeant? I’ve got an extra little job for them as well.’

Brownlow was intrigued and raised an interrogatory eyebrow, so Dodd explained. It was Brownlow’s turn to be excited and they had a small domestic about whose idea was best, before agreeing they were both excellent.

Green and Watson came over and crouched in front of Dodd.

‘Not ready for bed yet chaps?’

Watson answered. ‘Couldn’t even think about it Boss, could you, Gilbert?’

‘Not a chance, Bill. Why’s that, Skipper?’

‘Well, I’d like us to be ready when the Germans pull out. I’ve got a bit of a job for you two, if you’re interested?’

The two young soldiers leant forward to listen, then as they understood what he was suggesting, began to laugh.

Over in the town hall, Colonel Hutt was having similar thoughts about when to pull out. He'd already had his men from the harbour master's office moved back to the main camp, and all but a handful of essential personnel from the town hall had also gone. The troops that were left had orders to move about outside, looking busy: he didn't want to give his opposition any easy clues about when he was evacuating. He'd reviewed his orders - they were clear. He was to hold on as long as he could without losing troops or equipment, and already he wasn't looking forward to explaining to higher command how he was already missing the best part of fifty soldiers, not to mention two armoured cars, three trucks and a Kubelwagen.

Hutt decided to go. He called for Captain Schellenberg and told him to prepare to evacuate by four in the morning: he judged that to be the time when the opposition would least expect them to leave, and the last thing Hutt wanted was to have to battle his way out. Schellenberg realised that the way things stood, it wouldn't look good for him at HQ - Hutt had made it very clear who was going to be carrying the can - and wanted an extra two days to finish his demolition programme and, with luck, find the missing troops. Hutt was adamant. Schellenberg tried for an extra twenty four hours, but Hutt wouldn't be moved: four in the morning it was.

But Hutt did agree to allow Schellenberg to lay one final set of explosives, just as Brownlow had predicted, to block the road by demolishing the very buildings the Italians had identified. At least, Schellenberg noted in his little book, the passage through Naples by the Americans would be made impossible for days. He even wrote that it would be more effective to block the road than to blow a hole in it, though he didn't note that the success of the rumoured attacks on the road over the mountains had given him the idea.

And in the meantime, the few remaining town hall staff would quietly move back up to the main camp, leaving only a corporal and three men to make the place look occupied and prepare to burn all the remaining papers in the courtyard at the back of the town hall.

Chapter 18

They'd eventually managed to settle down, but Dodd felt he'd only been asleep for five minutes when he was shaken roughly awake by Angelo. '*Colonello, Colonello*, they're leaving!'

Dodd was bewildered, still more than half asleep. 'What? Who?'

'The Germans, my friend! We've just had the message from a lookout up on the hill! They're going! All of them! We've done it!'

It suddenly dawned on Dodd what he was being told, and he clambered to his feet, asking, 'Are you sure? Where's the messenger?'

A young lad, no more than ten or eleven, was pushed forward, and excitedly confirmed that the main gates of the compound had been thrown open and a large convoy could be seen was forming up. Dodd was sure that it would be just as Brownlow had predicted, and the convoy would move down to the main road, then turn north.

The rest of the group was already stirring and were ready to go in a minute, having got themselves organised last night. There was a brief repeat of last night's discussion as to whether the convoy should be attacked, but the same conclusion was reached - that the last thing they wanted was for the Germans to get themselves into solid defensive positions: better by far that they be allowed to leave unmolested, unless their actions showed that Brownlow was right again, and they'd have a team stop to demolish buildings to block the road.

Dodd called his miniature army together and said 'All right, chaps, the Americans will be here before you know it. So we'll do what we agreed, all right?'

He was greeted by enthusiastic acceptance, and the men went to their appointed tasks.

Kelly was to lead the group off, Brownlow being otherwise engaged. This time, nobody could think of a reason for Dodd to stay behind, so he was going too: even so, he did his usual stand-at-the-door-and-wish-each-person-well performance.

As they emerged into the gathering day, they saw that already, the news was common knowledge and people had begun to drift into the lanes and alleys, uncertainly at first, then more confident and noisy, grinning, waving and hugging, shaking hands and kissing indiscriminately. Already, the little shrines built high into the walls were being decked with flowers. As the group moved through the people towards the northern edge of the town, they received small bursts of applause, and slightly embarrassed cheers.

They had to scurry along: the plan they'd decided on was that they would position soldiers inside the last buildings at the northern edge of Naples so as to stop the Germans setting explosives as they abandoned the city, but that assumed that Dodd's people would have more warning. Now, they'd been caught off guard and would have to do the best they could.

Kelly, up front with the forward screen, was in time to see the tail of the German convoy grind its ponderous way onto the main road. He signalled the main force to come to him and after a few words with Dodd and Toni, the main group was sent scuttling along back alleys to keep pace with the German tail, their task being that if the convoy kept going, Toni's lads could shoot up the last few trucks, but only after they'd left the buildings behind. Kelly, with the British soldiers (less Brownlow and Tullett) and Angelo and his gang, armed with the automatic

weapons, were to follow the Germans along at a distance, ready to threaten any attempt to stop and demolish the ancient buildings that loomed over both sides of the road.

At first, it seemed that the Germans would simply drive off into the hills on their way north, and Kelly and his group were hard pressed to keep station about two hundred yards behind the last vehicle. But it was all too good to last. As the tail of the convoy clattered its way towards the open countryside, Kelly and his team rounded a kink in the road to see what seemed to him to be the longest straight stretch of road in the whole of Naples: the road was wide enough to allow two vehicles to pass between the high walls of the factory buildings that lined the road. Beyond them, Kelly could see where the city stopped and the open country beyond started, perhaps a bit less than two hundred yards away. The last two trucks had pulled up side by side, blocking the road. Nothing happened for a moment, then, as though at a signal, the canvas covers came off, revealing a heavy machine gun mounted on each, pointing defiantly back into the town. A dozen men, maybe more, clambered past the guns, laden with boxes and wires, obviously demolition materials, and began to trot towards the ancient doorways of their targets. Through the silence, Kelly clearly heard the sharp *click-clack* as the machine guns were primed and as soon as any of his group showed themselves to bring their weapons to bear on the advancing sappers, the German machine guns began to lay down a heavy curtain of fire. There was no need for any orders - just the noise of the guns, and the whang and echo of the heavy bullets knocking great chunks off the stone walls was enough to let even the most inexperienced soldier that any movement was suicidal. Kelly caught Dodd's eye and shrugged: there was nothing they could do but risk the odd short burst of fire, unsighted, along the approximate line of the road, which caused the Germans to drop to the ground for a moment, but the ferocious return fire from the machine guns was overwhelming and the troops continued their steady progress.

Suddenly, a new source of noise emerged from behind Kelly – the clatter of a powerful diesel engine, accompanied by the shriek and grind of metal on stone, as a German armoured car staggered clumsily into sight. Kelly caught his breath as he strained to study the great machine, then saw what he'd hoped for. The black German cross on the front of the vehicle had been overpainted with the green, white and red vertical stripes of the Italian flag! As though to confirm it, its heavy machine gun began to hose a stream of bullets towards the German trucks: the sound was overwhelming now, echoing and re-echoing between the thick stone walls as the armoured car ground past Kelly. After a moment of frozen incomprehension, the demolition teams dropped their equipment and raced back towards their trucks, but their machine gunners had already realised the danger of their positions and had leapt off the trucks to seek shelter. The drivers were too late to react and both trucks exploded in a hail of bullets.

Then suddenly, relative silence as Brownlow, the novice driver, brought the vehicle to a ragged halt and Tullett, the novice machine gunner in the armoured car, ran out of targets.

A moment later, as Kelly's men emerged cheering and shouting onto the road, they heard a cascade of rifle fire as Toni's team fired enthusiastically but wildly on the disappearing tail of the convoy. It wasn't until then that Kelly's right leg gave way and he fell down in a heap. An unlucky bullet, or maybe a shard of stone, had torn away a chunk of his right boot and cut a deep groove along the side of his foot.

The sun was well up as Brownlow had his first daylight look at the main plaza outside the town hall. It was an impressive area, bounded on all sides by buildings designed to remind the

townsfolk of the importance of their civic leaders. Each building, the post office, the theatre, the police headquarters, the public library, the two main bank buildings, seemed to vie with the others for the title of most magnificent. But they needn't have bothered – the town hall had been built when Naples was at the height of its fortune, and it comfortably won the race. The broad sweep of beautiful old stone steps alone was enough to say that the leaders of this community were important men, and the rest of the building, behind a façade of pillars, stood proud and confident.

By mid-morning the soldiers, Angelo's people and an ever-increasing crowd of *scugnizzi*, augmented by the young men who'd found their way to the hotel storeroom over the last couple of days, milled around excitedly at the foot of the town hall steps. Toni kept glancing at the roof of the theatre opposite, waiting for the signal that the Allies were in the city and approaching. The mayor and his party, seemingly too self-important to be standing about with the ordinary people but in fact worried about being given a good hiding by the populace, watched anxiously from inside, waiting to be called.

They were entitled to be nervous, the mayor himself having been appointed just two hours ago when it was discovered that the then mayor and his deputy, the municipal financial controller, had taken the opportunity to disappear. At first, it was assumed that they (along with several other senior city officials, all of whom had been enthusiastic fascists) had simply acknowledged that when the Germans left, they would be in danger from the populace. It would be weeks before it was discovered that the city's account books, signed off annually by the two men, had been a major work of fiction for years. Oddly, the mayor's wife would accept her loss with a shrug, though the mayor's secretary, a homely middle aged spinster, would be inconsolable.

In addition to these sudden vacancies, several other city officials - who were known fascists but who had been left to their fate by the old mayor - had been bundled off to be locked up with the German prisoners in the St. Efremo building by a populace bent on revenge. Incidentally, while they were at it, the citizens also took the opportunity to throw the senior customs officer and several policemen into St. Efremo too, on the grounds that they were due for it.

So the new and reluctant mayor, a butcher by day and until just now a minor councillor by night, resplendent in his glittering chain of office, which was almost put in the shade by the shininess of his antique suit, prepared to make his way to the step allocated, accompanied by a gaggle of even more minor officials, suddenly elevated beyond their dreams into the newly dangerous world of senior municipal office.

Finally, the whistle Toni had been waiting for arrived. He gave an excited shout, and the crowd at the foot of the grand steps began to sort itself out. At the same time, the mayoral party emerged from the enormous double doors set well back above the steps and began an uncertain procession, keeping close to each other as though for protection, like a small clutch of penguins, to their places.

Colonel Wilbur 'Wild Bull' Bullivant sighed as he slouched in his jeep, watching the infantryman up ahead, who was cautiously examining the scene out of Bullivant's sight at the end of the street.

Bullivant was the US colonel from central casting – a great grizzled bear of a man, unshaven, unkempt and weary after several days pushing his men against stubborn German resistance – half sitting, half laying in the front passenger seat of a jeep even more filthy than the colonel. Somehow, his driver, a pudgy youth alongside him, and his aide, a bespectacled lieutenant who clung to his perch in the back, had managed to keep themselves moderately clean, which only accentuated the disreputable air of their boss.

Bullivant sighed: he'd be glad to get this friggin' town taken and get himself a shower, no, a shower then a bath, a shave and some clean clothes. People didn't realise how damn uncomfortable it was playing the part of the gung-ho cowboy whose only ambition was to chase the goddam Germans all over the friggin' universe. Still, the boys up at the front seemed to like the image.

At least the goddam Krauts weren't making him fight for every shitty so-called street in this goddam town. It'd been real hard work back there, pushing and pushing 'til the German resistance had finally broken, and he'd expected to encounter the same opposition for Naples. But so far, well into the city, there were no snipers, no booby traps, nothing to slow him down at all, though he knew better than to take things for granted. He chomped down on the regulation cigar stub, thinking that now he wasn't allowed to be right up at the point with the boys any more, all the fun had gone out of it, too.

He sighed again, remembering a stormy interview with General Clark himself. He was in hospital after being shot for the second time, and the general had come to remind him that colonels were not supposed to be way up on point. A vigorous shouting match only concluded when the sister threw the general out for disturbing the other patients, but as he left, Clark, in a rage, told Bullivant that if he ever got shot again, he'd be busted down to major, and if he got killed, he'd find himself a goddamned captain!

He allowed himself half a smile behind the cigar butt as he thought of that, and was wondering if he might risk a stroll up there to the end of the street, when a wave from the soldier at the corner brought the driver back to life. As the jeep whined towards the end of the street, the soldier signalled it to stop and approached the colonel's side.

Bullivant carefully removed the soggy remains of the cigar from his mouth and asked 'What's happenin' son?'

The soldier was mesmerised by the cigar, which was in the final stage of disintegration into a soggy mess, and kept his eye on it as he replied 'I don't rightly know, Colonel, sir. Beyond here's one o' them market square places, y'know?'

Bullivant nodded as he tried to massage the cigar into something like the correct shape. The soldier watched for a second, then went on, 'Seems like there's crowds of people standin' about, lookin' this way, mostly, like they're expectin' us.'

Bullivant gave up on the remains of the cigar and threw it away, then brightened. 'Maybe there's some sort o' welcome parade? Maybe this town's gonna be easy, eh, son?'

He turned to his aide in the back. 'Hal, seein' they've gone to all that trouble an' all, we better put on a show. So get those vehicles behind us up real close, and get a bunch of soldiers to march in right behind us. OK?'

The lieutenant started shouting into his walkie talkie, which squawked in return, and in a minute, said 'OK Colonel, there's some vehicles and soldiers ready when you are.'

The colonel craned round to see the jeeps and armoured cars piled up behind, then nodded and jammed a new cigar in his mouth.

'Uh, Colonel,' said the young officer, 'you sure about this? It might be a trap.'

The colonel turned and stared at the lieutenant with distaste. 'Maybe you're right, *lieutenant*, he growled, emphasising the last word, 'but if you are, I'll be busted down to captain, so I'll still outrank you.'

Leaving the aide to wonder what the hell the old man was on about, Bullivant heaved himself upright in the jeep and made a little pantomime of lighting his fresh cigar. When he was sure he had everybody's attention, he clutched the top frame of the windscreen with one hand - leaving the other free to wave - and muttered to the driver from behind the cigar, 'OK, son, nice an' easy, so we don't scare *anyone*.' He glared meaningfully at the lieutenant. 'Let's go.'

Bullivant eagerly took in the scene as they entered the piazza. He was ready for an exchange of gunfire, or a wave of adulation, but not this, not the silence of the people who lined the sides of the square watching his arrival. He saw what seemed to be some sort of reception parade on the other side of the square, on the steps of an imposing building, and told the driver to take him there, at walking pace, so the doughboys could keep up.

As he got closer, he saw, to his utter astonishment, what seemed to be a British officer, standing at ease, watching the new arrivals interestedly, while two metres behind him stood a sergeant, and behind *him*, a line of assorted people that included a few British soldiers in the middle, with mixture of Italians in uniform and civilian clothing on one side, and a whole bunch of kids on the other. On the steps behind them, a small group stood either side of a frightened looking man who was obviously, judging by the enormous beribboned chain around his uncollared neck, the local civilian chief.

The driver swung the jeep and stopped it so it was broadside to Dodd and a few paces away from him, as if rehearsed

For a few seconds, the two officers regarded each other curiously as the following American vehicles pulled up in a ragged line and stopped their engines. The US foot soldiers were still straggling up when there was a shout from the British sergeant. '*Parade!*' he yelled.

The British soldiers, who'd been craning for a sight of the Americans, faced front. '*Parade, atten-shun!*' The soldiers came to attention, and the Italians in the line stood up straight.

Brownlow let the silence hang for a second or two, then bellowed 'Honour guard! Forward!'

There was a tremendous crashing of boots on stone as the three soldiers in the line behind him stamped to one side, and from behind them, every inch of leather gleaming, every scrap of brasswork glittering in the sun, marched Watson and Green, their uniforms immaculately pressed, their burnished rifles over their shoulders. The two young men moved with a swagger that said they knew they were beautifully turned out, not a neatly trimmed hair out of place under their berets, and they marched in confidently perfect step one each side of the sergeant and stamped to a halt at the same millisecond on each side of Dodd. Bullivant was still frozen, half out of his jeep, as Brownlow shouted again, as though he were addressing a battalion parade rather than the men two yards in front of him, 'Honour guard, *pre-sent*' another pause, '*arms!*'

As Dodd saluted, Watson and Green, in what seemed an unnecessarily complicated manouvre involving more crashing of boots and loud smacking of rifles (made even more impressive by the rattle of the coins placed in the rifle magazines for just that purpose) presented

arms. The audience of Neapolitan onlookers broke into a burst of spontaneous applause, and Bullivant was so surprised he sat back into the jeep and looked at the British soldiers in amazement for a long moment, then turned to his aide and muttered ‘Shit, Hal, you see all that? You better get some pretty boys up here right now.’

The aide waved helplessly round at the filthy and tired soldiers behind him and whispered ‘Geez, Colonel, we got nothing like that within a thousand miles!’

Bullivant accepted that with a nod, threw his aide a look that said he hadn’t heard the last of this, hauled himself out of the jeep and wafted Dodd a lazy salute. Brownlow yelled ‘Honour guard, shoulder *arms!*’ The stamping, crashing performance was repeated, and Dodd stopped saluting.

Bullivant realised the situation was slipping out of his control, and decided to go on the offensive. He studied Green and Watson, then said ‘Yeah, very cute, lieutenant,’ - he used the American ‘loo-tenant’ – ‘but how’d they look if they’d been fightin’ for a few days?’

Still stiffly at attention, his eyes straight ahead, Dodd replied, ‘Lieutenant Dodd, Sir, representing His Majesty’s forces in Naples.’ he emphasised the British ‘lef-tenant.’ He continued ‘As it happens, we’ve been behind the lines for some weeks now.’

Bullivant was shaken, but ploughed on. ‘Oh, really? I thought *we,*’ he gestured behind him, where the troops were standing in unkempt fascinated knots, ‘were doin’ the heavy liftin’ around these parts. You been hangin’ around somewhere in the hills, drinkin’ tea and waitin’ for us to push the krauts out?’

‘Something like that, Sir, if you say so. Now, can I formally, on behalf of His Majesty and the citizens of Naples, hand over the city to your control?’

Bullivant, rattled, but aware that his troops were craning to follow the exchange, replied ‘Guess so, loo-tenant. Wouldn’t want your nancy boys to have to get their seams all crooked, would we?’

This brought a few guffaws from the American soldiers, which Dodd, still ramrod straight, and eyes front, silenced by saying ‘And perhaps you could take over our prisoners too?’

The colonel, interested now, asked ‘You got prisoners? How many?’

‘Oh, just a couple of dozen or so. And the vehicles, of course.’

Suddenly impressed against his will, Bullivant blurted ‘You got captured vehicles? What, trucks?’

Stone faced, Dodd replied ‘A truck, yes.’

Bullivant, strangely relieved, grinned, sensing his audience behind him. ‘Just the one?’

‘Yes, just the one. And a Kubelwagen.’ Dodd let the silence continue for a long second. ‘And an armoured car.’

Bullivant thought about that for a while, then grinned widely, and held out his hand for Dodd to shake. ‘Loo-tenant, er, Dodd, was it? I guess maybe you and I got off on the wrong foot. Maybe we should start again?’

Dodd visibly relaxed and smiled, and Bullivant continued ‘I’ve got some stuff to get organised right now, but maybe we should have a chat. How about I send someone to find you when I’m done, maybe about five?’

‘Excellent, Colonel. Excellent. I’ll look forward to it.’

Dodd and his men were loafing, silent and morose, around on the steps of the town hall. The same reaction they'd felt back at the bridge had set in but this time it was worse: much worse. This time, they realised that they really were back in the clutches of the great military machine, and their adventure was finally over. No chance now of nipping off again, like they did at the bridge, when they were still behind the German lines. Now, they'd be shunted back to their old units, to do their old jobs alongside their old mates.

Brownlow, the career soldier, was used to moments such as this – the sudden lurching change to what he was doing – and had grown philosophical about it, but even so, he was upset enough. He knew they'd been doing something that might actually have made a difference, but now, they would each become, once again, mere specks in the great military scheme.

And Kelly, well, he stared accusingly at his mangled foot, realising that he'd be out of action for a good while. He'd had a mate, ol' Will Roach, back in the bush, had his ankle stamped on by a steer, and he, well, he'd been on crutches for months, it seemed like. He'd never got over it, not really. Ended up as a camp cook. Bloody shame. Kelly worried that he'd go the same way.

Green and Watson had at first felt it even more badly: the thought of going back to the Ceremonial and Presentation Unit, poncing about as pretend soldiers again, was too horrible to contemplate. But Watson had been contemplating the day when their great adventure would come to an end, and had come up with a plan, which he now revealed to Green for the first time.

'You know we're going to be sent back to the CPU, Gilbert?'

Green winced, as though the idea was completely new to him. 'Yeah, Bill. Going to seem a bit tame after this, eh?'

'Absolutely. That's why, soon as we get back, I'm going to put my name down for the paratroops.'

Green was thrilled at that. 'Of course! Brilliant! I'll come with you!'

Watson was pleased, but said 'Look, chum, I've been thinking about this for a while. Perhaps you'd better mull it over for a bit, eh?'

Green waved that away. 'No need, Bill. I've been dreading the thought of going back to Captain Murray and his damned theatrics. No, it's settled.'

And Green was so thrilled with the notion of a future outside the CPU, he strolled, as nonchalantly as he could, across the steps to tell Tullett and Burgess. Tullett was aghast. 'What? All that jumpin' out o' fuckin' planes, gettin' shot in the knackers comin' down? Are you fuckin' barmy, mate?'

That thought didn't appeal to Green, so after mulling it over for a moment, he tried another gambit. 'Yeah, OK, you might be right. I'll put in for the commandos then, eh?'

Tullett snorted. 'What?! They're just as bad, only not so 'igh up. Climbin' fuckin' great cliffs with a fuckin''

He paused to think of a suitably gigantic object to be dragging up a cliff, then continued: 'A fuckin' pianner on yer back?'

Green was baffled. 'A pianner? What's a pianner?'

Tullett pantomimed playing a piano. 'Geez, chum, you never 'eard of a pianner?'

Green understood now. 'Oh, right, yeah, a pianner.' But his tone said he wasn't convinced, so Tullett mimed the piano playing again, and concluded, 'Fuckin' barmy, eh, John?'

Burgess nodded, but without conviction, and after a while the two of them could be seen, heads together, deep in a vigorous conversation.

But for Dodd, it was the worst of all. Did he really have to exchange what he thought of, with a twinge of guilt for his family back at Oxford, as the best, the *very* best time of his life, to go back to being a lowly intelligence officer, asking the same poor bewildered fellows the same useless questions, and dutifully recording the same pathetic answers?

True to his word, soon after four, the colonel's aide found Dodd and led him inside the town hall where Bullivant had already made himself at home in the mayor's magnificent office. Dodd studied the room - everything was big, the dark wood of the furniture beautifully carved and polished to that glow that only comes after a hundred years of loving attention. Gold leaf embellishments twinkled, the ancient faces of mayors long gone peered vaguely through paintings misty dark with age, and the aroma of a century of beeswax battled gamely with the tang of fresh cigar smoke. The shattered windows looked shockingly out of place.

Dodd walked silently on deep carpet to face Bullivant across the acreage of the mayoral desk. His well-tuned antennae sensed a chill in the air, unexpected after the way they had parted a few hours earlier, but he tried a friendly opening. 'Good afternoon, Colonel. It seems you're comfortably settled in. May I?' he added, gesturing towards an ornate chair beside him.

Bullivant seemed not to notice, and just looked at him for a few seconds before speaking, his voice neutral. 'I've been making a few calls, *loo*-tenant.' He emphasised the rank. 'You know how it is, catching up with the scuttlebutt.'

The good ol' boy act was gone now that there were no private soldiers to impress and to report the colonel's antics to their comrades, and the real Bullivant, shrewd and clever, was revealed.

'And you know what? I keep hearing about this gang of limey soldiers, setting fire to petrol dumps, blowing up trains loaded with artillery, all kinds of horsing around. You know anything about that, *loo*-tenant?'

Again, the rank emphasised. Dodd wondered what had brought this on, and wary, gave a non-committal shrug.

Bullivant pressed on. 'And you know what? It seems their officer, if he *was* an officer, kept changing his rank. Would you know anything about *that*?'

Again, Dodd shrugged but stayed quiet.

'See, *loo*-tenant, I keep hearing this guy's name was Dodd. Would that be a co-incidence, or is there some other crowd of boy scouts roaming about Italy?'

This time, Dodd didn't even shrug.

'Now, I don't know about the British Army, but in the US forces, we don't take kindly to impersonating a senior officer. I haven't checked it out, but I'd guess that's worth a good long spell in a military prison. Not nice. You ever seen the inside of a military prison, Dodd?'

Dodd decided he'd had enough of this bullying attempt. 'Actually, Sir, yes, many times. Before the plane crash, I spent a lot of time in military prisons.'

That put Bullivant off his stride. 'Plane crash? What crash? Gee whiz Dodd, you're a man of many surprises. I don't know if I should be locking you up or giving you a medal! Now, I hear tell that this officer told a limey armoured car patrol he was a colonel.' He glared at Dodd. 'What do you say to that?'

Dodd smiled, recognising the clumsy attempt at a trap, and replied 'I assure you I did not tell that arrogant young man I was a colonel, Sir.'

Bullivant nodded, poker faced, and continued ‘And there’s several witnesses who say your little Italian pals call you *Colonello*. How do you explain *that*?’

This time, Dodd couldn’t resist a laugh. ‘Just a joke, Colonel. Ask them yourself - they know perfectly well what my rank is.’

Bullivant sighed. ‘Just tell me straight, Dodd. Have you impersonated a senior officer or not?’

Dodd pondered a second, then, straight faced, replied ‘Does impersonating a senior *German* officer count? And what about impersonating a senior officer *to* a German soldier?’

That completely disarmed Bullivant, who smiled and studied Dodd afresh.

‘I think you’d better tell me the whole story, loo-tenant. And I get the feeling that’s going to take a while, so you’d better sit down.’

The earlier, friendly Bullivant was back. ‘You want something? Some tea, maybe?’

Dodd relaxed and said ‘To be honest, Colonel, I was hoping for a very large scotch indeed!’

Bullivant barked a laugh, and called for his aide. ‘Now Hal, I want you to get the best bottle of scotch you can find and bring it right back here, and plenty of ice.’

Dodd broke in. ‘Water for me.’

Bullivant nodded. ‘Whatever the lieutenant wants, Hal. We’re going to be here a while.’ Dodd noticed he’d used the British ‘leff-tenant’ and nodded acknowledgement as Bullivant continued. ‘Anything else, Lieutenant?’

Dodd hesitated. ‘I’d love one of those cigars. Haven’t had a smoke in quite a while. Lost mine in the ocean, you see. And Father Verdi couldn’t find me another supply.’

‘You couldn’t have made do with a cigarette?’

‘My wife enjoys the smell of an occasional cigar, at Christmas and so on, but cigarettes, she can’t stand them, you see. So I just got sort of trained’ He let the sentence collapse, embarrassed.

Bullivant pondered this for a moment before asking ‘Who’s this Father Verdi?’

‘Ah, he helped us out a good deal. But it’s a bit of a long story.’

‘OK,’ Bullivant responded, ‘you’d better start at the beginning.’

‘Yes, Sir, except, well, my chaps are hanging around outside, feeling pretty glum, I might say. Could somebody organise some food for them, and I’m sure they’d appreciate a drink, too.’

Without moving his interested gaze from Dodd, the colonel said ‘See to that, would you Hal? OK, so far we’ve got a fire in a German transport camp – I’m getting the feeling you know something about that?’ He arched an eyebrow. Dodd nodded a fraction and Bullivant continued, ‘And a blown up train?’ Again, the fractional nod. ‘And then destroying the road? Your guys again? And a crash of some kind, and a friendly priest, and time in military prison?’

He rubbed his hands in anticipation, settled back in his deeply padded chair, and called to his aide, who was halfway out the door. ‘Guess you’d better bring us some food as well, Hal.’

Two hours later, the air in the room was opaque with cigar smoke and the scotch was almost gone - most of it down Bullivant’s throat, without any noticeable result - and an amiable silence fell as Dodd drew his story to a close.

Bullivant, slumped in his magnificent chair, didn't move for quite a while, then refilled their glasses and said 'That's one hell of an adventure for a backroom officer and a handful of oddball soldiers, Lieutenant.'

'It is rather, isn't it?'

'You know what, Lieutenant, I believe it!'

Dodd replied 'Oh, good.' Then, because there was something about the way the colonel had said it, added 'Er, should I have been worried about that?'

Bullivant smiled. 'You sure should, yes. See, your general staff over the mountains asked me to do one of two things, depending on your story. If I thought you'd impersonated a senior officer, I was to have you arrested and sent back down the line.'

'And if not?'

'You Brits enjoy a little irony, yes? Well, as I'm satisfied with your story and you hadn't impersonated a senior officer, ...' he reached forward and took an envelope from a drawer, '... I can confirm your promotion, *Captain!*'

He stood and offered his hand. Dodd rose and grasped it, smiling, then took the envelope. 'Oh, excellent, Colonel. Excellent! Ironic, as you say. If it's all right with you, I'll go and tell the chaps?'

'Before you go, Captain, if you don't have any plans, I've maybe got a job for you, if you're interested?'

Dodd looked suspicious. 'Not intelligence work, is it?'

Bullivant smiled gently. 'Not really, no. The way I figure it, the Germans are building some pretty impressive defences right across the country, and judging by the fight they gave us at Salerno, they're gonna be one hell of a job to move. I reckon we'd find it real useful if we had a gang like yours behind the lines to, how did you say it, get up to mischief, much the same as you and your boys have been doing lately. What do you say?'

Dodd had no need to think about it. 'Excellent, Colonel. Lovely. Count me in. But what about my lads? I'm pretty sure they'd be interested.'

Bullivant rubbed his chin: that was a new concept to him. 'Gee, Captain, I don't know about that. I was picturing you working with a team of our Rangers.'

Dodd nodded. 'Hmm. I'm not so sure I could manage without my chaps.'

Bullivant spread his hands. 'Think about it, Dodd. You have no one who can work a radio, none of you have any first aid training, even, never mind paramedic skill, only one driver, no trained demolition or sabotage man, nobody used to heavy weapons.'

He snorted in exasperation.

Dodd thought about that, and replied 'I know: it's amazing what we've achieved, though isn't it?'

He made up his mind. 'Yes, we come as a package, I'm afraid. Perhaps you could drop us off somewhere up that coast a bit, and leave us to it?'

Bullivant looked doubtful, and Dodd saw he needed time to think about the value of having a bunch of crazy limeys running around up beyond his front line, and turned to go. At the door he paused and turned. 'You know what's *really* ironic, Colonel? I don't think I've ever been a captain before! Not in the *British* army, anyway!'

As the door closed behind him, there was a roar of laughter from inside.

Dodd sat on the steps of the town hall, surrounded by his men, a cloud of cigar smoke, and a deep feeling of satisfaction. As he'd expected, the men had delightedly pounced on the possibility of going back behind the lines with him. All, that is, except Bimbo and Giovanni, who tearfully explained that they were needed back at Casagrigo to help with the harvest.

Angelo and his mates had been up to the hills and brought both the trucks down into the piazza earlier, and the whole group had now made a solid start on the line of flagons of the coarse red wine they'd cajoled from Dino's farmer relative.

Dodd took a sip and lazily thought back to the crash at the start of their adventure, what was it, four weeks ago? Six? More? He shrugged a Neapolitan shrug that said, *'Who would know? Or care? It's not important'* and tried to remember the sequence of events. Then he remembered he'd written some notes before, at the bridge when he thought the game was over, and again later as the opportunity arose, so now, all he had to do was bring them up to date.

He relaxed and beamed benevolently around him then closed his eyes. As he began to doze, he heard the familiar sounds of the old truck chugging round the piazza, steered haphazardly by a delighted Dino, who hadn't driven before. Angelo stood in the open back of the truck, clinging to the frame and exercising his latest English as taught by Tullett, 'Bollocks to the Yankees! Churchill is wanker!'

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